WITH THE DONBAS BATTALION

A young reporter gets his first taste of war in eastern Ukraine.

BY CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

In the evening, the elementary school is quiet, filled only with the low murmur of conversation and the sliding, clicking, and scraping of guns. The men sit on their sleeping bags or in small chairs meant for children and prepare their weapons. One chalkboard is still covered with math problems; another features the words *Putin, Fuck Yourself*. Taras Shevchenko, a seminal 19th-century writer whose work contributed to the construction of Ukrainian national identity, stares down from a portrait on the wall. It's mid-August in eastern Ukraine and this school in Kurakhove, about 50 kilometers east of the Separatist stronghold of Donetsk, has been repurposed as a barracks and staging ground for the Donbas Battalion's operations.

I had driven to Kurakhove on empty highways, through open fields of sunflowers and grass and wheat, under a big evening sky painted dull yellow and orange and blue. It was quiet then, though the reminders of war were everywhere: trenches dug into burnt fields, tanks positioned by the side of the highway, the twisted metal skeleton of a structure that once supported power lines, the battered road signs and pockmarked asphalt of a once-busy intersection now torn apart by shelling.

In eastern Ukraine, there is a casual juxtaposition of concepts foreign to the world I left behind in Europe and America. Men with guns outnumber civilians in restaurants; minivans, a symbol of the suburban society in which I grew up, here are adorned with machine guns and used as vehicles of war; brightly colored community exercise equipment has been appropriated by men in mismatched fatigues. Now, in Kurakhove, I watch a man don military gear as he listens to Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son"—*They send you down to war, Lord / And when you ask them, "How much should we give?" / Oh, they only answer, "More, more, more."*

War has not simply torn this place apart; it has changed the way the world works for those who live here. It has perverted my understanding of what is natural, maybe fundamental in human society. Ivan, one of my acquaintances in the grenadier unit of Donbas Battalion, young and tall with short cropped blond hair and a measured voice, wants to tell me more about his "fucking summer holiday." Fucked-up is the new normal.

I went to Ukraine a year after graduating from Penn and after completing my master's degree in European history through a program at Oxford, the University of Leiden, and the Sorbonne. I left academia because I believed that out here in a place where humanity is at its most exposed and raw, I might better understand something fundamental about the way the world works and the way history is made—about who people really are.

I came here to get as close to the conflict as I could, to see how it was being fought and why, to better understand the lives of those fighting it and those affected by it, and to try to grasp the history unfolding here. I believed there was an important story to be told. What I found was a situation immune to the reductive efforts of media to define and describe it.

This trip to Ukraine was my first foray into journalism. I found myself chasing shelling and following the path of conflict. On July 17, I was one of the first reporters on the scene of the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. It was a major story that drew international attention, and I was fortunate to be able to publish an article in the *Telegraph* about the crash and the civilian cost of the war in eastern Ukraine. But while the significance of the crash was not lost on me, my goal was always to get close to active sites of conflict rather than report on the collateral damage left in its wake. In August, after weeks of arrangements and conversations through a network of connections, I managed to embed with Donbas Battalion, an anti-Separatist militia group fighting in eastern Ukraine.

On the morning of our departure for the first major attack on Iloviask, Donbas Battalion receives a wooden box of medical supplies: blood coagulators, bandages, wound sealant. In the gymnasium, green wooden cases of weapons are stacked high beneath the basketball nets.

The night before, in the warm evening air outside the school, men had waited in line to use the improvised showers; inside, a commander stood in the hallway flanked by small desks, his men in formation before him. Now, in the evening, we eat, talk, smoke. Later, I sleep restlessly on the wooden floor of the classroom as the radio crackles and soldiers snore.

The next morning is cool, the sky clear. My first anxious cigarette is acrid and harsh. I wish the momentary pause would last forever. Wood-smoke rises from a small fire on the other side of the field. Outside, soldiers smoke, wash, and eat; an old man hands me a pack of strong unfiltered cigarettes. A soldier plays AC/DC through a small cellphone speaker. Artillery is mounted on the back of one pickup truck, a machine gun on the back of another. A human skull with a cigarette in its teeth rests on an old ammunition crate being used as a coffee table. I wonder if it came from a dead Separatist or from the biology classroom.

