

'I won't go and kill my brothers!': Russians set fire to draft centres

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More than 50 Russian military draft centres have been targeted in arson attacks since the invasion of Ukraine

There have been 18 attempts to set fire to draft centres and state administrative buildings across Russia since the Kremlin announced that it was mobilising Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine last week.

They are the latest in a wave of arson attacks on draft centres and state offices following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February.

The number of attacks had declined by the end of the summer, but since 21 September, when Vladimir Putin announced [mobilisation](#) – the first such call-up of Russian citizens to serve in the military since the Second World War – they have flared up with renewed vigour.

Russian media outlet Mediazona has [studied](#) all the available information about the attacks, to figure out who is responsible and what Russian law enforcement is doing to stop them. Below is a shortened translation of their investigation.

The first attack on a draft centre

Three days after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, Kirill Butylin, a resident of the Moscow satellite town of Lukhovitsy, turned 21. The next day, according to Russian investigators, he threw Molotov cocktails at a draft centre in the town.

It was the first recorded attack on a draft centre following the invasion.

A video of the attack and a statement by the anonymous arsonist [appeared](#) online on 8 March, on an anti-Putin Telegram channel called 'VataHunters' (Vata is a derogatory term for supporters of Putin).

"Let these motherfuckers know that their own people hate them and will kill them. The earth under their feet will soon begin to burn. Hell awaits at home," the statement read.

The author claimed that he had painted the gates of the military enlistment office in the colours of the Ukrainian flag, and then written "I won't go and kill my brothers!" on them. The video shows him dousing the outside of the office with petrol, breaking its windows and throwing Molotov cocktails inside.

"The goal was to destroy the archive containing personal files of conscripts," the arsonist explained. He said the attack "should prevent mobilisation in the [Lukhovitsy] district".

Butylin was arrested the same day the statement appeared online. He had got rid of his phone and

managed to travel across Belarus to the border with Lithuania, Russian media [reported](#), where he was detained. Allegedly, Butylin told Russian police that he wanted to fight in Ukraine against Russia. The young man was promptly extradited to Russia.

On 13 March, Butylin escaped from Lukhovitsy police station. According to local media, he jumped out of an interview room through a window (his handcuffs had been removed for a toilet break). He then climbed over a three-metre chain-link fence and ran towards a highway. Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs provided only a short statement, saying he had "arbitrarily left" the police station in the morning. He was later caught.

Little is known about Butylin's past. Information suggests he may have participated in opposition rallies in Moscow in 2019.

A few months later, while in pre-trial detention, Butylin saw the charges against him had been extended significantly, a source told Mediazona. The vandalism charge had been replaced with arson, and a charge of terrorism added. Butylin is currently facing up to 20 years in prison. It is not clear exactly when the charges were changed, but Butylin [was added](#) to an official list of extremists and terrorists on 21 June.

"At some point, Russian law enforcement decided these arson attacks should be considered acts of terrorism – some of those arrested, like Kirill Butylin, have had the charges against them 'upgraded'"

It is not known whether other Russian citizens were inspired by Butylin's example (the post containing his statement and video has had more than 90,000 views) or whether the idea was already in circulation, but by the time of the mobilisation announcement, there had been 34 attacks on draft centres and administrative buildings.

At some point, Russian law enforcement decided these arson attacks should be considered acts of terrorism – some of those arrested, like Kirill Butylin, have had the charges against them 'upgraded'. Now, new arson attacks are often charged as terrorism from the start.

More than 50 attacks across Russia

According to Mediazona's estimates, at least 52 military draft centres and other administrative buildings in 38 regions of Russia have come under attack since the start of the Russian invasion. In the majority of occasions (36), the targets were institutions belonging to Russia's Ministry of Defence, primarily draft centres.

Eighteen attacks have occurred in the last week alone, since Putin announced mobilisation on 21 September: 13 on draft centres and five on administrative buildings.

As a rule, the attackers largely use Molotov cocktails – the simplest and most popular method. The attacks have been mainly symbolic; few people managed to cause significant damage. As an anonymous police Telegram channel [commented ironically](#): "You can't take an old Soviet military registration and enlistment office with your bare hands!!!"

Sometimes the arsonists have caused real fires – as in the case of a 48-year-old former village teacher, [Ilya Farber](#). In May, Farber visited relatives in the Udmurt village of Igra in central Russia, where he set fire to a local recruiting office and then, two days later, a draft centre.

In the [first instance](#), a room containing employees' personal belongings burned down; in the second, the fire damaged an area used to store service documents of Second World War veterans. Farber

was charged with arson and sent to a pre-trial detention centre.

Another attacker, from Kirovsk outside St Petersburg, turned out to be quite resourceful. According to a local news website, the attacker allegedly used a timed device complete with a fuel canister. The fire spread across ten square metres on the first floor before a night watchman extinguished it.

