

CHRONICLE

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SLOVYANSK

THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR

Kharkiv
"FOLIO"
2020

Foreword

I am a civilian, although my father is a serviceman, and I actually spent all my life in garrisons and permanent military camps. However, I obviously couldn't even imagine what would happen here in April-July 2014.

When I worked as a head of Kharkiv Regional State Administration from 2005 to 2010 I travelled through the length and breadth of all these fields in the Iziumsky district, appointed with the task of recording the best wheat harvests in the region. Not far from there, In Bugayivka, there was also the biggest farm in the region as well. I couldn't even imagine that everything would change so drastically here. I couldn't think that the real and full-scale war for the Independence of Ukraine would start from here. I couldn't imagine that all these fields and forests would be mine-infested, that the local farms would be filled with troops, and that the farm machinery operation stations would turn into military camps. It felt strange and unusual not only for me. Even the soldiers couldn't really fully accept it. Then why did the National Guard decide to play the role of a leader back at that moment? They were the first to change and adapt to the situation. The army men needed more time for that. And later, when the Armed Forces of Ukraine finally gathered their strengths and prepared themselves psychologically and mentally, they immediately they became a dominant power and it was when they got their own separate training camp in the village of Dovgenke, a little bit closer to Slovyansk. As for this training camp that was known as "The Moon", it functioned for quite a long time afterwards.

There are forests everywhere around here. Svyatogirs'ka lavra is located a little further — in the middle of a beautiful pine forest, on the high bank of the Siversky Donets River. There is a huge recreational area, with numerous resorts, health and spa centers there. It felt that nothing could go wrong here, especially something like a threat of a military situation. There was this unbelievable beauty everywhere around here. However, there was even a date set for the enemy to attack our camp. There are thick forests around, that's why there was lots of shooting all the time. We were prepared for this and anticipated this attack as we managed to intercept the information about our enemy preparing such an operation. According to their plans, a few specially trained people would have to secretly permeate "The Moon" training camp in the night, to enter the tents and barracks where the soldiers used to sleep and to silently butcher them in their sleep. They wanted to shock us with this, to shake our will so that we wouldn't be able to resist anymore. That was how arrogant and bold the enemy was! Moreover, the enemy set up traps



May 2014. Arsen Avakov, Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine (*right*) and Secretary of the National Security Council of Ukraine (27.02–07.08.2014) A. Parubiy (*left*) at the ATO base "The Moon" near Iziurm. Photo by Inna Petrykova

and ambushes along the road between Iziium and Slovyansk, on both sides of the road, on the left and the right, and they would constantly open fire on the road and especially on our military equipment. That's why we were extremely cautious and checked these green areas on a regular basis, and we would spend a lot of time and effort on that as well. However, it scared the enemy and helped us create at least some kind of a balance there.

There was the biggest threat here as the road through the city of Slovyansk and then farther through Iziium formed something like a bottleneck on the Kremenets Mountain and was actually the main gateway to Kharkiv region. It was extremely important and crucial for us and for them as well.

During World War II, in May 1942, one of the bloodiest and scariest battles of that entire war was happening here. It is known in history under the name of "Iziium-Barvenkovo bulge" and as the last great triumph of the German Wehrmacht and the last biggest catastrophe of the Red Army. An unprecedented number of Soviet soldiers, almost a quarter of a million people, has died, disappeared without a trace, or been taken captive here. There are still so many traces of that terrible and violent battle in the nearby forests till now. And the memory of those tragic and heroic events is strong and holy for the people here.

In 2014 Iziium was in serious danger. On the ninth of May, there was always a torch-light procession held in the city to the monument for the people who lost their lives during World War II here. During the peaceful times of my governor's days, I used to always participate in these processions. It was noble and beautiful. But everything changed in May 2014 as all of it had changed its meaning due to the propagandist usage of these symbols and the memory of that war. And this propaganda was spread by those who started the new war against Ukraine and by those who took the city of Slovyansk. There were separatist moods in the neighbouring city of Iziium as well at the beginning, but they changed quickly. Yet, it was still a challenge and we were really afraid that we could have lost control over the situation. And here I should admit that I have to give credit to the

local farmers, to the head of the local Iziium City Council and to many activists from Kharkiv and Iziium who did everything they could in this fight and helped us even with the smallest things. Everyone did their part.

