

Talking to my Russian friends about Ukraine

I had close friendships in Russia. Then Putin went to war.

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



Red Square, the Spasskaya Tower, and St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow. (AP Photo / Alexander Zemlianichenko)

For 20 years, I, an American Protestant theologian, have worked hard to understand Russians and their point of view. I have spent a total of more than three years living in Russia, both in large cities and in provincial towns. I have wanted to understand what Christianity means to Russians today, and why the Orthodox Church has become so prominent again.

The invasion of Ukraine left me shocked and speechless. I could not comprehend an act of aggression that would result in massive destruction and death, and I wondered what I could now say to my friends—these wonderful people who have cared for me, welcomed me into their homes, and nevertheless either support their government's actions or refuse to speak out against them.

Gradually, since the invasion, I have found my voice again. At a time when many Americans call for breaking off all relations with Russia, I believe that just staying in touch has become my Christian duty. I want to be someone who moves between the fronts, waiting to see how God is bringing about new possibilities for Russian, Ukrainian, and American Christians to work for a just peace.

In January and February, Western media reported a Russian buildup of nearly 200,000 soldiers along Ukraine's border. Many were in a quiet, rural area in the western part of the country where I lived four years ago. Photos of places I know well, now dominated by columns of tanks and armored vehicles, suddenly appeared on the *New York Times* home page. By late February, President Biden was declaring that Russia had decided to invade Ukraine, although President Putin steadfastly denied any such intention. I texted my friends and asked what they made of the situation.

I wasn't sure what to expect. Even when I am in Russia, my friends and I rarely discuss politics. Now people have become even more cautious about what they say. The Russian government has closed down all independent news media and blocked access to Facebook and Instagram because those platforms have allowed people to post "fake news" about the war—that is, reports that do not correspond with the government's. Citizens who protest peacefully are quickly detained and fined or even imprisoned. To designate Russian actions as acts of "war," rather than as "special military operations," publicly can mean a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

Moreover, my friends want to be proud of their nation and its achievements since the fall of communism in 1991 and the subsequent decade of "democracy" and "market capitalism" that left people disoriented and impoverished. Since the rise of Vladimir Putin, Moscow has become an attractive, cosmopolitan city, where the standard of living has risen noticeably every year. Its transit system makes New York's look laughable. At peak hours, trains run every 20 to 30 seconds. Cars are sparkling clean, fares are inexpensive, and stations are magnificent works of art.

Those who are Orthodox are especially grateful for the freedom of religion that they enjoy in the wake of the country's 75 years of atheistic communism. Thousands of churches have been restored or constructed. Iconographic traditions have been revived. The church's great monasteries once again receive countless pilgrims and tourists. Most importantly, believers are able to live according to the rhythms of the church calendar without fearing that others will belittle them. Christmas is again a

national holiday, and even political leaders show up for Easter Vigil services.

My friends don't want to lose this renewed vision of holy Russia: that glimpse of the unique beauty of a heaven on earth that their Orthodoxy cultivates. They are suspicious of Western democracies, with their liberal moral values that seem inevitably to erode religious belief and practice.

To some, the United States seems like a big bully that imposes its will on other nations even as it declares its commitment to diversity and inclusivity at home. And even those friends who are troubled by their government's authoritarianism prefer to emphasize to me, an outsider, what is good about Russia—its rich culture and wide-open spaces—rather than to criticize its deficits. As sympathetic as I try to be, I hope that the war will cause Russians to reevaluate their stance toward their government and the war.

Just prior to the invasion, Mikhail, a friend in Moscow, sent me links to articles in leading Russian newspapers. It would be foolhardy, the articles agreed, to launch an attack. Russian leaders were well aware of the immense price that they would pay—intense Ukrainian armed resistance and debilitating Western sanctions. The West, said Mikhail, was stirring up a hysterical frenzy to drive a wedge between Russians and Ukrainians.

My friends in the western border area responded differently. They reported that thousands of refugees were pouring into town from the Donbas, a region of eastern Ukraine, parts of which are under the control of Russian-allied separatists. There were rumors that the Ukrainian army was poised to move into the Donbas within a day or two.

