

# “Cyborgs at Little Stalingrad”: A Brief History of the Battles of the Donetsk Airport

*26 May 2014 to 21 January 2015*

by Major Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army



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## Preface

The fight for the Donetsk airport, hammered out through two distinct battles between May 2014 and January 2015, illustrates that violent battles of attrition still loom large in the modern wars of the Information Age. Additionally, the contest illustrates the lengths to which the Russian Federation is willing to go to maintain its strategic and operational interests in Ukraine. The battles serve as the sinew between Russia's summer and winter offensives; these offensives were initiated to preserve Russia's proxy forces—the Donetsk People's Army and the Luhansk People's Army—and to destroy Ukrainian offensive capabilities. Consequently, these battles were catalysts for the winter offensive's decisiveness in the campaign.

The struggle for the Donetsk airport illustrates Russia's effectiveness in deploying forces from every corner of the Federation, rapidly training those forces and feeding them into battle. The conflict also served as excellent training ground for Russian tank, infantry and artillery formations, and, as part of a larger campaign, provided the opportunity for 47 percent of Russian land forces to gain indispensable combat experience—a point that must not be taken for granted. In the end, these battles resulted in a pulverized airport, in the Ukrainian army being blunted and defeated and in Russia being able to maintain access and influence in eastern Ukraine.



## **“Cyborgs at Little Stalingrad”: A Brief History of the Battles of the Donetsk Airport, 26 May 2014 to 21 January 2015**

### **Introduction**

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War offers a glimpse into Russia’s effort to re-exert itself as a great power on the world stage. Historian Orlando Figes provides an excellent explanation of Russian political ambition under President Vladimir Putin. Figes posits that “from the start of his regime, Putin aimed to restore pride in Soviet history. It was an important part of his agenda to rebuild Russia as a great power.”<sup>1</sup>

While the exact extent to which Russia seeks to pursue its status as a great power is unknown, what is known is that Russian policy is oriented on rebuffing further NATO advances in its historical sphere of influence and on gaining (and maintaining) influence across Europe and the Caucasus region. The Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in the spring of 2014, is but one illustration of this point. The war is Putin’s crack to re-exert control and influence over Ukraine, which had been distancing itself from Russia and growing closer to the West during the post-Soviet period.

The fight for the Donetsk airport was pivotal to this Russian strategy. It changed the operational and tactical battlefield calculus, helping shift the strategic momentum to that of the Russians and their proxy agents in the Donets River basin, or the Donbas. It effected more than the destruction of the airport; it served a much larger role in the conflict. First, it was the pivot point between the Russian summer and winter offensives, the countermeasures that Russia took when it appeared that its proxy client in the Donbas was about to be defeated. Second, when coupled with the Battle of Debal’tseve, the battle at the airport drove the Minsk II agreement, illustrating that effective traditional campaigns can still result in true decisiveness in war. Similarly, the battle demonstrated that, for all the talk of hybrid maneuvers in contemporary warfare, Russian land forces and their intermediaries possess the acumen, strength and sustainment infrastructure to fight hard, rigorous land combat.



The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief history of the battle. It does so by structuring the conflict in a chronological narrative to show its connections from the policy level down to the battalion. However, in doing so, this narrative tends to hover at the operational to “high-tactical” levels of action and analysis. It is not intended to be the authoritative history of the battle; rather, it is intended to be one of the first works to corral the disparate reports about the battle into a coherent account. A drawback of this paper is that it only makes use of English reports and information, vastly limiting the sources from which it structures its argument. However, attempts were made to cross-reference as much of the information as possible to ensure that the use of single sources was the exception and not the rule.

Finally, this work provides reflections on its findings. This is not to say that it offers “lessons learned” or projections on future war. As historian Victor Davis Hanson contends, “The key is not to look to the past and expect to see the present, but to identify in history the seeds of change and of the possibilities across time and space.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Strategic and Operational Context: Seeking Equilibrium**

The Russo-Ukrainian War started in February 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. In April and May 2014, under the guise of a separatist movement, Russia began a subversive campaign to weaken Ukraine by fracturing the country along ethnic and linguistic lines. Russia organized the separatists along political and military lines that correlated to the oblast boundaries of Donetsk and Luhansk. This resulted in the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Donetsk People’s Army (DPA) and in the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) and the Luhansk People’s Army (LPA).

Late spring and early summer of 2014 saw the Ukrainian defense forces mounting counteroffensives across the Donbas. The purpose of these offensives was to thwart westward expansion of the DPA and LPA, retrieve lost territory and neutralize the separatists’ offensive capability.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Kyiv won a string of victories, highlighted by recouping Slovyansk, Kramatorsk and the significant port city of Mariupol.<sup>4</sup>

Russia, intent on retaining a divided Ukraine and a viable proxy force, sought to recalibrate the operational and tactical balance of power.<sup>5</sup> While Russian participation had been thinly veiled during the early days of the conflict, it became far more pronounced during the summer of 2014; reports poured in indicating a deluge of Russian tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled rocket artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRSs) crossing the Don River, from Russia’s Rostov and Belgorod oblasts into battlefields in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. Further, Russian-based MLRSs—primarily BM-21 Grad, BM-30 Smerch and 9A52-4 Tornado systems—supported counteroffensive action through the summer and winter of 2014.<sup>6</sup>

The two battles for control of the airport illustrate the lengths to which Russia was willing to go to preserve its political and military foothold in the Donbas. The first battle, a deft Ukrainian victory, sowed the seeds for the second battle by demonstrating the DPA’s frailty and inability to conduct offensive operations against a prepared Ukrainian military. The second battle, a resounding Russian and DPA victory, contributed to the decisiveness of the Russian winter offensive, which all but guaranteed the stalemate in the Donbas that continues today.

With the stage set, the remainder of this paper chronicles the events of the battles and how they fit within the Russian operational offensives to retain their strategic objectives in the region.

## The First Battle of Donetsk Airport

The struggle for the Donetsk airport was conducted in two distinct segments. The First Battle of Donetsk Airport, a short, relatively one-sided affair, ended with the airport in the hands of the Ukrainian forces. The Second Battle of Donetsk Airport was a four-month attritional slug match that resulted in the destruction of the airport and left its remnants in the separatists' hands.

The airport, officially known as the Donetsk Sergei Prokofiev International Airport, is 5 kilometers northwest of Donetsk city and a few kilometers east of Pisky, a small hamlet outside of Donetsk. To the airport's northeast sits the town of Spartak. Both Pisky and Spartak had populations of approximately 2,000 people at the outset of the war. About 2 kilometers north of the airport lies Opytne, a town of 750 people. The towns and airport are all linked by modern roads, and all of the towns were critical to the fight for the airport.

