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By Alec Luhn

Ukraine separatists celebrate Soviet holiday in Donetsk

Medals awarded to outstanding fighters as thousands of people gather to mark Defender of the Fatherland Day, also known as Men's Day

В Донецьку українські сепаратисти святкують радянське свято. Повстанці нагороджуються медалями за видатні бої, в той час як тисячі людей збираються відзначити День захисника Вітчизни, відомий також як «чоловічий день».

Тисячі людей та повстанці зібралися в самопроголошеній Донецькій Народній Республіці, щоб відсвяткувати День захисника Вітчизни. На центральній площі біля пам'ятника Леніну командир повстанців нагороджував своїх побратимів медалями, деяких помертньо. Колись радянське свято зараз на території ДНР набрало нового звучання і, за словами представника ДНР Пушиліна, воно символізує незламність людей перед фашистською загрозою, яку вони зуміли відбити.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/ukraine-separatists-soviet-holiday-mens-day-donetsk>



Thousands of residents and rebel fighters have gathered in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic to celebrate Defender of the Fatherland Day, also known as Men's Day – a celebration that has taken on additional meaning during the conflict between Russia-backed separatists and Kiev.

The holiday, which was originally known as Red Army Day and is widely celebrated throughout the former Soviet Union, in recent years has come to be less militaristic and more broadly focused on male relatives and friends.

But the atmosphere in Donetsk was decidedly Soviet, with the crowd waving Soviet flags beneath a giant statue of Vladimir Lenin in the main square. Commanders awarded medals to outstanding fighters, some of them posthumously, and performers read patriotic songs and poems.

“Now this holiday is not just about girls congratulating boys, it's about congratulating those who make it possible to build civilian institutions here,” said Denis Pushilin, vice-speaker of the people's council of the DPR. “Our guys have proven that they're worthy of the memory of our grandfathers, who once drove the fascist scourge out of Donbass. Now they are doing the same.”

A group of French volunteers fighting with the rebels spoke out against the Kiev government. The crowd clapped and cheered for the fighters, who stood in front of the stage and called the names of popular commanders. They joined in a moment of silence for those killed in the conflict, which has claimed more than 5,600 lives since it began last April.

Alexander Khodakovsky, head of the rebel security council who founded the prominent Vostok Battalion, said 172 men from his unit had been wounded and 110 killed. "When the enemy falls from your bullets, mourn him," Khodakovsky said. "But they came here with the sword. We didn't invite them."

The highlight of the holiday was a concert by the Russian singer and MP Joseph Kobzon, a native of the Donetsk region and a popular Soviet-era crooner who was sanctioned by the European Union this month over his support for the annexation of Crimea and the breakaway republics in eastern Ukraine.

The local poet Oleg Tokarev read lines dedicated to a nine-year-old boy named Vanya, who Tokarev said had lost his legs to shelling and was recuperating in a Moscow hospital.

"I was too young to become a rebel, but as soon as they let me out of this Moscow hospital, I'll dance a victory dance without legs," Tokarev said, speaking from Vanya's point of view.

Nina Anatoliyevna, a teacher in the crowd, said: "We've celebrated this holiday since Soviet times. Today it's even more important."

Her companion Anatoly Nikolayevich, also a teacher, argued that Donetsk was standing up to a "fascist junta" that had taken power in Kiev. Some protesters in Kiev who demonstrated in favour of ousting President Viktor Yanukovich last winter were from far-right groups, but they have remained relatively marginal in Ukrainian politics since then.

Despite a ceasefire agreed in Minsk on 15 February, Nikolayevich said shelling near the hotspot of the Donetsk airport had not ceased. "You can't sleep at night. We don't turn on the light or a shell could come flying in," he said. "Nothing has changed since the ceasefire. I go to work in the morning and see where the shells hit."

On Sunday Eduard Basurin, a Donetsk deputy militia commander, said 29 instances of shelling had been reported in the past 24 hours, most of them near the Donetsk airport, which rebels took nominal control of last month after heavy fighting. Basurin said pro-Russia forces were not firing back and the withdrawal of heavy weapons called for in the Minsk peace agreement would begin on Tuesday.

On Monday Ukrainian authorities reported the first major outbreak of shelling in the Luhansk region since the ceasefire took effect. Mortar fire hit the outskirts of Popasnaya, a government-controlled town a few miles from rebel positions, at 4am and again at 6am, according to the Luhansk governor's office.

Artillery shelling struck Ukrainian positions near the towns of Krymske and Trokhizbenka on Sunday and Monday, and occasional fire was reported in Troitske. These towns are located near Stakhanov and Pervomaisk, which are held by Cossacks who have clashed with the leadership of the Luhansk People's Republic and who have criticised past ceasefire attempts.