The Donbas: A Region and a Myth

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While the entire world was looking with horror at the ongoing war in Ukraine, there was still one country in Europe where the word "war" was not mentioned in the official media: the Russian Federation. In the official parlance of the Kremlin, the undisguised Russian invasion of Ukraine was referred to as a "special military operation to defend the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" or simply a "special operation in the Donbas." The supposed goal of this operation was to "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine" in order to prevent the imminent "genocide of the population of the Donbas."[1] Since Ukraine controlled about two-thirds of the Donetsk and Luhansk administrative regions prior to the start of the Russian military onslaught on February 24, 2022, the genocide allegation, coupled with Russia's recognition of "people's republics" within the administrative boundaries of Ukrainian territories, became a "veritable" reason for war.

Distorting and obfuscating the truth has long ago become an essential part of the Russian leadership's political repertoire. Without adhering to this perfidious rhetoric, it is nevertheless worth taking a closer look at the construct of the "Russian-speaking people of the Donbas" – after all, for more than eight years the Donbas has been the scene of a fierce struggle between the Ukrainian armed forces and the (pro-)Russian "people's militias" from Donetsk and Luhansk. But what actually is Donbas and who are its inhabitants?

Territory and History

The Donets Basin (*donetskii basein* in Russian), or Donbas for short, was originally not a topographical, political, or cultural term, but primarily a geological one. It refers to the coal deposits in the basin of the river Siverskyi Donets, which, since the late 19th century, enabled the rapid growth of local heavy

industry. Thus, the territorial affiliation of Donbas, or rather the defining of certain localities and areas as being part of the Donbas, was decided based on what lay several hundred meters below ground. Therefore "historical Donbas" includes not only the Russian-speaking agglomerations of Donetsk and Luhansk, but also the Ukrainian agricultural regions, the Greek and Tatar settlements on the coast of the Sea of Azov, and even parts of Rostov Oblast in what is now the Russian Federation.

In terms of topography, the Donbas belongs to a steppe area that used to be called the "wild field", essentially a no man's land. This reputation saw it attract those seeking greater freedoms, leading to the wild field becoming a free, Cossack steppe land. Even after the free steppe was conquered, the frontiers closed, the Zaporozhian Cossackdom abolished, and the Don Cossacks incorporated into the Russian Empire, the metropolis' hold on this former frontier region remained weak, while the people's free spirit died hard. Moreover, while industrial development from the latter half of the 19th century onward, certainly tightened the grip of the Russian imperial administration over this sparsely populated area, it also opened the region to massive levels of migration, thereby recreating the former frontiers in a symbolic sense.

The prerequisites for the formation of the Donbas as an industrial hub arose in the late 18th century and were closely connected to the geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire in the Black Sea area. After a series of successful wars against the Ottoman Empire, and the forceful liquidation of the Crimean Khanate as an independent Tatar state in 1783, Russia seized the Northern Black Sea coast and launched an ambitious project of building new seaports and strengthening its navy. These ambitions required a solid industrial base, therefore the vast reserves of coal discovered as early as 1721 in the territory of present-day Donbas acquired new value. In 1795, by decree of Empress Catherine II, the authorities started the construction of the Luhansk iron foundry and established new coal mines in Lysychia Balka, now the town of Lysychansk.

These first islets of industrial society in what is now the Donbas had a somewhat paradoxical nature, combining advanced technology and a modern pioneering spirit with the archaic social structures of the Russian state. Both the mines and factory where subject to a severe regime of military discipline, where workers were basically treated like soldiers. Their whole life was regulated by the "mining statute", which generally followed the norms of the army statute: officials were given military ranks, while military courts observed and enforced labor discipline, punishing workers for even the slightest offence.

Furthermore, this industrialization and technological development required foreign capital and knowledge, which were welcomed by the Russian authorities, but ultimately altered the perception of the former "wild field" by adding new facets and new tensions to the area. While the colonial practices of British, French, German, and (especially) Belgian entrepreneurs in the Donbas resulted in the region being nicknamed "the white Congo",[2] rapid industrial growth also fueled hopes of a "New America" arising in the East European prairies. This optimistic expectation was famously pronounced by Aleksandr Blok in his eponymous poem.[3] Unsurprisingly, the free steppe was not free for everyone. Pernicious ethnic tension and severe economic exploitation were facts of life, yet this reputation did not discourage people from seeking freedom and fortune in the Donbas.

