

# BATTLE FOR THE EAST

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Mariupol sits on the coast of the Azov Sea between the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014, and the self-declared Donetsk republic, which President Vladimir Putin recognised as independent, along with the Luhansk republic, before ordering the invasion of Ukraine. On February 24, Russia started the war on three fronts — in Ukraine's north, from the Belarus border, in the east, from the rebel-controlled Donbas and in the south, from Crimea. As the war has entered the second month, the main effort of the Russian troops is on the eastern front as their advances in the south and north appear to have stalled. And at the heart of the battle for the east is Mariupol, which has been under siege for weeks.

Named after Maria Feodorovna, the 18th century Russian empress, Mariupol was part of the Azov Governorate of imperial Russia. In the 18th century, Russia settled Orthodox Christians from Crimea in Mariupol, at the mouth of the Kalmius river that flows into the Azov Sea. By the late 19th century, the city became a steel manufacturing hub. During the Second World War, Mariupol was occupied by the German Nazis, for almost two years. This period also saw a systematic campaign to exterminate the city's Jewish population. After the city was liberated by the Red Army, its name was changed to Zhdanov, after Andrei Zhdanov, a Soviet communist leader. It would become Mariupol again in 1989.

## Industrial engine

If Odessa is 'the pearl of the Black Sea', Mariupol, the largest port of the Sea of Azov, was the industrial engine of eastern Ukraine. But everything would change in 2014 after the so-called "Euromaidan revolution", which the Russians call a coup, brought down the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich.

Rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk took up arms against the new authorities in Kyiv. Russia supported the rebels who seized parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, which is collectively called Donbas, and annexed Crimea through a referendum. This turned Mariupol, a city of about half a million people (a majority of them Russian speaking), into a battlefield. Mariupol briefly fell into the hands of pro-Russian rebels. But they faced strong resistance from a local neo-Nazi militia called the Azov Battalion. In June 2014, the rebels retreated from the city.

When President Putin declared his "special military operation", it was evident that the Russians wanted to take Mariupol, which was critical for Russia for many reasons. First, the city is part of the areas claimed by the Donetsk republic. Second, the city hosts the headquarters of the Azov Battalion. As "denazification" is one of the declared goals of Russia's invasion, they would want to take over the city and declare victory over the neo-Nazi group.

Third, the strategic location of Mariupol is critical for Russia if it wants to establish "a land bridge" from Donbas to Crimea. The Russians have already established a partial land bridge but taking over the city would provide them seamless access from continental Russia to Crimea. Lastly, with Mariupol in their hand, the Russians would be in control of almost 80% of the Black Sea coast.

Russian troops have already captured almost 70% of the city and are now fighting in the city centre. In the past three weeks, Russians were accused of carrying out heavy bombardment and shelling in the besieged city. The Russian attack on a maternity hospital, in which three

people were killed, had triggered widespread international criticism. Ukrainian authorities also blamed Russia for attacking a theatre that was sheltering civilians. Russian forces, on the other side, claim that civilians are being used as human shields by the Azov Battalion.

As Ukraine is unable to resupply its forces holed up in the city, including the Azov Battalion, and Russians are making incremental advances, Mariupol could fall in the coming days or weeks, according to an assessment by the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War. For Russia, whose slow military gains in Ukraine have raised questions about its military planning and execution, seizing Mariupol would not only be a major military victory but also free up combat resources, which would allow them to reinforce other fronts.

[Our code of editorial values](#)

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com