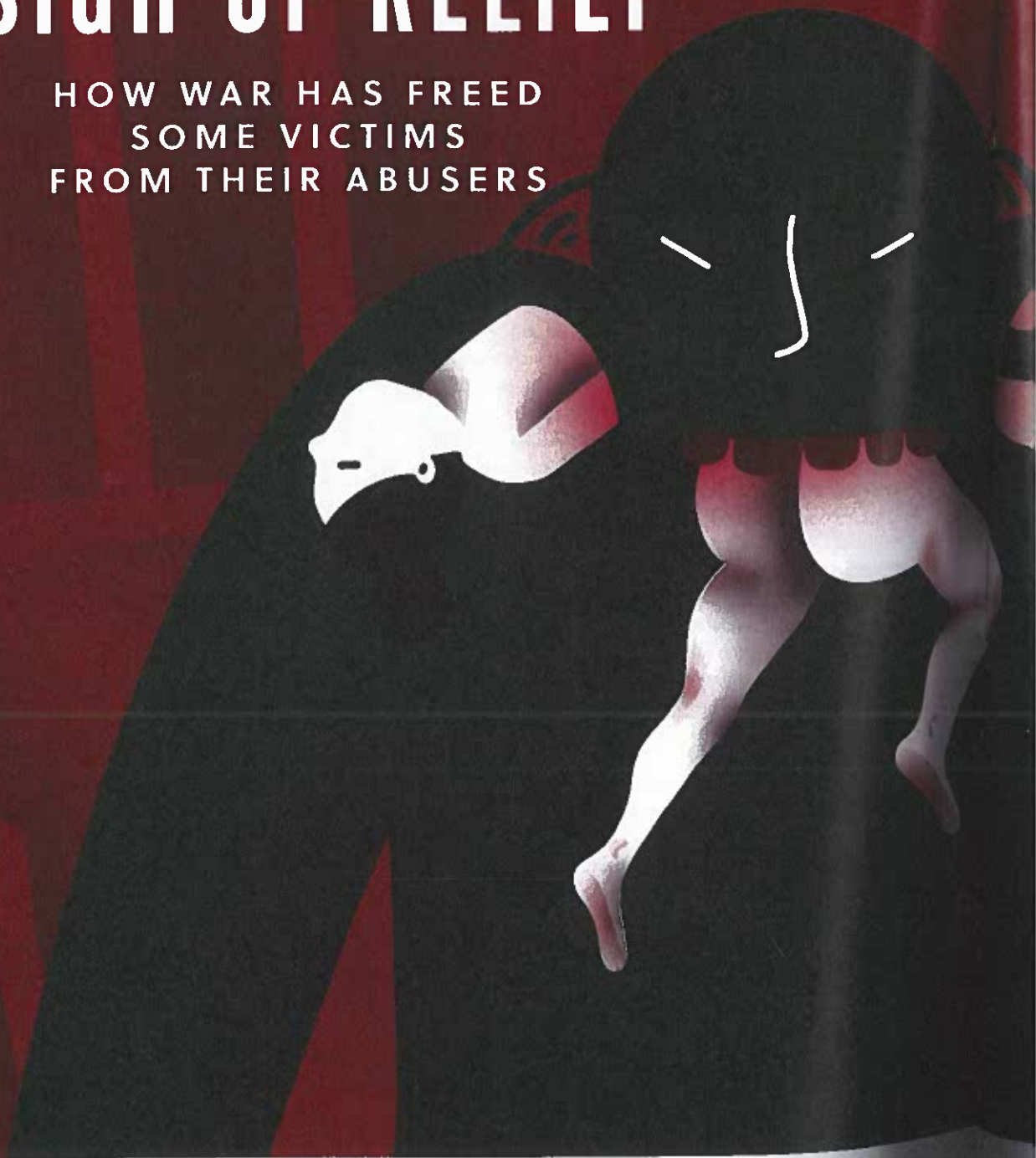


“I BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF”

HOW WAR HAS FREED
SOME VICTIMS
FROM THEIR ABUSERS





Illustrations by Rita Cherepanova

WARNING: This article contains scenes of graphic and cruel violence. Readers who may find this disturbing should skip this article.

