

# DEAD END

*The witches' cauldron and Russia's hybrid war in eastern Ukraine*

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ESTATE INK.

## AD UTRUMQUE

***Elena Tafalan, Ulf Ekwurtzel, Randy McGuire, Mike Skillt, Anders Lindberg. In loving memory of my mother, Ginger.***

Hat off, and I wish we could have been together a lot more: My family in North Carolina: Karl, April, Kyler, Myla, Parker, Lily. Ukraine: Anton Ryshkevych (Semper Fi, brother!), Tanya, Val, Alisa, Iren, all at Nationalny. Stora Essingen: Lotta. Stockholm: Amanda W, Anna Nordenmark. Smaland: Fredrik Polback, Jonas Schander, Henrik Lofgren. Sweden: Nils A, Sujit, Anna Hugoh. Robertsfors: Dannielle, Erna, Magnus. Maryland US: Tunji, Austin, Chris. Belgium: Marvin. Me and Kiwis very dear friends: Becka, Matteo and Sammy. Juna. Blast from the past: Johan D, Jens J, Bjorn J. 1<sup>st</sup> NSKY platoon 911. My deepest respect: Anthony Lloyd (GB), Arkadij Babtjenko (RU), Karl Marlantes (US), Nikolai Lilin (RU), Romeo Dallaire (CAN), Sebastian Junger (US). *The indefatigable and undefeatable SOD Battalion Αζοφ.*

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## Explanations

**AK** – Automatic rifle. In eastern Ukraine it was Kalashnikovs. AK 47, 7,62 mm (many from the improved M-series), and AK 74, 5,45 mm. The volunteer battalion had a few M1/M16 and Fabrique Nationale, 5,56 mm (NATO standard).

**APC** – Armored Personnel Carrier.

**Battalion** – 400-1200 troops = 4-8 companies. Fireteam 2-4 troops. Group 8-10 troops. Platoon 4-6 groups. Company 4-8 platoons.

**Berkut** – Ukrainian Special Purpose Police Unit (Abolished fall 2014).

**BUK** – An advanced Russian surface-to-air missile system.

**Click** – NATO-term for kilometer. 1 click = 1 km.

**Donbass** – Region in eastern Ukraine. Historically with very close ties to Russia. Mostly heavy industry and mining.

**DPR** – Donetsk Peoples Republic (self-proclaimed).

**Flack jacket** – Basically a bullet proof vest.

**GRAD** – Russian artillery grenade system. As inaccurate as Iskender missiles, which are extremely imprecise.

**Heli** – Attack helicopters. The models used by the UA army was Mi-2, Mi-8, and Mi-24, comparable to the NATO Cobras. They carried the equivalent to Hellfire missiles, 45 kg of TNT, and fully accurate. Some were equipped with GAU-8 Avenger (30 mm high firepower capacity, 3 900 rounds per minute. A scythe, basically).

**Intel** – Intelligence, mostly military information.

**ISAF** – Internat. Security Assistance Force (Afghanistan).

**KGB/GRU/FSB** – Russian intelligence organization. The KGB was feared. Very well trained and disciplined to instill extreme fear amongst civilians.

**KIA** – Killed in action.

**KSVK** – Russian 12,7 mm anti-material rifle. Recoil-less. Metal-piercing. Equal to NATO cal .50.

**LPR** – Luhansk Peoples Republic (self-proclaimed).

**MH17** – Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, Boeing 777-200ER. Downed with 298 individuals onboard.

**MIA** – Missed in action, soldiers unaccounted for.

**NCO** – Non-commissioned officer, for example sergeant.

**Oblast** – County.

**OSCE** – Org. for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

**Para** – Russian paratroopers. Primarily in APCs.

**Pink mist** – The blood cloud effect of a distant high calibre round piercing a human skull.

**PK** – Russian 7,62 mm rapid fire machine gun. Equals Fabrique Nationale KSP 58 and US M60/M2.

**POW** – Prisoners of War.

**QRF** – Quick Response Force.

**Ragtags** – East Ukraine insurgents; rebels; guerilla; rouge street gangs. They wore no insignias, had no clear command, followed no conventions. Some led by Russian regulars.

**Recon** – Reconnaissance, scouting.

**Regulars** – Soldiers and officers by trade.

**RPG** – Rocket Propelled Grenade. Effective on helis, tanks and troops. Mostly hand-held caliber 40 mm. More wide spread than Coca-Cola and Donald Duck.

