

# Pay-to-Survive: Inside Russia's Battlefield Black Market

Date: April 28, 2026 | Model: anthropic-batch:claude-opus-4-7

Source: Screenshot (OCR via AI)

---

## Contents

1. Explanation (Ages 14–18)
2. Key Terms Glossary
3. Reading Comprehension Quiz (10 questions)
4. Answer Key with Explanations

*Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).*

## 1. Explanation (Ages 14–18)

---

*Imagine paying your boss a million rubles just to get medical leave after being shot. For Russian soldiers in Ukraine, that's not a metaphor — it's the price list.*

### What's Going On?

The Economist reports that Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine are being systematically extorted by their own officers. To avoid the deadliest assaults — what soldiers grimly call the "meat grinder" — troops pay bribes ranging from 100,000 rubles for leave after a wound to 2 million rubles to get discharged.

Interviews with a dozen contract soldiers and deserters describe a full-blown shadow economy on the front lines. Officers collect money for drones, body armour, even office parties. Soldiers who refuse to pay are reportedly tied to trees, beaten, denied medical care, or shot by their own commanders — a practice insiders call "zeroing out." An independent Russian news site, Verstka, has confirmed at least 100 commanders involved in such killings.

### How To Think About It

This isn't really about one corrupt officer here or there. It's a whole institution where survival itself has been turned into a product with a price tag.

- Think of a video game with aggressive pay-to-win mechanics — except the "loot box" you're buying is not dying that week, and the currency is your real salary.
- Or picture a workplace where your manager runs a side hustle selling your job assignments: the safe desk job costs extra, the dangerous one is "free," and HR is in on the cut. That's the Russian army's internal market.

### Key Things To Know

- Maxim, a 26-year-old deserter from Krasnodar, says he received 8 million rubles total — but spent 6 million on equipment and bribes just to function as a soldier.
- Ukraine's drone warfare has created a "kill zone" roughly 20km deep, making mass infantry assaults nearly suicidal and dramatically raising the value of avoiding the front line.
- Russian online retailers Wildberries and Ozon now openly ship boots, body armour, and assault trainers to occupied Donetsk and Luhansk — a retail supply chain feeding off soldiers' fear.
- Corruption inside the officer class isn't new: the article notes professional officers have controlled "the means of destruction" since Soviet times, treating recruits as both cannon fodder and cash cows.
- Most people assume a wartime army tightens discipline. The counterintuitive reality here is that war has expanded the opportunities for graft, because demand for safety is now infinite.

### Why It Matters

If you follow the war in Ukraine — or debates about US military aid, NATO, or sanctions — this story changes how you read Russian battlefield performance. An army where soldiers bribe their way out of

fight is structurally weaker than its troop numbers suggest, which matters for every foreign-policy decision your generation will vote on. It's also a vivid case study in how authoritarian systems decay from the inside, a theme you'll meet again in AP history, political science, and economics classes.

### **The Bigger Picture**

Historians will recognise echoes of Nikolai Gogol's 1842 novel "Dead Souls," where a con man profits off serfs who exist only on paper — hence The Economist's headline. Tsarist and Soviet armies both rotted through similar rackets before major defeats. Watch for second-order effects: a flood of traumatised, armed deserters returning to Russian cities, deepening distrust between troops and officers, and a Kremlin that may need ever-larger sign-up bonuses to keep recruitment going. When an army has to bribe people to join AND soldiers have to bribe officers to survive, the math eventually breaks.

## 2. Key Terms Glossary

---

### **Korporativy**

Russian word for company office parties; in this context, lavish gatherings that officers force soldiers to fund through bribes.

### **Cannon fodder**

A grim military term for low-ranking soldiers treated as expendable — sent into attacks where heavy casualties are expected.

### **Zeroing out**

Slang used by Russian troops for the killing of soldiers who refuse to pay bribes or obey orders, often carried out by their own side.

### **Refusenik**

Originally a Soviet-era word for someone who refused state demands; here, a soldier who refuses to pay extortion or take part in assaults.