The hardest thing back then was to transition from the peaceful times to the situation when the rules have actually changed. The entire morals have changed. We had to make some important and often difficult and quite harsh decisions as otherwise, our losses would have been really terrible. That was actually what prevented us from destroying this separatist den from the very beginning. I am quite sure that if only we would adopt harsher and more radical decisions at that time the situation in the region would have been developing in a different way. However, it is what it is. Often we would have really emotional discussions during our military councils. The heads of different military and state security departments have basically divided into two groups. The first group consisted of people who were willing to take the responsibility for the situation and act in a more decisive way, and the second group consisted of people who were trying to avoid this responsibility in any possible way. Some of them would say that they didn't have to anything to do with that because it was our function. There were different people and the war showed who was who. Some people have chosen to switch to the administrative and logistics service, the others have resigned. And then the war gave the stage to other people, to those who were brave and confident. Among them were Generals Stepan Poltorak, Yuri Allerov, and Mykola Balan from the National Guard, as well as General Viktor Muzhenko of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. There were many other brave officers, from the colonels to the lieutenants. Some of them have probably become the generals already. We met with all of them here.

I am trying to keep all these events and emotions in my memory and to never forget them, but at the same time, I am trying not to return to them too often. Although later we had some great victories there as well. When I visited again our former military training camp "The Moon" near Slovyansk, a couple of years later after Slovyansk was

taken back, I immediately recalled the late evening of May 13, 2014, when the helicopters would transport wounded and dead soldiers and paratroopers. Together with them, there were also those tubes for the used hand grenade launchers, also being unloaded from these helicopters. These hand grenades were taken by our soldiers from the battlefield as evidence that the enemy was shelling them from an ambush. These enemy's RPG-22 rocket launchers were covered in bloodstains, and that was something I remembered so vividly. Later on, our forces have captured a group of spies and also a group of journalists of one of Russian propaganda TV channels. They were together with the militants who would shell our helicopters from an ambush. Later they said, "We were just walking by and taking footage, it was by chance. We are just journalists. What do you want from us?" Those Russian information spies were playing innocent saints!

I remember the first full-scale battle with the significant losses that we had on May 5, 2014. We were waiting for the cover, particularly for our air forces, and they wouldn't come. We had so many quite emotional conversations back then. People would shout and yell at each other despite their ranks, positions, and uniforms.

Much has happened in those times. However, I feel like I'd like to remember only about good things. For example, about the strawberries. Iziom is so famous for these strawberries. There were so many of them then. And all of us were eating those strawberries that local farmers would bring for our soldiers. I want to thank them and all the people who risked their lives and their health to protect Ukraine. This book is about them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a long horizontal stroke followed by a vertical stroke that loops back down and then a series of smaller, connected strokes.

Arsen Avakov,

Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine

Introduction

On January 24, 2014, Euromaidan which would be later called the Revolution of Dignity was happening right in the center of the Ukrainian capital, in the city of Kyiv. The people rebelled against the brutal tyranny of the corrupted power of the former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, who was under the political pressure of the long-standing Kremlin's leader Vladimir Putin and refused the European integration course right on the eve of the anticipated signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union. As a result of such a step, Ukraine would remain in the strong imperial grip of Moscow.

On this day, January 24, Maidan was mourning its first victims killed during the protests. Active participants of Euromaidan protests Serhii Nigoyan, Mikhail Zhyznevsky, and Roman Senyk were shot in the early morning, on January 22. It happened during the riot police attack of the protesters' positions on Grushevsky Street. These three murders were the first but sadly not the last during the Revolution of Dignity, and these terrible crimes aren't solved till now.

