

Russia: What Mobilization Has Done to the Sverdlovsk Region

Monday 23 January 2023, by [ROZHKOV Alexei](#) (Date first published: 16 January 2023).

The Sverdlovsk Region is one of the leading Russian regions in terms of the number of casualties among mobilized men. Many of them perished in the Kherson Region, from whose capital Russian army retreated after eight months of occupation. Relatives of the mobilized men said that, despite the fact that the authorities promised not to send untrained soldiers to the front line, their loved ones were killed a week after they were drafted. Some were killed literally within a few days. Despite this, the mothers, wives and children of the mobilized men support the war and thank Putin. Our film explains why.

[00:00](#) Sverdlovsk Region is among the leaders in numbers of mobilized men killed [01:15](#) “They were quickly dispatched to the Kherson Region” [04:57](#) A man who had four children was taken away [08:43](#) How a father went to fight instead of his conscript son [13:10](#) “We had a funeral, but we didn’t see who we were burying” [14:55](#) What relatives of dead draftees receive [16:40](#) The mobilization’s end result

Alexei Rozhkov responded with Molotov cocktails to the decision by the Russian authorities to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On March 11, he set fire to a military enlistment office in the suburbs of Yekaterinburg. He was detained the same day and charged with “attempted murder”: allegedly, there had been a watchman in the building at the time. The young man faced up to fifteen years in prison.

Alexei was held in a pretrial detention center for six months. The charges were then unexpectedly reduced to a less serious crime — “property damage” — and the insurgent was released on his own recognizance. After a time, thanks to the support of a human rights organization, Rozhkov left Russia, and we were able to speak to him.

Tell me what you did before February 24. Did you have a job? Any hobbies? Were you interested in politics?

Rozhkov: I lived in the city of [Beryozovsky](#), a suburb of Yekaterinburg with a population of about 100 thousand. Yekaterinburg itself can be reached by bus in twenty or thirty minutes. I worked as a sales consultant at a [DNS store](#).

I was fond of music — I’m a guitarist, a bassist. About six years ago, I had a band, Tell Me the Reason. I started recording a solo album [before February 24], which is still not finished due to the war, having to moving around, and being in prison.

I love dynamic, energetic music: it invigorates me, helps me get out of depression, and gets me warmed up and excited.

I have been interested in politics since I was fourteen. [Alexei is now twenty-five.] My views have

changed over time. Previously, they were more democratic or something, more legal. Now I can call myself a left-wing anarchist. I have always campaigned to open people's eyes and make them see what is happening with the country — for example, with the standard of living. I talked to my family and acquaintances, friends and even strangers. I drew leaflets and spray-painted walls. Do you know those big advertising banners? At night, I would climb up and write "Putin is a thief" on them. At the time, he was merely a thief. But now, of course, he is not just a thief but also a murderer. I wrote on such billboards at night so that people would also start asking questions and arrive at the same opinion.

Tell me why you decided to set fire to the military enlistment office. What did you hope to achieve?

Rozhkov: Since February 22, I had been closely following independent media and social media channels. I expected the war to start in the last week of month, because Russian troops were amassed in Belgorod, Belarus, and other border areas. It was obvious that some kind of movement of troops would begin. And it kicked off on February 24. I began to go into a depression. I was constantly flipping channels and reading the news. I was getting worse every day. I just understood that it was impossible to remain indifferent. What is happening now is illegitimate; it is illegal. Any war means death for ordinary folks. A war in the twenty-first century seems somehow alien to me, especially for such ridiculous, made-up reasons. We annexed Crimea in 2014, and I said already back then that it was wrong. Crimea is not ours and will never be ours. I said there would be consequences. And that's how it turned out.

