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MARTYR EVGENY RODIONOV

*From Village Boy to Soldier, Martyr and, Many Say, Saint
November 21, 2003 - By Seth Mydans, The New York Times*

Shoulders back, chest out, the young soldier stands as if on parade in his camouflage fatigues - his boots polished, his rifle at his shoulder, a halo around his head. His face is the blank mask of a man for whom duty is life. It is not easy being a soldier, or a saint. Portraits of this young man, Yevgeny Rodionov, are spreading around Russia - sometimes in uniform, sometimes in a robe, sometimes armed, sometimes holding a cross, but always with his halo.

He is Russia's new unofficial saint, a casualty of the war in Chechnya who has been canonized not by the Russian Orthodox Church but by a groundswell of popular adoration. The portraits are religious icons, venerated in homes and churches where Private Rodionov has become the focus of a minor cult that seems to fill a nationalist hunger for popular heroes. In one icon he is painted to look like a medieval Russian knight. In another he is included, in full uniform, in a group portrait of the last czar and his family, under the gaze of Jesus. Church officials say all of this breaks religious law. Sainthood is not a popularity contest, and icons are not campaign posters. The process of canonization, the officials say, is long and arduous and can only be carried out by the church. But it does happen from time to time that a symbolic figure emerges to capture the passions of a moment and becomes a sort of folk saint - sometimes the first step toward official sainthood.

In pamphlets, songs and poems, in sermons and on Web sites, Private Rodionov's story has become a parable of religious devotion and Russian nationalism. The young soldier, it is said, was killed by Muslim rebels seven years ago because he refused to renounce his religion or remove the small silver cross he kept around his neck.

It is the story his mother says she was told by the rebels who killed him and

who later led her, for a ransom of \$4,000, to the place they had buried him. When she exhumed his body late one night, she said, the cross was there among his bones, glinting in the light of flashlights, stained with small drops of blood.

"Nineteen-year-old Yevgeny Rodionov went through unthinkable suffering," reads an encomium on one nationalist Web site, "but he did not renounce the Orthodox faith but confirmed it with his martyr's death.

"He proved that now, after so many decades of raging atheism, after so many years of unrestrained nihilism, Russia is capable, as in earlier times, of giving birth to a martyr for Christ, which means it is unconquerable."

As his story has spread, pilgrims have begun appearing in this small village just west of Moscow, where his mother, Lyubov, 51, tends his grave on an icy hillside beside an old whitewashed church. Some military veterans have laid their medals by his graveside in a gesture of homage. People in distress have left handwritten notes asking for his intercession. In a church near St. Petersburg, his full-length image stands at the altar beside icons of the Virgin Mary, the Archangel Michael, Jesus and Nicholas II, the last of the czars, who was canonized three years ago. Aleksandr Makeyev, a paratroop officer who heads a foundation to assist soldiers, said he had seen soldiers kneeling in prayer before an image of Private Rodionov. "The kids in Chechnya, they feel they've been abandoned by the state and abandoned by their commanders," he told the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets*.

"They don't know who to appeal to for help, but they understand that Zhenya is one of them," he said, using Private Rodionov's nickname. "You can say he is the first soldier-saint." Among the photographs of her son that Mrs. Rodionov spreads on her kitchen table are laminated cards that she says some soldiers carry with them for luck. They bear his image along with a prayer:

"Thy martyr, Yevgeny, O Lord, in his sufferings has received an incorruptible crown from thee, our God, for having thy strength he has brought down his torturers, has defeated the powerless insolence of demons. Through his prayers save our souls."

Although he has not been formally canonized, Private Rodionov's mother and other believers say his icons sometimes emit rivulets of holy perfume, as some extremely sacred Orthodox icons are said to do. Indeed, Mrs. Rodionov said, her own icon of her son drips perfume. "When that happens and I am planning a trip, I postpone it," she said. "The icon gives me signs."

Mrs. Rodionov said she was able to find her son's body and learn how he died during a lull in the war when rebel soldiers were demanding huge sums of money to return live prisoners or the bodies of men they had killed. According to the accounts of his captors, she said, he and three other soldiers were seized in

1996 while manning a checkpoint and were held in a cellar for 100 days before they were executed.

