

When a Murderer Becomes a Hero

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It just so happens that Yury Budanov, the tank commander convicted of murdering a Chechen teenage girl during the second Chechen war, was gunned down in Moscow on the eve of the acquittal of Oleg Orlov, head of the Memorial rights group, in the defamation lawsuit against him.

Orlov implicated Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov in the murder of Memorial worker Natalya Estemirova in 2009. Kadyrov responded by saying Estemirova “never had any honor, dignity or a conscience. Never.”

Now Budanov — whom Kadyrov characterized as “a schizophrenic and a murderer, a recognized enemy of the Chechen people” following Budanov’s early release in 2009 on parole — has been killed.

But there is one caveat concerning Kadyrov’s comment on Budanov: It is absolutely true. If there is anything even more shameful than Budanov’s crime, it is the way Russian ultrapatriots reacted to it.

Budanov killed 18-year-old Elza Kungayeva. After he was detained, Budanov was also accused

of raping Kungayeva before he murdered her, but then the prosecutors themselves smoothed over his crime and turned him into a hero.

“Kungayeva was a sniper,” they claim, “and the heroic colonel did not rape her. He strangled her in a fit of rage during her interrogation.”

Budanov was sent to serve out his prison term in the Ulyanovsk region. This worked out quite well for him because for three years of Budanov’s sentence — from 2001 to 2004 — the region’s governor was Vladimir Shamanov, Budanov’s superior officer during the Chechen war and Budanov’s most vocal supporter when he faced murder and rape charges.

Shamanov, who was proclaimed a war criminal by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, helped turn Budanov’s jail cell into a resort. For example, witnesses claim that food from a local restaurant was delivered to Budanov.

There have been many cases throughout history of soldiers who have committed heroic acts during wartime but who were also guilty of rape and murder. Budanov, however, is the only soldier who was hailed as a hero exclusively for raping and murdering. No other heroic wartime feat has been attributed to him.

In Russia, the war crimes committed by its army in Chechnya were outdone only by the Red Army when it occupied East Prussia and Germany in 1944 and 1945, a period when historians estimate that more than 1 million young girls and women were raped and hundreds of thousands were killed. In both cases, soldiers’ crimes were encouraged by their superiors, but there is one difference: The second Chechen war was won by Chechnya — or, at the very least, by Kadyrov.

Now look what happens in Moscow: Ruslan Yamadayev is killed on Smolenskaya Naberezhnaya, a stone’s throw from the White House, in 2008; Movladi Baisarov was killed on Moscow’s Leninsky Prospekt in 2006; and a couple of years ago, Adam Diliyev, a Kadyrov follower, opened fire at a Moscow city bus simply because he was cut off in traffic. And now Budanov is gunned down in broad daylight.

Russian patriots hail Budanov as a hero, and Chechens love their man who shot at a Moscow bus and showed those Russians who is the boss.

Maybe it is time for the two sides to separate from each other for good. What point is there in living in the same country if Chechens and Russians have two completely opposite hero types who are constantly at war with each other?

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