

Industrial Decline and Conflict in the Donbas: A Study of the Economics of Separatism

Abstract

The regional conflict that emerged between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern Ukrainian region of the Donbas from 2014, was an explosive event which has drawn a number of strong opinions on the future of Ukrainian nationhood within the post-Soviet world. Many of these arguments have generalised the conflict, studying it as an identity clash on the border between the European and the Russian world. By shining a light on the experiences of ordinary people during the modern history of the Donbas - from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the social upheaval of Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution, this dissertation removes the conflict from this identity-based framework and studies it as the result of underlying economic factors that blighted the region during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In doing so, this dissertation contends that the phenomenon of industrial decline played the determining role in creating the grounds for a sustained insurgency against the Ukrainian state, placing this topic within a wider context of the political consequences that industrial decline has had on modern societies.

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Introduction

A Brief Overview of the Conflict and Clarifications

In May 2014, the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic held referendums intending to legitimise their separation from the rest of Ukraine. These events were sparked by the Euromaidan, which started out as a popular uprising against the widely resented president Yanukovich, but the uprising transformed into a revolution as clashes between protestors and government authorities became increasingly violent, and eventually Yanukovich was deposed.

Yanukovich left office a disgraced politician who was even unpopular with his voter base of Russian-speakers in the East, but his overthrow and the accession to power of a nationalist government called into question the political future of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Counter protests started in Eastern regions (oblasts) after Yanukovich's ousting in late February. In the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, this culminated in protestors storming the Donetsk oblast administration building and the security service building in Luhansk on 6th April 2014.¹

After this, self-declared parliaments were formed and rebels began taking over state buildings

¹ Asayev, Stanislav, *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas* (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2022) p.6

in other towns, whilst many local police officers joined them.² The Ukrainian government organised a crackdown of the insurgents, but this never materialised.

By May, the self-proclaimed republics had raised armed militias and taken control of roughly half of the Donbas in the region's east. The Ukrainian Government undertook an anti-terror operation to reclaim their territory, whilst the separatists sought to seize all of the Donbas.³ The conflict was active for ten months, and in that time both sides made advances, with Ukraine taking back key towns but failing to defeat the separatists. Peace talks resulted in the first Minsk Accords in September 2014, but this failed to bring about a ceasefire. A ceasefire was agreed with the second Minsk Accords in February 2015, and this brought the war into a dormant phase, although sporadic fighting continued.

The areas that the separatists controlled centred around the regional capitals of Donetsk and Luhansk, with Donetsk being on the front line. The republics came under the administration of military governments and were defended by an array of militias. Politically, these Republics are held together by their violent opposition to being part of Ukraine and their allegiance towards Russia, but it should be noted that within the Republics there was a lot of jostling for power between competing militias. This has resulted in assassinations and massacres, including the unresolved assassination of the former leader of the Donetsk People's Republic Alexander Zakharchenko. Because of this, the term 'separatist

² Ibid.

³ Coffey, Adam, 'Ukraine Declares 'Anti-Terrorist Operation in the Donbas' Officially Over: What Does That Mean?' (2018) <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-declares-anti-terrorist-operation-donbas-officially-over-what-does-mean> [accessed 17th October 2022]

movements' will be used throughout this dissertation, except in cases where a source refers to them as separatist republics, as it more accurately portrays their lack of centralised power.

As of the 24th February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a 'special military operation' in Ukraine. The separatist militias have fought alongside the regular Russian army, expanding the conflict in the Donbas into a wider war between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, as of 30th September 2022, Putin announced Russia's intention to annex the Republics, as well as occupied parts of the Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts into Russia. For these reasons, the conflict will be referred to in the past tense as a historical event, as it ended in its original form in 2022.

Wild Fields: The History of the Donbas

The region known as the Donbas has long been forsaken. The Donbas (or Donbass) is a region formed around the Donets Basin – a highland area around the Donets river which is rich in coal and other natural resources. Administratively, it is covered by large parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. For long parts of its history, it was a sparsely inhabited land with very few settlements. These largely barren steppes were a no-man's land between European powers from the West and Eurasian tribes from the East, mythicised as a hellscape that was home to 'barbaric' nomads and a highway for Turkic raiders.⁴ As a result, it became a land of feral mystery to those that sought to traverse it from the West. When the Polish-

⁴ Pinkham, Sophie, *Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2016) p.198

Lithuanian Commonwealth ruled over Ukraine, they called these lands the “wild fields.”⁵

Russian Empress Catherine the Great’s conquest in the late eighteenth century was a watershed moment for the Donbas. Whilst most of Ukraine remained in touch with its folk traditions, the Donbas became an organ of the rapidly industrialising Russian empire. It became transformed, with the creation of industrial cities such as Donetsk and Luhansk, which made use of the abundance of natural resources as well as the river and sea connections that the Donbas possesses. There was a huge inflow of migration, particularly with Russian workers came to make up a significant portion of the region’s population. The region became blurred between the Ukrainian lands to the West and Russia’s expansion from the East.

