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July 2026

The present absent war:

*how Russians experience the war with Ukraine
at different proximities to the frontline*



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Introduction

This paper examines how Russians are experiencing the war with Ukraine in their everyday lives through the lens of geographical differences, focusing in particular on the factor of distance from the frontline. In simplified terms, it asks: *Does geographical proximity to the frontline affect everyday life in Russia and the ways in which “ordinary” Russians relate to the war? If so, how?*

In brief, the findings suggest that while proximity to the frontline certainly shapes the material landscape through militarisation and the visible traces of the conflict, it does not automatically translate into stronger political engagement, personal involvement or a sense of living in “war-time”. For most Russians, the prevailing common wisdom is to try to keep the war at arm’s length, to preserve normalcy as far as possible, and to avoid politicisation. Interestingly, the closer the war gets geographically, the more effort people put into keeping it at bay. Where the war does impinge on everyday life, it does so primarily through familiar and intimate domains such as family and economic concerns, rather than as a distinct political event.

The analysis is based on ethnographic data collected by the *Public Sociology Laboratory (PS Lab)*,¹ a collective of sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists who have studied Russian society’s perceptions of the full-scale invasion since spring 2022.

Ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, allow us to examine how attitudes are embedded in everyday contexts. Unlike surveys, which tend to produce more schematic representations, ethnography reveals how people discuss, interpret and live through events in a variety of environments. This is particularly important in authoritarian contexts, in which censorship and fear make open expression risky, and where official opinion

polls themselves become political tools with which the government may “manufacture legitimacy”.²

This does not mean that surveys are useless. Well-designed ones can reveal contradictions, shifts over time, and a general unease surrounding the topic of war.³ Nevertheless, they cannot show the mechanisms with which people form, modify or silence opinions, as well as explain how and why they change, depending on the social context, while such categories as “support” or “approval” themselves “can be imbued with different meanings”.⁴

Moreover, polling rarely takes sufficient account of Russia’s immense geographical and social diversity: “what Russians think” or “what Russia is” cannot be adequately understood without attending to regional, economic and cultural inequalities.

Large metropolitan centres, small industrial towns and peripheral rural regions differ not only in terms of their economies and lifestyles, but also in their exposure to the war. Physical distance from the frontline is one such factor, influencing, we assumed, how “present” or “absent” war is in local everyday life, as well as the ways people relate to it.

Ethnography enables us to grasp these nuances, even though in contemporary Russia it has to be done under conditions of risk and limited access to the field. While PS Lab researchers lacked the resources for long-term immersive fieldwork, and prioritised producing grounded knowledge more quickly than traditional academia allows, they instead carried out short-term, intensive ethnographic visits to document everyday life and its transformations under wartime conditions.

This paper draws on two such cases:

(i) **Cheryomushkin** (a fictional name) is a small town in Sverdlovsk Oblast, about 2,500 km from the front-

¹ The Public Sociology Laboratory (PS Lab) is an independent research collective that has been conducting intensive qualitative research on Russian society under wartime conditions since the very first days after the full-scale invasion. The work is carried out almost entirely on a voluntary basis and with minimal or no funding. We prioritise making our analyses publicly accessible, publishing across open-access platforms to reach both Russian- and non-Russian-speaking audiences. Our detailed analytical reports are published first in Russian and later translated into English, while shorter, adapted versions appear on various media platforms. Some of our fieldwork materials and ideas, including the Cheryomushkin case discussed here, therefore appear in several places in different forms and lengths. We allow such repetition in order to make our research accessible to a wider audience. In particular, a shorter version of this text was published here: Lurie, Y. (2025): War in the Everyday Life of “Ordinary Russians”: (How) Does Proximity to the Frontline Matter? *Russian Analytical Digest*, 333, 4-7.

² Yudin, G. (2019): Governing through Polls: Politics of Representation and Presidential Support in Putin’s Russia. *Javnost – The Public*, 27(1), 2-16; p. 6. See also: Morris, J. (2023): Public Opinion Still Does Not Exist; War in Ukraine and Dictatorship in Russia Can Help Us Acknowledge That. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 292, 7-9.

