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Title	The Russo-Ukrainian War and the “Enigma” of the Donbas
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Description	Cluster Section “Origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War”
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 46(2), 149-163
Issue Date	2025
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/ASI.46-2.149
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/99151
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	08_Acta46-2_Kuromiya.pdf



The Russo–Ukrainian War and the “Enigma” of the Donbas

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In 2014, in the wake of “Euromaidan” (the Revolution of Dignity) in Kyiv and the ensuing chaos, Russia (the Russian Federation) secretly sent its military forces to Crimea, occupied, and quickly annexed it following a sham referendum. Russia’s ambitions were not confined to Crimea. It sought to capture a very large chunk of eastern-southern Ukrainian territory, calling it “New Russia [*Новоросси́я*],” but only succeeded in militarily occupying large sections of the Donbas (Donets’k and Luhans’k oblasts). Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was merely a continuation of the war Russia had covertly unleashed against Ukraine in 2014.

In the West, and to some extent in Ukraine as well, there was a general understanding (though not approval) of Russia’s Crimean annexation. In the Crimean peninsula, ethnic Russians accounted for a majority of the population (more than 60 percent in 2014, though the exact figure is disputed). Crimea only became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. Although Crimea played an important role in the history of Rus’ (Kyiv-Rus’), it was incorporated by force into the Russian Empire only in the eighteenth century (followed by the expulsion of indigenous Turkic people, “Crimean Tatars,” the massive in-migration of Russians). Stalin’s punitive, wholesale deportation of Crimean Tatars from Crimea in 1944 artificially created a Russian majority on the peninsula. The Russian majority notwithstanding, 54 percent of the Crimean population voted for the independence of Ukraine in the December 1991 referendum. Following Ukraine’s independence and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia reacted by fostering separatist movements in Crimea with a degree of popular support. When Russia militarily occupied and annexed Crimea in 2014, it met little open resistance from the Crimean population. Although non-violent resistance did take place, no armed fighting ensued.

By contrast, armed fighting erupted in the Donbas in 2014 and continues to this day. Clearly the Donbas, an industrial region of collieries and steel plants in eastern Ukraine bordering Russia, played a cardinal role in the outbreak of the Russo–Ukrainian war. Nevertheless, the Donbas, with its complicated history and contemporary political mood, is poorly understood in the West. Even in Ukraine itself, it remains a sort of political enigma and is even more poorly understood than is Crimea. Russia takes advantage of the seemingly inscrutable political life of the Donbas to spread disinformation. Unfortunately,

the world, including many scholars, are influenced by Russia's shrewd and adroit propaganda, which prevents the world from comprehending the Donbas and the war itself. The present short essay seeks to address this deplorable situation.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The most salient historical legacy of the Donbas is that its political life has always been difficult for outsiders to understand, perhaps more so than any other region of Ukraine. Even today, the Donbas defies a simple characterization. Historically, no easily identifiable political ideology or identity defined politics in the Donbas: neither Marxism nor nationalism nor imperialism nor liberalism has ever captured the hearts and minds of the Donbas population. It appears as if the Donbas spurned everything external as alien.

Lev D. Trotskii, Vladimir Lenin's close collaborator and Iosif Stalin's arch-rival, was born in Ukraine, versed in Russian, Ukrainian, and international politics. Trotskii, who had an extraordinarily keen sense of modern mass politics, once remarked, having despaired of the enigmatic nature of the Donbas: "One can't go to the Donbas without a [political] gas mask [в Донбасс нельзя приезжать без противогаза]."¹ Ivan Maistrenko, after having worked in the Donbas in 1921 as a Ukrainian Communist and trade-union organizer, gave up on the Donbas, despairing that the Donbas people had no understanding of nationality issues. They reasoned, Majstrenko lamented, that "Well, if nothing comes of the All Russian party (Bolsheviks), let's try the Ukrainian one." Ten years later, when tasked to work in Stalino (today's Donetsk) in the Donbas to convert its Russophone newspaper into a Ukrainophone one, he was "categorically inclined not to go there," calling it a "culturally joyless province."²

Even though today's Donetsk, at least before Russia's occupation, is a big city with a population of close to a million people and a relatively vibrant cultural life for a provincial area, the same kind of prejudice remains entrenched in the minds of the Ukrainian people. The cities in the Donbas have been historically Russophone (although the countryside remained generally Ukrainophone). Even so, ethnic Russians have never been a majority in the Donbas, which have been ethnic Ukrainians. Culturally, too, Ukraine has been a defining feature of the Donbas. People there say that even though they speak Russian in everyday life, they always sing in Ukrainian, that it is in Ukrainian that they express their deepest emotions. Volodymyr V. Rafeienko (b. 1969), a Ukrainian writer born and raised in Donetsk, has written: "Still, one has to mention that despite all its specific characteristics, [the] Donbas never felt it was part of

1 Quoted in XI з'їзд Комуністичної партії (більшовиків) України, 5-15 червня 1930 р. Стенографічний звіт. Харків, 1930. С. 373.

2 *Майстренко І. Історія мого покоління. Спогади учасника революційних подій в Україні.* Edmonton, Canada, 1985. С. 171, 251.