Blaming Ukraine

Over the past six months, pro-government media in Russia has suggested that the arson attacks on draft centres are coordinated by the Ukrainian security services. One tabloid, Life, [wrote](#) that the people behind these radical actions are either “drug addicts, outcasts and teenagers who are attracted by easy money” or “ideological opposition activists” recruited by Ukraine.

Mediazona did find several cases where detainees testified to having committed arson for money.

On 20 July, a social media account in Vladivostok published [a](#) video of the interrogation of Andrei Alexeyev, 21, who was accused of a terrorist attack after throwing a Molotov cocktail into the city’s draft centre (only the cladding was damaged).

In the video, Alexeyev says, hesitantly, that he received an offer to set fire to the draft centre when he was looking for a job via Telegram. He urgently needed 120,000 rubles (about £1,900).

Alexeyev says the stranger’s offer “interested [him] for financial reasons”, but “the terrorist act was not carried through, and the fire was extinguished.” The young man promised it would not happen again. He has since been charged with terrorism offences.

Citing a source in law enforcement agencies, Life claimed that Ukrainian recruiters pay an average of 30,000 rubles (£474) for setting fire to military registration and enlistment offices, and that a prerequisite for being paid is to video the attack.

Intriguingly, a far-Right Russian Telegram channel previously offered the same reward for setting fire to police cars.

This channel is associated with a banned Russian neo-Nazi movement, National Socialism/White Power (NS/WP). The FSB (the successor to the Soviet-era KGB), arrested several NS/WP members in April over the [attempted assassination](#) of Russian TV firebrand Vladimir Solovyov.

One of the men arrested is allegedly friendly with Timofiy Mokiy, who, according to anonymous Telegram channels close to Russian security services, set fire to at least four draft centres and one police department in Moscow, after the April arrests.

Mokiy was detained at the beginning of June. In a [video](#) released by the Russian security services, Mokiy says he received money “from Ukraine” for setting fire to draft centres.

Lone wolves

Some attacks have been committed by individuals who did not associate themselves with political movements and had never taken part in protests before.

Alexey Rozhkov, 24, from the Urals, worked at an electronics store. On the morning of 11 March, according to investigators, he threw a Molotov cocktail at a draft centre in the small town of Berezovsky. He tried to escape, but was detained by a traffic police patrol who happened to be nearby.

"He admitted that he wanted to disrupt the draft campaign," a source told a [local news site](#). Rozkhov was charged with attempted murder after it turned out that a night watchman – who was not hurt – had been on the premises.

Judging by Rozhkov's social media profile, he is fond of music and played bass in a local rock band as a teenager. "His action is very surprising," one of Rozhkov's friends told Mediazona. "He's such a soulful guy, calm and cheerful." The friend recalled that they had talked after the start of the invasion, and that Alexey was "a little disappointed that prices had risen and that he had to find another job".

"The tendency to treat arson as terrorism began in Crimea, which has become a testing ground for new tactics by Russian law enforcement"

Denis Serdyuk, 30, a seasonal construction worker on the Yamal peninsula in northern Russia, visited relatives in Volgograd in southern Russia in May. According [to](#) investigators, on the night of 15 May, Serdyuk threw a Molotov cocktail at a draft office in the city.

Law enforcement promptly detained him. "They asked him: 'Why did you do this?' and he responded: 'No to war,'" [recalled](#) a neighbour, who acted as a witness to a search of Serdyuk's apartment. "He said that he did it so that no one else would take part in the special operation."

Serdyuk was sent to a pre-trial detention centre on charges of hooliganism and arson.

From hooliganism to terrorism

Although the Russian authorities have been actively developing CCTV surveillance systems across the country in recent years, not all the attackers have been caught. In 18 of the 52 known attacks, Mediazona did not find any reports of detentions. However, most of the unsolved cases have only occurred in the last week.

It also seems Russian security forces are reluctant to report on the capture of arsonists, although information about arrests usually seeps into Telegram channels and the media.

In the early months of the war, criminal investigations focused on relatively light charges, such as the deliberate destruction of property or hooliganism. But as summer approached, it appears the FSB took matters into its own hands, prosecuting incidents under terrorism legislation.

The tendency to treat arson as terrorism began in Crimea, which has become a testing ground for new tactics by Russian law enforcement. In May, Bogdan Zizu, an artist in the Crimean town of Evpatoria, was accused of attempted terrorism after pouring [blue and yellow paint](#) over the city administration building and then throwing a Molotov cocktail at it.

In July, a 21-year-old student in Uglich, north of Moscow, was also [accused](#) of an attempted terrorist attack. He was detained with Molotov cocktails near the military registration and enlistment office, but did not have time to use them.

"On whose instructions were you acting?" a Russian law enforcement officer [asks](#) sternly during a recorded interrogation.

"On the military... On the instructions of the military personnel of Ukraine."

"How did you meet them?"

“On the internet.”

For those who set fire to Russian draft centres, it is likely they will face similar accusations of committing terrorist acts on behalf of the Ukrainian security services – if they can be caught.

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