



Beneath the Kremlin’s portrayal of unity, resentment and fatigue fester in Russia



FRANCESCA EBEL/THE WASHINGTON POST

Wounded Russian soldiers in Olkhovatka, Russia, on Nov. 20, where they stopped for a break on their way to the hospital.

War’s grind corrodes a society

BY FRANCESCA EBEL

OLKHOVATKA, RUSSIA — The bus from the front lines ground to a halt outside the roadside kitchen, and the soldiers on board limped out into the winter mud.

Most were missing feet or a leg. A water bottle filled with blood swung precariously from a plastic tube attached to one soldier’s stomach as he was helped toward a bench. Another stared blankly at the blood-

ied stump where his right hand had once been.

“I would never have signed a contract if I’d known what it’s like out there. Our television is lying to us,” said Fyodor, a young soldier from Siberia. Like others in this article, The Washington Post is not identifying him by his full name to protect him from any repercussions for criticizing the war.

Fyodor had his lower leg blown off by a mine two days previously during

an advance on Lyman in Ukraine with what remained of his unit. He said he was one of just 10 people left of the 110-strong unit he joined two years ago.

He had no regrets over the loss of his leg. “It means that I can finally go home — alive.”

“We’re fighting for fields that we cannot even take,” interjected a fellow soldier, Kirill, also in his 20s, laughing wryly. “This war will never

SEE RUSSIA ON A12

RICHARD SMALLWOOD 1948-2025

A soaring voice of gospel music

He crafted melodies that reflected his church upbringing and love of Bach

BY ETHAN BECK



MARVIN JOSEPH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Gospel singer-songwriter Richard Smallwood, seen in 2015, was perhaps best known for the church choir staple “Total Praise.”

Richard Smallwood, a singer-songwriter and pianist who became a chart-topping stalwart of gospel music, writing songs that were performed by artists including Destiny’s Child and Whitney Houston, died Dec. 30 at a nursing center in Sandy Spring, Maryland. He was 77.

The cause was complications from kidney failure, said his publicist Bill Carpenter.

A longtime Washingtonian who fused music and ministry, Mr. Smallwood wrote uplifting, classically informed church songs that spread a message of faith and love. He was perhaps best known for “Total Praise,” a church choir staple covered by Destiny’s Child and Stevie Wonder, and “I Love the Lord,” a soaring anthem that Houston popularized on the soundtrack of the 1996 film “The Preacher’s Wife.”

As a songwriter, Mr. Smallwood crafted melodies that bridged past and present, reflecting his upbringing in the church (he played piano for his stepfather’s Baptist congregations); his love of baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach; and his interest in the Motown soul that blanketed the radio in his youth.

Even with those pop influences, he considered himself far more than an entertainer.

“This is not about making money,” he told The Washington Post in 2015. “It’s about winning souls and encouraging people

SEE SMALLWOOD ON A8

Citing safety, DHS wants quick razing at site in D.C.

BY PAUL SCHWARTZMAN

The Department of Homeland Security is seeking to fast-track the demolition of more than a dozen historic buildings at St. Elizabeths in Southeast Washington, asserting that the conditions of the vacant structures represent an “emergency” and pose potential security risks, according to documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi L. Noem, in a Dec. 19 memo to the General Services Administration, said the buildings “constitute a present risk to life and property” on the 176-acre West Campus, a fortified complex that Homeland Security has been transforming into its new headquarters over the past 15 years.

“Demolition is the only permanent measure that resolves the emergency conditions,” Noem wrote in the memo. A risk assessment report undertaken by her agency “supports immediate corrective action,” she wrote.

The assessment report, which Noem included with her memo, concludes the vacant buildings “may be accessed by unauthorized individuals seeking to cause harm to personnel.” The structures “provide a tactical advantage for carrying out small arms or active shooter scenarios,” the report states.

DHS’s proposed demolition is SEE DEMOLITION ON A8

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Kennedy, in one year, has upended U.S. public health

SPEED AND SCOPE ALARM MEDICAL INDUSTRY

Insider interviews shed light on his vision for change

BY RACHEL ROUBEIN,
LENA H. SUN
AND LAUREN WEBER

On his way to being confirmed as the nation’s top health official, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. promised lawmakers he would do nothing that “makes it difficult or discourages people from taking vaccines.”

Almost 100 days into the job, amid rising measles outbreaks and congressional scrutiny of his messaging on vaccines, Kennedy made clear behind the scenes that he wanted to reshape the nation’s immunization system.

Kennedy, the founder of a prominent anti-vaccine group, presented several top federal health officials with a new vision.

“Bobby has asked for the following changes,” Kennedy’s deputy chief of staff for policy at the time, Hannah Anderson, wrote to the officials in a May 19 email later reviewed by The Washington Post.

Among his requests was to replace the entire membership of an influential independent committee of experts that makes recommendations for how and when to vaccinate Americans. Kennedy also asked the panel to reconsider

a long-standing recommendation that all newborns get a hepatitis B vaccine and revisit the use of multidose flu shot vials, which contain a mercury-based preservative.

Anti-vaccine activists have criticized those vaccines for years, claiming they unnecessarily endanger children. Career federal scientists who learned of Kennedy’s asks said they represented a sea change for shots that have been extensively studied and deemed safe.

“At that point we were just bracing for upheaval,” said Demetre Daskalakis, who was then the CDC’s top respiratory diseases and immunization official.

Kennedy would get what he wanted. The May 19 email reveals his previously undisclosed influence on some of these changes in a highly unusual way, according to legal experts and former and current health officials, showing how Kennedy has wielded government power to overhaul a public health system he has blasted as corrupt and ineffective.

Andrew Nixon, a spokesman for the Department of Health and Human Services, said of the email: “All this was a sugges-

SEE KENNEDY ON A6



SALWAN GEORGES/THE WASHINGTON POST

Critics say the sweeping changes ushered in by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. risk undermining trust in science.

U.S. operations in Syria kill seven ISIS members

Multiple missions also lead to capture of more than a dozen fighters

BY TARA COPP
AND KAREEM FAHIM

The U.S. military announced Tuesday that it had killed seven Islamic State members and captured more than a dozen as it continues to put pressure on the terror group in Syria, weeks after an ambush there killed two Iowa National Guard soldiers.

The missions to kill or capture the fighters occurred from Dec. 20 to Dec. 29 and directly followed large-scale U.S. and Jordanian airstrikes on Dec. 19 that hit more than 70 Islamic State targets across the country in response to the attack on U.S.

forces at a military base in Palmyra earlier this month.

The U.S. has maintained a military presence of roughly 1,000 troops in Syria as the transitional government has struggled to control all of the country’s territory and quell sporadic violence following the toppling of the former president, Bashar al-Assad, by rebel forces led by the current president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, in December 2024.

In the months since, the U.S. military’s role in Syria has been transitioning to support the new government’s efforts to reestablish security after years of training and fighting alongside partner forces.

At its height, the Islamic State controlled a wide swath of territory stretching across Iraq and Syria. Last year, U.S. Central Command estimated that some 2,500 Islamic State fighters re-

SEE SYRIA ON A14