



## THE FOG OF CIVIL WAR: DIVINING THE TRUTH IN AVDIIVKA

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Samuel Johnson noted some centuries ago that among the casualties of war may be numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates. To ascertain the truth of what is happening in a civil war - that is to say, a war fought predominantly within the territory of one country - may be more difficult still. That is because civil wars are often chaotic and disorganised, involving as they do people who used to be neighbours suddenly turning one upon the other. Even if encouraged by proxies, the chaos of confrontation between former friends generates an insuperable mist.

Civil wars have a random and arbitrary quality to them. What begin as small events, often occurring in places with minimal present objective media coverage, suddenly escalate dramatically and unexpectedly. Sometimes media is the reason for the escalation. The origins of the conflagration are quickly lost, but everyone places their own factual twist upon events. This in itself may catalyse escalation. Suddenly there emerges a danger that a small problem gets out of control and starts to endanger far more people than those over whom it originally cast a shadow.

Avdiivka is a town in Ukraine whose precise current population is unknown but might be estimated at 20,000. Measured in a straight line, the distance from the centre of the town to the centre of Donetsk is approximately nine miles north. Until 29 January 2017, the *de facto* zone of separation between the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and territory controlled by the Ukrainian armed forces ran between Avdiivka and Donetsk. Avdiivka had been occupied by separatist forces in the early part of the war in Donbas (from April 2014), but Ukrainian forces recaptured the town in July 2014. The front line between the two sets of armed forces (called the "contact line"), established by the Minsk-II agreement in February 2015, required the establishment of a security zone of 31 to 87 miles between the belligerent parties for different types of artillery and missiles systems. Hence there should have been no risk of the resumption of serious fighting in the region between Avdiivka and Donetsk, if the terms of this security zone were being fully observed.

The contact line runs (or ran) close to the southeast of Avdiivka, and very close to the road from Donetsk to Yasynuvata. Yasynuvata is another town, whose exact population is unknown but might be currently roughly estimated at 25,000, some eight miles northeast of Donetsk. At the time of writing (and since the Minsk-II agreement) the town is in the territory of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, as is the whole of the road between Donetsk and Yasynuvata.

The area has been mostly peaceful since Minsk-II until very recently. However it saw a progressive build-up of Ukrainian military fortifications in its southeast, very close to the road between Donetsk and Yasynuvata, from March 2016. A debate ensued about whether this was a violation of the terms of Minsk-II. Nevertheless for the most part conflicting arguments about who was in breach of Minsk-II remained academic. The road from Donetsk to Yasynuvata remained basically passable for those civilians who wished to use it. As in most post-armistice border disputes in civil wars, both sides made their cases but not much turned upon their differences. That was the status quo until very recently.

Reports emerged of bombardments between Ukrainian and separatist forces on 29 January 2017. Nobody seems clear who fired first, or how either side had procured that the artillery forbidden by Minsk-II from the security zone and necessary to undertake these bombardments had entered into the prohibited area. However it goes without saying that each side held the other responsible. Likewise, nobody seems certain what sorts of artillery were involved on either side; how many rounds each side fired; whether there have been any infantry engagements (allegations of tank battles have been made but evidence of actual such battles seems scant, at least at the time of writing); or how many people have died in the five days (at the time of writing) since hostilities apparently began.

At the time of writing fatalities seem to be not more than ten to twenty, combining both sides. This in itself suggests that the conflict has been fairly limited. But that could change at any time if, motivated by international media attention or otherwise, one side or the other decides to escalate. Perhaps the most significant issue is that a power station appears to have been disabled in the town, which is troubling given the low temperatures typical for the region in February. The humanitarian consequences of a loss of power are concerning, but the precise scope of this potential danger are presently uncertain.

Why has any of this happened, given almost two years of significant (but not complete) peace in the Donbas after the conclusion of Minsk-II? The coincidence of timing cannot be ignored. The current Avdiivka hostilities started barely a week after the inauguration of an ostensibly pro-Russian US President, Donald Trump. There are theories and counter-theories as to why there would be fighting over this relatively small town, where there had been peace previously. The Ukrainian account is that Russia-backed separatist forces attacked the town to test the Trump administration's reaction. The Russian account is that Ukrainian forces initiated hostilities to galvanise European resolve to focus upon Ukraine in the face of US-Russian rapprochement. Who knows how to resolve these debates.

The truth - as historians know is usual in events of this kind - is that nobody will ever know what motivated the first person to fire first, because facts and evidence are the first thing to be lost in civil wars. And now I would like to turn to a more fundamental thesis. It does not matter for the international policymaker who was first at fault. That is because common faults follow the first fault upon a much compounded scale, until the exercise of counting relative faults becomes impossible by reason of the wartime circumstances in which one is trying to count facts that are impossible by their very nature to measure.