Despite the influences of Western urban culture, the dual military-civic structures of the newly founded industrial settlements became a distinct feature of pre-Soviet Donbas and arguably forged the peculiar political culture of this mining region, which would persist over the subsequent decades and survive different state formations and political regimes.

At the core of the region's path dependent trajectory, one may identify the socio-political and cultural characteristics of stone coal as a natural resource, which facilitates certain types of production and social structures. In culture and literature, resources are often associated with certain models of political order and domination: cotton production, for example, is associated with slavery (as in the southern United States), and grain cultivation with serfdom (as in the Russian Empire). In this sense, coal mining can also be considered a culture-forming phenomenon.

However, the idea of coal mining areas as regions that decisively promoted the emergence of the first "mass democracies", famously postulated by Timothy Mitchell in his book *Carbon Democracy* (2013), is not as easily established when looking at the development of the Donbas. Although one can find clear and frequent references to the miners' and workers' strong sense of communal solidarity, one looks in vain for the image of a consolidated, institutionalized democracy or an open society. Similarly, the role of social-democratic ideology or trade unions remained marginal and was often overshadowed by the region's supposed affinity to various forms of political radicalism and authoritarian rule. Arguably, the Donbas never managed to produce any political organization or movement that would fit into Western historical framework. According to Hiroaki Kuromiya, "class" and "nation," the two major political concepts that arose in reaction to the Enlightenment, did not necessarily apply

to the politics of the Donbas.[4] Leon Trotsky's claim that "One can't go to the Donbas without a gas mask", best describes the noxious political history of the region: everyone from Moscow to Kyiv and every political party from the far-right to Marxists seems to have gotten burned politically in this region.

In the early 1920s, the Donbas was often perceived as the laboratory for the creation of the Soviet "new man" and a motor for a profound social transformation – an attitude famously captured in Dziga Vertov's avant-garde movie *Enthusiasm* (1931). However, already in the late 1920s this transformation was firmly anchored within the totalitarian policies of Stalinism, which turned the Donbas into a testing ground for "rapid industrialization", the "collectivization of agriculture", and the "aggravation of the class struggle".[5] While the region's rural population was decimated by the 1932–33 Holodomor (or the Great Famine), the infamous Shakhty Trial of 1928, the first show trial of the Stalin era, heralded the beginning of the "purges" in industry. The launch of the so-called Stakhanovite movement in 1935 also placed Donbas coalmining at the very center of the all-Soviet campaign intended to increase worker productivity in all segments of industry and agriculture, turning it into a trope within state ideology and the perceived epitome of Soviet identity.

The rise of coal and steel production in the Donbas reached its climax in the late 1960s and 1970s and was followed by rapid decline in the early 1980s due to the increasing role of oil and gas both in the global economy and Soviet exports. This resulted in the mining sector becoming increasingly dependent on state support, precipitating a long period of stagnation culminating in a wave of miners' strikes from the late 1980s into the 1990s – in the wake of Ukrainian independence. The transition towards a capitalist economy only accelerated the economic and social decline of the region's historically mono-industrial towns. Moreover, since the 2000s, the growing socio-economic tensions in the Donbas "re-activated" issues of language and identity, thus making its Ukrainian-Russian dualism susceptible to political manipulation.

