

A Hero's Reward

Investigation by Svetlana Tsygankova

Foreword

The following article has been conducted in collaboration with the investigative reporting program SCOOP Russia. The program was designed in coordination with International Media Support (IMS), the Danish Association for Investigative Journalism (FUJ), the Fojo Media Institute (FOJO), the Swedish Association of Investigative Journalists (FGJ) and the Regional Press Institute (RPI). Through peer-to-peer support, coaching and financial assistance, SCOOP Russia strengthens, develops and empowers investigative journalism throughout the Russian Federation. With this support, SCOOP Russia strives to expand the role of the media within regions lacking a conducive environment and the historical foundation for investigative journalism. With this expanded role, the program, ultimately, hopes to bolster the media's status as a societal watchdog, improving conditions for future journalists within the Russian Federation.

Russia just celebrated a remarkable holiday—the 66th anniversary of Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War¹. Everything is being done so that the veterans who are alive today want for nothing. They live in well-furnished apartments and receive both ample pensions and medical services. They also receive the honor and respect they deserve. However, there exists a category of combat veterans who have been unjustly forgotten, scratched from the lists of victors in the Great Patriotic War. This group of forgotten heroes is composed of the blind, armless and legless service men and women who from the end of the 1940s wandered the streets of Russia’s villages and cities. These disabled veterans² had either been begging or mournfully playing on the accordion when the Soviet authorities drove them from the streets and placed in nursing homes for the disabled and elderly. According to the security forces’ accounts, in the second half of 1951, they detained 107,766 beggars, in 1952 the number reached 156,817, and by 1953 the number had risen to 182,342. Among those arrested, 70 percent were disabled from injuries sustained at work or in the war. The Soviet authorities then decided to eliminate any signs of begging by committing the embarrassing, badgering beggars to homes for the disabled and elderly. These institutions were then converted into secure, specialized facilities ensuring that their disabled residents would not be able to escape.

In 1950, the Supreme Soviet of the Karelo-Finnish SSR issued a decree to form one such facility on Valaam Island. They formed a nursing home on the grounds of the former monastery for those who were disabled from injuries sustained at work or in the war. Residents came to the home for various reasons. Some veterans sought this end for themselves, not wanting to burden their relatives. For other veterans, those close to them turned their backs on them, and a third group could not adapt to civilian life. Those who were healthy enough, worked, and upon receiving a wage or combatant’s pension, they drank through it in the blink of an eye to drown out their loneliness and sorrow. When steamships sailed into dock from Sortavala, the veterans would use their crutches or take the invalid’s vehicle—the wheelchair or the roller board—to the pier. With the aid of ‘clothes irons’ specially constructed for the hands of the legless veterans, they would pull themselves on their roller boards or hobble on crutches over six kilometers from the village just to see the cheerful people in full dress, to gaze on real life. However, other veterans lacking both arms and legs never left their spots; they continually lay in baskets.



It is hard to fully comprehend the ‘clothes iron’ phenomenon, so I have included a photo to assist the reader in fully comprehending the experience of the disabled veteran.

Eugene Kuznetsov, a guide at the monastery, further described the government’s attitude toward the nursing home for the disabled from injuries sustained at work or in the war in his *Valaam Journal*. “To show tourists this almshouse in all its glory, was at the time completely impossible. Not only was it emphatically forbidden to take groups there, but if one were to even show the way, they could be fired or brought to the KGB for questioning. Be that as it may, someone would still make it through, either alone or in groups of three or four people. One had to have seen the looks of shock and bafflement when those people came upon the disabled veterans. It was especially frightening to have met the elderly women along the road searching for their husbands, sons and brothers. The husbands of many of these women died on the front lines, and instead of being given the opportunity to bury them, their wives only received the notification “missing in action”. Some of these women would make the greatest of pilgrimages to institutions like the Valaam nursing home.”

¹ Russians consider World War II the Great Patriotic War, starting from June 22, 1941 and ending on May 9, 1945.