Russia in a cultural sense. Ukraine and everything Ukrainian were much closer for all of us than anything Russian." The Donbas identity was "still essentially based on the Ukrainian cultural matrix."³

Nevertheless, the Donbas has been relentlessly "othered" by numerous Ukrainians, including some of the most prominent Ukrainian writers and intellectuals. The othering of the Donbas has manifested itself frequently, especially after 2004. In 2004, Viktor Yanukovych, a politician from the Donbas and presidential candidate, falsified the results of that year's presidential election in Ukraine in his favor. This event occasioned the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine, a mass protest movement, which resulted in a repeat election and Yanukovych's loss to Viktor Yushchenko. In the wake of the Orange Revolution, Yuri Andrukhovych, a prominent writer from western Ukraine, wrote that the Donbas was a region that "easily succumbs to political manipulation in connection with a black-and-white view of the world," and that its people were "medieval-feudal" or "Cro-Magnon-Neanderthal" (*кроманьйонської та неандертальської*). The "ballast of the Donbas," which the writer called a "big proto-cultural wasteland" (*велику протокультурну пустку*), could become an impediment to Ukraine's integration into Europe.⁴ Taras Prokhas'ko, a literary colleague of Andrukhovych's, wrote in the spring of 2014 when armed fighting was about to erupt in the Donbas, "An entirely different people live in our far eastern regions, people whom we, westerners, [*zakhidniaky*] can neither understand nor accept, nor, in particular, consider our own.... Obviously, they are a people completely different [from us "westerners"]."⁵ It is noteworthy that these Ukrainian intellectuals do not seem to harbor similar prejudices against the people in Crimea. For them, the Donbas appears to represent something worse than the radical pro-Russian separatists in Crimea.

The apparent non-committal, undefinable political stance of the Donbas is nothing new in Ukrainian history. The best, if inadequate, way to characterize it is to see it as consistently anti-Metropolitan. This is the position that characterized the Zaporizhzhian (Ukrainian) Cossacks. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries those who sought autonomy from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*) formed armed brotherhoods in today's eastern Ukraine. Far removed from the metropolises of the Commonwealth, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy (later the Russian Empire), it provided a degree of freedom and autonomy, which the metropolises could not easily control. (Hence the

3 Volodymyr Rafeenko, "Donbas—Ukraine, a Life Journey," Volodymyr Yermolenko, ed., *Ukraine in histories and stories. Essays by Ukrainian intellectuals* (Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2019), p. 211.

4 Андрухович Ю. Шукаючи Dreamland // Критика, 2005, no. 1–2, С. 3; Атлас. Медитації // Критика, 2006, no. 1–2, С. 10–11.

5 Прохасько Т. Далекосхідний український фронт [<http://gk-press.if.ua/node/11885>] (accessed 29 May 2015).

moniker “wild field [*dyke pole*],” a frontier land for the Cossack land.) In order to safeguard their freedom, the Cossacks always took a very practical position, allying with one side against another depending on the political situation (hence they were often regarded by all sides as unprincipled mercenaries). The Cossacks represented a land of demos (“democracy”) as opposed to the Rzeczpospolita’s aristocratic rule and the autocracy of Muscovite (Russian) Tsars and the Ottoman Sultans.

The freedom provided by the Cossack lands attracted whoever needed freedom (from religious, economic, political, and criminal persecution) as well as fortune seekers, adventurers, and others. After the Cossacks lands were absorbed into the Russian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the frontier nature of the lands (including the Donbas) was largely lost. However, the discovery of huge coal deposits in the Donbas and its exploitation in the nineteenth century’s industrialization in the Russian Empire revived the “wild field,” and people flocked to the Donbas in search of labor, opportunity, fortune, and freedom. This continued into the Soviet period. Whoever needed freedom from persecution by the Communist dictatorship was often able to find it in the Donbas, which was in constant need of a labor force for the hard and dangerous work in the dark underground. It was the favorite place to flee for those Ukrainian peasants who were “de-kulakized” by Stalin’s drive for collectivization of agriculture. For the freedom the Donbas afforded, it became a politically suspect land and consequently suffered terrible terror even by the standards of the Stalin era. Thus the Donbas presented a seeming contradiction as a land of freedom and terror.⁶

The freedom of the Donbas afforded a democratic feel to its political life. Because of large scale migrations over many years, the Donbas had become an ethnic melting pot, even while remaining predominantly Ukrainian. The renowned Ukrainian poet, Volodymyr Sosiura (1898–1965), born in Debal’tseve in the Donbas, counted at least six ethnic groups in his ancestry: Ukrainian, Serbian, Hungarian, Jewish, French, and Karachai.⁷ It is not that the Donbas was free of ethnic prejudices, for instance, anti-Semitism. It should be noted, however, that at the time of Stalin’s “anti-Cosmopolitan” (Jewish) campaign after WWII, Ukrainian Jews were encouraged to try their luck in the Donbas. Moreover, ethnically defined (“integral”) nationalism was alien to the Donbas, which had instead a democratizing impact on the Ukrainian national movement. Ievhen Stakhiv, an organizer of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) who had idealized Spain’s Franco regime, was sent to the Donbas during World War II. He was treated by people in the Donbas as a “fascist” for following the OUN. Stakhiv subsequently “abandoned a narrowly defined

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

7 *Сосюра В. Третя рота* // Київ. 1988. No. 1. С. 63.