The first battle was fought on 26 May 2014. Approximately 200 fighters from the DPA's Vostok Battalion and other sundry separatist units stormed the Ukrainian-controlled airport.<sup>7</sup> Soldiers from Russian vassal-state Chechnya were included in the assortment of fighters comprising the Vostok Battalion.<sup>8</sup> The attack stemmed from DPA basing locations in Donetsk. The DPA swept into the airport's perimeter and seized key facilities, including the terminals and logistics infrastructure. The deftness and surprise of the initial attack caused the airport's defenders to fall back to the western side of the airport.

The separatists, feeling momentum on their side, called for Kyiv's forces to evacuate the facility and cede all remaining territory at the airport. Kyiv rejected this ultimatum and instead issued its own proviso to the separatists, directing the DPA's forces to vacate the airport or face reprisal. As expected, the separatists refused these demands.<sup>9</sup>

With the separatists refusing to withdraw, the Ukrainian government sent in an airborne task force, supported with attack aviation and fighter aircraft, to quell the uprising. Throughout the remainder of the day, Ukrainian forces engaged separatist forces in the air and on the ground. The combined air-land offensive overpowered the separatists and pushed them from the airport. Although intermittent skirmishing continued along the outskirts of Donetsk, where the city and airport connect, by the morning of 27 May 2014 it was clear that the Ukrainian forces had won the battle.<sup>10</sup>

The First Battle of Donetsk Airport resulted in more than 50 dead fighters from across the various separatists' battalions.<sup>11</sup> The government of Ukraine, however, reported that they had not lost a single soldier in evicting the separatists.<sup>12</sup>

The battle was one of the first in a string of Ukrainian victories against the separatists that continued into July 2014.<sup>13</sup> The "Zabrodski Raid," in which Ukrainian Colonel Mykhailo Zabrodski's 95th Air Assault Brigade embarked on a 200-mile excursion to maintain Ukrainian operational momentum, is perhaps the high-water mark of Ukraine's success during this time.\* Zabrodski's brigade was able to advance from Kramatorsk, fight Russians and separatists at Bakhmat, Debal'tseve, Saur-Mogila, Krasni Luch and Luhansk. While in Luhansk, the

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\* The Ukrainian Army went through a series of reforms during the early phases of the war in the Donbas. As a result, unit designations and names changed during the conflict, and whole units were deactivated or reorganized. Consequently, units' names in this paper are listed in multiple ways; for instance, sources have the 95th Brigade designation as the 95th Air Assault Brigade, the 95th Airmobile Brigade and the 95th Airborne Brigade. The author has attempted to go with the most current name or the most commonly used name and designation.

brigade fought to relieve a beleaguered battalion that was defending the city's airport against a Russian-supported LPA attack to seize it.<sup>14</sup> By the end of July 2014, the offensive capability of Zabrodski's brigade had culminated, and the 95th Air Assault Brigade returned to the relative safety of Kramatorsk.

Ukrainian operational success represented an existential threat to the Russian-backed separatists, which, in turn, represented an existential threat to Russian military strategy and policy objectives in the region. This threat—tangible and on the precipice—triggered a resolute Russian response. Russia launched a counteroffensive—the summer offensive—to ensure retention of its subversive agenda in Ukraine and to retain its territorial acquisition in the Donbas.

### **The Summer Offensive: Setting the Scene for the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport**

Russia began to support its proxies in the Donbas more blatantly with indirect fire from across the Russian border in July 2014. The strike at Zelenopillya, in which Russian rocket fire killed over 30 Ukrainian soldiers, injured hundreds of other soldiers and destroyed two battalions' worth of combat platforms, is perhaps the best known of these attacks.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Russian land forces began to pour into Ukraine at an alarming rate. During the summer months of 2014, the number of Russian soldiers in Ukraine swelled to as high as 6,500.<sup>16</sup> These forces, organized into the hard-hitting task forces known as battalion tactical groups, or BTGs, were pulled from almost every Russian field army. Both Russian and separatist forces were organized into BTGs of 600–800 soldiers each. The Russians filled between eight and 14 BTGs, and the separatists filled 18 BTGs throughout Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.<sup>17</sup> Causality is difficult to discern, but the BTGs appear to have been organized in such a way as to negate Ukrainian strengths, while still providing a degree of deniability. For example, the BTGs included their own air defense capabilities and MLRSs, both of which significantly contributed to the success of Russia's summer offensive.

The Russian BTGs were sent into battle with their separatist proxies during the summer of 2014 to stop the hemorrhaging along the Donbas front, launching the summer offensive campaign. Historically speaking, Russia is no stranger to operations and campaigns. Digging through the pages of Russian military thought, one finds that it has a well-developed bench of theorist generals. Of note, Georgii Isserson, 20th century Russian general officer and military theorist, contends that “a front must be broken by means of a decisive operation. A front must be broken and totally crushed through its entire depth.”<sup>18</sup> The summer offensive was not a disconnected series of random battles; it was a comprehensive campaign to deny Ukrainian forces key terrain, destroy their offensive capabilities and reinforce Russia's proxy client, in a strategy much in line with Isserson's thoughts.

In Luhansk, the summer offensive was predominately focused on the airport. The battle for Luhansk airport does not have a clear start date, but it essentially began with the onset of hostilities in April 2014. It spiked in June of that year as separatists downed several aircraft near the airport. In late August, as part of a concerted effort to synchronize operations across the Donbas front, Russian and separatist forces launched an assault on the airport. The attack consisted of tanks, including the T-90 Main Battle Tank, and self-propelled artillery.<sup>19</sup> The battle for Luhansk airport concluded on 1 September 2014 with the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces.<sup>20</sup> The airport and its support facilities were destroyed, rendering the airport useless. The outcome of the battle served as a portent of things to come at the Donetsk airport.