It is really awful for me to get my head around the fact that people are getting killed — civilians are dying, and those who do not want to fight, but have been drafted, are also getting killed. I wanted to make some kind of appeal for people to start fighting against this war. I wanted to impact the situation, to do something to stop it all or at least weaken [Russian troops]. So, I set fire to the military enlistment office in the city of Beryozovsky. I didn't try to burn it down. I threw three Molotov cocktails at the glass doors, which broke. I didn't even expect them to shatter. Actually, I was thinking that I would just set fire to the door, to the entrance. I was unlucky: at that moment, traffic cops were driving past and noticed what I did. [They] put out the fire, and then they followed me. I couldn't get far. I ran about a kilometer, and I was blinded by the high beam from their vehicle. I tried to get out of there, to run away, but they threatened to shoot me, and I was forced to surrender.

Tell me how you prepared for this. How spontaneous was this protest?

Rozhkov: It happened quite spontaneously. I didn't even develop an exit plan and was operating in unfamiliar territory. It seemed to me like some kind of self-sacrifice. I perfectly imagined that I would be held [criminally] liable for this, but I had no fear.

After my protest action was carried out, Putin admitted on Channel One that conscript soldiers had been deployed to the military special operation zone, and [said] that they would be withdrawn from there and that those who had sent them would be punished. It was after my arson attempt that he said this. I was the third person in Russia to set fire to a military enlistment office, and this is [an example of how] several people made an impact to save guys like us, guys our same age. [Conscripts] were not killed in the war. None [of them] were killed: they were simply transferred back to Russia, leaving only contract soldiers [in the war zone].

So you think that the arsons of military enlistment offices also influenced this decision by the authorities?

Rozhkov: Yes, I think so. I'm certain of it.

How did you feel while you were in police custody? Was there any pressure from the investigative authorities? What actually happened after you were detained?

Rozhkov: I was detained, handcuffed, searched, thrown into a paddy wagon, and taken to the police station. I was treated pretty badly at the station. The police chief of the city of Beryozovsky threatened me personally that he would piss on me and beat me with a stick — those were literally his words. But there were also decent people [among the police officers] who did not threaten me and talked to me calmly. They supported me so that I would not go into complete shock.

At Pretrial Detention Center No. 1 in Yekaterinburg, I was quarantined at first. They didn't issue me bed linens, they didn't give me a pillow or a blanket — they only gave me a pissed-stained mattress. Thank God I didn't spend much time there. On the fourth day, the head doctor of the psychiatric ward summoned me. Since I have some ailments, she put herself in my shoes and I was transferred to the hospital wing, to the "psycho hut." Basically, I liked it there. Despite the fact that some people in my cell were wacky, I had almost no conflicts with them. It wasn't the first time my cellmates had been in prison. I was the only first-timer.

[In the pretrial detention center] they gave me very strong drugs, which made me feel lousy. One of those drugs was [risperidone](#), which is prescribed to schizophrenics. I was given a triple dose. I suffered from restlessness [[akathisia](#)], I had panic attacks, I was short of breath and suffered from insomnia. That is, the treatment wasn't right for me. Nevertheless, I'm glad that I was sent there, and not to gen pop.

I was a "road worker" [the person in a prison cell or block responsible for the "road," the illegal system of communication among cells] — they respected me and listened to my opinion. Basically, everything was fine while I was in the joint. The prison staff were mostly supportive: you could talk to them a little bit during inspections or when the gruel was served.

During the period of my imprisonment, I was taken for an inpatient mental competency examination to the psychiatric hospital on the [Siberian Route](#) [i.e., Sverdlovsk Regional Clinical Psychiatric Hospital]. I stayed there for twenty-one days. There, on the contrary, the prison staff behaved aggressively and tried to provoke many people, including me, into conflict.

Those who succumbed to provocations were tasered and locked up in solitary confinement. The worst, most deranged prison staff, I believe, were in the tenth ward of the psychiatric regional hospital on the Siberian Route.

Did anyone support you while you were in prison, such as relatives, friends, or maybe human rights campaigners?

