

The War in the Donbas in Historical Perspective

Hiroaki Kuromiya

Indiana University

hkuromiy@indiana.edu

Abstract

Does the Donbas represent the stronghold of Russian separatism? Since Russia's military intervention in the Donbas (following its occupation of the Crimea), this view of the Donbas as un-Ukrainian or anti-Ukrainian has gained wide circulation in and outside Ukraine. Yet it is patently wrong. In the Donbas, there have never been ethnic, linguistic, or religious (sectarian) conflicts to speak of, nor did its population consistently manifest strong pro-Russian or pro-Union sentiments. True, such sentiments existed in the Donbas, like elsewhere in much of Dnieper Ukraine, but they never dominated the political scene of the Donbas. Instead, until the twenty-first century this region always tended to be anti-imperialist and anti-metropolitan. What is remarkable is that in 1991 the Donbas overwhelmingly supported the independence of Ukraine. What followed in the wake of Ukraine's independence was an attempt by the Donbas power holders, in particular Viktor Yanukovich, to take over all of Ukraine. Moscow helped this attempt, which failed ultimately. The "free steppe" of the Donbas undeniably attracted, among others, radical Russian nationalists from outside and provided them with space for action. It is this historical characteristic of the Donbas as the "free steppe" that has colored the popular view of this region as a stronghold of Russian separatism. In the rest of Ukraine, a strong prejudice against the Donbas as a culturally dark region has only helped to boost this popular misconception.

Keywords

Donbas – nationalism – regionalism – separatism – independence – free steppe – transnational provocation – hybrid war

In the understanding of many both within and outside Ukraine, the Donbas is the stronghold of Russian separatism. It is widely believed to be similar to

the Crimea, where ethnic Russians account for the majority of the population. True, they were the largest minority in this Ukrainian land, accounting for almost forty percent. True, the common language, especially in the cities, has been Russian, although in the countryside Ukrainian or at least a Ukrainian-Russian mix (*surzhyk*) has been widely spoken. The fact is, however, that at no time in its history did ethnic Russians account for a majority of the population in the Donbas as a whole. What has seemed to bolster the mistaken notion that the Donbas has always been a bastion of anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian political sentiment is the fact that a large segment of the Donbas has ended up controlled by separatist and Russian forces. As will be discussed later, this assumption is simply wrong. How, then, should we understand the continued occupation of the Donbas? Is it simply an accident?

Proving causality in history is often a tricky matter. Many historical events can be accidental. The occupation of the Donbas might well be considered accidental, except for the fact that it is a region bordering Russia, a factor that facilitated the invasion by Russian troops. (Of course, Kharkiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv oblasts also border Russia, but they were not taken over by Russian forces, which, however, appear to have made covert attempts.) In any case, after the war began, many people in the Donbas were caught off guard, believing the very idea of war to be an absurdity. Whatever problems may have plagued the Donbas, its inhabitants had never even considered taking up arms to resolve disputes. After all, the Donbas, a land of freedom, had always been a welcoming place to all sorts of people and ideas.¹ Even though President Vladimir Putin of Russia, who, in justifying his clandestine operations against Ukraine, insisted that Russian-speaking people were being persecuted by Ukrainian “fascists,” it is simply untrue that in the Donbas ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people were persecuted or experienced discrimination. Even Pavel Gubarev, who became one of the separatist leaders in the Donbas, openly claimed that “Here [in the Donbas] there was no ethnic enmity” (*Ne bylo zdes natsionalnoi rozni*).²

It is difficult to claim that the freedom and independent-minded nature of the Donbas led to the war and the occupation. One sees no historical inevitability or necessity here. The facile reasoning that links the historical specificity of the Donbas to the war and the occupation ignores the clandestine yet critical role played by Moscow.

1 See Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s–1990s* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2 Pavel Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii* (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2016), 10.

In one respect, however, the specificity of the Donbas did facilitate the work of Moscow and its agents against Ukraine in the Donbas: as a haven for freedom-seekers, it always attracted all kinds of political adventurers.

1 The Donbas from 1991 to 2014

The Donbas made an important contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine in 1991. The miners' strikes in the summer of 1989 decisively loosened Moscow's grip on one of the most important industrial centers in Ukraine. They demonstrated to Ukraine as a whole that they could stand up to Moscow. The Donbas strikes were thus a watershed event that led to the independence of Ukraine in December 1991. In the national referendum held that month the Donbas as a whole voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence: in Donetsk oblast 83.9 percent "for" with 76.7 percent of the population participating and in Luhansk oblast 83.9 percent and 80.7 percent, respectively.³ Even if these figures are somewhat lower than the national average (90.3 and 90.3 percent, respectively), the verdict of the Donbas population was unmistakably clear. The implicit assumption of the vote for Ukrainian independence in the Donbas, like in Ukraine as a whole, was that Ukraine would be far better off without Moscow's tutelage and interference.

Such optimism did not last long, however. The post-independence economic decline in Ukraine, according to one account, was "one of the deepest post-Soviet recessions experienced by any of the transition economies not affected by war."⁴ In the Donbas, industrial output declined as much as 25 percent from 1990 to 1993, and the average real wages—by almost 80 percent.⁵ The new, independent government in Kyiv appeared reluctant to reform the country's economic system, and corruption was rampant. This situation contributed greatly to the strengthening of regionalist sentiment in the Donbas, which had always been strong in this industrial center. Anti-metropolitan sentiment exploded in the form of industrial strikes. One strike leader explained: "Our view

3 For the final results, see "Do piatnadtsiatoi richnytsi vseukrainskoho referendumu. Dokumenty z fondiv TsDAVO Ukrainy," http://www.archives.gov.ua/Sections/15r-V_Ref/index.php?11.

