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What the People Say: Yevgenia Albats Goes on the Road

The journalist talked to people in Russia's small towns and cities.

By Yevgenia Albats

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"Bandera scum," the Rabbi said.

I didn't understand at first: who was he talking to?

It was the first time I had ever been to the Tver synagogue, and I had never met Rabbi Rosenzweig before. I came in, said hello, and introduced myself.

"I withdraw my 'Hello,'" he said. “You burn people to death in the Ukraine, you douse them with who knows what, you, you, you..." The man in the white shirt and the black Chabad kippah was carried away, getting more wound up with every word, but he was speaking to me.

It was Friday, a couple of hours before the Sabbath. I had been taken to this early 20th century red brick building with a menorah at the top of the wrought-iron gates by colleagues in Tver. They had never been to a synagogue before and were amazed by this unexpected supporter of the war and Putin.

This was the first time that a rabbi, not an anti-Semite, had reacted this way to my name. "Go away," he shouted, "we're going to call security." He had no security service, of course. But we turned around and left.

I set out in my car to drive through along some of Russia's highways and byways. I went to Tver, Serpukhov, Klin, and other cities, all within a radius of about 350 kilometers from Moscow. I had one goal: to talk to people. I wanted to understand who was for and against the war and why. Why do they support a war that that is turning into a disaster for 190 million people in two countries? In one country, Ukraine, people are being killed as bombs and missiles are wiping entire cities off the face of the earth. In the other, Russia, the catastrophe has already happened, but many people living in that country don't realize it yet. But judging by the hysterics coming from various people — like the rabbi in Tver — they feel it in their gut. The earth is already shaking under their feet, the Archduke has been killed, but the virtual world of TV obscures reality, blinding, deafening and replacing facts and real life with a flashing images and relentless lies.

My belief that sociological polls measure mainly those who support the government has been completely confirmed.

Opponents of the war speak only if you have been introduced to them by someone they trust and if you guarantee them absolute anonymity. Assurances at the beginning of a conversation are not enough. Afterwards a few of them always come up and privately ask, "You won't mention my name, right? Or where I work? The town is so small that people will figure out who spoke to you."

If the conversation is spontaneous, not pre-arranged, in a public place, say, the food market, the opponents or doubters hide behind phrases like, "we still do not know the whole truth," "who would admit they started it?" Or they give advice like Lilya (61), who sells *salo* and honey from Krasnodar, to read the Bible because it says that one must not kill. Her husband served in Afghanistan and her son is in the military, but since he has three children, they won't send him to fight in Ukraine.

The war, like the annexation of Crimea, has divided families and caused generational rifts. Almost everyone I spoke to who was 50 years or older were ardent supporters of the "special military operation" as the war is called by Russian officials. They repeat almost verbantum the very phrases they hear on propaganda TV: "Do you want NATO missiles under our noses?" (Anya, 60+, an artist, sells greens at the market). When I ask, "So this is a preventive war?" I get a textbook answer: "Where have you been for eight years? 14 thousand civilians died in Donbas" (former military man, did not identify himself, 61 years old). Even one death is too many, but if you try to explain that even the Russian official numbers are less than 3,000, it's no use. They don't listen.

On the other hand, the vast majority of people I talked to who were 30-40 years old are horrified by everything that is happening. "I went on a 10-day bender and then started to put

myself back together" (Stas, an IT professional, age 46). "I'm walking across the bridge and think: Should I jump? What's the point of living now?" (Sonya, artist, 34). "It will lead to the disappearance of the country," Andrei, 40, employee of a state financial institution. "My friend and I, who is also a reserve officer, made a deal: if they mobilize us, we will surrender right away. We won't shed blood for that *****" (Alexei, in his forties, technical director of a commercial structure, supporter of Navalny).

Parents of schoolchildren are most frightened of what the new principles of education will do to their kids' brains: "In computer science class my daughter was taught how to recognize fakes." "How?" "If a fact or figure isn't on the Defense Department website, you can't believe it." (Luba, former journalist, 40 years old).

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Almost everyone complains about conflicts with their parents.

"My father has been in the army all his life" (Alexei). "I set up normal Telegram channels for him, but he still watches TV and says that the country is finally 'rising from its knees'" (Andrei). "My parents listen to such crap all day long — they're totally for Putin" (Alexei). "My mother served in the military, and she talks to me in phrases from the TV." "Like what?" "Do you want NATO to come and attack our house?" and "You support Nazis."

That's the 65-year-old mother of Katya (36 years old, creative professional). "But Luba's mother," Katya says, "is even worse. Her mother tells her that she is paid by the Americans for her (volunteer) project." "It's hard for my father to admit that the organization he gave the best years of his life to — the Soviet army — is now a criminal organization" (Yevgeny, former television personality, age 40).