From the moment Russia invaded Ukraine, experts feared that the war would lead to an upsurge in domestic abuse. No precise figures are yet available (they are extremely difficult to gather and there is no reliable tracking in Russia), but there have indeed been instances of soldiers who returned home from the war and committed gruesome, and in some cases fatal, acts of domestic violence.

While the fear experts expressed is valid, there's an unexpected twist to the situation: some Russian women have finally been freed of their abusive partners. We spoke with one such woman who recounted how her ex-husband, after being incarcerated for brutally beating her, was released ahead of time to fight in the war, and then was killed.

LEARN TO DEAL WITH IT

Marina Skorplyuk met her husband, Yevgeny, in 2003, in her hometown of Omsk, when his and her parents happened to be sharing a hospital room. Since Yevgeny was then in the process of getting a divorce, his and Marina's first two children were born out of wedlock. They were married only later.

Only after Marina divorced Yevgeny did she understand how he had been trying to control her from day one. "Back then, it seemed to me he was showing that he cared about me. He would ask where I had been and where I was going," Marina recalled. "He always forced his opinion on me about the clothes I bought and

SHE TRIED TO GET HER HUSBAND HELP BY PHONING THE LOCAL PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL AND EXPLAINING THAT SHE FEARED FOR HERSELF AND HER CHILDREN

told me what I should wear. He would say that my friends whom he didn't like were jealous of me. Whatever opinion I had was always wrong."

Major trouble started in 2018, when Marina was pregnant with their fifth child. Yevgeny began to experience constant fits of unprovoked jealousy. "He imagined that I was always at orgies. If he was out walking the dog and saw a disposable wipe, he thought that I had been there at night. At the same time, he was always complaining of hearing ringing in his ears and voices, and he had headaches." When Marina and Yevgeny saw on the ultrasound that she was having a girl, Yevgeny claimed that the child was not his, because all the couple's other children were boys. As soon as the baby was born, Yevgeny took a DNA test to confirm that he was the father.

In January 2019, Yevgeny hit his wife for the first time, which, Marina says, he did for absolutely no reason. It was then that Marina understood her husband might be a threat to her and her children. She had already gone back to work after her maternity leave and had tried to get her husband help by phoning the local psychiatric hospital and explaining that she feared for herself and her children. A psychiatrist told Marina that she needed to bring Yevgeny in for an appointment, because he could have "obsessive morbid jealousy," which could spell trouble. But Yevgeny refused to get help. A staff member at the domestic abuse crisis center advised Marina to just "learn to deal with it."

After Marina filed for divorce in March 2019, Yevgeny changed. He started to take her to work and pick her up afterwards, have lunch with her, and meet all her co-workers. For the next few months, Marina said, everything was "absolutely perfect."

AFTER THE OFFICE PARTY

In May 2019, Marina invited Yevgeny to her office party. He had a good time the whole evening playing poker and chess and practicing his archery skills.

After the party finished, Yevgeny and Marina gave two of her co-workers a ride home. Along the way, Marina chatted with them, while her husband, who was scowling and coolly answering her questions, only said, "You sure had fun and were laughing your head off." They were about ten minutes from home when they dropped off the second co-worker.

Marina called her mother and told her that they'd be home soon, but immediately after she hung up, Yevgeny hit the brakes. Rain was pouring on the dark freeway and Yevgeny pulled off to the side. Marina figured that he had stopped to get out and smoke, because he never smoked in the car. But instead, he abruptly jumped from the driver's seat into the passenger seat and attacked her. He started off by beating her with his fists and then put his thumbs in her eyes, pressing hard until he drew blood.

Yevgeny yelled at Marina, "I'm going to kill you now, bury you in the woods, and say that you ran off with your boyfriend." Then he abruptly changed his mind and said that they'd both die in a car crash because they had nothing left to live for.

Marina managed to free herself enough to fumble for the door handle and try to get out of the car, but Yevgeny would not let her go and kept banging the car door against her fingers. Then he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back in, bit off her left ear, and gouged out her right eye. Her left eye was literally "turned inward."

Eventually, a passing driver pulled up next to them after seeing Yevgeny's hazard lights flashing and decided to ask if he could help. Marina was so badly injured that she couldn't see anything and practically couldn't hear either. When the driver, Mikhail, testified in court, he said that he knocked on the car window to check whether everything was alright. Since the lights were off in the car and it was almost midnight, he couldn't see inside. Yevgeny cracked the window open and told Mikhail that everything was fine. Just then, Marina was able to open the door, which caused an overhead light to go on, and Mikhail saw her bloodstained face. She collapsed onto the ground. Mikhail rushed to help her and Yevgeny sped off.