4 Quoted in Vlad Mykhnenko, "State, Society and Protest under Post-Communism: Ukrainian Miners and Their Defeat," in Peter Kopecký and Cas Mudde, eds., *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003), 101.

5 Vlad Mykhnenko, "From Exit to Take-Over: The Evolution of the Donbas as an Intentional Community," paper presented at Workshop No. 20, "The Politics of Utopia: Intentional Communities as Social Science Microcosms," 13–18 April 2004, Uppsala, Sweden, 26.

of independence was always the destruction of the center, the Kremlin, and getting the party out of economic life ... we have changed from one political machine to another, with practically the same people. This was not our view of independence.”⁶ Another strike leader noted: “The Center has just moved from Moscow to Kiev [Kyiv]. We didn’t want that.... We wanted power to be given to the localities, enterprises, cities. We wanted the living standard of the population to improve rather than Kiev concentrating the reins of government in its fist.”⁷

The survival of Ukraine as an independent state appeared to be threatened by the emergent anger in the Donbas. Nevertheless, however disenchanted its inhabitants may have been, they did not demand outright secession from Ukraine. Rather, they demanded greater concessions from Kyiv for greater regional power and autonomy.

Ukraine survived this and many other crises of the 1990s, and the Donbas, under President Leonid Kuchma’s administration (1994–2005), began to acquire greater economic freedom from Kyiv. The economic reforms and restructuring in the mid-to-late 1990s, which involved privatization, led to the creation of large industrial holding companies that were independent of Kyiv’s constant intervention and which were controlled instead by “oligarchs,” such as Rinat Akhmetov and Vitalii Haiduk, leading to the growing assertiveness of the Donbas in national politics. Kuchma’s appointment of Viktor Yanukovych, governor of Donetsk oblast, as prime minister in 2002 marked the dramatic rise of the “Donetsk clan” of Akhmetov, Yanukovych, and others who sought to capture economic and political power in Ukraine. This, in turn, marked a dramatic turnabout for the Donbas from its historically anti-metropolitan political orientation.

This shift, often termed by political observers as a “takeover,” signified the beginning of the Donbas’s integration into the Ukrainian body politic. The Ukrainian economy began to perform better under Kuchma, even though it lagged far behind Russia and Poland. Certainly, Ukraine did not adhere strictly to the recommendations of its Western advisers for privatization, deregulation, and stabilization. Yet even Belarus, which had largely rejected Western models and instead maintained a Soviet-style economy, fared better than Ukraine in economic indices. Nevertheless, in the first few years of the twenty-first

6 Lewis H. Siegelbaum, “Freedom of Prices and the Price of Freedom: The Miners’ Dilemma in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 13, no. 4 (1997): 17.

7 Ibid.

century there was a degree of optimism that the Ukrainian economy might be on its way to steady growth.⁸

The capture of Kyiv by the so-called Donetsk, or Donbas, clan did not go as planned, however. The falsification of the presidential election results in 2004, with Moscow's support, led to the Orange Revolution. This mass protest movement forced a run-off election, in which Yanukovich, the falsifier of the first round, was defeated by Viktor Yushchenko, his predecessor as prime minister under Kuchma. The Donbas as a whole, however, continued to support Yanukovich with an overwhelming majority of more than 90 percent. Not long after the election, Yanukovich made a comeback as prime minister on the strength of his Party of Regions in the parliamentary elections. In 2010 Yanukovich beat Yulia Tymoshenko in the presidential election to become the legitimate president of Ukraine. He enjoyed strong support in the Donbas and Ukraine's eastern regions until he was expelled from office in early 2014, after a prolonged mass protest (the Revolution of Dignity, or the Euromaidan Revolution).

This did not mean that the people of the Donbas as a whole supported Yanukovich unconditionally; far from it. In his native region he was known as the "thief from Yenakiieve," the "shame of the Donbas."⁹ Yanukovich and his gang were understood to be "bandits," but they were "our bandits."¹⁰ As one worker in the Donbas noted, "Yanukovich is a criminal ... all governments are criminal."¹¹

As Ararat L. Osipian and Alexandr L. Osipian have noted perceptively, the Donbas is "terra incognita for many Ukrainians and the broader international community."¹² Stereotypes and downright negative prejudices regarding the Donbas abound in Ukraine and beyond. In 2002 one observer commented:

8 See Mykhnenko, "From Exit to Take-Over" and Adam Swain, ed., *Re-constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region: The Donbas in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2007). Others claim, from the vantage point of the post-Maidan era, that the Donbas's takeover of Kyiv had a negative impact on Ukraine's democracy and rule of law. See Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2015).

9 See Marta Studenna-Skrucka, *Ukraiński Donbas: Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej* (Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014), 284–85.

10 See Igor Todorov, "Faktery ukraińsko-rossiiskoi voyny v Donbasse: vnutrennee izmerenie," *Nowy Prometeusz*, no. 7 (April 2015): 17.

