

# BEHIND LINES

**MOTHERS RISKING ALL  
TO FIND THEIR LOST SONS**

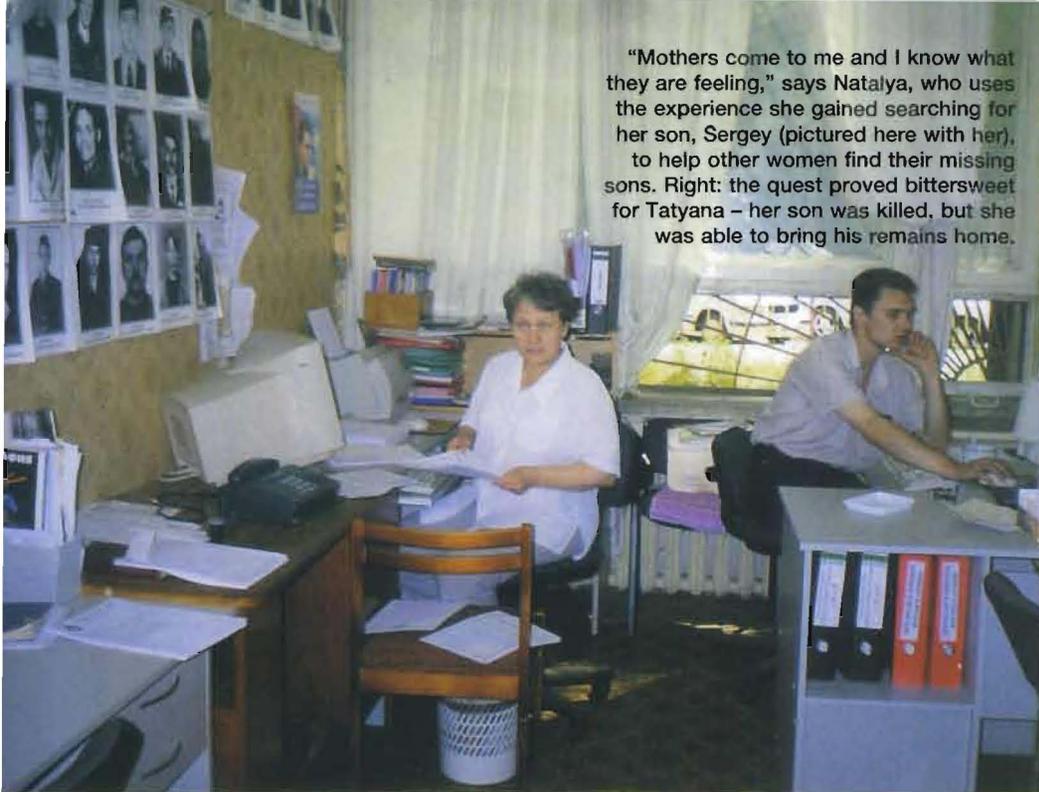


Natalya Zhukova (above inset) is one of the few women to have seen the safe return of a son from Chechnya. Sadly, for most mothers, like Tatyana Makarova (pictured opposite with a photo of her son, Sasha), their children come home fit only for burial.

# ENEMY

**THOUSANDS OF YOUNG RUSSIAN SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN CAPTURED OR GONE MISSING SINCE THE START OF THE CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA. KATYA CENGEL TALKS TO FOUR WOMEN WHO, DESPITE THE DANGERS INVOLVED, ARE DESPERATELY TRYING TO TRACK DOWN THEIR CHILDREN**





"Mothers come to me and I know what they are feeling," says Natalya, who uses the experience she gained searching for her son, Sergey (pictured here with her), to help other women find their missing sons. Right: the quest proved bittersweet for Tatyana – her son was killed, but she was able to bring his remains home.



**N**atalya Zhukova clearly remembers the day she first sensed something was wrong with her youngest son: December 11, 1994, the start of the Russian war in Chechnya. She was strolling through a tree-lined park in the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod, 450km south-west of Moscow, when she suddenly felt disoriented.

She would later learn that this was the day her 19-year-old son, Sergey, an army recruit, was captured, along with 58 of his colleagues.

