Chapter 4. The Totemic Value of Cities

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On 20 January 2015, at about half past three in the afternoon, a major explosion ripped apart the New Terminal building at Sergei Prokofiev International Airport. Situated at the northern edge of the city of Donetsk in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region, the airport had become the focus of heavy fighting between Ukrainian troops and separatist militiamen from the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) – a breakaway Russian-backed statelet. By late January, the Ukrainian military had been all but driven from the airport, with the last defenders holed up in the New Terminal's shattered mezzanine galleries. Once the steel-and-glass centrepiece of a modern airport, the fighting had long since carried away the top two of the New Terminal's original seven stories. The day before, separatist troops had used repurposed anti-ship mines to blow out the last of the New Terminal's interior walls, forcing the surviving defenders down into the basement. This latest blast collapsed the terminal's uppermost floor, crushing the Ukrainian soldiers trapped in the structure below. The remaining defenders surrendered the following morning, ending an eight-month long battle for control of the airport. During the course of this fighting, Donetsk Airport emerged as a potent symbol of national resistance for both sides. In Ukraine, the airport's defenders were lauded as super-human "cyborgs", while its capture became an acid test for the viability of the separatist cause. This totemic importance, together with the unusual intensity of fighting, has lent the battle a reputation as the 'little Stalingrad' of the Donbas war.[1] Indeed, the fighting there continued long after the airport's functional utility had been destroyed, persisting unabated even in defiance of the Minsk I ceasefire signed by both parties.

Urban fighting has an established reputation for political symbolism, evoking images of bloody quagmires like Stalingrad and Grozny, or strategic mis-steps like Mogadishu and Fallujah. Yet, the causes and consequences of urban symbolism in war are far from universally accepted. On the one hand, urban symbolism has been regarded as a regrettable if sometimes inexorable driver of strategic *engrenage*. As Posen laconically observed, the political imperatives behind urban struggles like Stalingrad 'were probably stupid, but the decision to engage in battle was made at the highest political levels'.[2] On the other, the impact of urban symbolism on the conduct of operations has been dismissed altogether as an "urban myth" borne of 'Stalingraditis'; an over-inflated concern for the intrinsically political qualities of urban spaces.[3] Intriguingly, while the fighting at Donetsk Airport appears to have been laced with symbolic meaning, it was far from the only hard-fought urban battle of the Donbass War, nor arguably was it the most militarily significant. During the summer of 2014, for example, Ukrainian troops made a similar stand against separatist rebels at Luhansk Airport, holding out for almost five months until rescued in dramatic Ukrainian raid. Simultaneously, Ukrainian soldiers fought a bitter rear-guard action at the town of Ilovaisk; their defeat marked the high-water line of government efforts that year. Yet, in stark contrast to the fighting at Donetsk Airport, neither battle displayed any profound symbolic importance, at the time or since.[4]

This chapter seeks to understand the development of symbolic meaning at Donetsk Airport, and the extent to which this accounts for the intensity of the fighting there. If the future of warfare lies in the megacity, as some predict, then explaining how and why ostensibly mundane urban spaces become infused with political meaning – and what this symbolism holds for the conduct of urban fighting – is vital to understanding the future character of warfare.[5] Moreover, as professionalized Western armies continue to diminish in size, particularly in

Europe, so the strategic importance attached to the costs of urban operations – both human and political – seems likely to become only more acute. This chapter argues that while the symbolic importance of Donetsk Airport was deeply rooted in the high costs and lived experience of the battle, the character of fighting itself was determined by the wider context of the internationalised civil war in the Donbass, and specifically, the principal-agent politics of proxy conflict.

Re-Examining the Symbolic Perils of Urban Warfare

Combat in cities has traditionally been seen as a costly and difficult endeavour, leading armies to eschew urban fighting wherever possible. The ancient strategist Sun Tzu held that the 'worst policy is to attack cities', while Napoleon repeatedly cautioned his lieutenants 'not [to] engage in the streets' for 'the greatest catastrophes [occur] as a result of armies rushing and diving into the narrow streets of towns'.[6] Although armies have frequently struggled for control of small villages or isolated farmsteads, fighting inside large cities was historically rare. Instead, cities were typically defended by fixed fortifications at the periphery, which when breached, usually led to the collapse of the defence.[7] Deliberate fighting within urban centres only became commonplace in the middle of twentieth century, as changes in technology rendered perimeter defences obsolete. By then, the size of armies had expanded to the point where fighting for control of urban centres typically extended along fronts well beyond the city, with combat outside the suburbs every bit as intense as that within the city proper.[8] During the battle for Brest in 1944, for example, US divisions fighting in the surrounding countryside saw comparable rates of battle fatigue to those engaged within the city itself; a reality that still prevailed during the

Vietnam War, despite the lived experience of the battles like Huế City as 'a black and white madness of destruction and death'.[9]

In recent years, however, urban fighting has become an increasingly prominent feature of warfare. Rapid urbanisation and population growth have seen cities become larger, denser, and more important than ever before. Simultaneously, downsized professional armies now lack the mass to maintain extended fronts, focusing fighting within the city itself.[10] Nonetheless, urban warfare continues to present distinct challenges for modern armies. The built environment impedes movement and communication, constrains the employment of weaponry, channels manoeuvre and hinders command and control. Dense networks of buildings likewise provide defenders with a plethora of cover and concealment across three-dimensions, providing ample opportunity for ambush and infiltration from above, below and behind an attacker. Consequently, urban engagements often occur suddenly and at extremely close quarters, increasing the propensity for confusion and organisational atrophy.[11] As a result, urban spaces are considered to provide an inherent defensive advantage. Whereas doctrinal estimates require a concentration of three attackers for every one defender in open country, this ratio rises to 8:1 or higher in urban terrain.[12] In conventional military thought, therefore, the city is a potential graveyard for attacking armies – and the smaller the army, the greater the potential danger.

Yet, urban centres are more than simply an acute tactical problem. As centres of population, commerce, industry, and governance, cities also provide the locus for a nation's social and political life, reflecting 'the values, social perceptions, and interactions' of their inhabitants.[13] This political quality can serve to limit the conduct of urban operations, exacerbating the practical challenges of city fighting. Historically, for instance, sieges represented 'the most highly structured, ritualized and rule-bound forms of military conflict of

the early modern era', and a besieged city could reasonably expect the opportunity to surrender honourably as soon as its walls were breached.[14] Nonetheless, a city taken by storm was liable to sack, and the protection of civilian populations and symbolic places remains difficult even today. As Hills has argued, the tactical challenges of street fighting mean that 'high levels of violence are inherent in urban war, regardless of the nationality of those involved or the scale of operations', creating profound tensions between the vision of restrained "liberal" warfare and the reality of urban fighting – as recent operations in Mosul and elsewhere attest.[15] Consequently, the city has become a bolthole of choice for guerrillas and insurgents, prompting Western armies to pursue more precise urban tactics in response.[16] Close-quarters battle techniques, once the preserve of small elite units, are now the stock-in-trade of the ordinary infantryman, becoming a de facto measure of modern military professionalism via a process sometimes described as a "special forcification".[17]

Conversely, though, these social and political meanings also sometimes intensify the conduct of urban fighting, generating disproportionately high costs. During the First World War, General Falkenhayn's efforts to "bleed France white" at Verdun relied in no small part on the city's symbolic importance to French politics. In 1870, Verdun was the last fortress to fall to the Prussians before Paris, while according to legend, its ill-fated commandant committed suicide rather than surrender to the besieging Austro-Prussian army in 1792. Hence, in 1916, abandoning the Verdun salient was as politically unacceptable as it was militarily inadvisable, despite the strain this placed on the French Army. In the words of Alistair Horne, Verdun has subsequently become 'a sacred national legend' for the French, but simultaneously also 'a modern synonym for a Pyrrhic Victory'.[18] Perhaps the most infamous example of this phenomenon is the Battle of Stalingrad. Although initially irrelevant to German military planning on the Eastern Front, the

city's symbolic name transformed its stubborn Soviet defence into a personal affront to 'Hitler's image as a military genius and the Social Darwinist concept of German racial superiority'.[19] More recently, the destruction of Dubrovnik's Old Town and Mostar's Stari Most during the breakup of Yugoslavia owed much to their symbolic association with particular ethno-national communities, and their rebuilding has likewise become a potent totem of post-conflict reconstruction.[20]