³ See, for example, PROPA [<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/propa-public-opinion/>] and the Chronicles [<https://www.chronicles.report/en>].

⁴ Erpyleva, S. (2024): Do Russians Rally Round the Flag? Support for Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine among Russian Citizens. *Demokratizatsiya*, 32(4), 309-333; p. 310.

line. I selected it over other cases here because it better represents “ordinary” Russia. The town is neither particularly wealthy nor very poor, has no strong ethnic or religious distinctions, and, according to the available data, its population has experienced war-related casualties and recruitment at levels close to the Russian average.

- (ii) **Kursk** and a nearby small town are located roughly 100 km from the Ukrainian border. Fieldwork there took place in late 2024, shortly after parts of the region had been occupied by Ukrainian forces. Many of our interlocutors were refugees who had evacuated to Kursk from towns and villages just a few kilometres from the border and had lived in direct proximity to the frontline for several years prior to the August 2024 occupation.

A researcher spent a month in Cheryomushkin in the autumn of 2023, observing local life and conducting informal conversations and interviews with the help of a local gatekeeper, Tonya, a young entrepreneur with a vast network of social connections in the town. In Kursk, two researchers conducted fieldwork in the autumn and winter of 2024, volunteering at humanitarian centres assisting evacuees from occupied border territories.

Across both sites, each researcher gathered hundreds of pages of detailed field diaries, documenting daily routines, conversations and observations. These diaries reconstruct the settings and interactions as closely as possible, including direct quotations and contextual details.

Together, these two cases offer a comparative view of how the war manifests – or not – in everyday life, helping to understand what role geographical distance from the frontline plays in this process.

Case no. 1 – Cheryomushkin

The near-absence of war in the townscape, public life, and everyday conversations

If one had woken up in Cheryomushkin in the fall of 2023 after falling asleep on 23 February 2022, it would have been difficult to guess that a full-scale war had been going on for more than a year. During several weeks of walking through the town, our researcher encountered only a handful of reminders of the conflict: a few “Z” stickers on cars, two dusty and hardly visible propagandistic flags on a local hotel façade, and little else. There were no recruitment posters or war symbols marking public buildings, let alone private ones.

According to the interlocutors, visible traces of war had nearly disappeared over the past year. Car stickers had been removed, send-offs of soldiers and funerals that used to be public no longer attracted people, and conversations about the war had faded from daily interactions.

There are few public spaces in Cheryomushkin to begin with. Café *Ulybka*, managed by Tonya, was one of very few spaces in which people gathered, and even there, the researcher overheard only one short war-related conversation. According to interlocutors, online discussions on local social media petered out after critical comments were deleted by the local administration and one person was fined.

Official patriotic and war-themed events had also lost momentum:

a propagandistic film screening presenting the official Russian version of the events in Bucha, announced at the local House of Culture, drew zero attendees, and a patriotic film night was cancelled.

Even a charity concert with the “promising” title *We Don’t Leave Ours Behind*⁵ turned out to be a routine local performance of folk songs and dances, with almost no reference to the war. By late 2023, it seemed that war-related themes

persisted mostly “on paper”, folded into the standardised formats of local cultural life that had been in use for decades.

The only exception was a small community around a church in which

the local priest openly supports the war, organising prayer services for soldiers, travelling to the front, and preaching about “defending the Motherland”.

But despite the priest’s ideological conviction, his efforts seemed to resonate only within a small, self-contained circle of like-minded people, mostly women with relatives at the front.

Did the near-total absence of war in public settings mean it had moved into the private domain? Not quite. With Tonya’s invaluable help, our researcher gained access to informal home gatherings and other private get-togethers where people felt comfortable engaging in everyday conversation.