Like Sergey, many of the 80,000 Russian soldiers believed to be serving in Chechnya are teenage recruits fulfilling their two years of compulsory military service. Ill-trained and ill-equipped, they are easily captured by Chechen rebels. The fates of these men matter little to the commanders they serve who, rather than admit that the recruits may have been captured through some fault of theirs, callously refer to them as deserters in a bid to avoid any recriminations over their disappearance.

While Natalya knew that Sergey was in Chechnya, the Russian government had told her he was there to combat cholera. The 54-year-old mother of two only learnt of her son's true mission – and his subsequent capture – after television news reports revealed that fighting had broken out. On December 13, Sergey was released by the rebels, together with 37 of his fellow captives.

He was allowed to go on one condition: that he leave Chechnya and never return. His captors made it clear that if he did, he would be killed. Despite the warning, Sergey's commander sent him straight back to the front.

Natalya, a small, round woman with short, grey hair and a quick smile, doesn't like to talk about the soldiers who weren't released when her son was. She doesn't know exactly how these young men died, only that all of them are

dead. "We are still looking for the body of one of them," she says grimly.

It wasn't until after the new year that Natalya heard news of her son, when she discovered a note tacked to her front door. On a small slip of paper, someone had scrawled: "Your son is alive in Grozny." Below the message was an unfamiliar phone number.

By this time, Natalya had seen so many horrific news reports of what was happening in Chechnya that she'd become very worried about Sergey. "That is when the sleepless nights started," she says. It was also when she decided that nothing could be worse than the unknown. She knew she had to find out what had happened to her son.

Twelve days later, she was sitting in the cockpit of a Russian military plane heading for Mozdok, the Russian military headquarters in the Caucasus mountain range. The price of her illegal passage: two boxes of vodka.

"Sitting there, I realised the pilots were drunk," recalls Natalya with a wry smile. "I wasn't sure if I would get there."

But she did. And she soon realised that she was not alone in her search. Entering a cafe in Khasavyurt, a city in the border area between Chechnya and Dagestan, Natalya found herself among hundreds of Russian women. Sitting on chairs, lying on benches and crying in corners were mothers from all over the country. All of them had come here to search for their missing sons.

"The mothers would approach strangers in the cafe and ask, 'Have you seen my son?' and only one answer in thousands would be positive," says Natalya. "Every second, my mood changed from hopeful to hopeless." Hopeful when she asked strangers if they had seen her son; hopeless when their answer was no. She became concerned that she might be in Chechnya for months on end. Then a man

approached her in the cafe and told her that he knew where Sergey was.

He explained that shortly after Sergey had been sent back to the front, he had run away, terrified of his fate if the Chechen guerrillas found out he was still in the country. He was befriended by a Chechen father of five, who in turn contacted a comrade in Nizhny Novgorod, who left the note on Natalya's door.

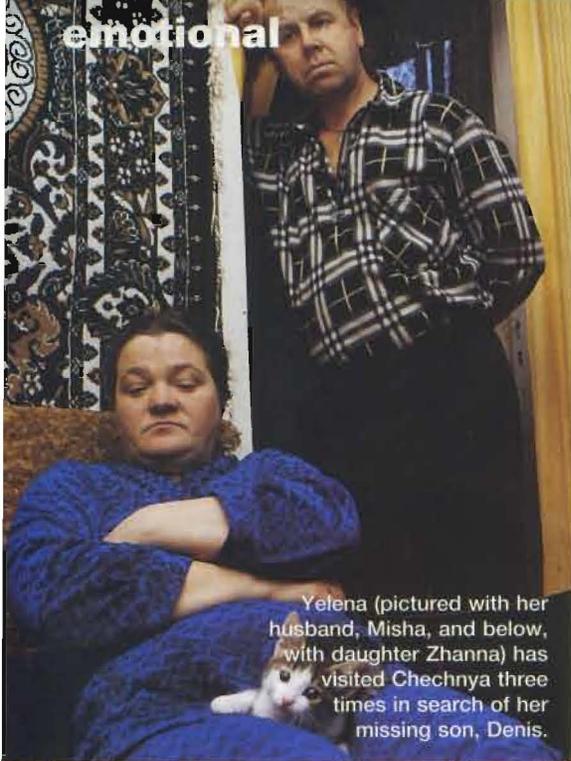
The man took her from the cafe to a house where Sergey was hiding. But she says their reunion was strangely subdued. There was no crying or shouting. She'd imagined the reunion so many times in so many different ways that the real one was unusually controlled. Less than a week later, she was on a train bound for Moscow, her son safely by her side.

