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Donetsk Is Neither Grozny Nor Stalingrad

By Mark Galeotti

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As Ukrainian forces close in on the rebel stronghold of Donetsk, it is inevitable that the rebels will seek to deter any decisive attack with bloodcurdling threats. Newly elected rebel prime minister Alexander Zakharchenko warned that "the fight will be for every street, for every house, for every meter of our land," and will make Donetsk a "new Stalingrad."

The other obvious parallel that comes to mind for many is the Chechen capital Grozny, evoking the battles that saw it become a death trap for Russian invaders in 1994.

But let's not confuse rhetoric with reality. Not every urban engagement is a Stalingrad or Grozny, any more than all defenders are General Vasily Chuikov's Red Army or Aslan Maskhadov's Chechens.

Unlike Stalingrad, this will not be a battle of equals. Man-for-man, the rebels have demonstrated superior individual combat skills to those of many government troops. But in the coming battle for Donetsk they will be heavily outnumbered, both by the cream of the Ukrainian military as well as a first wave of ardent National Guards.

A cynic might suspect that the Ukrainian army's enthusiasm to grant such units as the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion a position in the front line of the fighting is to use them as expendable cannon-fodder. Either way, such paramilitary units as the Azov, Donbass and Aidar Battalions make up with enthusiasm what they may lack in training and discipline.

The rebels will also be outgunned. Despite Russia's provision of ever-heavier weapons — and, probably, their operators — a battery of Grad rocket launchers here and some machine-gun-armed personnel carriers there will not make up for the inequality when faced with a regular army.

Furthermore, with Donetsk encircled, it will become harder and harder to resupply the rebels. A six-vehicle battery of Grads can fire 240 67-kilo rockets in a single 20-second salvo. An impressive display of firepower, to be sure, but until another 16 tons of rockets have been acquired and loaded, that battery is no more than a target. Modern war consumes ammunition at a voracious rate, and supply is likely to become an issue very quickly.

Indeed, supplies of every kind must be considered. There are still more than 700,000 civilians in Donetsk, who need food, water and other necessities. They are largely neither devoted supporters of the rebel cause, nor eager Ukrainian nationalists; they simply want the fighting to end.

So long as Donetsk is at war, humanitarian relief efforts will not be able to provide more than a fraction of their needs. Supplies did continue to flow into Stalingrad and even besieged Leningrad, courtesy of Lake Ladoga.

A ruthless, disciplined regime could either force the population to work for the defense of the city or at the very least ignore their plight and hoard what supplies were available for the fighters. In Stalingrad and Leningrad, after all, genuine patriotism was stiffened by the judicious application of terror by a state apparatus that had the skill, will and experience to use it effectively.

The "Donetsk People's Republic" is not such a regime. With the departure of Alexander Borodai and Igor Strelkov, the rebels have lost an effective political broker and military commander, respectively.

Its chain of command is largely fictional, with individual field commanders exerting disproportionate authority, and it lacks the infrastructure of repression and propaganda to hope to mobilize the population.

Nor will Donetsk become another Grozny. Unlike the Russian Army in Chechnya, Ukraine has publicly committed itself to refraining from wholesale air and artillery bombardments. Although its use of inaccurate Grad rockets has lead to civilian casualties, it has avoided simply leveling the city. This is at once a humanitarian, political and practical decision.

Such barrages not only would take a savage toll of civilian lives, leading to international condemnation of Kiev — and perhaps giving Moscow an excuse for intervention — they also turn cities into rubbled wastes that actually hinder the attacker's advance.

Instead, according to National Security and Defense Council spokesman Andriy Lysenko, Kiev

"will use only ground forces, who will free the city street by street, block by block."

That would be neither easy nor quick. Urban warfare is always especially dangerous, chaotic and bloody, a close-in knife fight, rather than the choreography of the open battlefield. It is also advantageous for the dug-in defender, especially when, as in Donetsk, they have had time to dig their trenches, barricade their strong points and stockpile their weapons. But the Ukrainian Army, with its superior numbers, will not be at a disadvantage in this fight.

It is inevitable and right that history is considered a guide to the future, but that history needs to be understood in its context. Just like those who assume that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would be met with the same unquenchable partisan warfare as faced the Nazis when they invaded the Soviet Union during World War II, any who pluck stray examples of urban conflict and map them across to Donetsk are mistaken.

The rebels do not have the mass support that buoyed the defenders of Grozny, any more than Kiev is likely to repeat the extraordinary blunders of the Russians in 1994. Nor do they have the discipline, patriotic zeal and external support that allowed Stalingrad and Leningrad to survive.

If Kiev chooses to take Donetsk, it will pay a price in military casualties, civilian victims and international concern, but in the final analysis, these will be costs it can bear.

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