The Battle of Ilovaisk was the summer offensive's decisive engagement, resulting in the Minsk Protocol. Separatists took the city of Ilovaisk, located in Donetsk oblast, during the initiation of hostilities in April 2014. The city is home to one of eastern Ukraine's major railroad hubs and therefore is a profitable objective. As previously mentioned, Ukrainian success in the spring of 2014 saw their forces advancing on all fronts. In mid-August, they attempted to retake Ilovaisk. Timed to link with the counterattack at the Luhansk airport, Russian T-90 and T-72B3 Main Battle Tanks, self-propelled artillery and MLRSs poured across the Don River and into the area surrounding Ilovaisk.<sup>21</sup> The Russian counterattack, undertaken in the last week of August, encircled the Ukrainian forces in Ilovaisk. Russian and separatist forces then laid siege to the trapped Ukrainians for approximately three weeks, while simultaneously launching local attacks to bleed the beleaguered forces.<sup>22</sup> Unable at last to withstand the bludgeoning at Ilovaisk, Kyiv issued orders to withdraw and then negotiated terms with Russian, DPR and DPA leadership. The siege ended on 1 September 2014 as Ukrainian forces fled Ilovaisk. Reports vary, but it is estimated that during three weeks of battle at Ilovaisk, the Ukrainians had more than 1,000 casualties and that over 1,000 Russian soldiers were killed.<sup>23</sup>

Russia's summer offensive curtailed Kyiv's offensive capability. Chronicling the events of the summer offensive, correspondent Alec Luhn wrote that "the defeat at Ilovaisk and a series of similar losses across eastern Ukraine . . . are part of what pressured Ukraine to head to the bargaining table for a cease-fire and peace plan," which was negotiated on 5 September 2014.<sup>24</sup> Journalists Howard Amos and Damien McElroy, reinforcing the changing operational and tactical situation, said, "The fortunes of separatist fighters, who were trapped in small areas around the cities of Luhansk and Donetsk, have been dramatically reversed over the last week, and they have pushed back troops loyal to Kyiv."<sup>25</sup>

### **The Second Battle of Donetsk Airport: "Cyborgs at Little Stalingrad"**

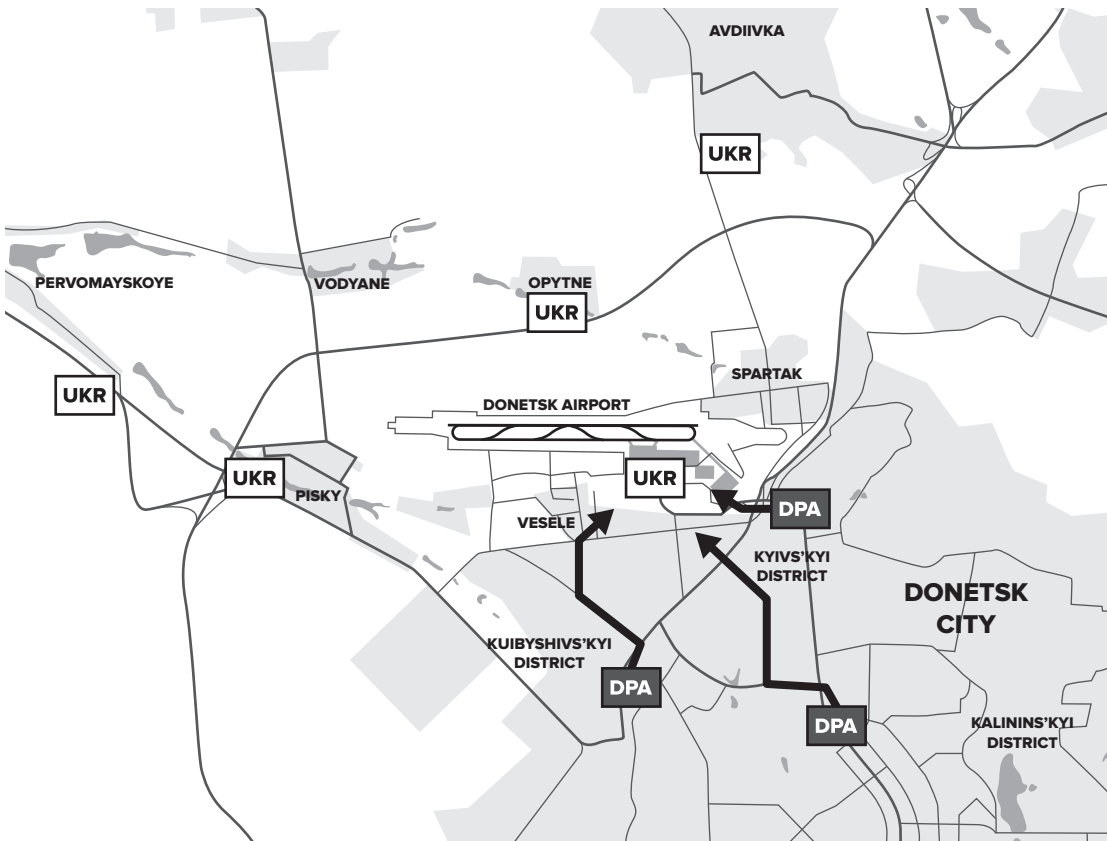
Defense analyst Franklin Holcomb correctly aligns the summer offensive with what came next. He writes, "Russian forces exploited their victory at Ilovaisk by launching a major offensive against Ukrainian positions outside the city of Donetsk at the Donetsk airport (28 September 2014 to 21 January 2015) and at the strategic rail hub of Debal'tseve (14 January to 20 February 2015)."<sup>26</sup> The Second Battle of Donetsk Airport and the siege at Debal'tseve were the bookends of the Russian winter offensive, which broke the back of Ukrainian land forces and resulted in the Minsk II agreement. Minsk II paved the way for a battlefield dominated by trenches positioned along a static front, artillery duels between the warring parties and a frozen conflict.

Although the First Battle of Donetsk Airport ended on 27 May 2014, and despite the cease-fire agreement of the Minsk protocol on 5 September, intermittent fighting at the airport and its surrounding area continued through the summer. As the sporadic fighting gained momentum, on 28 September 2014, the Donetsk airport found itself besieged again.

At the outset of this battle, the Ukrainian Army's 93d Mechanized Brigade and volunteer battalions were securing the airport. Donetsk city was in the hands of the DPA and the DPR. The DPA's separatist fighters and their Russian handlers were tightly intertwined in the urban area around Donetsk. They regularly employed indirect fire—mortar, artillery and BM-21 Grad MLRS—from the city into the airport to both draw counterbattery fire and to desensitize its defenders.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of drawing counterbattery into the city was to gain information. The more the Ukrainian forces returned fire into the city, the more the average citizens of Donetsk would turn against Kyiv's troops, thus helping to keep the Donbas fractured.

Figure 1

## Initial Attack on Donetsk Airport



On 29 September 2014, the separatists, augmented with Russian regulars, launched their attack to capture the airport. They leveraged massive salvos of artillery and MLRSs to suppress the airport's defenders to cover their ground advance. The separatists used high-rise apartment buildings in Donetsk's Kyivs'kyi District to call for and spot their artillery and rocket strikes, as well as to reconnoiter the area and monitor the situation while the initial thrust got underway.

Under cover of indirect fire, the DPA uncoiled from their hiding positions within the Kyivs'kyi District, Kuibyshevskiy District and the Donetsk train station.<sup>28</sup> Organized in BTGs, much in the same fashion as their Russian patrons, the DPA advanced along Donetsk's Kyivs'kyi Avenue, Artemivs'ka Street, Zlitna Street and other lesser thoroughfares (as shown in figure 1) to cordon the airport and prepare to advance therein.

