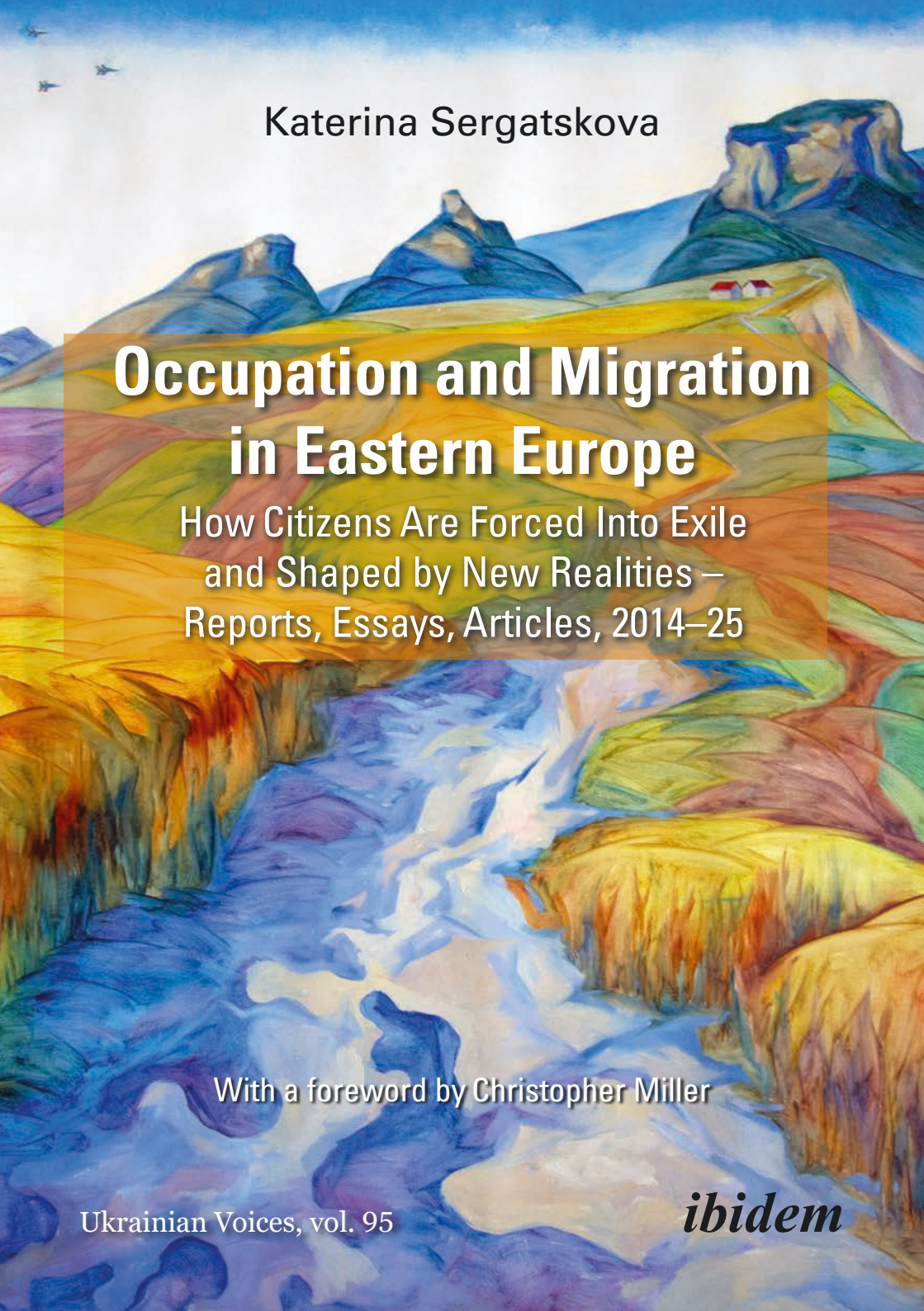


An abstract painting of a landscape. The background features jagged, blue and purple mountains under a light blue sky with a few small, dark birds. In the middle ground, a yellow and orange valley contains two small red-roofed houses. The foreground is dominated by a wide, turbulent river or stream, rendered in vibrant, swirling colors of blue, purple, yellow, and orange, suggesting a powerful flow or perhaps a metaphorical journey.