I am driven to another base in Kurakhove to meet the rest of the battalion by "Thirteen," a gruff, lanky Georgian with a beard that seems to have been on a progressive march toward his eyebrows since puberty. There I meet up with a couple of other members of the press. I am the only non-Ukrainian here, although many of the men speak some English. Roman, with his soft face and thin facial hair, and the somewhat older Alexsandr, who has a tellingly battered Leica slung over his shoulder, flip a coin for the last spot in the car.

"I guess it's luck," Roman says on winning the place.

"I only hope it's good luck," I respond.

Our car has certainly seen combat before. The front light and rear window have been shot out. Maybe it's the bullet holes in the windscreen in front of him that prompts Thirteen to ask if any of us can drive.

The convoy is a motley collection of dozens of (mostly) civilian vehicles repurposed for war, and it grows as we meet up with other battalions closer to the front. Bulletproof vests are draped over the doors of old Lada sedans in lieu of armor plating. The few armored personnel carriers (APCs) are decades old. A small tank rolls by; I feel as though I should be seeing it on celluloid rather than the battlefield, yet a man's face peeks through the hatch as it maneuvers the rural roads. Decommissioned APCs can be bought privately for $10,000 "for fishing trips," then donated to the Battalion and re-commissioned for war by installing a machine gun on the top. Public buses that have had their windows shot out are used to bring soldiers to the front line. Utility vans have had their sliding doors removed and artillery mounted inside. Pickup trucks have heavy weaponry mounted on the back; civilian trucks sport heavy sheet metal welded onto the sides to provide protection to the troops in the back.

Berek—tall, young, and often shirtless, with a cigarette in his hand and an automatic rifle and grenade launcher draped over his shoulder—tells me that these military operations are like "surgery," adding that "you have to cut away" Separatists like "cancer." But our operation is lacking in surgical precision. Artillery and mortars, for example, sometimes pound civilian areas—with little accuracy—in which Separatists are holed up. "We're shooting at shadows," Berek tells me. "It can get messy."

After about 20 minutes, our car runs out of gas and we are forced to fall behind the convoy in order to find a place to refill. Thirteen keeps his receipt from the pumps—maybe the Battalion will reimburse him after the battle, assuming he survives. Now deep in the Donbas—territory solidly sympathetic to the Separatists—we get a flat tire and have to stop. In the back of Thirteen's car we find only a badminton racket. A couple of soldiers take a

local man with them to find a spare. A British correspondent—dark hair neatly combed back, brown leather boots polished and clean—appears and starts asking questions. But his "fixer" interrupts and says they must leave: they could get ambushed at any moment. He's right—it's dangerous here and, separated from the convoy, we are all exposed. Locals drive by, some talking on cell phones. With whom are they speaking? To whom are they loyal? It would be easy for a small team of Separatists to be called in to take us out by the side of the road. Thirteen and another soldier set up an ad-hoc defensive position up the road, but the approach from the east is exposed.

Eventually the tire arrives, and we soon find ourselves driving quickly to catch up to the convoy, accompanied by Semen Semenchenko, the Battalion's 39-year-old commander. Then we get separated and lose our way on paved roads that roll across undulating fields and dirt tracks that rattle the car's fragile suspension. A young Ukrainian reporter, lacking a bulletproof vest and helmet and looking entirely out of place in a war zone, miraculously has brought a map book and gives directions to the driver. It would be a bad time for a wrong turn; we might end up on the Separatist side of the front line. But we manage to rejoin the attacking force and stop at a gas station to regroup and buy drinks and food.

I had never imagined war like this. I had pictured organization, discipline, modern equipment, stern commanders in high boots directing men and materiél. What I found in eastern Ukraine was a ragtag amalgamation of men of wildly different ages and backgrounds fighting with old and improvised equipment and led by officers with questionable tactical ability. One soldier is a graphic designer; another is a Tatar Muslim from Crimea; another plays clarinet and has just graduated from conservatory. ("This is my instrument now," he says, pointing at his gun.) The professional soldiers are augmented by overweight office-dwellers presumably bored with their old lives. The soldiers have only been paid about $100 over the past two months; even the outsiders from Georgia and other seemingly disinterested professionals don't appear to be here for the money. On the whole the men here seem spurred by some combination of Ukrainian nationalism, anti-Russian sentiment, and an excitement for conflict.

