

THE WRONGS OF PASSAGE: Inhuman and Degrading Treatment of New Recruits in the Russian Armed Forces

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
BACKGROUND: THE STORY OF ONE CONSCRIPT	5
INITIATION PRACTICES AND HUMAN RIGHTS	23
Torture, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment	25
Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health	28
Right to the Peaceful Enjoyment of One's Possessions	29
Government's Responsibility to Investigate	29
DEDOVSHCHINA ABUSES: AN OVERVIEW	29
Expectations of Servility to <i>Dedy</i>	30
Food, Money and Other Belongings	31
"Stodnevka"	32
Confiscation of the Property of Conscripts	33
Confiscation of Salaries	34
Confiscation of Money and Food from Correspondence	36
Visits by Relatives	36
Demands for Money, Cigarettes, and Other Goods	38
Off-Hours	39
Nighttime Chores	40
Rituals	40
Food and Health	42
Punishment	43
Individual Punishment	43
Shaving with Lighter	45
Collective Punishment	45
Gratuitous Abuse	48
Drunken Abuse	49
Sexual Violence	50
THE CONSEQUENCES OF <i>DEDOVSHCHINA</i>	52
Desperate for a Way Out	52
Flight	53
Suicide Attempts and Suicidal Thoughts	56
Suicides, Deaths, and Suspicious Deaths	58

Physical Consequences.....	59
Psychological Consequences.....	61
Disclosure of Medical Condition upon Discharge.....	62
<i>DEDOVSHCHINA</i> AND THE ROLE OF OFFICERS.....	63
Good and Bad Units: The Contrast.....	64
Oversight.....	66
Prevention Mechanisms.....	68
Complaints and the “Rule of Silence”.....	69
Complaining to Medical Professionals.....	71
ACCOUNTABILITY.....	72
Investigation of Abusive Practices.....	72
The Disciplinary Code.....	74
Disciplinary Punishment for <i>Dedy</i>	74
Disciplinary Punishment for Officers.....	75
Criminal Prosecution of <i>Dedy</i>	76
Criminal Prosecution of Officers.....	78
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	79
Public Commitment to Combating <i>Dedovshchina</i>	80
Prevention.....	81
Training of Officers.....	81
Enforcement of Existing Prevention Mechanisms.....	81
Learning from Best Practices.....	82
Accountability.....	82
Independent Monitoring.....	84
Structural Reform.....	84
Recommendations to the International Community.....	85
GLOSSARY.....	86

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout the first year of their military service, hundreds of thousands of new recruits in the Russian armed forces face grossly abusive treatment at the hands of more senior conscripts. Under a system called *dedovshchina*, or “rule of the grandfathers,” second-year conscripts force new recruits to live in a year-long state of pointless servitude, punish them violently for any infractions of official or informal rules, and abuse them gratuitously. Dozens of conscripts are killed every year as a result of these abuses, and thousands sustain serious—and often permanent—damage to their physical and mental health. Hundreds commit or attempt suicide and thousands run away from their units. This abuse takes place in a broader context of denial of conscripts’ rights to adequate food and access to medical care, which causes many to go hungry or develop serious health problems, and abusive treatment by officers.

This report, which documents these abuses, is based on three years of research that have allowed Human Rights Watch to analyze the *dedovshchina* system, its consequences for the physical and mental well-being of conscripts, and the extent to which treatment under *dedovshchina* is inconsistent with Russian and international human rights standards. During 2002 and 2003, we conducted research in seven regions across Russia, including Cheliabinsk, Moscow, Novokuznetsk, Novosibirsk, St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Volgograd. We interviewed more than one hundred conscripts, their parents, officials, lawyers, NGO experts, and former military servicemen. The conscripts served on more than fifty bases in more than twenty-five of Russia’s eighty-nine provinces. We also extensively studied the archive files of several soldiers’ rights groups. In February 2004, we had a meeting to discuss our findings with officials of the Ministry of Defense in Moscow.

Dedovshchina exists in military units throughout the Russian Federation. It establishes an informal hierarchy of conscripts, based on the length of their service, and a corresponding set of rights and duties for each group of the hierarchy. As in militaries around the world, newcomers have essentially no rights under the system—they must earn them over time. At the beginning of their service, conscripts are “not eligible” to eat, wash, relax, sleep, be sick, or even keep track of time. Thus, any restrictions placed on these functions are considered permissible. The life of a new recruit consists of countless obligations to do the bidding of those conscripts who have served long enough—a year or more—to have earned rights in the informal hierarchy. Second-year conscripts, called the *dedy*¹, have practically unlimited power with respect to their junior

¹ *Dedy* means grandfathers. Its singular is *ded*.

colleagues. They can order them to do whatever they like, no matter how demeaning or absurd the task, while remaining beyond the strictures of the Military Code of Conduct or any other set of formal rules. If a first-year conscript refuses to oblige or fails in the assigned task, the senior conscript is free to administer whatever punishment he deems appropriate, no matter how violent.

Dedovshchina is distinguished by predation, violence, and impunity. During their first year of service, conscripts live under the constant threat of violence for failing to comply with limitless orders and demands of *dedy*. Many conscripts spent entire days fulfilling these orders, which range from the trivial, like shining the seniors' boots or making their beds, to the predatory, such as handing over food items to them at meal time, or procuring (legally or illegally) money, alcohol or cigarettes for them. First-year conscripts face violent punishment for any failure—and frequently not only for their own individual failure, as punishment is often collective—to conform to the expectations of *dedy*. As a rule, punishment happens at night after officers have gone home. *Dedy* wake the first-year conscripts up in the middle of the night and make them perform push-ups or knee bends, often accompanied by beatings, until they drop. First-year conscripts also routinely face gratuitous abuse, often involving severe beatings or sexual abuse, from drunken *dedy* at night. *Dedy* sometimes beat new recruits with stools or iron rods.

Dedovshchina has all the trappings of a classic initiation system; indeed, it likely emerged as one several decades ago. Such systems, which exist in many social institutions around the world, including schools, athletic clubs, and especially the armed forces of many countries, can play a legitimate role in military structures by enhancing group cohesion and esprit de corps. Initiation systems license the group to erase a certain degree of individuality in its members, and the possibility of abuse is inherent in that license.

While *dedovshchina* may once have served the purpose of initiation, it has in the past twenty years degenerated into a system in which second-year conscripts, once victims of abuse and deprivation themselves, enjoy untrammelled power to abuse their juniors without rule, restriction, or fear of punishment. The result is not enhanced esprit de corps but lawlessness and gross abuse of human rights. The collapse of *dedovshchina* as an initiation system has occurred at both the command level and at the conscript level.

At the command level, abusive practices associated with *dedovshchina* have persisted due to an almost universal failure on the part of the officers' corps to take appropriate measures. Our research found that the vast majority of officers either chose not to notice evidence of *dedovshchina* or, worse, tolerate or encourage it because they see *dedovshchina* as an effective means of maintaining discipline in their ranks. Indeed, we

found that officers routinely fail to send a clear message to their troops that abuses will not be tolerated, reduce existing prevention mechanisms to empty formalities or ignore them altogether, and fail to respond to clear evidence of abuse.

The perversity of this attitude toward “maintaining discipline” in the short run is that it so clearly undermines the effectiveness of Russia’s armed forces over time. Horror stories about *dedovshchina* motivate tens of thousands of Russian parents every year to try to keep their sons out of the armed forces. As the most affluent and educated families do so most successfully, the armed forces increasingly draw recruits from poor segments of the population, and many of the recruits suffer from malnutrition, ill-health, alcohol or drug addiction, or other social ills even before they start to serve. Moreover, as mentioned above, thousands of the young men who are drafted each year run away from their units, and hundreds commit suicide.

At the conscript level, the degeneration of the system is more contemptible than perverse: instead of initiating new recruits into their new role of soldiers, *dedy* use *dedovshchina* primarily as a means of avenging the abuses they themselves faced during their first year of service and of exploiting new recruits to the fullest extent possible, both materially and otherwise. The comment of one *ded* to Human Rights Watch was typical:

When we arrived as first-year conscripts, nobody spared us, we slaved for the *dedy*, and were beaten much more than this [new recruit] now... And we did not complain, we did not run away, and eventually we became friends with the *dedy*. Now it’s our turn. That’s the law here. We didn’t put up with a full year here so that some *dukhi* [a derogatory term for new recruits] can now ignore us. Let them take it, and then their time of compensation will come.

As such, *dedovshchina* is more a system of vengeance than a means of building esprit de corps or forming a disciplined army, as initiation systems can be in other armed forces.

Yet, there seems to be nothing inevitable about the situation at either the command or conscript level. We found evidence suggesting that officers who provide strong leadership can stop the abuses associated with *dedovshchina*. Six conscripts told Human Rights Watch that they served both in units where *dedovshchina* was rampant and where it was practically absent. They uniformly stated that the officers in units without *dedovshchina* sent a consistent and clear message to their troops that they would not

tolerate abuses, maintained a certain closeness to their troops, meticulously implemented existing prevention mechanisms, and acted decisively on evidence of abuse.

Although international law requires the Russian government to take immediate measures to end these abuses, it has thus far failed to take the appropriate steps. Instead of taking a clear and public stance against the abuses, government officials have largely ignored the issue in their numerous speeches about military reform. The government has yet to adopt a clear and comprehensive strategy to deal with the abuses. Instead of vigorously examining the reasons why first-year conscripts flee their units, military officials routinely threaten runaways with prosecution for unauthorized departure from their bases. Military commanders and the military procuracy routinely shield their perpetrators from justice, rather than investigate reported incidents of abuse. The government's position is all the more puzzling because *dedovshchina* so clearly undermines the military effectiveness of Russia's army.

Human Rights Watch calls on President Vladimir Putin to create a task force to design a comprehensive strategy for combating *dedovshchina* abuses and to implement that strategy. We also call on the government to create a special ombudsperson for military servicemen under Russia's general ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin. We urge top Russian leaders to make a firm, public commitment to ending these abuses, and to take steps to prevent them, in part by reinforcing existing prevention mechanisms, training current and future officers, and studying best and worst practices. The government should establish a meaningful accountability process for the perpetrators of *dedovshchina* abuses as well as officers who tolerate them.

BACKGROUND: THE STORY OF ONE CONSCRIPT

At the age of eighteen, Alexander D. was a high-school drop-out, had a criminal record for a burglary, and had once attempted suicide.² He grew up in a poor and dysfunctional family—his mother was an alcoholic and his father was altogether absent—in an economically depressed town in northern Russia. He was raised by his grandmother who survived on a meager pension. In Russia, Alexander D.'s background was typical of the average conscript. And so, in November 2000, he was drafted into the Russian armed forces.

² Unless otherwise noted, all information on Alexander D. stems from an interview a Human Rights Watch researcher conducted with him on April 10, 2002 in St. Petersburg, materials collected during a trip to Mga military unit on April 17, 2002, as well as on archive files at the office of the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg. Alexander D. is a pseudonym.

* * *

Modern Russia has had a conscription army since 1918. In recent years, approximately 400,000 young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven are drafted each year for two years of service in the regular army, the Ministry of Internal Affairs forces, border troops, or other branches of Russia's vast armed forces.³

Russia's approximately 800,000 conscripts are the core of its armed forces. As in other conscription-based armies, draftees make up the vast majority of the rank-and-file soldiers.⁴ However, in Russia, where only officers are career soldiers, all non-commissioned officers are conscripts. As even low-ranking officers are considerably removed from the day-to-day life of the rank-and-file soldier—their positions involve a lot of bureaucratic and managerial work in offices or away from the unit—Russian conscripts play an exceptionally large role in the day-to-day running of their bases.

The Official Hierarchy	
<u>Ranks of Conscripts</u>	<u>Ranks of Officers</u>
Private	Junior Lieutenant
Private First Class	Lieutenant
Junior Sergeant	Senior Lieutenant
Sergeant	Captain
Senior Sergeant	Major
<i>Starshina</i>	Lieutenant-Colonel
	Colonel
	Major-General
	Lieutenant-General
	Colonel-General
	General
	Marshal

³ Article 2 of the Law on the Conscription Obligation and Military Service of March 28, 1998 contains a full list of all branches where conscripts may serve:

Military service is a special kind of federal state service, which citizens perform in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, as well as in the border troops of the Russian Federation, the interior troops of the Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation, the railway troops of the Russian Federation, troops of the federal agency for government communication and information under the president of the Russian Federation, civil defense troops (hereinafter—other troops), engineering-technical and road construction military formations of federal executive organs (hereinafter—military formations), the foreign intelligence service of the Russian Federation, the organs of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, the organs of the Federal Border Service of the Russian Federation, the federal organs for government communication and information, the federal organs of state security (in Russian: *gosudarstvennoi okhrany*), the federal organ for ensuring mobilization preparedness of the organs of state power of the Russian Federation (hereinafter—the organs) and in special formations created for time of war.

⁴ The Russian armed forces also employ soldiers on short-term contracts. They make up the remainder of the rank-and-file soldiers.

The majority of these conscripts come from the most disadvantaged, least affluent parts of society, as for years young men from middle and upper class families have successfully found ways, whether legal or illegal, to avoid the highly unpopular military service. In 2002, Ministry of Defense statistics reportedly indicated that that year every second conscript had an alcohol problem prior to entering service, and that every fourth had been a drug user.⁵ Military officials have complained about the decreasing level of education among new conscripts and the increasing number of new conscripts with a criminal record.⁶ In September 2002, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov bluntly characterized the conscripts drafted in the fall of that year as a “pathetic lot, afflicted with drug addiction, psychological problems and malnutrition.”⁷

The situation of Russia’s officers’ corps, especially with respect to junior officers, is also bleak. For years, the military has had serious problems recruiting new junior officers and cope with high turnover. As a result, according to one expert on the Russian armed forces, 40 percent of platoon commanders are graduates from civilian colleges with no more than “the most primitive training.”⁸ Because of this shortage, the commander of every tenth platoon does not even have an officer’s rank.⁹ Second-year conscripts thus end up performing duties that should be officers’ responsibilities. Considering the harsh realities of the life of junior officers, the recruitment problems are not surprising. Alexander Golts, a leading expert on the Russian military, has compared the plight of the junior officer with that of a serf.¹⁰ The salaries of junior officers are low, their living conditions under which they live are harsh, and for professional growth and social benefits they depend on the whims of their immediate superior and officials at the personnel department. At a government meeting in March 2004, Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov stated that the families of 136,000 officers or ensigns do not have their own apartments, and that those of another 28,000 are of such poor quality that they need new apartments. More than half of these officers and their families live in dormitories.¹¹

⁵ “Umstvenno ogranichenny kontingent” (An Intellectually Challenged Lot), Grani.ru, July 3, 2002 [online], <http://www.hro.org/editions/press/0702/04/04070208.htm> (retrieved September 30, 2002).

⁶ “Osenii prizyv sobiraet dan,” *Utro*, October 1, 2001 [online], www.utro.ru/articles/2001100113103938448.shtml (retrieved September 3, 2002).

⁷ Natalia Yefimova, “Lawmaker: Defense Ministry Plans to Slash Draft Deferrals,” *The Moscow Times*, September 12, 2002.

⁸ Alexander Golts, *The Russian Army: Eleven Lost Years* (Moscow, Zaharov, 2004), p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹ “Zhilishchnoi probleme, gosudarstvennoe reshenie” (A State Decision for the Living Quarters Problem), *Krasnaia zvezda* (Red Star), March 31, 2004. At a meeting in late March 2004, President Vladimir Putin ordered his government to work out a state-sponsored mortgage system that would gradually resolve the living quarters problem in coming years.

* * *

After being drafted, Alexander D. was assigned to the railway troops. In keeping with an old Soviet tradition that conscripts should not serve in their native provinces, he was sent to the village of Mga in Leningrad province.¹² Alexander D. spent his first two months in basic training—popularly referred to as the *kurs molodogo boitsa*, or the “the young fighter’s training course.” During basic training, conscripts, among others, practice standing in formation and marching, undergo physical training, learn to shoot, and study the Military Code of Conduct and other relevant documents. While officers are supposed to lead many of these training sessions, due of the officer shortage, second-year conscripts often do. At the end of basic training, Alexander D. took the military oath, becoming a full-fledged soldier.

* * *

A key element of basic training is the study of the Military Code of Conduct, the Disciplinary Code of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and other documents relevant to military service. These documents outline the basic principles of engagement and behavior expected of members of the armed forces. For example, the Military Code of Conduct requires that “soldiers must constantly serve as an example of high culture, modesty and firmness,”¹³ and that “relations among soldiers are built on the basis mutual respect.”¹⁴ They require commanders to be firm but just. For example, commanders must be “close to [their] subordinates, know their needs and requests” and should “not tolerate rudeness or humiliation of the personal dignity of [their] subordinates” so that each soldier “feels the commander’s concern for the inviolability of his personal dignity....”¹⁵ The documents also describe in great detail the military’s hierarchy, the rules of engagement in the armed forces, and rights and duties of soldiers. They also provide for an exhaustive list of types of disciplinary punishment, and state exactly who can assign what punishment to whom, and what procedure is to be followed.

After basic training, conscripts take the military oath. From that moment on, they participate in the day-to-day management of their unit. The everyday life of conscripts at

¹² In Soviet times, conscripts were generally not allowed to serve in their home provinces. Although that rule is no longer applied strictly, many still serve away from home. In fact, serving close to home is seen as a privilege and many people are willing to pay significant bribes to relevant officers to ensure their sons serve at nearby units.

¹³ Article 64 (1 and 2) of the Code of Conduct of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Article 7 of the Disciplinary Code of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

military bases consists of numerous assignments: standing guard at the entrance of the unit, the officers' building, the weapon depot or elsewhere; doing kitchen duty; doing construction and painting on or off base; cleaning bathrooms, sleeping quarters, or the mess; working in the vegetable gardens; or tending to the territory of the base.

* * *

After taking the oath, Alexander D. was integrated into a regular railway troops company, also in Mga, and started participating in the day-to-day management of the base, with little training and endless assignments. There, Alexander D. soon realized that the rules he had studied during basic training were a far-off utopia. In practice, he found, an entirely different set of rules dominated his life—rules that, though informal and unwritten, set up an elaborate parallel order and hierarchy. In this order, the exemplary behavior, mutual respect, and careful oversight by superiors required by the Military Code of Conduct did not apply. To the contrary, these informal rules allowed second-year conscripts to treat new recruits like slaves whom they could order around with utter arbitrariness, punish in whatever way they saw fit for invented infractions, or abuse for no particular reason at all. As a first-year conscript, Alexander D. found himself at the bottom of this informal hierarchy.

* * *

At the beginning of their military service, new recruits are disparate groups of strangers. Conventional army training, with its strong emphasis on the need for teamwork, strenuous physical exercise, and basic skills training, seeks to mold these strangers together into tight military units, in which the capabilities of each individual member are marshaled for the pursuit of a common goal. In armies around the world, informal initiation practices have also traditionally also played a role in building team spirit.

For example, until it was banned in 1997, an initiation practice called “Neptune” or “shellback” was prevalent in the U.S. Navy and helped develop unity among recruits. In this ceremony, veteran sailors, called seafarers, initiate new sailors, or pollywogs, when they first cross the equator. The pollywogs dress up, sometimes in drag, eat inedible food, perform silly and demeaning tasks, and crawl on the deck covered in repulsive substances.¹⁶

¹⁶ Description taken from Donna Winslow, “Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne,” *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 25 (April 1999), No. 3, pp. 425 – 457. The author of this report used an emailed copy of Winslow’s article and therefore does not reference exact page numbers in subsequent citations.

In the Canadian Airborne, new recruits of Two Commando faced cold shoulder treatment during the first six months of their service.¹⁷ As one recruit described it,

See when you come to the Commando, you're an FNG, you're not a new guy, you are a fucking new guy, that's how you are treated for six months. No one talks to you, no one is your friend, you do what you are told and you carry on. You're told to do this, by whoever, you do it. Now, if people want to get in, what they generally do, in any circumstance, they try their best to please.¹⁸

Academics who study initiation practices in armed forces have found that they indeed promote group cohesion. In the words of Donna Winslow, an anthropologist who has studied initiation practices in the Canadian Airborne, “the bonding of initiation pulls them [new recruits] together in a very short time.”¹⁹ Other studies have shown that the more severe the initiation the greater the bonding within the group, and the greater the loyalty and devotion to the group.²⁰ Interestingly, Winslow points out that bonds forged through initiation can be so strong that they undermine military effectiveness: in such cases, soldiers place group interests above those of the armed forces as a whole.²¹

In the same study, Winslow identifies several different types of initiation.²² Some of these involve symbolic initiation rites that occur at specific times during a new recruit's military service and signify the transition of the initiate from one status to another—the pollywog who is accepted as a full-fledged sailor after the Neptune ceremony. Another

¹⁷ In 1995, the Canadian Airborne Regiment, to which Commando Two belonged, was disbanded, after a number of scandals shocked the Canadian public. These included the release to the media of video materials showing soldiers of Commando Two involved in racist behavior in Somalia and another portraying hazing practices in Commando One. Ibid.

¹⁸ Description taken from Winslow.

¹⁹ Winslow.

²⁰ Aronson, E. and J. Mills (1959), “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 59, pp. 177-181.

²¹ Description taken from Winslow.

²² Winslow and others also identified three stages in initiation practices in armed forces. In her study on initiation practices in the Canadian Airborne, Winslow wrote:

The rites of passage occur in three stages. The first stage occurs when the initiates' former identity is stripped away. They are set apart and made alike to one another. They are “leveled” into a homogeneous group and effort is put into the suppression of individuality, thus encouraging investment in that group. Initiates then enter the liminal phase of the rite where events become parodies and inversions of “real” life. In this stage group bonding is reinforced as the initiates undergo similar processes of testing and humiliation. In the final stage, the initiates are incorporated into the group as members of the Regiment.

