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## ‘We Can Only Be Enemies’

One family’s experience of Vladimir Putin’s invasion offers a path to the end of the war.

By Peter Pomerantsev



Paul Spella / The Atlantic; Getty; Alamy

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in the War Against Reality.

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**W**HEN THE RUSSIAN ARMY first began shelling Lukashivka, a village in northern Ukraine, dozens of residents fled to the Horbonos family's cellar. Children, pregnant women, bedridden pensioners, and the Horbonoses themselves headed down below the family's peach orchard and vegetable patches, and waited. For 10 days, they listened as shells whistled and crashed above several times an hour. The attacks left huge craters in the land, incinerating the Horbonoses' car and destroying the roof of their house. Finally, on March 9, they heard the sound of heavy weaponry and tanks entering the village: The Russian army had taken Lukashivka.

Soldiers ordered the terrified villagers to the surface, and then threw a grenade into the cellar, targeting any hidden Ukrainian soldiers. The Horbonoses—Irina, 55; Sergey, 59; and their 25-year-old son, Nikita—spent the next night in a neighbor's cellar, but it was so wet and cold that they returned to theirs. Upon arrival, they found five Russian soldiers living inside.

“Where are we meant to live?” Irina asked. “This is our home.” The soldiers told the Horbonos family that they could return home—they could all live there together. And so the Horbonoses moved back in.

They would spend about three weeks with those five Russian soldiers, eating together, walking together, talking together. The Russian soldiers would make nonsensical declarations about their mission and ask alarmingly basic questions about Ukraine, yet also offer insights into their motivations and their morale; the Horbonoses would push back on their claims, angrily scream at them, and also drink with them, using that measure of trust to prod at the soldiers' confidence in Vladimir Putin's war.

Over the course of those several weeks, a period the Horbonoses recounted to me and my colleague Andrii Bashtovyi, the cellar in

Lukashivka became a microcosm of the war's propaganda front. On one side were the Russians, who repeated a litany of falsehoods they had been told about their assault; on the other, the Ukrainians, wondering how their home could be decimated by aggressors driven by a fiction.

Yet after meeting with the Horbonoses and, in the same week, with their nation's leader, President Volodymyr Zelensky, I was struck by how clearly the family's experience also informs a question haunting the many politicians, officials, journalists, and activists in Ukraine and abroad desperately trying to bring this war to a close: How do you persuade Russians who have been fed an unending series of lies to drop their support for Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

**A**T FIRST, the Horbonoses were too scared to talk to their Russian housemates. The soldiers, for their part, always clung to their guns. They rarely left the cellar unless called to duty, fearful, like their hosts, of the artillery barrages overhead as the Ukrainian and Russian armies battled for the area surrounding the nearby city of Chernihiv.

After several days of this, however, the two groups began to get to know each other, initially discussing what felt like neutral subjects, such as food, and popular Ukrainian recipes. The Horbonos family learned that the five soldiers were military mechanics. Among them was a captain, the youngest of the group at 31. Three others were in their 40s—two had served in Syria; one's face had been burned when a vehicle he was in detonated a mine on the way to Lukashivka, and he would curse as he rubbed his face with ointment. All four of them were from Siberia. The fifth was also in his 40s, a Tatar, an ethnic group with its own large republic in central Russia. The others found his incessant singing of Tatar tunes annoying, and would tease him for his apparent cowardice, because he always seemed to be the first to scamper into

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the cellar when artillery barrages began.

At first, the captain fervently repeated Kremlin propaganda: He and his compatriots were in Ukraine to rescue the Horbonoses, he said; the soldiers were fighting not Ukrainians but Americans; this wasn't a war, but rather a "special operation." Once it was over, they could all live happily under Putin's rule, he said.

Irina would push back. She didn't need rescuing, she would say. There were no American soldiers or bases in Lukashivka, or anywhere in Ukraine. She didn't want to live under Putin. When the captain said that he had been told Ukrainians were barred from speaking Russian, she told him they could speak in any language they chose. (I spoke with the Horbonoses in Russian.)