Languages and Identity

The Russian-speaking population of the Donbas, which sits at the core of Putin's contemporary war rhetoric, is by no means a "natural", but rather a hybrid historical phenomenon. Like most other Ukrainians, the people of the Donbas are largely bilingual, with Russian clearly dominating everyday communication. However, Russian as a high variety (i.e. the language variety,

which has a higher prestige and is used for official purposes) was ultimately established in the Donbas only after the Second World War as a result of both state-sponsored Russification, particularly in the sphere of education, and the growing difference between urbanity and rusticity in Soviet Ukraine. During this period, the Ukrainian language was largely considered the language of the rural areas. As a consequence of the forced urbanization and industrialization of the Donbas, it often came to be perceived as a sign of cultural and social backwardness with those who moved to the cities and towns tending to switch to Russian in the public sphere and retain their use of Ukrainian only when communicating with relatives.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian element has always been a constitutive part of regional identity, even though its role had often been downgraded to the level of folklore. For instance, in the popular Soviet musical comedy "The Young Years" (*Gody molodye*, 1959), which takes place in the Donbas and Kyiv, all the characters speak Russian, but all the songs are performed in Ukrainian.

The image of an industrial "melting pot" facilitated a regional attitude of national indifference, which under the conditions of Soviet cultural and education policies, could only mean its further Russification. Indeed, while this tendency could also be observed across wider Soviet Ukraine, intellectual resistance against this state of affairs is associated, first and foremost, with Ivan Dzyuba, a philologist from Donets'k, who in his 1965 book *Internationalism or Russification?* directly addressed and criticized the Communist Party leadership for its policy on nationalities. Although Dzyuba articulated his criticism from a Marxist standpoint, he was still sentenced to five years in prison in 1972. Despite this, Dzyba and other prominent dissidents from the Donbas, such as the poet Vasyl' Stus or the human-rights activist Oleksa Tykhyi, undoubtedly contributed to the image of the Donbas as a place of dissidence within Ukrainian culture, constantly challenging the official Soviet monopoly.

Like other coal and steel regions, such as Germany's Ruhr valley or Poland's Upper Silesia, today's Donbas can probably be described as a translocal entity: an area that has no clear administrative or natural boundaries, and only gains contours and solidity through various narratives, such as those found in literature and film – and often through a nostalgic retrospective. Since Soviet times, industrial culture and the working man's ethos have been a source of collective pride and cornerstones of local identity, which blurred ethnic, religious, or ideological boundaries. However, since the 1970s, most of the mines, factories, and machinery have hardly been modernized or restructured, having continued to be exploited until their imminent collapse. As a typical old industrial region,

the Donbas has inherited its economic base from the early era of industrialization with its inflexible large-scale enterprises as well as a high industrial density coupled with below-average economic growth. Against this background, the memory of the Soviet era mutated into a myth of the "golden age" in which the region was still considered the engine of the wider Soviet economy. It was precisely this mythology that made the local population particularly receptive to Russia's neo-imperial propaganda.

Separatism and Beyond

In 1991, the overwhelming majority of the Donbas population voted for Ukrainian independence. Yet, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Donbas immediately became the most troublesome spot for Kyiv. The problem was not just that the Donbas had a large Russian population, or that it was highly Russified linguistically and culturally, but rather the exaggerated political ambitions of the regional elites and the incompatibility of the old industrial structures with the rules of the new capitalist economy.

On the other hand, after the fall of communism in 1989–91, the Donbas often became an object of deliberate "othering" by the Ukrainian political and cultural elites precisely because of its historical and structural peculiarities, thus serving as contrasting foil for the nation-building practices of the new state. Being often portrayed as a reservation of the collective Other or as a "sick" and "ugly" part of the Ukrainian national body, the Donbas was now obliged to adapt to an unsettled, subaltern status.

Before 2014, however, there was no pronounced cultural, let alone political, separatism or irredentism in the Donbas. Although Russia's meddling in local politics intensified after Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004, and the region soon became the electoral stronghold of the pro-Russian "Party of Regions" (and its leader Viktor Yanukovych), this remained firmly anchored in the all-Ukrainian context, with separatist and secessionists agenda still a marginal feature. The population on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian border was convinced that this border should be passable for people and goods in both directions. Faced with a geostrategic choice between Europe and Russia, the Donbas residents probably did not reject the pro-European, democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian Euromaidan movement as such. Rather, they rejected the entire premise through which such a geopolitical choice had to be made in the first place.