² The physically disabled in Russia are most common referred to as ‘invalids’ (инвалиды). The author uses this term in the original text to represent the physically disabled from injuries incurred in WWII. I replace it with the term ‘disabled’ as invalids is not as commonly used in English as invalids is in Russian, and it emphasizes that the disability is the result of an event other than birth more so than the more commonly used term ‘handicapped’.

It is impossible today to say with certainty the exact number of veterans who lived on the island, there just isn't enough information; nevertheless, it is assumed that there were at least one thousand veterans. However, practically no one remembers their names. Therefore I decided to identify and record the lost names, so as to return them to society. I also resolved to establish whether those disabled combat veterans who had been tucked away on Valaam had received the same privileges, rights and benefits as veterans living on the mainland with their families.

Vidlitsa

After trying various phone numbers, I realized that it was pointless to search for documents on Valaam, nothing remained. The majority of the land and buildings had already been returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, and the nursing home for veterans and the disabled had long ago moved to the village of Vidlitsa in the Olonets region of Karelia, where a new building had been specifically built for the disabled. Therefore I decided to set off for Vidlitsa to find out whether the names of the combatants had been saved or not.

First off, I should say that I had to travel to Vidlitsa multiple times because I am but one person looking through the entire archive in my free time. And in Vidlitsa there were thousands of thin little files to delve through. One would need more than a year to pour over all of the personal records. Besides just the sheer size of the collection of personal records, they did not all belong to veteran combatants. In fact, the overwhelming majority of personal files belonged to individuals who due to their age and inability to take care of themselves were committed to the nursing home.

In 1984, the nursing home for those disabled from injuries sustained at work or in the war moved to Vidlitsa, but none of the former veteran residents are alive today to tell their story. Fortunately, it was decided to compile a list of all the veterans, and this list would assist in any future studies of the archives. Lyubov Shcheglakova, a physician's assistant at the nursing home is constructing this list. She was born on Valaam and can still remember many of the residents from when she was in high school, working in the nursing home.

"In the past, there wasn't much attention given to the veterans of the war," said Shcheglakova. "They lived like any other person with the same types of problems: drunkenness, fights and death. I remember, though, that they would sometimes don their medals."

"But then where have all their awards and decorations gone? Where are their documents?"

"I don't know. While I was working on the archive, I only uncovered one Red Army Book (a soldier's identification papers)."

Stepan Danilin, a worker on the kolkhoz (Soviet collective farm) was mobilized in August 1941 to the front-lines from Pryazhin region in Karelia. Within three years, he was decommissioned due his injuries and returned home to his wife and two small sons without a leg. What became of this disabled veteran? No one knows. Only one fact was ever recorded—the faded certificate from 1947 allotting a bread stamp for 30 days; however Danilin never procured the food. In those 30 days, he was supposed to have reached the nursing home on Valaam, but he would never again return to his normal life. He died within three years at the age of 53. As if by a miracle, it was his Red Army Book that was saved in the personal records.

Within the remaining residents' personal records there are virtually no traces of documents for combat veterans nor references of their awards. Within these records, it is only possible to discern whether the resident participated in the Great Patriotic War by his date of birth and medical records where it is documented if the person had been injured in combat.

More often than not these injuries consisted of severe concussions, loss of sight, and the loss of lower and upper limbs. Ivan Kalitarov was paralyzed on the right side after having been severely wounded. It was believed that he wanted to cross the frozen lake to the mainland, but froze to death 10 kilometers from Valaam. The body of the 36 year-old wasn't found for a month. Mikhail Kholodny's lower limbs had completely atrophied while Matvei Kotov lost his leg. Vasily Menshikov, a military officer, attempted to live in the city after the war. He rented a

corner within a private residence and started working. However, his illness became prevalent and forced him to the island. Ivan Gorin was also disabled from the war, and he left behind him a wife and children in Petrozavodsk. Once a year his wife would write to the institution's administration asking how her husband was getting along and anxiously wondering why he wasn't answering her letters. They informed her that he was healthy and had promised to write her back. After a year, the woman once again sent a letter, but for some reason she never travelled to the island. The one-sided correspondence ended with a shred of paper discovered in the combat veteran's file. Instructions had been scribbled on the piece of paper to inform 'so and so' at 'such and such' address that Gorin had died.

