Inside Donetsk, the separatist republic that triggered the war in Ukraine

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Posted Wed 2 Mar 2022 at 6:48pm, updated Fri 4 Mar 2022 at 1:29am

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Pro-Russian activist Alexandra Lygina says Ukraine is a "Nazi country". *(Foreign Correspondent)*
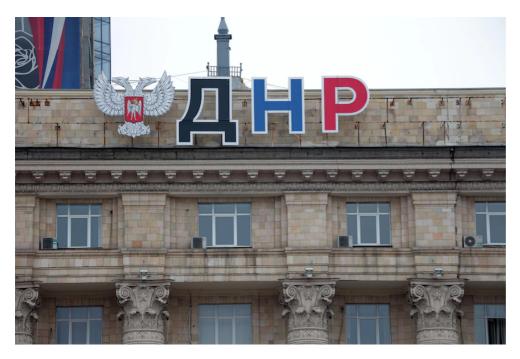
Alexandra Lygina is a 20-year-old student on a mission to fight Nazis.

"We can't live in the same country as the Nazis," she tells me. "We can't forgive all that we experienced through the years. How can I live in one country with those who killed my loved ones?"

It's a week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine begins and Alexandra is speaking to me from her shabby apartment in the city of Donetsk, capital of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR).

The DPR, in Ukraine's east, split from the rest of the country eight years ago and has a so-called "people's militia" to keep Ukrainian government forces out. In the rest of Ukraine, most see it as Russian-occupied territory. Alexandra says it's an independent country that will probably one day join Russia.

"I feel myself Russian despite the fact that my mum is Ukrainian," she tells me. "We will never be part of Ukraine again."

A public building displays the emblem of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic alongside the Russian eagle coat of arms in rebel-held Donetsk, Ukraine. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

Some Australians know the DPR as the rebel enclave from where MH17 was shot down in 2014, after missile system controllers mistook the passenger jet for a Ukrainian warplane.

Last week the DPR became the pretext for Russia invading Ukraine, with President Vladimir Putin declaring his "military operation" was to "protect people who have been bullied and subjected to genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years".

"For that, we will strive to de-militarise and de-Nazify Ukraine and will bring to justice those who committed multiple bloody crimes against civilians, including Russian citizens," Putin said.

It's been all but impossible for foreign media to enter the DPR for some time. But as Ukraine counted down to war, Foreign Correspondent gained permission to send a crew from Moscow in the days leading up to the invasion, as this forgotten statelet suddenly changed history.

Almost Russian

It doesn't take long to see who the real power in the DPR is. Russian flags adorn the city centre, cars have Russian number plates, cinemas show patriotic Russian films.

Alexandra Lygina is a member of a staunchly patriotic pro-Russian youth group. She grew up in Russia but chose to move to Donetsk to attend university, where she is studying to become a diplomat. She spends her spare time delivering humanitarian aid from Russia to struggling locals.

"[The DPR] feels Russian because people speak Russian," she tells me, a week before the invasion begins. "People have Russian money, Russian documents. So we are almost Russian."

The Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) are Russian-controlled portions of two larger Ukrainian regions. *(Foreign Correspondent: Emma Machan)*

The colours of the Donetsk People's Republic flag adorn a walkway in the city of Donetsk. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

A Russian recruitment poster plastered on the front of a Donetsk concert hall. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

She says people here are feeling reassured by the build-up of Russian troops on the border. "We have Russian passports, so Russia must protect us," she says. "And Russia is not an aggressive country because Russia doesn't want the invasion that Western media talks about."

Many Russians moved into the area after a devastating famine in the 1930s, when Stalin's disastrous economic policies saw millions of Ukrainians starve to death. Ethnic Russians were resettled into empty towns and villages to replace them.

In Soviet times, being Russian or Ukrainian didn't matter. They were all part of one country, the Soviet Union. But independence and the rise of Ukrainian nationalism made many Russians nervous.

After seizing Crimea, Russia encouraged and armed hard-line separatists in the east to rise up against Ukraine. Eight years of fighting the Ukrainian military has forced people in these regions to choose sides.