The initiation model was first described by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his classic *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

type involves the “cold shoulder” treatment described above, which, she argues, constitutes “hazing.”²³

Winslow has observed that recruits generally voluntarily submit to initiation practices, no matter how humiliating, as they are keen to prove their readiness to participate in the group regardless of the personal cost. She interviewed soldiers about an initiation ritual, later investigated by an official commission of inquiry, that took place in an elite Canadian Airborne regiment in 1992, which was partially recorded on video. The footage shows how corporals initiate fifteen to twenty initiates. The initiation involved, among others, initiates vomiting and urinating on a piece of bread prior to placing it in their mouths, doing push-ups on a piece of cardboard with feces, splattered on it, and a black initiate doing push-ups with “I love KKK” written on his back while an initiator urinated on his back.²⁴ When interviewed by Winslow and officials investigating the incident, the initiates confirmed the voluntary nature of their participation. One said that “it’s the pride of belonging to a group...but no one makes you do it. No one gets beaten or shaken up.”²⁵ The black initiate said he was willing to tolerate having KKK written on his back in order to be accepted by the group.²⁶ Winslow also observes that investigators of the incident had had difficulty obtaining information on what had happened because the initiates refused to provide details.²⁷

In recent decades, the armed forces in many Council of Europe countries, as well as in the United States, Canada and Australia, have taken steps to ban harsh initiation practices. These efforts are not seen to undermine the ability of the armed forces in these countries to mold new recruits into cohesive groups. To the contrary, the United States military has prohibited a number of initiation practices noting that severe methods of initiation undermine rather than help esprit de corps. For example, an October 1, 1997 policy statement of the United States Department of the Navy on hazing states that “Hazing degrades and diminishes the ability of victims of function within their unit. It destroys members’ confidence and trust in their shipmates and is destructive to a unit’s cohesion and combat readiness.”²⁸

²³ Winslow.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Secnav Instruction 1610.2 ASN (M&RA) of October 1, 1997

* * *

An elaborate, informal system of initiation of new conscripts, known as *dedovshchina*, or “rule of the grandfathers,” has existed in the Russian armed forces for decades. This system establishes an informal hierarchy of conscripts, based on the length of their service, and a corresponding set of rights and duties for each group of the hierarchy. Essentially, newcomers, also known as *dukhi* (ghosts), have no rights under the system—they must earn them over time. At the beginning of their service, conscripts are “not eligible” to eat, wash, relax, sleep, be sick, or even keep track of time. Thus, any restrictions placed on these functions are considered permissible. The life of a *dukhi* consists of countless obligations. They must at all time do the bidding of those conscripts who have served long enough—after a year of service *dukhi* are graduated to the elite by way of a rite of passage—to have earned rights in the informal hierarchy. Second-year conscripts are called the *cherpaki* and *dedy*, or grandfathers.²⁹ The *dedy*, the elite of the system, have practically unlimited rights with respect to first-year conscripts. They can order *dukhi* to do anything beyond the strictures of the Military Code of Conduct or any other set of formal rules, no matter how demeaning or absurd the task. If a first-year conscript refuses to oblige or fails in his task, under this informal system the *ded* is free to administer whatever punishment he deems appropriate, and punishment is frequently violent.

Konstantin Bannikov, the author of the most in-depth sociological study of *dedovshchina* to date, has observed that the informal status of conscripts is far more important for them than their official military ranks, “[b]ecause the former, not the latter, determine the life of the person in the army and his place in the group.”³⁰ Indeed, *dedovshchina* dominates every aspect of the life of the first-year conscript.

During day time, first-year conscripts must do the most physically demanding and filthiest work on the territory of the base, in the kitchen, in the barracks—due to their low status in the informal system. Bannikov describes soldiers’ messes as places where the *dedy* “demonstrate their power” and associates them with “great stress” for first-year

²⁹ Conscripts who have served from twelve to eighteen months are called *cherpaki*. *Cherpaki* derives from the verb *cherpat*, or to “scoop.” The term most likely refers to the fact that *cherpaki* have half-way through their service and are gradually “scooping” away their last year. Those who have served more than eighteen months are called *dedy*. See text box below for a full explanation of the various informal ranks.

³⁰ Konstantin Bannikov, *Antropologiya ekstremal'nikh grupp. Dominantnye otnosheniia sredi voennosluzh ashchikh srochnoi sluzhby Rossiiskoi Armii (The Anthropology of Regimented Society. Relations of Dominance in Social Interactions among Russian Soldiers)*, (Moscow: RAN, Institut Etnologii i Antropologii im. N.N. Miklukho-Maklaia, 2000), p. 14.

conscripts.³¹ *Dedy* restrict eating time for first-year conscripts and confiscate many food items they are entitled to under the official rules, frequently leaving first-year conscripts hungry. At bathing time, Bannikov observes, “the youngest are pushed away from the best faucets, and have to crowd around one single faucet with boiling or, to the contrary, icy water coming out of it. They don’t get tubs, body scrubbers, soap.” Indeed, he says, in the armed forces “cleanliness of the body is a sign of belonging to the elite.”³²

As first-year conscripts have not yet “earned” the right to free time or sleep, *dedy* can place unlimited and arbitrary limitations on their free time or nightly rest. Bannikov observes: “[D]uring their first year soldiers sleep considerably less than the eight hours they are entitled to under the military code of conduct.” He states that, “as the daytime schedule is fully filled, young soldiers have to fulfil the majority of their informal duties at night.”³³ In the evening hours and at night, *dedy* make first-year conscripts work for them: make their beds, clean, dry, and repair their uniforms, tell them “fairy tales.” Also, as the absence of officers gives them a free hand, this is the time that the *dedy* “clarify relations, settle scores and abuse young soldiers.”³⁴ They routinely wake up first-year conscripts and make them perform army “traditions and jokes,” or impose collective punishment for “violations” that occurred during the day.

A *dukob* does not even have the right to be sick. Bannikov observes that, prior to seeking medical care, a first-year conscript should “remember his place in the informal hierarchy. After all, the health of a *dukob* and the health of a *ded* are not equally important. As the status of the patient determines the attitude of the group to the illness, a soldier better not be ill before he becomes part of the elite.”³⁵ The *dedy* tell first-year conscripts not to seek medical care and punish them if they do.

Personal belongings are also not for first-year conscripts. Bannikov observes that “spring and fall in any military unit [when new draftees arrive] are a time of general expectation of the new *dukobi*... anyone with any power sees in the *dukobi* an opportunity to improve their material situation.”³⁶ Thus, the *dedy* confiscate the belongings and money of first-year conscripts, confiscate their salaries, and frequently make them beg for money from relatives or on the street.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See also: Human Rights Watch, “To Serve without Health. Inadequate Nutrition and Health Care in the Russian Armed Forces,” *A Human Rights Watch Short Report*, Vol. 15, No. 9 (D), November 2003.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Bannikov argues that most conscripts submit voluntarily to the rules of *dedovshchina*. He observes that the *dedovshchina* system, in contrast with the official system, allows everyone to move up the social ladder and become part of the elite.³⁷ The system is based on a “ruthless but logical agreement:” the newcomer endures acts of initiation at the hands of *dedy* on the understanding that, at the end of the year, he will himself make the transition to the elite, and will receive “compensation” for his suffering during his second year of service.³⁸ This compensation consists of the right to subject new *dukhi* to the same treatment he endured himself. *Dedovshchina* is self-perpetuating, as “the harsher the *cherpaki* [conscripts who have just entered their second year] will abuse (in Russian: *goniat*) the *dukhi*, the more fully they overcome their earlier humiliation.”³⁹

While the suffering of those who accept this system may be somewhat mitigated by the prospect of future “compensation,” the suffering of those who reject it is all the greater. Bannikov observes that these conscripts deeply fear that they may, over time, lose their own human dignity. He cites the letter of a conscript to illustrate the point:

I look at those who have served for two years. Probably in two years I will become such a psycho, idiot myself, or I will go crazy as some have.... They can beat someone up for no reason. For them, hitting someone is no problem... Oh well, I will survive. Let them beat, humiliate even their own, but I will make it through, and remain a human being... I am not a bastard, I can't beat a person for no reason, just like that, take him and beat him... Mother, here you can become a bastard, a beast, they are almost like animals here, they...are proud when they beat someone up. I am afraid that I may become like them.⁴⁰

³⁷ According to Bannikov, *dedovshchina* follows the three phases of the anthropological model for initiation rites (Ibid., p. 19). In the first phase, the individuality of the conscripts is taken away—upon conscription, they are shaved bald, dressed uniformly, and stripped of their belongings. They then enter a year-long liminal phase, during which they are neither civilians nor full-fledged soldiers. This phase is often characterized by parodies and inversions of “real life,” testing and humiliation. The third phase involves a rite of passage to the elite—in the Russian army, this rite of passage generally involves *dedy* hitting initiates twelve times with a belt or other object. According to Bannikov:

The entire first year of service is a preparation for this rite—the ‘gradual killing’ (in Russian: *umershchvlenie*) of the boy for the sake of his ‘rebirth’ in a new quality—that of a man and warrior. During the first year, the person is destroyed as an individual... (Ibid., p 45.)

He adds that, with that transition, the former *dukhi* takes on the role of his tormentors and “he himself destroys the individuality of another person.” (Ibid.)

³⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

While officers know of the *dedovshchina* system, they rarely intervene and have very little to do with conscripts generally. Joris van Bladel, the author of a PhD thesis on reform in the Russian armed forces, has observed that the absence of a non-commissioned officers' corps in the Russian armed forces has caused a radical split between soldiers and officers.⁴¹ This split makes communication between officers and soldiers "limited and very formal." The soldiers' collective, he maintains, perceives the officers' corps as an adversary and lives by an unwritten "rule of silence" that prevents soldiers from reporting to officers incidents among conscripts. According to Van Bladel, even a conscript who becomes "even sporadically involved with the officers" is viewed with suspicion by the others.⁴²

The Informal Hierarchy

In this report, we use the terms *dukhi* and *dedy* to refer to first and second-year conscripts. While the most important divide in the informal system is between first-years and second-years, *dedovshchina* actually establishes an unofficial, five-level hierarchy. During the first eighteen months of their service, conscripts move up the informal social ladder every six months, gradually attaining rights and shedding duties. Finally, one hundred days before the end of their two-year military service, they reach the highest level in the informal ranking. Bannikov describes the five steps on the social ladder, and the corresponding rights and duties of the conscript, as follows:⁴³

Time of Service	Informal Rank	The Rights and Duties
0 to 6 months	<i>Dukhi</i> (spirits or ghosts). According to Bannikov, the word <i>dukhi</i> is used because the more senior conscripts "see something ephemeral in them." Conscripts in this group are also called: <i>ptsury</i> , <i>zelenye</i> (greens), <i>salagi</i> (plebes), <i>solobony</i> , <i>slony</i> (elephants), and <i>chizhi</i> (siskins, a small bird).	"The new recruit, the lowest caste. These are the people who have just been conscripted and have no rights whatsoever."

⁴¹ Joris van Bladel, "The All-Volunteer Force in the Russian Mirror: Transformation without Change" (Groningen: University Library Groningen, 2004). The author of this report used an electronic version of the manuscript and can therefore not reference page numbers.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bannikov, pp. 31-34.

6 to 12 months	<i>Molodye</i> (youngsters). Members of this group are also called <i>fazany</i> (pheasants) and <i>stazhery</i> (interns).	“The next step along the social ladder. The spectrum of their obligations is very wide. Representatives of this group have a few insignificant rights (mostly the right to apply psychological pressure on the <i>dukhi</i>). The <i>molodye</i> are responsible for the socialization of the <i>dukhi</i> in the “right” direction. At the end of the first year, the <i>molodye</i> “graduate” to the next step, as a result of which they enter the class of the elite.”
12 to 18 months	<i>Cherepa</i> . Members of this group are also called <i>cherpaki</i> .	“The first privileged layer in the system of regimented groups. Their primary function is to control the fulfillment of the obligations by the <i>molodye</i> and <i>dukhi</i> . <i>Cherepa</i> have the entire bouquet of rights: they keep track of their time, i.e. they are allowed to count the days until their discharge, they can discuss issues related to the discharge. Their differences from the higher castes are observed mostly in the area of symbols of the hierarchy and in the more active, executive domination.”
18 months to 100 days prior to discharge	<i>Dedy</i> (grandfathers).	“Full-fledged subjects of regimented groups. These are servicemen of the “fourth period” (18 to 24 months, [or] the final six months of their service) who have all rights. Their main obligation is to guard themselves, maintain the reputation of the elite and prepare for discharge.”
Last 100 days of service	<i>Dembel</i> (the word is a reference to <i>demobilizatsia</i> , which means discharge).	“The <i>dembel</i> is a person of a special status. He is a transcendent subject of the army system who is eligible to associate himself with a civil community... Although he has all possible privileges in army terms, he is already beyond them.”

A number of sociologists, including Bannikov and Van Bladel, believe that the origins of *dedovshchina* lie in the structure of the Soviet military organization and its Russian successor.⁴⁴ They point out that the armed forces fit the description of a “total institution,” a model first developed by Erving Goffman to describe places where “a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society for an appreciable period of time, together form an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”⁴⁵ This model has been used to explain inmate subculture in the Soviet Gulag and Van Bladel considers this subculture to be the inevitable result of the dynamic between the staff of the closed institution and its inmates. Thus, Van Bladel concludes, *dedovshchina* is a “perverse effect” of the exceptionally closed nature of Russia’s military organization.⁴⁶

Over the past fifteen years, the nature of *dedovshchina* has changed. In his study of the Russian armed forces, Van Bladel observes that “the system in the 1950s and 1960s was less brutal and criminalized than it was in the 1990s.” In his analysis, scarcity is a key factor in subcultures of total institutions, and the economic crisis of the 1990s increased scarcity of essential goods for the armed services and resulted in a harshening of *dedovshchina*.⁴⁷ Comparing their own experiences with *dedovshchina* in the 1960s and 1970s with those of their sons now, the fathers of a number of conscripts told Human Rights Watch that their sons had endured far harsher practices than they ever had.

A more complicated informal hierarchy exists in units that have a high percentage of Caucasians or other persons of non-ethnic Russian background.⁴⁸ In such units, soldiers belonging to the dominating ethnicity form a tight group and superimpose a hierarchy based on ethnicity on the *dedovshchina* hierarchy. Dozens of conscripts told Human Rights Watch that the Caucasians—universally referred to as the *Dagestantsy*, after the inhabitants of the largest region in the Caucasus—form a tight group that behaves abusively toward all non-Caucasian conscripts without necessarily differentiating between first and second years. They said that in these units first-year conscripts of Caucasian descent are immediately accepted as part of the Caucasian group. As a result, even Russian *dedy*, untouchable in other units, face abuses. For example, Andrei D. said that although he was a sergeant himself, the *Dagestantsy* abused him nonetheless: “They

⁴⁴ Another school of thought traces the origins of *dedovshchina* back to 1967, when military service in the Soviet Union was reduced from three to two years. Supporters of this school of thought believe that soldiers in their third year of service were so resentful of this decision that they started abusing junior conscripts, thus planting the seeds for *dedovshchina*. See: Van Bladel.

⁴⁵ The concept of total institutions was developed by Erving Goffman in *Asylums, Essays of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 13.

⁴⁶ Van Bladel.

⁴⁷ Van Bladel.

⁴⁸ The Caucasus is a mountain range in southern Russia. People from the areas immediately north and south are called Caucasians.

don't care. They live as one family... They know that there are more of them and that no-one can protest."⁴⁹ Another conscript said the Caucasian first-year conscripts would blend in with the second years "as if they had served forever."⁵⁰ In parallel, the division between first- and second-year conscripts of non-Caucasian origin continues to exist in these units. As a result, non-Caucasian first-year conscripts suffer abuses not only from the *dedy* but also from the *Dagestantsy*, and many said they feared the *Dagestantsy* most. Vladimir Z. told Human Rights Watch that the *Dagestantsy* in his unit were in charge: "The *Dagestantsy* even humiliated the [non-Caucasian] *dembeli*... You just have to do what they say." He said the non-Caucasian *dedy* also abused him, but mostly the *Dagestantsy*.⁵¹

* * *

No sooner was Alexander D. assigned to the Third Company at his unit, than the rules of *dedovshchina* became apparent. While he described the abuses during the first week as "not all too strong," after about a week, Alexander D.—a young man with a strong sense of personal dignity—came into serious conflict with the *dedy* when he refused to comply with one of their orders. He told Human Rights Watch that "the one way to avoid physical abuse was complete submission—turning into a 'lackey' (in Russian: *shesterka*) who does whatever he is asked no matter how humiliating or senseless." And Alexander D. was not willing to become one. While Alexander D. was standing guard at night, the *dedy* ordered him to sew collars on their jackets, and went to bed themselves. Alexander D. did not do any sewing that night. The next morning, when the *dedy* found out, they made it clear his refusal would not go unpunished. One of the *dedy* told Alexander D. he would be better off "hanging himself." Later that morning, one of the *dedy* took Alexander D. to the storage room and started beating him on the arms with an iron bed post wrapped in a towel. When Alexander D. tried to resist, the *ded* twice beat him with full force on the thigh. Alexander D. fell and the *ded* hit him on the back and head. The *ded* then told Alexander D. that the worst would follow at night. Indeed, that night, after Alexander D. had gone to bed, the *dedy* hit him over the head with a stool to wake him up and took him to the sergeants' room, where they beat him for a while and then told him to do push-ups. Alexander D. initially refused but after more beatings he did push-ups until around 2:00 a.m. when they told him to dust and themselves went to bed. Alexander D. again refused. These incidents early in his service set the tone for Alexander D.'s time in the armed forces.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Andrei D., November 3, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Andrei D. served in unknown units in Chebarkul (Cheliabinsk Province) and Verkhnaia Pyshma (Sverdlovsk Province). Andrei D. is a pseudonym.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii S., October 4, 2002, Uriupinsk, Volgograd Province. Vasilii S. served in unit 2062 in the city of Kaspiisk, Republic of Dagestan. Vasilii S. is a pseudonym.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir Z., November 4, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Vladimir Z. served in unit 69771 in Sverdlovsk Province and in an unknown unit in Shadrinsk, Cheliabinsk Province. Vladimir Z. is a pseudonym.

On a regular day during day time hours, Alexander D. and his peers were routinely assigned the most unpleasant and heaviest physically demanding tasks at the base. At mealtimes, the *dedy* confiscated their tea, as well as their white bread and butter, leaving them “only 100 grams of potato and a piece of black bread.” At dinner, the *dedy* also took their meat or fish away: “You wouldn’t even get to the table before they take it from you.”

The *dedy* took away Alexander D.’s belongings, and sent him and his peers out to beg for money to buy vodka: “They forced us to walk around the [train] platform and ask for money from people. We were supposed to say that we need money to call home: ‘Please give us some change.’” Alexander D., however, refused to beg: “I just couldn’t make myself go up to people and beg for money.” As punishment, one of the *dedy* hit Alexander D. over the head with a fire extinguisher, leaving a gaping scar on the top of his head.

Nights were infinitely worse. When the officers had gone home, the *dedy* had complete free reign over the barracks. The *dedy* regularly deprived the first-year conscripts of sleep and made them sew collars into their uniforms or wash their clothes. Alexander D. said: “There were many of them [*dedy*] so they’d wake five people up at night, and you would sew for them. If you sewed badly, you paid for it. [Once,] I sewed, and they beat me badly with a mop, then took me to the bathroom...and beat three of us with the handle of a shovel.” The *dedy* also used the nights to punish those who had broken the rules or failed to comply with their orders during the day.

Gratuitous abuse was possibly the most widespread at night, especially when *dedy* got drunk. Sometimes, the *dedy* woke up first-year conscripts and made demands that were impossible, as a pretext for abusive punishment. For example, Alexander D. said he was once told, in the middle of the night, that he had fifteen minutes to get a *ded* a plate of fried potatoes. Another time, the *dedy* demanded to know where the keys to a tank were: “You’re supposed to answer the question. If you don’t know, they beat you.” Other times, the *dedy* would intentionally dirty a linoleum strip in the barracks with their tarpaulin boots, and force first-year conscripts to clean it up at night. The *dedy* also sometimes forced first-year conscripts to act out an old army joke called “dried crocodile.” The conscripts had to put their hands and feet on the posts at the head and feet of the bed and remain in push-up position for extended periods of time. “They [the *dedy*] lie down on the bed [beneath you] and God forbid you fall. They beat you up and then start from scratch. Sometimes they even burn your leg from down there... when they were drunk they could make you hang all night.”

The abuse even continued when Alexander D. was sick. After a *ded* hit him over the head with a stool, Alexander D.'s temperature spiked to 39 or 40 degrees Celsius (102.2 to 104 Fahrenheit) and he was admitted to the sickbay. Two *dedy* accompanied him there and, after getting drunk in the evening, "forced me to serve them: take away plates, prepare soups for them. Once, they forced me to clean up even though I was on an I.V."

The daily grind of harassment, humiliation and abuse gradually wore Alexander D. down. One incident put him over the edge. He told Human Rights Watch:

I received a letter from home informing me that my mother was seriously ill. Sergeants and officers...open our letters. Sometimes, someone sends money and they immediately take it away. When my letter came, they read that my mother was ill and said "Well, what are you going to do to yourself now?...Your mommy got sick. Maybe she'll die..." They sat down and started to laugh about the letter before they gave it to me.

Two days later, Alexander D. went to the sickbay. Second-year conscripts joined him there and continued to harass and humiliate him. He made a request for short-term leave—to visit his mother in the hospital—but was denied. Then he decided to attempt suicide. He told Human Rights Watch:

At night, when they had gone to bed, I wanted to insert air into my veins and took a syringe... A guy from my draft had gone to the bathroom and came into the kitchen to drink some water. He noticed the syringe in my hands. He took it from me and said: "Are you crazy, or something? Don't do that. You're going to kill yourself because of someone. You should just run away."

And so, after about two and a half months of service, Alexander D. tried to run away for the first time. When his section was going to the smoking room, he pretended to be going to the bathroom and tried to run. However, a fellow conscript noticed him and informed his sergeant. He was captured before he reached the railroad tracks. That night and the next morning the *dedy* beat Alexander D. and told him that he would "never manage to run away."

Alexander D. endured the situation in his unit for another six weeks, but then another incident made him decide to try to escape once more. Sick of the abuse in the unit, he pretended to have a fever and went into the sickbay. As before, a second-year conscript accompanied him. For three nights, the *ded* did not allow him to sleep before 4:00 a.m., forcing him to make tea and clean the floors. Alexander D. escaped. Near the base, he found a deserted house, where he hid for the day. In the evening he walked to the train station, hoping to be able to catch a train to St. Petersburg. But as he approached the station, he noticed a military patrol. After hiding from patrols for five days, Alexander D. got help from a few civilians who gave him regular clothes, and advised him what train to take to avoid the military patrol.

In St. Petersburg, a hungry and exhausted Alexander D.—he had not eaten for five days and slept very little—went into a church, believing no police officer would dare to bother him there. A fellow conscript had told him about the Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg but he did not know how to find them. Alexander D. was lucky: a priest at the church happened to know the organization’s address and an elderly man in the church offered Alexander D. a bed and eventually helped him make contact with the organization.

* * *

For years, Russia has faced a true epidemic of thousands of first-year conscripts who flee their military units every year—according to soldiers’ rights groups, the vast majority run away from *dedovshchina*.⁵² These young men realize that they may face prosecution for unauthorized departure from their units. And they can vividly imagine the treatment they will face if a military patrol captures them and returns them to their units. Yet, their desperation is so great that they take the risk. Many of them are captured by military patrols, and many are returned by parents who fear that their sons may be imprisoned for desertion otherwise. But thousands every year make their way home and, more often than not, they end up in the offices of one of the many soldiers’ rights organizations active around Russia.

In 1989, groups of women, often mothers of victims of *dedovshchina*, began to organize all over Russia. Their aim was to help young men avoid being drafted arbitrarily when they had legitimate grounds not to serve, and to protect conscripts who fled their units

⁵² All young men Human Rights Watch interviewed for this report, with the exception of one, said that they ran away because of *dedovshchina*. The one conscript, a woodworker by profession, told us that he ran away because he was sure that as soon as the officers found out about his profession, they would make him work at their homes and *dachas*.

due to *dedovshchina*, ill-treatment, malnutrition, and other abuse. These groups, popularly referred to as the soldiers' mothers' committees, quickly became one of Russia's most widespread and effective grassroots movements, and throughout the years have helped tens of thousands of young men, literally saving lives every day.⁵³

Most soldiers' rights groups follow two basic models to help abused runaway soldiers avoid returning to their units. Initially, they try to establish whether there are any grounds for discharge from the armed forces on medical grounds, whether acquired pre-conscription or during military service. When soldiers' rights groups cannot find medical grounds for a discharge from the armed forces, they seek the transfer of the conscript to a different unit.