On February 21, President Putin made his case to the Russian nation, as he rehearsed dozens of grievances against Ukraine and the West, some reaching back decades and even centuries. On February 24, troops rolled into Ukraine. Mikhail immediately texted, "I am shocked. I never believed this could happen. I am so ashamed. Please forgive me." In contrast, his wife, Lyudmila, began sending me videos and messages that supported the official Russian view: Ukraine had to be demilitarized and denazified.

Aleksei, one of my friends in the western border region, asserted that the special military operation was long overdue. In an eight-year struggle over the Donbas, the Ukrainian army had killed several thousand Russian speakers and had forced nearly

2 million to flee. “Come join us in Russia,” he wrote, adding a smiley emoji. “Life is better here than where you are.”

Another friend, Katarina, wrote, “Your news media is not giving you the whole picture. If you visit us in the fall, we will show you the truth. Russia did not begin this conflict; rather, it is ending a war that the Ukrainian government began against its own people in 2014 [after the pro-democracy Maidan Revolution in Kyiv].”

I could feel my temperature rising. I wanted to argue back, “But you’re not getting the whole story either. How can you justify invading a sovereign nation and killing innocent people? Why do you believe your government, when you say that I should not trust mine?” Pictures in the Western news of pregnant women ready to give birth being wheeled on gurneys out of a bombed hospital building in Ukraine moved me to tears. For several weeks, I quit communicating with Russians altogether, I was so angry and distressed. *What good is it to write?* I told myself. *We’re in completely different places, there is nothing more to say.*

Tensions between the West and Russia have only escalated since then. The State Department asked all Americans to leave Russia. Russia warned President Biden against delivering weapons to Ukraine. My own life has been turned upside down: after I was recommended for a grant to spend another year in Russia, the program was suspended because of US sanctions. I may not be able to return to Russia again in my lifetime.

While this sadness weighs heavily upon me, something in me has changed. I now have a growing conviction that I must nevertheless write to my Russian friends. Indeed, I am writing to as many and as often as I can, mostly just short texts. I don’t call Putin a murderer or a war criminal. I don’t talk about the dead bodies on the streets of Bucha. I don’t make accusations about who is right or wrong. All that I know to say is this: I’m thinking of you. I miss you. Thank you for all the ways you have cared for me. I remember the good times we’ve had together. I wish I could see you.

To my astonishment, people have written kind messages back to me, and their hopes and fears come into focus. Each friend, it seems, is just trying to keep body and soul together, as the economy gets tight, internal repression intensifies, and dead bodies return home.

Andrei, a Ukrainian who works in Russia, maintains a home just across the border in Ukraine. When the Russians invaded, his wife and son were in Ukraine. For two weeks, they hid in a cold basement, as their city endured daily Russian aerial assaults; for a time, they had no electricity or cell phone service. One evening, Andrei unexpectedly texted me, “It’s the happiest day of my life. My family is safe!” Attached was a photo of his 12-year-old son, shyly but joyfully smiling. I assumed that they had been reunited.

But several weeks later, Andrei sent another photo of his son and mentioned that the boy was in Bavaria. When I asked why his family was in Germany, he wrote that by the time the Russians allowed his wife and son to leave their besieged city, their only option was the last train out: a standing-room-only, 14-hour trip across the country to Poland. They are now registered refugees in Germany. Once a week, Andrei sends me a “lament for his native land.” The words “Russia” and “Ukraine” never appear, but the message is clear. When I ask him if work colleagues in Russia offer him emotional support, he does not respond.

Five million Ukrainians have fled to the West, but more than 800,000 have ended up, willingly or unwillingly, in Russia. A young man, Slava, from a small city in Russia’s far north, wrote to me that he accompanied a semitrailer stuffed with humanitarian goods to an area in the south near the Donbas. The trip took five days and traversed 2,500 miles on the equivalent of ill-maintained state highways. For him, it was the adventure of a lifetime—and as significant as, say, a kid from a small town in northern Minnesota delivering aid to hurricane victims in New Orleans.