Katerina Sergatskova

Occupation and Migration in Eastern Europe

How Citizens Are Forced Into Exile
and Shaped by New Realities –
Reports, Essays, Articles, 2014–25

With a foreword by Christopher Miller

Ukrainian Voices, vol. 95

ibidem

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Katerina Sergatskova

OCCUPATION AND MIGRATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

How Citizens Are Forced into Exile and Shaped by

New Realities

—Reports, Essays, Articles, 2014–25

With a foreword by Christoph Miller

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Foreword

I first met Katerina Sergatskova crouched behind the trunk of a large poplar tree in central Donetsk city where we had both taken cover during a shootout between rival Russia-backed militant groups. It was early summer 2014, and Ukraine's Donbas region was in the early throes of war. Under the guise of a separatist uprising, Russian forces and their local proxies were doing battle against a then-degraded Ukrainian army. In the chaos, Russian and pro-Russian warlords had also begun fighting with each other. Looking back, it feels like the only way our friendship could have begun, forged in the armed mayhem that would define so much of the reporting and conversations we would share over the next eleven years about Russia's war and its immense consequences.

Katya — as I now refer to my longtime friend — and I have both covered President Vladimir Putin's unprovoked invasions of its sovereign neighbor since the first bullet was fired. What many people may not realize is that the bullet was shot from a gun not in the Donbas, but one a few months earlier in Crimea, Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula that Russia annexed in the spring of 2014. Indeed, many people like to say that land grab — the first forced annexation in Europe since WWII — was without blood. But that's not true. On March 18 of that year, Russian forces shot at a Ukrainian military base in Simferopol, the Crimean capital, killing 37-year-old warrant officer Serhiy Kokurin and marking him the first casualty of Russia's war. Of course, there would soon be other deaths — of soldiers and civilians, including many thousands of the latter living in territories under the control of Moscow's armed forces. The Crimean Tatars, indigenous to Crimea and with a history of being forcibly exiled under Josef Stalin and only allowed to return to their homeland generations later, would be among the first to experience the wrath of Russia's occupation. Katya was there in Crimea in the spring of 2014, and so was I. We didn't know each other yet, but we were on the ground, reporting on the Russian oppression and killing that would come to define its military aggression against Ukraine.

As evidenced by the extensive reporting in the following pages of this book, Katya has specialized in covering the hell that Russia has made of life in Ukrainian territory under its control ever since, from Crimea to the Donbas and beyond after its full-scale invasion of 2022. As the co-founder of Zaborona, an award-winning Ukrainian news outlet whose name loosely translates from Ukrainian as “Prohibition,” she for years led a team of reporters who focused their coverage on human rights abuses and war crimes perpetrated by Russian troops. That work, along with her reporting for several Western media outlets, has made her a leading expert on Russian occupation and thus the right person to author this book.

As I also know from my reporting, in areas under Russian occupation, daily life is tightly controlled and coerced; abuses at the hands of Russian troops and authorities have become routine and increasingly more brutal. There are forced disappearances without trial, torture and killings conducted in some of the most heinous manners imaginable. Orphans are stripped of their Ukrainian names and language. Russia’s abduction of those Ukrainian children, as well as others still with parents – with the Kremlin’s blessing – has led to international arrest warrants for Putin and one of his top aides meant to protect children. Residents live with shortages of water, electricity and medical care. Ukrainian citizens are pressured to accept Russian passports and, in some cases, conscripted into the Russian forces and forced to fight against their compatriots. Ukrainian officials have been arrested or driven underground. The Ukrainian language has been banned. Ukrainian Orthodox churches have been shuttered; the Catholic church has been forbidden from practicing. Everything is leveraged to suppress Ukrainian identity and enforce Russia’s rule.

In her new book, Katya records what that reality looks like on the ground, eschewing the geopolitical analysis that can be found in many other books published in English – and it’s good that she does. Instead, what is offered is invaluable, ground-level reporting – ground truth, if you will – of a war too often viewed and discussed from afar.

Russia occupies roughly 114,500 square kilometers, or a piece of Ukrainian land that is bigger than the US state of Arizona and

the European country of Bulgaria. Some 6 million Ukrainians call that territory home, even as most of them have been forced to flee or else survive under Russian rule. Katya, a brave and tenacious journalist, an empathetic reporter and a gifted storyteller, introduces us to many of those people in the pages that follow. As she writes in a dispatch from June 2024, the impact of Russian occupation can be sudden and brutal, but there is also a more insidious nature to it, a creeping grip that takes hold. "Occupation is like a flood," she explains. "The water doesn't reach every house at the same time. First, it covers the roads until it meets an obstacle—a wall or a fence. Then it starts to rise, finding cracks, seeping further, conquering one house after another, together with everything inside them."