* * *

Alexander D. reached the office of the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg one day in late March 2002. He filled out a form with basic details about himself and his military service, wrote a statement about the treatment he had faced, and filled out a questionnaire about torture. Soldiers' Mothers staff then discussed his situation with him and subsequently set in motion an effort to get Alexander D. discharged from the military on medical grounds.

In the next few days, Alexander D. underwent several medical examinations. While Alexander D. had no significant physical problems, a former military psychiatrist, who now cooperates with the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg, found that he had a personality disorder. At the request of the Soldiers' Mothers, military officials at Alexander D.'s unit referred him to a military hospital for observation in the psychiatric ward. After three weeks of observation, doctors at the hospital ruled that Alexander D. was not fit for military service for psychiatric reasons, and ordered him to be discharged from military service. It was unclear whether Alexander D. was drafted with the disorder or acquired it during his military service.

Toward the end of his stay at the military hospital, one of the *dedy* who had abused him came to the hospital and tried to take him back to the unit. He threatened Alexander D. with violent revenge for running away and for giving an interview to a journalist about the abuses he had endured during his service. Alexander D. managed to escape and made his way back to the office of the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg.

⁵³ Throughout Russia it is overwhelmingly the mothers of recruitment-age males who actively seek to prevent their conscription.

Upon discharge, Alexander D. learned that his ordeal in the armed forces would complicate his life for years to come: On his military identity card, officials indicated that he was discharged for psychiatric reasons. As many employers demand to see a prospective employee's military identity card, he expected this to complicate his search for work considerably. He told Human Rights Watch, his former employer, with whom he maintained good relations, would not take him back with it.

After his release from the military hospital, Alexander D. went back to his military unit together with an employee of the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg and a Human Rights Watch researcher to pick up some documents. The three met with the unit's commander, who did not seem at all concerned about the abuses Alexander D. had faced and displayed no inclination to investigate what had happened to him. Soldiers' Mothers and Human Rights Watch representatives also met individually with each of the four *dedy* whom Alexander D. had identified as his main tormentors. The *dedy* did not deny that they had beaten Alexander D. They maintained that without beatings it was impossible to maintain discipline in the company. They also appealed to what they clearly saw as their "right" to humiliate and abuse first-year conscripts. One of them said:

When we arrived as first-year conscripts, nobody spared us, we slaved for the *dedy*, and were beaten much more than this Alexander D. now... And we did not complain, we did not run away, and eventually we became friends with the *dedy*. Now it's our turn. That's the law here. We didn't endure a full year here so that some *dukhi* can now ignore us. Let them put up with it, and then their time of compensation will come.⁵⁴

The *dedy* felt that Alexander D. was just a "weakling" who needed to be turned into a man. The fact that Alexander D. had broken the "rule of silence" by complaining about his treatment, including to the press, particularly outraged the *dedy*. They called it an act of "betrayal."

INITIATION PRACTICES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

From the perspective of international human rights law, military recruits are an exceptional group. The special mission of the armed forces may justify restrictions on their rights that far exceed those that may be placed on almost any other group. For

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with a *ded* who asked to remain anonymous, Mga, Leningrad Province, April 17, 2002.

example, ordering a prisoner to crawl through the mud for several hours would almost certainly constitute degrading treatment. Such an order from a military commander to conscripts during field training would be a legitimate part of a soldier's preparation for battlefield conditions, as would temporary deprivation of food or sleep. Analogously, acts of initiation that would constitute degrading or inhuman treatment with respect to prisoners or other categories of persons may not reach that threshold when they occur in the armed forces, provided that they contribute to the specific mission of the armed forces.

However, a person's status of military recruit does not justify the placement of unlimited restrictions on his rights. In its case law, the European Court of Human Rights, the body that enforces implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights,⁵⁵ has consistently held that, while certain restrictions on the rights of military servicemen may be necessary to ensure the proper functioning of the army, these may not serve to altogether negate a basic right.⁵⁶ Initiation practices can therefore violate a number of

⁵⁵ Russia became a party to this convention on May 5, 1998, and has accepted the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights over its territory.

⁵⁶ In *Engel and others v. the Netherlands* case (Judgment of June 8, 1976), the European Court of Human Rights laid down a general rule on the applicability of the European Convention on Human Rights to military servicemen. It held that:

The Convention applies in principle to members of the armed forces and not only to civilians. It specifies in Articles 1 and 14 (art. 1, art. 14) that "everyone within (the) jurisdiction" of the Contracting States is to enjoy "without discrimination" the rights and freedoms set out in Section I. Article 4 para. 3 (b) (art. 4-3-b), which exempts military service from the prohibition against forced or compulsory labour, further confirms that as a general rule the guarantees of the Convention extend to servicemen. The same is true of Article 11 para. 2 (art. 11-2) in fine, which permits the States to introduce special restrictions on the exercise of the freedoms of assembly and association by members of the armed forces.

Nevertheless, when interpreting and applying the rules of the Convention in the present case, the Court must bear in mind the particular characteristics of military life and its effects on the situation of individual members of the armed forces (para. 54).

Applying this general rule to the concrete circumstances of the *Engel* case, in which the applicants alleged that the measures of military discipline they were subjected to violated their right to liberty, the Court held that "the bounds that Article 5 (art. 5) requires the State not to exceed are not identical for servicemen and civilians. A disciplinary penalty or measure which on analysis would unquestionably be deemed a deprivation of liberty were it to be applied to a civilian may not possess this character when imposed upon a serviceman. Nevertheless, such penalty or measure does not escape the terms of Article 5 (art. 5) when it takes the form of restrictions that clearly deviate from the normal conditions of life within the armed forces of the Contracting State" (para. 59).

The Court has also ruled that a state's authority to impose restrictions on the rights to respect for the private life and freedom of expression of servicemen due to the particular characteristics of military life is not unlimited. In the *Lustig-Prean* case (Judgment of September 27, 1999), the applicants complained that the authorities had investigated their sexual orientation and dismissed them from the armed forces on account of their homosexuality. They alleged that both the investigation and the dismissal violated their right to respect for their private lives. The Court held that "it is open to the State to impose restrictions on an individual's right to respect for his private life where there is a real threat to the armed forces' operational effectiveness, as the proper functioning of an army is hardly imaginable without legal rules designed to prevent service personnel from undermining it. However, the national authorities cannot rely on such rules to frustrate the exercise by individual members of the armed forces of their right to respect for their private lives, which right applies to service personnel as it does to others within the jurisdiction of the State" (para. 82).

In the *Vereinigung Demokratischer Soldaten Österreichs und Gubi v Austria* case (Judgment of December 19, 1994), the applicants alleged that the decision by the Austrian Ministry of Defense not to

basic human rights norms, including the prohibition against torture, inhuman and degrading treatment and the right to property.⁵⁷ They can also violate the right to the highest attainable level of health.⁵⁸

Torture, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment

The European Convention of Human Rights, to which Russia is a party, holds that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”⁵⁹ It does not allow for derogation from this right under any circumstances.⁶⁰ As suggested by the language of the provision, the Convention differentiates between three distinct types of prohibited treatment or punishment: torture, inhuman treatment or punishment, and degrading treatment or punishment. According to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, the difference between these three types of treatment is primarily one of gradation in the suffering inflicted, with torture causing the most and degrading treatment the least severe suffering.⁶¹

In order for treatment or punishment to be unlawful, it must reach “a minimum level of severity.”⁶² As there are no abstract or absolute standards for prohibited treatment, the borderline between harsh treatment and prohibited forms of treatment is often hard to establish. Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights has held that “the assessment of this minimum is, in the nature of things, relative” and “depends on all circumstances of the case.”⁶³

distribute a magazine about the armed forces to servicemen while distributing all (other such magazines constituted a violation of freedom of expression. The government argued that the magazine presented a “threat to discipline and to the effectiveness of the army” and this justified its decision not to distribute it. The Court held that “none of the issues of *der Igel* [name of the publication] submitted in evidence recommend disobedience or violence, or even question the usefulness of the army. Admittedly, most of the issues set out complaints, put forward proposals for reforms or encourage readers to institute legal complaints or appeals proceedings. However, despite their often polemical tenor, it does not appear that they overstepped the bounds of what is permissible in the context of a mere discussion of ideas, which must be tolerated in the army of a democratic State just as it must be in the society that such an army serves” (para. 38).

⁵⁷ Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibits torture, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. Article 1 of Protocol 1 to the convention provides for the right to the peaceful enjoyment of one’s possessions.

⁵⁸ Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides for the right to the highest attainable standard of health. See: G.A. res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force Jan. 3, 1976. Russia, then the Soviet Union, ratified the covenant in 1973.

⁵⁹ Article 3. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights contains a similar provision in article 7. The Soviet Union, to which Russia is the successor state, ratified the covenant in 1976. Russia is also a party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

⁶⁰ Article 15(2).

⁶¹ *Ireland v United Kingdom case* (Judgment of January 18, 1978), para. 167.

⁶² *Kudla v. Poland case* (Judgment of October 26, 2000), para. 91.

⁶³ *Kudla v. Poland case* (Judgment of October 26, 2000), para. 91.

The European Commission of Human Rights, a now defunct supervisory body for the convention, has held that “treatment or punishment of an individual may be said to be degrading if it grossly humiliates him before others or drives him to act against his will or conscience.”⁶⁴ The Court has also held that treatment or punishment that arouses “in the victims feelings of fear, anguish and inferiority capable of humiliating and debasing them” constitutes degrading treatment.⁶⁵ Inhuman treatment covers “at least such treatment as deliberately causes severe suffering, mental or physical, which, in the particular situation, is unjustifiable”⁶⁶ and treatment that “was premeditated, was applied for hours at a stretch and caused either actual bodily injury or intense physical and mental suffering.”⁶⁷

All forms of physical assault associated with *dedovshchina* clearly reach this minimum threshold. But short of physical assault, it is often not immediately obvious whether a specific treatment or punishment meets the threshold. Treatment may be humiliating but not qualify as inhuman or degrading treatment. Indeed, the Court has held that “the suffering and humiliation involved must...go beyond that inevitable element of suffering or humiliation connected with a given form of legitimate treatment or punishment.”⁶⁸ Applied to military recruits, the treatment in the course of initiation can thus reach the threshold of degrading treatment only if it goes beyond suffering and humiliation ordinarily connected with military service.

While the threshold may be higher for military recruits than for detainees it can only be marginally so. The Court has repeatedly held that the nature of treatment and its effect on the person undergoing the treatment, rather than the justification for the treatment, is decisive for determining whether a violation has taken place. For example, in *Tomasi v France*, the Court ruled that “the undeniable difficulties inherent in the fight against terrorism cannot result in limits being placed on the protection by Article 3 to be afforded in respect of the physical integrity of individuals.”⁶⁹ Although the Court has never in its history ruled on a case related to initiation practices in armed forces, the *Tomasi* ruling seems to indicate that it may not be receptive to the argument that treatment that would normally be considered to violate Article 3 is acceptable with respect to military recruits because it enhances military effectiveness.

⁶⁴ Report of November 5, 1969, *Greek Case*, Yearbook XII (1969), p. 186. Although the European Commission on Human Rights is now defunct, its case-law remains relevant.

⁶⁵ *Kudla v. Poland case* (Judgment of October 26, 2000), para. 92.

⁶⁶ Report of November 5, 1969, *Greek Case*, Yearbook XII (1969), p. 186. Although the European Commission on Human Rights is now defunct, its case-law remains relevant.

⁶⁷ *Kudla v. Poland case* (Judgment of October 26, 2000), para. 92.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Tomasi v France case* (Judgment of August 27, 1992), para. 115.

Initiation practices can vary greatly from regiment to regiment. As discussed in the previous chapter, they may be one-off rituals that take place at a certain stage of one's military service and last one evening or night; or can span an extended period of time, sometimes as long as six to twelve months. The rites can consist of a small number of violent, humiliating, or disgusting acts, or can involve less harsh "cold shoulder" treatment over a longer period of time. Recruits may submit to initiation semi-voluntarily because they want to win group acceptance; they may be forced into submission by violence or the threat thereof. All these factors may be relevant in determining whether acts of initiation, individually or cumulatively, violate international human rights standards. The Court's case law has indicated that it can make such determination only on a case-by-case basis taking into consideration such circumstances as the nature and context of the treatment, the manner and method of its execution, its duration, its physical or mental effects and, in some instances, the sex, age, and state of health of the victim.⁷⁰

As noted above, all forms of physical assault, whether as punishment or otherwise, fall within the scope of the prohibition of torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. In contrast, many other forms of treatment associated with initiation practices do not in and of themselves qualify as degrading or inhuman treatment or punishment, but Human Rights Watch believes that their excessive or protracted nature, or their combination with the constant threat of violence, may push them over the threshold. This is the case in the following situations:

- Deprivation of food or sleep as part of an initiation does not necessarily constitute degrading treatment, but depriving a recruit a significant part of his food or sleep over an extended period of time would be degrading or inhuman.
- Severe forms of physical exercise as punishment in the context of initiation practices are not in and of themselves degrading or inhuman, but forced physical exercise to the point of physical collapse under threat of violence would constitute degrading treatment or punishment.

⁷⁰ *Kudla v. Poland case* (Judgment of October 26, 2000), para. 91. It is unclear how the Court will look at the issue of consent, as it has, to date, considered this issue in cases regarding medical treatment for mental patients or mentally deranged prisoners (see: P. van Dijk and G.J.H. van Hoof, "Theory and Practice of the European Convention on Human Rights, The Hague, 1998, p. 317). Also, the Court has repeatedly stated that it takes into consideration prevalent views at the time of the treatment, as it considers the European Convention to be "a living instrument which...must be interpreted in the light of present-day conditions." (*Tyrer v UK case*, Judgment of April 25, 1978, para. 31) In this respect, moves in recent decades in many Council of Europe countries, as well as in the United States, Canada and Australia, to ban harsh initiation practices are important.

- Making new recruits perform chores as part of an initiation does not in and of itself constitute degrading treatment, but forcing a recruit to live in servitude for extended periods of time, under threat of violence, reaches this threshold.

Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) provides for the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.⁷¹ Under it, states are required to “refrain from interfering directly or indirectly with the enjoyment of the right to health” and to protect persons within its jurisdiction against interference with the right by third parties.⁷² The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the body that monitors states parties’ compliance with the covenant, has noted that states have a special obligation with respect to groups, like persons living in state custody, that cannot, for reasons beyond their control, realize that right themselves.⁷³ Conscripts live in a custodial situation as they are not allowed to leave their base without prior permission from their commander and may be administratively or criminally punished should they do so.

The ICESCR allows for restrictions on the right to health “as are determined by law only in so far as this may be compatible with the nature of these rights and solely for the purpose of promoting the general welfare in a democratic society.”⁷⁴ Such limitations must be “proportional, i.e. the least restrictive alternative must be adopted...”⁷⁵

With respect to military recruits, certain restrictions may be placed on the right to health for reasons of national security. For example, temporary deprivation of food or sleep as part of training exercises for battlefield conditions may be legitimate because of the special mission of the armed forces. Yet, the impact of such deprivation on the health of recruits must be proportional to the benefits to national security.

The fact that hazing practices are not officially organized or sanctioned does not absolve the state from its obligation to protect the right to health of recruits.

⁷¹ Article 12.

⁷² *General Comment 14. The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health*, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 22nd sess., 2000, para. 33 [online], [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(symbol\)/E.C.12.2000.4,+CESCR+General+comment+14.En?OpenDocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(symbol)/E.C.12.2000.4,+CESCR+General+comment+14.En?OpenDocument) (retrieved October 24, 2003).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, para. 37.

⁷⁴ Article 4.

⁷⁵ *General Comment 14. The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health*, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 22nd sess., 2000, para. 29.

Right to the Peaceful Enjoyment of One's Possessions

Dedovshchina almost invariably involves depriving new recruits their money and personal belongings. The European Convention on Human Rights stipulates that “every natural or legal person is entitled to the peaceful enjoyment of his possessions.”⁷⁶ A person can be deprived of his possessions only “in the public interest and subject to the conditions provided for by law and by the general principles of international law.” As Russian law does not provide for the type of deprivation of property practiced as part of *dedovshchina*, these practices also violate the European Convention on Human Rights.

Government's Responsibility to Investigate

Russia has an obligation to investigate any incidents of torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment that come to their attention under the European Convention on Human Rights and the Convention against Torture. The European Convention requires that states establish “an effective remedy before a national authority” for anyone whose rights and freedoms as set out in the convention have been violated.⁷⁷ In addition, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that the Convention requires an effective investigation of ill-treatment complaints whenever the applicant has an “arguable claim.”⁷⁸ The Convention against Torture obliges states parties to initiate a prompt and impartial investigation of torture complaints whenever circumstances give “reasonable ground to believe that an act of torture has been committed.”⁷⁹ The same applies to incidents of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.⁸⁰

DEDOVSHCHINA ABUSES: AN OVERVIEW

Alexander D. was one of many conscripts Human Rights Watch interviewed for its research on the Russian armed forces. Throughout our research, conscripts from all over Russia told us numerous versions of what was essentially one and the same story. They spoke about the *dedy* treating them like slaves, of the violent punishments they suffered at their hands, and of gratuitous abuse. They recounted the indifference and remoteness

⁷⁶ Article 1 of Protocol 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights.

⁷⁷ Article 13.

⁷⁸ For example, in the case of *Assenov and others v. Bulgaria* (Judgment of October 28, 1998) it stated: The Court considers that, in these circumstances, where an individual raises an arguable claim that he has been seriously ill-treated by the police or other agents of the State unlawfully and in breach of Article 3, that provision, read in conjunction with the State's general duty under Article 1 of the Convention to “secure to everyone within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms in [the] Convention,” requires by implication that there should be an effective official investigation [of alleged violations of the rights set forth in the Convention.] This obligation...should be capable of leading to the identification and punishment of those responsible.

⁷⁹ Article 12.

⁸⁰ Article 16.

of the officers, and the increasing despair they felt at the prospect of a full year of initiation, and, eventually, their decision to runaway. There were exceptions, of course: the occasional conscript talked about a unit where there was no, or almost no, *dedovshchina*. Their stories varied greatly in details, as initiation practices vary to some extent from regiment to regiment and depend on local traditions, the personalities of the *dedy*, the first-year conscripts, and the officers. Yet, the uniformity of the testimony was striking.

This report discusses three broad, interconnected categories of *dedovshchina* abuses: coerced servility, with its excessively arbitrary orders; gratuitous abuse; and excessive punishments, for failing to comply both with expected servility and for violating formal rules.

Expectations of Servility to Dedy

While the Military Code of Conduct gives second-year conscripts some formal authority over first-year conscripts who are lower in rank, it also limits this authority, stipulating clearly that orders may not be given that have nothing to do with military service or that are aimed at violating the law.⁸¹ Yet, in practice, *dedy* expect servility of first-year conscripts. They make up arbitrary rules that first-year conscripts must abide by, and change them at will; they expect first-year conscripts to be at their service at any time of day or night, and for any kind of order, whether lawful or unlawful, safe or dangerous, innocuous or malicious. If first-year conscripts complain, fail to deliver, or refuse to abide the rules or orders, the *dedy* punish them in whatever way they see fit, and often do so violently. These rules and demands dominate every aspect of the life of the first-year conscript: their day-time military duties, food, personal hygiene, health, possessions, and sleeping patterns. The military code of conduct does not provide for these arbitrary restrictions or the threats of punishment should they refuse to obey. Thus, from the point of view of Russian law, the vast majority of the orders and rules of the *dedy* are not lawful.

Determining whether these rules and orders also violate international human rights law is more complicated. A certain level of submissiveness to soldiers who have served longer arguably strengthens the respect for hierarchy necessary in military structures. This is the case even if new recruits are told to perform acts that are mildly degrading—for example, cleaning soldiers' dirty boots, repairing their uniforms, or fetching them food—and do not directly serve the special mission of the military. But there must be a limit to this submissiveness; otherwise the right to be free of degrading treatment would

⁸¹ Article 40(4) of the Military Code of Conduct.

be negated. Likewise, some interference with the right to health may be acceptable, but initiation treatment may not unjustifiably threaten the health of new recruits. It is important to note that, even if many of the *dedy*'s orders do not in and of themselves amount to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, their cumulative effect may well push them over the threshold.

In this section, we primarily discuss the orders and rules of the *dedy* during off-hours and with respect to the property of first-year conscripts. We also briefly discuss the situation with respect to meals and health, which was documented extensively in another Human Rights Watch report, "To Serve without Health."⁸² We do not consider as violative of international law the assignment of the most unpleasant tasks during day time routines, such as the dirtiest kitchen duties, or heaviest tasks keeping the military base clean. First-year conscripts generally did not talk about this in their interviews, evidently considering it a fact of life that junior conscripts perform the least pleasant official tasks. Indeed, this would seem routine in armed forces around the world and raises no concerns under international law.

Food, Money and Other Belongings

Van Bladel observes that Russian soldiers live in a "world of scarcity," lacking such "fundamental things as food, beverage and especially money."⁸³ This may explain why *dedy* use *dedovshchina* so consistently to prey on new recruits' money, food, and clothing, and to coerce them into procuring the same.⁸⁴ Conscripts face the constant threat of violent punishment for failing to surrender their property, no matter how meager, or to procure food, cigarettes, and the like.

They told Human Rights Watch that *dedy* routinely confiscated their property immediately upon arrival at the unit; forced them to hand over their salaries every month, as well as food and money they received in the mail or during visits from their parents. The *dedy* also frequently ordered first-year conscripts to procure money, food, or cigarettes, thus forcing the conscripts to ask their parents for these items or to beg on the street. The *dedy*'s demands that first-year conscripts procure for them were so routine that, in many cases, they placed the conscripts in a permanent state of servitude. Conscripts said they were beaten for failing to comply.

⁸² Human Rights Watch, "To Serve Without Health. Inadequate Nutrition and Health Care in the Russian Armed Forces," *A Human Rights Watch Short Report*, Vol. 15, No. 9 (D), November 2003.

⁸³ Van Bladel.

⁸⁴ Van Bladel goes on to say that "money gives the soldier access to products that may color his gray, dull and monotonous life. It can improve his diet and may help him temporarily flee his dreadful situation through alcohol and drugs." *Ibid.*

“Stodnevka”

Numerous conscripts described a tradition called *stodnevka*, or “one hundred days.” According to this tradition, every night first-year conscripts have to put cigarettes under the pillows of *dembeli* (conscripts who have entered the last hundred days of their military service). They must inscribe the number of remaining days before the *dembel*’s discharge order on the cigarettes. As one conscript explained to his mother, he had to write: “Thirty-eight days remain before *ded Vova*’s discharge. All the best, *dukob* Roman.”⁸⁵ Several conscripts stressed the cigarettes had to be of good quality, or they faced punishment.