Since that initial journey, Natalya has returned to Chechnya at least six times, helping other women to locate their sons. "Mothers come to me and I know what they are feeling," she explains. "How you keep yourself together during the day and are overcome with nightmares at night." She is one of thousands still searching for the young men lost in a battle they never wanted to fight.

Russia's first invasion of Chechnya in 1994 was designed to bring the mainly Muslim republic of around one million people back under Russian control (Chechen president Djokhar Dudayev had declared independence from Russia in 1991). It was supposed to be a short operation, but the Chechens fought back bitterly. By mid 1995, at least 25,000 people – mainly civilians – had been killed, and the Russians withdrew in disgrace the following year. But in September 1999, following a series of bombings in Moscow blamed on Chechen forces, Russia invaded again.

During the first conflict, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (one of the most powerful citizens groups in the country, with over 300 branches) took up the cause of defending the rights of Russian soldiers, especially recruits. The organisation continues to help mothers bring their captured sons home.

Natalya is chairwoman of the Nizhny Novgorod branch. Her son, Sergey, once a



Yelena (pictured with her husband, Misha, and below, with daughter Zhanna) has visited Chechnya three times in search of her missing son, Denis.



## “THREE TIMES, WE WERE TOLD THEY WERE DEAD. WE WENT TO IDENTIFY THE BODIES, BUT THEY WERE NOT OUR SONS” YELENA

She tries to explain the feeling, which she knows must sound strange. But after a year of searching, at least she finally knew what had happened to her son. And now she could take Sasha home to be buried.

**T**atyana Makarova's apartment in Bor, a small town near Nizhny Novgorod, is filled with pictures of her son, also called Sasha. She pulls out a small photo album and points to a polaroid of three teenage boys dressed in green army uniforms.

“This is the last picture he sent,” explains Tatyana. “He said I should keep it in memory of him. He probably didn't mean anything by it, but as a mother, I was worried.”

The year before 18-year-old Sasha joined the army, he had a dream in which he was flying above a funeral where he knew all the guests. As he flew closer, he noticed that the face in the coffin was his. “The only difference was in the dream the coffin was open and in reality it was closed,” says his mother.

In April 1996, two months after Sasha was sent to Chechnya, the local recruitment office informed Tatyana that he had been captured. A few weeks later, she hitched a ride on a truck bound for Khasav'yurt.

She was told that her son was being held in Komsomolskoye, a mountain village headquarters for Chechen forces. For weeks, she tried to get there, but each day the Russian guards refused her passage.

Then, on June 15, a new guard who came from Tatyana's home town allowed her to continue on her journey. In Komsomolskoye, the Chechen commandant assured her that her son and the other captives were alive and well but refused to let her see them. Instead, he told her to go home and wait.

“He said they were negotiating and soon my son would be released. I left. What else could I do?” she asks.

Komsomolskoye was bombed the day after Tatyana got home. Later, she would learn that her son and the other captives had been shot before the bombing because they were too weak to travel. “I think Sasha and the others were not given back on purpose. I think they witnessed something,” says Tatyana.

She flips through the album containing photographs of her son. Each page features

a picture and a date. The last one is in 1996. The rest of the pages are blank. But Tatyana has found a form of peace. “At least I know what happened to him,” she acknowledges.

In a small village a few kilometres down the road from Bor, Yelena Arefieva is still searching. The 41-year-old mother has been looking for her son, Denis, since September 2000.

Yelena's quest began after a young police investigator who'd just returned from serving in Chechnya informed her that her son and another recruit (also named Sasha) were being held captive. Then she received a telegram from Sasha's mother, Masha Chernikova, informing Yelena that she intended to go to Chechnya. Soon after, the two women were on a train together, bound for the region.

Over in Chechnya, Russian forces tried repeatedly to send the two mothers home. As far as the commanders were concerned, Denis and Sasha were deserters. Both Yelena and Masha believe that the commanders simply didn't want to get involved in the complicated transactions they knew would be involved in the locating and exchanging of captives.