Once at the airport's gates, the DPA split off onto the facility's service roads.<sup>29</sup> After punching through the government-controlled airport perimeter, the separatists fanned out and began to seize control of infrastructure. The DPA—notably, the Somali Battalion, the Sparta Battalion and the Vostok Battalion—established a foothold by seizing infrastructure along the eastern side of the airport. Between 1–3 October, the DPA's efforts focused on the old terminal and the hangars and airfield support facilities on the airport's eastern sector.

By 5 October, the DPA was firmly ensconced at the airport. It expanded its hold by methodical extension, rooted in and reinforced by secure lines of communication to Russian rear areas and basing locations in Donetsk. While not critical in early October, this network allowed Russia to rapidly support the DPA and Russian forces at the airport in January 2015, staving off defeat.<sup>†</sup>

By mid-October 2014, the separatists had dislodged most of the Ukrainian forces from the old terminal and muscled them into the airport's new terminal. At the start of the conflict, the new terminal was a modern seven-story edifice. By the time the DPA pushed the Ukrainians into it, it was little more than three floors within a dilapidated facade. By the end of October, the DPA had positioned themselves in the new terminal alongside their adversaries. The Ukrainians defending the new terminal, with a small residual force left at the old terminal and the air traffic control tower, included the Ukrainian 93d Mechanized Brigade, volunteer battalions from Right Sector, the Dnipro Regiment and other volunteer militias.<sup>‡</sup> The situation was chaotic and claustrophobic; the separatists occupied the bottom two floors, while the Ukrainian defenders occupied the third.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of autumn, the battle transitioned from an attenuating frontal attack to a positional battle that sought to exhaust the Ukrainians through a slow, attritional siege. To the outsider looking in, the siege might have appeared to be little more than a stalemate, but DPA action suggested otherwise. The separatists consolidated their positions around the airport, squeezing closed most of the Ukrainian forces' corridors to the outside world. Through the remainder of October and well into November 2014, the DPA conducted daily attacks; they focused on killing whatever presented itself outside the terminal and on pummeling Ukrainian defensive positions with rocket and artillery fire while reducing the airport's infrastructure. The goal of destroying the airport was twofold: it centralized its Ukrainian defenders, and it devalued the facility's future use.

As dire as the situation was for the Ukrainians, many small routes in and out of the airport remained open. The semi-porous siege allowed limited but vital resupply and reinforcement from Pisky, the small town due west of the airstrip that was still under Kyiv's control.<sup>31</sup> Reinforcements included the 79th Airborne Brigade, 80th Airborne Brigade and 95th Airborne Brigade, who brought relief to elements from the 93d Mechanized Brigade and the 3d Spetsnaz Regiment.<sup>32</sup>

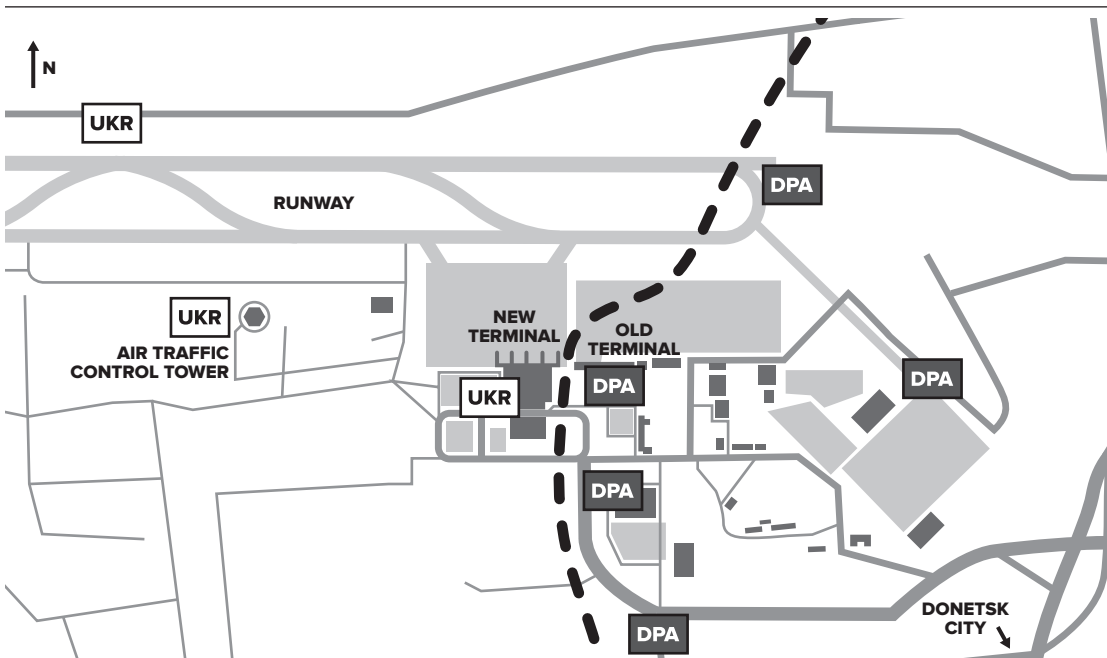
In the meantime, the airport's power, water and heat were null. As autumn gave way to winter, the frigid weather began to factor into the tactical equation. The average temperature through October 2014 was 45 degrees Fahrenheit, and it continued to plummet through the winter. Through November and December, the average temperature fell to 36 degrees and 39 degrees, respectively. Rain, snow and biting temperatures compounded the tactical problems for Ukrainian troops.<sup>33</sup> Holed up in the airport's terminal and air traffic control tower, they had to rely on generators for intermittent power and space heaters for limited amounts of localized heat. This situation put basic survival on equal footing with fighting. Their resolution to endure and hold out in such perilous conditions earned them the moniker "the cyborgs of Donetsk airport."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Secure ground lines of communication and interior lines also allowed Russia to win the Battle of Debal'tseve. This was because it was able to push supplies and reinforcements all the way from basing locations in Rostov (and beyond) to the front with no fear of molestation. See "How Ukraine Rebels Rely on Russians," *BBC News*, 31 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32114522>.

<sup>‡</sup> The Azov Battalion is reported to have participated in the battle, but the report is single-sourced and cannot be cross-referenced for accuracy.