The conscripts all said forgetting to prepare the cigarette or failing to find one led to beatings. Vasilii B. said: “Every night he must have a cigarette. If you skipped a day and he comes in the evening and there is no cigarette – that’s it. In such cases, they beat [you] very severely.”⁸⁶ The mother of another conscript said: “If eleven [junior conscripts] brought cigarettes and one did not, all [were taken] to the bathroom or storage room and beaten that night. Then the eleven [who did bring cigarettes] also beat the twelfth, who did not bring that cigarette.”⁸⁷

The story of one conscript illustrates the stresses associated with *stodnevka* particularly vividly. On May 27, 2002, Dmitrii Samsonov wrote to his parents and grandmother that the *stodnevka* was starting on June 19. He asked them all to send him supplies. For example, he wrote to his mother: “Mama, this is what I need for the next four months: every week a transfer of forty to fifty rubles, and a small package with Prima [cigarettes] and filter cigarettes... Mama, don’t forget to send this immediately. Immediately!”⁸⁸

The letter was delivered late and his parents received it only the day before the start of the *stodnevka*. A few days later, a second letter arrived in which Samsonov expressed his desperation:

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Rem P., October 28, 2002, Novokuznetsk. Rem P. served in a training unit in Kashtak and then in a regular unit in Borzia, both in Chita Province. Rem P. is a pseudonym.

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii B., October 17, 2002, Novosibirsk. Vasilii B. served in a training unit in Pereslavl-Zalesskii, Yaroslavl Province, and in a rocket troops unit in Uzhur, Krasnoyarsk Region. Vasilii B. is a pseudonym.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Rem P.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Dmitrii Samsonov, October 27, 2002, Novokuznetsk. Samsonov’s parents provided Human Rights Watch with copies this letter and other letters, which remain on file with us. Samsonov served in a training unit in Kolomna and in a regular unit in Nizhnii Novgorod Province.

Today the *stodnevka* is starting and I haven't received anything from you, nor from mama or grandma... I don't know what to do. It's 2:00 p.m. now. It will be lights-out in eight hours. I think that I will not survive this night. Or actually, I will survive but it will cost me a lot. I wrote to you, begged you—just in case, I also wrote to grandma—so you would [send me money] quickly but nobody responded. You just don't understand how important it was for me. I needed 200 rubles for the *stodnevka*, a pack of Yava Zolotoi [a cigarette brand name] and four cigarettes per day by June 19. That was it...⁸⁹

As a post scriptum to the letter, Samsonov wrote: "I love you very much and miss you but I don't know how I'm going to survive now." In a letter dated July 13, 2002, Samsonov wrote that he was in a military hospital with a broken wrist. He wrote: "I'm not going to explain how that happened. It would take too long. I just wanted to inform you that I survived the beginning of the *stodnevka*." In the letter, he repeated his requests for money and cigarettes.

On July 24, 2002, his parents received a telegram saying that their son had died the day before. Later, they were told that he had slit his veins.⁹⁰

Confiscation of the Property of Conscripts

Conscripts almost uniformly told Human Rights Watch that in the first days after they were assigned to a regular military unit the *dedy* took their civilian clothes, food packages from home, and their personal belongings. Many also said *dedy* forced them to swap newly-issued military clothing for their own worn-out clothes. In some cases, the *dedy* openly demanded that newcomers hand over these items, in other they took them while the first-years were outside or asleep.

Dmitrii Kosov told Human Rights Watch that when he and other first-years arrived at their unit outside St. Petersburg, military officials brought them into a room and sat them down. He said:

They [military officials] took us in and sat us down in the Lenin room... We sat there and waited. Then some unshaven guy comes in, his pants are falling down, and asks everyone to give him money because he

⁸⁹ Letter from Samsonov to his father, dated June 19, 2002. The letter is on file with Human Rights Watch.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Dmitrii Samsonov.

doesn't have enough to buy alcohol. [When nobody volunteers,] he takes one of the people...out into the corridor. This person later returns, clearly beaten. Then he [the unshaven guy] asks: 'Is there anybody else who doesn't want to share his money?' Everyone starts to give money. Then another one comes in and says that he will soon be discharged and that he needs pants. He collects six or seven pairs of pants. Others come in who need shoes. One of them liked my coat. My wallet went the same way, as did my telephone.⁹¹

Dedy told Anatolii T. to take the food package his mother had made for him to the pantry, where, as he was told, he could collect it later. However, when he went to change his clothes in the barracks, "they sat on the bed, and had already eaten it all."⁹²

Aleksei Koshelev was left with nothing but his trousers when he arrived at his unit. He told Human Rights Watch: "[A]ll [the clothing] we had was new. Warm jackets... They, the *dembeli*, had old, worn out [clothing]... And they started to take [them] from us all. I met one [a *ded*] in the hallway. He said: 'Take it off!' I said 'I won't.' They started to [beat me]...they took it anyway, took my cap... I ended up in just my pants."⁹³

Numerous conscripts said senior soldiers went through their pockets and night tables as they were sleeping or outside. For example, Vasilii S. and Aleksei Koshelev said the *dedy* went through their pockets at night and took their belongings. Vasilii S. said: "Whatever you have in your night table disappears within two days. They can't be locked."⁹⁴ Anatolii T. said that the *dedy* even stole his personal items, like his watch, tooth paste, soap, and razor.⁹⁵

Confiscation of Salaries

Many conscripts told Human Rights Watch that the *dedy* confiscated their small monthly wage for purchasing cigarettes, tooth paste, and other personal items.⁹⁶ In some cases,

⁹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Dmitrii Kosov, April 11, 2002, St. Petersburg. Kosov served in the Ministry of Defense's unit 12744 in Osinovoe Roshche, Leningrad Province.

⁹² Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii T., April 13, 2002, St. Petersburg. T. served in unit 6716 of the Ministry of Interior's troops in Lembolovo, Leningrad Province. Anatolii T. is a pseudonym.

⁹³ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Koshelev, April 12, 2002, St. Petersburg. Koshelev served in units 6716 (Lembolovo, Leningrad Province) and 6718 of the Ministry of Interior's troops.

⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii S.

⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii T.

⁹⁶ At the time of service of most of the conscripts interviewed for this report, the wage was thirty-six rubles per month. It has since been raised to one hundred rubles per month (about U.S.\$3.00).

conscripts said, officers also confiscated their salaries. A few lucky conscripts told Human Rights Watch that they were allowed to keep their salaries.

Anton A., who served in a railroad troops unit north of St. Petersburg, said that, before he and his peers received their first salary, conscripts who had served six months more than they had, warned them that they had to hand their salaries over the *dedy*. “We went to get [our money], came back to the Company and handed it over.” Anton A. said that he did not always have to hand over the full amount. “Sometimes they allowed us to keep sixteen or six rubles, sometimes nothing—as they [the *dedy*] saw fit.” Once, Anton A. tried to keep his salary because he wanted to call his mother: “Junior Sergeant S. asked me for the thirty rubles. I said [that]...I wanted to phone home. He did not beat me but began to intimidate me: ‘Do you want to live normally here? ... Watch out.’” Anton A. said that after that he “did not have a quiet day...” The *dedy* beat and taunted him, apparently in retaliation. Shortly after, he ran away.⁹⁷

Alexander Sukhanov said that the *starshina* of his Company, a second-year conscript, disbursed salaries to conscripts. However, he always kept part of the salaries for himself. Once, when Sukhanov asked for his full salary, the *starshina* told him that he withheld it “for me, for gasoline. After all, it’s me who drives around searching for you, or takes you to the military prison in my own car. You can’t expect me to spend my own money on that, can you?” Sukhanov said that when he collected his salary, a *ded* always accompanied him: “As soon as you leave the Company, he [the *ded*] says: ‘Let’s share... God ordered [people] to share.’ So I get the money, want to give him [just] ten rubles. He takes it all, quietly turns around and walks away.” Sukhanov said the *dedy* routinely took the salaries of all twenty first-year conscripts in the company, with the exception of one conscript who had befriended a *ded*.⁹⁸

A number of conscripts said they signed a registry every month to confirm receipt of money they never actually saw. In these cases, it was not always clear whether the *dedy* or officers took the money. For example, Aleksei K., who served as commander of a squad in Totskoe in Orenburg province, told Human Rights Watch that the commander of his battalion came by with the registry once a month, saying “Today is salary day,” and had conscripts sign the registry. However, Aleksei K. and his fellow conscripts never saw a penny. He did not know where his money went. Aleksei K. also said he had spent the few months of his military service in a unit in Krasnodar Region, where officers made

⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A., April 18, 2002, St. Petersburg. Anton A. served in unit 51046 of the railroad troops in Mga, Leningrad Province. Anton A. is a pseudonym.

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother, April 17, 2002, St. Petersburg. Sukhanov served in the Ministry of Defense’s construction unit 32087 in St. Petersburg.

sure everyone got their full salary every month.⁹⁹ In some cases, officers and *dedy* offered justifications for not giving conscripts their salaries. For example, Pavel P., who also signed for his salary every month but never received any money, said that he and his peers were told that the money was used to buy soap for them.¹⁰⁰

Confiscation of Money and Food from Correspondence

Dedy and officers routinely screen packages and letters for conscripts and confiscate any money and other valuables they contain. For example, Alexander Sokolov told Human Rights Watch that his grandmother sent him a five ruble note in every letter. While he received all her letters, the money was always gone and the envelopes were taped up.¹⁰¹ Aware of this pervasive practice, Pavel P. told his parents not to send him anything valuable: “Why [should they send things], if half disappears right and left?”¹⁰² Anatolii S. instructed his mother to specify the sender of the letter as someone not related to him because mail from parents was more carefully scrutinized. The mother of one conscript told Human Rights Watch that, after a while, she started writing on the envelopes: “There’s no money in here, give the letter to the soldier, he’s expecting it.”¹⁰³ Conscripts whose parents sent food packages by mail said they were forced to “share” the package with the *dedy*. Iliia B. told Human Rights Watch that when a person receives information that a package has arrived, “he goes there with the *starshii*... , takes the package and comes back to the unit...and opens his package. And that is it... Two or three *dedy* walk up and say: ‘Let’s have a look.’ They look, and half [your stuff] is gone. Another looks and you’re left with one piece of candy.”¹⁰⁴

Visits by Relatives

Dozens of conscripts told Human Rights Watch that, whenever relatives visited them, the *dedy* confiscated whatever valuables and food they received. They said that refusal to give up these items led to beatings and was pointless anyway, as the *dedy* took the desired items nonetheless. In a number of cases, the *dedy* put together “shopping lists” for the relatives. The *dedy* frequently also sent conscripts from the area to their homes to get food and money, or made them contact their parents so they would visit them.

⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei K., October 4, 2002, Volgograd. Aleksei K. served in units 37115 (Krasnodar Region) and 61918 (Totskoe, Orenburg Province). Aleksei K. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Pavel P., April 19, 2002, St. Petersburg. Pavel P. served in unit 01375 of the railroad troops in Mga, Leningrad Province. Pavel P. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sokolov. Sokolov served at a training unit in Belidzhi in Dagestan and in border troops unit 2350.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch interview with Pavel P.

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Anatolii S., November 3, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Anatolii S. served in a construction unit near Ekaterinburg. Anatolii S. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Iliia B., October 29, 2002, Novokuznetsk. Iliia B. served in a Ministry of Defense unit eastern Siberia. Iliia B. is a pseudonym.

Aleksei Koshelev told Human Rights Watch that whatever his parents brought him during visits was taken away: “For example, my relatives came to visit, we sat around for two hours... I can’t immediately eat everything, [but if I] bring a bag back to the Company, already at the checkpoint [it’s]: ‘Come here, we’re going to search you...’”¹⁰⁵ A number of conscripts told their mothers not to bring them care packages. Ilia R. told his mother: “Mom, it’s pointless. I won’t even get near my unit with this.” He told her that the *dedy* would be waiting for him at the entrance to his base to shake him down upon his return.¹⁰⁶ Another conscript told his mother that she should visit him only when he was in the military hospital because otherwise her visits were more trouble than good.¹⁰⁷

In some cases, the *dedy* placed orders with conscripts who expected visits from relatives. For example, Anton E.’s mother told Human Rights Watch that the *dedy* instructed her son to make sure she brought packages of soup: “I told him I would [get some] and he said I should buy extra, that it ‘wasn’t for us.’” A fellow conscript of her son’s later explained to her that the *dedy* had “warned him not to return without gifts.”¹⁰⁸ Egor Z. said the *dedy* ordered him to get his parents to bring him money, cigarettes, and notebooks when they were visiting. When Egor Z. did not get the *dedy* what they wanted, they beat him and announced that “things would get really bad” if he did not produce the goods by the next morning. Egor Z. and a fellow conscript climbed over the military base’s fence that night and ran away.¹⁰⁹

A number of conscripts who served near their hometowns said that the *dedy* told them to get money or goods from their homes. Alexander Sukhanov told Human Rights Watch that a *ded* told him and his fellow conscripts: “I can’t eat here, I’m sick of it, I want something else. Who’s local?” When they learned that Sukhanov was a local, they instructed him to call home and “order something tasty.” Sukhanov said his father brought some food over. The next day, the *ded* wanted something more “filling” and accompanied Sukhanov to his house to get more food. Sukhanov’s mother told Human Rights Watch that at first she did not realize what was happening and put together some food. After that, she visited his unit twice per week and brought food packages each

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Koshelev.

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Ilia R., November 7, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Ilia R. served in unit 3344 in or near Ekaterinburg and briefly in 32 Gorodok. Ilia R. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Vasilii E., April 10, 2002, St. Petersburg. Vasilii E. served at unit 67636. Vasilii E. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Anton E., April 16, 2002, St. Petersburg. Anton E. served in a marines unit in Severomorsk in northern Russia. Anton E. is a pseudonym.

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Egor Z., October 5, 2002, Volgograd. Egor Z. served in unit 6688 in the Northern Caucasus. Egor Z. is a pseudonym.

time, which the *dedy* took away from him every time.¹¹⁰ *Dedy* sent Vladimir Z. to his sister, who lived nearby, for money.¹¹¹ Stepan K.'s mother told Human Rights Watch that *dedy* instructed her son to make his parents to bring 650 rubles to the unit. She said that the *dedy* told him that if his relatives did not bring these items before a specific date, "you will not have a life."¹¹²

Demands for Money, Cigarettes, and Other Goods

A number of conscripts recounted how *dedy* demanded that they give them money, cigarettes and other goods that they did not have. These conscripts said the *dedy* did not care how they got these goods, by begging, stealing, or otherwise, and that they faced physical violence if they failed to deliver. For example, Vladimir P. told Human Rights Watch:

[The *dedy*] openly demanded money. Absolutely nobody was interested in where you were going to get it. At the factory, for example, [where I was sent to work] I had to put a cigarette every day [under the *dembel's* pillow]. In addition, you have to give them cigarettes during the day; they don't buy cigarettes. If he [the *ded*] wants to smoke, he walks up to you [and says]: "I need a cigarette." I initially had some money... If someone didn't have money, they asked passers-by. Our unit is located in the city and you could walk up to the fence [and beg]. This was a daily practice.¹¹³

The mother of another conscript said that *dedy* put her son and his peers out on the streets at night with orders for vodka and sausage. She said:

These poor soldiers stand in Severomorsk with outstretched hands. I saw it myself when I drove by, they stood there... They also sent my son... he doesn't get rest at night, he's already sick because he doesn't sleep... And then, what can [he] do, he knows that if he does not bring vodka and sausage back [he will be punished]. ...and who will give him money at night? So he either has to steal handbags from women, or rob

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir Z.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Stepan K., November 6, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Stepan K. served in a unit near Ekaterinburg. Stepan K. is a pseudonym.

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir P., September 30, 2002, Volgograd. Vladimir P. served in unit 47084 in Vladikavkaz. Vladimir P. is a pseudonym.

apartments, or sell himself. [My son] was beaten for returning without anything.”¹¹⁴

Iliia R. told his mother that he and his fellow conscripts were “thrown across the fence” at night in order to get cigarettes and vodka. He described the attitude of the *dedy* as “if you don’t have money, go and steal it.” She said her son never stole anything, returned empty-handedly and was beaten.¹¹⁵

Pavel P. said that whenever a first-year conscript was given leave, he had to bring money, food, cigarettes, or other goods back for the *dedy*. Once, when Pavel P. failed to do so, the *dedy* scolded him for not bringing anything back, gave him three blows to the chest, and told him that he would not be given leave again. Later, when Pavel P. had to go to the military hospital for an unrelated illness, the *dedy* ordered him to bring back cigarettes and other things. He told Human Rights Watch: “Where am I supposed to get these? After all, I can’t go and beg for it, can I?” So he decided to run away.¹¹⁶

Aleksei L. ran away from his unit because *dedy* punished him for failing to bring them the one hundred rubles they had demanded from him. His mother told Human Rights Watch that he did not have the money and was unable to find it. As punishment, the *dedy* put two military overcoats and a bullet-proof vest on him and beat him. The *dedy* told him the next day that if he did not bring them one hundred rubles that night, the “execution” would be repeated. Aleksei L. ran away together with a fellow conscript that evening.¹¹⁷

Off-Hours

Dedy consider sleep a luxury that first-year conscripts have not yet earned, and frequently make that understood. Indeed, many first-year conscripts said the nights were a time they dreaded. One conscript captured the mood of many others when he told Human Rights Watch that “nobody liked lights-out because the most horrible things happened [at night]. We eagerly awaited reveille.”¹¹⁸ Many first-year conscripts said that the *dedy* kept them up until long after lights-out at 10:00 p.m., or said they woke them in the middle of the night. Many told Human Rights Watch that they suffered from severe sleep deprivation and several maintained that they regularly “fell asleep standing.”

¹¹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Anton E.

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Iliia R.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Pavel P.

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Aleksei L., October 5, 2002, Volgograd. Aleksei L. served in a interior forces unit 3033 in Persianovka, Rostov Province. Aleksei L. is a pseudonym.

¹¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir O., October 1, 2002, Volgograd. Vladimir O. is a pseudonym.

Nighttime Chores

Practically all conscripts interviewed for this report said that the *dedy* made them do all sorts of chores: make their beds, wash, dry, and repair their uniforms, polish their boots, et cetera. Bannikov observes in his study of *dedovshchina* that “while the *dedy* and other privileged individuals watch their favourite television programs, the junior comrades must prepare their lodges for sleep: make their beds and straighten their blankets in such a way that [the *ded*] can cover himself with one movement of the arm.”¹¹⁹ While many of the chores are themselves rather innocent, they are performed under threat of punishment. As we saw in the case of Alexander D., punishment for failure to perform these chores can be severe. Sometimes, the *dedy* gave an abusive twist to the chores themselves. For example, Anatolii T. said that the *dedy* would stand behind him and his peers when they made their beds and if they weren’t fast enough, the *dedy* would mess the bed up and beat them in the kidneys.¹²⁰

Rituals

Conscripts told Human Rights Watch of numerous army rituals, traditions and jokes. Many of these rituals are in and of themselves innocuous but their combination with violent punishment may make them abusive.

Many conscripts said that they sometimes had to tell the *dedy* fairytales or sing them songs at night. According to Bannikov, such readings are often theatrical performances: the *dukb* stands on a stool, gesticulates, waves his arms to imitate a cuckoo, and varies his intonation.¹²¹ Bannikov provides the lyrics of a “lullaby,” which he says is sung all over Russia.¹²² Predictably, the lyrics are graphic and vulgar. In most cases, conscripts did not complain of any violence or abuse associated with these readings. However, in at least one case, the *dedy* turned this tradition into an abusive game. In early 2001, at a military hospital at Kamenka military base, *dedy* forced Aleksei Andriushchenko, who had been hospitalized for pneumonia, and another conscript to get out of bed late in the evening on several occasions, and sing for them.¹²³ Whenever the two young men got the lyrics to the songs wrong, the *dedy* punched them in the chest.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Bannikov, p. 180.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii T.

¹²¹ Bannikov, p. 181.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 180 and 181.

¹²³ The description of Andriushchenko’s plight is taken from the verdict of the Vyborg Garrison Military Court of January 18, 2002, which found that Andriushchenko had committed suicide after other conscripts severely humiliated him on several consecutive nights. See below, “Sexual Violence,” for further details.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Ivan Andriushchenko, St. Petersburg, April 19, 2002. A few days later, after the *dedy* forced him to imitate sexual intercourse with another first-year conscript, Andriushchenko was found dead. According to military doctors, he had committed suicide. His father believes that the *dedy* murdered him.

Numerous conscripts described traditional army jokes—with exotic names like “dried crocodile,”¹²⁵ “the *dembel’s* train,”¹²⁶ “bicycle,”¹²⁷ “musical elk,”¹²⁸ “fire from the left, fire from the right,”¹²⁹ “dried flying mice,”¹³⁰ and “dried parrot,”¹³¹—that the *dedy* made them perform in the evening or at night. While some said that the *dedy* treated these jokes primarily as innocuous entertainment, others said the *dedy* turned them into abusive games.

Five conscripts mentioned dried crocodile. Two said that they and their peers had to hang above their beds for a few minutes, were not punished when they collapsed, and felt that it was “like a joke.”¹³² For Alexander D. and two others the ritual involved abuse. Anatolii T. said that the *dedy* in his unit forced him and his peers to do “dried crocodile” when they were drunk or bored, and forced them to do push-ups while hanging: “If you fell, they beat you in the chest.”¹³³ In the case of Aleksei Andriushchenko (see above), the court listed hanging above the bed as one of the abuses that he faced on the night before his death but provided no further detail in its verdict.¹³⁴

Dedy woke Petr P. and his peers up almost every night for a full month.¹³⁵ On a standard night, Petr P. said, the duty officer would announce lights-out and everyone would get in bed. A few minutes later, however, the *dedy* would say: “Reveille!” and everyone had to get up again—those who did not jump out of bed were kicked. Frequently, the *dedy*

¹²⁵ See below for a description.

¹²⁶ One conscript told Human Rights Watch that, while the *dedy* were lying in their beds, he and his peers had to shake the beds to imitate the motion of a train. Human Rights Watch interview with Federov.

¹²⁷ Vasilii B. described “bicycle” as follows: “They put matches between your fingers and light them. When it gets hot, you start to wave your hands.” Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii B.

¹²⁸ Vasilii B. described “musical elk” as follows: You stand with your arms and fingers outstretched to the sides and sign songs. As you sing, you slowly move your hands toward your forehead. At the end of each verse a *ded*, who stands facing you, punches you at the level of your forehead. If you’re hands are in front of your forehead, they break the punch. If not, you get hit in the face. The ritual derives its name from the fact that, when your hands are in front of your forehead, your fingers resemble the antlers of an elk. Ibid.

¹²⁹ Alexander D. described this ritual as follows: He would stand outside in the mud and when the *dedy* would tell “fire from the left” he had to drop into the mud on his in right, and vice versa. Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander D.

¹³⁰ Bannikov describes the ritual as follows: “[A *ded* orders at any time during the night:] ‘Dry flying mice!’ and all *dukhi* must hang under the top bunk bed, holding on to the wire mesh with their hands and feet.” Bannikov, p. 182.