11 A worker's remark featured in Jacob Preuss's 2010 documentary *The Other Chelsea: A Story from Donetsk*.

12 Ararat L. Osipian and Alexandr L. Osipian, "Why Donbas Votes for Yanukovich: Confronting the Ukrainian Orange Revolution," *Demokratyzatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, no. 4 (2006): 495.

“A region with an important concentration of capital but totally devoid of any democratic parameters is a dangerous problem for a state which has learned to at least imitate civilized behavior and pretend that it formally recognizes the need for certain democratic values. But in Donetsk the authorities do not even appear to bother with appearances.”¹³ This may be a reference only to government authorities in the Donbas, but in 2006 Yurii Andrukhovych, a prominent Ukrainian writer and columnist, described the Donbas as a region in far more explicitly negative terms: the Ukrainian East (meaning the Donbas) is “a big proto-cultural wasteland” that “easily succumbs to political manipulation in connection with a black-and-white view of the world,” and the Donbas population is “medieval-feudal” or a “Cro-Magnon-Neanderthal” people.¹⁴

For a brief period after the Orange Revolution the rest of Ukraine paid serious attention to the Donbas. People outside the region, including Andrukhovych himself, came to realize that its inhabitants have “the same aspirations that they do: for a better life and a better, stable, and peaceful future.”¹⁵ Indeed, at no time in the turbulent years since 1991 did the Donbas population as a whole dream of a life outside of an independent Ukraine. Those who grew up in independent Ukraine had learned to speak Ukrainian and identify themselves as Ukrainians, alarming older residents still oriented toward Russia.¹⁶ In 2004, 74.2 percent of the Donbas people believed that the Donbas “has a common destiny with the rest of Ukraine,” while 77.7 percent of people felt good about being citizens of Ukraine.¹⁷ This did not necessarily preclude the possibility of Ukraine’s union with Russia. Support for such an eventuality fluctuated wildly in the Donbas, depending on the political situation at the

13 Hiroaki Kuromiya, “The Donbas—The Last Frontier of Europe?,” in Oliver Schmidtke and Serhy Yekelchuk, eds., *Europe’s Last Frontier: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 101.

14 *Ibid.*, 102.

15 *Ibid.*, 110.

16 A one-time leader of the Donbas separatists, Denis Pushilin, noted: “In recent years the country underwent ethnocide. It resulted in the majority of the young generation coming to see themselves as Ukrainians. Their grandparents identify as Russians, but they consider themselves Ukrainian.” See Serhy Yekelchuk, “From the Anti-Maidan to the Donbas War: The Spatial and Ideological Evolution of the Counter-Revolution in Ukraine (2013–2014),” *Perspectives on Europe* 44, no. 2 (2014): 68.

17 See Natalia Chernysh and Oksana Malanchuk, “Dynamika identychnosti meshkantsiv Lvova i Donetska: komparatyvnyi analiz (1994–2004 rr.),” *Ukraina Moderna*, no. 12 (2007): 89, and “Tablytsi odnovymirnykh rozpodiliv trendovoho sotsiolohichnoho doslidzhennia ‘Lviv—Donetsk,’” *Ibid.*, 324.

time polls were taken.¹⁸ A poll taken on 21–25 February 2014, that is, immediately after Yanukovych's flight from Kyiv in the wake of the bloodshed in Independence Square, shows only limited support for unification with Russia: 33 and 24 percent in Donetsk oblast and Luhansk oblast, respectively. The same poll shows that 72.2 percent of those in the four eastern regions of Ukraine (Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts) supported the following position: "Ukraine and Russia must be independent, but friendly states – with open borders, without visas and customs houses."¹⁹ In March 2014, 58 percent of residents polled in the city of Donetsk considered themselves citizens or residents of Ukraine, and only one-third oriented themselves toward Russia.²⁰

Whatever separatist sentiments may have existed in the Donbas, they consisted more of political maneuvering than of a real movement, with a corresponding alienation from the rest of Ukraine.²¹ The brief interest in the Donbas that the rest of Ukraine demonstrated in the wake of the Orange Revolution proved to be short-lived. In 2010 Andrukhovych himself began to write off the Donbas (and the Crimea), suggesting that if "Orange Revolutionaries" were to triumph one day, Ukraine should offer them the possibility to secede. Andrukhovych even contended that the population of Donetsk was alien to Ukraine, which in turn was alien and uninterested, or at least indifferent, to it (*Vono chuzhe Ukraini. Ukraina tomu chuzha i netsikava, shchonaimenshe baiduzha*).²² This was the voice of a leading Ukrainian writer. Such voices were in fact widespread. The absurdity of Andrukhovych's claim is apparent, but it went largely unbuffered. Alienation was profound.

2 The Euromaidan, the Donbas, and the Occupation

In spite of the profound alienation in the Donbas, support for separatism there was weak and very limited even in February 2014, when President Yanukovych

18 See the data compiled by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute at: <http://gis.huri.harvard.edu/independent-ukraine/ind-ukraine-map-gallery.html>.

19 See "What Relations between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 4 March 2014, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=1>.