However, there is little consensus as to why cities sometimes assume a particular symbolic value, or how these meanings affect the conduct of urban fighting. Neiman, for example, has argued that some urban centres are intrinsically more important than others, concluding that places which inherently 'hold special religious or historical meaning are likely to affect combatants in ways that cities without such intensely held symbolic or nationalistic implications are not'.[21] Yet, the innate value of an urban space is not self-evident; nor do such characteristics always generate the same symbolic effect. In 1944, for example, the Allies were careful to preserve historic Paris intact, but extended no such courtesy to Saint Malo's historic *intra-muros*, which was destroyed during liberation.[22] Consequently, Posen has argued that the political value of urban spaces – and by extension, their symbolic potential – depends not on the intrinsic properties of the place itself, but on its strategic context. Accordingly, the meaning and importance of city can be fluid, depending on its relationship to the wider strategic peculiarities of the conflict. Hence, while Stalingrad assumed an immense symbolic importance in 1942-3, Moscow did not demonstrate the same strategic resonance in 1812 – as Napoleon discovered to his cost. Nonetheless, Posen concluded that where 'urban battles occur for high-level strategic reasons, whether those ideas are right or wrong, they are very likely to take on the maximalist character' seen at Verdun or Stalingrad. Moreover, although the symbolic imperatives behind

battles like Stalingrad 'may seem stupid in retrospect...a repetition of such thinking is not impossible'.[23]

Recently, though, Betz and Stanford-Tuck have dismissed the symbolic influence of urban spaces altogether. They argue that a scholarly and doctrinal focus on Stalingrad – 'one titanic and highly peculiar battle' considered 'extremely unusual in the strength of its political symbolism' – effectively 'distorts perceptions of the problem at hand'.[24] Instead, they ascribe elevated political interest in urban warfare as a product of the high human and material costs traditionally associated with fighting in such environments, leading to something akin to a phobia of urban combat among commanders and policy-makers alike. As Betz and Stanford-Tuck have argued, for 'the contemporary Western politician, conflict in the urban environment…is beyond the public's tolerance in terms of expenditure of "blood and treasure."'[25] More broadly, this concern with the political implications of battlefield cost reflects the so-called "Wootton Bassett phenomenon", in which grassroots commemoration of British war dead exacerbated political opposition to the conflict in Afghanistan.[26] The pair conclude that a renewed focus on the generation of effective urban tactical capabilities will prevent political intrusions into the conduct of urban warfare, irrespective of a city's political status or strategic value, by lowering the costs of operational success.

In principle, of course, high costs can conceivably also produce the very inverse of this urban aversion, by inflating the political importance of particular urban spaces through a symbolic logic of sunk costs. Certainly, high costs in war can develop distinct political meanings of their own, even when their accumulation is otherwise accepted as worthwhile.[27] Yet, the political significance of any casualties or costs incurred in urban fighting, as in all warfare, can only be understood in relation to the perceived importance of the goals pursued at the time.

Indeed, modest costs incurred in a discretionary or unimportant operation might be unacceptable, while far greater costs would be tolerated in pursuit of a more existential goal.[28] A city may likewise be destroyed in heavy fighting because the landscape was unimportant to risk soldiers' lives protecting, or paradoxically also because it was too important to give up without a fight. In fact, the willingness to incur costs in urban fighting *beyond those required by pure military necessity* is the very sine qua non of urban symbolism as a phenomenon.[29] Consequently, this chapter argues that the symbolic quality of urban fighting is a product both of strategic context *and* elevated casualties, and the two interact with each other in important ways. Bloody attrition is the product of strategic context, which t in turn imbues these urban sites with distinct symbolic meanings engendered by the high costs of fighting.

Donetsk Airport as a Case Study in Urban Symbolism

The case of Donetsk Airport provides an important opportunity to understand the causes and consequences of urban symbolism in recent warfare, for number of reasons. Firstly, the fighting there displayed an abundance of exactly the kind of symbolic meanings in question. The battles for control of the airport have acquired a legendary, almost mythical status in Ukraine, imbuing both the airport and its defenders with politically symbolic meanings. As the fighting progressed, the airport's Ukrainian defenders became known as "cyborgs"; resolute, terminator-like part-man, part-machine. The sobriquet apparently originated among the separatist ranks, perhaps as a derogatory dismissal of the defenders' endurance as a marker of something less-than-human, but was rapidly adopted in the Ukrainian press as a reference to their purportedly super-human tenacity.[30] However, the symbology of the airport's cyborg defender was also propagandistically exploited by the separatists after the airport's fall, as a means to reinforce

their own claims to military prowess. As one separatist commander disingenuously told journalists, 'Those on the Ukrainian side, who survived this *took a massive hit from us*. They deserve respect'.[31] Moreover, the airport does not appear to have enjoyed any particularly special status or inherently political significance prior to the conflict. Admittedly, the airport represented one of Ukraine's more modern and internationally-recognised pieces of infrastructure, having been substantially renovated ahead of the Euro 2012 football championships at a cost of £537m.[32] Yet, the airport did not possess any particularly unique historic, religious or cultural connotations prior to the fighting, and prestige alone cannot account for the totemic importance the airport subsequently assumed. Indeed, this symbolic meaning only emerged during the fighting itself.

Secondly, while control of the airport did provide important tactical advantages to each side, these do not appear objectively significant enough to justify the escalating intensity of the fighting there, reinforcing the focus on urban symbolism. Situated on high ground at the northern edge of the city, close to a series of major road and rail routes, the airport provided Ukrainian troops with a vantage point overlooking Donetsk from which to project force into the separatist-controlled city. Moreover, government possession denied the separatists use of the airport's long runway and modern logistical handling facilities, precluding direct resupply from Russia by air. For the separatists, by extension, the airport represented 'the most important gate into the city', and the government presence there constituted an 'advance intrusion into the heart of the rebellion' that impeded rebel consolidation in and around Donetsk.[33] Yet, the strategic importance of the airport *as an airport* also declined in inverse proportion to the intensity of the fighting, as the airport's facilities were progressively destroyed. Moreover, either side could effectively deny the other use of its runway without having to physically occupy the airport

itself, via the siting of ground-based anti-air systems on adjacent territory within their possession. Indeed, conventional military wisdom generally holds that an 'inferior port or airfield, away from a large urban environment, which can be taken and held with moderate casualties, and improved with engineering' is usually 'preferable to theoretically better facilities that can be had only through hard fighting, and which would be badly damaged by such fighting in any case'.[34]