Figure 2  
Situation, December 2014



As the siege wore on, both sides faced the elimination of airport infrastructure and the continued attrition of force.<sup>35</sup> As conditions devolved, the battlefield took on a look reminiscent of World War II's Battle of Stalingrad, resulting in the nickname "Little Stalingrad."<sup>36</sup>

The DPA, supported by Russian special operations forces, launched another concerted attack on the old terminal on 28 November.<sup>37</sup> The attack lasted three days and exacted a high toll on the Ukrainian defense. Although they had held their small outcropping at the old terminal, by this point they had been worn down so much that they could not withstand another attack.<sup>38</sup>

By 5 December, the Ukrainian's grip had slipped. The old terminal had been reduced to little more than a skeleton, unable to be defended or provide cover. As a result, the Ukrainians fell back to the new terminal, as shown in figure 2.<sup>39</sup> The new terminal, given its location at the airport, the limited remaining infrastructure and the territorial advances of the Russian-backed DPA, was the last tenable position for the Ukrainians. Any further territorial loss would mean defeat.

The situation maintained a degree of stasis through much of December. The separatists continued to attack Ukrainian defensive positions, now focused at the new terminal. The DPA continued to target Ukrainian basing and sustainment in Pisky with rocket and artillery fire. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians continued to defend themselves at the new terminal, resolved to retain the airport. They conducted limited attacks against Russian and DPA forces and maintained limited resupply and casualty transfer between their positions on the front and back at Pisky.

With the arrival of 2015, the winds of change began to blow at the Donetsk airport. Perhaps sensing that it had the upper hand, the DPA launched another three-day attack around 10 January. The attack focused on the forces within the new terminal and the air traffic control tower.<sup>40</sup> It was the final straw for the air traffic control tower, which had been consistently attacked

throughout the battle. After months of unremitted shelling and unable to withstand any further attack, the tower gave way, collapsing on 12 January.<sup>41</sup>

The tower's collapse serves as a useful metaphor for the Ukrainian defense of the Donetsk airport. Since May 2014, the tower had stood stalwart in the face of the Russian-backed invaders, as had the brave Ukrainians who had come to the airport's defense. Battered throughout the contest, it defiantly stood until it could take no more. At about the same time, the Ukrainian defense also teetered on defeat, unable to absorb much more abuse before faltering.

Likely sensing the “cyborgs” precarious state, the DPA issued an ultimatum on 13 January 2015 that directed the Ukrainian forces to depart the airport by five that evening.<sup>42</sup> The Ukrainians refused the ultimatum, and the siege continued. By this point, Russian-backed separatists had established a foothold in the new terminal and the Ukrainians rapidly lost their hold, going from controlling the second and third floors of the airport to only possessing the second floor. Furthermore, as casualties continued to mount, the Ukrainians were no longer able to evacuate injured soldiers from the terminal due to the proximity of DPA and Russian ground forces.<sup>43</sup>

Aware that defeat was right around the corner, the Ukrainians launched a last-ditch assault on 17 January.<sup>44</sup> The offensive was one part counterattack, a last vestige to defeat the DPA, and one part rescue mission for their wounded soldiers. It caught the DPA and Russians off guard, allowing the evacuation of a large number of casualties.<sup>45</sup> By 18 January 2015, reports surfaced that Ukrainian forces had evicted the separatists and retaken the airport; however, these reports were premature.<sup>46</sup>

On 19 January, Russia dispatched an additional 600 soldiers, organized into two BTGs, to reinforce its stake at the Donetsk airport. The BTGs brought T-90 tanks, additional artillery, MLRSs and Buk air defense systems.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, a substantial number of Russian special operations forces descended on the airport.<sup>48</sup>

The final throes of the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport played out from 19–21 January. The Russian reinforcements of 19 January tempered the Ukrainian counterattack, swinging the tide of battle back in favor of the separatists. The Ukrainians, confined to the terminal's second floor, were out of options.

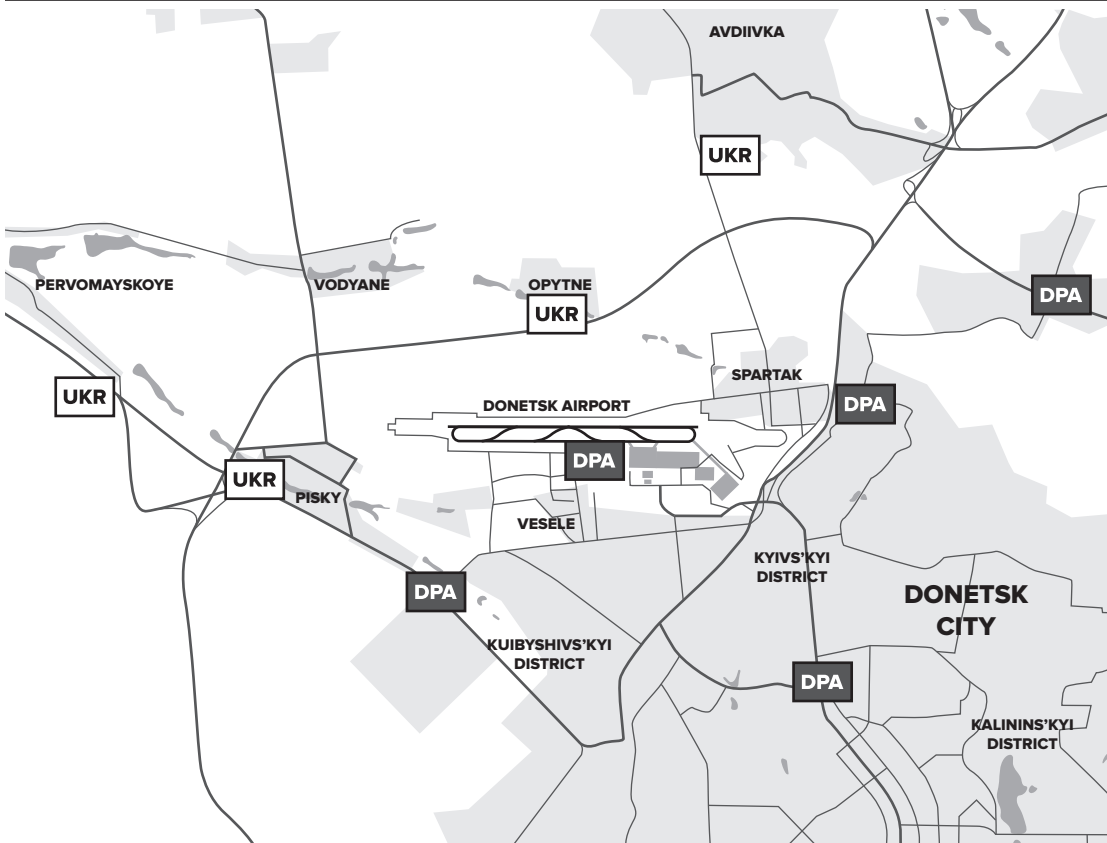
On 21 January 2015, the final Ukrainian defensive positions were overrun. In the *coup de grâce*, Russian special operations forces explosively dropped the top floors of the new terminal onto the Ukrainian soldiers holding out on the second floor.<sup>49</sup> This expert demolition work broke the defense's back, both metaphorically and physically, resulting in more than 50 Ukrainian soldiers being killed or injured.<sup>50</sup> The Ukrainians' withdrawal from the airport was a mix of chaos and deliberate action as some soldiers fled on foot and others moved as part of small units disengaging from the terminal. The DPA and Russians captured many fleeing soldiers.<sup>51</sup>