In her collection of reporting and essays spanning the entirety of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine from 2014 to the present day, Katya provides an important and original source of information about Russia's war, its occupation and its impact on Ukrainians. She moves beyond the statistics to reveal the true human cost of occupation, peeling back the mask to expose the profound and often overlooked toll on everyday lives.

Christopher Miller
Kyiv, Ukraine, August 2025

Preface

I have no idea why you are holding this book in your hands. Perhaps you are one of the few people on the planet who is interested in learning about how occupation arises and how people live in the conditions of exile and repression. Or perhaps you want to know why the largest military conflict since World War II happened in Eastern Europe – in the sequence in which events arose. One thing I can state for sure: extremely few people on Earth are interested in this problem.

This collection of essays and analytical articles can be considered a kind of diary of an eyewitness to the events. It begins with the seizure of military bases in Crimea – a peninsula with an incredible world history, which fell as the first victim in Russia's war against Ukraine, unleashed against the backdrop of its aggressive colonial ambitions.

History only unfolds forward. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb aptly wrote, the Black Swan of history – in other words, a catastrophe – often appears suddenly, while in retrospect, we can easily understand that it was preceded by very specific phenomena and events that could have been prevented if someone had paid enough attention to them. The art of preventing catastrophes is too subtle, complex and not rewarding enough for people to do it.

Nevertheless, time cannot be gained back. This is another sad fact that must be taken into account when analyzing history. War, emigration, occupation – all this takes not only the lives of real people, but also wastes the precious time of those who had other plans for its use. Someone aspired to get a good education, but remained under occupation to care for sick parents. Someone had the opportunity to build a career in business, but went to the front. Someone tried to establish justice and went missing. People who have lost something because of the war cannot fully recover, because it takes a long time, and they have less time advantage than others.

Currently, about five million Ukrainians live outside their country because of the war. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to live under occupation. Hundreds of thousands of people

died on the front or due to shelling. Hundreds of thousands were injured, including tens of thousands of children. Most of them will never be able to fully recover their health and former quality of life. Many of them do not have enough energy and resources to fight for justice any further – and have to move on.

If you have turned to this book in order to understand how the occupation arises and how people live in the conditions of exile and repression, and why this terrible war broke out in the center of Europe, then, most likely, you are looking for answers to the question of how to end it once and for all. I wish you success in your search and hope that sooner or later you will achieve what you want. All those who have survived the war, occupation or emigration will be grateful to you.

Poker Face in Crimea

March 3, 2014

I thought I was going to the occupied Crimea. I expected the air to be charged with the energy of impending war, to see armed people in camouflage at the station. I expected for passengers to be thrown off the train in Armyansk and left in the middle of a field – and for anxious faces everywhere.

Instead, I saw a different Crimea: calm, indifferent, springlike. Life went on as usual. Taxi drivers called out for tourists to go to the resorts: “Yalta! Alushta! Sevastopol!” – they pounced on newcomers as if nothing had happened. Buses were waiting for tourists in every direction. There weren’t many tourists, if any at all, but they were still expected, and that was surprising.

A friend said: “Crimea is just one big poker face: everyone pretends not to notice anything.”

In Simferopol, there were two rallies: one near the Supreme Council, another at the Council of Ministers. During the day, local activists took down Ukrainian flags and put up Crimean ones. One excitable man brought a pack of white-blue-red flags: “Let’s hang a Russian one, why not!” They did. When asked which organization they were from, one activist replied, “The United Nations.” He laughed strangely.

An Afghan man told the camera that near the Taras Shevchenko metro station in Kyiv, he and dozens of other activists who had come to help “Berkut” on the Maidan were doused with Molotov cocktails, and seven of his comrades were beaten to death by “Banderite” girls. He shouted, not spoke.

A former law enforcement officer said he was against war, for expanding autonomy, against “Banderites,” and that he was friends with Crimean Tatars. He said Crimea was fine without everyone else. I believed him; he didn’t shout.

A young man in camouflage with a gun approached me – I was holding a tablet with an online broadcast – stood very close,

and I could feel the gun. He demanded I step away and stop filming. Another, in civilian clothes, pushed me away by the elbow. The law enforcement officer told them, “She’s one of ours, from Crimea!” they calmed down.