Gradually, he was worn down, confronted not simply with Irina's protestations but with the grim facts of the war. In the conflict's early days, he was buoyant, believing conquest to be imminent. He would rush into the cellar, declaring, "Kyiv is surrounded! Chernihiv is about to fall!" But as the weeks went by, and neither Kyiv nor Chernihiv fell, his mood soured. At one point, Sergey told me, he had to show the captain where Kyiv was on a map, leaving the Russian surprised to learn that it was not anywhere nearby, as he had assumed, but nearly 100 miles away.

The other soldiers were less fervent than their captain. Two retreated into cynicism, unwilling to trust reports or information from either Russians or Ukrainians. The one whose face was burnt was as fervently anti-Putin as the captain was pro-. He openly cursed the president, calling him a goat. He had never voted for Putin's party.

Gradually, a kind of trust was built. One night, a drunk Russian sergeant

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major roamed Lukashivka, wearing a leather coat and a U.S.S.R. pin, threatening to kill local residents as revenge for the soldiers he'd lost. He was too drunk to make good on his threat, but the incident was not an isolated one: Younger soldiers were drinking and getting high, shouting at the Ukrainians that they all needed to be "punished." The Horbonoses rarely ventured beyond their orchard. They felt safer in their cellar, with their five soldiers.

When the Russians would leave the cellar for a drink or a smoke, they would invite Sergey to join them. The group would dilute raw spirits with a little water, and Sergey would roll up tobacco with newspaper pages. Their conversations became more reflective. "What are you doing here?" Sergey would ask. "What's the point of this war?" Despondently, the Russians would answer that they had come expecting not a fight but a celebration. They had come, one said, "for a victory march in Kyiv."

The soldiers' low morale, their cynicism and distrust, is in some ways unsurprising. Putin's famed propaganda system has always been less about ginning up enthusiasm and more about spreading doubt and uncertainty, proliferating so many versions of "the truth" that people feel lost and turn to an authoritarian leader to guide them through the murkiness. In a domestic political context, these tactics make sense: They keep people passive, unsure of what is truly happening. But they show their limits when you want to move a country toward the rabid enthusiasm required for war.

I lived and worked as a TV producer and documentary director in Russia during Putin's first two terms as president, from 2000 to 2008. As one of Putin's spin doctors told me then, the Kremlin has always had a problem motivating people. Whenever it needed to put on a progovernment demonstration, officials were forced to bus in civil servants and pay extras. It is notable that, despite rampant censorship, thousands have been locked up for protesting against the war. For all the supposed domestic support the Kremlin claims for the invasion, there have been no mass demonstrations in the streets

of Russian cities in favor of the government's actions.

Even for the legions of Russians who buy into the conspiracy theories—that their country is under threat from the U.S., that Russia deserves an empire—there is the issue of whether the Kremlin is competent enough to pursue such ambitions. The longer the war drags on, the more questions will surface about whether the Kremlin knows what it's doing. Men like the officer who lived with the Horbonoses will begin to doubt what the country is capable of when confronted with reality.

Other signs indicate that Russians are not wholly convinced by the Kremlin's narrative. Some of the top searches on the Russian internet recently have been about the whereabouts of the defense minister, Sergey Shoigu, who mysteriously went AWOL for a time after being seen as responsible for misadventures at the front. Other top searches were about the atrocities allegedly committed by Russian forces when they withdrew from Bucha, outside Kyiv. Researchers at the Public Sociology Laboratory, an independent institute, conducted 134 in-depth interviews with Russians, and found that even those who bought the underlying idea that their country was surrounded by enemies and that the war in Ukraine was the fault of NATO nevertheless doubted apparent evidence supplied by Moscow. One of the researchers who conducted the study, Natalia Savalyeva, concluded, "There are many whose attitudes balance between support and opposition ... They don't understand the reasons for the invasion, and instead repeat the opinions they have heard from others. They report confusion in the face of an 'information war' fought by all the parties involved, and 'propaganda' coming from both sides."

