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By Anna Nemtsova

## Ukraine Rebels Praise the Lord While Russia Passes the Ammunition

*Українські повстанці славлять Господа, в той час як Росія передає їм озброєння*

*Повстанець по кличці Дяк з гордістю розповів журналістці, що у його формування є все необхідне для ведення "великої війни", і похвалився російським танком Т-72Б3, трьома самохідними гаубицями 2С1 "Гвоздика" і самохідною гаубицею "Мста".*

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/24/ukraine-rebels-praise-the-lord-while-russia-passes-the-ammunition.html>

DEBALTSEVE, Ukraine — The Russian-backed rebels of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Donetsk People's Republic army have been flying a flag with the face of Jesus Christ on it since they went to war in eastern Ukraine in April. Now it's flapping in the wind at a checkpoint between the mostly destroyed towns of Vuhlehirsk and Debaltseve, and the troops are pumped up with a sense of righteous victory. Last week, after a long siege—and ignoring a nominal cease-fire—they forced the Ukraine government's troops to give up Debaltseve in what was, for Kiev, a humiliating defeat.

On Sunday, bearded and dirty after weeks of fighting in the epicenter of the war, the rebels could not wait to conquer more Ukrainian towns. As one of the commanders, nicknamed Dyak, told The Daily Beast, first they plan to take over Slovyansk, a hometown for several of them that served as a rebel operations center for much of last year, then became the focus of outrageous Russian propaganda after it was taken by Ukrainian forces. The rebels want to surround Volnovakha, and eventually they plan to take control of Mariupol, a strategic port on the Sea of Azov that sits astride the land route between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow seized and annexed almost a year ago. (On Monday, Kiev reported rebel attacks on government troops in Mariupol.)

Dyak proudly told us that now his forces have everything they need to fight “a big war.” He pointed at a Russian T-72B3 main battle tank and three 2S1 SAU Gvozdika

self-propelled howitzers fueling up at a gas station mostly destroyed by artillery. The commander bragged of even more powerful weapons, including an MSTA self-propelled gun known as a “Tank Destroyer” sent from Russia and deployed with rebel forces.

But weaponry was not the only explanation of the victory, Dyak insisted, pointing at a big blue-and-yellow sign across the road that said: “Ukraine is above all.” The rebels mocked the slogan, popular among Ukrainian patriots. “We are beating Ukrainians because Jesus is with us, not with them, executioners of their own people,” Dyak said. “Ukraine should know, we are not a bunch of insurgents—we are a serious army now, the forces of Novorossia.”

The rebels talk constantly these days about setting up new “cauldrons” where they can trap Ukraine’s troops the way they were trapped in Debaltseve, with heavy artillery pouring in on them from all sides. The strategy, which some Ukrainian soldiers refer to as “meat grinder,” destroyed hundreds of lives twice before: in Ilovaik, where the rebels killed around 1,000 Ukrainian soldiers last August, and in Debaltseve this month.

All in all, thousands of civilians and military have been killed and villages and towns devastated as the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine has experienced combat the likes of which nobody has seen here since World War II.

“Nobody is going to make peace in Ukraine,” the leader of the Donetsk People’s Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, declared at a public meeting on Monday. He blamed Ukraine for taking weapons from United States. (Washington is still debating whether to supply any sort of lethal weapons, in fact.) Zakharchenko predicted that Ukraine would attack the rebels again in late March or early April.

Clearly, there’s no confidence in the cease-fire arrangements hammered out in Minsk this month. “As soon as we withdraw heavy weapons from front lines, Ukraine will pull weapons in from Kharkiv and Dnepropetrovsk,” said Zakharchenko. “It seems to me, there will be a provocation. Ukraine needs war.”

In the meantime, the security services of Ukraine warned against mass rallies in Kharkiv after Sunday’s terrorist attack on a peaceful march of Ukrainian activists, which killed three and wounded 10 people. That was not the first such bombing in the southeast of Ukraine; explosions set off by the insurgent underground have kept the situation tense for months.

Russia has “helped out” the Donetsk militia with weapons of all calibers and levels of destructive power, from semiautomatic pistols and assault rifles to heavy artillery, missiles, rockets and thermobaric bombs.

On Monday, columns of rusty tanks and armored vehicles with no identification numbers on them could be seen on both sides of the border. Three armored vehicles in a cloud of black exhaust parked on the road by the cemetery outside of Amvrosyevka village, not far from the Uspenka border checkpoint now controlled by Russia and Donetsk.

The devastated population of Debaltseve came out of the basements after being terrified by artillery fire raining on the city for over two weeks. Loudspeakers blared patriotic songs about the Donbass war on the main square on Sunday, where dozens of people lined up to receive packages with food aid from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Some victims of the war loaded the boxes with food onto the bicycles, others dragged their UCRC packages along the bumpy streets past buildings with no windows and giant holes in the walls. “We live here like in an apocalypse,” Maria Fyodorova, 57, told The Daily Beast. At the Debaltseve checkpoint the rebels under the Jesus flag also talked about apocalypse.