Twenty-six-year-old Sava, a soldier responsible for communications in the Battalion who had been an IT worker in Kiev, tells me that the long, bloody demonstrations at Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Kiev's Independence Square) "helped form the conception of citizenship in some way." While Maidan may not have been entirely successful in replacing the political establishment in Ukraine, for many it represented a national awakening and provided a renewed sense of political engagement, thus contributing to a burgeoning Ukrainian identity. But the growing schism between the eastern, pro-Russian part of the country and the more European-oriented western region is a manifestation of complicated and long-standing mentalities and emotional ties.

"In the first place, this is an internal conflict, a conflict of mentality—there is an element of citizen war here," Rosomaha, Donbas Battalion's deputy commander of internal relations, tells me through a translator. "The nation is very young," he adds, and "Ukrainian society is not formed." But the nascent Ukrainian identity inadvertently seems to exclude many of those in the east, who don't approve of the west-leaning orientation of the government in Kiev. Their resulting sense of disengagement and disenfranchisement has helped fuel the conflict—as have forces and influences from outside the region.

Yet many of the soldiers are driven by urges that have long motivated young men. As one soldier said about another: "Before, he had no sense of life, but this war gave him a sense of life." The events in Ukraine over the past year, whether political protests in Kiev or fighting in the east, have provided the opportunity for people to redefine their relationship with the state and assert themselves in a way that was impossible before. The Donbas Battalion is one result of that opportunity. Franko, a bilingual, middle-aged Ukrainian American with a distinct New York accent, tells me how "extraordinarily ordinary" and well intentioned its 500 members are.

But while the militia groups have sided with the government in Kiev, the relationship between them is tenuous and unstable. There is a feeling, endemic among the men in Donbas Battalion, that the war against local Separatists and Russian forces is only a part of the problem. Upset with the corruption and the government's unwillingness to change—what Rosomaha calls the "huge gap between government and citizen society in Ukraine"—most of the men believe that there could eventually be what Franko calls "an armed Maidan." One officer tells me that the government in Kiev "should be scared," adding that Donbas is a "group of thinking people who have guns." Some openly express suspicions that the government may have sabotaged the Battalion's efforts—that troop movements coordinated with Kiev have led to confrontations with enemy forces who seem to have been provided privileged information. The war Kiev has waged so far has just been a "morphine drip," Franko tells me, one with limited military support and "antiquated" equipment.

The scene at the gas station is surreal: soldiers from the Right Sector and Donbas, Azov, and Shahktar battalions spill out of sedans and pickup trucks and vans and jump off of APCs to crowd into the Sun Market gas station and convenience store. The women at the counter are expressionless as the men buy drinks and snacks for the upcoming battle. It feels like a perverted field trip. But soon, after a mass cry of *Slava Ukraina!* ("Glory to Ukraine!"), we drive off. Thirteen has one hand on the wheel, the other on his pistol. We pass men on bicycles and others bringing in hay. In the small village of Osykove, where pails of fruits and vegetables are for sale in front of small houses, we are forced to drive around cows wandering across the road. A little girl in her underwear plays by herself, seemingly oblivious to the convoy rattling by.

I've been tiring of the irony of all the bright sunflowers, but the closer we get to the site of the battle, the less irony there seems to be; many droop as if in mourning, brown and dull green in the summer heat. On the car's radio we can hear soldiers in the convoy boasting that they will have "success not less than Nestor Makhno [a Ukrainian anarchist and revolutionary] in his best times!" We don't know exactly where we are going, and because the radios are monitored, directions are only given to the next checkpoint, though in these pro-Russian villages less than 50 kilometers from the Russian border, our convoy is sure to be spotted by informers. Commander Semenchenko, holding a rifle and laughing in the back seat of his black SUV, speeds to the front.