"I latched on to Mikhail and asked him for his phone so that I could call my children," Marina said. "I was sure that Yevgeny would harm them and my mother. Mikhail replied, 'Forget the phone! Your eyeball is hanging down on your cheek!' I guess adrenaline had kicked in and I didn't care about anything except the safety of my small children."

Mikhail then called an ambulance and the police. While Marina was in the ambulance, she sat up a few times and asked for a phone to call her family, but she couldn't remember anyone's number. Then she asked the police to check on her mother and children.



In the meantime, Yevgeny arrived at his friend's house, where he called the police and told them what had happened. This detail was later found to be a mitigating circumstance in Yevgeny's case.

Marina underwent two surgeries – one to remove her right eyeball and replace it with an implant, and the other to operate on her left eyeball and ear. Later, she had several more reconstructive surgeries.

In 2020, Yevgeny Skorpilyuk was sentenced to five years and five months behind bars for intentionally causing grievous bodily harm to Marina and threatening to kill her. Marina and her attorney tried for a year to file a motion to reclassify her case as attempted murder or the infliction of serious bodily harm in an especially heinous manner, but the judge refused, since Yevgeny had not used a weapon in the attack.

LIFE IN A HOLDING PATTERN

Yevgeny was scheduled for release in April 2024. The entire time he was incarcerated, Marina said she was afraid that he would be released without her knowing, which caused her to live in constant fear, always looking over her shoulder. Sometimes she thought she saw Yevgeny's face in the faces of people she passed on the street.

Marina went into a heightened state of alert when Yevgeny became eligible for parole. She decided to proactively send a letter arguing against parole to the Kirovo-Chepetsk Correctional Facility No. 5, where Yevgeny was being held. She said she "realized that otherwise, no one would ask [her] opinion." She received a letter back from the facility stating that Yevgeny had not applied for parole.

Marina became especially worried when news surfaced that prisoners were being recruited to fight in the war, sent to the battlefield, and given presidential clemency after six months of combat, and then sent home. But, at the same time, she doubted that Yevgeny would muster up the courage to enlist, because he was "a coward and in love with himself."

"While Yevgeny was imprisoned, he would send me 80 rubles each month for child support," Marina said. "That way I could keep tabs on his whereabouts and know he was still in prison. I knew that no one would let me know if he was released. When he stopped sending child support money in January 2023, I started to sound the alarm and asked my friends to call the facility and find out whether he'd been released. They learned that he was still there."

It turned out that in January 2023 Yevgeny Skorpilyuk had, in fact, signed a contract with the Wagner private military



company, which meant that he could potentially receive clemency and return home as early as July 2023. Marina said she doesn't know what exactly prompted her ex-husband to go fight.

FORMER KILLERS AND NEW ONES

Over the past year and a half, the Russian media has reported on several cases of domestic violence by soldiers who returned home from the war, but their actual number is anyone's guess. Statistics simply don't exist.

In April 2023, 44-year-old Alexander Mamayev, of Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, returned home from the war and killed his wife Yekaterina in front of their children. In late 2022, he had volunteered to fight in the war in Ukraine and in April came home on leave. Mamayev's neighbor Nikolai Yurev told the media outlet Kosa that Mamayev and his wife were drunk every day, and the couple's children had told him that their father regularly beat their mother. According to Yurev, the police came to the Mamayev home about five times in one week.

Natalya, a friend whose children attended the same kindergarten as Yekaterina's, said that she had not noticed any signs of injury on Yekaterina before she was murdered.

According to Svetlana, one of Yekaterina's neighbors, she never saw Yekaterina sober.

In 2020, Mamayev had been fined 5,000 rubles for beating his wife. On the day he murdered her, neighbors heard screams coming from the couple's apartment and called the police three times. After Alexander killed Yekaterina, he called law enforcement himself.

There have also been instances when victims' family members have run into their relative's murderer on the streets of their hometown after the killer received clemency for serving with a Wagner unit in Ukraine.

In 2020, Vladislav Kanyus killed his former girlfriend, Vera Pekhteleva, when she went to his apartment to retrieve her belongings. Although Kanyus's neighbors called the police several times, law enforcement officials took their time getting there. When they finally arrived, Vera was dead.