**Shelling** – 18 cm artillery grenades. Sometimes Katjusjka, which were 12 cm and fired rapidly. Horrifying, though very inaccurate.

**SitRep** – Situation report.

**SOD** – Ukrainian army Special Operations Detachment. Essentially the volunteer battalions. Front line infantry, snipers, and recon. Serving under the ministry of defense.

**Titushky** – “Criminal scum”, villains for hire.

**VKontakte** – Russian version of Facebook.

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**War is father of all, and king of all  
He renders some Gods, others men  
He makes some slaves, others free**  
*Herakleitos, Fragments*

## Flashpoint

### *Kiev, Maidan square, November 2013*

The floodgates were breaching. It was almost pitch black before the fires started. The men and the young in the first thin red line were up-tight, clenching sticks and stones. The state-militia, Berkut, was preparing for a new shock. They were visibly nervous for a fast and swift retaliation. The shouting and the burning tires had that effect. The bitter cold was never a factor. Citizens kept amassing in the thousands behind the front, constituting a most powerful and unyielding manifestation. Roaring Berkut APCs engines kept sending troops of militia into the perimeter. In three months' time, bodies would get stacked up on the pavements on both sides of Khreshchaty central city street, in the city of Kiev, in the heart of Europe. The sight of corpses with eyes half open, in unnatural positions and blood flowing from head shots was unforgettable. The dead bodies got stuck in the crossfire and could be laying for twenty-four hours or more. The violence opened up the gates of hell.

The icy winter night was set ablaze, ignited by treason and rightful rage that had been built up for decades. Finally, it only took one single spark, and the tinder was lit. The cold November darkness went flaring by fires under the bellowing thick, black smoke from petrol and burning tires in the makeshift barricades, piled up against the militia. Berkut had their rubber batons replaced with metal rods.

Ukraine was fiercely flammable, year after year of oppression, lies, midnight house searches, balaclava-clad Berkut-men, row after row of black SUVs parked outside the police headquarters, oligarch children committing manslaughter and walking free, intimidation, corruption, a useless currency, and salaries not even covering half of any apartment rent. When the fuse was lit, it spread like wildfire. The high command should have seen it coming but turned a blind eye. It could in no way be stopped. It was too late for that. The great betrayal had unknowingly initiated its own self-destruct. Now the king cobra had lost its threatening potency, but far to complacent to see it coming. The viper twitched under the blade, its venom now jaded, and every bite more and more pathetic. The disenchantment had evolved into an exploding pressure boiler. In the movement of protest were young as well as old. By time it came to be efficiently organized, with localities for med-care, food, rest, and debriefing. Up came barricades along the twenty-eight meters broad Khreshchaty street that was impenetrable, and the heavily armed Berkut made advances practicing shock after shock, but in the end to little avail. When it was over none from Berkut could live in Ukraine anymore, the mark of Kain on their foreheads. Welcomed in Moscow, in rat-infested apartments, on the constant brink of starvation, forever in exile: “Daddy, when will we go home?”

After constant stagnation since the early nineties and a deep-rooted culture of bribes and money-for-this that was effectively suffocating every glimpse of democracy. A youth bereft of all hope for a decent future, after the sordidly failed “Orange Revolution” in 2004. That was also an uprising, led by Julia Timotjenko, the Oil Queen, but it ended up only promoting the oligarchs. Now under the de facto Russian

supremacy, the ex-con Victor Yanukovich as the puppet dictator, the Ukrainian people had finally been promised an opening to the West and the EU. A free trade deal with the EU was on the table in November 2013. But in the last minute the semi-dictator and usurper Yanukovich breached, and he would sign a new decree with Russia instead of the EU, crushing all aspiring hope for the country's citizens. For him personally it was a far sweeter deal, since he had drained the country of its hard-working taxpayer's money to build his own castle, complete with a Wonderland and a Zoo, and stacked gold bars in Russian vaults, the exact amount being inconceivable. How came the Ukrainian Intelligence did not act upon the usurper, accordingly to the Ukrainian constitution, decided after the secession from the Soviet Union in 1991? There are question marks around that. The truth is they were corrupted and rotten down to the core. And so, the new protocol with the inevitable Russian supremacy unleashed a unanimous uprising against corruption and broken promises.