The Second Battle of Donetsk Airport—a 242-day siege—was finally over. The eviscerated airport was now relegated to the detritus of war. As illustrated in figure 3, separatists occupied what was left of the airport.<sup>52</sup> Ukrainian forces—including the 93d Mechanized Brigade, 80th Airborne Brigade, Right Sector elements and other units—occupied defensive positions in what was left of Pisky, Opytne and Avdiivka. Doing so established a de facto front line along the northern edge of the city of Donetsk.<sup>53</sup> The existing front line, a vast network of interconnected battle positions, is tied together by miles of trenches and underground bunkers. This



Figure 3

### Approximate Front Lines, 22 January 2015



landscape, reminiscent of World War I, stands in stark contrast to the supposed high-tech wizardry of Information Age warfare and Russian hybrid warfare.<sup>54</sup>

Stepping away from the tactical level and instead viewing these events from an operational level, the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport must be viewed as a component of the Russian winter offensive. This offensive—ended with the Ukrainian defeat at the Battle of Debal'tseve—concluded on 20 February 2015 and was politically decisive as it resulted in the Minsk II agreement.

Following the winter offensive, Russia withdrew a number of forces; at their height, there had been approximately 10,000 Russian troops in Ukraine.<sup>55</sup> To date, this offensive was the last phase of major combat operations in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Since February 2015, only small-scale engagements have taken place.

In all, estimates contend that a combined 36,000 Russian, DPA and LPA soldiers participated in the summer and winter offensives in the Donbas. Accurate numbers on the residual Russian force in Ukraine are difficult to ascertain, but arguments from May 2015 suggest that 200 tanks, 525 armored personnel carriers, 145 pieces of artillery and 83 MLRSs remain supporting Russian and separatist operations in that region.<sup>56</sup> However, more recent unclassified information on Russian war materiel in the region is unavailable, leaving the reader to speculate on increases or decreases in combat power since 2015.

Russian forces, drawn from across the reaches of the Federation, used the Battles of the Donetsk Airport and the other major battles and offensives in the Donets River basin to hone their martial acumen and skill. Estimates indicate that 27 of Russia's 57 tank and infantry brigades and regiments participated in the two offensives, which equates to significant combat experience for roughly 47 percent of Russia's warfighting units.<sup>57</sup> This does not account for the command and control, sustainment and force projection knowledge and experience gained during the same period.

## **Reflections on the Fight for the Donetsk Airport**

### *Decisiveness and the Conduct of War*

The fight for the airport, when viewed as part of the summer and winter offensives, helped contribute to two decisive Russian campaigns. The word *decisive* is used loosely in the modern parlance of war, but historian Cathal Nolan provides an instructive example. He said, "'Decision' is a more morally and politically neutral term than victory or defeat and more useful in describing a war's outcome. A war is usually deemed to have been decisive when some important strategic and political goal was achieved in arms, gaining a lasting advantage that secured one side's key values and hard interests."<sup>58</sup> Bringing Nolan's definition to an operational and tactical level, decisiveness in war is achieved when battlefield activity generates effects that drive a political decision.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, notable international relations strategist Thomas Schelling argues that decisiveness—a political decision reached through the effect of the use of arms—is one of the primary reasons for which a nation or actor engages in war. Specifically, Schelling states that "war appears to be, or threatens to be, not so much a contest of strength as one of endurance, nerve, obstinacy and pain. It appears to be, and threatens to be, not so much a contest of military strength as a bargaining process—dirty, extortionate and often quite reluctant bargaining on one side or both."<sup>60</sup>

Although U.S. wars following World War II have lacked traditional decisiveness, the concept retains a role in war, as the conflict for the Donetsk airport and the Russian offensives illustrate. In most cases, decisiveness is the result of a significantly destructive battle or campaign.

### *Organization of Land Forces: Seeking Dominance and Dislocation*

Although there has been much talk about Russian New Generation (hybrid) warfare, the truth on the ground is that conventional land combat has dominated the Russo-Ukrainian War. Cyber and electronic attacks have augmented separatist and Russian land forces in the conflict, but the fact remains that the war has been fought on the ground with tanks, mechanized infantry and a robust package of rockets, missiles and artillery. The Battles of the Donetsk Airport, straddling both of the offensives, illustrate this point.

The Russians employed an innovative concept, the BTG, to locally dominate the Ukrainians and disaggregate their airpower and land forces. The First Battle of Donetsk Airport highlighted attack aviation's ability to tactically dominate a battle. However, during the spring and summer of 2014, separatist air defense capabilities became more robust, as evidenced by their string of shoot downs across the Donbas.

Between 2 May and 5 May 2014, the separatists downed three MI-24 attack helicopters in Slovyansk. In June 2014, the separatists downed an AN-30 reconnaissance airplane in

Slovyansk, an IL-76 troop transport plane near Luhansk airport and an MI-8 transport helicopter in Slovyansk, collectively killing 63 Ukrainian soldiers. In July 2014, the Separatists continued their anti-air offensive by shooting down an AN-26 transport plane over Luhansk and three SU-25 fighter jets near Amvrosiyivka and Saur-Mogila.<sup>61</sup> It is almost impossible to find any mention of Ukrainian aircraft on the battlefield after August 2014. The Russian-backed separatists had counterbalanced the fighting by dislocating Ukrainian joint capabilities.

### *Positional Warfare and Sieges*

Contrary to conventional narratives on the primacy and high-mindedness of maneuver warfare and the crippling effects of electronic and cyber warfare, positional warfare and sieges are the zeitgeist of contemporary war. At the tactical and operational levels, the Battles of the Donetsk Airport are an example of positional warfare. Russians and their interlopers used tactics, movement and firepower to lure the Ukrainians into a fraught position. Next, they encircled them, largely isolating them from external support. They also leveraged combined arms to kill Ukrainian forces and destroy existing infrastructure, further applying pressure on them.

These battles are one data point that support the pivotal relevancy of positional warfare and sieges in modern war. Positional battles and sieges have also commanded the counter-Islamic State campaigns in Iraq, Syria and the Philippines.<sup>62</sup> It remains to be seen if this trend in positional warfare and the employment of sieges will continue, but current conditions suggest that it will.