But what if I didn’t have a Crimean residence permit and Russian passport, which I already sincerely dislike? I respect my homeland, love my Russian friends, but... It all comes down to one name, and you may guess which.

Some here say, “Putin is our president.” I’m confused. Everyone seems to have their own president now: Yanukovych, Turchynov, Putin¹. Personally, I don’t have a president now. A president is something else. Not a name...

Some people who don’t shout said, “Thanks to Maidan for teaching us how to rise up. We’ve learned a lot. We’ve realized who we are.” Others understand that Maidan and the new government are not the same. Some clench their fists at the word “Maidan” and start shouting.

On Lenin Square, the band “Russkie” performed, saying they came on their own initiative to support a peaceful rally. And “Zemlyane”² came too. Everyone here feels like aliens – from some other planet. They call me, a Russian native, a Ukrainian nationalist. They say they’ll “crush” me and take me down.

A woman screamed: “When Putin says ‘Good morning, country!’ – that will be my brightest day.” A lady with a dog shrieked that she wanted to be in Russia. Everyone around screamed that they wanted to be in Russia so desperately that it seemed like a show. Yet it also seemed sincere. And that made it even scarier.

Evening. The rallies ended. An elderly woman walked down the street with a Ukrainian flag. I asked, “Aren’t you afraid to walk alone like this?” “No,” she replied in Ukrainian, “I’m not afraid of anyone. Let them stab me if they want. Glory to Ukraine!”

1 Viktor Yanukovych is a fourth president of Ukraine who fled the country to Russia during the Maidan revolution; Oleksandr Turchynov temporarily served as acting head of state until the presidential elections in May 2014; and Putin was and, as of 2025, is still a president of Russia.

2 Russkie means Russians, and Zemlyane means Earthlings.

Everything Is Upside Down

March 4, 2014

Discussions about civil war should have started with conversations about Crimea. If anything like that is happening, it's here, not in Kyiv, where the people faced off against security forces defending the authorities.

In Crimea, for now, the security forces are protecting the people, no matter what the newly appointed head of the Council of Ministers, Aksyonov, orders.

Yesterday, near a military base in Simferopol, pro-Ukrainian activists—rarely called that here, usually labeled “Banderites” and “fascists”—gathered spontaneously. Without flags or slogans—just to support the security forces. Some activists even suggested staying overnight at the base, just in case.

A colonel came out and promised that the military, no matter what, would stand by the people. You wanted to believe him—he spoke sincerely. You could feel his concern.

While the colonel spoke with activists, a group of “titushki” gathered near the base—this is what they'd be called in Kyiv. Red faces, the smell of alcohol, cigarettes clenched between their teeth—a grim sight. In Crimea, these people are called “self-defense.”

In Crimea, everything is upside down.

Instead of Ukrainian flags, people wear the tricolor. Yellow-blue ribbons here are like leprosy. If you wear Ukrainian symbols, you're a Nazi and a “Banderite”; if you speak Ukrainian, you're a provocateur. Even those who ask too many questions are called provocateurs.

Pro-Ukrainian activists have to walk quietly. No one arranges meetings by phone anymore.

On Lenin Square, at the Communist Party of Ukraine tent, people were collecting opinions about what to do with the “leader's” monument. There were three options: move it, leave it, or put a fountain in its place. It seemed most voted to “leave it.”

"Why tear it down? It's my history!" an Afghan war veteran protests—he already recognizes me. He's the one who, a couple of days ago, told me he'd been doused with Molotov cocktails in Kyiv. "If someone wants a fountain, let them put it right in front of Lenin. Why not?"

An old woman holds a sign with big red letters: "Our Russia," and a hammer and sickle. I ask, "Why Soviet symbols if you're for Russia?"

"Because Russia is the Soviet Union," she says. "Didn't you study history in school?"

At the same time, another old woman attacks me, insisting I'm filming lies.

"But I'm filming live, showing exactly what you're saying," I protest.

"You're lying!" she grabs my arms and shrieks. Others behind her chime in.

People gather from all sides, telling how they want a union of "Russia-Ukraine-Belarus." Someone declares, "Let Lukashenko³ come and bring order here!"

Crimea is a mirror world.

If thousands of people went to Maidan for change and progressive development, here people demand a reversal. If on Maidan, thousands looked each other in the eyes with a new mindset, far from Soviet ways, then in Crimea, the gazes are those of a by-gone, degraded era.