### **Kill zone**

An area — here roughly 20km deep — saturated with drones and weapons such that crossing it on foot is nearly suicidal.

### **Requisition**

To officially take or demand property for military use; in the article, officers "requisition" soldiers' bank cards and PINs as a cover for theft.

### **Military prosecutor**

A government lawyer responsible for investigating and charging crimes committed within the armed forces.

### **Dead Souls**

A famous 1842 Russian novel by Gogol about a swindler who buys legally-still-alive-on-paper deceased serfs; the title is now shorthand for fraud built on phantom identities.

### 3. Reading Comprehension Quiz

---

Circle the best answer for each question.

**Q1.** Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) Russian soldiers in Ukraine face an extortion system run by their own officers.
- B) Ukraine's drone warfare has made mass infantry assaults nearly impossible.
- C) Russian online retailers profit from selling military gear to occupied regions.
- D) Soviet-era corruption patterns have reappeared in modern Russian recruitment.

**Q2.** According to the passage, soldiers must purchase their own boots and body armour primarily because:

- A) Russian online retailers offer steep discounts to frontline troops.
- B) Standard-issue equipment is reserved for elite airborne and special-forces units.
- C) Commanders have banned the use of state-supplied protective gear.
- D) Ukrainian drones have destroyed most Russian military supply convoys.

**Q3.** As used in the passage, the word "price" most nearly means:

- A) retail cost
- B) required payment
- C) honest value
- D) market reward

**Q4.** As used in the passage, the word "snapped" most nearly means:

- A) broke audibly
- B) photographed quickly
- C) gave way suddenly
- D) spoke sharply

**Q5.** Which statement about the relationship between Ukraine's drone warfare and Russia's internal corruption can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) Drone warfare has reduced corruption by making outcomes harder to fake.
- B) Drones have replaced bribery as the main concern for Russian commanders.
- C) The danger created by drones has increased what soldiers will pay to avoid combat.
- D) Russian commanders use drone operators primarily to attack Ukrainian targets.

**Q6.** The passage suggests that the existence of the "battlefield economy" depends most directly on:

- A) officers controlling who is sent into the most dangerous assaults
- B) soldiers having access to large state-issued recruitment bonuses
- C) Russian retailers shipping equipment into occupied territories
- D) the Russian government formally legalising officer side-payments

**Q7.** The author's tone in describing the extortion system is best characterized as:

- A) outraged and emotionally charged
- B) detached and grimly factual
- C) sympathetic toward Russian commanders
- D) uncertain about the evidence presented

**Q8.** The author's primary purpose in including the story of Andrey Bykov is to:

- A)** argue that most Russian commanders eventually face military prosecution
- B)** illustrate the violent consequences faced by soldiers who refuse to pay
- C)** demonstrate that wounded soldiers receive priority medical evacuation
- D)** compare Russian military discipline to Soviet-era practices in detail

**Q9.** Which statement about Russian military prosecutors can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A)** They have successfully reduced extortion within frontline units.
- B)** They generally side with soldiers who file extortion complaints.
- C)** Filing complaints with them can endanger rather than protect soldiers.
- D)** They operate independently of military commanders in the field.

**Q10.** Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** "Russia's recruitment drive for its war in Ukraine has poured blood and money into the system"
- B)** "He filed a complaint with military prosecutors saying Kemer had taken 2m roubles from him."
- C)** "But shortly before the new year he was found by military police and sent back to Kemer's unit. On January 11th... he was tied to a tree and killed."
- D)** "Verstka, an independent Russian news site, confirmed the identities of at least 100 commanders."

**My Score:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

## 4. Answer Key with Explanations

---

**Q1.** Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

**Answer: A**

The passage centers on a systematic internal market where Russian soldiers pay officers for safety, leave, and survival. B is a true detail from the passage but only one supporting fact – that's TRAP B, using passage vocabulary in too narrow a combination. SAT Tip: central-idea questions reward the option that covers the WHOLE passage; if a choice only fits one paragraph, it's a supporting detail, not the main idea.