Ukrainian nationalism and embraced the ideal of a democratic Ukraine without discrimination against its national minorities." Stakhiv remained grateful to the Donbas people for his democratic conversion for the rest of his life.⁸ After WWII, when the Ukrainian insurgents were faced with defeat by the Soviet forces, they ordered their members to seek refuge either by fighting their way to the American occupation zones in the West or to escape to the Donbas by posing as resettled workers.⁹

In critical respects, the Donbas has functioned as a modern-day Cossack land, refusing to succumb to the control of the metropolises. It has been a perennial "problem child" for Moscow and Kyiv. Inasmuch as the Cossack mythology (representing independence/insubordination, freedom, and democracy) is the core of the modern Ukrainian national movement, the Donbas can be said to be a supremely Ukrainian land. However, the Donbas also embodies the contradictions of the modern Ukrainian national movement: under conditions of Russian and Soviet domination, the emphasis on liberty and independence has tended to overshadow the task of nation-building and state-building.

State-building became real only in 1991. It is not surprising that in 1991 the Donbas population overwhelmingly supported the independence of Ukraine, with more than 83 percent voting in favor. Once freed from Moscow's tutelage and exploitation, they imagined that their lives would improve dramatically in independent Ukraine. Their hopes were dashed, however, by Ukraine's post-independence economic woes, turning them against the Ukrainian government in Kyiv. The post-independence history of the Donbas has turned out to be a history of continuous protest, openly expressed in a free and independent Ukraine. The Donbas did not help Kyiv to build a strong and stable state. Yet, unlike Crimea, there is no evidence that the Donbas protest movements actually sought a secession from Ukraine. Rather they demanded autonomy, greater power to run their region than Kyiv had allowed. To be sure, as will be discussed in the following section, some Donbas politicians floated threats of separatism on occasion. Yet they used the threats to extract maximal concessions from Kyiv, and there were no serious demands or movements to

8 See *Стахів Є. Кризь тюрми, підпиля й кордони. Повість мого життя*. Київ., 1995. С. 133–134, 308.

9 Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror*, p. 302. For a very different view of the Donbas as Ukraine's "Klondike" resembling the American South under slavery, see *Кульчицький С., Якубова Л. Триста років самотності: український Донбас у пошуках смислів і батьківщини*. Київ, 2016. С. 20, and my rejoinder, "Does Ukraine Have a 'Northern Ireland'?" in Joseph Ruane, Ludmilla Hrynevych, Stephen Velychenko, eds., *Ireland and Ukraine: Studies in Comparative Imperial and National History* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2022), p. 597, and *Донбас был обречен на российское вторжение? Есть ли у него будущее после окончания войны — и каким оно может быть?* [<https://meduza.io/feature/2024/05/07/donbass-byl-obrechen-na-rossiyskoe-vtorzhenie-est-li-u-nego-budushee-posle-okonchaniya-voyny-i-kakim-ono-mozhet-byt>] (accessed 7 May 2024).

separate the Donbas from Ukraine. On the contrary, in a stark turnabout, the Donbas politicians sought to “take over” the political capital of Kyiv.¹⁰ Although the attempt by Yanukovych in 2004 failed, he succeeded legitimately in 2010. Needless to say, behind Yanukovych stood Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, whose ultimate goal was to seize control of Ukraine through Yanukovych. Yanukovych did not always follow Putin’s diktat. In any case, it was scuttled by Euromaidan in 2013–2014.

THE RUSSIAN INVASION AND “REFLEXIVE CONTROL”

The military conflict that followed Euromaidan was occasioned by an initially covert Russian military invasion. Unfortunately, many Western observers and commentators failed to see through Russia’s camouflaged military operations in the Donbas. According to Jakob Hauter, the majority of Western academic research on the causes of the war in the Donbas roughly follows the Russian fictional account of the war as a conflict of opposing domestic forces in Ukraine.¹¹

In fact, Moscow has long practiced a sophisticated political operation which has come to be known as “reflexive control” (*рефлексивное управление*). At least since the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, it has been used repeatedly to conceal Moscow’s hand in sensitive political and military operations outside the country. Moscow’s operatives hide behind local forces or assume false identities and carry out Moscow’s directives. In covert military operations in Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and elsewhere in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Moscow dispatched its own military forces disguised as local soldiers. Over the years, Moscow refined and polished its covert operations and elevated them to a cherished doctrine. The basic idea is to induce the target subject to make decisions formulated in advance by the controlling side: the “objective of reflexive control is to force an enemy into making objective decisions that lead to his defeat by influencing or controlling his decision-making process.”¹² This technique requires an intimate knowledge of the enemy and a meticulous analysis of its political vulnerabilities. It was this technique, sometimes also known as “active measures,” that Moscow employed to create armed conflict

10 Rafeienko has noted that “It was back then [in the early 2000s] that even the regional identity [of the Donbas] began to give up its positions significantly to the general Ukrainian identity.” See Rafeienko, “Donbas—Ukraine,” p. 211.