"I think some people, maybe, want to join Ukraine," Alexandra tells us. "But it's not very many people because most of such people have moved to Ukraine."

Certainly nobody in the city's crowded open-air food market expresses any sympathy for Ukraine.

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"I don't want gay prides here like they have in Kyiv," one woman says.

"Why should I run away from my territory?" asks another. "So that Nazis can live here?"

That word Nazi again.

A 'Nazi' state

A short distance from the centre, signs of conflict are everywhere. Buildings are pockmarked with bullets. An unexploded shell lies in a suburban front yard.

Military journalist and commentator Dmitry Astrakhan, a former spokesperson for the Donetsk People's Militia, takes our cameraman on a tour of the city outskirts.

"You can see that nearly all the buildings are destroyed by Ukrainian shelling," he says.

"That's how it goes here. Right now, the Ukrainian military struck today 10 villages and cities of Donbas. We just heard the shelling, and nobody knows what happens next."

A missile in the front yard of a Donetsk home, before the Russian invasion began. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

Donbas is the term for the mainly Russian-speaking south-east of Ukraine, where the DPR sits alongside another self-declared independent statelet, the People's Republic of Luhansk. Dmitry tells us they share a common fight — against Nazis.

"That's why they had to make the militia and had to defend themselves," he says.

"They were under attack both from the Ukrainian army and from Nazi battalions and Nazi paramilitary units."

He singles out a particular paramilitary group, the Azov Regiment.

"They began as Nazi paramilitary groups, they are formed from skinheads and from white supremacist groups and from Nazis.

"They are far-right extremists who are legal in Ukraine, that have heavy weapons in Ukraine and that they can do whatever they want fighting against people of Donbas."

It's a line the Kremlin has been pushing since Russia invaded Crimea in 2014. And it's not subtle.

That year, ahead of a referendum to join Russia, I saw authorities erect giant billboards across Crimea showing maps of Ukraine covered in swastikas. Other billboards showed a giant Mother Russia pushing back a Nazi stormtrooper.

In part, it was a reference to World War II, when Ukrainian extremists led by Stepan Bandera sided with Nazi Germany to try to win independence from the Soviet Union. But the Azov Regiment has been a handy update for the narrative.

Azov emerged in 2014 from a collection of often violent ultranationalists who joined peaceful democrats in the Maidan protests against the pro-Russian government. Russia portrayed the uprising as a Nazi coup and armed and supported separatists in Donbas.
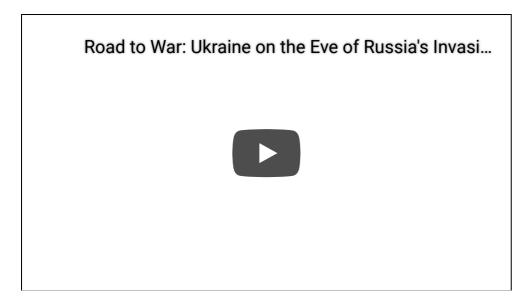

The Russian word for "forbidden" is emblazoned on a street poster in Donetsk showing children threatened by a knife. A swastika is visible on the knife handle. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

The Azov battalion – mainly drawn from local Russian speakers – threw itself into the fighting with separatists, helping to wrest back the eastern port of Mariupol. Its success endeared it to a new Ukrainian government desperate to not lose more territory.

Politicians ignored or played down Azov's Neo-Nazi ideology and symbols, like the Sonnenrad (sun wheel) displayed on its insignia. Some far-right figures were given senior positions in the civil administration.

In November 2014, Azov was expanded from a battalion into a regiment and absorbed into the Ukrainian National Guard.

It was a propaganda gift for Russia, especially after the Christchurch massacre of 2019, when the shooter was found to have a Sonnenrad emblem on his backpack.

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While there is little evidence he travelled to Ukraine, some Russian media have linked him to the Azov battalion.

"He was one of the people who were trained by Azov, who got his leadership and ideas from Azov website," Dmitry tells us.

Today, Azov is a tiny part of the Ukrainian military with fewer than 1,000 soldiers out of a Defence Force of nearly a quarter of a million. Azov's new commanders deny any links to Nazism.