It started on the city square Maidan in Kiev, after a Facebook-proclamation. The protests on Maidan became a battle ground, fueled by discontent. The well-organized protests escalated into violent clashes between the militia, and the people yearning for freedom, and a fair chance to a better future. The violence displayed by Berkut was fierce, brutal, unjust. In the back of their lines, among their vehicles, they arrested Maidan front figure Mykhailo Gavrylyuk, and stripped him naked in the snow, beat him up and humiliated him. The Berkut filmed the atrocity and put it up on VKontakte as to deter anyone else from participating in the protests. The ignorant Berkut echelons sorely miscalculated the anticipated effect, for that vulgar display of power was just fuel to the fire. Oppression would have to be overcome,

no matter the cost. As a last desperate measure Yanukovich ordered Berkut-snipers up to the top of a high building, towering over Maidan. They opened fire with fine caliber sniper rifles direct into the protesters, and the body count was in the hundreds. It was a slaughter.

Government buildings were stormed by protesters with shields, helmets, and firebombs. The 22<sup>nd</sup> of February Yanukovich was escorted out of the country with the help of Russian special forces with attack helicopters. The bloodshed on Maidan continued for three days. None of the dead were youngsters. Meanwhile, the Kremlin had just bided their time during the turbulence, and in April Russia seized the moment and invaded Crimea, a highly productive and strategically important peninsula in the Black Sea, flanked on its eastern shore by the Sea of Azov. Russian unbadged special forces got their cue and moved in; “polite little green men”, as Russian foreign minister Leonid Lavrov so eloquently put it. They quenched all resistance using covert force, murder and intimidation. And it worked smoothly. The executions of the opposition took place in the backyards of small houses instead of the city squares. Nighttime house search and seize took out all protesting voices. The Ukrainian army didn’t even try to resist, reeking of cowardice, treason, disorganization and complacency. Not one yellow-blue bullet was fired. The Russian head of state, Vladimir Putin, put out brazen and bold enough lies to not stir up the EU or NATO, and he was accompanied by the usual choir of lies from the Kremlin and the Duma. You can fool some people all of the time, and you can fool all people a short time, but you can’t fool all the people all of the time. But it was too late to wake up.

The sentiments in Donbass in south-eastern Ukraine had always been pro-Russian, in large part due to proximity,

language, business, and family ties. It didn't take much propaganda to ignite an uprising against "the fascists in Kiev". Since Donbass was actually Ukrainian homeland, the Ukrainian Army sent in troops. Fully in line with international law. Their intervention made things worse, and captured Ukrainian regulars were humiliated and beaten in front of the TV-crews. Tanks were abandoned, soldiers forced on their knees under gun point cried, their quarters were set ablaze. At least twelve young soldiers were murdered execution style. The rebels went from victory to victory, cheered on by the heated masses. Since the Ukrainian regular army still had transport planes, fighter jets, and helicopters, Russia sent in thousands of heavily armed forces and technologically advanced military battalions. From Rostov came BUK, Iskender, Katjusjka. Groups of Russian GRU crossed the border for infiltration. Those captured by the Ukrainian army and the volunteer battalions were not treated very well in this stage of the war, but they were sent down the lines as POWs and served hot chai. The Russian army never responded to proposals for prisoner exchanges. The Kremlin denounced their own soldiers. In Donbass, Donetsk and Luhansk their self-appointed leaders were proclaiming referendums on secession, and declaring loyalty to Russia.

From the West came the usual right wing extremist pro-Putin nut jobs as self-appointed "electoral observers". And of course the referendum was fair: 94,9 percent of the electorate voted for secession. It was a parody. But the continuation became no cause for laughter. As a tardy reaction the Ukrainian army started to shell their own citizens in Donbass, and the big cities as well as small villages was hammered by artillery. Parts of the Ukrainian homeland was laid to waste, people was in despair, a flood wave of domestic

refugees fled west-wards, and the economy crashed into free fall. Donbass' self-appointed leaders whipped up fierce anti-Ukrainian sentiments and stoked the war.

The volunteer battalions came as a reaction to the incompetent Ukrainian Army Command, and the eastern rebels' increasing atrocities. The war in the east spiraled totally out of control and became merciless and unforgiving. Around 2016 the optimism for the future had turned sour. The promised democracy showed itself to be very selective; corruption still plagued the system, and you could bribe yourself free from exactly everything. You could buy a seat in the parliament. The economy was a wreck. The oligarchs were few and supreme. Unemployment escalating, especially amongst the young. And the war raged on. 1,4-1,8 million domestic refugees, the figures differs. Families losing sons on a daily account. Donbass kept getting supported with soldiers and arms by the Kremlin, sending paras and Spetsnaz, but eagerly denying it.