Yet the pair of them persevered, meeting middleman after middleman. Each person they came across wanted something different –

some wanted money; others wanted captured Chechens. The money was much more than either woman could afford; the captured Chechens impossible to locate.

“Three times, we were told they were dead,” recalls Yelena. “We went to identify the bodies a couple of times, but they were not our sons.” In a quiet voice, she recounts her story, her husband, Misha, prompting her on some of the details. Having recently been hospitalised for high blood pressure, Yelena is reluctant to go through the experience again. She has now made three trips to Chechnya in the past two years – once with Masha, once alone, and once with her husband.

“I am almost always there,” she says. “My eldest daughter, Oksana, was married while I was in Chechnya.”

Still, she continues to search. Each time Yelena travels to Chechnya, she is introduced to a new middleman and a new trade. Years of war have destroyed the infrastructure and institutions of Chechnya. In their place, a system of kidnapping has developed. One of the few ways for people to make money is by selling and exchanging captives. A number of local Chechens who have no other means of making a living become middlemen who help with negotiations. They appear and disappear. Some actually know where the captured are; others are thieves looking to make a profit.

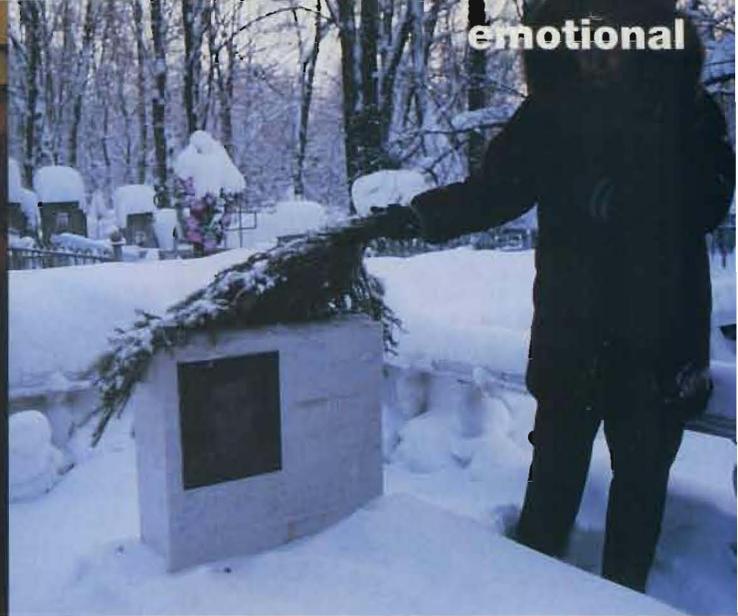
Yelena was encouraged last year when she heard that Denis's comrade, Sasha, had been released. She is currently in the process of negotiating to exchange her son for a captured Chechen being held in prison in Russia. Not having a telephone herself, Yelena travels to the local post office every day to phone the presidential administrative representative in her region and ask them to help her with the exchange. In two weeks, despite her poor health, she will go back to Chechnya again. Yelena insists that she isn't scared, although her family fears the worst. “I'm sick every time she goes,” says her 14-year-old daughter, Zhanna. But the only thing Yelena fears is finding her son dead. Her own life means nothing to her if she cannot track down Denis.

Maria Fedulova, head of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in Moscow, has helped many mothers retrieve their captured sons. However, experience has taught her that there is little hope for Yelena.

“As a rule, if you don't get him at the very beginning, according to our bitter experience you won't get him at all,” she says. “Or if you do, it will only be his body.” ■



Parents hold a vigil for their sons, many of whom are still missing in Chechnya. Right: an entire section of the Nizhny Novgorod graveyard is devoted to Russian soldiers who were killed in the protracted conflict.



romantic lover of spy novels who dreamt of entering the Federal Security Service (formerly the KGB), is now a married father and legal scholar. Natalya gestures towards the computer sitting next to hers. It is Sergey's. Her relaxed manner fades.

"If my son comes in, do not mention Chechnya to him or let him know that I have talked to you about his story," she implores. "He is not as trusting as he used to be."

Few in the region are. A formerly closed military city, Nizhny Novgorod has seen its share of suffering since the Chechnyan war began. In the city's main graveyard, there is a church financed by Vera Kudryavtseva in memory of her son, who died in Chechnya in 1996. The church's foundations contain two time capsules: the first lists the names of those who had died in Chechnya at the time; the second contains a plea for peace.