International policymakers must not get distracted by the act of assigning blame. One of the cruelties of civil wars lies in the fact that howsoever a new conflagration occurs, both sides may have a perverse advantage in weaving their own narrative of events and enhancing their competing accounts in the eyes of a diverse international community of potentially intervening political, economic, diplomatic or military forces. A destructive cycle of escalation is thereby engendered. Third states buy into the competing and destructive narratives preferred by the parties for their own domestic policy reasons, taking one position or the other for their own convenience. But they should try to avoid this to the extent that they can.

Failing to do so encourages everyone to escalate. It is my experience that many of the so-called trigger events in civil wars often begin in insignificant ways that through the broader lens of history cease to matter. A radical Serb nationalist group with whose agenda few people sympathised tried to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. It was only the fourth putative assassin on 28 June 1914 who managed to achieve the task. Three assassins had previously failed on the same day. The fact that Franz Ferdinand had carried on with his duties nonchalantly notwithstanding his knowledge of at least one serious prior attempt upon his life was an accident of history. Investigating exactly why or how he did this, or why Gavilo Princip was motivated to murder a man he had never met before, does not help us much in understanding the causes of the First World War.

The same is true for any putative exercise of trying to divine who fired the first artillery round in Avdiivka,

The more important point for the international policy maker is to understand the risks of escalation by reason of the fact that the combatting parties may be taking actions to provoke one-another based upon their anticipation of how one or more international policymakers will react. The first course for the international policymaker in such circumstances, exposed to these winds, is to step back and try to understand this corrosive dynamic, even in the absence of perfect information. Then the priority should be to take action. Pressure must be applied upon both parties not to escalate. It is generally best that this be done with discretion and care. This is because even if one tries to be neutral or fair in one's public statements, one's comments will inevitably be seized upon by some side - and maybe both sides - as not being so.

There are some things that must be said by third parties, because their domestic political constraints compel it and because only third parties can legitimately say things that must be said and that the warring parties cannot say with credibility. But the only sane strategy in response to incidents of this nature in civil wars is to prevent a serious risk of escalation driven by competing desires for international media attention of different kinds. Hence the obviously proper means of preventing that escalation is not to feed into the media cycle. This may entail saying the minimum in public, and doing the maximum in private.

In my opinion, the sudden crisis in Avdiivka is relatively easy to resolve. One most prompt solution might be a multinational force of 1,000 peacekeeping troops placed in the security zone for a limited but renewable period of (for example) 60 days. This would likely disperse the problem straightaway. However I am quite certain that this will not happen. Nobody wants to put their troops in such harm's way. There is a Great Power on the doorstep. People would rather act from afar. So be it. In that case, those with an interest in the region are bound to act intelligently. Whatever its genesis, it is obvious that the Avdiivka conflict is artificial. We must be realists, where we are not prepared to intervene militarily ourselves. This means that there is only a limited amount we can do. Accordingly we are obliged to accept, at least in some *de facto* sense and for the time being, establishment of the contact line in the location where Minsk-II has prescribed it to be. There is no will on the part of the international community to commit troops to change military outcomes. Hence we must accept that it is easier using the diplomatic and economic means at our disposal to defend an existing military status quo than to try to rewrite it. Neither the town of Avdiivka nor the road from Donetsk to Yasynuvata are sufficiently strategically significant for either side to conflagrate a so-far limited conflict into one in which major loss of life is suffered by anyone. Hence we should do whatever we can to prevent this.

To the extent that escalation is tempting for either side to the conflict for short-term reasons, it is a tactic whose net results will be negative both for the parties involved and for the international community. The strategic international goal in Ukraine should not be to encourage people to believe that the problems of the region are best resolved by further killing and loss of life or disruption to everyday existence. Instead it should be to persuade the parties in conflict that cooperative and negotiated solutions to civil confrontations are vastly superior to military outcomes, even if slow. So much about civil war is driven by anger, brinkmanship and the desire to save face that motivates a refusal to back down. But all these emotions are morally irrelevant in comparison to the pain suffered by a family inflicted by a single loss of life, military or civilian. A dead man who leaves his wife and children without a father and husband is a tragedy of vastly more substantial proportions than emotional reactions to civil conflict in the heat of the moment.

Escalations of civil war entail very many families being left without fathers. The goal of any international policymaker must be to minimise the number of those deaths. This is the overriding imperative of international peace-keeping. It is my view that nothing else matters in comparison.

Achieving the minimum number of deaths may require military intervention upon occasion, to be sure. Peacekeepers cannot always be pacifists. But where a strategy of de-escalation is possible, it should be pursued. The self-destructive temptations of parties to a civil conflict to escalate events for their own emotional reasons or short-term political goals must be resisted. This is all the more the case for a conflagration such as Avdiivka. This conflict is so obviously (by virtue of the coincidence of timing) intended by somebody as a malicious political game, quite possibly pursued with an intent to escalate on account of convenience of political timing. Again, to emphasise: it does not really matter whose political game this is. The goal is to stop the game and to save lives.

The people of Avdiivka should take priority. The international community's goal should be mitigation of their suffering and the minimisation of the number of deaths on all sides. If the relevant international actors press all sides in concert to de-escalate, this goal can be achieved. Only if they flounder in their common determination may the malicious cycle of escalation of civil conflict take hold.

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