¹³¹ Bannikov describes the ritual as follows: “[A *ded* orders at any time during the night:] ‘Dry parrots!’ and all stand on the back of their beds, holding on to it not to fall, and the *ded* knocks them off with a pillow.” Bannikov, p. 182.

¹³² Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir P.

¹³³ Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii T.

¹³⁴ See above, footnote 123.

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Petr P., November 3, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Petr P. served in an interior troops unit in Lesnoi, Sverdlov Province. Petr P. is a pseudonym.

forced Petr P. and his peers to hang above their beds and do push-ups, and beat them as they were hanging. Petr P.'s parents took their son away from his unit after a *ded* hit Petr P. over the head with a stool one night.

Food and Health¹³⁶

Under the rules of *dedovshchina*, *dedy* are free to place limitations on first-year conscripts' access to food—after all, the first-year conscripts have yet to earn the privilege of food. They routinely confiscate the best food items from first-year conscripts, severely restrict the amount of time for eating, and punish first-year conscripts who take uneaten food with them. While training conscripts to consume food quickly may be a legitimate element of field training, this was clearly not the purpose in the numerous cases examined by Human Rights Watch.

Dedy determine when meals are over; when they finish, they order everyone else to stop eating as well. Almost half the conscripts interviewed for this report complained that for part or all of their military service *dedy* routinely gave them so little time to eat—by most descriptions between one and a half and five minutes—that they were forced to either practically inhale their food or leave half of it uneaten.

Every fourth conscript we interviewed stated that *dedy* had confiscated their food during mealtime, mostly white bread, butter, and meat. One said: “They gave us buns and [the *dedy*] took them away from someone. If a *ded* felt like having a second bun, he'd just walk up and take it. Nobody would tell him anything.”¹³⁷ In some units *dedy* systematically confiscated food, in others the practice was less common. One conscript said: “The *dedy* sometimes took the butter. If you managed to put it on your bread they left it to you but if you weren't quick enough you'd say goodbye to your butter.”¹³⁸ Another said: “They only took our butter, sometimes also an egg. They would give us two, one they took. But that was rare.”¹³⁹

Conscripts from military bases across the country described also a presumption that first-year conscripts who do seek medical care do so to avoid the hardships of military service. Because of this presumption, both junior and senior conscripts pressure their peers not to seek medical care. Conscripts who seek medical care anyway often face repercussions, including harassment, beatings, and extortion.

¹³⁶ For more extensive documentation about the role of *dedovshchina* in the denial of conscripts' rights to food and health care, see: Human Rights Watch, “To Serve Without Health. Inadequate Nutrition and Health Care in the Russian Armed Forces,” *A Human Rights Watch Short Report*, Vol. 15, No. 9 (D), November 2003

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Andrei D.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir Z.

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Koshelev.

Punishment

Dedy punish first-year conscripts when and how they see fit, both for violating their own rules and demands, as well as the official rules. Punishment generally takes place at night in the barracks, after the officers have gone home, or in concealed spaces such as storage rooms or bathrooms. The punishment can be both individual and collective, and ranges from push-ups or other physical exercise to severe beatings or other forms of physical abuse.

None of the forms of punishment that first-year conscripts said *dedy* applied to them on a regular basis is provided for in the disciplinary code. This code provides for the following types of punishment: warnings, stripping of leave, detention for up to ten days, extra assignments and stripping of medals for rank-and-file soldiers.¹⁴⁰ Second-year conscripts who have reached the rank of deputy platoon commander or *starshina* of a Company may, at maximum, independently issue rank-and-file soldiers warnings, strip them of leave, and assign up to two and three extra assignments respectively.¹⁴¹ However, *dedy* most frequently use other forms of punishment like severe physical exercise at night, beatings, and other forms of physical abuse.

Individual Punishment

First-year conscripts gave dozens of examples of individual punishment by *dedy*—frequently violent. Some of these examples are summarized below:

- Anton A. recounted how, one day, he stood in formation and became distracted: “I looked at a different company. At that moment, they gave the marching order and I did not move my leg in time.” Afterwards, a *ded* took him to an enclosed space: “He put me against the wall. There was another person there [as well]... He initially beat me, then him.” Anton A. said that the *ded* beat and kicked him all over his body, including with a flat hand in his face and on the legs.¹⁴²
- Anton. A. gave another example. In his company, the *dedy* had established the rule that first-year conscripts had to hand the white bread they received at lunch time to them. If a first-year nonetheless ate his bread, the *dedy* sent him to the

¹⁴⁰ Article 51.

¹⁴¹ Article 54, 55, and 56.

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

drying room and beat him there with sticks left over from construction work. Anton A. said that “several guys ended up in the hospital because of it.”¹⁴³

- Aleksei Riabov recounted that one day he was in the storage room to do upkeep on his uniform when a *ded* entered. The *ded* told him to take off his socks. When he refused, the *ded* first made him do push-ups and then hit him in the chest.¹⁴⁴
- Vasilii B. told Human Rights Watch that he and another first-year conscript refused to be lackeys for two *dedy*. As punishment, the *dedy* took them to the storage room and beat them in the kidney area and the head with their fists wrapped in towels.¹⁴⁵
- While standing guard, Denis Ivanov and two other first-year conscripts drank the tea of a *ded*. The next morning the *ded* accused him and one of the other conscripts of finishing his tea and sugar—an accusation Ivanov denied. According to Ivanov, the *ded* answered with “brute force” and he confessed. The *dedy* then beat Ivanov in the bathroom. Later that day, Ivanov was taken to his company, which was doing push-ups. He said: “[The *dedy*] brought me out to the middle and said: ‘Look, company, this is the rat of our company.’ At this point I started feeling really awful. I looked at my friends who were doing push-ups. They ordered them to get up. It seemed to me that every one of them wanted to kill me.” Ivanov said the *dedy* continued to beat him after that. Eventually, the most senior *ded* put an end to the beatings and made Ivanov eat a whole loaf of bread as punishment. Ivanov said his peers refused to talk to him for several weeks after the incident.¹⁴⁶
- Aleksei Koshelev recalled how a *ded* came up to him once and said: “We’re going on a patrol now, when I get back from the patrol you have to fry a potato for me. I’m a *dembel*, you have to fry [one] for me every day.’ I told him that ‘I will not fry [anything] for you...’ He said: ‘if there won’t be potato, there will be

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Riabov, November 5, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Riabov served in a ministry of defense unit in 32d Gorodok, and at units in Shadrinsk (Kurgansk Province) and Karabash (Cheliabinsk Province).

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii B.

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Denis Ivanov, April 17, 2002, St. Petersburg. Ivanov served in units 3526 (Lebiazhe, Leningrad Province) and 6717 (St. Petersburg) of the Ministry of Interior’s troops.

a big fight.” Koshelev nonetheless refused to comply. Enraged by Koshelev’s refusal, the *ded* later stabbed him in the stomach with a penknife.¹⁴⁷

- Two conscripts who fled the same unit together said in separate interviews that the *dedy* forced them to save their pieces of white bread and hand them over later. One said: “Sometimes when you are hungry, you eat the piece of white bread, which you’re supposed to give away. And you pay for that. If you don’t bring it, they say: ‘Go to the drying room.’ And there you get [beaten]. Several guys went to hospital because of it.”¹⁴⁸

Shaving with Lighter

Several conscripts told Human Rights Watch that *dedy* had burned their facial hair as a punishment for not shaving, and soldiers’ rights organizations confirmed this occurs regularly.¹⁴⁹ The conscripts said the *dedy* gave them no time to shave during the day and that secret visits to the bathroom after lights-out were strictly punished, resulting in a vicious circle. For example, Anatolii T. said:

We used to get up at night to shave, wash and sew... One night, a *ded* saw me go to the bathroom. He beat me in the bathroom so my eye was all swollen. He asked me what I was doing and said I wasn’t supposed to. If you don’t shave, they come at night... If the sergeant sees that you’re not shaven he shaves you with a lighter... It [doesn’t give you burns] but leaves some red spots and is unpleasant.¹⁵⁰

Pavel P. also complained that the *dedy* did not allow first-year conscripts time for washing or shaving and said that the *dedy* did not give them razors. As punishment for walking around unshaven, he said that the *dedy* made them rub a towel over their chins and cheeks to burn away the hair, or would burn the hair with a lighter.¹⁵¹

Collective Punishment

Numerous conscripts said *dedy* punished them collectively for the failure of one or more first-year conscripts to comply with the demand or rules of *dedy*. Valentina Melnikova of

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Koshelev.

¹⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

¹⁴⁹ Article 335 of the Military Code of Conduct obliges conscripts to shave “in a timely manner.”

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii T.

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Pavel P.

the Union of Committees of Soldiers Mothers of Russia told Human Rights Watch that collective punishment is “extremely widespread” and that “threats of collective punishment are a key tool of coercion.”¹⁵² In the words of one conscript, Stepan M., “If someone does something he isn’t supposed to or...does something not the way he was told to, [they punished us collectively].”¹⁵³ Another conscript, Pavel P., said: “[If] someone did not clean up somewhere, didn’t bring slippers where [the *dedy*] wanted them, or...didn’t make the bed evenly...all suffered because of [that person].”¹⁵⁴

While collective punishment of prisoners and most other categories of people violates international human rights law, this is not necessarily the case when applied to military servicemen. Collective punishment can play an important role in promoting discipline and group cohesion in armed forces, both of which are crucial for their proper functioning. Indeed, most armed forces around the world use collective punishment in one form or another. Thus, the issue of the severity of the punishment is the key in making the determination whether a violation has taken place, not its collective nature.

Numerous conscripts said the *dedy* made them do push-ups and knee bends at night—evidently, this was the most common form of punishment used. Pavel P. said: “Everyone did push-ups... [They made us do them] until we dropped, one hundred, 150, sometimes 200. [If you fell, they said:] ‘Get up and go on with the rest.’”¹⁵⁵ Stepan M. gave another example:

We had to go to the smoking room [to smoke] but [the *dedy*] took us there very rarely [because it was cold]. The sergeants [the *dedy*] themselves could smoke in the toilet or washroom but we were not allowed... [So when] someone smoked in the toilet, they [the *dedy*] smelled it was smoky and they put everyone in a row and we did knee bends. We stand in a row and the first person counts to ten [we all do knee bends on each count], the second counts to ten and like that to the end. And there were eighty of us. And each of these eighty has to count to ten. Some of us fell and were taken to the sickbay.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Human Rights Watch interview with Valentina Melnikova, August 10, 2004, Moscow.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M., April 18, 2002, St. Petersburg. Stepan M. served in unit 51046 of the railroad troops in Mga, Leningrad Province. Stepan M. is a pseudonym.

¹⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Pavel P.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M.

Ilia B. said the *dedy* made him and nine fellow first-year conscripts do push-ups “until he [the *ded*] gets sick of it.” Sometimes the *ded* would order them to do push-ups, lie down on his bed and fall asleep. He said he and his peers would stop doing push-ups when they realized the *ded* was sleeping.¹⁵⁷

In these examples, *dedy* limited their punishment to physical exercises and did not resort to any significant physical abuse. However, in other cases, *dedy* also beat conscripts while they were doing the exercises or when they failed to keep up. For example, Stepan M. said that the *dedy* had established a rule that first-year conscripts had to bring the white bread they received at mealtime to the barracks and hand over it to them. He told Human Rights Watch:

God forbid if someone saw you eat a piece of white bread. They wake you up at night, and you’re again going to do knee bends and push-ups, and you get [hit] with a stool in the head or with a post of the bed. They often beat us with the post on the arms, muscles, legs and back.¹⁵⁸

Anton A. said violent collective punishment occurred frequently in his unit. He recounted the following incident, which happened a few nights before Human Rights Watch interviewed him:

One guy had forgotten his cup in a box for a fire extinguisher. The [officer who found the cup] punished the company duty officer [a *ded*]. And he [in turn] punished us in his own way. He woke us up at 4:00 a.m. and we started to do knee bends... [At one point] an officer came into the company and everyone ran [to their beds]. The officer left and [the *dedy*] lined us up once more. One guy said that he would not do any more knee bends because he couldn’t any longer. [The *dedy*] started to yell: ‘You can’t, you can’t?!’ Then they beat him. But he didn’t do any more knee bends. Then, to my surprise, they [the *dedy*] calmed down and said: ‘Go to sleep.’¹⁵⁹

A. said a day or so later the *dedy* retaliated against the conscript who refused to do more knee bends and apparently tried to force his head into a toilet bowl and beat him. A. said that he was taken to the sickbay with a bloody face and bruises all over his body.

¹⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Ilia B.

¹⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M.

¹⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

Denis Ivanov said that nightly collective punishment in the barracks was rare in his company because the most senior *ded*—“the only person who did not try to humiliate people”—would not permit it. However, throughout the four months Ivanov served in the unit, the other *dedy* took them to the bathrooms for punishment. He said:

[W]hen there was [collective] punishment of the platoon, they lined up the whole platoon and brought us all to the bathroom. There [we had to do] all sorts of physical exercises and they beat us there. They made us stand with our faces to the wall. We had to do whatever they told us...¹⁶⁰

Alexander Kaiankin gave an example in which he was the cause of the collective punishment of his entire platoon:

I used to give my friends haircuts. A *ded* walked by and looked for someone to send to do some job in his stead. He walked up to me and said: “Let’s go” but I refused. He immediately started [to get angry]: “What are you talking about? I’m a *ded*!” He began to harass me. I couldn’t contain myself and hit him twice in the chest. I couldn’t believe what I’d done. [I knew] three of them would beat me up... Later four of them came to me—he brought his friends—and said: “You, *dukebi*, what do you think you are doing? You have to submit. When you reach our seniority, in a year, you can abuse your own [*dukebi*]... Three of them beat me a little... Then they called up the rest of my platoon and beat all of them in turn. They put them all in a row and everyone got a share: a fist in the chest, a kick.¹⁶¹

Gratuitous Abuse

A system that designates certain people as having no rights, as *dedovshchina* does, is an open invitation for wanton gratuitous abuse. Human Rights Watch documented numerous abusive acts that *dedy* did not even try to justify in terms of rules, orders, or punishment. Most frequently, these abuses happened at night when the *dedy* were drunk. They ranged from poking fun at first-year conscripts in an abusive manner to forced acts of a sexual nature.

¹⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Denis Ivanov.

¹⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Kaiankin, April 18, 2002, Sosnovo, Leningrad Province. Kaiankin served in the Ministry of Defense’s unit 22336 in Volgograd Province.

Drunken Abuse

Alcoholism is Russia's foremost social problem. Millions of Russians are alcoholics, and alcohol plays a significant role in human rights problems such as domestic violence and random police abuse. Unsurprisingly, alcoholism is a considerable problem on military bases. As has been noted above, a considerable percentage of conscripts suffered from alcohol addiction prior to their recruitment.¹⁶²

For Anton A., *dedovshchina* started two weeks after he began his military service. He said that the *dedy* woke him and his peers up several times a week at night, "depending on how much they [the *dedy*] were drinking." He said that the *dedy* typically put them all in a line, and forced them to do push-ups and knee bends while wearing gas masks. While doing the exercises, the *dedy* "walked up to us and kicked us. They beat us on the heads, of course." Once, the *dedy* forced them to do push-ups and knee bends for two straight hours and only allowed them to stop when one of the conscripts lost consciousness. A. said: "I stood across from him. He went all white, and fell with his head against a bed. They took him to the sickbay. After that, things calmed down a little but soon the abuses started all over again."¹⁶³

Alexander Sukhanov gave another example. He said that his *ded* together with three others drank every other night in his unit. "After lights-out [the *ded*] sent me repeatedly to get beer. I had to climb over the fence because you can't go out through the checkpoint [without authorization]." Sukhanov said the *dedy* regularly became abusive after drinking.

If he was cheerful, he would start humiliating someone, laugh at him. He would throw someone's slipper under the bed...or throw someone's mattress out of the bed... But he could also beat someone, knock someone over, or burn him—whatever comes into his drunken head. He [picked] on those who couldn't say anything, who were afraid... There were me and some eight to ten others. He beat me, a wet towel wrapped [around his fist] so there wouldn't be any bruises. He hit me in the face, in the stomach. It's an army law that when you beat someone, you do it with a wet towel... I was afraid what would happen later.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² See above. Experts on armed forces have noted the prominence of alcohol among soldiers. In his book "Boys in the Barracks. Observations on American Military Life," L. Ingraham says that "[s]oldiering and alcohol have been almost synonymous since the invention of armies." Ingraham, L.H., "Boys in the Barracks. Observations on American Military Life," (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 91. For the role of alcohol in hazing at U.S. colleges, see: Hank Nuwer, "Wrongs of Passage. Fraternities, Sororities, Hazing and Binge Drinking," (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

¹⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother.

Sukhanov ran away from the unit several times but his parents returned him. After his second escape, he was in bed when a *ded* told him to come over and asked him why he had run away. After a short exchange of words, the *ded* told Sukhanov to go to sleep:

...I started to fall asleep. Everything was quiet. I was sleeping on my stomach. Suddenly someone sat down on my legs from behind and a big hand [pushed] my head into the pillow. The sergeant sat down on my back. I felt something hot on my back. He burned me with a cigarette. I wanted to scream but nobody could hear me—they buried me in the pillow. They managed to burn me twice when I heard an officer coming and the guard yelled something. They immediately ran away. The one who lay on top of me got into his bed last, and I figured out who he was. I noticed that he was drunk and did not care. He did not bother me again [that night]. The next day at the formation I...was afraid to stand next to him. He might cut my throat. That day, I ran away again.¹⁶⁵

Human Rights Watch researchers saw pictures taken by the Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg of several burn marks on Sukhanov's back.

Vladimir P. gave Human Rights Watch the following example. One night at 2:00 a.m., when he was standing guard, a clearly drunk *ded* walked up to him and demanded that he bring him soup: "Where am I going to get that at 2:00 a.m.?" he rhetorically asked Human Rights Watch. "I couldn't and I caught hell for it." Vladimir P. said the *ded* had beaten him in the kidney area and also beat a fellow guard, who had served six months longer than he had. After that, the fellow conscript hit Vladimir P. with the flat hand on the ear. When Human Rights Watch interviewed Vladimir P., he still had problems with his hearing in that ear but he has, according to Right of the Mother in Volgograd, fully recovered since.¹⁶⁶

Sexual Violence

The relatives of two conscripts told Human Rights Watch that *dedy* had exposed the young men to sexual violence. We also interviewed several conscripts who, according to soldiers' rights organizations, had faced abuse of a sexual nature but who themselves did

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir P.

not provide us with that information directly. Soldiers' rights groups say that conscripts encounter sexual violence frequently.¹⁶⁷

Renat U. told Human Rights Watch that his nephew, Igor U., suffered sexual violence from *dedy* who had accused him of being an informer for the commander of the company. When the nephew denied the accusation, the *dedy* gave him a week to find out who the informer was. One night, the *dedy* woke up the company, put it in formation, brought Igor U. forward, and said: "Did you find the informer?" When he answered in the negative, the *dedy* concluded that he was therefore the informer. They then ordered him to take off his clothes and told him to get on his knees. Next, they brought forward one of Igor U.'s peers, gave him a condom and ordered the conscript to rape Igor U. The conscript refused. The *dedy* chose another conscript and told him to put his genitals in Igor U.'s mouth. The conscript laughed and took off his underpants. Igor U. resisted. Eventually, the *dedy* kicked him, beat him with an iron bed post wrapped in towels, and gave him another day to find the informer. They threatened that if he failed he would be raped. Igor U. fled the next day.¹⁶⁸

While in the hospital recovering from pneumonia, *dedy* forced Aleksei Andriushchenko, a first-year conscript who served at Kamenka military base, to imitate sexual acts with another conscript. The next day, Andriushchenko's dead body was found; according to military doctors, he committed suicide.¹⁶⁹ A military court later found the *dedy* guilty of humiliation of their fellow servicemen causing serious consequences, and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from a year and a half to four years. In its verdict, the court stated that, in the night from February 16 to 17, 2001:

Poluianov [a *ded*] forced Andriushenko to bare his torso and imitate an athlete. Then Poluianov and Karmashov [another *ded*] began to play cards. The loser repeatedly forced the ill servicemen, including Andriushenko, to hit each other on the forehead. The person being hit had to fold his hands over the forehead. Andriushenko received no fewer than five such blows.

At 2:00 a.m. that night in the same ward, junior sergeant Magomedov [a *ded*]...forced... Vasilkov [another first-year conscript] and Andriushenko

¹⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Valentina Melnikova.

¹⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with the uncle of Igor U., April 11, 2002, St. Petersburg. Igor U. served in unit 6717 (St. Petersburg) of the Ministry of Interior's troops. Igor U. is a pseudonym.

¹⁶⁹ As has been noted above, his father believes that the *dedy* killed his son.

to lie down on the floor and imitate sexual intercourse, making all relevant noises and kissing one another, for a half hour.

That same night and in the same place, between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., Poluianov and Kormashov...repeatedly hit and kicked each [of them] in different places of their bodies, causing bruises and abrasions. After that, they forced them to do push-ups until they collapsed: do knee bends; stand with knees and elbows on the legs of a stool that had been turned up side down; hang above a bed, with the hands and legs placed on the head and foot boards of the bed; stand with the legs half-bent, holding a stool in front of them with stretched out arms. Only after that...they allowed Andriushenko and Vasilkov to rest, but forced them to lie together in one bed.¹⁷⁰

THE CONSEQUENCES OF *DEDOVSHCHINA*

Dedovshchina has devastating and lasting consequences for the physical and psychological well-being of conscripts. Tens of thousands of young conscripts try to flee their units every year because of the abuses associated with it, some armed and ready to kill themselves and others if they are apprehended. Every year *dedovshchina* proves lethal for some conscripts, while many others sustain permanent physical injuries as a result of it. Hundreds of conscripts commit suicide each year to escape it, and many more attempt to do so.

Desperate for a Way Out

Every year, *dedovshchina* drives tens of thousands of first-year conscripts to desperation, reflected in the radical options they try to escape it. Consider, for example, Denis Ivanov. He told Human Rights Watch that he contemplated intentionally breaking a leg so that he would be hospitalized and could leave his unit for a while.¹⁷¹ Or Aleksei K.: He wanted to volunteer for Chechnya to get away from the *dedovshchina* at his unit. He told Human Rights Watch that he never thought what the situation would be like there: “I just thought: at least I won’t be here.”¹⁷² Other conscripts said that they became consumed by a desire to kill or seriously injure their tormentors. Stepan M., for example, said that he dreamed of getting up at night and hitting one of the *dedy* with a stool “with

¹⁷⁰ Verdict of the Vyborg Garrison Military Court of January 18, 2002.

¹⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Denis Ivanov.

¹⁷² Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei K.

great force so he would never wake up.”¹⁷³ Alexander D., as we have seen, contemplated suicide as an escape from the abuses. These four conscripts eventually chose to run away from their units, as do most conscripts who cannot stand life in their units any more.