Lastly, but by no means least given the theme of this book, the scale of fighting at Donetsk Airport was comparatively modest - at least in numerical terms - when compared with previous examples of symbolic urban battles like Stalingrad or Grozny. The airport was initially defended by a single Ukrainian volunteer battalion, rising to the 93rd Mechanised Brigade supported by the 3rd Spetsnaz Regiment by the autumn of 2014. These were subsequently replaced by elements of the 79th and 95th Airborne Brigades, supported by various militia and volunteer battalions, before the 93rd Mechanised Brigade resumed the defence in January 2015, alongside the 81st Airborne Brigade and elements of the 80th and 95th Air Assault Brigades. Nonetheless, these formations were typically under-strength and under-trained, and the forces actually present in the terminals can seldom have amounted to more than a few companies of infantry at any given time. The 81st Airborne Brigade, for example, was comprised of two battalion-sized manoeuvre units, which despite its elite status, were both largely manned by mobilised reservists and wartime volunteers.[35] If anything, the airport's separatist attackers were an even more ad-hoc affair; one rebel militia even called itself the "Somali Battalion" after its a rag-tag pirate-like appearance.[36] Yet, while both sides may have lacked the pronounced capabilities Betz and Stanford-Tuck advocate, they certainly did not lack the will to absorb casualties. Indeed, the fighting for control of the airport's terminal buildings developed exactly

the maximalist characteristics highlighted by Posen, despite the otherwise quite limited scale of the battle. At times, forward positions were so close that Ukrainian paratroopers could hear the separatists 'baiting us from behind the walls', shouting 'time to surrender, Ukies, we're coming to cut your throats',[37] or pretending to be feared Chechen foreign fighters in an effort to psychologically intimidate.[38]

If the fighting at Donetsk Airport thus provides an ideal case study into the emergence and influence of urban symbolism on warfare, this chapter argues that the airport's symbolic meaning was intimately connected with, and derived from, the intensity of the fighting experienced there. However, this intensity did not emerge as the escalatory product of symbolic sunk costs, or because of the airport's inherent societal value, but was instead the product of wider political imperatives rooted in the fighting's strategic context as a proxy conflict. Proxy warfare can be understood as a principal-agent problem, in which the principal employs an agent to conduct activity on its behalf, typically in pursuit of some shared goal. For the principal, proxies provide a means to pursue objectives that would otherwise be too costly or risky to be worthwhile by providing an agent with assistance or reward in return for the conduct of the desired activity on their behalf. However, the interests of each party rarely align exactly. This can create incentives for the agent to shirk particular activities, or misappropriate the patron's resources for their own ends, in turn necessitating a degree of carrot-and-stick supervision by the principal to ensure it gets what it wants.[39] In a proxy conflict, these "interest asymmetries" can lead the agent to distort the aims and objectives of the patron, while the principal's efforts to secure their own discrete interests (often at the expense of the agent) likewise affect the conduct of the fighting.[40] Importantly, the Donbass conflict has been widely described as a proxy war, in

which the policy goals of the DPR's Russian backer shaped the conduct of the fighting as much as the aims and ideas of the cyborgs and separatists themselves.[41]

Methodologically, a range of sources have been used to reconstruct the fighting at Donetsk Airport. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) maintained a team in Donetsk city throughout the battle. Established in March 2014 to act as a humanitarian observer in the Donbass, the SSM subsequently gained a formal role in ceasefire monitoring, providing a daily 'seismograph on the actual intensity of the conflict'. However, the mission's neutral civilian status meant that, by its own admission, OSCE monitoring sometimes offered little more than 'a good account of the intensive and continuing shelling around Donetsk Airport'.[42] Consequently, SSM reporting has been augmented with media accounts, in order to provide further detail on the perspectives and experiences of combatants themselves. A number of investigative journalists gained impressive access to belligerents on both sides, sometimes even reporting on the fighting first-hand in close to real time. That said, such accounts are typically filtered through the journalistic lenses applied by reporter and editor, as well as the self-censorship of the original subjects, and must be treated with caution. Moreover, neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian press can be considered impartial, while Western media typically sympathised with the Ukrainian cause – although the Kremlin's deliberate exploitation of Russian media for information operations was particularly problematic.[43] Even so, propaganda created by the belligerents themselves is particularly useful for understanding how each side sought to frame the fighting. Finally, existing scholarly research has been used to situate the battle in its wider strategic context, while the handful of published US military assessments provide valuable tactical benchmarks. Critically, the use of multiple

different types of source has enabled information to be cross-referenced for veracity, offsetting the limitations of each while underpinning analytical rigor.

The chapter now provides a brief chronology of the first and second battles for Donetsk Airport. It then turns to examine the emergence of the airport's symbolic cyborg narrative, concluding that this symbolic image alone cannot explain the escalation of the fighting at the airport. The chapter then places this symbolism in its wider strategic context, examining the principal-agent politics behind the separatist offensives, together with the wider strategic dynamics of the fighting at Donetsk Airport. The final section concludes that the strategy and politics of proxy warfare best account for the unusual intensity of the fighting at Donetsk Airport, and in so doing, significantly explains the emergence of its totemic status.

The First and Second Battles for Donetsk Airport

The war in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine began in the spring of 2014, precipitated by tumultuous events earlier that year. In late 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign an association agreement with the European Union sparked mass protests in Kiev. By February 2014, this 'Euromaidan' movement had spiralled into revolution, leading to the overthrow of Yanukovych and the collapse of the government. Russia viewed these events with alarm, fearing a shift in Ukrainian policy that might threaten its strategic warm-water naval base at Sevastopol on the Black Sea. Almost immediately, undisclosed Russian troops seized key instillations in Crimea, rapidly assuming de facto control of the peninsula in a political and military fait accompli. Russia formally annexed Crimea in March, though de jure ownership remains disputed. Simultaneously, anti-Kiev protests began in eastern Ukraine, in the Donbass oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk. Assisted by Russian intelligence, pro-Russian activists took

over government offices and local administration buildings, in many cases with the tacit support

of local police and security agencies. The following month, separatist leaders proclaimed two

break-away "People's Republics", centred in Donetsk and Luhansk respectively. However, with

Kiev still engulfed in political turmoil, the new Ukrainian government did not immediately

respond. Instead, nationalist militias self-organised and took it upon themselves to resist, leading

to a series of tit-for-tat skirmishes as the separatists attempted to consolidate their territory. Then,

in mid-April, the interim Ukrainian administration initiated an 'Anti-Terrorist Operation' (ATO)

in the Donbass in an effort to reassert Ukrainian sovereignty. While the euphemistic rhetoric was

intended to preclude full-scale hostilities with Russia, it ultimately failed to prevent a further

escalation of the conflict.[44]

The fighting for control of Donetsk Airport began that spring, as insurrection

descended into fully-blown civil war. In the early hours of 26 May 2014, between one and two

hundred separatist militiamen from the DPR arrived unexpectedly at Sergei Prokofiev

International Airport, having deployed from their makeshift barracks in the city in

commandeered civilian buses. Many had only recently joined the cause, having been smuggled

across the Russian border during the preceding week.[45] The separatists established a hasty

defence of the main terminal buildings, driving out government sentries and placing support

weapons and snipers on the New Terminal roof. They also evacuated travellers from the

terminals, though the airport received two arrivals as normal that morning before flights were

suspended. However, Kiev refused to cede control of the airport, and instead demanded the

separatists withdraw. Then, at around 2pm, the Ukrainian military launched a combined arms

attack to recapture the airport. This was spearheaded by several companies of air assault infantry,

supported by Mi-24 helicopter gunships and ground attack aircraft, and made skilful use of the

airport's exposed terrain to fix the separatists in place.[46] In the words of one militiaman, government troops 'forced us tightly into the building and were bombing from all sides. They had missile launchers around the perimeter of the airport and were firing on the terminal'.[47]

By late afternoon, government troops were threatening to cut off the terminal complex, forcing the separatists to abandon the airport altogether. Having already been driven from the roof and surrounding areas, the remaining militiamen boarded a series of KamAz trucks inside the New Terminal and drove at speed for the city. A cover party was left behind to facilitate the withdrawal, later slipping away on foot under cover of darkness, though the convoy itself was ambushed as it passed through Donetsk's northern suburbs. The DPR later claimed it had been fired on by government forces, but it appears that separatist militiamen actually mistook their retreating comrades for Ukrainian troops. [48] Although skirmishing continued around the airport into the following day, it was evident by then that the DPR had lost the first battle for Donetsk Airport. In all, the separatists suffered an estimated 30-35 killed and a further 15-20 injured, provoking both desertions and renewed determination in equal measure.[49] In early June, DPR leaders called for additional volunteers to help prepare for an expected government attack, and checkpoints along access routes into the city were strengthened.[50] With government troops also digging in at the airport, the battle lines were now drawn for a further confrontation.