Private Rodionov was killed, she said, when he refused the rebels' demand that he remove his cross and forswear his religion. A poem called "The Cross," composed in his honor, paints a scene of laughing heathens who beheaded the young soldier when he defied them.

"Pure mountains in the distance, slopes covered in blooms of blue," the poem reads. "Refusing to renounce Christ, the soldier of Russia fell. And his head rolled, blood flowed from the saber, and the red grass whispered a quiet prayer in its wake."

Private Rodionov was proud to wear his military uniform and to do his duty for his country, his mother said. But as a boy in this small village, all he really wanted was to be a cook.



Lyubov Rodionov holding two portraits of her son Yevgeny - a primary school photograph and an unauthorized icon. Mrs. Rodionov says Muslim rebels killed him because he refused to renounce his religion.

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Another account:

When he was 11 years old, Yevgeny Rodionov received from his grandmother a little cross on a chain. He wanted to wear it to school, but his mother, then an atheist, warned him against it, since the communist authorities frowned on such things. Yevgeny wore it anyway and refused to ever take it off. As a 19-year-old soldier in the Russian Army, Yevgeny Rodionov was captured by Muslim Chechen rebels. They kept him hanging by his wrists in a basement. They starved and beat him. The Muslims commanded Yevgeny to write his mother and ask for a \$10,000 ransom. He told them his family was poor and could not possibly raise such a sum. They then ordered him and several other Russian prisoners to convert to Islam. In order to save their necks, most of the prisoners complied. Yevgeny refused to betray Christ. For that he was rewarded by the

Muslims with decapitation.

This happened in 1996. Since that time Yevgeny's mom has been able to recover her son's body from the Chechens - in increments: first the body, which still had the little cross around the neck, then, later, the head. I do not have the details, but miracles have been occurring in connection with Yevgeny's relics, and an icon of him in a small Russian village church has begun weeping myrrh. Yevgeny's father died shortly after the return of his son's body. Yevgeny's mother, who never before set foot in a church, is now an Orthodox Christian believer, saved by the example of her son, the Holy Martyr Yevgeny Rodionov.

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Another account:

Evgeny Rodionov, 19 years old, did not lose his faith despite horrible tortures. "The Chechen captivity is the most horrid, the most inhuman and barbaric thing that can ever happen," says Evgeny's mother. She had to survive hell to find her son, the body of her son, to be more precise. Evgeny's death coincided with his 19th birthday. Evgeny's mother, Lubov, was a little late: she was just seven kilometers far from the place of her son's execution.

"Evgeny was born 30 minutes after midnight on May 23, 1977. His delivery was not hard. He was a good and healthy child, his weight was 3900 grams. I was so relieved, when I heard his first cry. As if he was trying to say: "I came into this world, love me!" I incidentally looked at the window. It was dark outside, and I suddenly saw a falling star. I went pale, my heart turned to a cold small piece. Doctors tried to convince me that it was a good sign. They told me that a falling star was a sign of good life for my baby. However, I had to live with a sense of something dangerous coming over us. Time made me forget about it, but I had to remember the sign in 19 years."

The Russian patriotic press has already reported about the deed of a 19-year-old Russian soldier, Evgeny Rodionov. This young man found himself in the Chechen captivity in 1996. He did not betray either his fatherland or his faith. He did not take off his cross even at the hardest moment of beastly tortures. The state decorated Evgeny with the Order of Courage. People's donations made it possible to put a two-meter high Orthodox cross on his grave. People come to visit his grave from most distant parts of Russia. His mother, Lubov Rodionova, says that people's attitude changed her entire awareness of life. A WWII veteran once came to visit Evgeny's grave. He took off his military decoration – the Bravery Medal – and put it in on the tombstone. Evgeny Rodionov's biography was published in a book that came out in 2002. The book was called "The New Martyr of Christ, Warrior Evgeny." This is not really a book, but a booklet, which was written by priest Alexander Shargunov. However, we know little about Evgeny's inmost thoughts, feelings, emotions, or what he had to go through during three

months of the Chechen hell. A lot of things remain a mystery. Lubov Rodionova shared her thoughts with the priest about her son's childhood, his interests at school, his attitude to the military service. She also shared her most horrible thoughts – about the news of his alleged desertion from the army, and what followed that news afterwards.