20 Todorov, "Faktohy ukrainsko-rossiiskoi voyny v Donbasse," 15–16.

21 This is one of the main themes in Studenna-Skrukwa's work *Ukraiński Donbas*.

22 "Andrukhovych: Iakshcho peremozhut pomaranchevi, to Krymu i Donbasu treba daty mozhlyvist vidokremytisia," UNIAN, 22 July 2010, <http://www.unian.ua/politics/382762-andruhovich-yakscho-peremojut-pomaranchevi-to-krimu-y-donbasu-treba-dati-mojlivist-vidokremitisya.html>.

fled Kyiv in the wake of his failure to put down the protest movement in the Maidan by gunfire. Both pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan movements had emerged in the Donbas, but neither was particularly strong. There is certainly no evidence that a pro-Yanukovich, anti-Maidan movement predominated in the Donbas. True, an opinion poll conducted in March 2014, shortly after Yanukovich's flight, does not demonstrate strong pro-Maidan sentiment in eastern Ukraine in general. Only 22 percent of those in the eastern regions (Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts) were in favor of joining the European Union and 59 percent against. However, only 26 percent of those in Ukraine's eastern regions considered Yanukovich's overthrow a coup d'état, and as many people viewed it as a conflict among "Ukrainian elites."²³ In other words, when it came to politics, the people in eastern Ukraine were relatively neutral. Unfortunately, there are no separate figures for the Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts). Yet, as discussed earlier, even then the Donbas was very clear on one issue: support for Ukraine as an independent state. Separatism, though it existed in the Donbas, was far from dominant.

Indeed, following Russia's disguised military takeover of the Crimea on 27 February 2014, people in the city of Donetsk took to the streets, in support of the unity of Ukraine and not necessarily in support of the "Euromaidan."²⁴ Support for Ukraine's unity in Donetsk was so overwhelming in early March that people were confident that the Donbas, unlike the Crimea, would not be lost and would not surrender to Russian forces without fighting.²⁵ Yet violence soon erupted against the supporters of Ukrainian unity. Witnesses note that Donetsk was flooded by outsiders arriving in cars with Russian license plates.²⁶

Remarkably, in the face of the violence encouraged and supported by Moscow, residents of the Donbas showed even more support for Ukraine's unity and independence. In a poll conducted in April 2014, 79.7 percent and 72.7 percent in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, respectively, supported the idea that "Ukraine and Russia must be independent but friendly states—with open borders, without visas and customs houses." Like earlier, the people of the Donbas did not necessarily take a strong stand on the Euromaidan: 70.5 and 61.3 percent of the population of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, respectively, considered the Euromaidan a "military coup" organized by the oppositionists with the West's support, a sharp rise from only a month earlier. Therefore, it is not

23 See "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Ukraine March 14–26, 2014," 14, 86, and 106, available at <http://www.iri.org>.

24 See Liudmyla Nemyria's film, *Vidtorhnennia: Bytva za Ukrainu* (2015).

25 See Hromadske TV's film, *Iuzivska vesna: Iak my borolys za Donetsk* (2016).

26 Note the two films cited above.

surprising that approximately three-quarters of the population of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts rejected the new, temporary government headed by Oleksandr Turchynov and Arsenii Yatseniuk as “illegitimate.” Perhaps unexpectedly, however, 58.2 and 57.6 percent of the residents of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, respectively, also rejected Yanukovych as the legitimate president of Ukraine!²⁷ In other words, the Donbas rejected *all* politicians.

Support for Russia and Russia’s intervention was limited in the Donbas. This is demonstrated by a poll conducted in April 2014, following Russia’s covert military takeover of the Crimea and just when armed conflict was breaking out in the Donbas: 67 percent of the four eastern Ukrainian regions responded negatively to the question: “Do you support the decision of the Russian Federation to send its army into Ukraine under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking citizens?” Only 19 percent answered affirmatively.²⁸ Unfortunately there are no separate figures available for the Donbas. One can reasonably assume, however, that these figures apply to this region, even if they may be somewhat higher. The following month, May 2014, a London-based organization conducted a telephone poll in the Donbas. The results were equally clear: pro-Russian sentiments were not dominant. Almost half (49 percent) of people in Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv oblasts said that “Ukraine would be better off if it did not ally with either.” Fourteen percent favored “an alliance with the European Union,” while 37 percent supported “an alliance with Russia.”²⁹

It is clear that even though the Donbas population as a whole was neither strongly in favor of the Euromaidan nor against it, it was overwhelmingly in favor of Ukraine’s independence and against Moscow’s military intervention. Even Pavel Gubarev, who became a leader of the separatists in Donetsk as the “people’s governor of Donetsk,” contended that there was no “serious movement in Ukraine against Euro-integration” and that if Yanukovych had signed an agreement on Euro-integration, the Donbas “would have silently accepted it.”³⁰

The political mood of the Donbas population had long been a disappointment for those who wanted to promote separatism there. For ten years Moscow,

27 See “Mnieniia i vzglyady zhitelei iugo-vostoka Ukrainy, aprel 2014,” *Zerkalo nedeli*, 18 April 2014, https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhiteley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html.

28 See “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine April 3–12, 2014,” 5, available at <http://www.iri.org>.

29 See Richard Allen Greene, “Ukraine Favors Europe over Russia, New CNN Poll Finds,” CNN, 14 May 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/12/world/europe/ukraine-cnn-poll/>.