The setting sun lights up a sepia sky. Outside of Iloviask we meet the rest of the attacking force, hundreds strong here. Ammunition is distributed. I spend the evening on the very front line, in the trenches with the artillery company from the 39th Battalion of the Dnipropetrovsk Territorial Defense. The sky turns a dull orange, then a deep, heavy purple, as the sun disappears behind thin trees. On the other side of these fields, flames color the night sky orange. Intermittent blasts from the mortars beside the trench are accompanied by cheers and song. Commanders read a map by flashlight as soldiers calibrate the artillery. A Russian drone streaks overhead, a bright light among these static stars.

As has been the case the last few nights, the soldiers are expecting incoming Grad rockets at around two in the morning. A man gives me something to sit on: "Don't sit on the ground—it's bad for your health," he tells me. "Don't think about Grads, think about your ass. You can't control rockets, but you can prevent hemorrhoids."

We eat stale bread and boiled buckwheat and flavorless yellow peppers served from big pots out of the back of an old van—I'm not hungry, but the chance to eat serves as a distraction from the attack to come. Later, we drink beer and smoke cigarettes. One man tells me to smoke with my hand cupped around the lit end to prevent snipers from seeing it across these open fields: "They fire at the light, what they can see." We recognize each other only by voice now and by our rough shapes against the bright moon. We drink languidly but smoke anxiously, one cigarette after another, hands cupped around burning embers, late into the night.

Finally we try to sleep. The soldiers sprawl like corpses around me in the trench and outside of it: silhouettes in the moonlight. There is nowhere, it seems, so dark as a bunker, even when the moonlight filters in from the trench. It is quiet now, but I sleep restlessly, wondering if this will be my last night. All there is to do is wait.

The first shell of the morning jumpstarts the heart: a heavy blast sweeps across the cold fields. Soon the air reverberates with the different frequencies of rockets and mortars. After a while, the shelling becomes less noticeable, and when it ends the convoy moves slowly toward the Separatist position at the edge of Iloviask. The pounding of heavy machine-gun fire, the pop of small arms, a haze of smoke and dust, the bitter smell of gunpowder, the sweet scent of trees torn by bullets.

Sometimes a sniper is called forward to inspect the road ahead or the fields beyond the trees to our left; later one fires across a field. He must have hit somebody—the man next to him shakes his hand as if to congratulate him for a point well played. ("You have to take these people out," Franko had told me. "You have to be vicious with them.") Men move through the woods beneath a haze of thin grey smoke. A Separatist who had been hiding in the woods with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) has been killed. His weapon, its

handle and trigger coated with blood, is used to prop open the door of a van.

I think we all believe in our luck here; otherwise, how could we bear this place? Everything is decided by centimeters, by seconds. We are all targets; a press badge can't protect me from an explosion.

After the soldiers take the Separatist checkpoint just outside of Iloviask, there are a few salvos of mortar fire from the Ukrainian army's 39th Battalion not far from us. It's so close that we take shelter.

"It's our artillery?" I ask.

"Yeah," I'm told, "but it's Ukraine artillery"—notoriously inaccurate.

There is fierce fighting at the train tracks nearby, as 20 well-trained soldiers—too disciplined and organized to be local Separatists—fire from between railroad cars holding off the front of the attacking force. Just ahead, four Donbas Battalion soldiers in the lead car—Mongol, Semolot, Nemo, and Communist—see wires leading to a mined bridge. It may be the last thing they ever saw. I miss the shots, but soon see the ambulance racing back to Ukrainian-held territory. Separatists had probably intended to blow up the bridge and cut our attacking column off from the rest of the convoy. Since I was so close to the front, I would have been with this group—we would have been surrounded and eliminated. But though the four men have been silenced, word has filtered back: our column retreats.