I am always amazed how the Soviet principle that the collective is more important than the family is so firmly embedded in people's heads. It's like a microchip that was dormant for 30 years, and when the program is turned on — click! — it immediately switches to the propaganda channel. Yesterday they were parents and grandparents. Today they are soldiers of an unknown party — not even the ruling "United Russia" Party. No one even mentioned it. You may call them Putin's subjects.

At one of the markets I got into a conversation with a former serviceman, who was from a place near Vinnitsa. My family was from a place not far from Vinnitsa, Derazhnya, so we were almost neighbors. He said: "There are Nazis everywhere."

"Not true. In 2017 I drove from Odessa to Khmelnitsky by car, stopped in almost every small town: not a single bad look, not a harsh word."

"What are you telling me? I have an older brother there!"

"Does your brother talk about Nazis?"

"My brother became a follower of Bandera!"

That is to say: his brother didn't find any Nazis near Vinnitsa so he became the enemy.

Don’t think that the man I talked to was a poor pensioner. He drove a white Lexus SUV.

"*The Soviet principle that the collective is more important than the family is so firmly embedded in people's heads, it's like a microchip that was dormant for 30 years. When the program is turned on — click! — it immediately switches to the propaganda channel.*"

Opponents of war often find themselves alone, especially if their work is somehow connected with the state. Financier Andrei says that of the 18 people in his white-collar office, he is the only one against the war, even though his colleagues are the same (40+) age. "Aren't you afraid of losing your job?" I ask. "I'm afraid, I have a family. But I keep arguing and giving evidence to them, even though I know it is useless.” A doctor at the regional hospital (Stas, 39) and a teacher at a local university (Ilya, 34) were in a similar situation.

On the other hand, Alexei has a private firm with a small team of eight people, and all of them believe the "special operation" is insane. Stas, an IT specialist, has no problems with his colleagues.

Another conversation amazed me, I have to admit. It was with some young guys about 20 years old, millennials. They don’t watch TV, they spend their time on the internet and on Telegram channels. We were by a shopping mall, which they didn’t go into because they didn’t have any money. I asked what they thought of the "special operation," and they answered: "Putin is a cool dude. He should have put those Ukrainians in their place a long time ago.”

“Why?”

Their reply was different from the usual “they were ready to attack us.” Their motivation was different. “Who do they think they are?! They made fun of Russians!”

In other words, all Slavs are equal, but Russian Slavs are more equal than their Ukrainian brothers.

So why is this happening?

It seems to me that the generational gap in attitudes toward the February 24 catastrophe is largely connected to personal experiences of humiliation. People of pre- and post-retirement age were formed under Soviet rule, when any resistance was fraught with danger and it was impossible to influence the decisions and actions of the authorities. Conformism was a must-have survival skill, and if they kept their heads down, they were guaranteed a more or less tolerable existence that allowed them to buy a set of furniture and raise their children.

The generation of today's 30- and 40-year-olds grew up under radically different circumstances: individualists, elections, protest rallies ("when Navalny came back, our central street was packed with people — people who had never come out before"), and volunteer projects. Before the political situation had completely gone to hell, they were certain that they had rights. All this formed a totally different relationship with the state.

They are used to believing that they are a part of civil society, that they are independent creators of their own lives, and not just a mass of voiceless people getting handouts of benefits and pensions.

The 20-year-olds who have only known Putin as a leader don't have the fear of going back to the Soviet system as they don't have slightest idea of what that system was all about, but they also don't have any experience of freedom: Putin has been the only president they've known. They just have inferiority complexes that they compensate for by believing that they belong to a prime nation.

For 30- or 40-year-olds, the deployment of troops in Ukraine, the severing of relations with the outside world that they felt a part of, the shuttering of independent media, censorship, arrests, enormous fines, the impossibility of protest, and finally the fear of being fired from work — all this is a disaster. All their big life plans have fallen apart and the future is impossible for them and especially for their children. "We might still be able to adjust somehow, but to imagine that our daughters would have to live in this is unreal" (Yevgeny).

It's no wonder, then, that eight out of 10 don't see themselves staying in Russia. "I'm scared. I'm just scared of being stuck here," says Sonya. "Emigrating is also scary, but it depends on you: whether you succeed or fail. And here nothing depends on you."

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I returned to Moscow earlier than I had expected. Most people weren't feeling the full effect of the catastrophe. Yes, prices have gone up. "I used to pay 1,100 rubles for dog food, and now I pay 16,000." "I just did the numbers and my monthly expenses have tripled, although I buy exactly the same thing as two months ago." And yes, you no longer hear Ukrainian singers on the radio. A war veteran complains to a regional radio station "Why are you playing traitors?" But most of the same goods and food are in the stores. Only McDonald's has closed.

People may change their minds about the war — which way, we can't say — and the "refrigerator will win over the television" in mid-summer when, as the head of the Central Bank warned, supplies will run out and "the restructuring of the economy will begin."

To my surprise, I almost never saw the letter "Z" in towns or on the road — just three times on cars and once on a building. This was nothing compared with the patriotic fervor when Crimea was annexed. Maybe that's still to come.

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