War-related topics very rarely emerged on their own, and when they did, they quickly dissolved into other streams of talk. Tonya, familiar with the research, would sometimes gently steer conversations towards the war, for instance, by mentioning a local man who had been sent to the front or Prigozhin’s mutiny, which was then recent news. By introducing the researcher as a university friend, Tonya provided for a level of trust and comfort that enabled open and candid conversations. But even in such a safe, domestic environment, people tended to avoid the subject, distancing themselves with phrases such as “Let’s stop talking about politics”, “We’re simple people, we don’t understand these things” and “Let’s talk about anything but the war”. This only confirmed Tonya’s own observation that people in Cheryomushkin were tired of the war and felt the need just to “carry on”.

The war’s indirect presence in familiar, private domains

Nevertheless, complete amnesia was impossible. As one interlocutor put it, *“one could forget about the war entirely*

⁵ *Svoikh ne brosayem*, a wartime slogan widely used in Russia to express loyalty to “our own” soldiers and compatriots, and also a pun on the military abbreviation “SVO”, which stands for “special military operation”, the official term in Russia for the “war”.

if not for the news of deaths and the funerals". The "if not" here captures a tension between the desire to keep one's distance from the war and the realities of its presence. Though by Tonya's count only around a hundred locals had gone to war by fall 2023, nearly every resident was connected by one or two handshakes to someone who has been affected. In the small, tightly knit town, where "every-one knows everyone" every mobilisation or death becomes public knowledge.

For example, the death of a young teacher, killed in a training accident just days after mobilisation, sparked collective mourning. In informal conversations and interviews, residents of Cheryomushkin expressed regret over deaths, especially when it came to sending very young people to war. "They just came back from the army!" exclaimed manicurist Alyona during one get-together. Her colleague Lyuda echoed this sentiment, "They send kids off to fight!" Such remarks sometimes led to criticisms of abstract "powerful men" sacrificing ordinary lives, though criticisms almost never targeted the Russian government directly.

For the residents of Cheryomushkin, the war's impact is felt most vividly through personal and familial disruption. Lyubov Vasilievna, a retired woman, described a young man whose body was never returned to the town: "There was nothing left to bury! A military shoe, and inside the shoe – a foot!" She emphasised the broader family consequences, noting that the young man's death had deprived his single mother of her only son, without leaving any offspring – "if only he had left a child!" – thus violating the "proper" course of life.

Events in private life also sparked moral judgement and community debate. One widely discussed case involved the widow of the deceased school-teacher who used her "coffin money" to buy a car and was seen disco dancing just a month after her husband's death. Town gossip condemned her behaviour,

though some, such as Zhanna, a nurse at a local hospital, was sympathetic: "But what else is she supposed to do? Life goes on for her, right?"

A similar case concerned a woman that everyone called Petrova, who was rumoured to be cheating on her husband fighting at the front. "We've got girls like this Petrova around here", said Alyona, expressing her disapproval. "She took the money her husband sent and bought a car. And now she's riding around in that car with her lover. And everyone knows it! He comes back from the war and she's hopping around like a bunny, back and forth. As soon as he leaves, she's at it again!"

Again, the war had infiltrated everyday life indirectly through the familiar realm of relationships, prompting people

to make moral judgements and recalibrate social norms concerning what is acceptable and what not, while not leading them to question the war itself as the defining event that stands behind these changes.

It was no accident that "coffin money" was brought up in the discussion.

Money is a concern against the backdrop of Cheryomushkin's modest economy, as many homes lack a centralised water and gas supply. Earnings, payouts and purchases tied to the war become public knowledge and food for debate. Residents discuss high wages for those serving on the front lines and compensation paid out for deaths.

For example, Kolya, a friend of Tonya, shared how a woman he knew had married a prisoner who was sent to the front, only to inherit 7 million rubles after his death. These financial narratives were often juxtaposed with tales of personal spending, such as families taking out loans to equip their sons for deployment. At a friendly women's gathering, Lyuda and Alyona engaged in the following exchange: Lyuda: "Let me tell you something else! I know someone who, when her son got sent to the SVO, took out a loan for 100,000 rubles to fully equip him, buy him all that damn gear." Alyona: "We had someone take out 180,000 rubles! Just to get all that equipment!"