According to the results of a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in the spring of 2014 – before the active military clashes commenced – only one-third of the population of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions supported the idea of stronger affiliation with Russia. Another third favored a broader level of autonomy for the Donbas within the Ukrainian state, while roughly the remaining third wanted to preserve the status quo. In 2014, the pseudo-referendum on the creation of the two independent "people's republics" in the territory of Donbas was held by pro-Russian activists within the context of a regional power vacuum and the overall confusion that followed the, by then, ex-President Yanukovych's escape to Russia. Moreover, the referendum only took place in a few cities (mainly in the Donetsk agglomeration) without independent election observers, therefore it remains unknown what proportion of the population actually participated in this "state-building event".

Similarly, one can hardly speak of a Russian "popular uprising" in the region. The maximum number of participants in the pro-Russian rallies in Donetsk, a city with over a million inhabitants, was about 30.000 to 35.000 people, with the total number who stormed administrative buildings and subsequently participated in units of the "people's militia" only being about 1.500 to 2.000. While the participation of Russian citizens in the hostilities in these territories has become the subject of heated debate since the outbreak of the conflict, the glorification of Russian "volunteers" and their participation in the fighting in eastern Ukraine is increasingly proving to be a leading theme of literary productions, being expressed in numerous published texts with an almost touching directness and simplicity. An illustration of this is provided by the anthology *Vybor Donbassa* ("The Choice of the Donbas"). Published in 2017, the volume, which is full of contributions by writers from Yaroslavl, Moscow, Orenburg, Chelyabinsk, and other Russian cities, makes it clear that the supposed "Donbas choice" was predominantly made outside the Donbas.[6]

Indeed, long before the events of 2014, some prominent Russian authors had already envisaged a war in the Donbas as both a trigger for major changes in Russian society and as the pivotal moment for Russia's reemergence as a global power. For instance, Zakhar Prilepin's *Terra Tartara*, a "prophetic" essay published in 2009, predicted mass uprisings starting in Russia shortly after the outbreak of a war in Ukraine:

> There were some problems with one of [our] country's former colonies, the land of Ukraine, where, somehow, slowly and gradually, a civil war broke

> out, with West fighting East. (…) Of course, it was necessary to do something about it, since all over the country volunteer units were beginning to organize themselves. Easily crossing the state border, they were vanishing into the vast open spaces of Ukraine.[7]

Having acquired military experience in the "Ukrainian Civil War", numerous Russian volunteers are returning to Russia to resume their fight for the national cause on the "home front". Similar scenarios are proposed in various novels that explore a forthcoming war in Ukraine written between 2003 and 2010 by authors from the Donbas: Fedor Berezin, Georgii Savitskii (both from Donetsk) and Gleb Bobrov (from Luhansk). Bobrov's novel *The Era of the Stillborn* (2008), Berezin's *War 2010: The Ukrainian Front* (2009), and Savitskii's *Battlefield Ukraine. The Broken Trident* (2009) all characterize the Ukrainian state as a "stillborn" geopolitical anomaly, which will give way to the rise of a new Eurasian empire, or even the re-established USSR. In all these texts, Ukraine in general, and the Donbas in particular, turn into a battleground and the place where the fable of Russia's imperial recovery begins. Unsurprisingly, all of these writers have seized the opportunity to take an active part in the war in the Donbas, grasping the chance to become the heroes of their own stories.

What unites this body of anti-Ukrainian literature, written both by Russian and the local authors, is the geo-political function attributed to the Donbas as a borderland region. As the much-desired imperial renaissance of Russia is obstructed by social atomization and corruption, the new imperial community is imagined as extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Thus, the revival of the Russian state starts with the rescue of "compatriots" living in the Donbas. Rogers Brubaker defines this kind of political attitude as "trans-border nationalism of the external national homeland", but while for Brubaker the typical goals of this sort of nationalism are to "promote the welfare, support the activities and institutions, assert the rights, and protect the interests of one's own ethnonational kin in other states",[8] in Russian patriotic literature it is frequently applied in order to deny the very existence of those states. Indeed, the territories themselves are describes as attributable to Russia since they are already inhabited by a Russian-speaking population.

