

Three Stories of Torture: What I Witnessed While Volunteering for OVD-Info

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Having people detained after protests in Russia is a tradition. Most people who take to the streets already know exactly what to do if they are arrested. The first instruction: contact OVD-Info so they can add you to their database. That way, your relatives and volunteers can locate you before the system disappears you.

OVD-Info is a human rights organization that tracks political detentions across Russia. At some point, it began working with a project called Peredachki, which means “transfers.” Together, volunteers like me took on four main tasks: (1) locating detainees, (2) finding and informing their families, (3) recruiting local volunteers to buy basic supplies (food, water, hygiene products) and deliver them to jails, and (4) connecting detainees with OVD-affiliated human rights lawyers.

Often, as the only person in contact with a detainee, you became their lifeline. They told you what was happening to them and to others inside. These are three stories of torture I directly witnessed while volunteering with OVD-Info.

1. Sexual and Verbal Assault of Women

After the invasion of Ukraine, those who continued to protest did so knowing the risks. One day, a woman I will call K was detained during an anti-war demonstration and taken to the Khoroshevsky detention center. She spent more than five hours in a police van, first parked at the protest site, then outside the facility. No food. No water.

During that time, she texted me and other OVD volunteers with her location and helped us track others who had disappeared into the system. When K was finally admitted, officers began interrogating her in front of other detainees.

“What is your name?”

“Why were you protesting?”

“Who are the organizers?”

Before it began, K gave her phone to another detainee and asked them to record and relay everything to OVD. I was on the other end, receiving voice memos and fragmented texts through poor signals. K refused to answer their questions, calmly repeating “51st Amendment to the Constitution,” which is our equivalent of pleading the Fifth.

The officers grew aggressive. One began shouting, then pulled K around the corner, away from the others. According to the detainee who was updating me, he began threatening her and groping her. K was ordered to remove her shirt for a mugshot, which he took with his personal phone.

At that point, her family and lawyer were already outside the building, but they were not allowed to enter. Volunteers were also blocked from delivering supplies or checking her condition. K stood in a hallway wearing only her bra, while one male officer yelled in her face and the only female officer watched silently. Other detainees witnessed this but were too afraid to intervene. They knew that if their phone was discovered, the outside world would never know what happened to them.

Then I received three voice memos in a row. K was screaming. The officer had punched her in the stomach. Once while she stood. Twice while she was on the ground. He took photos of her lying there, then threw her shirt at her and told her to get up.

By the time her lawyer was finally let in, the officer had disappeared inside the facility.

2. Broken and Twisted Arms

This story happened just a few days after K's. It involves two brothers, P and T. They were arrested for individual pickets, a form of protest that was still technically legal even after the government banned gatherings under the pretext of COVID-19. By the spring of 2022, most pandemic restrictions had already been lifted.

Even so, standing alone with a sign was supposed to be permitted. It was not a mass gathering. But the government consistently managed to arrest nearly every person holding a sign. Even blank paper or a raised credit card was treated as a political gesture.

One of the brothers, P, held a sign that said "Stop the War" in Pushkinskaya Square. T stood nearby and took a photo. It took less than ten seconds for law enforcement to rush in, throw them face down on the pavement, and escort them to a police truck.

They were taken to the Pechatniki detention facility for interrogation. T contacted OVD while P was already inside. He asked us to send legal help and someone with a first aid kit. That was already a red flag. But it is not unusual for police to deny medical care. T stopped responding for nearly forty minutes. Then I heard from P, who sent us a selfie with blood running from his nose.

He told us they had asked him the same questions they asked K. He also pleaded the 51st, and when the officer got angry, the physical assault began. P tried to joke, saying that he and his brother were martial artists and that it was probably the hundredth time his nose had been broken. He said he would be fine. We called an ambulance to the detention center.

About ten minutes later, P sent terrifying photos of his brother lying on the floor with his hands behind his back. Two officers were clearly applying force, and by the end, they had broken his arm. The ambulance had not yet arrived. This time, we called and shouted at them to come faster.

Police often deny access to lawyers and volunteers, even though that is not legal. But they usually allow medical staff to enter. The doctors were the only ones who managed to get the brothers out and bring them to a trauma clinic. They were released without paperwork. The phone they used was destroyed between the moment they sent the last photo and the time the ambulance arrived. The clinic treated them but recorded nothing about the nature of their injuries.

3. There Is No Right Way to Name This Story

I hate this story. I hate thinking about it, and I hate that something like this still happens in the world.

This case is more speculative than the others. The detainee never contacted us directly. His relative did. She said he had been detained, named the time and place, and said his phone was turned off. He was not showing up in any detention databases.

We followed standard procedure: find volunteers to call every detention facility. The tactic was to overwhelm them with calls, asking the same questions again and again until

someone broke and gave us information. No one admitted to having him. So we began calling jails in the Moscow Region, though it is rare for detainees to be sent there.

The first day passed with no results. We kept calling. The second day. The third. Still nothing.

In cases like this, detainees are sometimes sent to expedited trials. Often, they do not receive formal arrest records or criminal charges. But even then, they usually appear in the system. They are supposed to get access to legal aid, to their phones, and to contact their families. All we had was silence.

His relative began to hope he had been released but something happened afterward. She filed a missing person report with the police.

A few days later, we found him. He had been held for two weeks in a detention facility we had already called multiple times. He was kept apart from other detainees. That is why no one reported him. He was not allowed to receive food or water from volunteers.

He was released in the afternoon.

That evening, his relative sent us a message.

“S was released today. He was detained, as we thought. He did not say what happened to him. He took his own life.”

I do not know if it is a tragedy that we never found out what happened to him during those fourteen days. Or if it is a blessing. We know the worst abuses happen out of sight, inside Russia’s jails and prisons. I do not feel comfortable speculating about what they did to

him. If you are curious, you can visit Gulagu.net, which published over 40 gigabytes of leaked footage documenting torture by Russian law enforcement.

There is no training for receiving someone's last message. No script for what to do when a detainee goes silent and you are the only person still looking for them. Volunteering with OVD-Info meant answering calls that never felt like enough, and sending texts into the void hoping someone still had a phone, a voice, a body that could answer.

Some did. Some didn't.

These stories are not exceptional. They are not the worst I've heard. They are only the ones I remember in sharp detail—because I was there, on the other end of the line, trying to keep the record alive. If I have one purpose in telling them, it's this: so that silence does not win. So that someone, somewhere, knows what happened in those rooms.

And maybe, so that it doesn't keep happening.

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