30 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorosii*, 73.

with the help of the Orthodox Church had promoted the concept of a “Russian world” (*russkii mir*), emphasizing that it was not the “Russian world” (*rossiiskii mir*), which implied the world of “Russia” or the Russian Federation. When Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church visited Horlivka in the Donbas in 2009, he emphasized the common historical destiny of Russia and Ukraine, calling the Donbas “holy.”³¹ Yet this covert imperial movement of Moscow did not gain traction even in the Donbas; it was a very marginal movement and the local residents paid little attention to it.³² Nor did a similar movement for “New Russia” (*Novorossia*), aimed at resurrecting the old Russian administrative region that included much of the Donbas, fare any better.³³

Almost certainly Moscow was uneasy about the loyalty of the Donbas population as a whole, including oligarchs such as Rinat Akhmetov, the richest man in Ukraine, who controlled much of the industrial economy of the Donbas. In contemplating military subversion and invasion, Moscow’s priority appears not to have been the Donbas (at least the Donetsk oblast). A leaked document dated sometime between 4 and 12 February 2014 shows that in planning the takeover of eastern Ukraine, Kremlin advisers did not seem to place much confidence in the Donbas, and may have been surprised by their own success later. They wanted the Crimea, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, Mykolaiv, and Dnipropetrovsk, and to a lesser extent Kherson and Odesa oblasts, but feared that Akhmetov and his business-political clique were not politically reliable.³⁴

In the end, the takeover succeeded only in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and nowhere else. Gubarev praises himself and his comrades in Donetsk for their determination, organization, and courage to take up arms without fear of consequences, which he contends were decisive factors. By contrast, according to Gubarev, separatists in Odesa did not dare to take up arms, and in Kharkiv and elsewhere they chose to collaborate with “local elites” (in the case of Kharkiv, its mayor, Hennadii Kernes), who, Gubarev contends, betrayed them.³⁵ In the case of Donetsk, Akhmetov eventually did turn against the separatists, calling on workers to stand up against the “Donetsk People’s Republic” created by the separatists in April 2014. This was in mid-May. Akhmetov

31 “Slovo Sviateishego Patriarkha Kirilla v Nikolskom kafedralnom sobore goroda Gorlovki,” Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov: Ofitsialnyi sait Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, 31 July 2009, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/707934.html>.

32 See, e.g., Gubarev’s testimony in his *Fakel Novorosii*, 59.

33 See *ibid.*, 46 and 61.

34 See “Predstavliaetsia pravilnym initsiirovat prisoedinenie vostochnykh oblastei Ukrainy k Rossii,” *Novaia gazeta*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67389.html>.

35 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorosii*, 13–14.

simultaneously challenged the Kyiv government by demanding a constitutional change to decentralize the government of Ukraine.³⁶ Many suspect that Akhmetov initially supported the separatists. At the very least he did not take a clear stand against them and this ambiguity likely militated in favor of the separatists. As Andrii Portnov has argued, “The fact that the Donetsk elites avoided direct action in the initial phase of the conflict in March–April 2014 played a decisive role, both intensifying the disorientation of the local population and shifting the situation into military mode.”³⁷ Similarly, in the Donbas, unlike elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, law enforcement (the police and the security services or the SBU) did not take decisive actions against the separatists. The government in Kyiv blamed local forces for sabotaging its orders, while the latter blamed Kyiv for its lack of a clear directive regarding the Donbas. Both are likely correct. According to one account, most high-ranking SBU officials in Donetsk oblast were recruited by Russia.³⁸ Kyiv, for its part, remained suspicious of the Donbas and did not act decisively.

No evidence exists that either independent-mindedness or a Russified culture in the Donbas per se was responsible for its occupation by separatists and Russian forces. Undoubtedly, there was a large number of disgruntled citizens. As discussed earlier, approximately one-third of the Donbas population favored unification with Russia in the wake of Yanukovich’s ouster. Yet, among the population there was very little support for a military solution to the conflict or for foreign (Russian) military intervention. Nevertheless, Russia’s military intervention, forced upon an unwelcoming population, created alternatives that had not existed before. Discontent thus spilled over in unpredictable ways.

Perhaps the most decisive yet least clarified factor for Moscow’s “success” in the Donbas may be attributed to the historical specificity of the Donbas. The Donbas has been a frontier land, free, in people’s imagination, from political persecution, economic exploitation, and other forms of domination. A historically Cossack land, the Donbas functioned as an “exit” (as opposed to “compliance” and “resistance,” according to Albert Hirschmann’s famous formulation about individuals in human society).³⁹ The Donbas did not lose this identity even at the height of Stalinism. It retained a fiercely independent

36 See his video statements at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHhsTbX6e7w> (14 May 2014) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoKEjA-uLPY> (19 May 2014).

37 Andrii Portnov, “How ‘Eastern Ukraine’ Was Lost,” *Open Democracy*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/andrii-portnov/how-eastern-ukraine-was-lost>.

38 See Todorov, “Faktoiry ukrainsko-rossiiskoi voiny v Donbasse,” 17–18.

39 Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 107.

spirit, resisting any facile political characterization. Liberals, Marxists, Ukrainian nationalists, and other political groups all had their hands in the Donbas and got burned. The Donbas was and is a melting pot where many nationalities live together.