The second battle for Donetsk Airport effectively began in early September, when sporadic fighting at the airport developed into a new separatist offensive. DPR troops used "technicals" mounted with anti-aircraft autocannons, together with recoilless rifle, mortar and artillery fire spotted from apartment blocks in the adjoining districts, to advance along access roads in the airport's eastern service area towards the terminal complex. They progressively seized the airport's control centre, police station, and hotel, along with a series of hangars, but

stalled briefly in the open ground surrounding the Old Terminal building.[51] Then, on 3 October, the separatists used main battle tanks and a smoke screen to the break into the Old Terminal, although the assaulting Oplot Battalion reportedly suffered 40 percent casualties in the process.[52] The offensive petered out again towards the end of October, but not before the DPR gained a further foothold in the New Terminal as well. Simultaneously, the separatists worked to surround the airport, attacking the ring of villages along the northern side of runway, beginning in Spartak and progressing west towards Opytne by the following month.[53] Meanwhile, the Ukrainian defenders retained a tenuous line of communication west from the terminals via the village of Pisky, partially covered by support weapons sited in the government-occupied control tower. Nonetheless, government resupply became increasingly difficult even under armour.

By early November, the top two floors of the New Terminal had collapsed under shell-fire. The DPR occupied the New Terminal's remaining third floor and parts of its basement, while the Ukrainian Army retained an enclave in the Old Terminal, together with the lower storeys of the New Terminal.[54] A temporary cease-fire was agreed overnight on 16 November, allowing the separatists to recover their dead and wounded, although fighting resumed promptly the next morning.[55] A further separatist push in late November failed to dislodge the Old Terminal's remaining defenders, but left the building so badly damaged that the Ukrainian Army decided to abandon it overnight of 5 December.[56] This was followed by a more extensive cease fire, providing safe passage for the Ukrainian military to rotate their forces at the airport. On 12 December, 51 Ukrainian soldiers were driven out through DPR-controlled territory and replaced by 48 incoming soldiers that day and a further 36 on 15 December, driven in by separatist drivers who then handed over the transports to government troops at the south side of the New Terminal.

Further roulements were completed on 20 December and again on Christmas Day, though skirmishing continued elsewhere, as separatist troops advanced to the edge of Pisky.[57]

These arrangements held into the new year, but were not to last. Around 8 January, the separatists launched a renewed assault on the New Terminal, preceded by an intense artillery bombardment. The control tower finally collapsed under shell fire on 13 January, and separatist troops seized around a third of the New Terminal soon after.[58] Here, main battle tanks were again used in close support, reducing two government positions in the New Terminal and forcing the Ukrainian Army to blow up a third in order to create an obstacle to slow the DPR's advance. According to Colonel Yevgeny Moysyuk, then commanding the Ukrainian 81st Airmobile Brigade, the separatists 'drove up two tanks right in front of the terminal and shot it point-blank a few times and went away before our artillery could get them, and they would do it again and again, completely turning the terminal into a sieve'.[59] This fire was deliberately concentrated on corners of the building, in an effort to collapse parts of the structure, enabling the separatists to use the rubble to infiltrate above the defenders. By mid-January, the defenders had become progressively confined to the mezzanine balconies on the second storey of the New Terminal, while the separatists controlled the floors above them as well as parts of the ground floor and basement. Moreover, Ukrainian resupply was becoming a major challenge. As one Ukrainian officer explained, 'We couldn't get our tanks or armored vehicles there anymore because they had used the truce time to fortify all the side approaches and deploy all kinds of heavy weapons'.[60]

Confronted with an increasingly bleak situation, the Ukrainian military mounted a series of ever more risky operations to relieve their stranded troops. On 17 January, efforts to extract wounded from the New Terminal failed, prompting a larger-scale operation the following day.

This time, Ukrainian armour managed to force a passage along the southern perimeter of the airport, briefly allowing a relief convoy to reach the New Terminal.[61] Even so, the defence remained precarious, with the separatists throwing first grenades and later tear gas down onto the defenders in the terminal in an effort to flush them out.[62] Then, on 19 January, DPR troops used repurposed anti-ship mines to blow out the New Terminal's remaining interior walls. The explosion was sufficiently powerful that Ukrainian officers orchestrating the defence felt the blast from their basement command post 6km away.[63] A further attempt to relieve the terminal was made by the 81st Brigade that night, using borrowed armoured vehicles crewed with their own men, after the original drivers refused to go. Some of the vehicles got lost in heavy fog and drove to a separatist-held building by mistake, but the operation did manage to evacuate the most severely wounded from the New Terminal.[64] An additional battalion of Ukrainian paratroops arrived early the next morning, and was immediately thrown into action, but without success. The separatists then used explosives to collapse the upper floor of the New Terminal onto the remaining defenders below. By then, command and control in the terminal was beginning to erode, and some of the survivors decided to try and escape under cover of nightfall. The following morning, only about 16 Ukrainian soldiers were left in the New Terminal. After a brief discussion, the remaining defenders surrendered on 21 January, led by a sergeant.[65]

Emergence of Symbolism at Donetsk Airport

Donetsk Airport's symbolic importance emerged during the course of this fighting, with the image and potency of the airport's "cyborg" narrative intimately derived from the intense combat experienced there. Indeed, at the start of the conflict, the airport did not appear to possess any particularly noteworthy symbolic meanings. Admittedly, the DPR's initial attempt to seize

Donetsk Airport betrayed a certain propagandistic quality, and may have been intended as a show of separatist political strength. The day before, as the rest of Ukraine went to the polls to elect a new president, the DPR had defiantly paraded its militias through Donetsk city centre, to the cheers of many (but by no means all) local residents.[66] Yet, this timing also reflected a high degree of opportunism, with Ukrainian elections likely seen as useful cover for a DPR land-grab while Kiev's back was turned. Certainly, the separatist militiamen sent to the airport in May did not expect to meet much resistance. One militiaman recalled how his superiors had 'told us no one would fire at us. Just pose for the cameras and that's all. They would see us, get scared, give up'; the DPR's Vostok Battalion even left its anti-aircraft weapons behind in the mistaken belief that they wouldn't be needed.[67] Although no Ukrainian aircraft were lost in the first battle for Donetsk Airport, separatist forces did shoot down a Ukrainian transport aircraft at Luhansk Airport just a few weeks later, then representing single greatest loss of government life in the conflict to date.[68] Accordingly, the relative ease with which the Ukrainian military retook the airport in May reflected both the tactical importance of government air power, but also the DPR's significant under-estimation of Ukrainian will to fight for it. Hence, while airport may have been militarily and politically important from the start, it was not initially all that symbolic in of itself.

