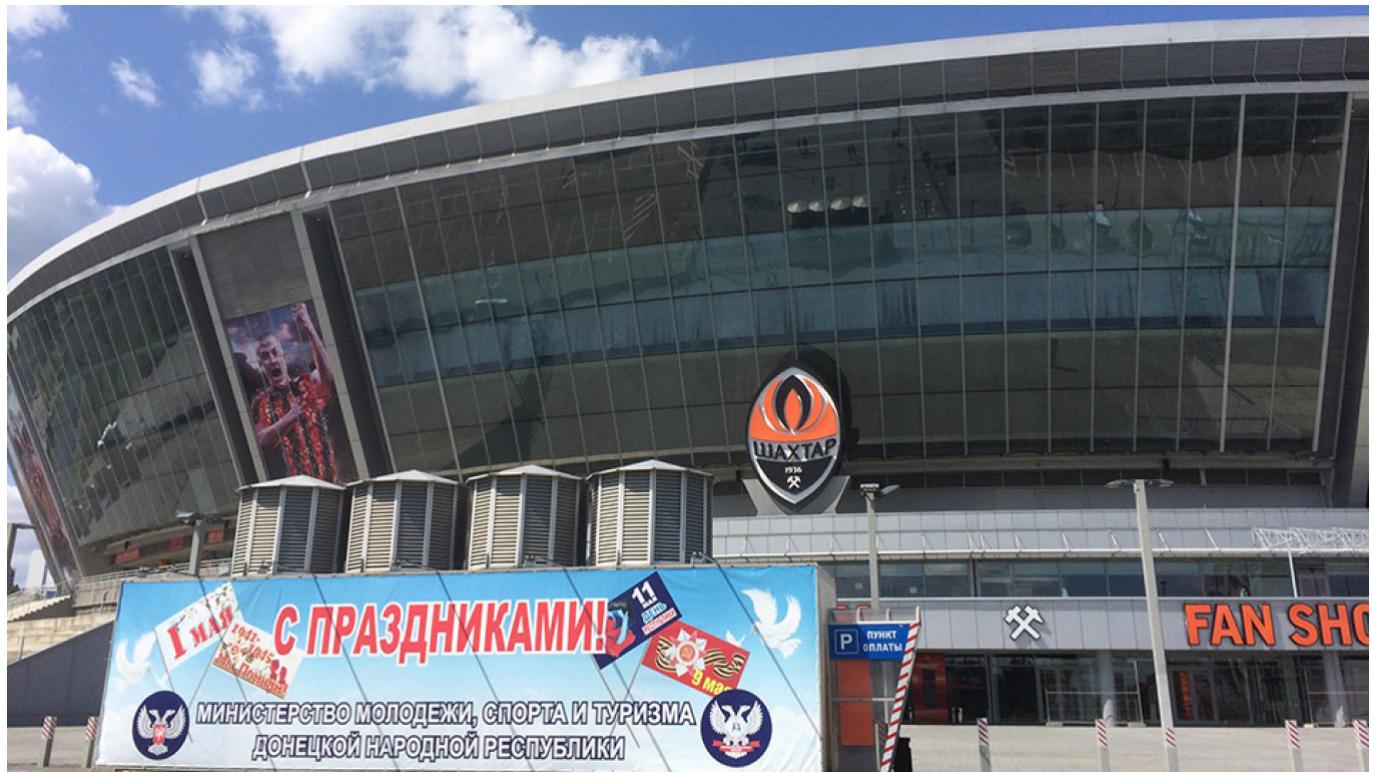


War Robs Donetsk of Its Proud Footballing Tradition

Shakhtar stadiums that once hosted UEFA giants and capacity crowds now lie empty.

By [Robert O'Connor](#)

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Donbass Arena, Shakhtar's former home ground, adorned with a Donetsk People's Republic banner.

Robert O'Connor

Gennady Laguteev remembers the day a shell landed in his garden and destroyed his veranda. It was Aug. 5, 2014, just after the war between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces had erupted in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbass.

“I kept the chair I used to sit in out there, even though it was completely destroyed,” said Laguteev, the general director of the Olympic Stadium in Donetsk, the largest city in the rebel region and capital of the self-declared Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR). “It’s so I can show it to my grandchildren, so they can see what it was we lived through.”

Until 2009, Olympic Stadium was the home ground of Shakhtar Donetsk Football Club. It hosted sell-out 25,000 capacity crowds for the U.S.S.R Championship throughout the 1970s, and again in the late 1990s, when European giants Barcelona and AS Roma played Shakhtar in the UEFA Champions League.

These days, the millionaire players of Shakhtar are long gone, forced to move to Kharkiv by the conflict. The stadium too stays mostly empty, used for just a few low-key games in the local league organized by the DPR's football union. The league is amateur, with almost all of the city's professional players having moved to Russia or elsewhere in Ukraine. On a good day, a few hundred spectators might turn out to watch.