11 Jakob Hauter, *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine’s Donbas* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2023), p. 29.

12 Timothy L. Thomas, “Russia’s Reflexive Control Theory and the Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 2 (2004), p. 243. See also Michał Wojnowski, “‘Zarządzanie refleksyjne’ jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w.,” *Przegląd bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego* 12 (2015), pp. 11–36. For an exposition by a Russian, see, for example, Смолян Г.А. Рефлексивное управление — технология принятия манипулятивных решений // Труды ИСА РАН, 2013. №. 2, С. 54–61.

in the Donbas in 2014 all the while concealing its hand.¹³ Moscow was so proud of the success of its deception that subsequently Putin could not help admitting that he had deployed "our boys" in Crimea and the Donbas. Months after Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas, Major General Aleksandr Vladimirov, vice-president of Russia's "Collegium of Military Experts," loftily showed to a BBC reporter "two enormous red volumes off his bookcase," "three times longer than Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*," proudly calling the hefty manual on camouflage (*маскировка*) "My Theory and Science of Warfare."¹⁴

Moscow had long been engaged in subversion in the Donbas and elsewhere in Ukraine (as well as in other former Soviet Union republics and for that matter the world over and in the United States in particular).¹⁵ Russian President Putin is guided by resentment against the West, which he believes engineered the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Putin calls the collapse the greatest geopolitical "catastrophe" of the twentieth century, a "humiliating" bane to Russia. It was a boon for many republics, including Ukraine. Whatever hopes Putin may have entertained at some point in his political career for a cooperative relationship with the West, he never shed his deeply ingrained distrust of the West. His dream has always been to restore the "greatness" of Russia and to resurrect the Russian Empire. This has led him, ultimately, to delegitimize Vladimir Lenin whose policy of allowing non-Russian nationalities such as Ukraine and Belarus' to form their own republics within the Soviet Union ran counter to Putin's agenda. By criticizing Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Putin has reverted atavistically to the pre-1917 Russian imperialist position of denying the very existence of Ukraine, which he contends is nothing more than a part of Russia. According to former U.S. President Bill Clinton, already in 2011, three years before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin told him in person that he did not support the "Budapest Agreement" that Russia had signed along with Britain and the United States (whereby Ukraine, Belarus', and Kazakhstan gave up their nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet Union in exchange for assurances of sovereignty and territorial integrity). Putin made it clear to Clinton that he was not bound by the agreement. Clinton "knew from that day forward, it [Russia's invasion of Ukraine] was just a matter of time."¹⁶

13 Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, "The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Occasional Paper, London, July 2019. On active measures, see Olga Bertelson, *Russian Active Measures: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2012).

14 Lucy Ash, "How Russia Outfoxes its Enemies" [<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31020283>] (accessed 31 January 2015).

15 See one of the early investigations into Russian subversion, Adrian Chen, "The Agency," about a Russian "troll factory," published in the *New York Times Magazine*, 7 June 2015, pp. 56–60, 62–65, 67.

16 "Bill Clinton saw Putin's Ukraine campaign as 'just a matter of time' in 2011" [<https://www.ft.com/content/404af8ef-d073-4edc-ab25-384442864342>] (accessed 10 May 2023).

In Ukraine as elsewhere, Russia, covertly yet often overtly, cultivated pro-Russian and anti-West political forces. Moscow's generally clandestine operations were all-encompassing and systematic, from open information war equating the Ukrainophone population with "fascists," to the penetration of Ukraine with its agents and "moles." Moscow's modus operandi was the time-honored method the Soviet government had consistently used: destabilize Ukraine and create chaos by methodically fostering discontent and encouraging and supporting extremist political views, both leftist and rightist, that were anti-Western and anti-liberal. Racist and anti-LGBTQ groups were Moscow's favorite targets for manipulation. So too were leftist and even liberal intellectuals eager to see the shortcomings of Western liberalism. The end simply justifies the means in Putin's view. Nikolai Mitrokhin, a Russian scholar now based in Germany, has called the Russian clandestine operations a "transnational preparation for separatism" and a "transnational provocation."¹⁷

The Donbas is a particularly attractive region from which to subvert Ukraine. It has a large ethnic Russian minority and an predominantly Russophone population. By the time Ukraine became independent, the Donbas with its stagnant coal-mining industry had come to represent gradual industrial decay within the context of the global transition from coal to oil as a major source of energy. It was further impacted by an even more radical transition on a global scale from the industrial to the post-industrial age. Discontent was almost universal and the Donbas remained a perennial troublemaker for the powers that be. Seeing a golden political opportunity, in 2004, Putin visited Ukraine seven times in support of Yanukovych in his bid to be elected Ukraine's President. When their ruse of falsifying the election results was divulged, a huge protest movement erupted in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine (the Orange Revolution). Immediately thereafter, in late November 2004, more than 3,000 supporters of Yanukovych, mostly from the south-eastern regions of Ukraine, convened a congress of "deputies of all levels" in Sivers'kodonets'k (Severodonets'k), Luhans'k oblast'. Putin dispatched Iurii Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow, in support. The entire affair turned out to be organized by Moscow through Viktor Medvedchuk, at the time the head of President Leonid Kuchma's presidential administration and Putin's trusted operative in Ukraine. (Putin is the godfather of one of Medvedchuk's daughters.) Medvedchuk was under the command of Russia's security organ FSB, successor to the infamous KGB.¹⁸ The Congress, extensively covered by the Russian press, declared Yanukovych Ukraine's legitimately elected President and even went so far as to declare the creation of a "South-Eastern Ukrainian Autonomous Republic." This latter did not

17 Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Transnationale Provokation. Russische Nationalisten und Geheimdienstler in der Ukraine," *Osteuropa* 64, nos. 5–6 (2014), pp. 161–163.

