

## Arson Attacks on Military Enlistment Offices and the Reaction of Russian Propaganda

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sis of the chat has demonstrated, refusal to participate in street protests does not equate to a pro-war position, and there are many other ways to demonstrate disagree-

ment with the state's military policy that are less visible but no less significant.

#### *About the Author*

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#### ANALYSIS

## Arson Attacks on Military Enlistment Offices and the Reaction of Russian Propaganda

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### Abstract

Attacks and arson against Russian military enlistment offices, which represent one of the cores of the Russian war machine, have become a common form of anti-war protest. This article examines these attacks and how the Russian state-run media discuss them.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a massive wave of discontent and protests worldwide. Within Russia itself, however, the public response is believed to have been muted. For instance, the number of protesters who took to the streets of Russia's capital, Moscow, on the first day of the invasion was estimated at around 700. This reality can be attributed to a range of factors, but the main cause is the serious toll that protests take on a person in Russia. With the invasion of Ukraine, Russia introduced de-facto "military censorship," rapidly issuing prison sentences to those who criticized the invasion of Ukraine. The severity and danger of persecutions produced an explosion of underground anti-war movements, which many Russians chose as a safer or more reasonable alternative to open protest. Attacks and arson against military enlistment offices (so-called military commissariats), which represent a core of the Russian war machine, became a regular form of protest, with around 77 attacks recorded in the first 10 months of the war.

### The Attacks

Military commissariats in Russia are, first and foremost, responsible for conscription into the compulsory and contract army service (the latter is available to those who served in the compulsory service and are willing

to stay). There are approximately 1,300 military commissariats in Russia. The first months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine mostly featured the participation of contract army soldiers. In September 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a mobilization in order to send around 300,000 additional soldiers to Ukraine on an obligatory basis. The implementation of this mobilization is also the responsibility of Russian military commissariats. Thus, the commissariats have been involved in supplying soldiers to Ukraine at all stages of the war. The attacks on the commissariats have both a concrete purpose—to destroy the personal records of Russian men in order to create a barrier to further conscription—and a general one—to attack military-related spots in Russia.

The first attack on a military commissariat took place in the Moscow region. On February 27, 2022, 21-year-old Kirill Butylin threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of a military commissariat near Moscow. He also published a manifesto about his arson. "Ukrainians will know that Russians are fighting for them; not everyone is afraid and not everyone is indifferent. Our protesters must be inspired and act more decisively. And this should further break the spirit of the Russian army and government," Butylin wrote.

This first arson was followed by a range of similar attacks across Russia. Attackers ranged from students to mature men in their 50s and from pregnant women to elderly people. Often, they caused insignificant damage with self-made Molotov cocktails. Most attackers were detained and charged with property damage.

In summer 2022, the Russian Federal Security Service, the internal secret service, became involved in investigating these arson attacks. According to Russian human rights observers, this period saw the swift reclassification of the criminal charge the arsonists faced—from property damage (Art. 167, part 2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) to terrorism (Art. 205, part 1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). This increased the maximum prison term from 5 years to 15 years. The measure temporarily depressed the wave of attacks on the military commissariats, which remained quite few in number over the summer.

The mobilization announced by the Russian president in September 2022 prompted a new wave of attacks on the military commissariats that significantly exceeded the previous one in scale. According to the advocacy-related *Mediazona*, approximately 77 acts of arson and attacks on military commissariats have been recorded since the beginning of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### Reaction of State Propaganda

Obviously, the Russian government and state-run media did not refer to the arsonists in a positive way. Nevertheless, the trend of increasing attacks has mostly been hushed up by the major TV channels and high-ranking officials. Online state-run media, meanwhile, have covered the arson attacks in significant depth.

#### *Drug Addicts, Teenagers, and Psychopaths*

These media have been characterizing the attackers and arsonists of the military commissariats in a dehumanizing way. According to *Life Media*, “performers of arson in Russia, as a rule, are drug addicts, outcasts, and teenagers who are attracted by easy money.”

State-run news agency *Regnum* wrote a story about a drug-addicted teenage girl whose drug dealer demanded that she carry out an arson attack at a military commissariat in Nizhny Novgorod. “According to the available information, a teenager from Nizhny Novgorod who was involved in the distribution of drugs received another batch of prohibited substances from the dealer and appropriated it. After that, the drug dealer began to threaten the teenager and demanded that she set fire to the military commissariat in the Kanavinsky district of Nizhny Novgorod,” *Regnum* wrote.

State-run outlet *Argumenty i fakty* released an article that claimed to paint a psychological portrait of the attackers of Russian military commissariats. The article

stresses that the perpetrators of these attacks are predominantly men who suffer from mental disorders. “A significant share of these people are psychopaths who are ready to do anything. They fall under the influence of some negative magnetic fields and a certain plan, an obsession, begins to crystallize in them. There are many people with a disturbed psyche,” the article quotes retired Federal Security Service (FSB) Major General Aleksandr Mikhailov as saying.

#### *Ukrainian Mercenaries*

Another popular narrative among state-run media is that of a “Ukrainian trace” behind the attacks. State-run news agency *RIA Novosti* issued a report titled “Ukrainian Nationalist Recruited Russians for the Explosions at Russian Military Offices.” In the video, a Russian man claims that some “Ukrainian nationalist” contacted him on Telegram and offered him around \$2,000 to conduct an arson attack against a Russian military commissariat.