Money often functions as a trigger to be contrasted with family values. The interlocutors generally did not agree that it was advisable to make money from the war, which is destructive for a family. For example, Zhanna explained why an acquaintance of hers does not want to return to the front: "Well, the wife is at home, and they need to start having children. It's not certain that he will come back. He might end up wounded, unable to move on his own. And who will need him then?" During the conversation, Zhanna emphasised this position: "I believe that no amount of money is worth a life. Even if he dies and they make those payments, it's all bullshit – the person is gone."

The three key realms in which the war permeates life in Cheryomushkin – death, money and family – are interconnected. Acquisitions, such as cars or jewellery become entwined with tales of marital infidelity, and the war, framed as a potentially lucrative job opportunity for some, is weighed against the value of life and family.

To summarise, in Cheryomushkin, the war indeed felt "far away". It has largely receded from public attention. Visible traces have almost disappeared from the urban landscape, and discussions of it are increasingly rare, both online and in everyday encounters. Institutional support has faded: public events retain merely a formal shell, stripped of mili-

tary-patriotic content and absorbed into familiar, preexisting formats.

But the war has persisted in more indirect ways. News of deaths spread through the community and evoked collective emotions, while key spheres of local life – family, relationships and livelihoods – become the primary sites where war intersects with daily experience. Stories of deaths, romantic betrayals or financial gains and losses linked to wartime service punctuate ordinary life, generating moral judgements and reinforcing social norms.

Thus, the presence of war is measured not in abstract political terms, but only through concrete, familiar realms of private life that already matter to people in peace time. The departure of a classmate to the front, a neighbour's new car or discussions of war-related spending become reference points, but the general pace of everyday life remains largely unchanged for most. For the majority of residents, the war remains a distant concern rather than a defining geopolitical event. As Alevtina Nikiforovna, a retired woman and a part-time cleaner, put it, *"I know I can't change anything myself, so I just keep living as I always have"*. Many would undoubtedly endorse her statement.

Case No. 2 – Kursk

The ubiquitous presence of war in material, social and conversational landscapes

If one were to repeat the Cheryomushkin experiment in Kursk, falling asleep before the full-scale invasion and waking up in a few years, the result would be diametrically opposite. When our researcher first arrived in Kursk in September 2024, she described her initial impressions: *“Already on the platform I saw a new banner saying ‘We Don’t Leave Ours Behind’. ... Right outside the station stood a large military truck surrounded by several men in uniform. ... While standing in the parking lot, checking my phone, an air raid siren went off. ... At the bus stop by the station entrance, I noticed a bomb shelter.”* Within minutes of arrival, multiple signs of war entered her field of vision and hearing, and it soon became clear that their density in the city’s public space – propaganda banners, military vehicles, soldiers, sirens and concrete shelters – was no coincidence.

In the urban landscape of Kursk in the fall of 2024, the war was not an abstraction but a tangible, physical presence. Advertisements for military contracts, patriotic posters and official events coexisted with material and social manifestations of war. Soldiers not only were featured on billboards, they walked the streets. Sirens and shelters did not merely symbolise danger, but served to protect people from it. Conversations about drones were not based on television images but on firsthand encounters. While Kursk was not a battlefield and attacks remained sporadic, the war had become part of the city’s sensory reality, something one could see, hear, touch and potentially suffer from.

One layer of Kursk’s wartime landscape was its safety infrastructure, which prescribed daily routines of alertness and response. Air raid sirens sounded almost every day, sometimes several times a day, and newly built concrete shelters stood prominently near bus stops. Cellars of residential buildings were converted into shelters, marked by direction signs, while windows of schools and kindergartens were reinforced with plastic film and sandbags *“so that there’d be no glass shards if it’s hit”*, as Marina, a local resident, explained. Some households even applied protective film to apartment windows and car windshields.