18 See Андрушко С. Репетиція вторгнення. Як Путін готував ґрунт для захоплення України ще у 2004 році [<https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/skhemy-siverskodonetskyu-zyzd-repetytsiya-vtorhnennya/32809670.html>] (accessed 10 February 2024).

happen, because the deputies did not actually mean to partition Ukraine. They made use of the threat of separatism to extract concessions from Kyiv. It is noteworthy that even these delegates thought of their lands as part of Ukraine, referring to their regions as "South-Eastern Ukrainian." Ultimately, Yanukovich gave in and agreed to a repeat election in which he promoted greater regional autonomy and the "federalization" of the state. He lost.¹⁹ In 2004–2005, Putin's attempt to divide and conquer Ukraine failed, because no one, not even Yanukovich, seriously considered breaking up the country.

The Ukrainian government in Kyiv, including President Yushchenko who defeated Yanukovich in the rematch, found no realistic means to satisfy and tame the discontented industrial east, particularly the Donbas, Yanukovich's power base. Kyiv's offhand stance toward the Donbas only reinforced its distrust of the government in Kyiv. It is not that the Donbas population supported Yanukovich without reservation. National politics in Ukraine was such that the electorates were extraordinarily apathetic and cynical. One worker in the Donbas noted that "Yanukovich is a criminal..., all governments are criminal."²⁰ To placate the Donbas, Yushchenko, who was busy fighting his erstwhile political ally, Yulia Tymoshenko, found himself making great concessions, to the extent of appointing Yanukovich to be Prime Minister in 2006. Four years later, with the support of the south-eastern regions of Ukraine and the Donbas in particular, Yanukovich defeated Tymoshenko in the presidential election. All the same the Donbas population maintained a negative view of politics. Yanukovich was known in the Donbas as the "thief from Ienakieve" and the "shame of the Donbas."²¹ The Donbas people understood Yanukovich and his political clique to be "bandits," but "our bandits."²²

Putin's strategy to subvert Ukraine's sovereignty was to federalize Ukraine "legally," that is to say by forcing Kyiv to grant greater autonomy to the discontented south and east. Taking advantage of the greater regional autonomy, thus created, Moscow aimed to increase legitimately its influence in south-eastern Ukraine (which had voted overwhelmingly for Yanukovich in 2010). By enforcing the recognition of the Russian language as a second state language, Moscow hoped to surreptitiously yet lawfully magnify its political, economic, and cultural influence in Ukraine as a whole (Moscow called this quiet offensive the recognition of the "Russian world" [*русский мир*]). By encroaching softly on Ukraine, Moscow expected to capture and subjugate Ukraine to Moscow's will.

19 See Казанський Д, Воротинцева М. Як Україна втрачала Донбас. Київ, 2020. С. 94–101.

20 See a worker's remark recorded in Jakob Preuss, "The Other Chelsea: A Story from Donetsk" (a documentary film, 2010).

21 See Marta Studenna-Skrukwa, *Ukraiński Donbas. Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej* (Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014), pp. 284–285.

22 See Игорь Тодоров, "Факторы украинно-российской войны в Донбассе: внутреннее измерение," *Nowy Prometeusz* 7 (April 2015), p. 17.

Unfortunately for Putin, he found Yanukovych less than dependable politically. Perhaps this was to be expected, because it is likely that Yanukovych, like all ambitious politicians, did not want to be a mere puppet of a foreign dictator. In fact, once in power, Yanukovych was in no rush to implement Putin's diktat. He lost interest in federalization. He learned to speak Ukrainian passably and made no move to make the Russian language a second official language. He pursued the course of closer integration not only with Russia but also with Europe until November 2013, when without explanation the Ukrainian government made a statement to reject "Eurointegration."²³ This rejection of the European path prompted a mass protest that became the Revolution of Dignity. It is not difficult to see what had caused this abrupt change: Moscow's intervention.²⁴