"For the time being, we have identified a little over 100 veterans," stated Shcheglakova. "And we are continuing the work."

However letters are already coming in from different cities as people ask for assistance in their search for their relatives. As of yet none of the letters have resulted in a success story; nevertheless, not all of the archives were transferred to Vidlitsa, and Lyubov Shcheglakova believes that a portion had possibly been sent to Sortavala.

Sortavala

Naturally, I went to the municipal archives in Sortavala. There I met the director of the archives, Marina Anisochkina, whom I had forewarned of the purpose of my trip. She looked into what had been saved in connection with the Valaam nursing home, but it turned out that very little had been stored there. Only a few record books with the names of individuals who should have been beneficiaries of social assistance programs were found. However, the books only indicated some names, dates of birth, birthplaces, where they had come from and where they were registered to live. They did not clarify whether the person had been a veteran of the Great Patriotic War.

I had to labor through each book, rewriting all the names so that later on I could verify them against the lists I was confident I would find. The final row in the record books designated the date of death, and unfortunately, many of the names in this row were filled out. The names of young men still in their prime at 30 and 40 years of age had died and were buried on Valaam.

Petrozavodsk

After having traveled a few times to Vidlitsa and Sortavala, I was unable to find a list of the veterans who had been relocated to the island in 1950. There were no specific documents, directives or governmental orders from the republic calling for the transfer of disabled veterans to Valaam. Why and for what purpose did the authorities transfer these combat veterans who had sacrificed their well-being for the general welfare? And had their rights been violated after they arrived on the island?

I decided to redirect my search to the Karelia National Archives. It was there that I discovered the main documents which described the rapid nature of the relocation, the disarray of the grounds, and the fatigue and discomfort experienced by the veterans. I even found documents confirming that the convalescent home had been organized and started on June 10, 1950.

The rest home had been staffed by 135 employees receiving a combined total of 43.125 rubles. The disabled numbered 770 with 177 workers and staff overseeing the operations. In all 1300 people had lived on the compound. The records even accounted for the number of livestock and agriculture possessed by the nursing home: 239 cattle, 29 horses and 46 hogs, 4 hectares of gardens, 2000 gooseberry bushes and 1200 currant bushes.

The records speak of a magazine and kiosk where produce and manufactured goods were sold. Poorly supplied, these stores lacked grains, canned goods, pastries, fish and butter. For the families on the island, a school existed with an enrollment of 100 students, composed of seven different class years, and the island only employed a single local police officer.

One month after opening, a commission was sent to perform an evaluation of the nursing home. The commission reported to the Ministry of Social Affairs on July 30, 1950. *On the transfer and relocation of disabled veterans to Valaam Island*, it is noted that in compliance with decree № 333 by the Council of Ministers on May 5, 1950, the following nursing homes had been liquidized: Muromsky, Paleostrovsky, Barany Bereg, Tomitsky, Svyatozersky, Lambersky, Klimenetsky along with all of their corresponding properties. These properties include all of the buildings, facilities, cattle, and horses given to the corresponding organizations and kolkhozys.

The committee also remarked on several inefficiencies at the nursing home. Specifically, they did not believe the living quarters would be finished in time for winter. Only 400 of the 7000 cu. meters designated for residential housing had been prepared; moreover there wasn't a bath house, cafeteria or cellar to store vegetables. The hospital had only partially been finished. The medical and recreational facilities didn't meet standards. They lacked the capabilities to conduct dental restoration and replacement, perform X-rays and treat tuberculosis. The convalescent home hadn't even built a laboratory for medical tests and observations.

