

MEDALS WITHOUT MERIT: RUSSIA'S FAKE VETERAN PROBLEM

Russia's fake veteran crisis isn't new – it's a Soviet-era control mechanism updated for a new war

By Galina Korol | 2026-06-17



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Russia's government can no longer tell its real "war heroes" from its fake ones.

At a recent meeting of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, officials admitted the situation had spiraled out of control. The sheer volume of military awards circulating in Russia has made it impossible for authorities to determine who actually fought in Ukraine and who simply bought their decorations online. For about \$5, anyone can purchase medals on Russian online marketplaces that are visually identical to official state honors, including the Gold Star of the Hero of Russia.

The scale of the fraud is no longer theoretical. Ekaterina Kolotovkina, a member of the Civic Chamber, said she personally

encountered three imposters whose decorations came from nongovernmental organizations, not the state – rewarded for delivering humanitarian aid.

These fake veterans give talks at schools, solicit donations on behalf of the military, gain access to government officials, and present their awards in court to angle for leniency.



Participants carrying portraits of World War Two soldiers, including a group of veterans with portraits of killed Russia's Wagner paramilitary group fighters, attend the Immortal Regiment march on Nevsky Prospect avenue in Saint Petersburg on May 9, 2026. [Olga Maltseva/AFP]

“One group of fraudsters forces militaristic propaganda into schools, while another capitalizes on it,” Alexandra Garmazhapova, head of the Free Buryatia Foundation, told Kontur.

A Russian court sentenced Garmazhapova in absentia to seven years in prison over an anti-war interview she gave to a Ukrainian television channel.

Control, not a fix

The public airing of the problem does not mean authorities plan to solve it. According to **Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk**, a senior researcher at the Institute of Political and Ethnonational Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, these campaigns are designed to bring the phenomenon under tighter state control, not eliminate it.

“Similar processes erupted periodically in the Soviet Union. They were always strictly monitored and managed,” Hai-Nyzhnyk told Kontur.

Publicly exposing the issue creates an illusion of government transparency, he said. It also serves as a tool for political infighting and purging rivals within the power hierarchy. And as veteran status has evolved from symbolic capital into a source of real financial benefits, the stakes have risen sharply.

“Enormous sums of money now revolve around veterans. This is about controlling financial streams, political influence, and career advancement opportunities, not just ideology,” Hai-Nyzhnyk said.

A Soviet-era playbook

The phenomenon has deep roots. Hai-Nyzhnyk traces it to the late Soviet Stagnation era of the 1970s and 1980s, when the state's cult of the “Great Victory” gradually replaced actual combatants with more compliant figures.

As real frontline veterans aged and died, Soviet and later Russian propaganda filled their ranks with people from “equivalent categories” – wartime factory workers, railway staff, hospital personnel, and military cadets who never saw combat. Starting in the Brezhnev era, the Soviet leadership issued veteran credentials and jubilee medals en masse to noncombatants. Security and intelligence operatives from the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Ministry of State Security, the KGB and the Gulag camp system also regularly secured frontline veteran status and front-row seats at official commemorations.

By the mid-1980s, individuals were appearing at public events wearing contradictory combinations of medals no single person could have earned. The system looked the other way, Hai-Nyzhnyk said, because compliant propaganda assets were more useful than authentic survivors.

Real frontline soldiers were inconvenient. They criticized the government, demanded better living conditions, and reminded people of the true cost of the war. The Soviet leadership responded by removing the most visibly wounded veterans from public life, institutionalizing many of them – including at the facility on Valaam Island, which became a symbol of the policy.

Sanitizing the current war

Observers say the same dynamic is playing out in Russia today. Garmazhapova pointed to Hero of Russia Dashibal Munkozhargalov, a highly educated veteran whom the government aggressively promotes as a model soldier and rising politician. “They use him to demonstrate upward mobility,” she said. “Through him, the authorities are trying to sculpt the ideal Soviet-Russian citizen.”

Many returning combatants, however, are unlikely candidates for state promotion. Viktor Yahun, a retired major general of the Security Service of Ukraine and director of the Security Sector Reform Agency, said the ranks of those fighting in Ukraine are filled with former convicts and people who enlisted to escape financial ruin. He added that Russia's professional standing army has been 80 percent decimated in Ukraine, meaning a large cohort of hardened, marginalized men will eventually return home.

In Buryatia, Garmazhapova said, civilians already go out of their way to avoid confrontations with servicemen. People view them with suspicion and cross the street rather than risk provoking aggression, she said.

The Kremlin's manufactured cult of heroism has created a problem it cannot easily walk back. Abandoning the propaganda myth, Hai-Nyzhnyk said, would force an honest accounting of the war's real cost -- and that is the one thing the system cannot afford.