With Yanukovych's flight from the political chaos in Kyiv in February 2014, Putin swiftly moved to occupy and annex Crimea. He trod more carefully regarding the rest of Ukraine, however, because outside Crimea there were neither Russian-majority regions nor separatist movements to speak of. Moscow's contention notwithstanding, there had been no language or ethnic conflict (persecution or discrimination of ethnic Russians or the Russophone). All of this was true of the Donbas as well. Even Pavel Gubarev, who in 2014 became one of the separatist leaders in the Donbas, frankly admitted that "Here [in the Donbas] there was no ethnic enmity" (*Ne bylo zdes' natsional'noi rozni*).²⁵ In the Donbas people regarded the few separatists in the region as exotic "lunatics" and did not take them seriously.²⁶ Putin plotted to carve out the south-eastern regions of Ukraine as "New Russia," resurrecting not quite accurately the old term employed by the Russian Empire. This large tract of the Ukrainian land extended from Kharkiv to Dnipro and to Odesa. Were this tract to have come under Russian control, Ukraine as an independent state would have been as good as dead. It was then, immediately after Yanukovych fled, that Moscow activated its secret agents, moles, "influencers," and operatives to seize "New Russia."²⁷ There is no evidence that Moscow targeted the Donbas, its historic troublemaker and "problem child," for takeover. In fact, Moscow did not want

23 Ярмошук Т. Спусковой крючок войны. Как украинские политики теряли Донецкую область, а Россия превратила ее в "ДНР" [<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kak-donetskuyu-oblast-ukrainy-prevratili-v-dnr/32901731.html>] (accessed 14 April 2024).

24 The Guardian, "Ukraine U-turn on Europe pact was agreed with Vladimir Putin" [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/26/ukraine-u-turn-eu-pact-putin>] (accessed 1 December 2013). For details, see Sanshiro Hosaka, "The Kremlin's Active Measures Failed in 2013: That's When Russia Remembered Its Last Resort—Crimea," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2018), pp. 321–364.

25 See Губарев П. Факел Новороссии. Спб., 2016. С. 10.

26 Казанський, Воротинцева Як Україна втрачала Донбас. С. 121–124.

27 Although this covert operation is a difficult subject to examine, see an excellent reportage from the occupied parts of the Donbas by a Slovak journalist: Tomáš Forró, *Apartament w hotelu Wojna: Reportaż z Donbasu* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2022), pp. 63, 77, 120.

the Donbas.²⁸ For this reason, separatists in the Donbas such as Gubarev soon entertained a grudge against Moscow.²⁹ Those in the Donbas who had dreamed of becoming Russians soon became disenchanted.³⁰ Even those locals who had partaken in the war against Ukraine became disillusioned and did not give a damn about the "Russian world," as was the case before the war began.³¹ Moscow was skeptical of the loyalty of the Donbas population (including its oligarchs and other powerful local forces). It was therefore not Moscow's priority.³² Had Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Odesa been taken, the Donbas would almost automatically have fallen into Russian hands.

Putin's grand scheme failed, however. Even though Moscow did its utmost to hide its presence, the Ukrainian people understood that Russia had used its military forces to annex Crimea and was furtively deploying its forces (dubbed "Russian tourists") elsewhere in Ukraine. The Ukrainian population did not want Russian interference, categorically rejecting Russia's military intervention and defending Ukraine's independence. This was also the case in the Donbas whose population at the time neither strongly favored nor overwhelmingly opposed the Euromaidan but resolutely supported Ukraine's independence and rejected Moscow's military intervention. Again, even Pavel Gubaraev stated that there was no "serious movement in Ukraine against euro-integration" and that had Ianukovych signed an agreement on euro-integration, the Donbas "would have silently accepted it."³³ Ultimately, Russia's covert military operations using secret agents and operatives did not succeed, with the exception of parts of the Donbas.

Many scholars have attributed Russia's success in the Donbas to the Donbas' supposedly anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian sentiments stemming from, among others, its Russophone population. As we have just argued, there is little ground to support such views, which in fact reflect Russian propaganda which cloaked its military operations as Ukraine's internal conflict or "civil war." Many scholars failed to see Russia's hidden hand in the Donbas until the summer of 2014 when Russia felt forced to silently deploy its regular military units to defeat the Ukrainian forces in the Donbas.³⁴ As Natalia Humeniuk, a Ukrainian journalist, has noted, the Donbas is no more different from the

28 Ibid., pp. 95, 171.

29 Ibid., pp. 340–344.

30 Grzegorz Szymanik and Julia Wizowska, *Po północy w Doniecku* (Warszawa: Agora, 2016), pp. 115, 186–187.

31 Асеев С. В ізоляції. Збірка статей. Київ, 2018, С. 175, 178.

32 See Hiroaki Kuromiya, "How to Make Sense of the Donbas in the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict in the Twenty-First Century," *Nowy Prometeusz*, 2016, no. 9, p. 18.

33 Губарев. Факел Новороссии, С. 73.

34 See, for example, Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). By contrast, Hauter, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion*, clearly sees Russia's covert involvement from the very beginning of the war.

rest of Ukraine than the Kharkiv region is from the Khmel'nits'kyi region.³⁵ Oleksandr Zakharchenko, who became one of the leaders of the Donbas separatists in 2014, was a believer in Ukraine: at a game of the 2012 European Football Championship held in Donetsk, he waved the Ukrainian national flag and rooted with cries, "Ukraine! Ukraine!"³⁶ In March 2014, 89 percent of the Donbas population considered Ukraine their motherland.³⁷ Therefore it appears that the Russian "success" in the Donbas was at most accidental, not predetermined by the supposedly pro-Russian sentiments in the Donbas. Moscow was pleasantly surprised by its good fortune in the Donbas. Yet this good fortune was merely a "consolation prize" for its failure to create "New Russia."