Caught in the Russian neo-imperial dreams, the Donbas not only became the site of the largest military contestation in Europe since the Second World War but is also currently experiencing an unprecedented wave of urbicides, through the deliberate destruction of urban areas by the Russian artillery, and the expulsion of the local population. Moreover, the identity of the Donbas as

a region with distinct, recognizable features has already become questionable. In the Russian geopolitical imagery, the area is now firmly anchored within the historical brand of *Novorossiya* (literally "New Russia") as well as within the concept of *russkiy mir*, or the Russian world. Both concepts intrinsically deny the region's cultural and ethnic diversity, reducing it to an area unequivocally attributed to the Russian sphere of political and cultural uniformity.

In Ukraine, however, the question of whether the Donbas deserves recognition as a distinct region remains, at least, debatable. Already in 2021, Oleksiy Danilov, the Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council and the former mayor Luhansk, pointed out that the word "Donbas" does not appear in official Ukrainian state documents and should therefore be abandoned altogether in favor of the more politically correct and neutral-sounding names of the local oblasts (administrative regions) Donetsk and Luhansk.[9] This bureaucratic logic notwithstanding, the term itself remains ubiquitous in the language of Ukrainian literature and media.

Yet, even if the future of the Donbas remains contested and obscure, its physical and symbolic survival today seems only possible within the boundaries of the pluralist and democratic Ukrainian state.

Re-Imagining Ukrainian Donbas

The growing interest in the Eastern borderlands, with the purpose of overcoming the country's supposed East-West divide, was a visible trend in the Ukrainian literature of the 2000s resulting in some notable shifts in Ukraine's imagined geography. Although in many literary texts the Donbas still features as the realm of collapsing Soviet industry and corrupted national consciousness, other depictions that sought to present the region's symbolic re-integration into the Ukrainian cultural sphere, proved far more productive and successful.

Serhiy Zhadan, a writer from the East, has particularly distinguished himself in this respect. In his novel *Voroshylovhrad* (2010), Zhadan follows the development of a young city dweller who unexpectedly becomes the heir to a rundown petrol station located somewhere in the Donbas, in the middle of the eastern Ukrainian "transit landscape". The new owner tries to come to terms with this unexpected and undesired property; however, he soon recognizes the no-man's land of the Donbas steppe as his "own place" and learns how to defend it against the intrigues and attacks of the local oligarchs and their mafia net-

works. Today, it is tempting to interpret this plot as a metonymy for Ukraine's coming to terms with the neglected and largely troublesome region on its eastern border, however, Zhadan's text, full of lyrical intermezzos and allegoric motives, escapes such straightforward parallels to the current geopolitical reality. In fact, the words "Ukraine" or "Russia" are not even mentioned in his novel.

Zhadan sticks to this strategy of deliberate poetic obfuscation of political realities in his more recent novel *Internat* (2017), which directly addresses the Russian military onslaught in the Donbas after 2014. In the book, the author describes an inner transformation of the protagonist, Pasha, as a result of his direct confrontation with the war. While trying to rescue his nephew from an orphanage in the occupied territory, Pasha gradually reconsiders his apolitical attitude and his self-selected role as an outsider. The hellish experience of travelling through his occupied hometown (recognizable as Debaltseve, the site of a major battle between Ukrainian army and Russian paramilitary units in 2015) forces Pasha to acknowledge his indifferent and apolitical attitudes as the fertile ground for the ongoing war. At the end of the story, an apathetic "Donbas dweller" turns into a self-conscious citizen who takes responsibility for his decisions and cares for those in need.

Instead of focusing on the issues of state or nation building, in both novels Zhadan pursues communitarian ideals of social cohesion and demonstrates mechanisms of solidarity, which function within the small communities of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Against this background, the proletarian ethos and the collectivist ideals of a coal-mining region no longer appear as the relics of the Soviet past but allow for the symbolic re-integration of the Donbas into the Ukrainian national project. Of course, this re-integration cannot be reduced to the writings of a single author. Other Ukrainian writers and poets such as Volodymyr Rafeenko, Evgeniya Belorusets, Andrey Kurkov, and Iya Kiva have also developed their own approaches for dealing with this war-torn region. Although it is hardly possible to reduce their literary discourses to a common denominator, one may still observe a poetic resemanticization of the Donbas in these contemporary Ukrainian publications (written both in the Russian and Ukrainian languages). Here the Donbas features as the terrain of historical anomie, where periods of radical political transformation and sheer violence trigger a constant feeling of anxiety over the perceived lack of social norms and moral standards, yet this uninviting terrain can still be treated with compassion and sympathy. Thus, in contemporary Ukrainian poetry, the former realm of the collective Other is often transformed into a nostal-

gic or melancholic landscape of abandoned industrial sites and collapsing architecture, evoking feelings of loss, decay, and sorrow.