One “objective” historical condition almost certainly contributed to the “success” of Russia’s intervention in the Donbas, which has always attracted all kinds of fortune hunters, adventurers, and other political “riff-raff” (including Russian nationalists of all stripes, neo-Nazis, neo-Stalinists, ultra-Orthodox believers, and disgruntled veterans of the Afghan War, the Chechen Wars, and other recent armed conflicts in the republics of the former Soviet Union). The Russian secret services found fertile ground in the Donbas for recruitment of operatives. Gubarev, the “people’s governor of the Donetsk,” was almost certainly one of these recruits. When he was a teenager in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he had taken part in the activities of “Russian National Unity,” a Russian ultra-nationalist organization founded in 1990 by Aleksandr Barkashov. Gubarev went on to participate in military-patriotic camps in Russia, staffed by Russian officers with experience of fighting in Chechnya.⁴⁰ Without the help of Russian operatives, Gubarev could not have joined such camps. At Donetsk National University, Gubarev organized an ostensibly amateur club of historians (“Lovers of the History of New Russia”), which, Gubarev admitted, was in fact an “underground circle.”⁴¹

According to Nikolay Mitrokhin, a Russian scholar based in Germany, Russia had long been engaged in this “transnational preparation for separatism,” which in 2014 grew into a “transnational provocation” in Ukraine.⁴² These hardcore separatist activists were few in number. In the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, there were only a “few dozen.”⁴³ Gubarev has admitted that in early March 2014 his fighting groups consisted of no more than 20 members.⁴⁴ Mitrokhin acknowledges that little is known about these and other men “without biographies.”⁴⁵

40 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii*, 40 and 89. For more on Gubarev’s personal history, see Hiroaki Kuromiya, “Pavel Gubariev jak ‘maloros,’” *Historians in UA*, 20 March 2015, <http://historians.in.ua/index.php/en/avtorska-kolonka/1839-hiroaki-kuromiya-pavel-gubarev-as-a-little-russian>.

41 See “Rossiia nastupaet na starye grabli,” *Russkaia vesna*, 30 June 2015, http://rusvesna.su/recent_opinions/1435647102.

42 Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation. Russische Nationalisten und Geheimdiener in der Ukraine,” *Osteuropa* 64, nos. 5–6 (2014): 161–63.

43 *Ibid.*, 165.

44 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii*, 108.

45 Nikolay Mitrokhin, “Bandenkrieg und Staatsbildung. Zur Zukunft des Donbass,” *Osteuropa*, 65: 1–2 (2015), 16.

What we do know is that in the spring of 2014 these hardcore local separatists were joined by armed fighters (“volunteers” and soldiers) from Russia as well as officers of the Russian secret services (GRU and FSB), disguised as local separatists. This, in essence, is the makeup of the war raging in eastern Ukraine, which came to be called a “hybrid war,” a war of camouflage. In fact, the concept of a “hybrid war” is not new at all: Moscow took a page from Stalin’s rule book.⁴⁶

Already in early April 2014, Igor Strelkov (Girkin), a veteran of the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service, who was operating in the Crimea, began directing military operations in the Donbas. It was he who led Russia’s 45th Special Guards Intelligence Brigade, a unit based in the city of Kubinka, near Moscow, which was operating in the Crimea at the time and had earlier taken part in the wars in Chechnya and Georgia) into the Donbas.⁴⁷ Gubarev and other separatists may have been militant, but they were reluctant in fact to fight and kill fellow Ukrainians. They were completely overwhelmed by Strelkov and his men (numbering only 52 soldiers) who “smelled of war” and were determined to fight and shed blood⁴⁸; these were the men who initiated and spread war in the Donbas in the spring of 2014. Strelkov later acknowledged that it was he himself who “pulled the trigger of war.” Otherwise the Donbas separatists would have been defeated, like in Kharkiv and Odesa.⁴⁹ On their own, the local separatists were simply not determined enough to engage in war. Gubarev does not deny that the entire affair was a “well-planned operation by the special services of the Russian Federation.” He credits Strelkov with taking the initiative in occupying the Donbas militarily.⁵⁰

There is no doubt that Russian special agents operated simultaneously in other regions of eastern and southern Ukraine. A veteran of war and subversion, Strelkov knew where he could achieve the most significant results. He probably knew how many reliable secret agents were operating in specific areas of eastern Ukraine. Whether Strelkov’s actions in the Donbas were based on his own decision or directed by Moscow is unknown. It is difficult to believe, however, that Strelkov would have operated entirely on his own; almost certainly he acted in accordance with a directive from Moscow. Strelkov conducted his

46 See Hiroaki Kuromiya, “Hybrid War Is Nothing New, Argues Japanese Historian,” *unian*, 5 May 2015, <https://www.unian.info/society/1074778-hybrid-war-is-nothing-new-argues-japanese-historian-video.html>.

47 See “Kontrrozvidka: Rosiia zbyraietsia vbyty 100–200 liudei i vvesty v Ukrainu viiska,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 April 2016, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/04/16/7022667/>.

48 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii*, 173.

49 See his interview: “Kto ty, ‘Strelok’?” *Zavtra*, 20 November 2014, <http://zavtra.ru/content/view/kto-tyi-strelok>.

50 Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii*, 177.

first military action on 10 April 2014 in Sloviansk, Donetsk oblast. He later stated that his choice was “purely accidental,” although he had been told that Sloviansk had the most active political group.⁵¹ This statement is hardly credible: Sloviansk is a place of strategic importance equidistant from Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk.⁵² (In July 2014, however, Strelkov was forced to abandon the city to Ukrainian military forces.) Whatever the case, it appears that Strelkov and his men were determined to use force to capture the Donbas. Only a few dozen local men inspired by them made the critical difference in the confrontation between separatists and anti-separatists in the Donbas and elsewhere.