Another significant event happened in Kyiv on the same day, in January 2014. It happened in the capital of Ukraine, in Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra which is the main monastery of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate and the oldest Christian Orthodox shrine built the XI century, from where the Christian faith was spread throughout the entire Slavonic world. On this day the Gifts of the Magi were brought to Ukraine from Greece through Russia and Belarus. This is an important and just invaluable Christian

Orthodox relic, a reliquary decorated with the exquisite golden plates of different geometric forms and with different ornaments. It was brought to Kyiv by Konstantin Malofeev who is a Russian businessman and a well-known patron of the church, something like a Christian Orthodox oligarch. Numerous pilgrims came here to see the relic, to kiss it according to the Orthodox tradition, and to say their prayers. And nobody paid any attention to a barely noticeable man with a mustache who was there in the crowd of the worshippers. This man was a Russian citizen, a retired FSB colonel, a veteran of Balkan and Chechen wars, an active member of various clubs of military and historical re-enactment, and an Imperial to the skin Igor Girkin. In less than two months this man has managed to light a fire of war in Ukrainian Donbas, prepared by his own country, Russia. During that time he was the head of the security services of Konstantin Malofeev and later actively participated in the Russian military aggression and annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

Together with the Gifts of the Magi from the Moscow church, an armed Russian aggressor has entered the territory of Ukraine. Right after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in April 2014 Russian Federation set in motion the next phase of their attempt to destroy Ukrainian state and sovereignty... This time it was the Ukrainian mainland, it was Donbas.

■ **Oleksandr Turchinov, Secretary of the National Defence and Security Council of Ukraine (December 2014-May 2019), Head of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and Interim President of Ukraine (February-June 2014):**

It happened simultaneously, on April 6 and 7, 2014, when Donetsk Regional State Administration, Luhansk SBU (National Security Agency) headquarters and Kharkiv Regional State Administration were taken. There were the same slogans everywhere: Kharkiv People's Republic, Donetsk People's Republic, and Luhansk People's Republic. These events were

orchestrated by the same people. Significant numbers of Russian citizens would cross the Russian-Ukrainian border to actively participate in the protests and forcible takeovers in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. And you also have to remember that there was practically no border whatsoever. In other words, people would travel through the border easily, without any kind of restrictions, and it was a very important problem. It was clear that those were the key strategic regions, especially Kharkiv, that's why after Kharkiv there would be Kyiv's turn, most likely.

It is a little wonder that one of the most active and most violent Russian militants, a redhead and short man Arsen Pavlov, better known as "Motorola", appeared for the first time in Kharkiv Regional State Administration when its building was seized by the separatists. He would be one of the most active participants of Slovyansk battles later.



June 4, 2014. Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and interim President of Ukraine Olexandr Turchynov during his visit to Slovyansk. Photo by Max Levin

On the dawn of April 8, 2014, Kharkiv Regional State Administration was liberated from the separatists quite fast, thanks to the decisive and determined actions of the Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov, the then-Commander of the National Guard of Ukraine Stepan Poltorak and the special forces of the National Guard regiment "Jaguar" from Vinnitsya. Although this success was, unfortunately, one of a kind in Eastern Ukraine, it became the key moment in deterrence against this "crawling Russian Spring". However, we couldn't do the same it either in Donetsk or in Luhansk. Thus, the separatist metastases broke free and continued to spread around the region, poisoning more and more Donbas regions, already quite befuddled with Russian propaganda. On the morning of April 12, this camouflaged and armed disease has already managed to reach Slovyansk which is the biggest town in the North of Donetsk region located right on the way to the Kharkiv region.

Some eyewitnesses from the house across from Slovyansk municipal Police Department accidentally filmed the attack. The main purpose of this attack was to capture the weapon including about two dozens police automatic guns, hundreds of revolvers, and non-lethal riot control weapons. These weapons were distributed later among about three hundred of long-trained separatists, mostly the locals. They were headed by the well-trained militants from Girkin's group formed earlier in Crimea. They were about fifty well-disciplined, drilled, extremely organized, and armed soldiers of the Kremlin's hybrid army. Hundreds of quite marginalized locals including some women and casual onlookers besotted with the "Russian World" propaganda would form a traditional crowd of "supporters" of this coup. The entire town of Slovyansk with its population of about 100,000 people found itself under the reign of the armed strangers and local rebels, except the police. They seized the City Executive Committee and SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) buildings and started setting checkpoints inside and around the town. Fear was ruling the town of Slovyansk.