With mounting casualties in horrifying numbers on both sides, civilians as well as soldiers, hundreds of thousands homeless, peace accords routinely breached by the Donbass militia, the situation became an infernal stalemate.

The prospect of a believable and lasting peace within two or three generations had come to a dead end.

# I

## Blood will follow blood

### *Mariupil, 23rd of June 2014*

This was as close as we could get, scouting over the parking lot on the backside of the police station, from the ruins of a five-story building. My throat sore from the lingering concrete dust, constantly afloat in the air because of the artillery, heart pounding, eyes twinging. Yuriy and I snuck into a looted apartment, bereft even of carpets, shattered glass grinding under our boots. It was a day with a gazing sun and a sweet breeze, but it was pierced by an eerie silence between the shelling.

We saw them through our scopes, maybe eighty meters away. There was no way we could fire. It would lead to severe retaliation on the civilians, and that we could not possibly justify. The trunk was open on the beat-up car that skid in from the main road. The two dead Ukrainian soldiers' legs dangling and dragging on the dirt road. One had his head beaten in so bad that its malformed shape looked grotesque, like made of jelly. Probably run over by an armored carrier more than once. There were six, maybe eight ragtag militias where the car screeched to a halt. Dressed in jeans and camo,

faces covered by scarves, like the usual makeshift mobs, they dragged the soldier's bodies in the gravel and spat at them.

One of the camos clearly was in charge, commanding and gesturing to the others. His face wasn't covered, and I had seen him before, his nom de guerre was Givi Tolstykh. I knew he had been a regular in the Russian army. Possibly lieutenant or captain, but he was a murderer not a soldier. He had a little mustache and a tidy hair cut that made him look like a gentleman. He was tall and slim, with a tad exotic trait in his face. He was the only one with a side arm, as the others carried AK 47's. No one else said a word. The car sped away again, and what just had happened was so brief. Defiling the two corpses on the ground made no sense at all. But in the DPR not very much made any sense. Months later, it would be Givi that staged my mock execution. A mobile and versatile man.

The ragtag militia slouched back into the sordid police station. The golden trident over the main entrance had been torn down.

I noted that the badges had been ripped from the Ukrainian soldiers' uniforms. A Givi trademark, forcing the badges down the throat of the POWs. Eventually the FSB had had enough of his manners, acting like he was the king of Donbass, ignorant to the powers that be. They resolutely ended him in February 2017, and his whole family became collateral damage.

We slowly retreated into the shadows of the concrete rubble. Careful with every movement, not to make any noise. Yuriy was a couple of meters ahead of me, sometimes he glanced back to check, and I nodded. We carefully stepped down the broken concrete stairs. In the moment before, for a couple of seconds, I intensely wanted to see the pink mist

of blood from a clear hit, and I felt it in every fiber of my body. But we made the right call. Exacting vengeance was a matter that had its time, and that time was not now.

The Grad-artillery would surely soon continue, pounding relentless and indiscriminately. We hurried back to the trenches as darkness fell. A cigarette and a cup of hot chai, and all was well. Sovo and Nikolai were more than eager to hear about our short stint with Kaiser Givi. An hour later the shelling started again, like clockwork. My opinion on things was totally obsolete, and I did never utter a word.

Five days earlier we had been transported east in endless hours, until we at last stood at the outskirts of the main city of Mariupil, the platoon grateful for a break and a cigarette, glancing from a hilltop over the city that was about to test us. We were to converge with regular UA army a click away. Mariupil, an old city with a history, but now dilapidated and derelict, characterized by the run-down Soviet metal factories and rusty cranes, but not lacking its own fascination, at the shore of the Sea of Azov, to the north in the Black Sea. To see the city from afar, from the heights sloping down to the urban areas was as beautiful as anything. My heightened, all absorbing eyes registered, and kept tabs. It was magnificent. The boulevards had the kind of cedar trees I had never seen before, and it seemed exotic, from something out of an old early Soviet-time photo. This was my first glimpse of Mariupil. My fellow soldiers seemed slightly hesitant at the sight. The sun, the warmth, the new surroundings, all these new impressions was elevating.

Contemplating the view and being a bit more matter of factly, I remember that I was thinking: “Nothing good will ever come out of this. Some of us will never come back from

here alive.” And this feeling took me so off guard, totally from out of nothing. It came to follow me every step through the battle grounds. Not as defeatism, more like a sense that what was to come was unavoidable. I would come to override all the hesitation.