Mikhail in Moscow has phoned twice. He calls the events “a catastrophe.” Lyudmila is less repentant. She continues to text me what she believes from the Russian media: the US has military trainers on the ground. The Ukrainian army has held its own citizens hostage, not allowing them to flee to safety as the Russians have surrounded their cities. Ukrainian Nazis have their own battalions. They are practicing genocide of Russian-speakers in Ukraine; in Odessa in 2014, they set fire to a building in which innocent people, Russian-speakers, were trapped.

Still another friend from Moscow sent me a photo of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* with the caption, “How can you know that a Russian painted the scene? Answer: Because God is *with us!*” Other Moscow acquaintances have written that the West hates Russia because of its extraordinary spirituality, which alone will save the world. When they say “the West,” they quickly add that they don’t mean *me*.

Kirill, the Russian Orthodox patriarch, has blessed the war, but two friends in Moscow forwarded an audio recording of a sermon in which their priest responded differently. While Kirill was railing against the dark forces that are striving to destroy the historic unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, this priest was reassuring his congregation: “There will not be a nuclear war. The days ahead will be difficult, but we will get through them together.” He noted that the conflict was taking place during the Orthodox Great Lent. He asked his people, his fellow Russians, to examine themselves and confess their sins.

As the war has dragged on, people’s texts have become even more sober. Those who at the beginning asserted that precise surgical strikes would spare civilians and deliver Russia a quick victory now lash out in frustration at NATO and the United States for supplying lethal weapons to the Ukrainians. More and more of my contacts report that times are hard and the mood is heavy. They are praying and hoping for a swift “conclusion.” Lyudmila finally apologized last week for sending me so much about the “Russian view”: “Maybe it’s more than you want to look at,” she conceded. I wrote back that I remain interested in what she is hearing.

A friend from St. Petersburg who has been studying in Denmark wrote that he has asked for “scholar at risk” status. A man from Moscow asked to phone me through Telegram, a service that encodes texts and calls more securely; he desperately wants to leave the country with his two young children: “The West doesn’t need me, but I don’t want my children to grow up in this kind of country.” A woman from St. Petersburg poured out her anger at Putin; she is desperately worried about her relatives in Ukraine (millions of Russians have relatives there). “Thank you for listening to me and being so understanding,” she wrote. “I can’t trust anyone in my parish to hear me out.”

Some friends who were vehemently pro-invasion now want to talk about more pleasant matters. Lyudmila is planning a pilgrimage with three other women to Orthodox monasteries in the Caucasus. A few have even asked if I plan to visit them later this year, as though they have completely missed the fact that US-Russian relations have hit bottom. Their texts remind me that Russians still get up and go to work in the morning; their world does not revolve around the war.

It is hard for me to read between the lines, and perhaps it is only wishful thinking, but I sense that my friends know, even if still vaguely, that something has gone desperately wrong—and that they and their country will have to come to terms with

it. I want to keep lines of communication open, in the hope that I can encourage them in some small way, even if as an outsider from afar.

Some American Christians accuse me of being too understanding. They insist that we must be doing everything possible to make Russia pay for its sins: flying Ukrainian flags, boycotting Russian products, and issuing harsh condemnations of the Russian Orthodox Church and Kirill. Recently, I gave an interview in which I expressed solidarity with Ukraine but also asked Americans to pray for the Russian people. War, I noted, leaves deep scars not only on the victims but also on the perpetrators. Afterward, I received a hate call.

The time will come for Americans to say less about Russia and to focus on our own national sins again. For now, I pray that God will spare the Ukrainian people further harm, and therefore that the Russian military effort will falter. In the meantime, we can help Ukrainians and especially the refugees.

But I will also keep writing to my Russian friends, hoping for a day when we are finally able to see one another face-to-face and to embrace. They will take me to church, and we will again glimpse a divine holiness that transfigures the world. I still believe—and I trust that they do, too—that God’s shalom will someday triumph and bring Russians, Ukrainians, and Americans together.

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[Jon Mathieu](#), the *Century's* community engagement editor, catches up with author [John Burgess](#) three months after the article's publication to get an update on his conversations with Russian friends.