Polling in a dictatorship is a questionable business during the best of times. How honest do you expect people to be when even using the word *war* carries a potential 15-year jail sentence? But evidence suggests that morale isn't low just among soldiers such as those who stayed with the Horbonos family, but among ordinary Russians too. Right after the start of the invasion, research circulating among a small group of academics that I obtained showed that

though nearly half of respondents in a nationally representative poll supported Putin's "special operation," the emotions they felt were shallow—*hope* and *pride*. By contrast, the fifth or so who opposed the war had much deeper feelings, citing *shame*, *guilt*, *anger*, and *outrage*. About a quarter said they had no strong opinions, or supported the war with reservations, but nevertheless said they felt *sadness*.

Putin's propaganda strategy, it appears, is more vulnerable than it might seem at first.

**A**S THE WEEKS PROGRESSED, the Horbonos family began to see that the Russian soldiers were beginning to understand how much unnecessary damage they had wrought.

The Horbonoses' home, a house they had been building for 30 years, was completely destroyed; their library burned for two days before collapsing into rubble. When Irina couldn't take it anymore, she would begin to cry and scream at the soldiers in the darkness of the cellar: "We had everything! What are you doing here?" The Russians would only sit in the dark, silent.

One morning, she took them with her to gather wild herbs for tea. As they walked through what little was left of the Horbonoses' lives, the soldiers apologized for all the destruction they had brought. It would be so much better, one said, if they could someday visit as guests. Sergey was livid. "You've come here to kill me and destroy my home," he said, "and we are meant to be friends? We can only be enemies." The Russians again apologized, and soon all of them began to say that the war was senseless. They even began calling it a *war*.

The Horbonos family also got unusual insight into the Russians' motivations. When I asked Sergey what he thought drove them, he was unequivocal. The soldiers, he said, were propelled not by national pride or expansionary zeal but by money.

The soldiers all said they had debt—mortgages, loans, medical bills—and needed their army salaries. Even those wages weren't enough. Their job as mechanics was to repair tanks, but their skill set meant they were also proficient at taking them apart. During breaks in the shelling, they would find damaged or destroyed Russian vehicles and smelt down plates with gold wiring. One plate would get them 15,000 rubles, or about \$200, back home.

Other Russian soldiers were less creative. On the day the Russian army left the village, many grabbed everything they could. Their tanks were piled high with mattresses and suitcases; their armored vehicles were stuffed full of bedsheets, toys, washing machines. (When the Tatar soldier came to say goodbye, he told Sergey that he would soon retire, and promised to send the Horbonoses part of his pension.)

On the surface, Russian officials may exalt Putin's new model of splendid isolation, claiming that their people don't care about sanctions, that they don't need any other countries, that Russia is its own civilization. But Russian behavior suggests otherwise: Think of the stampedes to buy out IKEA before the Swedish furniture chain closed its stores in the country, or the widespread use of virtual private networks and mirror sites to use Instagram and Netflix.

Economists differentiate between stated preferences—what people say they want—and revealed preferences, what their actions show they actually want. Russians might claim they don't need the West, but at the end of the day, the goods that those Russian soldiers were so keen to ransack in Ukraine were largely Western-made.

**F**EW PEOPLE THINK more about how to engage Russian audiences than Volodymyr Zelensky. He thrives on empathy, finding common ground with his audience. That's what he did as an actor, a stand-up comedian, and a sketch-show satirist. I met with him alongside Jeffrey Goldberg and Anne Applebaum to interview him for *The Atlantic*, and when I told him I was born in Kyiv, he spoke to me without ever breaking eye contact—he had found his common ground with me. This is key to his



communications strategy at all levels, with individuals and with countries. Every time he addresses another country's legislature, he and his team research its history to find a point of commonality with what Ukraine is experiencing now: For Britain, it was the Blitz; for the U.S., it was 9/11.

Right from the start of the invasion, he has tried to address Russians directly, saying he knows that there are good people among them. Sure, he told us in our interview, there have always been Russians who didn't think Ukraine was a real country, but there were many others who did, who enjoyed visiting Ukraine. The difficulty, he continued, was that this latter group wasn't taking his calls anymore. Outside a small circle of exiled Russian democrats, his appeals and those of other Ukrainians seem to be falling flat. Polling, problematic though it is, shows overwhelming support in Russia for the invasion, and stories about Ukrainians calling their relatives in Russia to tell them about the war are dispiriting—most seem to reject the evidence provided by their own kin. Russia is in an “informational bunker,” Zelensky told us, one that is psychological as much technological.

