

## **The Face of the Faceless Russian Police**

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The Russian MVD was once called the KGB. Before that, it was the NKVD, and before that, the CheKa. Whatever acronym it went by, it has always stood for obedience to the State. It maintained order, suppressed rebellions and controlled dissent. These were the faceless people who came at night. These were people of stories for me, people I'd read about, heard about and even personally dreaded. I certainly never expected to become friends with one.

Dima, at 39, looks the part he plays in life. Chiseled features, a solid frame and a gravitas that few can match all mark him as a *militционер* (militiaman). Russia calls its law-enforcement agency a "militia" rather than police, and in truth the Russian militia is a far cry from a Western police force. "There is very little difference between the militia and the army," Dima told me.

The militia are trained for battle. Dima used to play guitar. After breaking his left hand in combat training, he can no longer reach the chords. Dima fought in Kyrgyzstan in 1990, just before the fall of the Soviet Union. Most of his war stories, however, are from his six months in Chechnya in 2000-2001.

"It is very difficult there," he said simply. "The mountains there are indescribable. It's a shame such a beautiful place has to experience such problems." That was all he told

me of Chechnya at first. A few days and a bottle of cognac later, the stories began to flow.

On one routine patrol, his company of 50 was passing by an old stone tower in the mountains. He was sent with a half-dozen men to investigate. They had not gone far when gun-fire sounded. “Normally, you can hear right away where the fire is coming from,” Dima recalled. “In the mountains, everything echoes.” It took some moments to determine what was happening. Their primary company was being ambushed. Looking around, there was only one place for the ambushers to hide, and sure enough, from his vantage point, Dima could make out a group of rebels.

A firefight ensued. Soon, a Russian helicopter arrived, which was not entirely a good thing. “The Chechens knew our tactics,” Dima explained. “First, they shot up a green flare. That means ‘I’m on your side.’ Then they shot a red flare in our direction. That means, ‘There’s the enemy.’” The helicopter fired a rocket at Dima’s position. Luckily, he and the rest were able to spring out of the way and nobody was hurt.

Soon enough, matters were sorted out, and the all the rebels had fled or were killed. For his own part in the battle, Dima was awarded several medals.

“Many of the dead were Arabs, not Chechens,” he wanted to highlight. Before seeing it for himself, he had been somewhat skeptical of the government’s claim that the rebellion was strongly supported by international terrorists.

He saw no other pitched battles while in Chechnya, but his camp was regularly fired upon. “At night, you can see the firing of the guns. Based on the flashes of light, you would try to shoot back.”

“It was hard,” he repeated. “But you get used to it. After a few days, you find time for laughter, for jokes.”

“A lot of people think that if you fight and kill, you become a killer. You need to fight all the time. It’s not true.” Dima continued, “I had a gun and was shooting at another man.” He mimed shooting a rifle. “He had a gun and was shooting at me, or if not at me, then at my friend who was standing by me.

“People ask me if I’ve killed. I answer, ‘I’ve battled.’

Chechnya did change him, did take its toll. “I used to look much younger than I was,” Dima recalled. Not since Chechnya. “It took a few years, but my friends all remark on it. They say, ‘You have a look of knowledge in your eyes.’” In character, too, Dima says he is nothing like the fiery youth he had been. “When I was young, I always wanted to be a fighter. I never wanted to be an astronaut, like many boys. I wanted to be a fighter-pilot—not a bomber, a *fighter*-pilot.”

While he’s not seriously considering retiring from the militia any time soon, he’s starting to think about other things. “I’ve lived with some women, but in the end the work gets in the way,” he says. Many of his friends lost their wives and families to the job. “You work crazy hours. Your wife doesn’t know where you are. She calls the office, and they can’t tell her where you are. Soon, she begins to think you are having an affair.”

Between Kyrgystan and Chechnya, Dima investigated murder cases. Now, he battles the Russian mafia. All things mafia interest him greatly. He loves *The Godfather* – the book, not the movie, which disappointed him – and quizzed me constantly about the American mafia, of which I know very little. Of the Russian mafia, he knows much. “The Russian mafia is stronger than ever,” he told me. At the turn of the century, the mafia

went increasingly into big business, both making them stronger and criminalizing business. Many types of crime can be involved in the same case: financial crime, kidnappings, extortion, murder, etc.

As we sit in an upscale restaurant, having lunch, he tells me, “You have to be careful in restaurants. Not everybody eating in them made their money legitimately.” I glance around, nervously. Dima continues his meal.

Dima exudes much of the calm confidence of a warrior, and that is the impression that sticks, but that is far from all there is to him. With his Edwards-esque smile, he could as easily be a politician rather than a grizzled veteran. His uncommon generosity and warmth also contrast with what one might expect from his past. Standing on the deck of a ship cruising Siberia’s Lena River, where I first met him, wrapped in a windbreaker and with binoculars ever at the ready, he could have been any excited tourist on this trip up Siberia’s mighty Lena River. For Dima, who grew up along the Lena, it was a trip into the past. He remembered riding that same ship 31 years past. “It was much nicer then.” Many of the towns and villages along the river were unrecognizable to him; they had been rebuilt after one or another flood.

Traveling has always been a passion. Years ago, a professor told me that many young Russian men sign up for the war in Chechnya in order to travel. I didn’t believe it until Dima told me he went to Chechnya for exactly that reason. That and he believes separatists should be punished. “My friends say I’m a militarist. I’m not a militarist. But renegades should suffer, and they should see the suffering they cause.” He’s the only Russian I’ve met who supported the war in Iraq.

Asked what he will do when he retires from the force, he answered, “I’d like to spend a year traveling. For some reason, I’ve always wanted to go to Australia...and to Indonesia.” It’s no surprise he wants to visit islands. He likes being on the water. “It’s good for the soul. It’s very peaceful.”

Captions:

IMG 2701: On a riverboat, traveling to visit his elderly parents, Dima was never far from his binoculars.

IMG 2711: Dima usually flies to visit his parents in Yakutsk, but this time he traveled by river “for the peace and quiet.”