In one singular respect, the Donbas can be seen to have facilitated the Russian political and military subversion. That was by falling victim to its own reputation as a land of freedom and openness. The Donbas attracted those "exotic lunatics" who could not have operated elsewhere. It possessed as a historical land of refugees from persecution the capacity to tolerate them. The Russian secret services found it easy to infiltrate the Donbas with its agents, operatives, and moles, including political "riff-raff" of all stripes (radical Russian nationalists, Neo-Nazis, neo-Stalinists, ultra-Orthodox believers, disgruntled veterans of the Afghan War, the Chechen Wars, and other armed conflicts). Many of them fantasized and wrote about prospective war against the West allegedly hell-bent on further humiliating Russia.³⁸ In turn, the Donbas provided fertile ground for the Russian secret services to recruit agents for its operations. Gubarev himself was one of them and received political and military training in Russia. These separatists were relatively few in number. According to Mitrokhin, in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, there were only a "few dozen" of them.³⁹ Gubarev has testified that in early March 2014 his fighting troops numbered no more than twelve members.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Donbas apparently provided the most reliable, hardcore operatives on whom Russia could depend for its covert military operations. But even the most radical separatists in the Donbas were not ready to shed the blood of fellow Ukrainians. It was the Russian fighters (led by Igor' Strelkov [Girkin]) who

35 Гуменюк Н. Мені здалося, що Донбас втратив страх [<https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/intervyu/1294-natalia-humenyuk-meni-zdalosia-shcho-donbas-vtratyv-strakh>] (accessed 10 November 2014).

36 A testimony by the Spanish journalist Pilar Bonet in Фанайлова Е. "Россия делает ставку на смерть." Кораблекрушение империи [<https://www.svoboda.org/a/rossiya-delaet-stavku-na-smertj-korablekrushenie-imperii/32673506.html>] (accessed 12 November 2023).

37 See Регионы Украины: что нас разъединяет и что объединяет? Мнения социологов. Материалы круглого стола. Харьков, 18 апреля 2014 г., *Ab Imperio*, 2014, №. 3, p. 128.

38 Яковленко К. РІК ОРВЕЛЛА. З чого починається 'новий донецький' міф [<https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/avtorska-kolonka/1344-kateryna-yakovlenko-rik-orvella-z-choho-pochynaietsia-novy-i-donetskyi-mif>] (accessed 25 November 2014).

39 Mitrokhin, "Transnationale Provokation," p. 165.

40 Губарев, *Факел Новоросс*, p. 108.

were determined to shed blood. They, according to Gubarev, "smelled of war." The war in the Donbas, started by Strelkov, was a "well-planned operation by the special services of the Russian Federation."⁴¹ According to Mitrokhin, the number of soldiers, secret agents, and others who initially penetrated Ukraine from Russia was not great: from several hundred to somewhat more than 1,000, a number that skyrocketed, by the summer of 2014, to thousands and probably tens of thousands.⁴²

The Russian occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas radically altered the political situation and opened up new possibilities and alternatives for the future that heretofore had existed only in fantasy. Some disgruntled people in the Donbas began to explore such possibilities by joining the Russian invaders against the Kyiv government. In the summer of 2014, according to Mitrokhin, there were 20,000–25,000 "local fighters." He reckons, however, that more than half of them had come from elsewhere in Ukraine.⁴³ In other words, those people in the Donbas who took arms against Kyiv were a tiny minority, less than 0.5 percent of the six million or so residents in the Donbas. The most influential people (political and business leaders) in the Donbas also played a notable role in Russia's occupation: they tolerated, if not encouraged, the separatist rebels in hopes of extracting significant concessions from Kyiv, still naively imagining the future of the Donbas within an independent Ukraine.⁴⁴ They lost out to the Russian scheme to subvert Ukraine from within. Although it is exceedingly difficult to know what the people living in the Donbas under Russian occupation thought of their future, limited numbers of opinion polls conducted in 2016 do not suggest strong support for Russia. If anything, they seem to accept Ukraine, not Russia, as their future.⁴⁵ Rafeienko notes: "I am absolutely certain that if Russia had not attacked Ukraine, the emergence of the political nation, which has never been fast and simple in any country, would have definitely absorbed the lands of our Donbas."⁴⁶

Putin did not annex the Donbas after its occupation, allowing instead two puppet "people's republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk to exist uneasily between Ukraine and Russia.⁴⁷ Why? Because his end goal was not to capture the Donbas but all of Ukraine. The annexation of the Donbas would not have

41 Там же. С. 173, 177.

42 Mitrokhin, "Transnationale Provokation," p. 170.

43 Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion. Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine," *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 (2014), pp. 12, 14.

44 For this reason, they were distrusted by separatists in the Donbas such as Gubarev. See Forró, *Apartament w hotelu Wojna*, pp. 44, 51.

45 See the analysis of a poll Gwendlyn Sasse and Alice Lackner conducted in their "War and Identity: The Case of the Donbas in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, nos. 2–3 (2018), pp. 139–157.

