

Belgorod

Death and destruction in a Russian city

Russians in the border city of Belgorod have become victims too in the war Vladimir Putin launched against Ukraine



photograph: getty images

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For most people in Belgorod, a once quiet and comfortable Russian city 40km from the Ukrainian border, the war started on December 30th 2023, almost two years after it started in [Ukraine](#). That day the centre of Belgorod was hit by a Ukrainian rocket, killing 25 civilians, including two children, and wounding more than a hundred. Since then the city and the province that surrounds it have been attacked almost daily. Some 200 civilians have died and 800 have been wounded. Small numbers compared with what Ukraine has endured; but far more than anywhere else in Russia.

Mikhail Ivankiv, a 22-year-old final-year student at Belgorod State University, had just finished shopping for New Year presents for his parents and his fiancée. That New Year was supposed to be the start of his new life, his father says. “He had found his first job, and was about to move in with his fiancée. They planned to celebrate New Year’s eve together and he said he would come and see us the next day.” He never did. A few days later Mikhail died in hospital, after losing both his legs.

Mr Ivankiv senior, an ethnic Ukrainian, was born and bred in Soviet Kazakhstan, where his grandfather, a native of western Ukraine, was exiled after spending several years in Stalin’s gulag. He grew up a Soviet man, served in the Soviet army and lived in Pskov, in north-western Russia. In 2013 the family moved to Belgorod. They were attracted by its mild southern climate, its modern feel, its fertile agricultural land and its proximity to Ukraine, where many of their relatives lived.

[Kharkiv](#) and Belgorod, 80km apart and connected by a highway, were not just formally sister cities; they formed a common historic, cultural and linguistic space. Belgorod was settled by free Ukrainian peasants and Cossacks who fled Polish rule and Tatar raids. There was no distinction between the accents and dialects. It was a rare family in Belgorod that did not have relatives on the other side of the border.

For Belgorod, a city of 340,000 people, Kharkiv was a capital. A metropolis four times its size, “Kharkiv had a greater influence on us than Moscow or St Petersburg,” says Noize mc, a Russian rapper and singer, who was born and bred in Belgorod and gained fame in Kharkiv. Kharkiv had cooler bars and bigger shopping malls and cinemas. It had a McDonald’s that attracted schoolchildren from Belgorod, and the Barabashova open-air market, one of the largest in Europe, that drew traders and buyers from Russia and across the former Soviet Union. The border between Belgorod and Kharkiv was largely notional.



map: the economist

In 2014 that changed. That is when Russian forces first invaded Donbas and tried to incite strife in Kharkiv. The border between Belgorod and Kharkiv solidified and the fortunes of Barabashova turned sour. In 2022 Russian missiles hit the market, turning 15 hectares of stalls (nearly 20% of the whole) to rubble. But the war has also turned Belgorod into a front-line city.

Over the past few months it has been hit by everything that flies, including rockets and kamikaze drones fired from Ukraine, debris that falls from the sky when Russian air defence intercepts them, and Russian glide-bombs destined for Kharkiv but frequently released prematurely by accident. That is what happened on May 4th when a 500-kilogram bomb damaged 30 houses and ten cars and wounded seven civilians, including a child.

Once popular for its new housing and good schools, Belgorod now excels in concrete shelters, online schooling and regular drills on how to resuscitate, bandage and tourniquet the wounded; once a champion of attracting migrants from across the country, it now has a record outflow of people. Some 26,000 houses have been damaged, and 9,000 children have been evacuated. Those who have stayed are studying remotely. Elena Koneva, founder of ExtremeScan Group, a sociology-research group, estimates that 150,000 people have relocated from the province.

While many people are heading out of Belgorod, columns of military vehicles are heading in. According to the Institute for the Study of War, a think-tank in Washington, Russia has concentrated some 30,000 troops in the Belgorod region. Most of the time they remain invisible to civilians, but on June 1st a man in Belgorod died when a drunk tank driver rammed his car.

Vladimir Putin claims that the purpose of his stalled push into Kharkiv is to protect Belgorod from being shelled. If so, his bombs are having the opposite effect. And people in Belgorod know that when Russia bombs Kharkiv, they also suffer. “When we hear that Russia has launched a big attack, everybody anticipates an avenging strike,” says Timofey, a journalist and activist.

Ukrainian commanders in Kharkiv say attacks on Belgorod have a dual purpose. One is to take out military infrastructure. The other is to drive the war home to people in Russia. Although the former is a legitimate act of war, the latter smacks of retribution against civilians.

But if anything, being drawn into war has consolidated Belgorod. Nearly 70% of its people are volunteering: collecting money, joining territorial defence, staffing hospitals, says Ms Koneva. Her research shows that support for Mr Putin’s “special military operation” is 5-7% higher than in Russia as a whole; not because they wish death on their neighbours, but because they fear retribution from Ukraine. This fear breeds anxiety, a sense of despair, depression and alienation, rather than any real enthusiasm Ms Koneva says.

Despite his loss, Mr Ivankiv feels no hatred towards Ukrainians on the other side of the border, not even its soldiers. “They are people like us and their soldiers are also someone’s brothers, husbands, fathers.” He blames the governments of both countries for the war and describes it not as an act of Russia’s aggression but as a tragic occurrence. Like many people across Russia he knows that what is happening is not right, but in talking

about the war he invokes familiar propaganda tropes about Ukrainian nationalists, America's meddling in Ukraine or nato's threat to Russia; a psychological safety-blanket, perhaps, that helps him survive his grief.

As a dutiful citizen, says Mr Ivankiv, he never gave up on his country and he participates in elections, including the latest presidential one, in March. (He would not say whom he voted for, but that hardly matters since that election offered no choice.) Belgorod came under particularly heavy fire during the three days of voting; most people in Belgorod did not risk coming out. A reporter for Novaya Gazeta, one of the very few independent news outlets left in Russia, described empty polling stations. This did not stop Channel One, a flagship state propaganda channel, from reporting long queues of voters. Novaya Gazeta summed up the election result: "Turnout—87%, ten people dead, 68 wounded. Victory for Vladimir Putin."

For many people, particularly the young ones who did not bother participating in the farce, that result was a clear sign of the disconnect between their reality and Kremlin politics. "Moscow just does not give a toss about Belgorod," says Timofey. But just in case, the government has been throwing money and perks at Belgorod. On May 31st Russia's Ministry for Emergency Situations awarded Belgorod the first prize in its all-Russian competition for "a city without dangers". ■