In just one day not only Slovyansk but also most of the neighboring villages, including Semenivka, Mykolayivka, Andriyivka, and the Red

Lyman were controlled by the armed militants. On the night of April 13, Girkin's militants opened fire for the first time during their attack in the big industrial city of Kramatorsk which is the neighboring city with Slovyansk. At the beginning they would fire into the sky, just to scare people and to break into the strategic buildings, but later they started shooting to kill. Inside the perimeter, they would attack the standby units, and outside of it, they would open fire on the windows of the local police building. Some policemen tried to resist the attack, but it was to no avail. The forces were obviously not equal, so this sporadic resistance was crushed with the massive fire of the militants' assault team, and the city branch of the police was seized. It was a real miracle that nobody actually died in this intense shooting. That was when one of the militants ordered to one of the onlookers filming the attack to "move behind thee curb", using a specifically Russian dialect form of this word. Nobody uses this specific dialect word for "curb" in Ukraine, so it became clear that the core of Girkin's assault group actually consists of Russian special unit operatives, while the phrase about the "curb" became a meme in Ukrainian social media, often used to refer to the territories of neighboring state-aggressor Russia.

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST BLOOD.
THE PALM SUNDAY ATTACK
ON APRIL 13, 2014

■ **Oleksandr Turchinov, Secretary of the National Defence and Security Council of Ukraine (December 2014-May 2019), Head of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and Interim President of Ukraine (February-June 2014):**

It was planned that I had to fly to Lithuania to attend an international conference where the speakers of the parliaments of all European countries were expected to be present. I was invited to attend this meeting, and I was already at the airport when I heard the reports that a group of armed men had seized Slovyansk. The entire Donbas region was engulfed in these separatist flames at that time, and the fact that these people proceeded to such terrorist actions was extremely dangerous. So, instead of traveling to Lithuania, I had to turn my car back and return to the Verkhovna Rada building. Then, I called all the military and security forces servicemen and entrusted the Anti-Terrorist Center of SBU with the command of this operation.

There was a real governmental crisis in Ukraine back in those days, and the country lacked coordinated and decisive actions of the servicemen and security forces operatives who were demoralized with the victory of Euromaidan protests, the government's escape, Crimea's annexation and coupes in Donbas region. Meanwhile, the aggressive "Russian World", on the contrary, was imposing its initiative in a very decisive and persuasive manner. After the first shots in Kramatorsk, the first blood to be spilled in Slovyansk was rather a matter of time.

■ **Arsen Avakov, Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine:**

With the helicopters, we transported the personnel of the guard's elite forces unit "Omega" to the territory of the landing field of Slovyansk Aviation College located on the outskirts of the town. Once the people landed they sent us a signal that they were ready. At the same time, a few armored vehicles of the Armed Forces of Ukraine were heading to Slovyansk along the main route Kharkiv — Iziium — Slovyansk. The Army soldiers together with the National Guard would have to form a massive assault armored group. And then, under the cover of this armored group of the army our National Guard Special Operation Forces would have to take back the buildings seized by the separatists in Slovyansk. And then suddenly we got a report over the radio that our armored vehicles had stopped for some reason.

It was the morning of the rainy Palm Sunday, on April 13, 2014. A week before Easter. It is a great Christian holiday of Entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem. A retired SBU Colonel Andriy Dubovyk, who took part in Euromaidan on the side of the protests, right after these events returned from his retirement back to his service to the elite forces unit "Alpha", based on his pure patriotism. That was when he went on his first combat mission. As it turned out, it was a one-way trip. The village of Semenivka is a gateway to Slovyansk from the main international highway M-03 Kyiv — Kharkiv — Rostov.

■ **Andriy Dubovyk, Colonel on reserve, an officer of the Special Operations Center "A" of SBU (Security Service of Ukraine), badly wounded in the first Slovyansk battle on April 12, 2014:**

There was a former Commander of the high-mobility assault forces Colonel Oleksandr Shvets here, with the paratroopers from the 80th Lviv brigade. All the six armored vehicles and around forty paratroopers stood on this clearing, hidden in the bushes. It was quite a powerful force. There was also such

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