46 Rafeenko, "Donbas—Ukraine," p. 212.

47 Putin's playthings, these republics never managed to create their own distinct identities or their distinct futures. See John Roozenbeek, *Propaganda and Ideology in the Russian–Ukrainian War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

helped him. Instead, he continued to press for subversion from within Ukraine. Fearing the full exposure of his military involvement in the Donbas, Putin struck deals with Ukraine (the “Minsk Agreements”) to end outright armed conflict, even though he repeatedly violated them to keep the “republics” in line. By these agreements Putin tried to enforce the federalization of Ukraine. Accordingly, using the regions under his control, his intention was to hide behind his puppets in Ukraine, undermine Ukraine covertly, and ultimately seize the entire country by means of “reflexive control.” Ukraine saw through Putin’s stratagem and foiled it.

Putin had lost patience by February 2022. As Serhii Plokhy discusses in this issue, encouraged by the West’s “appeasement” following the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Putin brazenly and confidently staged an all-out war against Ukraine. It marked the failure of Russia’s “reflexive control” of Ukraine. After a disappointing seven months of fighting against the Ukrainian forces, he was forced to admit that the war was unlikely to achieve his goals any time soon. At this point (in September 2022) he decided to annex the occupied parts of the Donbas and the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts to consolidate the territorial gains he had wrought in the war.

CONCLUSION

No state is free from internal divisions. But whatever divisions existed in Ukraine before 2014 were not so serious as to destroy the country. Moscow, however, tried to convince the Ukrainians and the world otherwise—that Ukraine, fatally divided, constituted no viable state. Having seen Russia’s invasion succeed, if only partially and only in the Donbas, the “othering” and even “demonizing” of the Donbas came from many quarters in Ukraine and beyond, including pro-Western liberal Ukrainian and Western intellectuals. Many of them expressed relief opining that Ukraine would be better off without the Donbas and Crimea. Vitaliy Portnikov, a prominent Ukrainian journalist, insisted that Ukraine could be a “full-fledged political organism even without the Donbas or Crimea,” urging Ukraine to focus on the territory under its government. If Kyiv devoted its “political and economic life” to the recovery of the annexed and occupied lands, it would never be able to build a “full-fledged state.”⁴⁸ Such views became widespread, fanned by Russian campaigns.⁴⁹ In essence, such views signified

48 Україна може бути повноцінним політичним організмом і без Донбасу чи Криму. Країна. №. 19 (272), 14 травня 2015. С. 17.

49 For example, almost coinciding with Portnikov’s publication, an influential Ukrainian news site published an essay under an almost identical title by Vladislav Inozemtsev, a Russian political scientist and commentator: Без Донбасу Україна може стати успішною європейською країною [https://gazeta.ua/articles/politics-newspaper/_bez-donbasu-ukrayina-mozhe-stati-uspishnoyu-yevropejskoyu-krayinoyu/557955#comments] (accessed 9 June 2014).

defeatism. Prohas'ko, for example, frankly admitted that his patriotism was not so "all encompassing" as to want to fight and liberate the Donbas from Russian occupation.⁵⁰ Wrongly entertaining the idea that the Donbas and Crimea were alien to Ukraine, they happily played into the Russian ploys of propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation. It was a typical case of Russian "reflexive control."

Two factors are at play in this intellectual failure: the inability or unwillingness to understand the history of eastern Ukraine in general and the Donbas in particular, and the lack of a keen awareness of Russia's all-encompassing covert operations that influenced even the most critically-minded academics.⁵¹ Putin failed eventually, however, because Ukraine as a whole understood the Donbas as part and parcel of Ukraine and never abandoned it. Frustrated, Putin openly launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, "shocking" many a Western intellectual.

It is not that Kyiv and Ukraine as a whole are blameless. Countless observers have criticized Ukrainian politicians who apparently despaired and did very little to capture the hearts and minds of the Donbas people, leaving them at the mercy of redoubtable Russian propaganda and disinformation.⁵² Such neglect has helped the Russian forces to remain entrenched in occupied parts of the orphaned Donbas.

The Donbas played a critical role in the initial stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, Russia's success in occupying significant parts of the Donbas was accidental. If there was an intrinsic element to it, it was that the Donbas still represented a land of freedom and refuge. This historically open nature of the Donbas allowed Russian agents and subversive operatives to infiltrate and wait quietly (and often actively) for the "moment of truth." Thus the Donbas embodied the two factors that many scholars have neglected to consider in explicating the Russo-Ukrainian war: its history as a supremely Ukrainian land and Russia's clandestine subversion there. This dereliction naturally raises the question of intellectual responsibility for the Russo-Ukrainian war.

50 Прохасько, Далекосхідний український фронт.

51 Arel and Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War*, is a good example. Inexplicably, the authors simply ignore the history of eastern Ukraine and fail to assess the scale of Russian covert operations. For a critical assessment of the Japanese scholarship on the war, see Sanshiro Hosaka, "Ukraine's Agency in Japanese Discourse: Everything Ok With Government and People, While Academia in Trouble," *Journal of Regional Security* 18, no. 1 (2023), pp. 47–57.

52 The most powerful observation has been made by Stalinslav Asieiev, who stayed in Donetsk after its occupation by Russia, and later was caught and imprisoned by the occupiers. See Асеев. В ізоляції.