By displaying Soviet symbols, Crimeans are really demanding Russian imperialism. They sympathize not with communist, leftist values, but with the myth of Soviet prosperity.

For them, Maidan is an image of a world they're not ready to accept. That's why they believe in bogeymen like "Banderites," without caring who Bandera actually was.

The slogan "Glory to Ukraine!" is spoken quietly here. The response, "Glory to the heroes!" is whispered. But no one shouts

3 Aleksandr Lukashenko is a president of Belarus, serving since 1994. He changed the constitution of the Republic of Belarus so that he can participate in the elections any number of times.

"Glory to Russia!" either. They just shout, "Russia!" — without any "glory."

Crimea is a space of powerful cognitive dissonance. Only those who have lived here can understand Crimeans who advocate joining Russia, recreating the USSR, or separating as an autonomous region.

Sadly, for many years, the Center⁴ paid no attention to Crimea, perhaps seeing it as a toothless resort appendage. Meanwhile, that appendage built up a lot of resentment toward those who regularly "ditched" it. Only Russia never ditched Crimea — a loyal, big friend.

That's why "self-defense" here protects against pro-Ukrainian activist "titushki," "normal" people wear Russian and St. George ribbons, and the organizers of the "Stop Maidan" movement are considered heroes.

The presence of Russian troops in Crimea is nothing compared to the kind of warfare happening in the social sphere.

4 Center means Kyiv, as Crimeans often called it.

Virus in Active Phase

March 5, 2014

Approaching a pale-pink fortress, once a Soviet café veranda, my friend tries to catch in the frame the “little green men” hiding behind it. More popularly known as “polite armed people”, these are the guys in Russian uniforms with machine guns who suddenly appeared in Crimea on February 28.

A young woman runs up. “Why are you photographing them? Are you at a zoo?!” Her voice shakes. I ask, “Are you nervous?” — “Yes, I am!” — “Why? Do you know these guys?” She denies it, rummages in her bag, and with trembling hands takes out her phone, photographing our faces. Many people here do that these days.

“Why are you protecting them?” I ask.

“They protect me, and I protect them!” she says, running into a nearby bank.

We exchange confused glances with my friend: what was that?

Maybe it’s a delayed response to how people endlessly photographed themselves with “Berkut” on Bankova Street? Maybe she thought it was humiliating for them...

Serhiy, here for the first time, says he saw among the “self-defense” a guy with a Ukrainian flag. They explained it was a joke at the expense of pro-Ukrainian activists.

Every meeting between the two camps ends in scandal and threatens to turn into a fight. Anyone on the “Ukrainian” side is, in the eyes of others, a “Banderite,” a “Maidanite.” On the Maidan, they were paid, and now they’ve come here for money to destabilize peaceful Crimean land. “But I’m local!” — doesn’t matter: anyone who thinks outside the St. George’s ribbon is a traitor. That’s what they say: traitors, get out.

Crimeans have no unified position on what’s happening. Some change their minds every five minutes, depending on who they’re talking to.

Most agree Yanukovych stole more than any Ukrainian leader — but he's still the legitimate president, and they blame "Kulyavlob" and a few "radical fascists"⁵ for seizing power. They admit power in Crimea was also seized illegally, but "you showed us the example, now deal with it."

A solid man at a rally in Yalta argues with activists. When asked if Crimea should stay in Ukraine, he says: "What did you say? In this PROJECT?" He doesn't even call Ukraine a country.

The temperature of discussions is so high, and the level of quality is so low, it's impossible to figure out what Crimeans really want. It's a mix of buckwheat, semolina, and oatmeal, covered with either syrup or stale water from a flower vase.

Can a Crimean referendum put things in order? Can the new government ensure its legitimacy?

Crimeans don't accept radical rhetoric; they're used to calm and prosperity. Some still believe the tourist season will happen, that everything will return to normal.

It's clear that now a serious illness is in its active phase. The virus had long slept in Crimea's body, but now it's active.

Painkillers and symptomatic treatment won't help. A complex, painful surgery with anesthesia and a long recovery is needed.

But to figure out how to treat it, we must calm down and untangle this strange and frightening knot.

5 Former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk was nicknamed "Kulyavlob." The term "radical fascists" refers to politicians who actively participated in the events on Maidan.