### *Basing*

The Battles of the Donetsk Airport razed the town of Pisky.<sup>63</sup> The importance of places like Pisky often go overlooked when examining battles because of their auxiliary status. However, in positional wars and sieges, basing is necessary. As defense analyst Irena Chalupa points out, “Pisky is so shattered because it is so important. It is on a critical supply route to Ukrainian soldiers defending Donetsk’s most violent combat zone: the Sergei Prokofiev International Airport.”<sup>64</sup> Towns situated like Pisky are often the lifeblood for battles in adjacent areas. As a result, they become enemy targeting priorities. Therefore, as sieges and positional warfare continue to dominate the conduct of war, collateral damage of auxiliary basing locations is likely to increase.

Russia used camps positioned along the Russo-Ukraine border, primarily in the Rostov and Belgorod oblasts, to support its combat mission in the Donbas. As shown in figure 4, three known camps exist—Pavlovka, Kuybyshevo and Kuzminsky—but many more are likely littering the area adjacent to the Ukrainian border. Each of these three camps was established at some point after May 2013; they did not exist on map imagery before then. The camp at Pavlovka was established at some point between April and May 2013 and is 2 kilometers from the Ukrainian border. The Kuybyshevo camp is a larger tactical assembly area and firebase and is located 1 kilometer from the border. On the other hand, the camp at Kuzminsky is 46 kilometers from the border with Ukraine; it is likely an intermediate staging base positioned along a mobilization and deployment path to the front.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to being tactical assembly areas for reinforcements, refit and sustainment, these camps also serve as firebases. Reports indicate that the camps at Pavlovka and Kuybyshevo are home to Russian artillery and rocket brigades that have peppered the Donbas battlefield with BM-21 Grad, BM-30 Smerch and Tornado MLRS fire.<sup>66</sup> Unclassified reporting has not

Figure 4

## Known Russian Basing Locations



identified additional firebases, but based on the number and dispersion of rocket and artillery attacks into Ukraine, it is likely that many more firebases dot the border.

Moreover, camps deeper in Russia, like the Kuzminsky Camp, indicate intermediate movement and staging locations for Russian brigades and regiments that move from the far-flung edges of the Federation to support operations in the Donbas. Documented participation from the most remote units, including the 5th Tank Brigade in Ulan-Ude and the 37th Motorized Infantry Brigade in Kyakhta from Russia's 36th Combined Arms Army, support this argument.<sup>67</sup>

This basing plan has allowed the Russian Federation and its armed forces to maintain its acquisitions in Ukraine by providing a steady flow of men and materiel along secure ground lines. Russia's multiple counterattacks and relief of DPA units at the Donetsk airport, among many other instances, highlights this reality.

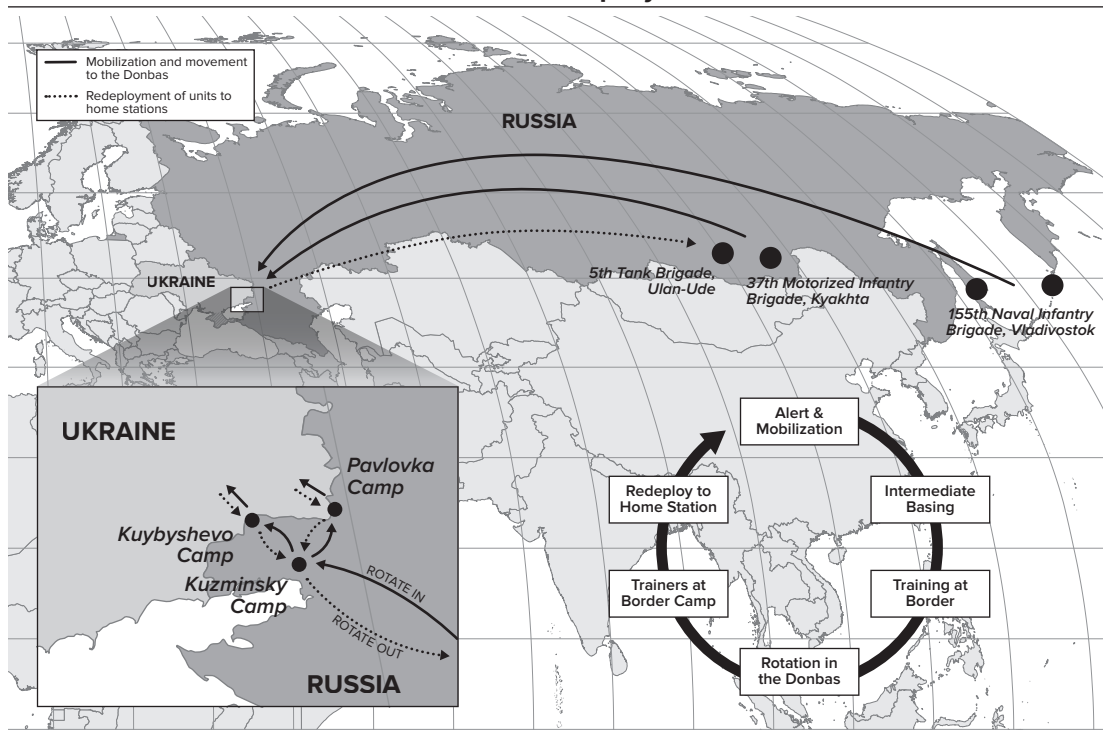
### *Mobilization and Deployment Model*

An assessment also can be made about the Russian mobilization and deployment cycle in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Russian assembly areas, primarily located in Russia's Rostov and Belgorod oblasts, enabled reinforcements and logistics to be rapidly sent to the front at critical points during the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport, ensuring that their proxy forces were supported and that the Ukrainians were defeated. Projections about the cycle (as illustrated in figure 5) can be derived from this information.

Initially, a unit is alerted and mobilized from its home station. From there, it likely moves to an intermediate camp, like the one at Kuzminsky. From intermediate basing, the unit continues movement to a tactical assembly area or forward operating base, like those at Pavlovka or Kuybyshevo. At the tactical assembly area, the unit likely spends a period of three to four weeks training for combat operations or serving as a reaction force; this was the case for many of the reinforcements who rapidly pushed into the struggle for the Donetsk airport in January 2015. From the tactical assembly area, the unit rotates into the Donbas, conducting a

Figure 5

## Predictive Russian Deployment Model



one-for-one replacement of the preceding Russian brigade, regiment or BTG. The unit likely spends a period of time (perhaps four to eight weeks) in the Donbas before returning to one of the Russian-based camps. At the camp, it conducts refit but may also assist in training other units based on its recent combat experience. This might take upward of four weeks. Once complete, the unit likely redeploys to its home station, probably again passing through intermediate staging camps along the way.