Runaway Shoot Outs

Dedovshchina literally drives some conscripts over the edge. Human Rights Watch interviewed one such conscript, Andrei S. He told Human Rights Watch that the *dedy* at his unit deprived him and his fellow first-year conscripts of sleep for two weeks, abusing them severely every night: “In the end I couldn’t stand it, took a metal rod and broke a senior conscript’s head...”¹⁷⁴

Russian news media periodically report on conscripts who shoot their fellow soldiers or run away from their units armed and shoot their pursuers or themselves out of fear of being caught and returned to their units. For example, in August 2002, two conscripts shot dead eight fellow soldiers at the outpost where they were based in the Caucasus mountain range in Ingushetia, southern Russia. They then ran away but were captured in a neighboring province a few days later. The conscripts later confessed to the murders, reportedly telling investigators that they had killed them “to avenge hazing.”¹⁷⁵

Flight

Most conscripts do not take the decision to run away lightly. They know that unauthorized departure from one’s unit is a criminal offense and that they may face prosecution. In the first days after their escape, military patrols and police capture many of them and return them to their units, where they often face violent repercussions. Others spend months making their way home across Russia’s vast expanses. Alexander O., for example, ran away from his unit in Novorossiisk because of constant abuses at night. For two months, he walked home, rode a cargo train part of the way, and spent some time with a group of homeless people before he was finally able to reach his family and ask them to pick him up.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M.

¹⁷⁴ Andrei S., to his great fortune, avoided criminal charges for his loss of self-control. When he learned of the incident, Andrei S.’s commander sent him to a military hospital for an assessment of his fitness for military service. The commander evidently wanted to avoid an investigation into the incident, which would no doubt have uncovered the conditions that led to Andrei S.’s outburst and could have reflected badly on the commander’s further career. The medical examiners found he was not fit on psychiatric grounds and Andrei S. was discharged. The fate of the *ded* is not known.

¹⁷⁵ Yuri Bagrov, “Two Russian border guards confess to killing eight comrades, Putin urges military discipline,” Associated Press, August 28, 2002.

¹⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander O., October 2, 2002, Volgograd. Alexander O. served in unit 42091 in Krasnodar Region. Alexander O. is a pseudonym. In this case, the abuses were perpetrated by so-called *Dagestantsy*.

Some reach their homes but their parents send them back to their units either because they are unsympathetic to their son's plight, panicked at the prospect of their son being jailed for what they believe is desertion, or feel strongly that he must do his patriotic duty.¹⁷⁷ For example, Alexander Sukhanov's mother (see above, *Drunken Abuse*) returned her son twice to his unit until one day he came home with burn marks on his back. Each time, she appealed to the commander of the unit, believing that that would be sufficient to make the abuses stop.¹⁷⁸ One man told Human Rights Watch that he told his nephew that he would "stop respecting you as a man" if he ran away because of *dedovshchina*.¹⁷⁹

Those who make their way home to sympathetic parents or reach the offices of a soldiers' rights organization face a difficult battle with military officials before they are discharged from the armed forces or transferred to a different military unit. In the first few days, representatives of the military unit actively look for runaway conscripts and return them to their units if they apprehend them. Disturbingly, military officials generally do not seek to establish the reasons for conscripts' escape and thus take them straight back to the very environment they fled. When a conscript succeeds in escaping and his parents or soldiers' rights groups make contact with the military unit or the military procuracy, the search usually ends.

Naturally, the runaway fears the mere thought of contact with military structures. They potentially face prison, return to an abusive unit, and encounter no understanding or redress from the military. Yet, the only way out of the armed forces runs through its structures: In order to be discharged on medical grounds, the runaway must spend several weeks in a military hospital for observation. And in many cases, reasons for a discharge on medical grounds do not exist and the conscript can only hope to be transferred to a different unit. While working in the offices of soldiers' rights groups, Human Rights Watch researchers repeatedly witnessed the panic attacks of runaway conscripts at the prospect of contact with military officials. For example, in both St. Petersburg and Volgograd we observed how the staff of local soldiers' rights organizations spent hours and days trying to convince absolutely terrified conscripts to go to the military hospital.

¹⁷⁷ In quite a few other cases documented by Human Rights Watch, it was the parents who, on the contrary, took the initiative to take their children away from their units. For example, Galina F. told Human Rights Watch that after she learned of the hazing her son had suffered her husband brought him home. He went to the unit and asked the commander to give their son a few hours of leave. The officer later complained that the father had broken his word of honor to which the father replied: "Yes, I did but when I saw his condition... What do you think, my word of honor is more important than my son?" Human Rights Watch interview with Galina F., the mother of Alexander F., November 5, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Galina F. served in a training unit in Elan and in unit 69771 in 32d Gorodok (both are in Sverdlov Province). Galina F. is a pseudonym.

¹⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother.

¹⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with the uncle of Igor U.

Apart from the battle to be discharged or transferred, some runaways also face a court battle over criminal charges of unauthorized departure from their unit.

Statistics on Absence Without Leave

The exact numbers of conscripts who run away from their units every year are not known, and estimates range from more than ten thousand to several thousand each year.¹⁸⁰ In August 2004, an anonymous source in the armed forces told Interfax news agency that “every month between 200 and 250 cases of absence without leave are registered in the armed forces.”¹⁸¹ In July 2002, the General Staff of the Armed Forces made public its statistics: in the first half of 2002, it had registered 2270 cases of servicemen who ran away from their units; most of those servicemen had been tracked down since but 860 remained missing. Furthermore, 2265 servicemen who ran away from their units since 1992 remained missing.¹⁸²

The official statistics are artificially low, as a variety of categories of runaway conscripts are never recorded as such. Under Russian law, when a conscript is missing, a military unit initially conducts its own inquiry.¹⁸³ If, after ten days, the soldier has still not been found, the unit is obliged to inform the military procuracy. Thus, conscripts who return to their units within ten days—whether on their own, captured by military officials or police, or are returned by their parents—are never formally recorded as having run away. Commanders must also report these incidents to their superiors in the armed forces.

However, military commanders are reluctant to formally report a runaway conscript even after these ten days expire because runaways shed a negative light on their units. Valentina Melnikova of the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia estimates that commanders formally report a soldier missing in only 30 percent of unauthorized absence cases. She told Human Rights Watch:

¹⁸⁰ Thousands of runaway conscripts seek the help of soldiers’ rights organizations every year. For example, between 700 and 1,000 come to the Moscow-office of the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia every year; around 1,000 to the Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg; more than 300 to Right of the Mother in Volgograd; around 150 to the Association of Soldiers’ Mothers in Cheliabinsk; and around 100 to the Nizhni Novgorod Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers.

¹⁸¹ “In Russia, arrest warrants are out for 1600 soldiers who have left their units,” Interfax news agency, August 5, 2004.

¹⁸² Vladimir Mukhin, “Minoborony: po Rossii guliaet dva batal’ona desertirov” (Defense Ministry: Two Battalions of Deserters are Wandering around Russia), Strana.ru, July 11, 2002 [online], <http://www.strana.ru/stories/01/08/23/1053/152459.html> (retrieved September 3, 2002).

¹⁸³ According to Russia’s criminal procedure code, military commanders are responsible for conducting an initial inquiry into potential criminal offenses (Article 40(1)). This inquiry must be finalized within ten days, after which the case must be transferred to the military procuracy (Article 93 of the Main Military Procuracy’s Instruction to the Investigative Organs of the Armed Forces and Other Military Formations of the Russian Federation of August 1, 1994).

There are cases when a young man hasn't been in the unit for a year or more. Their parents come to us, or the youngster himself, and we call the military procuracy and ask politely: "Could you tell us please, do you have a criminal investigation regarding soldier X?" [They respond:] "For what?" And we say: "He hasn't been in his unit for eighteen months."¹⁸⁴

For example, after Aleksei L. ran away, the commander of his unit repeatedly sent soldiers to the family's home to try to apprehend him and bring him back. But he formally informed L.'s mother, by telegram, that her son had runaway only after a month.¹⁸⁵ In another case, the commander of a conscript's company kept information about his escape from his superiors for more than a month, while trying to track down the conscript. The company commander apparently feared repercussions for having a runaway conscript.¹⁸⁶

Runaway conscripts who contact their military unit, for example through a soldiers' rights organization, and receive a referral to a military hospital for a review of their fitness for military service are also not classified as absent without leave.¹⁸⁷

Suicide Attempts and Suicidal Thoughts

Suicide is a form of self-defense. What happens there [in the units] is much worse than just hanging yourself or cutting your veins. After suffering those pains [from the abuses], you do not feel the physical pain you cause yourself.—Vasilii S.¹⁸⁸

At least eight of the conscripts whose cases Human Rights Watch documented for this report contemplated or attempted suicide. Several of them wrote to their parents about their suicidal thoughts in apparent attempts to have them take action to remove them from their units. In these cases, the conscripts or their parents volunteered the information to Human Rights Watch; we did not ask any of the conscripts interviewed directly whether they had contemplated or attempted suicide. It is thus possible that other conscripts we interviewed also contemplated or attempted suicide but chose not to share that information with us. As far as Human Rights Watch is aware, the military does not gather statistics on attempted suicides and it is not known how many conscripts attempt suicide every year during their service.

¹⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Valentina Melnikova.

¹⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Aleksei L.

¹⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Rem P.

¹⁸⁷ When unit commanders refuse to issue a referral to a military hospital, conscripts can appeal to the military procuracy for a referral. In such cases, the absence without leave is registered officially.

¹⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii S.

Vasilii S. endured standard abuses by the *dedy* in his unit: they forced him and his peers to beg for them, locked them up for hours in a safe, and subjected them to sleep deprivation. Vasilii S. was also one of the conscripts who volunteered to Human Rights Watch that he made a half-hearted suicide attempt before finding a way to run away from his unit. He told Human Rights Watch:

If you consider the people I was with, I got off easily. I'm the kind of person who never touches anybody. I always avoided conflicts and excesses... In the army it was difficult for me to see all that [violence], even if I got less than my share. It seemed to me that I had a harder time bearing it than others. They considered it a necessary [part of military service], that you need to endure, that will pass... And then "we will be like them ourselves." I simply knew that even if I endured it all, I would never be like that. I'm simply not such a person... I even wanted to kill myself in the army.

I did not try. In fact, maybe I would not be able to. We went to the sea on an assignment: catch poachers. We selected nets... I was so sick of everything that I thought: "I'm going to hang myself." I had already cut of a sufficient amount [of rope], chosen a place where I would do it so no one would notice me... Then an ensign noticed me...he started laughing and said: "Haha, that piece of rope is just what I needed." With that joke he pulled the rope out of my hands, turned around and walked away. But I think he understood... I became hysterical. I started crying, fell onto the net, I don't know how long I lay there. When I woke up, it was dark already, and they were looking for me. That's when a new goal was born: to go home.¹⁸⁹

Vasilii S. said that his unit was based in the mountains of Dagestan and that running away was dangerous and difficult due to its proximity to Chechnya. Vasilii S. managed to get away when he was hospitalized and met a local representative of a soldiers' rights organization. He said a number of other conscripts from his unit tried to commit suicide, in part because running away was so difficult.

Vadim Kh. told his mother that he had tried to hang himself in a deserted house where conscripts went to smoke in the summertime. He told her that he "did not see any other way out" to escape the abuses, and that he "did not want anything else." The noose,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

however, snapped and after this failed attempt Vadim Kh. decided to run away. He spent three months in the forests of Karelia in north western Russia before a villager picked him up, and contacted his mother. Earlier, while on a visit home, Vadim Kh.'s mother had noticed that her son had multiple bruises below the knees. He explained that the sergeants regularly kicked them with their tarpaulin boots.¹⁹⁰

The mother of another conscript told Human Rights Watch that her son cut his left wrist with a razor blade. However, other conscripts found him and took him to the unit. His mother said: "The cut was not big and did not threaten his life but it was a sign of protest."¹⁹¹

Several conscripts wrote to their parents warning that they would commit suicide. For example, Evgenii Grushko wrote to his mother that "if I can't manage to run, I will do something to myself." He expressed hope his parents would take him away from the unit so he would not have to commit suicide.¹⁹² Andrei T. wrote to his mother that "this is my last letter to you, I'm going to hang myself." His mother panicked when she received the letter two weeks later but soon learned that her had not attempted suicide. She told Human Rights Watch, however, that he had severe psychological problems for some time after she brought him home.¹⁹³

Suicides, Deaths, and Suspicious Deaths

According to official statistics, twenty-five conscripts died as a result of abuses associated with *dedovshchina* in the first half of 2004. 109 soldiers committed suicide during those six months, an increase of 38 percent compared to the same period a year earlier. Russia's main military procurator suggested that *dedovshchina* had driven many of these soldiers to suicide. In his words, sixty of these soldiers killed themselves "not by their own will."¹⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch has received information on a number of suspicious deaths but, in the absence of access to investigation materials and witnesses, has not been able to determine whether these deaths occurred as a result of *dedovshchina*.

¹⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Vadim Kh., April 9, 2002, St. Petersburg. Vadim Kh. served in Ministry of Defense unit 37551 in Sertolovo and unit 01480 in Pechenga, Leningrad Province. Vadim Kh. is a pseudonym.

¹⁹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Alexander K., April 18, 2002, St. Petersburg. Alexander K. is a pseudonym.

¹⁹² Human Rights Watch interview with Olga and Nikolai Grushko, parents of Evgenii Grushko, April 18, 2002, St. Petersburg.

¹⁹³ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Andrei T., November 4, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Andrei T. served in a ministry of interior unit in Lesnoi (Sverdlovsk Province) and at a unit in Ozersk. Andrei T. is a pseudonym.

¹⁹⁴ "Suicide rate on rise in Russian army," Associated Press, July 28, 2004.

As part of its research for this report, Human Rights Watch interviewed relatives of eight conscripts who, according to officials, committed suicide. Typically, these relatives knew few details about the problems their sons were having. The young men often told or wrote their parents about the general situation. For example, Andrei Kostykin wrote to his parents that he had a difficult time because the *dedy* were “pressuring” him.¹⁹⁵ Vadim T. asked his parents to send him money in several letters, suggesting he had to “share” it with the *dedy*.¹⁹⁶ Aleksei Andriushchenko told his mother that there were many Caucasians in his unit “who control everything” and that many conscripts run away due to abuses but he did not complain about his own treatment.¹⁹⁷ None of the young men conveyed in their letters the troubled mental state they must have been in when they wrote them. Several of the parents believe, for exactly that reason, that their sons were accidentally killed by *dedy*.

As investigations into suicides are often perfunctory, in many of these cases it remains unclear to this day what exactly drove these conscripts to commit suicide. However, in a number of cases there is substantial information on the treatment of the conscripts prior to their deaths. For example, Dmitrii Samsonov wrote about *dedovshchina* extensively in a series of letters to his parents, describing *stodnevka* and repeatedly urging his parents to send him money and cigarettes.¹⁹⁸ The military procuracy conducted a thorough investigation into the death of Aleksei Andriushchenko and found that several *dedy* had severely abused him in the days before his death. A court eventually found four fellow conscripts guilty of driving Andriushchenko to suicide.¹⁹⁹ Andriushchenko’s father believes that the cause of his son’s death was not suicide as the official report claims, but abuse by *dedy*, but he was unable to provide conclusive evidence for this conviction.

Physical Consequences

Many conscripts sustain short-term or lasting injuries because of the practice. Between January and August of 2003, the main military procuracy recorded around 2,500 physical injuries among first-year conscripts due to *dedovshchina*.²⁰⁰ During its research, Human Rights Watch documented a number of permanent and temporary injuries.

¹⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Kostykin, October 27, 2002, Chistogorsk. Kostykin served at a unit in Birobidzhan (Jewish autonomous province).

¹⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Vadim T., November 4, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Vadim T. served in ministry of interior unit 3468 in Snezhinsk (Cheliabinsk Province). Vadim T. is a pseudonym.

¹⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Ivan Andriushchenko,

¹⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with the parents of Dmitrii Samsonov.

¹⁹⁹ See above footnote 123.

²⁰⁰ See: Sergei Ovsienko, Alexander Shashkov, “Russian Prosecutor Says Cases of Hazing in Army up 30%,” Itar-Tass news agency, September 3, 2003; Dmitrii Iurov, “Prestupniku mesto v tiurme (Criminals should be in jail),” Krasnaia Zvezda (The Red Star), September 5, 2003; and “V rossiiskoi armii uvelichilos chislo neustavnykh otnoshenii,” Lenta.ru, September 3, 2003.

A number of other conscripts reported other long-term injuries, ranging from chronic headaches to spinal injuries. For example, when Denis Ivanov was punished for drinking a *ded*'s tea (see above, *Individual Punishment*), he sustained a spinal injury. He told Human Rights Watch:

It hinders my life. I can't lift heavy items. If I were to lift this table [a low, wooden table], I will displace a disc or something, my legs will start to feel numb, and by the evening I will feel very bad. I will have trouble sleeping... I sought treatment, and went to a chiropractor. The chiropractor made it better: I could bend my back and straighten my shoulders without pain. But after a week [the pain was back].²⁰¹

Beatings during his military service worsened Andrei S.'s childhood limp. He told Human Rights Watch: "If, in Anapa [his first place of service], I still ran, after these beatings I can only limp. I can't lift my leg." At the time of the interview in April 2002, Andrei S. was preparing for surgery. Doctors hoped the surgery would improve his limp but warned him that he would probably never be able to run again.²⁰²

Petr P. told Human Rights Watch that he suffered from bad headaches as a result of the beatings he endured during military service.²⁰³ Indeed, a military medical commission found that Petr P. had received a head injury during his military service, although it declared him fit to continue to serve.²⁰⁴ Subsequently, a higher military medical commission ruled that Petr P. should be discharged on account of the head injury.

As described above, Vladimir P. temporarily lost his hearing in one ear after being hit on the ear. *Dedy* also broke his jaw. He told Human Rights Watch that a *ded* became angry with him because he had not left him enough potato for dinner. The *ded* beat all five first-year conscripts but beat Vladimir P., the newest of all, more than the rest, including on his jaw. For about a month after that, Vladimir P. said, his jaw hurt. Finally, when he told his mother, she took him to a hospital for an X-ray and he learned that his jaw was broken.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Denis Ivanov.

²⁰² Human Rights Watch interview with Andrei S., St. Petersburg, April 13, 2002. Andrei S. is a pseudonym.

²⁰³ Human Rights Watch interview with Petr P.

²⁰⁴ The examination report is on file with Human Rights Watch.

²⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir P.

Psychological Consequences

[He wanted] to defend the motherland. But the things he saw [in the army] crushed and ruined his entire psyche. We do not just need to cure his bruises but also his psyche—and quickly too.—Anton E.’s mother²⁰⁶

During its research, Human Rights Watch repeatedly witnessed the arrival of fresh runaway conscripts at the offices of soldiers’ rights organizations. Typically, these young men looked deeply traumatized, their heads and shoulders bent forward as if expecting to be hit at any moment, their eyes radiating fear and suspicion. While some recover from their trauma soon after they leave the oppressive environment of their units, many others carry the psychological scars around for years.

A number of conscripts and their parents told Human Rights Watch about the psychological problems they had after their discharge from the armed forces. For example, when a Human Rights Watch researcher asked Aleksei K. how he had adapted to civilian life after the traumatic experiences of his military service, he sighed: “Oh, it was difficult.” He said that he did not understand the freedom of civilian life, that he did not want people to touch him, that he avoided people, and that he did not want to talk about his service.²⁰⁷ K.’s mother told Human Rights Watch that his army experience had changed him permanently. She said that ever since he ran away from his unit in Orenburg he had not been able to keep steady relationships and hinted that he was abusive in them. She said that he had become very explosive. For example, she said, “he can work on a radio or something very quietly in his room and then suddenly explode and start throwing things around in anger [when something goes wrong].” She said that he did not have such problems prior to his service. She also said that her son refused to talk to anyone about his military service and predicted he would refuse to speak to the Human Rights Watch researcher.²⁰⁸ To her surprise, her son spoke very openly in a long one-on-one interview about the abuses he endured.

Another conscript, Aleksei Koshelev, who served in a Ministry of Internal Affairs unit near St. Petersburg, acknowledged changes in his behavior following his military service. He said:

²⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Anton E.

²⁰⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei K.

²⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch with Aleksei K.’s mother, October 4, 2002, Volgograd.

Now I can't go work normally where I worked before. I'm not the same as I was. I...sleep more, eat less, and I constantly have [problems] with my girlfriend. Before, I worked in a disco as a disc jockey. I would...drink with my friends, dance with my girlfriend. When I came home [from the army] – that was over. I don't know [what exactly changed]. I have become unbalanced, angry, people say. They ask me [something], and I respond with force, bad force. That's what my parents say.²⁰⁹

Soldiers' rights groups frequently send runaway conscripts for full physical and psychological examinations to private clinics, which usually find that they have psychological and psychiatric problems. However, the absolute majority of conscripts who return from their military service with symptoms that may indicate post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological abnormalities never seek professional care. Only one of the young men interviewed for this report said he did. Vasilii S. said that when he left the armed forces, "this world [the civilian world] was like a dream, and that one was real... It all boiled and raged inside me. I lived it... Wherever I went I thought about it." Unable to come to grips with his life without uniform, he sought help. He said that over time a psychologist helped him reverse his feelings. In the interview, he told Human Rights Watch that civilian life feels real again and his army experience has now become like a "bad dream."²¹⁰

Disclosure of Medical Condition upon Discharge

Military medical commissions discharge numerous conscripts every year on neurological and psychiatric grounds, as was the case with Alexander D. Although Russian and international law protect the confidentiality of medical information, military commanders routinely include specific information about the type of medical condition that led to the discharge in the military identity cards of these young men.²¹¹ As Russian labor law allows employers to check the military identity cards of prospective employees, this disclosure can severely complicate the professional life of these young men.

²⁰⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Koshelev.

²¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii S.

²¹¹ Article 30(6) of the Principals of Legislation of the Russian Federal on The Protection of the Health of Citizens of 1993 states that a patient has the right to "confidentiality of information...about the condition of his health, the diagnosis and other information received during examinations and treatment." The disclosure of medical information also violates Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to respect for a person's private life.

DEDOVSHCHINA AND THE ROLE OF OFFICERS

Six conscripts who served both in units where *dedovshchina* was absent and where it was rife were consistent in the way they described the role of the officers in *dedovshchina*. In the former units the officers “cared,” in the latter they did not. In the former units, these conscripts said, officers sent a clear message to soldiers that *dedovshchina* (or, at least, abusive practices associated with it) would not be tolerated, in the latter the message was mixed at best. The research conducted for this report indicates that the vast majority of officers belong to the former. Indeed, we repeatedly encountered evidence that officers actively use or encourage *dedovshchina* as a means of maintaining discipline in units subordinate to them.

This is unfortunate, as the conscripts’ testimony so clearly suggests that officers are a determining factor for the prevalence and extent of *dedovshchina* in military units, and that an officers’ corps focused in its effort to eradicate initiation abuses can be successful. These testimonies also illustrate how the attitude of the majority of officers translates into day-to-day practices at military bases. In units where *dedovshchina* was absent conscripts said that officers had a visible presence on the base, maintained a certain closeness to rank-and-file soldiers, were alert to evidence of *dedovshchina*, and successfully used prevention mechanisms. This contrasted sharply with officer arrangements on bases where *dedovshchina* was prevalent: conscripts who served on such bases said that officers were not visibly present on the base, made no effort to maintain contact with ordinary soldiers, and reduced prevention mechanisms to empty formalities.