The End of the First Crimean Spring

A Conversation with the 'Little Green Men'

March 11, 2014

They say there are always two springs in Crimea. A week ago, the first one ended. Nature seems to react acutely to what's happening: a fierce wind has been blowing for three days straight.

We're going to Perevalne to deliver letters from all over Ukraine to the largest military base on the peninsula. A Yalta-based activist assists us, asking for a handful of letters for the servicemen in Massandra, which has also been occupied by the 'little green men.'

On the way, we pick up Valya, who serves at the base with her husband. She's in a tracksuit and sneakers, her hair pulled into a ponytail. She tells us that a few hours before Russian troops arrived, command sent her home on leave. Since then, she has walked past the 'little green men' almost every day to visit her husband.

"Actually, it's not as bad as some media describe it," says Valya. "There was a report on a Ukrainian channel about around a hundred casualties during the assault and a bunch of wounded, that the troops had nothing to eat and no electricity. My relatives from Ukraine called me in horror. But it was nothing like that!"

Yes, Valya says "from" Ukraine. For her, as for many here, Crimea is a space apart from the country. An island.

We hand over the box of letters. One of the soldiers immediately opens a letter, reads it with a smile, and puts it away. "Well, let's hang in there!" he laughs.

Later, a video appears showing Valya giving a letter to each serviceman at the base. They're happy like children. In recent days, though, several people from the base have resigned—they can't handle the pressure: "It's hard to work in such conditions, so they leave." As for Valya, she's back on duty starting tomorrow.

The base is surrounded by 'little green men.' They stand guard under the trees, their uniforms blending in with the budding leaves.

I walk up close to one of them. He doesn't object, his rifle pointed toward the sky. His uniform is worn; the fabric covering the helmet is ripped in places, boots caked in dried mud.

"Are you cold?" I ask. He looks at me with eyes watering from the cold. His young face is windburned. He nods.

I'm not sure, but I think he feels a mix of fear and resentment at having to stand out here in the open field on someone else's vague orders. No one brings him thank-you letters from Russians or "Snickers" bars, no one shakes his hand. He's an Alien here. An Alien, defending a Predator.

We get into conversation with a group of "little green men" at one of the checkpoints. They're all very young, except for the commander, who looks above thirty.

"Tell me, whose side did your grandfather fight for?" the commander asks the activist. The activist answers, "For the Soviet Union, of course..."

The discussion about what's happening drifts toward World War II and, of course, the mythical "Banderites."

"We saw on Maidan how they threw Molotov cocktails. Who are these people? Aren't they fascists?" a young 'little green man' asks. We try to explain that the people on Maidan are mostly educated individuals with two university degrees.

"Do we look like fascists to you?"

"No, you don't. We're not talking about you," he replies. He seems embarrassed that his internal stereotypes don't fit reality.

The 'little green men' don't hide that they are from Russia. They don't even know which unit they're in or which settlement they're stationed at. They were just given orders.

"What are you afraid of? If Crimea becomes Russian, what's so bad about that? Russia has a lot of money, life will be better here!" the commander says. "Why do you even need western Ukraine? There are no resources there!"

"We have friends there," I reply. "Don't divide us."

The icy wind nearly knocks us over. The soldiers' uniforms are heavy. Each new gust pushes them several steps away from us.

"I just want to say, I know this is primarily an information war right now," says the youngest "little green man." "They're just turning us against each other."

"Don't worry, once the referendum passes, the people will decide what they want," the commander tries to reassure.

Yes. But will this "referendum" really be honest, held under the barrels of guns?

"No one will stand at the polling stations with weapons," the commander insists.

But does he really know?

There are five days left until the "referendum." Already, eight activists and journalists have been kidnapped. On trains, people in camouflage search passengers and check passports. Human rights workers are forced to go underground.

There are more and more 'little green men' in Crimea.

They're cold and, probably, confused – after two weeks spent as living sculptures in Yudashkin camouflage⁶. But they swore allegiance to the homeland – one that so many Crimeans want to reunite with.

...The first spring has ended in Crimea. What should we expect from the second?

P.S. On March 11, 2014, the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the Sevastopol City Council adopted a declaration of independence for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. According to the declaration, if the peoples of Crimea decided through a "referendum" to join the Russian Federation, Crimea would be declared a sovereign republic and would join the Russian Federation with that status as a constituent entity. On March 16, the referendum was held, with, according to Russian authorities, majority voting for joining Russia.

6 Russian fashion designer Valentin Yudashkin created a military uniform for the Russian army in 2008-2010.