After the retreat, men sleep in the midday heat, guns resting on their chests. One young soldier is curled in the bed of a pickup truck next to the artillery mounted in the back, trying to sleep with the strong sun overhead. Soldiers struggle to understand how to prepare the packaged food that has been provided as part of American "humanitarian aid." Because the packages lack Russian or Ukrainian instructions, I show them how to use chemical heat packs to warm the food. But even though they are hungry and tired, the soldiers refuse to eat enchiladas and Sloppy Joes, picking through dozens of packages, trying to find something more to their liking. They finally eat the nuts and cookies and crackers included with the packaged meals. And they smoke. A few feet away, artillery aims down the road towards Separatist positions. Mortars fire on enemy lines. In the distance over Iloviask, two thin columns of black smoke rise and merge into a heavy cloud over the city. Separatists still hold Iloviask. Grad rockets fire in quick sequential blasts from behind Ukrainian lines onto that city. Across a long field of sunflowers, wilting in the dry heat, I see the many eruptions of low gray smoke.

The men here are sprawled out along the road, their bodies and faces betraying exhaustion—until a captured Separatist arrives in the back of a white van. He is bound and his face is swollen. A soldier with tan skin, a heavy beard, and a black headscarf pulls him through the angry crowd that has surrounded the van. The prisoner seems to have resigned himself to the suffering to come. Surrounded by soldiers, he is laid on the ground—a tall man in a green hood runs a knife gently, threateningly over the prisoner's throat, around his eye, questioning him. He puts the knife into the ground and then slowly wraps a rope around the man's throat. The soldier and the men from the Ukrainian forces surrounding the prisoner seem to be enjoying this first attempt at interrogation. Finally the prisoner is tossed into the back of a pickup truck, strung up and wrapped around the base of a machine gun. One man spits on him, another plays a lit cigarette across his scalp. Then he is covered in clean white canvas and taken away, his future uncertain.

The convoy retreats en masse. Together we move back across those long, dry fields and leave the artillery brigade of the 39th Battalion to hold the front line. How will these 30 men resist a counterattack? In my mind, I hear the Kalashnikovs firing from above the trenches, the men shouting, the heavy rhythmic pounding of the machine gun tucked behind sandbags; I can smell the sulfur now and see the smoke and feel the air ripple with artillery fire. In the end, if they are attacked, these men will have little recourse except to shelter in these trenches and under these bunkers of wood and dirt. But we leave them behind, pausing to regroup at a school.

At the same Sun Market gas station we stop, but the mood is much different now. Semenchenko orders his man to get him a bottle of whisky. A soldier gives him Mongol's helmet. Semenchenko's eyes are hard and expressionless, but he furrows his brow and, for a moment, seems to leave this place. Then he quickly summons himself—time to go.

On the way back to the base at Kurakhove, we stop at a hospital where the wounded have been moved. Outside, a soldier from the Battalion shows me a bullet that had torn through his jeep, just behind Mongol's car. The copper casing has been partially torn off. How does it look, I wonder, after it goes through flesh? The next day the same man, now crouching behind the base in Kurakhove among the cars getting repaired and the men smoking, uses the bullet to scratch into the cement the movement of troops at the battle. Men sit and smoke and talk quietly in the heavy summer heat.

Thirteen is still here. So are Wanderer, Spanish, Ivan, Berek, and Sava. But the men feel the loss of Mongol, Semolot, Nemo, and Communist. I eat dinner at the barracks alone. I ate breakfast here yesterday morning; how long ago that feels now, how different this world seems.

The day after the retreat, time again seems to stretch infinitely before us—yet who knows how much is left? I sneak out of the barracks with Stranik and Spanish to get beers and picnic and swim at the river. Stranik is a tall, lean Georgian immigrant with a long nose and thin, graying hair; Spanish is short, with dark skin and a soft face. They leave their guns and military clothes behind, despite having been told to carry them at all times. There are Separatist sympathizers here and probably Separatist soldiers in the town, so every excursion, even a trip to the local swimming spot, carries risk. As it turns out, we find only teenagers flirting, smoking, drinking, swimming. Yet my mind drifts inexorably back to the events of yesterday.

Later, I meet Alexander from the 39th Battalion outside of Iloviask. He has an old Cossack haircut, closely cropped except for a long straight tuft of hair falling from the back of his head. He has come from Dnepropetrovsk to fight, but when he returns, he knows things won't be the same.

"After this," he tells me solemnly, "you look at life from the other side." ◆

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