Warnings of shelling occasionally arrived on residents’ phones, while GPS disruptions, likely from military jam-

ming, interfered with navigation apps. Ambulances were seen covered with camouflage, as they had been targeted during earlier attacks. In public spaces – entrance halls, shops, shelters – posters explained what to do during air raids or shooting. City buses broadcast instructional videos showing maps of shelters and safety animations warning children not to touch unexploded mines.

The cityscape was also replete with war-related imagery. Alongside recruitment ads, public spaces were saturated with official war propaganda featuring the familiar symbols of the “special military operation”, such as the “Z” sign and patriotic slogans. In some cases, the propaganda took on a distinctly local and personalised form: streets of the near-by town were lined with banners showing portraits of residents killed in the war, each marked *“We remember our own”*.

In a city cemetery, a memorial wall already marked with the names of fallen soldiers from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Ukraine had a new granite plate reserved for future casualties.

The proximity of the front and the partial occupation of the Kursk region have reshaped not only the material but the social landscape of the city. Some residents have left Kursk, fearing the advancing war, while new groups have arrived, primarily soldiers and refugees from the occupied border areas. Along with military trucks, helicopters and armoured vehicles, soldiers in camouflage have become part of the city’s everyday scene, to be observed on streets, in buses and shops. The presence of refugees has introduced new spaces into the city: temporary accommodation and humanitarian aid centres.

In Kursk the war could not only be seen but also heard in conversations. In Cheryomushkin our researcher had to deliberately provoke conversations about the war, often without success. In Kursk, however, war-related talk was everywhere, in parks, cafés and public transport. One needed only to walk around and listen. People discussed everything, from conscripts dying at the front to teenage boys’ fears of conscription. Conversations about the war emerged easily and naturally; sometimes a casual question about air raid sirens or local life was enough to release a flood of stories. In Kursk, unlike in places farther from the front, talking about the war was not taboo, but part of social life and small talk, even among strangers.

What made these conversations distinctive was their frequent grounding in personal experience. For Kursk residents, the war was not an abstract media event but something happening “here and now”. Locals and refugees alike spoke as witnesses, sharing firsthand accounts of drone attacks, explosions and narrow escapes. Stories about “seeing drones” or “hearing strikes” had become a distinct genre of first-person tales, alongside refugee stories of evacuation and loss.

One might expect that such a dense “saturation” of daily life with the signs and elements of war would fundamentally reshape how people experience it; that the war would, in one way or another, subsume everyday life under its logic. One might also expect people to begin to question the broader political causes and meanings behind these seemingly drastic changes in their surroundings. Contrary to our expectations, however, something different happened.

Strategies for distancing from and integrating war into everyday life

A particularly telling conversation took place in a bar in Kursk. As usual, our researcher started to chat with some of the visitors, and at one point asked how life in Kursk felt during the war. One participant immediately replied, *“What war? Do you feel any war here?”* The researcher recalled that she had heard an air raid siren almost as soon as she got off the train. *“Well, the sirens go off all the time, that’s true – but for us, it’s just become part of everyday life”*, the young man said.

It is true that when our researcher arrived in Kursk and was greeted by an air-raid siren, no one batted an eyelid: *“People stood calmly; a few passersby didn’t change their route. Everyone seemed relaxed, as if they didn’t hear the siren at all”*, she wrote in her diary. Ignoring alarms, as was later confirmed, had become a public norm. Residents explained that at first, when the sirens began around August 2024, people did seek shelter, but soon stopped paying attention. Many even denied the existence of shelters altogether: *“No. There are no shelters. What shelters? I’m not going into those concrete boxes”*, said a volunteer in a refugee centre. In fact, apart from “concrete boxes” numerous shelters were clearly marked in residential buildings, but they were largely disregarded.