In times of war, however, the decay is usually perceived not as a gradual and slow process, which invites the reader to undertake contemplation and reflection. Instead, it becomes synonymous with artillery barrages and air raids, and therefore is often presented as a quick and painful decomposition of the entire region or as the sudden and unexpected collapse of the life-worlds of its inhabitants. In her poem *Decomposition* (2014) Lyuba Yakimchuk, a poet from Pervomaisk, in the Luhansk oblast, summarizes this traumatic experience as follows:

nothing changes on the eastern front
well, I've had it up to here
at the moment of death, metal gets hot
and people get cold
don't talk to me about Luhansk
it's long since turned into hansk
Lu had been razed to the ground
to the crimson pavement
my friends are hostages
and I can't reach them, I can't do netsk
to pull them out of the basements
from under the rubble (…)
there's no poetry about war
just decomposition
only letters remain
and they all make a single sound – rrr
Pervomaisk has been split into pervo and maisk
into particles in primeval flux
war is over once again
yet peace has not come (…)
I stare into the horizon
it has narrowed into a triangle
sunflowers dip their heads in the field
black and dried out, like me
I have gotten so very old
no longer Lyuba
just a –ba

Since 2014 not only the political future of the Donbas, but its sheer existence as recognizable regional entity remains opaque. On the one hand, after eight years of military contestation it is becoming increasingly clear that the area does not represent a consolidated communal or regional structure but is rather a terrain with multiple splits and ruptures. The ongoing war certainly changes the self-perception and the regional identity of the people on both sides of the frontline. The geopolitical "decomposition" caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine is mirrored and amplified here by myriad smaller splits within local communities and even families. The spirit of war nurtures old wounds and opens new ones.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the semantics of the word "Donbas" have expanded beyond the mere denomination of the old coal-basin and the corresponding industrial sites. It became a synonym for political instability, economic decay, but also for the remarkable solidarity and stubborn resistance. With the former geopolitical periphery becoming more and more central, the tenacity of the Donbas is perhaps that of a myth, rather than that of a certain area. This is the myth about a harsh terrain populated by simple and undemanding inhabitants, who live by simple rules and stick together against all odds. Or as Serhiy Zhadan (2011) puts it:

> Everything that you make with your hands, works for you.
> Everything that reaches your conscience beats
> in rhythm with your heart.
> We stayed on this land, so that it wouldn't be far
> for our children to visit our graves.
> This is our island of freedom,
> our expanded
> village consciousness.
> (…)
> because, man, as long as we're together,
> there's someone to dig up this earth,
> and find in its warm innards
> the black stuff of death
> the black stuff of life.

Notes

1 Putin, Vladimir (2022): *Obrashchenie prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federacii "O provedenii spetsial'noi voyennoi operatsii"* [Adress of the President of the Russian Federation "On conducting a special military operation"], 24 February 2022, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843 (28 December 2022).
2 Lazans'ka, *Istoriia pidpryemnytstva*.
3 Blok, Aleksandr, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh. Tom 3: Stikhotvorieniia i poemy, 1907–1921* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), pp. 268–270.
4 Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*, p. 335.
5 Ibid, pp. 119–166.
6 See Bobrov, *Vybor Donbassa*.
7 My translation (O.Z).
8 Brubaker *Nationalism Reframed*, p. 5.
9 Oleksii Danilov, "V Ukraïni nemaie slova "Donbas", *Ukraïns'ka Pravda*, 24 March 2021, https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/03/24/7287714/ (28 December 2022).

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