“Russians,” Zelensky explained to us, “are afraid to admit guilt. How do you work with that? They have to learn to accept the truth.” He described three steps necessary for this: changing the information environment; a political elite that admits culpability for aggression; and finally, ordinary people taking on responsibility themselves.

Shedding responsibility is the Kremlin's great obsession. Russia was given “no choice” but to launch its “special operation” in Ukraine, Putin recently said. It will be the role of culture, media, education, and the courts to change that. But such processes take time. At the end of World War II, most Germans saw themselves not as perpetrators but as victims—of the Nazi leadership and of Allied bombings. Only the war-crimes trials at Nuremberg, which revealed the full horror of the Holocaust, and then decades of cultural and educational interventions, changed that.

**T**HE SITUATION IN the Horbonoses' cellar was unique. Russians rarely have to confront reality or their victims so directly. But the Horbonoses' experience points to a possible strategy to engage the Russian people—and speed up the end of Putin's wars.

Counterintuitively, the war is not necessarily the topic to focus on. Instead, the issues that affect Russians' lives and define their behaviors are what really matter—mortgages, medicine, schools, their children's future, and their desire to be part of the wider world.

For his system to work, Putin depends on millions of people, including doctors, soldiers, academics, and police officers, to all be motivated and play along. That motivation is being sucked out of the system. Whether Putin has the repressive mechanisms necessary to rule purely through fear is unclear: The prisons are already packed. The endgame in Russia doesn't involve anything as dramatic as regime change, to say nothing of revolution. All it needs is for people to stop pulling their weight, because they can see that the government is no longer competent or acting in their interests. (Something similar happened in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s: The system seized up as people gave up on it, leading to elites changing course. Back then, a senseless war in Afghanistan catalyzed despondency. Today, Ukraine could play an analogous role.)

Prodemocracy media and communication—from independent Russian sources, the West, or Ukraine—can hurry this process along. Despite the bans on websites and some social-media platforms, the technical means to engage with the Russian people are available: radio, [Telegram channels](#), satellite TV, secure messaging groups, mirror sites, and VPNs.

Russian state media now put out wall-to-wall [political propaganda](#), which is always a disastrous content decision. Russians will soon look for alternative entertainment. That sort of demand offers opportunities to support unconventional sources.

Backing the (now largely exiled) independent Russian media is vital. In the past, these outlets and organizations have typically appealed to an already prodemocracy audience. They and others must be encouraged to engage groups outside the liberal bubble, who have their own priorities.

It's not just the agendas and audiences that need considering; it's the genres too. We all know how the Kremlin conducts its foreign information war, using troll farms, conspiracy-peddling state media, and abusive officials who belittle and insult anyone who dares to criticize them. Democratic governments' efforts to reach everyday Russians have to be utterly different. Think online town halls involving ordinary Russians, where Western celebrities who have large Russian fan bases, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (whose recent video appeal to his Russian fans got millions of views) envision a different Russia. Think responsive media, where Russians can ask for details about what is happening at the front, and receive evidence-based answers. Think online forums, where doctors discuss how ordinary people can manage the looming Russian health crisis, or YouTube channels where psychologists delve into the psychological stresses that Russians are experiencing.

Back in Lukashivka, Irina Horbonos told me about how she sometimes felt, bizarrely, lucky. Her village had been spared the worst of the atrocities that have been occurring as Putin's forces pull back from Kyiv and Chernihiv. Yes, she said, her home had been reduced to rubble, and everything she and Sergey had worked for their entire lives was gone, but it could have been even worse.

As I drove back to Kyiv, I reflected on her story, and what Zelensky had told us days earlier. Irina seemed to believe that all she had done was survive, but in reality she and her family had done far more. Zelensky, through his endless search for empathy, and the Horbonoses, through their remarkable dialogue with their Russian enemies, had shown us how this war could actually end.

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