As for recreational opportunities, neither a film projector nor a radio station were present to provide a social outlet. Due to the poor conditions, the committee ruled: "We consider that the most pressing matters facing the convalescent home are to: create handicap accessible facilities, develop the medical and recreational services, and provide food for the livestock. It is also urgent to repair the grounds and renovate the summer hotel so it can support up to 150 people. Furthermore it is necessary to remodel the dining hall by adding on a social venue, build a cellar to store potatoes and vegetables, and establish a location for a bath house."

I was also able to find an official telegram in the national archives which stated, "I urgently request for comrade Karenina to immediately send 20 rolls of roofing paper to Valaam. Shestakov." Why, with winter approaching, was it so urgent to relocate the disabled combat veterans to an island in the north where the buildings were absolutely unprepared for their needs?

In Vidlitsa I heard how those who had been transferred recalled their experience with terror. They had barely a day to gather their belongings, grabbing only the most necessary items because they were to be transported on barges. For the disabled veterans, the whole experience was similar to that of a house fire. Those who couldn't walk and had been confined to their beds were transported on stretchers. Not a soul was left behind on the mainland; they were all sent to the island far away from prying eyes.

I found another intriguing document, this time from December 15, 1950. It recorded the population of the island as of November 20, 1950 as 904 people of which 580 were workers, staff and social dependents, living in the main village and two smaller subsidiaries. The food supply on the island at the time was sufficient except for potatoes, consisting of 78 tons or 12 kg per person each month, if they hadn't been sold to the workers and staff.

The health and sanitary services were just as defunct as before. Only two physician assistants and two nurses worked on the island. There were less than three doctor's offices and no tuberculosis specialist; rather only one physical therapist who doubled as a doctor looked after the patients. Moreover, the population had no guarantees of aid during the dangerous months when the ice prevented travel to and from the island. These medical capabilities failed to meet the needs of the disabled combat veterans, many of whom required constant medical care. Exacerbating the situation, patients suffering from tuberculosis were brought to the island where there was no means to treat them.

The sanitary conditions were also inadequate. There was dirt in the living quarters, the bath house was cleaned irregularly, and they lacked a clean room for sterilization. It was also noted in this document that the island possessed only one bath house with a capacity of 185 people per day, a single bakery, seven cellars for storage, and one store.

The inventory was significantly worse off. According to the licensing certificate the convalescent home was supposed to supply three changes of linens and underwear for the residents; however in reality there were not enough socks nor underwear in stock to maintain half of the prescribed amount. Therefore it was decided to send for 1080 meters of fabric to sew

the necessary linens and underwear. It was promised that they would obtain the necessary inventory the following year, leaving the disabled veterans in dismal living conditions for their first year on the island.

Additionally, the residents had virtually no ability to communicate with the mainland. Only two speakers for the radio worked on the entire territory, and there were no plans to attain goods when the roads were impassible. The electrical system also posed problems. The power station could only supply 40kW of electrical power, and it was in need of a repair. Kerosene was undersupplied; and therefore when the power station shutdown, the inhabitants were left to sit in the dark.

There wasn't a social venue, so a church building had been refitted as a cultural house where a total of 5 films were played. The water distribution system was also demonstrating major problems.

The situation regarding labor was complicated as well. On July 28, 1950, an ordinance for the Work-Placement of Veterans of VOV (WWII) by the Committee for the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Karelo-Finnish SSR noted that 50 disabled veterans had been employed. Even though most of them were far from being physically capable of performing hard labor, many of the veterans were still able to carry out some type of work.