Mitrokhin reckons that initially the soldiers, secret agents, and others who penetrated Ukraine from Russia numbered between several hundred and a little more than a thousand.⁵³ The number of armed men pouring into Ukraine from Russia soon ballooned to thousands and possibly tens of thousands.⁵⁴

The war in the Donbas created a political alternative that had not existed before. It is no surprise, then, that disgruntled residents began to think and act differently under the new conditions. It is difficult to establish how many local fighters were drawn into the war. The highest estimates are 40,000–45,000, a tiny minority—less than one percent—of the Donbas population (over six million before the war). In fact, many of these “local” separatist fighters came to the Donbas from elsewhere. Mitrokhin estimates that in August 2014, out of 20,000 to 25,000 fighters, only 40 to 50 percent were from the Donbas.⁵⁵

3 Conclusions

The Donbas has always been difficult to understand; it still baffles observers. Simplistic and wrong-headed analyses abound in the press and academia. Yet, even those who live there and are intimately familiar with the Donbas population are sometimes at a loss to describe the political behavior of their fellow

51 “Kto ty, ‘Strelok’?”

52 A Russian admirer of Strelkov also questions Strelkov’s explanation, and points out the strategic significance of Sloviansk. See Mikhail Polikarpov, *Igor Strelkov: Bitva za Donbass. Razгром karatelei. Khroniki srazhenii* (Moscow: Knizhnyi mir, 2015), 16.

53 Mitrokhin, “Transnationale Provokation,” 170.

54 Nikolay Mitrokhin (“Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion. Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine,” *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 [2014]: 15) counts 3,000–4,000, which may be too low. On the same page, he mentions the deaths of “hundreds of soldiers from Russia.” If these numbers are correct, they constitute too high a casualty for 3,000–4,000 soldiers. This, in turn, suggests that the numbers of Russian soldiers are higher.

55 Mitrokhin, “Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion,” 12.

citizens. Oleksii Chupa, a writer from Makiivka, Donetsk oblast, who more than anyone else in today's Donbas has contributed to the understanding of life there, describes his own difficulty in comprehending politics in the Donbas.⁵⁶ A compelling example in Donetsk is the cruceSSION (Procession of the Cross) to Lenin Square, where a large statue of Lenin stands, to celebrate the name-days of the Romanovs. When armed fighting engulfed Makiivka, people hated the separatists. But that did not stop them from voting for the Donetsk People's Republic in the referendum of May 2014.⁵⁷ Writer Kostiantyn Skorkin from Luhansk has devoted his entire adult life to making his native city "cultured" and "civilized." But the war in the Donbas has brought him to despair. He sees among the separatists a schizophrenic and completely closed view of the world, one in which Stalin and Hitler peacefully coexist in the person of Putin.⁵⁸ He despairs of the people of his native city, who have submitted obediently to the separatists. Skorkin says: "I got tired. I'd like to live for myself and not for Luhansk."⁵⁹

The history of the Donbas abounds with cases of profound despair.⁶⁰ Yet, history also shows that the Donbas is not a closed world. On the contrary, it has always been an open place that welcomed people fleeing oppression. To be sure, this has also meant that it attracted political rabble-rousers, schemers, and conspirators. This is probably the most important historical factor that separates the Donbas from other areas of Ukraine and which facilitated its military takeover. This is not to say, however, that the Donbas is inherently "alien to Ukraine," as Andrukhovych once claimed.

From the start of the current war between Kyiv and Moscow, however, the situation was not particularly encouraging even in those areas of the Donbas that were under Kyiv's control. According to a poll conducted in November 2015, 35.4 percent of the residents of the Ukrainian government-controlled Donbas regarded the war there as a civil war between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian citizens of Ukraine, 22.5 percent as a war between Ukraine and Russia, and 10.8 percent as separatist insurgency supported by Russia. Far more significantly, as many as 43.7 percent of people in the Donbas believed in 2015

56 Most notably Oleksii Chupa, *Bomzhi Donbasu: Homo Profugos* (Kyiv: Diskursus, 2014).

57 See Kateryna Yakovlenko, "Pysmennyk-robotnyk v umovakh okupatsii," *izin*, 13 November 2014, <http://izin.com.ua/chupa-interview>.

58 See Kostiantyn Skorkin, "Mit Novorosii: krai reaktsiinykh utopii," *Krytyka* 14, nos. 9–10 (2014): 29–30.

59 Kostiantyn Skorkin, "Zhyttia na Donbasi ne mohlo ne zakinchytysya LNRom," *Espresso TV*, 9 June 2016, http://espresso.tv/blogs/2014/06/09/zhyttya_na_donbasi_ne_mohlo_ne_zakinchytysya_inrom.

