

# The Cost of War

An essay by Andrey Filimonov, writer, journalist, and refugee

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*'Life is fine'*

The village looks as if Putin's already pressed the red button, and more than once. In the road there are potholes as deep as bomb craters, and along it we see ruins with no roofs, no windows, and no signs of life.

The locals, though, feel comfortable enough here. Amongst all the dereliction you'll find lighted signboards over shops where you can pay by card.

'We're fine,' says a young lady, a sales assistant. 'The price of *tsukor*'s gone up. That's about it.'

Here in the Voronezh region, thirty kilometres from Donetsk, people speak a language that's a mix of Russian and Ukrainian. The information landscape is equally mixed. Ukrainian FM radio talks of how 'our brave boys' are burning the armoured columns of the Russian occupiers. The anchor of the federal TV channel is so happy he's choking: the special operation's finally begun. The sheer strangeness of it can set your head whirling.

Not that the villagers seem to be experiencing any cognitive dissonance. The outbreak of war has made practically no difference to their lives. They were on the breadline before; they still are

now. Added to which, for the whole of the last eight years they've had military objects whizzing over their heads and occasionally coming down; when it doesn't fall smack into your garden, that's a result. Only yesterday (the sales assistant told us), a combat drone carrying a missile fell onto land belonging to the old state farm. But the missile didn't explode, so everything's fine. 'Life is fine.'

Time to put a little distance between us and this 'fine life'.

*A semi-swastika for semi-fascists*

My wife and I decided to leave Russia after its president cheated us. He'd spent several weeks proclaiming that he was not preparing to attack Ukraine. And then he attacked. Suddenly, perfidiously, without declaring war. You can't forgive a head of state for a lie on that scale.

Besides, the man has absolutely no taste. He's given orders to gum up city streets with semi-swastikas—the symbol of the new Russian semi-fascism. Real fascists call a war a war. 'Ours' are hiding behind a 'special operation'. At the same time, they've introduced wartime censorship into their 'peaceful' country.

Now, when Russian troops occupy any Ukrainian town, the first thing they do is arrest the journalists. Then they think nothing of robbing businessmen, farmers, and anyone who has money. They simply drive a tank up to a person's house and demand a million dollars.

What do you expect them to do, if that's how their president behaves? First he trashed the independent broadcaster NTV, then he confiscated Khodorkovsky's oil company.

### *Putin's expensive plaything*

There's a queue of cars several kilometres long at the Upper Lars checkpoint on the border with Georgia. When war broke out, so many people wanted to leave Russia that a new business took off here: skip the queue and go straight through; ten thousand rubles a head. A local *dzhigit* gets behind the wheel and guns your car along the endless jam, past the traffic police (who somehow fail to notice him), right up to the gates of the checkpoint.

My wife and I decided not to resort to the services of the *dzhigit*, and spent twenty hours in the queue. For which we were rewarded with new friendships. Oleg, a farmer from Kherson, told us how the 'defenders of the children of Donbas' had made off with his car and other material assets.

'They drove up to the house in a Ural and climbed over the fence like cockroaches,' he says.

Oleg and his family have been making their way out of the war zone via Crimea. He was struck most of all by the directness of the FSB officers at the border. They simply take your phones and spend ages digging through them.

'We're not used to this,' he says. 'The idea of a Ukrainian cop taking your phone is just unthinkable.'

Oleg regards his month spent 'under the Russians' as the worst he's witnessed in his whole life. Snipers shooting passers-by 'because they can'. Looters filching household appliances from houses.

'Why do they need our washing machines if they don't have running water in their villages?' he asks. 'Better for Putin to fix them normal toilets than go to war against us.'

In fact, in the period from 1999 to 2013, Russia enjoyed a one hundred percent annual incremental growth in GDP. Granted, pensioners and state employees didn't feel it. After 24 February, it became clear why. The money had gone into preparing for war. Well, into yachts and palaces too, of course. But even the most expensive yacht, such as the one belonging to the peacekeeper Abramovich, is a mere trifle compared to the cost of the war. Every day, the war devours billions of dollars, to say nothing of human lives. To say nothing, too, of the brutalised state into which Russian propaganda—another of Putin's expensive toys—has led the soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces.

I hope that when it comes to it, a separate dock will be allocated in The Hague for Russians working on the media front line.

Such were the cheerless thoughts and conversations we took with us across our final few metres of Russian territory. The striped barrier separating us from the neutral strip rose in front of our car.