Another document from a later time period ordered by the Ministry of Social Affairs of Karelia ASSR №30 from May 5, 1969, described "the gross violation of the public order at the Valaam Nursing Home for the Elderly and Disabled". It attested to the fact that a portion of the residents were getting drunk, violating the public order, and that the staff was not only permitting this behavior, but when asked they would bring hard liquor to the residents. Legal proceedings were being conducted in connection with an incident where one resident killed another with an awl (small boring tool). The individuals getting drunk, as referenced by the order, were not the combat veterans; rather they were convicts who had been disabled while in prison or at the prison camps. They had also been sent to Valaam far from the public's gaze. After having been settled into the same wards as the sick and maimed combat veterans, the convicts caused continual scuffles, started drunken fights and begged at the wharves.

The document also demonstrated that little had changed within the past 19 years. It described the continued deficiencies at the nursing home including "the insufficient supply of firewood, problems with the delivery of food products and the low quality of medical services." Even after roughly 20 years, the residents experienced living conditions fraught with deficiencies.

Valaam Island

The final location for my research turned out to be Valaam. I wanted to see with my own eyes where and in what conditions the combat veterans had lived. The Winter Hotel, which housed the medical ward, still stands in its previous location, and even today one of the wings on the second floor still functions as a hotel serving pilgrims visiting the monastery. The local residents live on the opposite side, and on the third floor is a school for 27 students. Only 150 locals remain on the island with only two children attending the first grade this year. Last year the administration of the island transferred over to the Russian Orthodox Church, and as a result the village council administration shutdown. There isn't a local medical unit, and only one store sells a limited supply of goods. For the local inhabitants, the nursing home was a place of work, and practically everything was connected to it. When the institution shut down, the locals lost their jobs and were left without any work.

Currently, a multi-storied housing complex is being built in Sortavala for the local inhabitants of Valaam, but not all of them are clamoring to move. They are afraid that they will be unable to survive in the city; pensions are small and housing costs are high. While on the island, although the living conditions are shabby, the cost of living is cheap, and they can raise gardens for food.

The only citizens who remain are essentially the descendants of the disabled veterans who were able to start a family and raise their children on the island. One of these descendants is Sergei Aksentyev. His father, Mikhail Ivanovich Aksentyev was a veteran of the Great Patriotic War and lost his leg on the front-lines. In the nursing home fate brought him and nurse Klavdiya Ivanovna together. They lived on Valaam independent of the nursing home and raised their children there. At the same time Mikhail Ivanovich was a representative of the village council and looked after the combat veterans.

“Did your father attain any social benefits designated for veterans of the war?” I asked Sergei Aksentyev.

“He received a pension, then was allocated a car, a *Zaporozhets*³. However, he never received anything noteworthy after that.”

Many of the island locals who remember the veterans can tell similar stories. The combat veterans lived very modestly. By the 1970s there were already sets of linens and underwear, the veterans were being fed, they were able to wash in bath houses, and nurses looked after the bedridden. However the veterans didn't have any special social benefits or privileges, even though, as I managed to ascertain, the first social benefits had been mandated for disabled veterans of the Great Patriotic War and their families starting in 1944. True, they were receiving pensions of which a small portion was for personal use, but the government collected the rest. The veterans didn't receive any disabled benefits for traveling, public services or telephone calls. It wasn't even possible for them to obtain standard prosthetics, and therefore a few veterans barely ever left their beds for the remainder of their lives.

It's possible to adamantly assert that the veterans who established a personal life were very lucky. They would start families on the island and live independently from the nursing home; however those who managed to attain such a fate were few and far in between.

“Was there ever a case when the relatives of a veteran came searching for him, and then brought him back home with them?” I asked Vladimir Okuneva, the ex-director of the nursing home.

“I don't remember any such cases, but there was one incident which sticks out. After Grigory Andreyevicha Voloshin, one of the combat veterans, had died, his son came searching for him. When the son found out about his death, he purchased and erected a memorial in his father's honor.”

I found this memorial in the old, overgrown cemetery. The words engraved on it were very touching. After being wounded, Grigory Andreyevich Voloshin lost his arms and legs and was unable to hear or speak. He could only see. The son found the father 50 years later, organized a memorial engraved with gratitude to whomever had looked after his father all those years. Voloshin lived to be 64 years old, dying in 1974. Incidentally, the famous artist Dobrov came to the island to portray the veterans. In one of his portraits a man without arms or legs lay in a bed like a child in a diaper. He looks from the basket with his sad eyes. Could this be the same Voloshin, or is it some other hero who remains unknown?