Eighteen-year-old Evgeny Rodionov was taken captive with three other soldiers at night of February 14th, not far from the Chechen settlement of Galashki. The guys arrived from the Kaliningrad region. They patrolled the border between the republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. Their control and registration post was located some 200 meters far from the security detachment. The post was just a small cabin, without any light or wire communication. The cabin did not even have a military support, in spite of the fact that it was a single cabin on the mountainous road, which was used for carrying weapons, ammunition, captives, drugs and so on. The border guards stopped an ambulance vehicle to check it. More than ten armed Chechens got out of the vehicle. Needless to mention that it was very easy for them to cope with young inexperienced soldiers. The guys showed as much resistance as they could, but the outcome of the fight was evident before it even started. Lubov Rodionova believes that this incident happened over officers' negligence, basically.

“The captivity has always been considered to be the most horrible thing that can ever happen to a person. It implies no freedom, but only tortures and humiliation. Experience showed that the Chechen captivity is the most horrid, the most inhuman and barbaric thing that can ever happen,” Lubov Rodionova believes.

As soon as she learned that her son was a captive of Chechen guerrillas, she started looking for him all over Chechnya for nine months. She had to go through every horror imaginable. “I think that God was watching over me. I was walking along mined roads, but I did not step on a bomb. He protected me from bombings, he did not let me die, because my duty was to find my son, to bury him on his native land, according to Christian traditions. I have realized that recently. When I was walking along those military roads, I just kept silence, praying to God in my heart.”

Chechen bandits murdered Evgeny Rodionov on May 23, 1996 in the Chechen settlement of Bamut. Russian troops occupied the village the next day. Lubov Rodionova learned about her son's death only in September. She had to put a mortgage on her own apartment in order to find Evgeny's body and to take it away along with the bodies of his murdered friends. A Chechen man agreed to show her the place, where Evgeny was buried. She had to pay him a lot of money for that.

“When I came to Chechnya in the middle of February, a living private cost ten

million rubles. This price was 50 million in August. A friend of mine was told to pay 250 million rubles for her son, since he was an officer. It was nighttime, when I and some sappers were digging the pit, in which the bodies of four Russian soldiers were thrown. I was praying all the time, hoping that my Evgeny was not going to be there. I could not and did not want to believe that he was murdered. When we were taking out the remnants, I recognized his boots. However, I still refused to accept the fact of his death, until someone found his cross. Then I fainted." Evgeny Rodionov was murdered by Ruslan Khaikhoroyev. This bandit confessed that himself. "Your son had a choice to stay alive. He could have converted to Islam, but he did not agree to take his cross off. He also tried to escape once," said Khaikhoroyev. The guerrilla was killed together with his bodyguards on August 23, 1999 in a fight between armed Chechen groups.

When Lubov Rodionova came back home, Evgeny's father died five days after the funeral. He could not stand the loss of his son. Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, acting chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate department for cooperation with the Armed Forces, says that Evgeny Rodionov will definitely be canonized. The adequate inquiry has already been made, although more information about Evgeny's fate is needed. Father Dmitry said that Evgeny would be canonized as soon as the information was collected.

A sign in memory of the brave Russian border guard was put at the entrance to the school, where he studied. There was also a documentary released about him. The writings on Evgeny's grave cross run: "Russian soldier Evgeny Rodionov is buried here. He defended his Fatherland and did not disavow Christ. He was executed on May 23, 1996, on the outskirts of Bamut." "We know that he had to go through horrible, long-lasting sufferings that could be compared to the ones of great martyrs in ancient times. They were beheaded, dismembered, but they remained devoted to Jesus Christ anyway," priest Alexander Shargunov said during the requiem in Evgeny Rodionov's memory.



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