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Unearthing the Remains of War in Tver

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

BELY, Tver Region -- Sergei Zharov says he's lucky to be alive.

"I stepped on a Bulgarian mine," the 39-year-old veteran of the Afghanistan war said. "It blew me straight up in the air."

Zharov's brush with death, however, didn't happen during a tour of duty: He set off the explosive device in his own garage two years ago, and he says it wasn't the first time. "I've blown myself up four times," he said.

Take a glance around Zharov's property on the outskirts of this village of 5,000 people, and it's obvious that the retired Army senior lieutenant is in his element when surrounded by guns and explosives. Both of his garages are packed with rusty automatic weapons, rifles, Howitzer shells, mines and grenades. Propped up against his wooden fence is a 500-kilogram bomb shell.

Zharov's stockpile is the result of his work as head of a search team called the Belsky Rubezh, or Belsky Battle Line, a group of local military enthusiasts known as red diggers, who scour World War II battlefields in search of the remains of fallen Soviet soldiers and pick up Soviet and Nazi weapons along the way.

And there are plenty of buried remains and weapons to go around in the Tver region.

According to statistics from Podvig, the umbrella organization for red diggers in the Tver region, the remains of more than 22,046 soldiers have been recovered in the region since 1987. There are still many more to be found.

"It's hard to speak of any official statistics," said Anatoly Yakovlev, head of a group of Tver diggers called Zvezda. "But there are probably 1 million still lying around in the Tver region."

Zharov, unemployed since leaving the Army in 1993, has made it his mission to recover the remains of the soldiers -- many of whom are still officially missing in action -- and honor them with a proper



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Red digger Sergei Ivanov walking past air bombs outside the house of fellow digger Sergei Zharov. The bombs were recovered from World War II battlefields in the Tver region.

burial for defending their homeland in the Great Patriotic War. He claims he and his team of diggers alone have recovered the remains of 2,750 soldiers.

"I lost a lot of relatives in the war," he said Friday at the Petro-Pavlovskoye Cemetery in Bely ahead of the town's annual memorial service at which the soldiers' remains are reburied. "My grandfathers died or disappeared in the war. Someone has to do this work."

But there's a less altruistic aspect of Zharov's work, and red diggers maintain an uneasy relationship with the authorities due to the ease with which weapons, explosives and Soviet and Nazi artifacts found at dig sites can be sold to collectors and criminal groups on the black market.

War artifacts can bring a pretty penny, especially ones bearing a Nazi emblem. One Russian military history web site, angriff.narod.ru, advertises a U.S.-made battlefield telephone, delivered to the Soviet army in 1943, for \$120. A Nazi cigar case is going for \$450.

Zharov used to be what is called a black digger, someone who digs for Nazi artifacts and explosives to sell and is not interested in the soldiers' remains. He said he never sold anything directly to a collector.

"I had middlemen from Moscow that would come pick items up here in Bely," he said. "They'd sell them in Russia, in Europe, in America, everywhere."

But Zharov did slip up: He was convicted in 2002 of illegal storage of weapons and sale of explosives after undercover agents from the Interior Ministry's organized crime department caught him trying to sell 50 kilograms of TNT for \$700 in a sting operation. By law he could have been sentenced to four years in prison, but he managed to get off lightly: The Bely City Court gave him a 2 1/2 year suspended sentence.

"My wife was pregnant at the time," Zharov said. "I literally had no money. I guess you could say the circumstances forced me to do it."

The grassy plains outside Bely, about a four-hour drive west from Moscow, are next to a valley known as the Valley of Death and where a village called Ploskaya once stood before it was destroyed in the war. They harbor a mother lode of Soviet and German bones, explosives, guns and military knick-knacks.

Dozens of muddy holes have been dug and their more valuable contents collected by diggers: the bones for reburial, the weapons for sale or for personal collections. A few empty, rusty grenades and ammunition cases lay strewn about one of the holes, along with a German soldier's wallet and a muddy, black rubber gas mask.

"Sometimes we find condoms still in them," said Sergei Ivanov, a member of Zharov's search team, waving the muddy wallet. "The Germans came prepared."

Metal detectors are the device of choice for search teams, and not just for black diggers looking for weapons. Red diggers use them to locate soldiers' remains by picking



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Zharov showing off a set of howitzer shells from his collection of World War II weapons and artifacts he stores in his garage.

injuries. Zharov, whose limbs and digits are still in tact, says he has lost five friends to accidental explosions.

For kicks sometimes the diggers will rig up controlled explosions with the materials they find.

"It's called the echo of war," said Yury, a 20-something digger from Moscow who regularly drives to Bely to go out into the fields with Zharov. "You can't imagine the pleasure of feeling the wave off of the explosion."

While villagers began occasionally digging up and reburying soldiers' remains immediately after the end of the war, the red digger movement in the Soviet Union began to gather steam in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1993 the first nationwide organization of red diggers, called the Union of Search Units, was founded and began receiving funding from the federal budget.

Under a 1996 presidential decree, search units received around 180 million rubles from a federal program called Youth of Russia. By the following year, the Union of Search Units had officially registered four interregional and 46 regional organizations, in addition to more than 350 other groups and clubs totaling more than 15,000 members, according to a 2002 article posted on the web site adventure.ru and written by Sergei Tatarkin, head of the Moscow military-historical society Hope.

But the 1998 default was unkind to the groups, Yakovlev said. The Union of Search Units was broken up shortly after the crisis, and funding was placed in the hands of regional governments, who have steadily cut financing, including rewards for turning in explosive devices and TNT to the police.

In October 2003, Zharov turned over 280 kilograms of TNT to the Bely police and received \$2,000 dollars for his efforts.

"That was the last time I saw any money from digging," he said

up signals from any piece of metal that might have been buried with them: a knife, belt buckle or a medal of valor. The medals are rarer.

Traditionally, Soviet soldiers left medals and decorations behind before going into combat. "Most of the soldiers out here were young guys," Zharov added. "They didn't have time to win any medals."

The most productive digging is done in the spring, when the grass has not grown too high, or the fall, when the grass is starting to disappear. Some fanatics will continue searching into the winter.

Recovering decaying weapons is not the safest of activities. At least once a year someone in the region dies after accidentally detonating aging but still live grenades or mines, Zharov said, and dozens more will survive with

bitterly. "Earlier this year I turned over more than 100 kilograms of TNT, and I got nothing. They even told me they might throw me in jail because I have no right to handle the stuff.

"These days we travel on our own money," Zharov said. "You could say we're living off of our own enthusiasm."

Bely's identity is closely tied to the commemoration of fallen defenders of the fatherland. There is little else to be enthusiastic about in the town, which is pocked with crumbling buildings, only a few of which date from before the war and survived heavy German bombing.

"There is a collective farm around here, but most people don't work," said Zharov, who said he usually has to drive to Moscow to find work as a day laborer to support himself. "And all of the young people leave."

But the digger movement is still strong, despite financial difficulties. There are 564 search units and more than 60,000 diggers organized in 19 Russian regions, according to the web site for the Union of Search Units. The union's head, Yury Smirnov, is trying to bring them all back under the federal umbrella.

Zharov said he is confident the movement will continue growing. In any case, he said he plans to keep digging, though he said since his conviction he has ditched any thoughts of going back to black digging.

"It doesn't matter how bad the situation gets," he said. "I'm working legally from now on. There are a lot of soldiers left out there. We'll keep doing it until we rebury the last one."



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Ivanov pulling out a German wallet and mortar shell case from an excavation site.