In all, a Russian brigade or regiment might spend four to six months conducting a deployment to the Donbas. This quick turn allows many units from the Russian army to cycle through Ukraine, picking up invaluable combat experience, the likes of which no combat training center can provide.

### *Tactical and Operational Mobility—Maintaining Tactical and Operational Reach*

The Russo-Ukrainian War’s summer and winter offensives highlight the primacy of Russia’s ability to quickly and effectively move large numbers of combat formations and sustainment across a support area to the fight on the front. Operational mobility is linked with basing and with the idea of the Predictive Russian Deployment Model, as seen in figure 5. This model, its effectiveness demonstrated multiple times during the fight for the Donetsk airport, illustrates that the Russians have a well-developed and fluid paradigm for quickly reinforcing their forces at the tactical and operational levels in regional conflicts.

A recent report by Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, USA, Ret., and the Center for European Policy Analysis echoes this point, but does so through the lens of Russia’s Zapad 2017

exercise. Specifically, Hodges argues, “Zapad demonstrated Russia’s ability to move equipment and forces quickly and smoothly from east to west and farther into Belarus. More concerning than actual firepower was Russia’s logistical prowess in terms of speed compared to NATO. Russia’s speed comes from its ability to reduce friction through infrastructure and capabilities. This includes . . . natural ‘interior lines’ of movement within Russian borders. . . . Russia faces no international boundaries or customs procedures that could inhibit movement in a crisis.”<sup>68</sup>

As the U.S. military focuses its attention on a refractory Russia, operational and tactical mobility must be taken into consideration. As the Battles of the Donetsk Airport illustrate, this know-how and capability allowed Russia and its DPA proxy to overcome impending defeat more than once.

### *Proxies and Clients*

The DPA and LPA are Russian military proxies in the region. They enable Putin’s pursuit of his policy aims in Ukraine. In the Donbas, Russia tapped into existing social networks to build its proxy army. Specifically, Russia took advantage of the Russian identity—ethnic Russians, speakers of the Russian language, practitioners of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Slavic people and land historically tied to Russia.<sup>69</sup> The Russian identity goes beyond the border of Russia, Crimea or the Donbas. The Russo-Ukrainian War illustrates that the Russian identity is powerful enough to pull in fighters from Moldova, Belarus, the Baltic States and the Balkans to fill the ranks of separatist battalions.<sup>70</sup>

Russia also leveraged political clients for military force. Chechen fighters at the Battles of the Donetsk Airport, and throughout the greater Donbas region, highlight that Russia leverages Chechen fighters wherever it looks to sow the seeds of chaos.<sup>71</sup> Chechnya, of the 21 republics within the Russian Federation, is ruled by Ramzam Kadyrov.<sup>§</sup> Vladimir Putin put Kadyrov in power after the bloody Chechen War in order to suppress the historically irascible Chechen nation.<sup>72</sup>

The argument can be made that Putin and Kadyrov have a patron-client relationship in which Kadyrov provides support to Putin’s policy aims in order to retain his seat of power in Grozny. To be sure, Chechen fighters have been found generating chaos in Syria, Iraq (during both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve) and Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup> This involvement, often disguised as Chechens being dutiful Muslims seeking to support their brother Muslims on the battlefield, is not accidental or coincidental. Instead, it is a deliberate demonstration of support from client to patron. Chechens and other northern Caucasus fighters will continue to be found on Russian or Russian-proxy battlefields. The Chechens offer a degree of deniability while providing tenacious fighters who have proven themselves on the battlefield time and again.

Taking the patron-client relationship argument a step further, Russia will continue to use proxy forces to both augment its combat power and to obfuscate its involvement in areas in which it seeks to minimize its direct participation. It will continue to use preexisting social networks aligned with the Russian identity to draw support in vulnerable regions.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>§</sup> Due to the ongoing territorial disputes that dominate Russian and regional geopolitics, the number of subordinate administrative districts is in dispute. For this article, the CIA World Factbook serves as the baseline for the number of administrative subunits within the Russian Federation. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to shed light on the Battles of the Donetsk Airport in hopes of generating better understanding about them and the Russo-Ukrainian War. This work is certainly limited, most notably by the author's monolinguist pursuit for information, which in most cases has resulted in only English-based sources. Also, much of the information that would be helpful remains classified in vaults spread across Eastern Europe. As time passes and more information becomes declassified, future writers and historians will be able to fill in the gaps or correct inaccuracies in this paper.

These battles are important because they remind students of war that rugged, land-centric combined arms warfare has not been thrown into the dustbin of history but is instead alive and well. The Russo-Ukrainian War, fought on the ground with tanks, infantry and artillery, has pulverized towns like Pisky, Opytne and Debal'tseve. Its battles have contributed to over 13,000 people killed,<sup>75</sup> 1.5 million people displaced and 9 percent of Ukrainian territory under de facto Russian control.<sup>76</sup>

The war is not over. Ukrainian forces are dug in along a vast trench array that dots the front, running from Donetsk to the eastern border of Ukraine, shared with Russia along Luhansk oblast. Russian-backed separatists periodically make advances toward strategically important cities like Avdiivka and Mariupol but have not yet gone to the lengths they did during the summer and winter offensives of 2014 and early 2015.

Ukraine has not initiated any major offensive to retake its lost territory since the summer of 2014, when Russia actively intervened to stop Ukrainian momentum and save its proxy in the Donbas. Ukraine, while continuing to improve its military since the early days of the Russo-Ukrainian War, is not likely to launch such an offensive because of Russia's willingness to preserve its interest in the region. Therefore, one can ascertain that the conflict is likely to remain divided—Crimea in Russian hands and the Donbas in the hands of the Russian-backed DPA and LPA—for the foreseeable future.

Finally, and perhaps most important, it is instructive to understand that the U.S. Army has arguably not fought an opponent that can make it pay for poor or untimely operational or strategic decisions in over 60 years. The Russian military threat, while not as dangerous as that of the Red Army during the Cold War, possesses the ability to physically defeat and logistically exhaust the U.S. Army. Russian ground forces, as demonstrated in this paper, have fought significant battles and waged decisive sieges on a scale that vastly exceeds what U.S. Army brigade combat teams (BCTs) can experience at combat training centers. Russian generals, logisticians and other specialists have gained significant command and control, sustainment and application experience that the U.S. Army's warfighter exercises can only marginally replicate.

The fact that Russia has rotated 27 brigades and regiments through the Donbas while the U.S. Army possesses only 31 BCTs must not be overlooked. The Russian military, especially its ground forces and its combat experience, need to be respected. Naivete or hubris that sweeps aside their combat experience will likely result in peril for those that meet them on future battlefields.

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