Secondly, conscripts said that officers in units without *dedovshchina* were willing to act on evidence of incipient *dedovshchina*. In these units, officers were apparently able—through the clarity of their position on *dedovshchina*, their presence on the base, and their frequent direct contacts with rank-and-file soldiers—to break through the rule of silence, get to the bottom of incidents, and take steps against the perpetrators. In contrast, in the majority of units, officers made at best half-hearted efforts to look into incidents that collapsed in the face of the rule of silence and the lack of trust first-year conscripts in these units have in their commanding officers.

While Human Rights Watch recognizes the problems the Russian armed forces have had in attracting qualified junior officers, these difficulties may not serve as an excuse for the unacceptable attitude of the majority of junior officers in Russia toward abuses related to *dedovshchina*.

Good and Bad Units: The Contrast

Example 1: Aleksei K.

“[I went to unit] 37115 in Krasnodar Region, the city of Eisk, there is a school for junior specialists, junior sergeants, a training unit. There, everything was just fine. I was there for the first six months. After two months of service, we were part of the group, and I had thoughts that I might stay on, on a contract. The group was very good, there was no resentment... The Code of Conduct was [observed]—everything was very strict... They [the officers] simply paid attention... We were an air defense unit, we studied armory. You get up in the morning, do physical exercise, eat...and go to the classes. In class, we studied both general topics and our own specialty, the machinery and equipment that we would serve on. It was interesting.”

“[After several months] they sent twelve of us to Totskoe, in Orenburg Province. That is a place that is, I would say, rather unpleasant... On the third day, we had gone to bed, as usual... They [the Dagestantsy] started beating us blindly. [It didn't matter where you were,] on the lower or upper berth – they hit you with a stool or an iron rod... It only quieted down when we were transferred to new barracks. We were on the first three floors, and new recruits on the fourth, they were just doing the young fighter's course.”

Example 2: Andrei T.

Soon after finishing basic training, Andrei T. wrote his mother with a simple message: “Mama, take me away from here.” His mother initially refused reminding him that military service was not a summer camp and that he himself had wanted to serve. However, she continued to receive letters from her son pleading to be taken away, and eventually one threatening suicide. When she visited him at the unit, her son told her that the dedy regularly beat and kicked him and extorted money from him. Finally, after an extended illness, Andrei T. received short-term leave and went home. There, his mother arranged for him to be transferred to a different unit.

At the time of Human Rights Watch's interview, Andrei T. was finishing his service in the new unit. His mother was pleased with the new unit. She said that her son looked healthy and was in good spirits. He told her that the food at the unit was good, that the dedy did not demand soap, tooth paste, and other items from him, and that they receive their salary.

Example 3: Alexander Sokolov

I initially went to Outpost Two, where I had basic training for a month. There we learned all the skills, they gave us weapons and we learned to shoot. We learned to take apart and put together weapons. They taught us how to search for signs of trespassers... At Outpost Two, the commander more or less kept everything under control... At night, a duty officer was in the barracks. There was a bodily examination every morning but no-one ever had any bruises.

After a month, I went to Outpost One. One could say that Outpost One was a mess. [The commanders] drank. There were no [checks for bruises]. At night, the dedy made us perform 'electric chair': You stand in semi-sitting position and stretch your hands out. They sometimes beat us. I never got injured but there were times when I really got it... At Outpost Two they fed us much better than at Outpost One. There the starshina paid attention [to the meals].

Example 4: Andrei D.

Andrei D. served in two units that were practically free of hazing. He spent his first few months of service with a chemical troops training unit, which strictly followed the military code of conduct. He said that he and his peers studied and trained intensively, and that nobody complained or ran away. According to him, the commander of the battalion monitored the situation closely and did not tolerate any excesses. He said that even food and other items he had brought from home were stored in the storage room, and given out to the conscripts when they asked for them.

After about five months in the training unit, Andrei D. was transferred to a regular chemical troops unit where, he said, soldiers lived "as one family." At that unit, he said, "we learned in practice what we had learned in theory in the training unit."

Then, after about a year, Andrei D. was transferred to a chemical troops unit in Verkhnaia Pyshma. There, he encountered a completely different situation: Caucasians in the unit forced first-year Russian conscripts to perform all sorts of chores for them, extorted money, beat them in punishment or gratuitously, and regularly woke them up at night and abused them. As a second-year conscript, he said, he was beaten occasionally when he refused to perform chores for the Caucasians but was left alone most of the time. He told Human Rights Watch that officers at that unit did not intervene in any way. He said: "There were almost never officers around... [I think] that the junior officers were afraid of them [the Caucasians] themselves because they never complained to them about anything."

Example 5: Anatolii Z.

Anatolii Z. initially served in a unit in Novoaltaisk, where he said the dedy beat him and his peers regularly: “Outside, they beat us with their hands and feet. In the company, they beat us with iron bars and stools.” He said that they regularly walked around with bruises but the officers did not care. Anatolii Z.’s mother finally took him home when he was in the sickbay because, as she told Human Rights Watch, “I understood that if he returns [to his unit] I will not see my son again.”

At the time of the interview with Human Rights Watch, Anatolii Z. was continuing his service at a unit closer to home. He said: “Here [relations with senior conscripts] are just like with conscripts your own draft. There is no [hazing] here... Here, if the commander suspects something, he immediately sends away the person who wants to establish his own rules.”

Example 6: Vasilii B.

Vasilii B. served in a military unit in Uzbur, where he said there were beatings practically everyday. Dedy extorted money and other goods from first-year conscripts, confiscated packages from relatives, and woke them up at night for punishment and beatings. Unwilling to put up with the abuse, Vasilii B. ran away.

Shortly after, a captain and ensign from his unit came to his house and asked him to come back. Vasilii B. told Human Rights Watch that he decided to go back to the unit with them. When he got there, he said, the commander came up to him and said: “Come here! Why did you run away? I’ll hang them all! Couldn’t you have just come to me and told me?” Vasilii B. later learned that the commander had punished the two dedy who had been most abusive toward him. He also said that the commander introduced daily bodily examinations:

We had a medical assistant, a woman, she undressed everyone everyday. If the commander noticed a bruise, M. and I. [the two abusive dedy] were immediately called to account. Then everything became normal and nobody beat anybody. When they [M. and I.] were discharged, the unit became golden altogether. Nobody abused anybody.

Shortly after, Vasilii B. himself became a junior and later senior sergeant. Responsible for maintaining discipline, he said that he obviously punished first-year conscripts when they broke the rules—for example, by making them run—but “there was no setting people up against each other.”

Oversight

They could break your nose, knock out your teeth. Nobody is going to notice a bruise because the commander was drunk all the time. He was going to retire [soon] and he did not stop any of this in any way.—Alexander Kaiankin²¹²

Considering the prevalence of *dedovshchina* in the Russian armed forces, its consequences, and attention to it in the Russian media, one would expect a certain vigilance among officers toward signs of abuse. However, in most units, it is conspicuously absent. Officers are far removed from the rank-and-file soldiers, often not visibly present on the base, and routinely close their eyes to evidence of abuses. For example, Andrei Z., a regular victim of beatings during his first year of service, said that “nobody ever saw any officers” in his unit.²¹³ His words were echoed by Aleksei Riabov, who served in the notorious 32-nd Gorodok: “The officers were never around.”²¹⁴ Vasilii S. said the officers in his unit were content to be ignorant: “Our captain comes to work, sits down at his desk, and fills out some paperwork. He doesn’t go outside, he doesn’t ask how everyone is doing.” S. was convinced that the officers could guess what the *dedy* were doing to first-year conscripts but chose not to find out.²¹⁵

In some units, the breakdown of oversight was so complete that *dedy* made no effort to conceal their abusive practices. For example, at Anatolii Z.’s unit, the *dedy* did not care about leaving bruises. He said officers might ask conscripts about clearly visible bruises but said none of the first-year conscripts would disclose their origin and officers would not press them too hard for it.²¹⁶ When a Human Rights Watch researcher asked Andrei D. if the *dedy* beat their victims in concealed areas, he responded with surprise: “Why? There were never any officers on the base.”²¹⁷

²¹² Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Kaiankin.

²¹³ Human Rights Watch interview with Andrei Z., November 4, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Andrei Z. served in unit 41581 in Sverdlovsk Province. Andrei Z. is a pseudonym.

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Riabov. Riabov served in a ministry of defense unit in 32d Gorodok, and at units in Shadrinsk and Karabash (Cheliabinsk Province). 32-nd Gorodok near Ekaterinburg appears to be one of the most abusive bases in the Ural region. For years, a disproportionately large percentage of the conscripts who seek the help the Association of Soldiers Mothers in Cheliabinsk have runaway from that base. Although military structures are well aware of the situation—in part because of repeated complaints from the Association—no steps have apparently been taken to end the abuses. According to Liudmila Zinchenko of Association, “In 32-nd Gorodok things remain as they were [two years ago]. In the last year, it has [actually] gotten worse.”

²¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii S.

²¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Anatolii Z.

²¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Andrei D.

In other units, *dedy* did try to avoid leaving visible signs of beatings because officers might notice. They said that beatings often took place in concealed areas or at night in the barracks when the officers had gone home. While officers in these units may have been somewhat vigilant to signs of *dedovshchina*, this vigilance was still very limited. For example, Stanislav F. told Human Rights Watch:

They tried not to beat us so much that they left [obvious] bruises and abrasions. [They aim] mostly for the legs. It was easiest to kick you in the legs. You feel it and there are [generally] no bruises. And if there are... no one's going to pay attention to that.²¹⁸

Prevention Mechanisms

The Military Code of Conduct contains a number of mechanisms that should, if consistently enforced, help prevent *dedovshchina*. For example, commanding officers are required to monitor the health conditions of all staff during battle training and everyday life, to conduct weekly superficial physical examinations of all conscripts, as well as semi-annual, extensive physicals.²¹⁹ Although not required by the Military Code of Conduct, in some units an officer or ensign stays in the barracks at night as a measure to prevent *dedovshchina*. Human Rights Watch's research found that in practice, these prevention mechanisms are often ignored or are turned into empty formalities.

Several conscripts told Human Rights Watch that they underwent in-depth physicals only when transferred from one unit to another but not after every six months of service. One conscript told Human Rights Watch that superficial physicals were conducted every week while he was in a special training unit. He said that he and his fellow conscripts had to undress to their underwear, after which the commander of his company and the medical doctor checked them for bruises and health problems. Once he was moved to a regular unit, these body checks ceased.²²⁰ Another conscript said that "in our unit, they checked our pockets for sharp objects every day but we never had any body checks. In the early months, I walked around with several large bruises..."²²¹ Petr P. said: "I don't think they checked all that much. Maybe a couple of times."²²²

²¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Stanislav F., November 7, 2002, Cheliabinsk. Stanislav F. served, among others, in a training unit in Elan, Sverdlov Province. Stanislav F. is a pseudonym.

²¹⁹ Articles 341 and 342 of the Military Code of Conduct.

²²⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Petr K., July 31, 2003, St. Petersburg. Petr K. served in the Ministry of Defense's unit 67616 in Kamenka, Leningrad Province. Petr K. is a pseudonym.

²²¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton S., July 31, 2003, St. Petersburg. Anton S. is a pseudonym.

²²² Human Rights Watch interview with Petr P.

Even regular physicals will not help if physicians routinely accept at face value conscripts' explanations on their bruises. For example, Ilia B. said the medical doctor of the sickbay checked them weekly for bruises. Asked whether the doctor ever found any bruises, B. said: "Of course she did. One person will say he fell in the bathroom when he was washing—after all, it gets slippery there, another might say he bumped into a bed." He said that in these cases there was no effort to get to the bottom of what had really happened.²²³

The mere presence of officers in barracks is not enough to prevent abuses; the officers have to intervene to stop them. In some units, officers or ensigns stayed in or near the barracks at night, apparently as a precaution against nightly abuses. However, several conscripts told Human Rights Watch that the officers on duty at the barracks refused to intervene with *dedovshchina* or, while stopping the abuses, failed to take steps to punish the perpetrators. For example, Petr P. said that one officer stayed over night at his frontier post but paid no attention to what was going on in the barracks: for a full month, *dedy* beat him and his peers practically every night, but the officer never noticed or intervened.²²⁴ Stepan M. said that *dedy* regularly woke up junior conscripts individually over the three months he served in a railroad troops unit north of St. Petersburg, despite the fact that an ensign slept in the barracks. Once, he said, *dedy* woke him and six other first-year conscripts up, put them in a row, and beat them over the course of several hours. Finally, the ensign woke up from the noise and sent everyone to their beds. He apparently took no steps to punish the *dedy* for beating M. and the others.²²⁵

Complaints and the "Rule of Silence"

Nobody complained. It simply was not done.—Alexander Kaiankin²²⁶

It was useless to fight. You can't do anything. You don't want to tell the commander; for telling they humiliate you later... I did not complain and didn't say anything.

— Vasilii B.²²⁷

²²³ Human Rights Watch interview with Ilia B. For more on this, see below, *Complaining to Medical Professionals*.

²²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Petr P.

²²⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M.

²²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Kaiankin.

²²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Vasilii B.

Effective complaint procedures are crucial to a government's effort to bring initiation abuses in check. However, Human Rights Watch's research found that complaint procedures in the Russian armed forces are not effective. The overwhelming majority of conscripts interviewed for this report did not report abuses to their commanders, medical professionals, or the procuracy, because of the *dedy* enforced "rule of silence."²²⁸ First-year conscripts almost universally cited fear of repercussion from *dedy* and a lack of trust in officers and others as the reasons for not filing complaints. Officers are likely aware of the code of silence but the overwhelming majority of them do not appear to take any effective steps to break this code: as a rule, they do not act on clear evidence of abuse, or, when they do, they generally accept at face value unlikely explanations as to the origin of the injuries.

After a *ded* hit him over the head with a stool and landed him in the sickbay, Anton A. did not complain to an officer. He told Human Rights Watch: "If you tell the officers, you make life more difficult for yourself." Some of his fellow conscripts had tried complaining to officers, he said, but officers "hardly reacted, and rarely helped... They kind of don't care."²²⁹ Stepan M., who suffers from hepatitis C, also decided not to complain after a fellow soldier hit him hard in the liver area. He said: "If you say something you'll be humiliated in the company. They may beat you or may force you to constantly clean the toilets."²³⁰

Several conscripts told Human Rights Watch that *dedy* specifically reminded them of the rule of silence. Alexander Sukhanov said that the morning after a *ded* hit him in the face he woke up with a swollen jaw: "[the *ded*] looked at me and told me that if the ensign notices anything I should not say anything..." Sukhanov ran away from his unit that evening because he felt that if he did not say anything, the *ded* would feel that "anything goes."²³¹ After a *ded* beat Petr P. over the head with a stool, causing a bloody nose, he told P. to "go wash yourself and don't tell [anybody] anything."²³²

²²⁸ Interestingly, the rule of silence extends even beyond military structures. The parents of several conscripts said that their sons were afraid to tell them about the cause of their injuries. They apparently feared that their parents would complain to their commanders. Galina F. told Human Rights Watch her son, Alexander F. came home on leave in early 2002. When she noticed that his ear was blue, she asked him whether he had been beaten. Her son denied, saying it was frostbite. That evening, while her son was sleeping, F. found that he had multiple bruises on his back, shoulders, and legs, and one on his behind. The next morning F. told her son he should file a complaint with the procuracy. Her son told her he would not: "Do you want all the guys to be punished because of me?" (Human Rights Watch interview with Galina F.) When Stepan K.'s mother noticed bruises on her son's legs and asked him what had happened, he told her that "I fell down the stairs." His mother told Human Rights Watch that his bruises, which covered both his legs from the hip to the ankle, were not consistent with falling down stairs, and said he had clearly been beaten. (Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Stepan K.)

²²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

²³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Stepan M.

²³¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother.

²³² Human Rights Watch interview with Petr P.

Complaining to Medical Professionals

Lack of trust and the rule of silence meant that most conscripts also refused to reveal the true origins of their injuries to medical personnel at sickbays and military hospitals, all of whom are uniformed officials. Instead, many made up—often highly unlikely—stories. Testimony gathered for this report suggests that medical personnel at sickbays routinely took these explanations at face value, even when they were not consistent with the injuries.

For example, one day, Aleksei Riabov was beaten in the bathroom. A group of Caucasian conscripts first hit him to the ground and then kicked him several times as he was lying down. After a few hours in pain, Riabov's fellow conscripts helped him get to the sickbay. There, he told medical personnel that he had fallen from some steps. Riabov told Human Rights Watch that he was transferred from the sickbay to a hospital in Cheliabinsk, where he received surgery because one of his kidneys had ripped.²³³ A *ded* hit Anton A. over the head with a stool. He was taken to the sickbay with a concussion and had to explain in a written statement how he had sustained the injury. He wrote that he had fallen and hit his head against the wall. His explanation was apparently taken at face value.²³⁴ Andrei T. told his mother that he told medical personnel at the sickbay a made-up story about the origin of multiple bruises on his chest because he was afraid to tell the truth: "Mama, I did not say that they beat me. I said that I fell from a watchtower." He also told his mother that he had not stood guard on the tower that day and that military officials could easily have verified his story, and found out that he had made it up. Apparently no one bothered to check.²³⁵

Vladimir Z. went to the sickbay because he suffered pain in his heart area at night. The medical attendant examined him, told him he was fine, and sent him back to the barracks. Vladimir Z. noted that he had been beaten repeatedly in previous days and that he had numerous bruises on his back. Although the attendant had to notice the bruises, she asked him nothing about them.²³⁶

²³³ Human Rights Watch interview with Aleksei Riabov.

²³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Anton A.

²³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Andrei T.

²³⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Vladimir Z.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Under international human rights law, Russia is obliged to investigate any abuses that reach the level of severity of degrading treatment or worse.²³⁷ Many acts of initiation that do not reach that threshold do constitute violations of the Russian armed forces' disciplinary code, and should therefore be investigated and punished under Russian law. However, Human Rights Watch found that disciplinary and criminal investigation and punishment of initiation abuse are rare, and occurs primarily with respect to very serious abuses that led to permanent injury or death. However, even such cases are often not investigated properly.

Accountability efforts for *dedovshchina* abuses must target not just the immediate offenders, the *dedy*, but also their superiors, the sergeants and officers. As this chapter argues, the vast majority of officers in the armed forces knowingly ignore *dedovshchina*, and have allowed generation after generation of conscripts to continue the cycle of violence. Thus, a significant shift in the culture of the officers' corps is required. We believe this cultural change can only be achieved by holding officers accountable for failing to be vigilant to evidence of initiation abuses, failing to observe prevention mechanisms, and failure to take steps when evidence of abuse arises.

Investigation of Abusive Practices

Considering that in most units, officers close their eyes to evidence of *dedovshchina* and that conscripts, bound by the rule of silence, are unwilling to file complaints or tell the truth when asked, it is unsurprising that few incidents are investigated and few perpetrators punished. Human Rights Watch has found, however, that even when conscripts complain about their treatment—this typically happens after running away from their unit and visiting a soldiers' rights group—military officials were wholly uninterested in investigating.

Human Rights Watch found that when abused runaway conscripts returned to their units, commanders often derided them for running away or launched straight into the practicalities of a return to the unit or hospitalization, while failing to establish the reasons for their flight and taking steps to remedy the situation. A Human Rights Watch researcher witnessed this when she visited Alexander D.'s military base in Mga and

²³⁷ This obligation is contained both in the European Convention of Human Rights (Article 3 in conjunction with 1) and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Article 12, 13, and 16(1)). See also above, Initiation Practices and Human Rights.

confronted his unit commander with the story of his abuses.²³⁸ In another case, Alexander Sukhanov's mother informed the commander of his unit that he had an abuse problem in the unit. The commander answered that everything was fine in the unit and suggested she should let her son "...rest today, and bring him to the unit tomorrow."²³⁹

In several cases, we found that commanders, perhaps eager to keep their record clean, made deals with runaway conscripts: if the conscript agrees not file a complaint against the abuses with the procuracy, the commander helps the conscript transfer to a different unit or get a discharge through a military hospital. Alexander Sukhanov's mother, for example, told Human Rights Watch that after her son ran away with burn marks on his back, "[the commander] requested me personally: 'Let's not bring this case to the procuracy. Let's put him in the hospital. We will not interfere and we will discharge him [from the army].'" The commander then warned Sukhanov to agree to the deal, saying Sukhanov had committed criminal offenses by running away three times and might face prosecution if he went to the procuracy. Sukhanov's mother told Human Rights Watch that: "At that moment, we just wanted everything to end as soon as possible. We were in such a state for a full month..." They agreed to the deal and the commander kept his word: he gave Sukhanov leave and referred him to the military hospital. Sukhanov was discharged shortly after.²⁴⁰

In a similar case, Ilia R.'s mother told Human Rights Watch that after she took her son away from his unit with blisters from frostbite that he had sustained as a result of *dedovshchina*, two officers from the unit made numerous calls to her all night offering to transfer her son to a different unit closer to home. The next morning, the commander of that unit visited Ilia R. at her home. He said that his unit was "very good...that Ilya will like it." He reminded Ilia R.'s mother that her son could have problems because he ran away from his unit and finally suggested: "Let's do it in such a way that it is good for you and for us." Ilia R.'s mother inspected the unit and agreed to the transfer. Her son served the remainder of his two years at the unit and did not complain of further abuses. After her son's transfer, Ilia R.'s mother sent a complaint to the procuracy nonetheless but she never had her son's wound examined medically and the complaint apparently did not lead to any action by the procuracy.²⁴¹

²³⁸ See above, p. 27.

²³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Alexander Sukhanov and his mother.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Ilia R.

The Disciplinary Code

According to the Disciplinary Code of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, military discipline is “the strict and exact observance by all military servicemen of the order and rules, established in laws, military codes and orders of commanders...”²⁴² Military discipline is achieved by, among others, “maintenance in the military unit of the internal order...” and by “respect for the personal integrity of military servicemen and constant care for them.”²⁴³ To promote military discipline, the Code allows for both rewarding of exemplary behavior and punishment of violations of discipline. Forms of rewarding range from removal of earlier disciplinary punishment or a formal expression of gratitude to promotion.²⁴⁴ Disciplinary punishment ranges from a formal warning to ten days in detention.²⁴⁵

The Code provides certain procedural guarantees to soldiers subject to punitive disciplinary proceedings.²⁴⁶ The soldier’s commander must conduct an investigation before imposing disciplinary punishment. During this investigation, the commander must, among other things, establish what occurred, and when and how, who the guilty parties are, and whether there are any mitigating or aggravating circumstances.²⁴⁷ The code stipulates that all circumstances must be weighed in determining the severity of the punishment.²⁴⁸ The code also provides soldiers subject to disciplinary punishment the right to appeal.²⁴⁹ If, in the course of his investigation, the commander discovers evidence of a criminal offense, he is obliged to inform the military procuracy.²⁵⁰

Disciplinary Punishment for Dedy

Various forms of punishment are available for *dedy* who violate military discipline: a warning, a strict warning, stripping them of leave, detention for up to ten days, up to five additional assignments, and stripping them of the medal of excellence, if they have received one.²⁵¹ *Dedy* who have achieved the rank of sergeant or *starsbina* can also be lowered in rank, position, or both.²⁵² Commanders of squads, themselves *dedy*, have the right to give warnings and strict warnings, strip of leave, or assign one additional

²⁴² Article 1 of the Disciplinary Code.

