



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

## The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, CSMR (Russia)

(1996)



*...for their courage in upholding the common humanity of Russians and Chechens and opposing the militarism and violence in Chechnya.*

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers

CSMR was founded in 1989 and officially registered the same year by 300 mothers of soldiers, whose initial aim was to campaign for their sons to return home early from military service in order to resume their studies. They succeeded in bringing home nearly 180,000 young men for this purpose.

The mothers had been horrified by what they saw and learned about conditions in the armed forces: the regular beatings, abuse and humiliations, the lack of food or other necessities, the effective slavery imposed in the 'construction' battalions which comprised about 30 per cent of military manpower. Their demands were for thorough reform of military structures, reform of the armed forces on a democratic basis, an end to forced labour in the construction battalions, demilitarisation on the justice system, the establishment of effective civil control over the military and legislation to provide for an alternative civil service.

In 1990 some of these demands, including partial demobilisation of the construction battalions, were conceded by President Gorbachev, but in general the situation did not improve. CSMR set up a Rehabilitation Centre for soldiers who left the army for health reasons. Its activities expanded and diversified to include the organisation of human rights education for conscripts and their parents, dealing with individual complaints concerning human rights violations, regular inspections of military units, the working out of legislative proposals and the organisation of non-violent public protests.

In November 1994 the war in Chechnya broke out and, as CSMR put it, "the peaceful time for the Committee was over". They opposed the war from the start, both in itself and for the threat it posed to the new Russian democracy. Their new activities included dealing with individual complaints from soldiers and their mothers, running a weekly 'School for Conscripts', supervising the special military unit for the rehabilitation of so-called 'deserters', which is under the aegis of the CSMR, as well as participating in working groups of the State Duma (parliament). In the first six months of the war, the Committee received letters from up to 200 people a day and in the same period nearly 10,000 people brought their complaints in person.

Hundreds of mothers organised by CSMR went to Chechnya to take their sons away from the war. They negotiated with the Chechen army and obtained the release of 'prisoners of war'. CSMR organised a remarkable 'March of Mothers' Compassion', bombarded the Russian government with statements and petitions, and campaigned for the young men who refused to serve in Chechnya, declaring themselves conscientious objectors. Most controversially, they started a campaign encouraging mothers to support the right of their sons to refuse military service - and they travelled

abroad to support the idea of an International Tribunal on Chechnya.

The founders of CSMR were five women - two engineers, a journalist, a teacher and an economist. An all-volunteer organisation with no regular budget, CSMR now acts as the umbrella group for 50 regional organisations of soldiers' mothers and liaises with others. In 1995, CSMR received the Sean MacBride Award from the International Peace Bureau and an award from the Norwegian Committee on Human Rights.

In the late 90s and beginning of the new millennium the Soldiers Mothers have been trying to prevent anti-democratic changes in the Russian military legislation demanding the immediate abolition of involuntary conscription, which makes the army the source of threat to people and society, the source of social tension in Russia .

In 2003 the Soldiers Mothers began a campaign for negotiations with commanders of Chechen armed formations. In 2005 they negotiated in London with representatives of the Chechen side. The London memorandum , which was signed by both sides, called, among other things, for European participation in the constructive settlement of the Chechen crisis. It is CSMR s intention to broaden the circle of participants in negotiations on peace in Chechnya.

### Quotation

*"The mothers' love, the mothers' aspirations to defend their children, turned very soon into conscious human rights activity... The soldiers' mothers understood that to defend their children they have to change the State and society. Their call for human rights in all the military power structures meant a call for democracy."*

Ida Kuklina

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