In July 2022, Kanyus was sentenced to 17 years in a strict-regime prison and ordered to pay R.1.5 million in restitution to Pekhteleva's parents. They appealed the verdict, and an appeal hearing was scheduled for June 2023. But then, according to Vera's mother, Kanyus went to fight in Ukraine.

"I WASN'T HAPPY, BUT I WASN'T READY TO GRIEVE EITHER."

"How can a video appeal hearing be held when that monster is most likely nowhere near the prison? How am I supposed to live with this? That maniac, now that he's released from prison, could either flee the front line or go over to the Ukrainian side and then, at any moment, kill us, his victims, out of revenge," Vera's mother wrote.

A similar case involved former policeman Vadim Tekhov, who killed his ex-wife Regina Gagiyeva in 2019, stabbing her 21 times. He later joined the Russian Ministry of Defense's Storm-Z squad and went to fight in Ukraine. In November, Tekhov was arrested for dealing drugs to military personnel. Several months later, Regina's sister Roxana spotted Tekhov in their hometown. Sergey Menyailo, Head of the Republic of North Ossetia, where the crime took place, stated that he was "unable to intervene," since the decision to grant Tekhov clemency was made at the federal level.

DEATH WAS THE BEST WAY OUT FOR HIM

Before Marina Skorplyuk found out that her ex-husband had gone to fight in Ukraine, she had been preparing for his April 2024 release. She planned to install security cameras around her house, change her locks, and readjust her schedule so she could take her children to school.

Under existing Russian laws, domestic violence offenders are allowed to approach their victim, talk to them, stalk them, and share housing with them without legal consequences. Human rights activists have been pushing to change this, but the law they were advocating for failed to pass. Russian women are forced to take their safety into their own hands.

Marina did not have to follow through with any of the measures she had been planning, because on March 17 her ex-husband was shot in the head outside Bakhmut. He died on April 22. A mutual friend told her about this in May.

"I felt sorry for the man I had known and fallen in love with. But that person was long dead to me, and I buried him ages ago. When I learned of Yevgeny's death, I wasn't happy, but I wasn't ready to grieve either. Any normal person would not be happy when someone dies, regardless of what they did. But I immediately breathed a sigh of relief," Marina confessed.

As Marina tells it, even though she was constantly changing her phone number, Yevgeny often called her and their children from prison. He likely never openly threatened her, she said,

because he would have known that all their phone conversations were being monitored. But he did promise to return to their apartment or have "33 Tajiks or drug addicts take up residence there." In order to protect herself, Marina asked the court to terminate Yevgeny's paternal rights. A court ruling in her favor came into effect in March 2022, thanks to assistance from the Center for the Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence, part of a consortium of Women's NGOs.

One of Marina's sons was about to move to Novosibirsk for college and felt very apprehensive about leaving his mother. When he learned his father was dead, he admitted that he felt relieved. "Tears welled up in his eyes and he said he kept remembering his happy childhood," Marina said. "My children truly had a wonderful childhood except for those two difficult years, which cast a long shadow over everything in our lives."

Marina's oldest son, who was studying in Novosibirsk when he learned about Yevgeny's death, immediately said that his father had been dead to him ever since the attack on his mother. For this reason, the news of Yevgeny's death didn't affect him at all, just as it didn't affect Marina's middle son.

Marina said she feels certain that, over the course of his three years in prison, her husband never felt any remorse for his actions. When she would talk to Yevgeny on the phone, he would accuse her of being sexually involved with other men, of having other men's children, and claim that everything was Marina's fault.

"No matter how cynical and cruel it sounds, death was the best way out for him," Marina said. "He would have been released by now, but he wouldn't have had any money, job, or place to live, and it didn't look as if he could go back home to his relatives. Given the challenges that Yevgeny would have encountered after returning home from the front, who knows what kind of trouble he would have gotten himself into."

Before Yevgeny signed a contract with Wagner, he left a last will and testament in which he bequeathed all his death benefits to his cousin. He didn't leave his children anything.

Marina said she is "eagerly" waiting for Russian law to change in ways that will protect victims of domestic violence. "If there isn't a body, there isn't a case," Marina said, sadly echoing the words of other victims of domestic violence. **1**