²⁴³ Article 4.

²⁴⁴ Article 19.

²⁴⁵ Article 51.

²⁴⁶ Article 85.

²⁴⁷ Article 86.

²⁴⁸ Article 87.

²⁴⁹ Article 88.

²⁵⁰ Article 86.

²⁵¹ Article 51.

²⁵² Article 52.

assignment.²⁵³ The deputy platoon commander, the *starshina* of a company, and the platoon commander—the former two are conscripts, the latter is an officer—can each assign one additional assignment respectively.²⁵⁴ The commander of the company, an officer, can order the arrest of a soldier for up to three days.²⁵⁵

In our research, we found few examples of disciplinary punishment of *dedy* for hazing.²⁵⁶ Conscripts who served in units where *dedovshchina* was largely absent said that bruises led to investigations by commanders, and to punishment of the perpetrators. However, almost none of the conscripts who served in units where *dedovshchina* was prevalent mentioned any disciplinary investigations into bruises or other clear signs of abuse. The case of Alexander D. is a good example: While he was still serving, no one conducted any investigation into the initiation abuses that took place in the unit, including the incident when Alexander D. was hit over the head with a fire extinguisher. But the unit commander showed no inclination of conducting any investigation even when Alexander D. visited the unit after military doctors had ruled him unfit to serve. In addition, a representative of the Soldiers' Mothers of the St. Petersburg specifically told the commander about the abuses he had suffered in the unit, and gave him the names of the primary perpetrators. The case of Alexander Sukhanov is another typical example: although he had clear burn marks on his back as proof of mistreatment, no military officials ever questioned him about the treatment and his tormentors faced neither disciplinary punishment nor criminal prosecution.

Disciplinary Punishment for Officers

Officers are usually not directly involved in initiation abuses against first-year conscripts.²⁵⁷ They are, however, responsible for order and discipline in the units that are subordinate to them, and can thus face disciplinary punishment for failure to prevent violations of order and discipline. Indeed, the Disciplinary Code explicitly requires that commanders of all levels maintain a high level of vigilance for such violations. For example, commanders must “systematically analyze the condition of military discipline and the moral and psychological situation of subordinate military servicemen...” and

²⁵³ Article 54.

²⁵⁴ Article 55, 56 and 57.

²⁵⁵ Article 58.

²⁵⁶ While the victims of abuse generally do not know whether their abusers have been subjected to disciplinary punishment—under the Disciplinary Code, disciplinary measures taken with respect to a soldier may not be announced to his subordinates—they are in a position to know whether their commanders conducted an investigation into the alleged abuses. Hence, if their commanders never questioned them about the abuses, they can safely conclude that their tormentors were not given disciplinary punishment.

²⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch has documented a number of cases of abuse of conscripts by officers but these were not related to *dedovshchina* and therefore fall outside the scope of this report. However, according to soldiers' rights groups, abuse of conscripts by officers is a growing problem.

must be “close to his subordinates, know their needs and wishes, seek to satisfy them, not tolerate rudeness and degradation of the integrity of the subordinates.”²⁵⁸ The types of disciplinary punishment that can be applied to junior officers range from formal warnings to demotion to early retirement.²⁵⁹

The scale on which officers fail to intervene to stop *dedovshchina* abuses strongly suggests that they fear no sanction for their inaction. Human Rights Watch was unable to find any information on cases when officers faced disciplinary punishment for failing to stop *dedovshchina* in their ranks.

Criminal Prosecution of Dedy

Under Russian law, unit commanders are responsible for the initial inquiry into complaints. They must also, *ex officio*, investigate any cases of abuse that come to their attention. They collect testimony from witnesses and any physical evidence that might be available. On the basis of these materials, commanders, jointly with the military procuracy, decide whether or not to open a criminal case. Once a criminal case has been opened, procuracy investigators are in charge of the criminal investigation.

This report has described the numerous obstacles that impede proper investigations. Officers routinely close their eyes to abusive practices and the victims of such practices generally do not file complaints. Even when a conscript flees his unit, the commander rarely conducts a thorough investigation into the reasons for his decision to run away. Thus, the vast majority of incidents never makes the first hurdle—they never come to the attention of the relevant officials.

When victims do lodge complaints or incidents are so serious that the commander or military procuracy feel obliged to investigate it, a second hurdle emerges. The commander, who is responsible for the initial fact gathering, faces a conflict of interest: official documentation of abusive practices in his unit reflect poorly on him, and may hamper his professional advancement. Commanders are therefore often less than eager to thoroughly investigate these incidents, and tend to deny or downplay them. Indeed, soldiers’ rights’ groups have told Human Rights Watch that in response to numerous

²⁵⁸ Article 5 stipulates that commanders and their deputies responsible for education are responsible for discipline in the unit and must “constantly maintain high military discipline, demand from subordinates observance, and reward the worthy, and strictly but justly punish negligent.” According to article 6, they must “solidify friendship between military servicemen of different nationalities,” “know the level of military discipline,” “immediately rectify violations found and decisively end any actions that can cause damage to the military readiness of the unit (*podrazdelenia*)... “A commander must be close to his subordinates, must know their needs and wishes...”

²⁵⁹ Article 69.

complaints of confirmed *dedovschina* abuses lodged by them, the military procuracy sends letters with a standard formula: “the allegations were not confirmed by the facts.”

For example, on November 8, 2001, the soldiers’ rights group Right of the Mother requested in a letter to the military procuracy in Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia that it conduct an investigation into maltreatment of Aleksei L. In an appended complaint, Aleksei L. described his treatment as follows:

Sergeant P. forced me to bring him money, [and] cigarettes, and if I failed he put two overcoats on me and a bullet proof vest, and beat and kicked me... This happened in the storage room or bathrooms. They [the *dedy*] also hit me over the head with a stool. Every Tuesday we had a bodily examination when we were checked for bruises but they beat us so that no signs would be left. They forced us to learn the *dembel*’s fairytale, and to tell it to the sergeants at night. If we did not, they made us to push-ups at night in the corridor for hours on end.²⁶⁰

Aleksei L. also described abuses he suffered at the hands of an officer: “Major B. amused himself as follows: He put his car in a puddle and forced us to crawl under it...”²⁶¹ Several months later, the deputy head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs troops of the southern federal district responded to Right of the Mother saying that Aleksei L. allegations had been verified and that “unlawful manifestations with regard to private A.L. were not confirmed.”²⁶²

Even when a commander does try to conduct a meaningful inquiry—or when the facts simply cannot be denied or downplayed—and a criminal case is opened, the investigation faces major obstacles. Most importantly, in most cases, all witnesses to the incident remain at the military base, together with the *dedy*, and no witness protection program is in place to protect them. Thus, the *dedy* are able to enforce the rule of silence and seriously undermine the criminal investigation. In many cases, the witnesses are first-year conscripts and themselves victims of *dedovschina* abuses.

The following case is illustrative. Conscripts Vladimir T. and Igor Sh. served at military unit 5594 in Stavropol, southern Russia, where *dedovschina* was apparently rife. Vladimir

²⁶⁰ A copy of the complaint, dated October 17, 2001, is on file with Human Rights Watch.

²⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Aleksei L.

²⁶² Letter from the deputy commander of the interior forces of the southern federal district to Right of the Mother, dated December 6, 2001. A copy of the letter is on file with Human Rights Watch.

T.'s mother told Human Rights Watch, for example, that *dedy* had beaten her son on the head with stools, on his legs with bed posts, and with fists wrapped in wet towels. At night, he told her, *dedy* forced them to climb up seven flights of stairs while kneeling and beat those who failed.²⁶³ In August 2002, conscript Igor Sh. fled the unit and filed a complaint with the military procuracy regarding the treatment he and his peers faced at the base. In response, the military procuracy sent an investigator to the base to conduct an inquiry. Vladimir T., who was still at the base at the time, later told his mother that prior to the arrival of the investigator, one of the *dedy* had called all conscripts together and threatened them with unspecified repercussions should they cooperate with the inquiry.²⁶⁴ The criminal investigation never progressed.

Thus, the odds of any incident of abuse to be exhaustively investigated and prosecuted are very low. However, there are some precedents of successful investigations and convictions, which indicate that such prosecutions are possible. According to Russia's main military procurator, in the first half of 2003, the number of crimes related to *dedovshchina* "went up by 500 to almost 3,000."²⁶⁵

Criminal Prosecution of Officers

When officers know or ought to know that serious initiation abuses are happening in the units subordinate to them but fail to take steps to end them, they themselves may become criminally liable for the abuses. This may particularly be true in cases where a conscript has unsuccessfully complained to the commander but the abuses continue, or in cases when a particular unit is well-known as rife with initiation abuse but commanders fail to take steps. According to Russia's main military procurator, his agency is investigating cases "against the commanders who tried to conceal these crimes, thus depriving the soldiers of the right for a secure service in the Army."²⁶⁶ He did not

²⁶³ Vladimir T.'s mother took her son away from his unit after the mother of a conscript who fled the base called her and told her that her son had plans to throw himself out of a barrack window to escape the abuses.

Vladimir T.'s mother told Human Rights Watch that her son had also indicated in his letters that he faced abuse. She said that prior to his service she and her son had agreed that he would draw little trees on the margins of his letters if he was being beaten. She said: "At first, before the oath, there were very few. But then there were more and more of them." Human Rights Watch interview with the mother of Vladimir T., October 4, 2002, Volgograd. Vladimir T. served in interior forces unit 5594 in Stavropol. Vladimir T. is a pseudonym.

Vladimir T.'s mother provided Human Rights Watch with a forensic medical report obtained after he left his base. The report describes injuries that are consistent with his description of the abuses he faced. It states that "T. V.I. has bruises on his head, rump, and extremities, which occurred as a result of impact with dull objects, possible hands, feet and the like, about one to one and a half weeks before the examination." A copy of the examination report is on file with Human Rights Watch.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ See: Sergei Ovsiyenko, Alexander Shashkov, "Russian Prosecutor Says Cases of Hazing in Army up 30%," Itar-Tass news agency, September 3, 2003; Dmitrii Iurov, "Prestupniku mesto v tiurme (Criminals should be in jail)," *Krasnaia Zvezda* (The Red Star), September 5, 2003; and "V rossiiskoi armii uvelichilos chislo neustavnykh otnoshenii," Lenta.ru, September 3, 2003.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

specify, however, what kind of crimes the commanders sought to conceal. Human Rights Watch did not come across any criminal investigations against officers for failing to take steps against *dedovshchina* abuses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What to say about dedovshchina, its roots are deep, they date back to Soviet times. The issue can be resolved radically, by transferring the armed forces to voluntary recruitment basis. But let me tell you: that isn't going to happen any time soon.

– Comment by Russia's Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, March 2003.²⁶⁷

Sergei Ivanov's comment sums up the Russian government's approach to *dedovshchina*: while it recognizes *dedovshchina* as a problem, it has essentially accepted it as a fact of life—at least until an all-volunteer army is created and that, according to a more recent public statement by Sergei Ivanov, may not happen at all.²⁶⁸

Human Rights Watch believes that the Russian government cannot wait for the creation of professional armed forces in order to successfully fight abuses linked to *dedovshchina*, and that it does not have to do so. However, it does need to substitute its haphazard approach to the problem with a carefully designed, multifaceted strategy, and implement that strategy as a matter of priority. In an August 16, 2004 letter to President Vladimir Putin, Human Rights Watch proposed the creation of an interdepartmental task force to spearhead such an effort. We suggested that such a task force be headed by an independent prominent individual with relevant expertise and authority in the armed forces, that it be charged with developing the strategy in consultation with relevant government officials, military officials, nongovernmental organizations, and other relevant groups, and that it oversee the strategy's implementation. We stressed that the task force would need strong, publicly stated, support from and regular access to the president, minister of defense, and other relevant top officials.

In the letter, we recommended that the government mandate the task force to consider, at minimum, the following five issues when developing a strategy to combat *dedovshchina*: public commitment, prevention, accountability, independent monitoring, and structural reform.

²⁶⁷ *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, March 31 and April 1, 2003.

²⁶⁸ "S. Ivanov: v Rossii ne budet otmenena prizyvnaia sistema" (S. Ivanov: the conscription system in Russia will not be abolished), June 1, 2004 [online], <http://www.gazeta.ru/cgi-bin/newsarc.cgi> (retrieved August 4, 2004).

Public Commitment to Combating *Dedovshchina*

When fighting entrenched problems, such as crime, racism, or soccer hooliganism, widely circulated public statements of commitment by officials at the highest level are a necessary first step for success. Such statements make it clear to the public and officialdom that the issue is a priority for the government; they empower officials and public actors already trying to address the issue; they empower victims to step forward and lodge complaints; and they deter perpetrators and those who shield them from punishment. These public statements need to send a clear message and must be repeated regularly to reinforce the message.

Unfortunately, to date, public statements on *dedovshchina* by top government officials have been few and far between, and have sent mixed and inconsistent messages. For example, while addressing the priorities for the armed forces in 2003 and 2004, neither Sergei Ivanov, in an extensive interview with *Rossiiskaia gazeta* in January 2003, nor Vladimir Putin in his 2004 state-of-the-nation speech, mentioned the issue of *dedovshchina* even once.²⁶⁹ Comments occasionally made by top officials unfortunately fail to convey a clear message. This comment by Sergei Ivanov is an example:

One other thing that concerns me are the runaways, sometimes hundreds of kilometers, to so-called committees of soldiers mothers... In fact, there are hundreds of such committees, or even thousands. Who supports them, how they live, that remains a big question.²⁷⁰

Instead of focusing on the main problem—why conscripts run away from their units in such large numbers—he insinuates there is something suspicious in the sources of funding for soldiers’ mothers groups. While soldiers’ rights groups and the government may have an understandably adversarial relationship, these organizations could be a very useful resource for the Ministry of Defense in fighting *dedovshchina*.

The government’s public message on *dedovshchina* should convey that *dedovshchina* abuses are wrong; that they will not be tolerated; and that officers who tolerate them will be punished.

The creation of the above-mentioned task force would be a natural moment to launch a public outreach effort to send this message and emphasize the government’s

²⁶⁹ “Sergey Ivanov Eyes Army Priorities, Reform, Contract Manning,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, January 14, 2003.

²⁷⁰ Goltz, p. 9.

commitment to eradicating initiation abuses. The government should make use of its significant control over television media to promote the work of the task force and report on its progress. Regular meetings between top government officials and the head of the task force would underscore the continued importance the Russian government attaches to its work and would reaffirm the government's commitment to eradicating these abuses.

Prevention

A significant part of the government's strategy to combat abusive practices should focus on prevention, including the training of current and future officers on initiation practices, strengthening enforcement of existing prevention mechanisms, and examining best and worst practices.

Training of Officers

In a number of developed countries special training programs on preventing abusive initiation practices are a standard part of the curriculum at officers' schools. These programs seek to sensitize future officers to initiation practices; teach them what initiation practices are banned and why; how to spot such practices; and how to take steps against them. A similar training program should be part of the curriculum at officers' schools in Russia. The government should also strive to hold such training sessions for current officers.

Enforcement of Existing Prevention Mechanisms

Existing prevention mechanisms requiring officers regularly to monitor the health of soldiers in practice are not preventing *dedovshchina*. This report shows that officers frequently ignore these mechanisms altogether or reduce them to empty formalities, and suggests that officers' compliance with these requirements is checked only superficially.

Top officials at the Ministry of Defense and other relevant ministries should reinforce the importance of these prevention mechanisms. This could be conveyed in a written instruction from top officials to officers around the country explaining the importance of these mechanisms, and insisting on their rigorous implementation, and in articles in publications widely read by officers. Finally, the government should consider developing a mechanism for surprise inspections, to complement routine checks, that would not only examine the official records on prevention mechanisms but would also involve one-on-one interviews with randomly picked first-year soldiers about the way these mechanisms are implemented in practice. Any finding that officers failed to rigorously implement prevention mechanisms should have consequences for the officers.

Learning from Best Practices

Studying best practices can yield valuable information on effective strategies to address *dedovshchina*. Human Rights Watch's research provides a number of clues as to possible best practices, in particular the following findings:

- The testimony of conscripts from units without significant *dedovshchina* suggests that their officers consistently sent a clear message to soldiers that they would not tolerate initiation abuses, maintained a certain degree of closeness to rank-and-file soldiers, were alert to signs of abusive initiation practices, and were willing to address the occasional incidents immediately and forcefully whenever they occurred.
- Dozens of conscripts described serious abuses that took place at night in the barracks, and uniformly observed that the absence of officers at this time left second-year conscripts free to be particularly violent. Several conscripts from units without significant *dedovshchina* told Human Rights Watch said that one of the reasons why they did not face abuses at night was the routine presence of an officer at the barracks during night time. The mere presence of an officer at night is no guarantee—we found some examples where officers were at the barracks at night but abuses still continued. Officers would have to have specific instructions to prevent initiation abuses while in barracks at night.
- Several conscripts from units without *dedovshchina* observed that officers there kept them active for the entire day every day. They contrasted that with the boredom and inertia they faced in units where *dedovshchina* was prevalent, and suggested that the boredom bred the abuse.

Accountability

While some of the most serious abuses are investigated and perpetrators prosecuted, accountability has been almost completely absent for less severe abuses that are so typical of everyday life in the barracks. This lack of accountability, for perpetrators and officers who tolerate abuses, is one of the key factors that have allowed abusive practices linked to *dedovshchina* to persist.

The government should reverse this by making a public commitment to accountability, stressing that not only the perpetrators of *dedovshchina* abuses but also officers who tolerate them in their ranks are liable for disciplinary or criminal punishment. The Ministry of Defense and other relevant ministries should start a concerted effort to

establish a meaningful accountability process for abusive practices, specifically instructing commanding officers around the country that they must take the following steps:

- Whenever any evidence of abusive practices comes to their attention, whether *ex officio* or through a complaint, they must thoroughly investigate the incident. The instruction should specify that commanders should vigorously question any potential witnesses, and that implausible explanations should not be taken at face value.
- In responding to absences without leave, commanding officers should always investigate whether the conscript had been the victim of *dedovshchina* abuses.
- Commanding officers should offer any witnesses willing to provide testimony about the abuses protection from retaliation—through transfer to a different unit, temporary leave, or otherwise.
- Commanding officers should strictly and consistently apply disciplinary punishment in all cases where such punishment is warranted.
- If commanders come across evidence that *dedovshchina* abuses may have constituted a criminal offense, they should forward the materials to the military procuracy.

The government should specifically remind officers of their duties in this respect, and make it clear that failure to live up to these obligations will result in punishment. The government should, after a certain period, review the effect of its instruction by analyzing statistics on the use of disciplinary punishment.

The military procuracy should designate special officials to deal with complaints related to *dedovshchina*. These officials should investigate complaints from conscripts, their parents or soldiers' rights groups, as well as all cases of unauthorized departure from military units. It should also collect specific statistics on complaints about *dedovshchina*.

The Ministry of Defense and other relevant ministries should develop formal mechanisms to protect soldiers who complain about abusive initiation practices, as well as potential witnesses.

Independent Monitoring

A meaningful government effort to eradicate abusive initiation practices requires reliable information about the prevalence of *dedovshchina*. Although current monitoring procedures of the Ministry of Defense and other ministries that maintain armed forces could provide some relevant information on initiation abuses, investigations by independent, outside monitors are more likely to yield a full picture of the situation. Human Rights Watch therefore recommends the establishment of a special ombudsman for the rights of military servicemen, under the existing ombudsman's office of the Russian Federation. The ombudsman should be authorized to:

- a) access military bases without prior arrangement;
- b) move around inside military bases without restrictions;
- c) speak to any serviceman in private;
- d) have access to any documents relevant to the mandate, both at military bases, at the relevant ministries and other government agencies, and at military procuracy;
- e) receive mail from any serviceman without intervention of the military censor;
- f) receive information from nongovernmental, professional and other organizations.

Structural Reform

Our research has identified at least one structural problem: while in most armed forces around the world a professional non-commissioned officers corps is responsible for discipline—and thus for keeping initiation practices in check—in the Russian armed forces this duty lies with second-year conscripts, who themselves are the *dedy* and thus function as a check on themselves with respect to *dedovshchina*. Our research leaves no doubt that that set up has not worked. While in Soviet times low level officers were closer to the day-to-day life of the rank-and-file soldier, and were thus in a better position to keep initiation practices from degenerating into abuse, low level officers in the present Russian armed forces are too far removed from that daily life to effectively keep these practices under control.

This structural problem needs to be addressed. As President Vladimir Putin suggested in his 2003 state-of-the-nation speech, one option for resolving this issue is the creation of a professional non-commissioned officers' corps. Alternatively, steps need to be taken to decrease the distance between officers and the day-to-day life of rank-and-file soldiers.

Recommendations to the International Community

The European Union, its member states, the United States, and other countries should make the eradication of *dedovshchina* abuses a key piece of their dialogue with the Russian government. They should support the establishment of the ombudsman and the task force, and offer technical assistance on these issues to the Russian government. They should also support soldiers' rights organizations in Russia.

In the context of its Partnership for Peace program, NATO should share with the Russian government lessons learned on the eradication of initiation abuses in the armed forces of member states.

Constituent parts of the Council of Europe should engage the Russian government on the establishment of the special ombudsman and the task force. The monitoring mechanism of the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) should consistently raise the issue of *dedovshchina* abuses in its contacts with Russian government officials and in its reports. The office of the human rights commissioner should offer technical assistance on the establishment of the special ombudsman. Council of Europe countries should support PACE rapporteur Alexander Arabadjiev in his efforts to develop guidelines on the treatment of conscripts.

GLOSSARY

<i>Dagestantsy</i>	This term normally refers the inhabitants of Dagestan, an autonomous region in the North Caucasus in southern Russia. In the context of this report, it refers to conscripts of non-Russian ethnicity, particularly from the entire North Caucasus region.
<i>Ded</i> (plural: <i>dedy</i>)	Grandfather. In the informal hierarchy in the Russian armed forces, conscripts who have performed from eighteen to twenty-one months of military service are called grandfathers. In this report, <i>ded</i> is used for all conscripts who have served more than one year in the armed forces.
<i>Dedovshchina</i>	This term can be loosely translated as the “rule of the grandfathers.” It refers to an informal system of initiation in the Russian armed forces in the context of which second-year conscripts brutally haze new recruits throughout the first year of their military service.
<i>Dembel</i> (plural: <i>dembeli</i>)	This term refers to conscripts who have entered the last hundred days of their military service. It is derived from the word <i>demobilizatsia</i> or discharge.
<i>Dukh</i> (plural: <i>dukh</i>)	Scent or ghost. This is a derogatory term used by second-year conscripts for new recruits during their first six months of service.
<i>Stodnevka</i>	A tradition in accordance with which first-year conscripts must place cigarettes under the pillows of <i>dembeli</i> at night. Failure to do so results in punishment.