**Q2.** According to the passage, soldiers must purchase their own boots and body armour primarily because:

**Answer: B**

The passage states explicitly that Russia's army provides gear to elite airborne and special-forces units, but infantry must buy their own. D is a real-world plausible claim – that's TRAP C, true-sounding but unsupported by the text. SAT Tip: for "according to the passage" questions, only what is literally stated counts; outside knowledge is a trap, no matter how reasonable it sounds.

**Q3.** As used in the passage, the word "price" most nearly means:

**Answer: B**

In context – "a marketplace where everything has a price: drones, medals, home leave and life itself" – the word means a demanded payment to obtain something otherwise denied. A is the everyday meaning of "price" and is therefore TRAP B, a familiar usage that doesn't fit the sentence. SAT Tip: on vocab-in-context, mentally substitute each option into the original sentence; the right answer preserves the original meaning, not the dictionary default.

**Q4.** As used in the passage, the word "snapped" most nearly means:

**Answer: C**

Maxim says "something just snapped in my head" when explaining why he signed the contract – meaning his judgment or restraint suddenly gave way. A is the literal physical meaning – TRAP B, passage vocabulary used in the wrong sense. SAT Tip: when a word is used figuratively, the right answer will also be figurative; literal-meaning options are usually distractors.

**Q5.** Which statement about the relationship between Ukraine's drone warfare and Russia's internal corruption can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

**Answer: C**

The passage links the 20km drone "kill zone" directly to soldiers paying for safer roles – higher danger drives higher bribe prices, creating an "economy of life and death." D is true in general but reverses the passage's emphasis on drones killing Russia's own "refuseniks" – that's TRAP A, right scope but wrong direction. SAT Tip: inference questions reward the answer that follows directly from cause-effect language in the passage, not from your own reasoning about the topic.

**Q6.** The passage suggests that the existence of the "battlefield economy" depends most directly on:

**Answer: A**

The whole system works because officers decide who lives and who dies – that asymmetric power is what soldiers are paying to escape. B is a real feature mentioned in the passage but it merely supplies the cash; without officer control over assignments, there would be nothing to buy. That's TRAP B, passage vocabulary in a wrong causal role. SAT Tip: on "depends most directly on" questions, find the link without which the whole system collapses – that's

the foundation, not just a feature.

**Q7.** The author's tone in describing the extortion system is best characterized as:

**Answer: B**

*The author piles up specific numbers, names, and quotes without editorializing – letting horrifying facts (torture pits, soldiers shot by their own side) speak for themselves. A is tempting because the SUBJECT is outrageous, but the prose itself is restrained – that's TRAP C, conflating topic with tone. SAT Tip: tone questions are about the author's word choices and sentence style, not about how the topic makes you feel.*

**Q8.** The author's primary purpose in including the story of Andrey Bykov is to:

**Answer: B**

*Bykov refused to hand over 2 million rubles, was beaten, tied to a tree, and shot – a concrete example of the "zeroing out" practice the passage just introduced. A flips reality: the passage shows prosecutors are largely ineffective. That's TRAP A, right scope but opposite direction. SAT Tip: when an example follows a general claim, the example almost always exists to PROVE that claim – match the example to the claim it sits next to.*

**Q9.** Which statement about Russian military prosecutors can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

**Answer: C**

*Elena's husband filed a complaint, was found by military police, returned to his unit, and killed – the passage shows the complaint system feeding victims back to their abusers. B is the optimistic assumption a reader brings in – TRAP C, real-world expectation unsupported by the text. SAT Tip: when a passage describes one detailed case, treat it as the author's chosen evidence for the broader pattern they want you to see.*

**Q10.** Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

**Answer: C**

*This sentence directly shows that filing a complaint led to the soldier being returned to his abuser and killed – the precise causal chain the previous answer required. B mentions the complaint but stops before the consequence – TRAP B, correct vocabulary, incomplete evidence. SAT Tip: on evidence-pairing questions, lock in your previous answer FIRST, then pick the option whose words most directly prove THAT specific claim – partial matches are traps.*