Often, however, it was hard to ignore the war completely, as it disrupted daily routines. People therefore had to take active measures to avoid the things that threatened to shake them out of normalcy, reacting to constant alarms with irritation, muting phone notifications or turning screens face-down to block late-night emergency alerts. *“These messages keep buzzing at night – I just flip my phone over so it doesn’t flash”*, said one resident. One woman, annoyed by her neighbour’s loud air-raid app, recalled shouting at him to *“turn off that stupid thing”* because it kept her awake.

This disregard was often accompanied by humour, another everyday strategy for dealing with the realities of war. Laughing about the danger, exaggerating the fear and turning alarms into jokes helped residents reframe the extraordinary as ordinary. One scene at a humanitarian aid centre captured this type of behaviour: as the siren started wailing again, a teacher muttered, *“Oh God, it’s howling again”*, and the girls around her laughed, teasing each other about “jinxing” the explosions. One of them even started dancing to the siren’s rhythm. Jokes and laughter, in moments like these, transformed a sense of danger into routine.

Linguistic shifts also played a role in normalising the war. For example, locals often referred to the sound of air-defence systems as “fireworks”, a word borrowed from peacetime that softened the experience of explosions. Over time, these joking reinterpretations began to circulate independently of real danger. During fieldwork, our researcher observed two teenage boys at a bus stop playfully imitating the siren sound, “piiu-piiu-piiu”; for them, the sound was part of a game, completely detached from the original wartime context.

Such humour and play blurred the boundary between emergency and routine, turning the war into something familiar and manageable. Even the city’s material safety infrastructure was absorbed into this process: concrete shelters, as their smell suggested, were used by residents not for protection but as public toilets. Through these gestures, Kursk’s residents seemed to have found a paradoxical defence mechanism; not so much against the missiles, as against the defence measures themselves.

Some interlocutors openly framed the humour and distance as survival tactics. Nastya, a young woman from the border area, said she had to *“take things lightly”* or risk a breakdown, recalling how at the start of the war she hallucinated sirens during her psychiatric treatment. *“Either I joke about it, or I end up depressed and losing it”*, she said. Another woman from Belgorod, who had fled to Kursk after shelling, described learning to cope by disconnecting from news: *“I just stopped reading where things explode. It got easier.”*

By maintaining a sense of normal routine, Kursk residents shielded themselves from fear. Sirens had become background noise, but when danger came close, for example, linked to a familiar place, it provoked genuine terror. Such moments stood out in people’s memories and were retold as stories people shared eagerly. Dima, a student, recalled how an air defence system shot down a drone near his house: *“I was looking out the window, and there was this bright red flash on the wall opposite. It was unreal – terrifying. Right next to our building. That was a really scary day.”* Others spoke of particular sites hit by strikes – the oil depot, a friend’s street – and exchanged videos from the scene.

Such storytelling helped to create a mental map of the city's danger zones: *"My sister lives in the railway district, where most of the bangs happen. It's pretty creepy there"*, said a young nail artist. *"Out on the outskirts, it's chaos all the time – you can literally see things flying and exploding"*, added another woman. But these same comparisons helped people to imagine their own neighbourhoods as somehow safer: *"It's bad over there – so here, we're fine."* As one volunteer named Bogdana put it during an air-raid alarm, *"the main thing is that it doesn't hit here."*

This distancing strategy is perhaps clearest among refugees from border towns who experienced shelling at very close range before evacuation in August 2024. Despite the immediate danger, they often described the explosions as "far away", interpreting them as localised elsewhere and therefore not threatening their own daily lives.

One woman recalled that while there was constant shelling nearby, *"it was 10 kilometres away, 5 kilometres away"*, and she and others continued to go about their daily routines in the town. Another explained that streets closer to the border were marked as more dangerous, which in turn made the centre feel safe. As one former resident of Tyotkino, a village located right on the border with Ukraine, summarised: *"Well, it was booming, but it was far. We knew it was happening over there. We just thought: oh, somewhere they're hitting, somewhere they're hitting. So we thought everything here was fine."* These accounts highlight that even extreme geographical proximity to active combat does not automatically create a heightened consciousness of wartime: people actively work to preserve normalcy, as long as they can.