Rozhkov: When I was in the pretrial detention center, a lawyer from the Anarchist Black Cross came to visit me and offered their help. They also asked whether I wanted to receive letters, [financial?] assistance, care packages, and publicity for my case. I turned down the assistance and publicity, but decided that it would be nice to get letters from concerned folks who help people like us who are in prison. The letters really gave me a boost. My parents and concerned people from Yekaterinburg helped me by bringing me care packages. I won't name names, but they helped me and are still helping me.

Why did you decide to turn down the assistance from the Anarchist Black Cross?

Rozhkov: Because I gave into the persuasions of my parents and lawyer. They were against my case

being [widely] publicized — allegedly, so as to avoid hounding the investigator in my case. They were afraid that he would toughen the punishment if I attracted public attention. So, due to pressure from [my parents and lawyer], I had to turn down this help.

And yet, when you were in the pretrial detention center, as far as I remember, you were facing the rather harsh charge of attempted murder, right?

Rozhkov: Yes, I had been charged with violating Article 105, part two, in combination with Article 30 — “attempted murder, committed with extreme cruelty, from hooligan motives, in a generally dangerous way.” The crime carries a sentence of between eight years to life in prison.

Do you think that someone’s life was actually threatened as a result of what you did?

Rozhkov: I’m absolutely sure that this wasn’t the case. I doubt that there actually was a woman [night watchperson] of some kind in the military enlistment office building. According to the testimony of the policemen who detained me, who helped extinguish the fire, there were no lights turned anywhere on the premises, and they did not see this woman either. So, I doubt that she was there. In addition, in other such cases — I monitored similar cases — no one was charged under the same article of the criminal code as me. There were no guards there.

When you were released on your own recognizance, you didn’t leave the country immediately. What was holding you back?

Rozhkov: I was promised that the charges against me would be light: Article 167 in combination with Article 30, which translates into “attempted destruction of property,” and carries a maximum sentence of five years. But, after looking at the other cases, I realized that sooner or later, Article 205 [“terrorism”] would be rolled out against all of us.

I also wanted to spend as much time as possible with my family, with relatives and friends, so that I could at least somehow restore our relations and thank them. But ultimately I left. I was evacuated from the country.

How did your relatives react to your actions and to your prosecution?

Rozhkov: They said that I had acted stupidly, that it was impossible to go against the system and that I had let everyone else down. They accused me of suffering from a guilt complex. But I believe that I saved people and that my life is a small sacrifice compared to the number of people who survived thanks to what I did. Even if I had been shot when they were detaining me, I would still have achieved more than anyone else.

How are you feeling right now?

Rozhkov: I feel sad and lonely. I am not in my native country. But I have a friend — I am lucky that he ended up here for the same political reasons — and he helps and supports me. I am also supported by evacuation organizations. I feel pretty bad. But now I’ve purchased the medications prescribed by a psychotherapist, and things are getting easier and easier in my head every day. But sometimes a powerful sadness rolls over me, a melancholy due to the fact that I am lonely and had to leave the country.

When we were agreeing to do this interview, you said that after you had left [Russia], you tattooed the anarchy symbol on the back of your hand. Can you tell me about it for the interview?

Rozhkov: The symbol means a lot to me. I am an anarchist myself, a leftist; I espouse this political position. And although a society without powerful authorities and hierarchies seems like a utopia, we could get there. Power should belong to the people, not to a bunch of corrupt bastards who commit terrible crimes. My symbol also means that I share the views of the people who helped me when I was in prison. It says that I am close to these people. And that I, in turn, will also help political prisoners at the first opportunity.

Maybe you would like to convey something to Ukrainians?

Rozhkov: Yes, I would. I want them to know that there are dissenters, people [in Russia] who do not want war with Ukraine or any war at all. I hope that soon no one else will suffer due to this shit that Putin has made happen. Ukrainians are doing a good job of retaking their territory and destroying Russian troops. I think everything will be fine sooner or later. Ukrainians are very strong, motivated people and will defend their territory to the end. I respect them for that. I would have done the same thing in their place.

Alexei Rozhkov

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