Another state-run media outlet, *Izvestia*, released a video in which a Russian man claimed that some Ukrainians blackmailed him into setting fire to a military office in Dagestan by threatening to kill his father living in Ukraine if he did not.

Some media refer directly to the arsonists as “mercenaries of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).” The TV channel *Tsargrad* published on its website an article titled “SBU Mercenaries Are Caught in Russia. Experts Explained the Similarities between Them.” According to the article, the Russian FSB detained several SBU mercenaries who had planned sabotage across Russia. “21-year-old Andrey from Vladivostok was offered 120,000 rubles for an arson of the local military commissariat. Some man named Albert wrote to him and asked him to set fire to the commissariat. The guy agreed, but refused to pass the training. As a result, the customer did not like that the building did not even catch fire, so the arsonist did not receive any money,” *Tsargrad* wrote.

It has also become common for the Russian state-run media to publish “confessions” of the alleged arsonists in which, after being detained, they admit to having received a reward from Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Security Council have not commented on the accusations of Russian state-run media. However, the available facts suggest that their claims are hardly truthful. According to the Russian human rights NGO “Avtozak-live,” the intensity of attacks on military commissariats increased eightfold following the announcement of mobilization in Russia. This implies that the movement is driven more by personal issues (such as a fear of being mobilized) than by concern about the invasion in general. Arsonists’ confessions of connections with Ukraine cannot be treated as reliable proof, as many of them, especially those who have faced FSB investigations, claim to have been severely tortured.

### *Lack of Patriotic Education*

Some state-run media have conducted deeper analysis, attempting to find the “roots” of the arsonists’ behavior. *Tsargrad* issued a broadcast titled “We Will Bring Up a Russophobe for Your Money. How Traitors Are Raised in Private Schools.” The broadcast began by showing a range of videos featuring arson attacks against military commissariats that have been conducted in Russian cities, which, according to the presenter, are carried out by “typical schoolboys.” “How do such ideas appear in the heads of these homegrown 19-year-old half-witted Nazis? Were they taught anything at school? This is where we come to the main question: While healing the liberated territories of Ukraine of Nazism, don’t we lose sight of the same sprouts of Russophobia here in our country?” the presenter wonders. The presenter concludes that Russian private schools, often guided by European values and liberal standards, are to blame for raising such anti-patriotic youngsters.

### **Complex Background of Arsonists**

In general, regardless of the narrative that propaganda employs toward the arsonists, it follows a single trend: simplification. Whether the arsonists are “recruited by the Ukrainian secret service” or “drug addicts,” the coverage provides primitive explanations of arsonists’ backgrounds. In fact, the arsonist movement is quite complex; people involved in arson represent a wide range of political and ethnic groups, from national minorities to anarchists and right-wing movements.

A significant share of the attacks have been recorded in those Russian regions dominated by national minorities, where people associate themselves with Russians only to a minor extent and may also speak their native language. Thus, in Bashkortostan, the number of such attacks has been quite high. In an [interview](#) given to the Russian independent media outlet *Verstka*, a range of people allegedly involved in arson attacks in Bashkortostan referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as “not their war” and claimed “they were not ready to die for Russian values.” “Why should Bashkirs die for the ‘Russian world’ somewhere in Ukraine? Ukrainians have done no harm to us, while the Russian Empire always oppressed us,” argued Ruslan Gabbasov, founder of the Bashkir Resistance Committee, which is allegedly behind the arsons in the region.

Another major force allegedly involved in the attacks on Russian military commissariats are underground far-right and anarchist groups. The far-right group NS/WP

(prohibited in Russia) has [claimed](#) responsibility for a range of arson attacks in several Russian cities. The group pursues the ideas of white supremacy and claims the necessity of unification between Russians and other “brotherly nations,” in particular Ukrainians. In April 2022 the group [posted](#) an appeal headlined “Do As We Do. Do Better than Us!” on its Telegram channel. In this appeal, they called on their potential allies to conduct arson against Russian cars with pro-war symbols and military commissariats. “We, Russian national socialists and white racists, oppose the anti-people regime, the current system is our main enemy. We do not identify ourselves with the opposition or with any external forces. Our goal is a national revolution,” the appeal summarized.

Some left-wing groups have also claimed credit for attacks. The [Militant Organization of Anarcho-Communists](#), which mainly carries out attacks on rail infrastructure, has [claimed](#) responsibility for a range of military commissariat arsons. Other attackers of military commissariats, however, [were not](#) belonging to any movement or having been involved in activism prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

### **Conclusion**

Russian state-run media have been covering the arsons in quite an ambiguous way. While big TV channels broadcasting within Russia have mostly abstained from covering them, online state-run media have developed a range of narratives about the arsonists. The reason for this may be the authorities’ unwillingness to remind their audience about the fact and the number of arsons. Those who read online media are exposed to more information and thus may be more likely to learn about the attacks, prompting online state-run media to provide the explanation of “bad arsonists.”

In framing their narratives about the arsonists, state-run media have not bothered to investigate arsonists’ real backgrounds in order to come up with more realistic accusations. For instance, the fact that a right-wing group is openly involved in these arson attacks might have been exploited by the state-run media to discredit the liberal Russian opposition, yet they have instead continued to rely on propagandistic clichés about “drug addicts” and “Ukrainian mercenaries.”

Thus, while the arsonist movement includes people with very diverse backgrounds, Russian propaganda has followed its general trend of dehumanizing regime opponents and simplifying their backgrounds.

### *About the Author*

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