60 I discuss this in detail in my *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*.

that the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic represented the Donbas population, 35.6 percent believed they were terrorists, and 20.5 percent found the question "difficult to answer."⁶¹ Evidently, at least during the early stages of the conflict there was considerable support for the separatists in areas of the Donbas that Kyiv controlled, although this simply may reflect their distrust of Kyiv. Yet, a poll conducted only a few months later in February 2016 showed a shift in public opinion in a direction more favorable for Kyiv: 42.3 percent of the residents living in the Ukrainian government-controlled Donbas considered the two separatist republics to be terrorist organizations, 33.1 percent saw them as representatives of the Donbas population, and 24.6 percent found it difficult to assess the separatist republics.⁶² Another poll conducted in March 2016 also showed an ambiguous picture of the political attitudes of Donbas residents. Asked whether they support amnesty for everyone who has taken part in the separatist movement but has not committed grave crimes, 39.9 percent of the Donbas population (under Kyiv's control) responded positively, 33.3 percent negatively, and 26.7 percent could not respond either way.⁶³ These ambiguities do not seem to have disappeared even by 2019, after five years of war.

There are no comparable data on the population of the occupied areas of the Donbas. In a telephone poll conducted in August–September 2015, 41.9 percent of people living in the occupied zones responded that Russia's military intervention in the Donbas was a helping hand for the people of the Donbas to achieve "independence" (presumably from Kyiv), 35.5 percent considered Russia's actions a military intervention into Ukraine's domestic affairs, and 22.6 percent refused or were unable to answer. In the areas of the Donbas controlled by the Ukrainian government the corresponding figures were 14.3, 50.0, and 35.7 percent. How reliable this poll was is debatable, however, because the number of respondents was very small: 62 and 56 in the respective zones.⁶⁴ One must also wonder whether those in the occupied zones trusted the pollsters; in other words, whether they trusted the political neutrality of

61 Tsentrazumkova, "Hromadiany Ukrainy pro bezpeku: otsinky, zahrozy, shliakhy vyrishennia problem (2015)," 21–22, http://razumkov.org.ua/upload/1449050147_file.pdf.

62 See "Ukrainian Crisis Election Panel Survey (2014)," http://www.uceps.org/ukr/poll.php?poll_id=1108.

63 See Tsentrazumkova, "Stavlennia hromadian do sytuatsii na Donbasi," 4, http://www.uceps.org/upload/1461830509_file.pdf.

64 See "Dumky i pohliady naselennia Ukrainy stosovno metodiv oporu okupantam/interventam: veresen 2015 roku," Kyivskyi mizhnarodnyi instytut sotsiologhii, 28 September 2015, <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=546&page=1> and its appendix.

the pollsters who telephoned, asking for politically sensitive views. At any rate, it is difficult to characterize clearly the political orientation of the people in the Donbas. One observer in the occupied city of Makiivka noted in 2016: “The residents of this region are absolutely amorphous material in a political sense. No political force draws sympathy here.”⁶⁵ The political mood of the people in the Kyiv-controlled areas of the Donbas is also far from unambiguous. For good reason, the Donbas frustrates many observers and analysts.

This frustration is clearly reflected in Andrukhovych’s famous declaration that the people of the Donbas are alien to Ukraine. In the spring of 2016, two years after the war began, Andrukhovych reversed his position, stating that the Donbas is a “complicated region,” but “it is Ukraine.”⁶⁶ The war prompted many Ukrainians (including Andrukhovych) to reconsider their stance on the Donbas. In June 2015 Lviv scholars organized a two-week series of cultural and intellectual events called “Donkult,” in order to promote understanding of the Donbas as a Ukrainian land.⁶⁷ This signifies tremendous progress in support of the unity of Ukraine as an independent country.

In explaining the war in the Donbas, one cannot help but agree with Andrii Portnov, who deplors the effect on the Donbas of “the discriminatory rhetoric that Ukrainian politicians and public figures have permitted themselves to use when speaking about ‘residents of the Donbas.’”⁶⁸ The Donbas has always been suspect as a land where even politically subversive elements have enjoyed considerable freedom. No other region of Ukraine, not even the Crimea, has been subjected to such extreme discriminatory rhetoric. Mutual alienation has been profound, and it is this alienation that contributed to the work of foreign operatives in the Donbas.

All this does not mean that the Donbas is lost to Ukraine. Moscow knows full well how difficult the Donbas is and thus is in no hurry to annex it to Russia. Gubarev, Strelkov, and many other separatists have been openly critical of Moscow’s indecision. Other “separatists” in the Donbas have quickly come

65 Sergei Andreev, “‘Politicheskie ateisty’ Donbassa,” *Radio Svoboda*, 23 March 2016, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/27642489.html>. For another poll conducted in the occupied territory of the Donbas in December 2016 concerning the Ukrainian/Russian identity of the residents, see Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, “War and Identity: The Case of the Donbas in Ukraine,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, nos. 2–3 (2018): 139–57.

66 His radio interview on 21 April 2016 on Radio Svoboda, <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/27689191.html>.

67 The author of the present essay was one of its participants.

68 See Portnov, “How ‘Eastern Ukraine’ Was Lost.”

to realize that Moscow has no real concern for them⁶⁹ and will likely alienate the Donbas population. Can Kyiv win their hearts and minds? This seems to be the bigger question.

69 This is argued by Polish journalists, who directly observed the political mood in the occupied Donbas: Grzegorz Szymanik and Julia Wizowska, *Po północy w Doniecku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2016). For my review of this valuable book for *Historians in UA*, see <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/istoriya-i-pamyat-vazhki-pitannya/2092-hiroaki-kuromiia-opivnochi-v-donetsku-grzegorz-szyma-ski-julia-wizowska-po-p-nocy-w-doniecku-warszawa-agma-s-a-2016>.

Copyright of Soviet & Post-Soviet Review is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.