When you are sinking in a mire, you must not flounder. But you do, it is pure instinct. Me, being the eldest in the crew in the vehicle, I kicked my guilt into a level of carelessness I was not prepared to expect. We were there to kill. The distance from now and when we would get shot at was shrinking by the minutes.

This was the exact point at where I tried to establish some kind of reverence, for us and for them, the Others. So inane and naïve. The tic-tac of our metered time was loud and clear. I would soon enough put pressure on a friends’ blood-pumping thigh-wound, ripped through by a trip mine, thinking about the foreboding of my own death and the remembrance of old girlfriends. There is an immense difference between sadness and melancholia. In a war zone that divide becomes razor sharp, it is the difference between death, and mere endurance.

Later, two days into the fighting, looking back, I could still feel confused about our naïveté and our misguided attempts to be the good guys. That self-image was soon shot to pieces. There was no reason to feel any trust whatsoever. The mutual respect towards the aggressors was not only challenged but torched and burnt to the ground after we found the two murdered girls in the basement at the city center. One little blond girl had a white t-shirt with a Hello Kitty on the front, defiled by blood.

I saw what had been done to the civilians, accused by the Russians of spotting and spying. I came to see what was done

to very young persons. Ukrainian teenagers slaughtered and left like garbage outside the city center. Starving elders, their life belongings incinerated. Heaps of shattered glass, mortar, and wood. Burnt out cars along the streets, that was filled with rubble and debris. A young man had been drenched in diesel and lit on fire. His remains in grotesque display at one of the downtown squares. Only because these citizens disagreed about the integration of Donbass into Russia and its haphazard federation of murky states, they got harassed, robbed, beaten, tortured, and murdered.

It took the battalions about three days to regain and secure the city. The fighting was fierce, artillery pounding relentless, street fighting block for block. It would soon become much worse, away from the Sea of Azov and into the rebels' strongholds in eastern Ukraine, like Donetsk, Luhansk, Slavjansk and Kramatorsk. It is superfluous to say that to watch a system crumble and fall can be a curse as well as a blessing in disguise.

I was up-tight, I was so ready, though my earthly being could as well end up bleeding out in a field of mud, without even a spare chance in surviving. I remembered reading about a Second Lieutenant of the US Marines before taking land on Iwo Jima 1944 saying "this victory will cost us everything". Living in extreme realities comes with a price. You never really know what to expect, and when you do, it's too late. Drowning in a sea of blood, tears, defeat, and in the end, irrelevance.

The fox hole was deep enough for sure, almost one and half meter in the center, compliments of Russian artillery. The mud was sticky. Curbing the enthusiasm of hunkering down in that dirty hole didn't take an effort. We'd gotten so close we wielded bayonets, and I had blood all up my sleeves

and dripping, red dirt-water down my knees, and I was nauseous. The pungent stench of mucus, human waste, and death.

If there were snipers, and if we didn't keep our heads down, there would be a festival of pierced skulls and brain tissue. I had seen enough dead bodies, twisted, burnt, in decay, and my mind had gotten somewhat numb, but it taught me to keep my goddamn head down. I often wondered if I would ever have a good nights sleep again.

As we hunkered down in the pit, Anton looked at me with a blanc stare, almost morose.

"They were my friends, you know." He had always kept in contact with his friends in Donetsk, colleagues from uni in Kiev. Now they were on opposite sides, relentless, die hard.

"I know that."

"How the hell did it come to this?" His voice sounded almost fragile.

"Well, anyhow it's not kosher." What could I possibly say.

"It's not like I wanted this."

Anton grunted something, presumably for my deaf ears.

Contemplating that our Ukrainian volunteer comrades were for a fact fighting their own people, gave a very bitter after taste.

Later, the team got together in a safe perimeter behind a ridge. One of Oleg's rambblings would pick up on this, he was predictable that way. Though more than a bit tedious at times, it was liberating hearing his berating tirades of hate in words we all were just thinking.

"Let's force feed these murderous jackal's offspring's' with human blood! Wave their heads on sticks in front of their weeping mothers! Let their every conniving scheme

reward them with an asphyxiating stench of piled up corpses, consists of their sons and daughters!”

Like that. Maybe not so eloquent, but hard to misinterpret. Typical Oleg. I loved Oleg. We all loved Oleg. Everyone in the battalion loved Oleg. Oleg was deeply passionate. One day he would surely walk away from all of this without so much as a scratch. I had a strong vibe I would not.