Rather, the airport's symbolic value developed as a product of the intense fighting experienced during the second battle for Donetsk Airport. As with civil conflicts elsewhere, fighting across the Donbass frequently assumed a brutal, zero-sum dynamic, rooted in the contested identity politics of the region. At Donetsk, for example, Ukrainian artillery began targeting cultural sites with perceived associations to the separatist cause from late August, first shelling a number of Orthodox churches belonging to the Russian Patriarchy, and later also the

city's regional history museum.[69] However, the narrative of the cyborg owed more to the lived

experience of defending the terminals than anything else, reflecting the arduous conditions

experienced by Ukrainian soldiers – especially in the terminals. In October, for example, one

Ukrainian soldier described how the 'holes in the walls account for more space than the rest of

the structure', such that there was 'not a single place where bullets or shrapnel cannot reach you

at any given time of the day'.[70] Moreover, these conditions only deteriorated as the fighting

progressed. Come winter, Ukrainian troops in the terminals had to switch off their generators and

even some of their radios at night, as the separatists were so close that any noise or light drew

immediate fire in the darkness.[71] As one defender told journalists, 'It's cold. It's dark. It's

dangerous all the time. All this affects how you think. You get used to shots being fired pretty

quickly'.[72] By January, defenders described separatist infantry 'crawling all over the place like

rats – above, below, and on either side', commenting that 'the worst thing was this sense of

phantoms flying around you...people writhing in agony, moaning, crying for help'.[73]

 Importantly, the longevity of the second battle served to reinforce the exceptionalism of

the airport's defence in the public imagination, transforming the precarity endured by the

defenders into reputation for active heroism rather than passive victimhood. Here, media

accounts typically juxtaposed the ruin and decay of the terminal buildings with the stoicism of

the combatants' daily struggle to survive and fight in them. In one interview, for example, a

Ukrainian officer described how the 'terminals we are holding on to are weaker than the Three

Little Pigs' houses, and it is a miracle that they are still standing',[74] while another related the

everyday techniques soldiers employed to survive:

> When they're firing tank shells, you simply lie on the floor as flat as you can because
>
> there's no real cover, only drywall around you. We were in what was the airport's

customs department, where there were conveyors that moved luggage. These

conveyors are metal constructions that go up to your waist. So you could hide behind

those. That was the one thing that could save you – these three millimeters of metal

running along the conveyor. So we lie down, we sleep, we work, and we take our

breaks all behind that space.[75]

To a significant extent, even the progressive dilapidation of the airport – so striking to outside

observers – became a central feature of the cyborg legend, highlighting how separatist forces

were obliged to destroy more and more of the complex in an effort to dislodge the defenders. As

one Ukrainian officer asserted after the airport finally fell, 'The cyborgs withstood the final

attack; the concrete didn't'.[76] Here, the image of the cyborg at Donetsk Airport is reminiscent of

the symbolism that emerged from Verdun in the First World War, where the endurance of the

French *pilou* returning glassy-eyed from the maelstrom along the *Voie Sacrée* provided a central

component of Verdun's public '*on ne passe pas*' narrative.[77]

Yet, while the intensity of the fighting undoubtedly gave shape and resonance to the

image of the cyborg, it not clear that this symbolic meaning reciprocally affected the character of

the fighting. Certainly, some Ukrainian commanders felt that the operations mounted to relieve

pressure on the terminals during the final days of the defence were less than militarily sound.

Major Ruslan Prusov, for example, publicly described his battalion's mission to relieve the

terminal as 'just sheer idiocy', complaining that to 'really storm the airport and win it back, we

need 10,000 men, tanks and armored vehicles, but first of all one or two hours of serious artillery

or missile bombardments'. Instead, he 'lost two men dead, seven wounded and seven vehicles

before even reaching the tarmac'.[78] A brigade commander even told one journalist that 'We

should have evacuated our men a few days earlier, then waited for the separs [separatists] to

converge on the premises and bury them under the ruins', but by that then, the Ukrainian Army had 'fallen hostage to this beautiful cyborg legend'.[79] At the same time, however, the airport's symbolic importance does not seem to have been universally accepted, even among Ukrainian troops. As one defender remarked, 'Not everyone likes the [cyborg] name…We are humans. Almost every one of us is married with children. Our thoughts are human too – we want this to be over soon'.[80] Moreover, the airport's loss was not uniformly recognised as militarily or psychologically significant by combatants themselves. One Ukrainian soldier, for example, later asserted that 'defending the terminal was a pointless endeavour, there was nowhere from which to defend', claiming instead that abandoning the terminals had 'only strengthened our morale'.[81]

Importantly, the potency of the cyborg legend owed as much to the activities of journalists and politicians *after* the battle as it did to the actions and experiences of combatants themselves. The public resonance of the cyborg image is largely a product of media accounts of the fighting – including dedicated blogs that tracked the course of the battle day-by-day in near real-time – which drew public attention to the battle while simultaneously building sympathy for the Ukrainian cause.[82] This contemporary reporting was subsequently reinforced by accounts released after the fighting was over, including a spate of books, documentaries, and at least one novel written by journalists who had witnessed the fighting first-hand.[83] The Ukrainian state has subsequently sought to control this process, seeking to direct and appropriate the image of the cyborg as a national symbol. In 2017, a feature film lionising the defence of the airport was released, funded by the Ukrainian government, entitled *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die*.[84] The Ukrainian government has also designated 16 January as "Cyborg Commemoration Day", while the Ukrainian postal service released a set of commemorative postage stamps to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the fall of Donetsk Airport, emblazoned with the motto "they withstood,

the concrete didn't", as military bands played requiem concerts in airport terminals across the country.[85] Veterans organisations have likewise been active in curating the image of the cyborg. In 2017, for example, an Apple promotional video describing a Russian swimmer with a prosthetic leg as a "cyborg" drew particular ire.[86] Yet, the relationship between the Ukrainian government and veterans groups has not been universally harmonious, and these parallel efforts to shape the identity and legacy of the cyborg reflect what Käihkö has termed 'a nation-in-the-making during a state-in-breaking'.[87]

Critically, while the airport's cyborg symbolism is undoubtedly rooted in the intensity of the fighting there, this narrative alone cannot account for that intensity. The airport's symbolic meaning does not explain the escalation of the fighting from the first battle to the second, and can only partially account for its perpetuation during the second. Despite the political capital invested in the legend of the cyborg defender, this narrative actively survived the airport's fall; if anything, Ukrainian defeat at Donetsk Airport has actively reinforced the tragic heroism of the cyborg image. Moreover, this symbolic Ukrainian narrative cannot explain the separatists' repeated efforts to storm the airport complex. Indeed, without both high levels of Ukrainian *and* separatist resolve, the battle could not have assumed the intensity inherent in the image of the cyborg defender. In order to understand why the airport became so fiercely contested, we must instead look to the political imperatives behind each side's military strategy in the Donbass. If the airport's totemic status was a product of the intense fighting rather than its cause, what motivated the DPR's repeated assaults, and what alternate strategic rationales explain continued Ukrainian resistance?

Patriots and Proxies: Politics and Strategy in the Donbass

While the conflict in the Donbass was a logical extension of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Russian aims and commitment there were very different. Russia's annexation of Crimea was intended to secure its strategic Sevastopol naval base, pre-empting an expected shift in Ukrainian policy in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution. In contrast, control of the Donbass was nowhere near as vital to Russian national interests, and it is debatable whether Russia ever seriously expected to annex the region. Indeed, Russian support for separatism in the Donbass was largely opportunistic. In the words of one former Russian general staff officer, 'had the Ukrainian's fought for Crimea, we would not now be fighting in the Donbas'.[88] The region certainly offered tangible benefits for Russia. Donetsk and Luhansk represented some of Ukraine's richest industrial provinces, while control of the Black Sea coastline could have provided the first step in land corridor from Russia to Crimea. In its absence, Russia has been forced to construct an expensive bridge across the Kerch Strait in order to resupply the peninsula. Equally, though, Moscow continues to view Ukraine as a buffer with the West, and seeks to maintain influence over Ukrainian policy. Traditionally, this had been accomplished through economic levers, as with the post-Soviet provision of natural gas discounts in return for Russian basing rights in Crimea.[89] However, Russia's actions in Crimea hardened attitudes in Kiev, limiting the utility of such an approach, while Ukrainian resistance made outright annexation more difficult. Consequently, insurgency provided a new source of potential leverage, enabling Russia to hold Ukrainian policy to ransom by stoking or subduing the violence – but one which relied on the threat of succession rather than its actual accomplishment.[90]

