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The Sky Explodes Over Luhansk, and Kiev Blames the Separatists

Anna Nemtsova

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Heavy gunfire rocked a Ukrainian base Tuesday night, a day after Ukrainian military rockets killed eight unarmed civilians—an attack rebels say lost Kiev the war for this eastern city.

It was a dramatic and sad scene Tuesday in the center of Luhansk. A powerful wind blew up clouds of dust, coating the flowers that locals had placed over the puddles of dried blood in front of the regional administration building, in memory of the eight people killed here the day before. On the ground were fragments of rockets and at least 21 craters, evidence of what separatists say were unguided air-to-surface missiles. The sky looked as if it could explode over the city at any moment. But people were still arriving at the square to share their stories.

Fortunately, the rockets had not hit the playground in a park nearby. Emotional witnesses described how five women who were chatting outside the building when the jet fired were killed on the spot, along with three men. Eleven more people were injured outside and inside the administration building Monday. But every conversation on the square Tuesday eventually turned to the unfairness of the official Ukrainian reports, which blamed the civilian deaths on pro-Russian rebels misfiring an anti-aircraft missile.

“Our new president, Poroshenko, will have to explain to Obama why the authorities are lying to us and the entire world about this crime against the people in Luhansk,” bank manager Igor Brynkin told The Daily Beast. Brynkin happened to be in the park when the rockets hit just 150 feet away, and he rushed back to his bank and warned his clients and staff not to leave the building.

Nobody seemed too surprised that the Ukrainian military had cracked down on Luhansk, a separatist stronghold in eastern Ukraine. The governor of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People’s Republic, Valery Bolotov, had demanded that the entire population of the city, almost half a million people, “from big to little ones,” join the war to “wipe the Ukrainian military off the face of the Earth.” Bolotov also had called for Russia to deploy peacekeeping troops to eastern Ukraine. Here, as elsewhere in the east, armed separatists are occupying administrative buildings near parks and playgrounds.

Moscow has not ruled out the possibility of sending peacekeepers to the east. Describing Russia’s strategy, Kremlin adviser Sergei Markov said: “It is important for the anti-fascist movement to take over border guard bases, shoot down Ukrainian helicopters and airplanes, and provide humanitarian corridors for Russian volunteer forces to pour into Luhansk.” That strategy, Markov added, is partly why Russian President Vladimir Putin planned his trip to France to mark the 70th anniversary of D-Day for June 5.

The events of the past two days seem to bear Markov out. On Tuesday at about 9:40 p.m., the sky over Luhansk exploded once more, first with red tracers and then with sustained gunfire that lasted for over an hour. The war Bolotov called for had descended on a Ukrainian Interior Ministry base. Bolotov’s forces had been laying siege to another base since Tuesday morning. One of the Luhansk region’s 12 border guard bases had stood its ground for more than 10 hours under heavy fire. In Mirny district, loudspeakers at a base under attack were playing the Ukrainian national anthem.

“Luhansk has already won the war against Kiev,” Morozov said. “The locals will not forgive an air strike on civilians.”

Over the course of two days, about 20 Ukrainian soldiers had deserted, but more than 100 remained at their posts. The Daily Beast spoke to two soldiers inside the base by phone—they were “not ready to fight until the last drop of blood,” Sergeant Nikolai said, and many of his friends “wished they could go home, back to their families.” How long would this strange war between brother Slavs continue?