“Before the war and now are two entirely different eras,” said Laguteev. “We had a strong championship here. Twenty teams competing at a good level. Most of them left during the fighting. Now the level of playing has really dropped.”

The outbreak of hostilities between the separatists and Kiev in 2014 created a siege mentality in Donetsk. Huge numbers of people fled the city and sanctions made life difficult for those that stayed behind. Football lost its prominence in the city, with organizers reporting a plunge in the numbers of young people involved in the game in the months after the separatists declared independence.

But Laguteev sees cause to be hopeful, even if organized football is now a shadow of what it was. “Recently, more children have started to play, so we will have a good future. People look for normality in times of crisis. But adult football is ruined because so many people have left.”

What hope there is for talented young footballers in Donetsk to forge successful careers is largely dependent on the rebel government's relationship with Russia. A 2019 decree from Russian President Vladimir Putin gave Donetsk residents the right to apply for Russian passports. That will allow young athletes living in the separatist region to experience international competition despite its lack of recognition by the world's major sporting bodies.

Moscow or Kiev

Viktor Zvyaginstev, a former defender for Shakhtar and the U.S.S.R. national team, is the director of the city's football administration. He believes that cooperation with Moscow is Donetsk's only chance of reviving its rich football heritage.

“With the help of Mr. Putin, the gates are being opened again,” Zvyaginstev said. “There are many talented youngsters in Donetsk who were not getting the chance to grow professionally. With Mr. Putin's help, our children can travel and compete all over Russia, and they can develop. Our future can be bright again.”

He added that on top of the international competition ban, Donetsk cannot afford the millions of rubles it costs to stage matches in the stadium, or even to train up youngsters.

There are still some points of sporting contact between the separatist region and the rest of Ukraine. A football school in Donetsk offers children up to the age of 13 the chance to train and, if they're good enough, Shakhtar's scouts will take them to Kiev to have a shot at joining the club's academy. But not everyone sees that arrangement as mutually beneficial.

Igor Petrov is a former Shakhtar captain, captain of the Ukrainian team during its first match as an independent nation in 1994 and now the president of the DPR's football union. He said that while the separatist region is happy to allow players and scouts to travel to Donetsk from western Ukraine, he fears venturing in the other direction for fear of arrest over his involvement with the unrecognized authorities.

Related article: [Russia Opens First Center To Issue Russian Passports to East Ukrainians](#)

He is not alone in his distrust of Kiev. Andrei Sereda is the principal at the Sergei Bubka Olympic School in Donetsk, named after the famous pole vaulter. The school has produced some of the most successful Olympic athletes to come out of Ukraine and the former U.S.S.R.

“The athletic authorities in Ukraine have tried to lure away some of our more promising athletes from the academy,” says Sereda. “The authorities offer various benefits to their parents. But our athletes are patriots. They understand what this war is about. They know history, and that the republic will take care of them.”

While Donetsk mourns the loss of Shakhtar, it feels betrayed by the club’s owner, local billionaire Rinat Akhmetov. The oligarch made his money from mining Donbass coal and metal, but he left the city along with the club in 2014, and has been a vocal critic of the separatists.

Oleg Antipov, a former press officer at Shakhtar who chose to remain in the city, pointed out graffiti scrawled on a bench outside Donbass Arena, the club’s home from 2009–2014.

“It’s something like f--- you, Rinat,” he said. “Actually no, it’s probably more offensive than that.”

Workers' game

Before 2004, Shakhtar was indivisible from the spirit of Donetsk. Back in the 1930s and 40s, when the club was still called Stakhanovets after the Soviet mining hero Alexi Stakhanov, supporters still blackened from a day’s work in the local coal pits watched the team play from the top of the slag piles that towered over the Shakhtar Stadium at the city’s Shcherbakov Park. Today, the ground is long abandoned, its once-white walls now dirty and cracked.

The club was state-owned and run by people who worked in the local coal mining and smelting industries. The team’s orange and black striped jerseys were meant to represent colliery workers emerging blackened into the sunshine. Shakhtar had a reputation for hard-working, industrial football played by locals and roared on each week by thousands of workers.

Shakhtar began to change in 2004, with a wave of Brazilian imports replacing the local players. The change was instigated by Akhmetov and Romanian head coach Mircea Lucescu, and was the result of a stagnation in local talent resulting from the fragmentation of post-Soviet football structures in Ukraine. With Akhmetov’s millions and Lucescu’s tactics, Shakhtar began to win titles — but lose fans.

But former star player Petrov believes the city will one day be home to a world-class team again.

“Football is inevitable in Donetsk, just the same as the sun rises,” he said.

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