For the separatists, in contrast, the conflict was essentially zero-sum. Donetsk has historically displayed a greater concentration of ethnic Russians than elsewhere in Ukraine, and Russian remains the predominant first-language. Although ethnicity is a crude indicator of

identity, the gradual ascendancy of Ukrainian as the country's official language after the break-up of the Soviet Union helped to isolate and marginalise many Russian-speakers in the Donbass, who concomitantly struggled to gain access to state jobs and services. However, these Russophile tendencies were assuaged by the Yanukovych regime, which supported the adoption of Russian as a second official language and sought to balance Westernisation with cordial relations with Russia. Yanukovych himself came from the Donbass, where he had previously served as Governor of Donetsk Oblast, and his Party of the Regions drew significant electoral support from the region. Yanukovych's ouster thus raised concerns about the future status of Donetsk's Russian majority, itself a minority at the national level, while simultaneously removing access to important sources of informal government largess. With politics in Kiev shifting towards a more Ukrainian nationalist agenda, public sentiment in the Donbass began to coalesce around an alternate sense of Russian cultural identity.[91]

Consequently, the separatist leadership aspired either to full annexation by Russia, or else the formation of a Russian-backed breakaway enclave. Early in the rebellion, the two breakaway "People's Republics" declared an intent to confederate as Novorossiya, or "New Russia", appropriating the historic name for the area when first incorporated into the Russian Empire in the mid-eighteenth century.[92] DPR militias made extensive use of the Novorossiyan saltire as a combat identification symbol, alongside Russian tricolours and the black-and-orange Ribbon of St George, another traditional Russian military emblem. Some units even styled themselves as "Cossacks", replete with furry Papakha hats. Moreover, many separatist militia commanders – in addition to their strong Russian ties – were political non-entities prior to the conflict, and owed their position and notoriety to the separatist cause. For example, the DPR's self-declared defence minister and head of its Slovyansk militia, Igor Girkin (A.K.A. Strelkov or "gunman"), was both

an avid proponent of Novorossiya, and a former Russian colonel. Similarly, the DPR's Vostok Battalion was led by Alexander Khodakovsky, a former Ukrainian major who had defected from Yanukovych's "Alfa" counter-terrorism unit, while the Sparta Battalion was commanded by Arsen "Motorola" Pavlov, a Russian national who had spent some time as a signaller in the Russian marine infantry.[93] The campaign at Donetsk Airport itself appears to have been partly directed by Mikhail Tolstykh, callsign "Givi"; a Ukrainian of Georgian descent who used the battle to cultivate his media image as a war-lord.[94]

However, if the separatists' goals differed from Russian policy in important ways, they nonetheless became increasingly reliant on Russian military aid as the Ukrainian ATO gathered pace. Indeed, the DPR itself was less a breakaway statelet than a fragile coalition of independent militias sharing a somewhat similar political ideology. By late July, for example, the Ukrainian Army was able to conduct a major sally into separatist territory, punching through DPR positions near Debal'tseve before turning north to relieve besieged Ukrainian troops at Luhansk Airport.[95] In response, Russia was forced to commit increasing numbers of its own troops to prevent separatist collapse; first as advisors (or "vacationers") and then as formed units, shifting from what Malyarenko and Galbreath have described as "nomadic" or "creeping" occupation by proxy to overt military "consolidation".[96] In all, Russia committed at least six Reconnaissance Groups and ten Battalion Tactical Groups to the Donbass during the summer of 2014, supported by indirect fire from the 90,000-odd Russian troops massed along Ukraine's border. However, this support remained bounded by Russia's strategic ambitions in the Donbass, as well as the reciprocal pressures generated by the conflict on Russia. Russian Battalion Tactical Groups, for example, were composite formations drawn from a parent regular army brigade, and sustaining their deployment at scale placed a significant strain on the Russian military. Equally,

the rising number of Russian casualties began to draw unwelcome domestic criticism, exacerbated by the effect of international sanctions on Russia's economy.[97]

This underlying disagreement between Russian and separatist aims was exposed by the Minsk I cease-fire protocol, agreed by Russia and Ukraine in early September. Brokered by European nations eager to prevent a wider escalation of the conflict, Minsk I provided for an immediate ceasefire and the tacit withdrawal of Russian troops, together with the longer-term reintegration of the separatist regions into a federalised Ukraine under a new semi-autonomous special status. Consequently, Minsk I essentially recognised the key policy goals Moscow had sought to protect through force of arms that summer and represented a positive development for Russia. For Kiev, the idea of ceding of authority and legitimacy to Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass was less than palatable, but the agreement did offer the Ukrainian military some much-needed respite. Critically, the agreement was not acceptable for the separatists, who still aspired to a Russian protectorate rather than devolution within Ukraine, and had to be coerced into acquiescence by Russia.[98] Worse still, Russian formed units were withdrawn from the front line shortly after the agreement, representing a further nail in the coffin of the separatists' Novorossiyan project.[99] Thus, while Russia may have doubted the Ukrainian Government's ability to make good on the political vision put forward in the Minsk I protocol, the tenets of that agreement – and the ceasefire which these provided for – were viewed very differently in Donetsk as in Moscow.

The DPR appears to have initiated the second battle for Donetsk Airport in direct response to the Minsk I protocol, deliberately undermining the ceasefire in an effort to force further Russian intervention. Fighting at the airport had largely subsided during the summer of 2014, as Russian forces focused on checking Ukrainian advances further east. However,

conditions for residents in Donetsk city had continued to deteriorate, undermining the credibility of separatist claims to authority. Fighting elsewhere regularly damaged pumping-stations, interrupting the city's water supply and leading to sporadic water rationing in June and bucket-chain queues for water tankers by August.[100] Artillery exchanges also began to cause significant collateral damage, exacerbated by the DPR's frequent siting of artillery in residential areas, drawing government counter-battery fire, and the use of inaccurate rocket artillery to target the airport, falling short in adjacent suburbs.[101] On 7 August, for example, a hospital and residential high rise were both struck by government shell-fire, apparently intended for the nearby DPR-controlled SBU building. Two days later, part of the Donetsk Prison was destroyed by shelling, precipitating the escape of some prisoners.[102] Against this backdrop, the Minsk I agreement transformed the government presence at the airport from an irritant into an acid test for the separatist cause, providing a means for the DPR to demonstrate its own agency by undermining the Minsk ceasefire while attempting to compel further Russian intervention. Indeed, these political imperatives are apparent in the ebb and flow of the battle. In November, for example, the DPR offensive halted briefly while separatist elections were conducted, in contravention of the Minsk protocol. The DPR likewise exploited every opportunity to claim victory in the media, even prematurely hoisting flags over the New Terminal while the Ukrainian Army still held out below.[103]