In Kursk personal stories of fear were usually framed as exceptions; anxious moments that had already passed. Through such retellings, people subtly pushed frightening experiences away in time and space, turning storytelling itself into a way of maintaining a sense of normalcy.

Another way Kursk residents dealt with the geographical proximity of war was by framing its effects as *local, urban* issues rather than as signs of a larger geopolitical conflict.

The disturbances of wartime – sirens, refugees, soldiers and occasional explosions – were often discussed through the language of municipal problems. "There's such a mess on the roads", complained a man from the city's outskirts, referring to the influx of refugees.

Shelling or explosions, too, were meaningful mainly in terms of which neighbourhood they disrupted, not as symptoms of a national or geopolitical crisis.

This localisation made the war legible within familiar urban categories. A post on the popular Telegram channel

Typical Kursk reported, for instance, that the local authorities had decided to make the alarm sirens quieter following numerous citizens' complaints. For many residents, the intrusive sounds were not reminders of mortal danger but rather another flaw in the urban environment, like overflowing garbage, poor road maintenance or parking shortages.

The presence of soldiers and refugees was also interpreted in local terms. Military men stationed in the region were seen less as participants of war or symbols of patriotism and more as newcomers to the city. Locals spoke of them as they might talk about seasonal workers or visiting students; sometimes with warmth and curiosity, sometimes with irritation or suspicion.

Refugees, too, were folded into everyday categories of social difference rather than perceived as direct victims of world conflict. Some Kursk residents expressed sympathy, volunteering and collecting clothes or food; others distanced themselves through class or cultural stereotypes, describing the newcomers from rural border areas as "dirty" or "uncultured". In either case, discussions almost never revolved around the larger political causes that had driven these people from their homes in the first place.

War as the new mundane

Words such as "drone" or "tank" appeared casually in discussions among ordinary people, but even so the war rarely *dominated* conversations. Instead, it surfaced incidentally, intertwined with everyday topics rather than as a subject of political or historical reflection or even just as an independent subject in its own right.

Conversations flowed naturally between war and the mundane: a young woman could describe bombs hitting a city, then switch seamlessly to complaints about a burnt burger or poor nail services, treating both as part of the same continuum of personal concerns.

The researchers were struck by how calmly people could switch between talking about "bombs" and "manicures" without changing tone.

For the residents of Kursk, however, this was normal. While the researchers, used to seeing war mostly through news feeds, found mixing the "military" and the "everyday" unnatural, for locals these were events of the same order.

For example, in a conversation with Rita, a volunteer at a refugee centre, she recalled the first days of the Ukrainian invasion. When talking about news of drones flying over Moscow, she suddenly noted, *"Oh, and our washing machine broke too. My husband is trying to fix it."* The Russian verb *poletet'* can mean both "to fly" and, colloquially,

“to break”. This homonymy allowed her to merge the two events into a general category of “troubles”. For Rita, this was not a joke: both drones and a broken washing machine were part of her everyday problems.

For refugees, war had a much more immediate impact than for the average resident of Kursk. In their conversations, the realities of war appeared especially frequently, yet they, too, spoke of it mainly in casual terms. For example, while sorting clothes at a humanitarian centre, two women described the evacuation from their villages, burning houses and tanks passing by, all while discussing the colours, fabrics and fit of jackets. This was a typical scene observed numerous times by both researchers.

These conversations most often centred on the personal, family and economic consequences of the war: lost property, destroyed homes, lost land, missed social benefits and rising prices. The tragedy was framed in terms of individual misfortune rather than as a collective national catastrophe. In one example, two refugee women, Lina and Tatyana, spoke ironically about how all their hard work had gone to waste: *“You’ve worked your whole life, and now you’re begging for rice like some homeless person”*, one said. The emphasis was on the economic and social shock of them personally having *“nothing left”*, not on the broader scale of death or destruction.