There is an ocean of competing claims on the far right's influence in Ukraine, but what is clear is that it has almost no public support.

In the 2019 election, far-right parties including Right Sector, which absorbed many Azov leaders, received less than 3 per cent of the vote, below the threshold to enter parliament. Ukraine elected a Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who appointed a Jewish prime minister, Denis Shmyhal.

But still, the Kremlin insists, Ukraine is a Nazi state. Russian politicians can barely mention Ukraine without saying the word. Russian state television reports are full of stories of alleged Nazi atrocities.

Alexandra Lygina is a true believer.

"Ukraine is not a part of the Russian world anymore because Ukraine chose its way to the West," she says.

"It became a Nazi country. And the Russian world is against such things."

The 'special military operation'

We weren't able to film the Donetsk frontline. Authorities say an upsurge in shelling makes it too dangerous to visit. But on the ground, those we speak with welcome the Russian forces massing on the borders as a deterrent to Ukrainian aggression.

"The war has been going for almost eight years, and I don't believe that something will change dramatically," Alexandra says.

The military commentator Dmitry Astrakhan gives our crew the same assessment.

"If we are talking about the big war between Russia and Ukraine, I don't think it's really possible," he says. "The next days I don't think this will happen."

Within hours, everything changes.

On February 18, the leaders of both separatist republics release simultaneous video statements on the messaging app Telegram claiming Ukraine is mounting concerted attacks and sending saboteurs. All men are to be mobilised and women and children evacuated.

People walk to board a bus during the evacuation of local residents in rebel-controlled Donetsk to Russia. *(Reuters: Alexander Ermochenko)*

"Only in the past days our army prevented several attempts of terrorist acts from Ukrainian special services," DPR leader Denis Pushilin declares.

Suddenly, buses are on hand to ferry civilians to Russia and the DPR press service has cameras ready to film it.

The investigative group Bellingcat claims metadata from the leaders' videos show they had been recorded two days earlier, when the frontline was quiet.

Others wonder why Ukraine would suddenly mount major operations when it is desperately trying to avoid giving Putin the excuse to send 190,000 troops across the border. Ukraine denies making any such attacks.

None of that matters. Russia suddenly has a pretext to intervene.

On February 21, when Putin announces he will recognise the statelet's independence and send peacekeepers, Donetsk erupts in celebration. Three days later, he announces Russia will mount a "special military operation" to remove the Nazis from the Ukrainian government.

Pro-Russian activists celebrate in Donetsk after Russian President Vladimir Putin signs a decree recognising the two Russian-backed breakaway regions as independent entities. *(Reuters: Alexander Ermochenko)*

This is, in effect, Putin's declaration of war against Ukraine. But Russian state television is as careful to avoid the word "invasion" as it is to include the word "Nazi".

"You know, as they retreat, the Nazis continue to destroy Donbas," Russian talk show host Olga Skabeeva announces.

"Today is the day of a very just operation on de-Nazification of Ukraine," says shock jock Vladimir Soloviev, who later cries on air over the loss of his two luxury homes in Italy to sanctions.

After the invasion

Five days after the invasion, I speak to Alexandra again. She's in the Russian border city of Rostov distributing aid to civilians fleeing Donetsk.

"My main feeling is I hope the war will end soon," she says. "This operation gives us hope that Ukrainian forces will not have the resources to kill people in Donbas."

The television reports being shown in Russia portray a very different war from the one we are seeing in the West. Bulletins focus more on the West's alleged bullying of Russia, featuring condemnation by countries like Venezuela and Iran.

Alexandra Lygina distributing aid at the Russian border city of Rostov earlier this week. *(Foreign Correspondent)*

"I have relatives and friends in Ukraine in Kyiv, in Odessa, in Mariupol," Alexandra tells me.

"Of course I feel sad for them and hope they will be safe. But Russia bombs only military facilities, not houses or schools or hospitals as Ukraine did."

None of what has happened has shaken her faith in what she sees as Putin's quest to save the innocent from Nazis.

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