For Ukraine, meanwhile, continued resistance at the airport served a series of similarly political functions. Although Ukraine maintained 130,000 troops on paper at the start of the conflict, these were significantly unprepared to mount a major military campaign. Much of the force was comprised of under-trained and under-equipped cadres, with deployable capability limited to a Joint Rapid Reaction Force of just 24,000 troops.[104] Consequently, Ukraine relied

heavily on volunteer militias early in the fighting, variously raised by political organisations, local authorities, and regional oligarchs. Many owed little direct loyalty to the Ukrainian state, and had to be later coaxed into the auspices of the Army or National Guard in exchange for artillery and armoured support during the summer of 2014.[105] However, the official Ukrainian military continued to struggle with recruitment and retention, notwithstanding the reintroduction of conscription. Thus, while the Minsk ceasefire bought Ukraine time to consolidate, continued fighting at Donetsk Airport also provided a useful rallying cry. In the words of one Ukrainian militiaman, 'the future of our country depends on whether we will be able to hold on to this airport or not…That is why I am here'.[106] The battle likewise served as an outlet for the more truculent militia groups like Right Sector, which had refused to affiliate with either the Army or National Guard but agreed to co-operate at the airport. Its leader was later made an advisor the Ukraine's Chief of the General Staff, having himself been wounded at the airport, in an apparent effort to incorporate the group.[107] Moreover, as the defender, Ukraine could reasonably claim to be upholding the spirit of the Minsk ceasefire while simultaneously challenging the legitimacy of its political settlement, in a bid to elicit greater Western military support. As an article entitled 'The Death of Ukraine's Cyborg Army' in the US magazine *Foreign Policy* asked, 'If the United States is really supporting Ukraine, as President Obama claims, then why are Kiev's forces getting hammered?'[108]

Importantly, Russia's response to wayward separatist belligerence at Donetsk Airport only served to exacerbate the attritional character of the fighting, as Russia sought to exert greater control over the separatists. Russia continued to provide a degree of military support to the DPR, but limited direct militia access to battle-winning systems, including heavy weapons and artillery – a process already underway since the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight

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MH17.[109] Russia also acted to remove separatist leaders who refused to tow its line. Strelkov was

removed from office in late 2014, having become increasingly critical of Russian policy.

Moreover, a series of militia commanders were mysteriously assassinated shortly after the airport

fell, initially in Luhansk, but also subsequently in the DPR. Although officially blamed on

separatist infighting or Ukrainian special forces, the fact that a number of separatist leaders or

their families were killed while in Russia lends credence to the idea that these assassinations

represented the culmination of Russian efforts to control proxy behaviour in the Donbass.[110]

Russia also actively contributed to the Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination (JCCC), a bi-

lateral contact group established to negotiate the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which

facilitated the enactment of a local cease-fire at the airport in December 2014, enabling the

rotation of Ukrainian troops in the terminals.

Yet, as time went on, Russia also increased its covert military assistance to the DPR at

the airport, in an effort to pressure Ukraine into compliance with the Minsk settlement. Indeed,

Ukrainian officers have largely attributed their defeat there to Russian intervention. Towards the

end of the battle, the defenders perceived an influx of DPR "advisors" replete with Russian

accents and military terminology.[111] As one defender observed, 'the separatists changed their

tactics at Donetsk Airport':

> If, at the beginning, they had 'stupidly stormed', then all that changed. They
>
> concentrated a lot of artillery. They supressed our artillery before attacks, and then
>
> stormed. It felt like a regularly planned attack.[112]

Immediately after the fall of the airport, Russia launched a major offensive to capture

Debal'tseve, a strategic road and rail intersection mid-way between Donetsk and Luhansk,

leading one US military analyst to describe Donetsk Airport 'as the sinew between Russia's

summer and winter offensives'.[113] This fighting produced a further ceasefire agreement known as Minsk II, which obliged Ukraine to enshrine the Donbass' special autonomous status in the Ukrainian constitution, though with no more political will than before. Indeed, as Laurence Freedman has argued, Russia's salami-slicing approach has ultimately proved self-defeating, retrenching Ukrainian public opinion against reintegration of the Donbass while perpetuating separatist sentiment.[114] Certainly, fighting around the airport continued largely unabated, with the Ukrainian infantry company manning trenches in Pisky expending an average of 20,000 rounds of ammunition a week during the summer of 2015.[115] Consequently, Russia has sought to maintain a mutually-hurting stalemate. It continues to provide layered anti-air cover to the separatists, preventing the kind of Ukrainian overmatch seen during the initial fighting at Donetsk Airport, while simultaneously denying the rebels the ability to defeat the Ukrainian military outright. By early 2017, a visiting (retired) US general described the fighting as 'World War One with technology'; when a Ukrainian commander was asked what US support he needed, he purportedly replied 'concrete'.[116]

Conclusions

At Donetsk Airport, the creation of symbolic meaning went hand-in-hand with intense, costly, and extremely brutal urban fighting. The airport's totemic status was manifested in the narrative of the "cyborg" Ukrainian defender, holding out in the ruins of the shattered terminals against the odds. In fact, the very concept of cyborg-like Ukrainian resilience at Donetsk Airport was inherently connected to the ferocity of the fighting rather than the fabric of the airport itself, and the visceral destruction wrought by the conflict on the terminal buildings and the minds and bodies of the individual soldiers defending them only added to the potency of this symbolism.

However, although the symbolism of the airport was intrinsically tied to the costs of its defence, this cannot account for the development of the fighting there. Moreover, the airport's totemic status does not seem to have been universally accepted as a justification for maintaining the defence in the eyes of many defenders; nor can it explain the separatists' repeated attempts to seize the complex. Instead, the perpetuation and escalation of the fighting for control of Donetsk Airport was a product of strategic context, and in particular, the principal-agent politics of proxy conflict and internationalised civil war.

Here, the unsatisfactory nature of the Minsk I settlement for both Ukraine and the DPR transformed the airport from a minor military objective into a strategic political tool. For the separatists, capturing the airport became a means to undermine the Minsk ceasefire, reassert their vision for the Donbass over and above the policy goals of their Russian patron, and compel Moscow into providing further military and political support. For Ukraine, its continued defence garnered much-needed international support for continued struggle without sacrificing the political high-ground, while simultaneously providing a focal point for domestic mobilisation and military consolidation. Importantly, the drawn-out character of the second battle for Donetsk Airport reflected not only the belligerents' strength of will – both viewing the conflict (if not the battle) as existential – but also their evenly matched capabilities. Indeed, while Russian intervention ultimately facilitated separatist victory at Donetsk Airport, the Russian response to its proxy agent's divergent goals in the Donbass generally served to prolong rather than hasten the conflict, ensuring neither side had the ability to decisively overmatch the other.

The construction of urban symbolism at Donetsk Airport thus raises a number of important implications for future urban conflict. Firstly, the symbolic meanings which frequently emerge from major urban battles are not intrinsic, but the product of prevailing political or

strategic imperatives *and* high tactical costs. These costs are themselves shaped both by tactical capability, but also by the intersection of belligerents' will, such that the two ingredients of urban symbolism are themselves directly related. Secondly, this relationship calls into question our ability to prevent such battles in the future. If urban symbolism emerges from the interaction between the will and capability of belligerents in context, as the experience of Donetsk Airport suggests, then improvements in tactical practice alone are unlikely prevent a repeat performance. Indeed, because military capability is a subjective, situationally-defined characteristic, determined by relative strength compared to a given opponent and each party's aims, then urban symbolism is likely to emerge whenever the will to fight outstrips conventional tactical overmatch. Yet, despite the advent of precision, "special forcification" and similar advances in tactical urban praxis, it remains possible to envisage future scenarios in which Western forces will be pitted against urban enemies with similar or matched capabilities – and the will to use them. In fact, as Western military capability becomes ever more concentrated in smaller and more exquisite armies, and as cities become bigger and more important, such a prospect seems increasingly likely. When such a situation does occur, urban fighting is very likely to assume the same symbolic importance of a Stalingrad or Donetsk Airport.

Finally, the centrality of principal-agent politics to the escalation and continuation of fighting at Donetsk Airport stands as a salutary lesson in the potential pitfalls of proxy warfare. Both Moscow and Kiev made use of various surrogates and militias at Donetsk Airport, and both exploited the fighting there as an opportunity to exert greater control over these groups. Yet, despite these efforts, both principals appear to have struggled to maintain complete control over their local agents – and with them, the pace of events on the ground. That agents can and do exercise their own independent agency, potentially frustrating (or at the least complicating) their

patron's agendas, should come as no surprise. It does, however, provide a cautionary corrective to the notion that proxies and auxiliaries can be relied upon to augment their patron's own lack of military mass in future urban operations, without extracting their own costs in turn.