The church watchman and monastery apprentice, Sergei, who had already lived in the Valaam Monastery for 10 years showed me where to search for other graves. It was only possible to make out the names on a few of the graves: Pavel Ivanovich Bogdanov, Mikhail Ivanovich Svintsov and Sergei Kalitarov. The grave markers sagged and many of them no longer displayed the customary stars⁴.

“Unfortunately, the burial grounds in the cemetery are practically ruined,” said the Director of the Valaam Nature Museum and Reserve, Vladimir Vysotsky. “Currently they aren't visible. There are no distinct grave markers indicating where one disabled veteran or another was buried.”

³ Type of Soviet car designed and built from 1958 until production stopped in 1994.

⁴ Soviet military veterans' graves are customarily marked by little stars (звездочки)

On some of the wooden structures resembling memorials the names of the combat veterans weren't even written, only a soldier's identification number marked the grave. This is the type of 'thanks' veterans of the war received for ensuring the happiness and safety of our country. Director Vysotsky says the cemetery is expected to be renovated in honor of all of the veterans of the Great Patriotic War buried on the island. They are hoping to erect a general memorial designating all of their names. The site is already prepared, the base stones have been set, and a place has been designated for the stele.

For the time being, however, not all of the veterans have been identified. From the municipal archives of Sortavala, the Vidlitsa Nursing Home and Valaam Island, I managed to identify and record roughly 200 names of veterans of the Great Patriotic War who had lived and many of whom had died on Valaam. The rest may be identified after the archives in Vidlitsa have been delved through completely. There is still much work to be done.

Conclusion

From the results of my research I have come to the sole conclusion that the rights of the disabled combat veterans were violated. Their rights were first abused when they were literally gathered up in a few days, ripped from their homes and lives, transported on barges and shipped to an island which hadn't been properly prepared for patients with such severe injuries. The cells for the monks' living quarters had yet to be renovated and there wasn't a single bath house. There weren't any doctors nor medicines. Even though everything was more or less solved later on, it was still a long time before any of the disabled veterans received any qualified medical treatment.

Their rights were violated a second time when the elderly veterans who were still alive were hastily collected and taken to Vidlitsa village. They were transported in helicopters, some on stretchers and some in wheelchairs. As Vladimir Okunev, the ex-director of the Valaam Nursing Home stated, a roar hung over the entire island. People didn't want to go; they didn't want to depart from the few belongings they owned. Some time passed before Vladimir Okunev was in Vidlitsa, but by that time, only one woman who had moved from Valaam was still alive. The rest had quickly passed away in their new home.

The third time their rights weren't observed occurred when ex-convicts were moved into the island's nursing home. They made life difficult for the combat veterans, going through bouts of drunkenness, starting fights and often swiping money, food and all sorts of goods from the veterans.

The table of all the social benefits and various other payments promised to the veterans starts from the very first decree to the Law on Veterans which is still in effect today. While the combat veterans lived on the island they received nothing of the kind guaranteed to them by law. The government distributed pensions to them but that was it. Truthfully, cars, telephones and sanatoriums weren't wholly necessary, but they were completely without any prosthetics and a wide range of high-quality medical services.

There is, however, a happy ending to this sad story. The grandsons of these veterans of the Great Patriotic War are now searching for their hero-grandfathers, who lived out the remainder of their lives in obscurity. They want to know what their lives were like, where they were buried and how to give tribute to their memories. Similar requests are arriving at Vidlitsa and the archives in Sortavala, a sign worth rejoicing. Hopefully the list that I compiled will be of assistance, and the family members will be found amongst the veterans at Valaam. Each veteran must be identified.

Svetlana Tsygankova