In sum, for Kursk residents and refugees from the border regions, the war became part of the everyday fabric of life – *byt*⁶ – rather than a distinct political event in its own right. Most of our interlocutors did not reflect on the causes of the changes they had to deal with, nor did they raise questions about who might be responsible for them.

⁶ Быт (быт) refers to the routines, material conditions, and practical organization of everyday life, especially domestic life.

Conclusion

Our ethnographic findings demonstrate that proximity to the frontline undeniably shapes the sensory, material and social texture of everyday life, whether through physical safety infrastructure, the sounds of drones and sirens, the circulation of first-hand stories about the conflict, as well as the presence of war's direct participants and victims.

But this proximity does not translate into greater political engagement, reflection on the meanings of war or a heightened sense of living in "wartime". In both Cheryomushkin, where the war is largely absent from the material and discursive landscape, and in Kursk, where it visibly and audibly saturates everyday space, the dominant common sense notion is to keep the war at a distance, sustain ordinary routines and avoid politicising daily experience.

Paradoxically, the closer the armed conflict, the more active and sophisticated the repertoire of distancing and normalisation strategies becomes. Humorous comparisons, casual slang or mundane analogies – such as linking the flight of a drone to a broken washing machine – help people domesticate extraordinary events and reintegrate them into the rhythms of normal life.

Where the war does enter lived experience, it tends to do so through familiar and intimate domains – family relations, household economies or neighbourhood interactions – rather than as a defining political or existential rupture. In small towns far from the frontline, such as Cheryomushkin, the war manifests itself indirectly, through local incidents that people can relate to: unexpected deaths, marital infidelities, visible material acquisitions or expenses. Such events resonate within familiar moral and social frameworks, occasionally disrupting the "right" order of things but without transforming everyday life in a substantial way.

In Kursk, even dramatic moments – drone strikes, shelling or the sudden arrival of displaced neighbours – are re-framed in personal or local terms. They are downplayed, absorbed into ordinary routines or treated as city-level problems to be handled locally and administratively. The private, the economic and the local are still the dominant framings through which people experience the Russian war with Ukraine and its effects, while broader public or political ones remain marginal or absent.

Ultimately, what the people discussed in this article share, whether living thousands of kilometres from the frontline

or hearing bombs drop in nearby streets, is a desire to preserve normalcy and keep the war at arm's length.

Such ethnographic observations allow us to look beyond the quantitative surveys and capture how Russians experience and interpret the war in their immediate surroundings, revealing the ways in which geography can mediate these experiences. While our focus here is on "ordinary Russians", it is crucial to recognise that the war is lived very differently across social groups. Those in large, resource-rich cities may, unlike the residents of Cheryomushkin, have the means to ignore the war entirely, while others, such as relatives of mobilised soldiers or volunteers who support the frontline (the subjects of PS Lab's other research) experience it as an all-encompassing transformation.

About the author

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The present absent war:

how Russians experience the war with Ukraine at different proximities to the frontline



This paper examines how Russians experience the war in Ukraine in their everyday lives across varying distances from the frontline. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory in 2023–2024, it compares two sites: Cheryomushkin, a small town in the Urals far from the conflict, and Kursk, a region in close proximity to active combat, where fieldwork was carried out while parts of the area were under Ukrainian occupation.



The analysis shows that although proximity to the frontline reshapes the material, social, and conversational dimensions of everyday life, it does not lead to stronger political engagement or a heightened sense of living in “wartime.” Instead, in both locations, a dominant orientation is to keep the war at arm’s length, maintain ordinary routines, and avoid politicising daily experience.



Paradoxically, the closer the war is geographically, the more elaborate the strategies of normalisation and distancing become. When the war filters into everyday life, it does so primarily through private and familiar domains – such as family relations, economic concerns and local issues – rather than as a distinct political or existential event.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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