Natalya wipes a clump of snow from a grave in the section where soldiers killed in Chechnya are buried. "This one is new," she says. "The coffins are brought back at night."

**T**hat was how 47-year-old Tatyana's son, Sasha – or what was left of him – returned from Chechnya. The 19-year-old recruit was sent to Chechnya in early 1996. Tatyana feared for his safety, but Sasha reassured her in his letters that he was happy to serve his country like his grandfather, a military prosecutor, had. However, Sasha was captured by Chechen rebel forces in March 1996, along with 38 other Russian soldiers. When Tatyana heard about it two months later, she was on a passenger plane to the region within a week.

With her eyes fixed on the wall of Natalya's office, Tatyana is nervous. She will not reveal her last name and hesitates before disclosing that she works as a bus conductor. Like many Russians, she is scared the government will punish her for recounting her experiences.

Once in Chechnya, locals helped Tatyana travel from village to village to ask about her son. A fragile-looking woman with soft brown eyes, Tatyana was, ironically, more afraid of the Russian soldiers than the local Chechens.

She had good reason to be. Most of the Russian commanders cared little for the young recruits who served under them and even less for the mothers who came searching for them. If it weren't for these women, the missing soldiers could simply be listed as deserters and the truth of their capture, whose blame would ultimately fall on the shoulders of the commanders, would remain a secret.

On one of her journeys, Tatyana was pulled off a bus by a group of Russian soldiers, who kept her locked in an underground room for four days. They only released her after a group of Chechen women who she'd been travelling with intervened.

**"BOMBING WAS EVERYWHERE," SAYS ONE MOTHER. "I JUST KEPT PRAYING I'D BE ABLE TO STAY ALIVE BECAUSE IF I WERE KILLED, NO-ONE ELSE WOULD LOOK FOR MY SON"**

"I don't know what would have happened to me, if it were not for those women," Tatyana explains, while agitatedly zipping and unzipping her winter boots.

After her release, she disguised herself as a Chechen by wearing a veil. Like many of those who go searching, she had another reason to avoid contact with her own troops – Russian forces often bomb Chechen villages if they find out Russian mothers have been there. The logic is that if mothers are there, captives are there and so are their captors.

When the Chechens proposed to swap several of the captured Russians, including Sasha, for the bodies of five dead Chechens, Sasha's commander refused.

"He said, 'I wouldn't even give a rusty nail for them. I would take only their equipment. Their heads you can give to their parents,'" remembers Tatyana tearfully.

Other mothers recounted similar stories of brutal indifference. Few of those who fought in Chechnya wanted to be there. Fighting a war they had little hope of winning, for very little pay, Russian commanders profited where they could, often by selling the equipment of

missing soldiers. A well-documented sale of weapons from Russian commanders to Chechen rebels appeared during the first war.

For four months, Tatyana travelled from village to village, desperately searching for her son, sometimes missing him by days as he was continually moved by his captors. "The worst year was 1996 – bombing was everywhere. I just kept praying I would be able to stay alive because if I were killed, no-one else would look for my son." The thought of bringing Sasha home kept her going. "I didn't think they would shoot the captured," she adds.

But in September 1996, Tatyana was told to go to a forensic lab in Rostov-on-Don. A

local who had been helping in the search had located a Chechen rebel who claimed to have shot dead the 39 captives – including Sasha. Tatyana didn't believe his story. She only travelled to Rostov-on-Don to prove that the body lying there was not her son's.

The remains she was shown were too decayed to identify. But next to each body was a slip of paper on which 10 addresses had been scrawled. The soldiers had written the addresses so that after their release they would be able to contact the families of the others. "I saw my name and address on the notes," says Tatyana.

Still doubting that the remains she'd seen were those of her son, and refusing to give up hope that Sasha was alive, Tatyana decided to return home and continue her search from a distance. It was only when dental records proved that one of the bodies in the Rostov lab was indeed Sasha's that Tatyana finally accepted he was dead.

"After I got the news, I told everyone how happy I was," she recalls. "I had found my son and was taking him home. But what a horrible happiness it was." ▶