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[1] Fox, 'Little Stalingrad'; Beckhusen, 'Airport Siege "Stalingrad"'.

[2] Posen, 'Urban Operations', 157.

[3] Betz & Stanford-Tuck, 'City Is Neutral'.

[4] Stryzhova, 'Battle for Luhansk Airport'; Shramovych, 'Ukraine's Deadliest Day'.

[5] US Army, 'Megacities and the United States Army'.

[6] Tzu, *Art of War*, 78; Colson, *Napoleon on War*, 333.

[7] Duffy, *Siege Warfare*; Duffy, *Fortress in the Age of Vauban*.

[8] King, *Combat* Soldier, 237-8.

[9] Helmus & Glenn, *Steeling the Mind*, 39-55.

[10] King, *Urban Warfare*; King, *Combat Soldier*, 237-8; Smith, *Utility of Force*; Evans, 'Lethal Genes', 515-552.

[11] See British Army Review, *Special Report*, vol. I; British Army Review, *Special* Report, vol. II.

[12] Hills, *Future War in Cities*, 30, 54.

[13] Neiman, 'Urban Operations', 143.

[14] Daly, 'Siege, Sack and Violence', 163.

[15] Hills, *Future War in Cities*, 220; TADOC, *Mosul Study Group*.

[16] Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains*; Rosenau, 'Lessons of Modern Urban Warfare', 371-394.

[17] King, *Combat Soldier*, 237-41, 305-22; King, 'Close Quarters Battle', 276-300; Ben-Ari et al, *Rethinking the Sociology of Combat*.

[18] Horne, *Price of Glory*, 1-2.

[19] Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 5, 19; see also Garner, *Myth of Stalingrad*.

[20] Mahečić, 'Case of Dubrovnik', 27-41; Forde, 'Bridge on the Neretva', 467-83.

[21] Neiman, 'Urban Operations', 143.

[22] Clout, 'Place Annihilation', 165-180.

[23] Posen, 'Urban Operations', 157.

[24] Betz & Stanford-Tuck, 'City Is Neutral'.

[25] Ibid.; Glenn, *Combat in Hell*, 5.

[26] See Jenkings et al, 'Wootton Bassett', 356–363.

[27] On the politics of meanings generated by the costs of war, see Carden-Coyne, *Politics of Wounds*; Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*; Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*.

[28] Spencer, 'The City is Not Neutral'.

[29] Weinberg, 'Stalingrad and Berlin', 16; Posen, 'Urban Operations', 157.

[30] Grytsenko, 'Cyborgs'; Shevchenko, 'Ukraine Conflict'; 'Battles Rage in Donetsk', *BBC News*.

[31] 'Dispatch 95', *Vice News* (emphasis added). Footage also emerged of the same individual abusing Ukrainian prisoners of war. See Kates & Removska, 'Disturbing Videos'.

[32] 'Ukraine's Coveted Prize', *BBC News*.

[33] Ibid.; 'Dispatch 95', *Vice News*.

[34] Posen, 'Urban Operations', 158.

[35] Grytsenko, 'Cyborgs'; Galeotti, *Russia's War in Ukraine*, 54-6; Goncharova, '1,373 soldiers killed'; Kovalenko & Titish, 'Moysyuk about Airport'; Fox, 'Little Stalingrad', 7.

[36] Matveeva, 'No Moscow Stooges', 33-4; Galeotti, *Russia's War in Ukraine*, 23.

[37] Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'.

[38] Kovalenko & Titish, 'Moysyuk about Airport'; Carroll, 'Trapped in Donetsk Airport'.

[39] Berman & Lake, *Proxy Wars*.

[40] Marshall, 'Civil War to Proxy War', 183-195; Brown, 'War by Proxy', 243-257; Hughes, 'Perils of Proxy Warfare', 522-538.

[41] Malyarenko & Galbreath, 'Paramilitary Motivation in Ukraine', 113-38; Rauta, 'Towards a Typology of Non-State Actors', 1-20.

[42] Neukirch, 'Operational Challenges and New Horizons', 183-97; Neukirch, 'OSCE Conflict Management in Ukraine', 229-39.

[43] While Ukraine has improved in the World Press Freedom Index, moving from 127 to 102 between 2014-2019, Russia has declined from 148 to 149. Reporters Without Borders, '2014 World Press Freedom Index'; Reporters Without Borders, '2019 World Press Freedom Index'.

[44] 'Ukraine Profile', *BBC News*; 'Turchynov Announces Anti-Terror Operation', *BBC News*.

[45] Shakirov, 'Interview'.

[46] Ibid.; Walker, 'Fighting leaves Dozens Dead'; Salem, 'Let Them Eat Cake'; OSCE, 'Information received until 26 May'.

[47] Shakirov, 'Interview'.

[48] Langston, 'Dispatch 44'; Shakirov, 'Interview'.

[49] OSCE, 'Information received until 18:00 hrs, 27 May'.

[50] OSCE, 'Information received until 18:00 hrs, 4 June'.

[51] Thorp & Gamio, 'Cease-Fire War in Donetsk'; Associated Press, 'Attempt to Seize Donetsk Airport'.

[52] 'Heavy Fighting for Donetsk Airport', *BBC News*; Grytsenko, 'Cyborgs'.

[53] OSCE, 'Spot report...7 September 2014'.

[54] Loiko, 'Ukraine fighters'.

[55] Zverev, 'Artillery Explosions'.

[56] 'New Battle rages at Donetsk Airport', *BBC News*; 'Defenders to Leave Old Terminal', *Ukrainian Mirror Weekly*.

[57] OSCE, 'Information received as of 12 December'; OSCE, 'Spot report...16 December 2014'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 21 December 2014'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time) 26 December'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 30 December'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 2 January 2015'.

[58] OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 9 January 2015'; Harress, 'Pro-Russian Forces'.

[59] Loiko, 'Outgunned "Cyborgs"'.

[60] Ibid.; Kovalenko & Titish, 'Moysyuk about Airport'.

[61] Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'; Kudrytski, 'Ukraine Forces Retake Most of Donetsk Airport'.

[62] Kovalenko & Titish, 'Moysyuk about Airport'; Carroll, 'Trapped in Donetsk Airport'; Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 20 January 2015'; Goldsmith, 'Were Chemical Weapons Used'.

[63] Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'; Carroll, 'Trapped in Donetsk Airport'; Kovalenko & Titish, 'Moysyuk about Airport'.

[64] Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'; Loiko, 'Outgunned "Cyborgs"'.

[65] Carroll, 'Trapped in Donetsk Airport'; Walker & Grysenko, 'Ukraine Forces Admit Loss'.

[66] Ostrovsky, 'Dispatch 43'.

[67] Shakirov, 'Interview'.

[68] 'Military plane shot down in Luhansk', *BBC News*.

[69] OSEC, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 25 August 2014'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 27 August 2014'; OSCE, 'Information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 22 August 2014'; Ostrovsky, 'Dispatch 84'.

[70] Loiko, 'Ukraine fighters'.

[71] Ibid.; Shevchenko, 'Ukraine Conflict'; Fox, 'Little Stalingrad', 7.

[72] Shevchenko, 'Ukraine Conflict'.

[73] Carroll, 'Bloody Battle'.

[74] Loiko, 'Ukraine fighters'.

[75] 'Nine Days Defending Donetsk Airport', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

[76] Loiko, 'Outgunned "Cyborgs"'.

[77] Ousby, *Road to Verdun*.

[78] Loiko, 'Outgunned "Cyborgs"'.

[79] Ibid.

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