The ambiguity of the Donbas’s past has led to competing claims about its historical roots today, a historiographical dispute which acts as a backdrop to Ukraine and Russia’s ongoing conflict. The Ukrainian claim over the Donbas centres around the ‘we were here first’ argument, ie. that they were indigenous to the land.⁶ The nucleus of Ukraine’s claim comes from the heritage of the Zaporizhian Cossacks, who are a vital part of Ukrainian national identity.⁷ Although the Cossacks never strictly defined their borders, it is commonly stated that the Zaporizhians controlled most of the Donbas and even stretched their control out to

⁵ Arnold, Katherine, “‘There is no Ukraine’: Fact-Checking the Kremlin’s Version of Ukrainian History’ (2020) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history/> [accessed 25th September 2022]

⁶ Wilson, Andrew, ‘The Donbass between Ukraine and Russia: The Use of History in Political Disputes’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 30:2 (1995) 265-289, p.269

⁷ *Ibid.* p.271

what is now Rostov in Russia, and their autonomous control of these lands, even when they became unified under the Russian Empire, meant that Ukraine had a unique claim over them.⁸

Russian historiography also employs the argument that the Donbas was theirs first, but some Russian historians suggest the more nuanced argument that the Donbas has always been multicultural in its nature.⁹ They point to evidence of forays across the Siverskyi Donets river, which marked a vague border between the Donbas and the Muscovite state to the North-East.¹⁰ At first it was fugitives seeking refuge who crossed the river, but formal Muscovite settlement began in the early seventeenth century at what are now the cities of Sloviansk and Artemivsk.¹¹ The conclusion of the Russian claim is that the region was never authentically Ukrainian, that it was gifted to Ukraine by Lenin when the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was created.¹² Such Russian counterclaims do reflect the multicultural nature of the Donbas, but Ukraine has older and stronger ties to the area. It would be too far to suggest, however, that the Donbas is an integral part of Ukraine's identity, a claim that is itself often disputed amongst Ukrainian historians.

The Donbas is simultaneously central and peripheral in both Ukrainian and Russian history. This confusion is reflected by the people who make up the Donbas today. As historian Hiroaki Kuroyami puts it, the Donbas became a space in-between both Kyiv and Moscow, conforming to neither Ukrainian nationalism or a Greater Russian identity.¹³ Instead, the

⁸ Ibid. p.272

⁹ Ibid. p.276

¹⁰ Ibid. p.277

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p.280

¹³ Kuroyami, Hiroaki, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003)

region was defined by the industry of the nineteenth and twentieth century, becoming to its citizens a “homogeneous space distinguished by a uniform socio-economic situation,” in the words of historian Kerstin Zimmer.¹⁴ When conducting a number of polls in the 1990s, sociologist Illia Kononov found that the majority of Donbas residents considered themselves to be part of a “unique community” which had ties with both Ukraine and Russia.¹⁵ The history of the Donbas shaped its modern identity around both Ukraine and Russia, but the nucleus of this identity was its industry.

Hypothesis

The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that the causes of separatism in the Donbas can only be properly understood when the devastating industrial decline that the region has experienced is used as a lens through which to study this separatism. Historians up until now have explored the social, cultural and political causes of the separatist movements, providing a rich understanding of this topic, but have overlooked the fundamental role that economics has played in the region’s history. This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the historiography on this topic by contending that the economic history of the Donbas was the underlying cause of the separatist movements – the factor upon which their existence was dependent. By using industrial decline as a framework, this dissertation will be able to

¹⁴ Zimmer, Kirsten *Trapped in Past Glory: Self-identification and Self-symbolisation in the Donbass* in Swain, Adam, *Re-constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region: The Donbass in Transition* (London, Routledge, 2007) cited in Kudelia, Serhiy, Zyl, Johanna Van, ‘In My Name: The Impact of Regional Identity on Civilian Attitudes in the Armed Conflict in Donbas’ *Nationalities Papers*, 47.5 (2019), 801-821 p.805

¹⁵ Kononov, Illia, ‘Donbas v Etnokulturnyh Koordynatah Ukrainy’ (Doctoral Thesis, Taras Shevchenko Luhansk National Pedagogical University, 2005) cited in Kudelia, Zyl, In My Name p.805

recontextualise these social, cultural and political factors in a different light; and analyse additional factors which have yet to be written about.

The determinant role that economics plays in the conflict is relatively understudied. Public surveys carried out on both sides of the contact line by academics John O’Loughlin, Gwendolyn Sasse and Gerard Toal found that the most overlooked aspect of the crisis was “economic despair.”¹⁶ As part of their research, they gave the prompt, “it doesn’t matter to me in which country I live: all I want is a good salary and then a good pension,” and asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed.¹⁷ In the separatist controlled territory, they found that a majority of respondents agreed with this prompt.¹⁸ Political scientist Yuri Zhukov studied the economic causes of the insurgency by using micro-level data. He found that the insurgents had more success in areas where industry had been more closely connected to Russia, such as the machine and mining industry, whilst they found it harder to establish control in areas where industry had become integrated into the Ukrainian economy, particularly the metal industry.¹⁹ Zhukov concluded that “a municipality’s pre-war employment mix is a more robust predictor of rebel activity than local ethnolinguistic composition,” vindicating an economic approach over a social and political approach.²⁰ Ultimately, this proves that the region cannot be studied without taking into account its deeply embedded proletarian identity.

¹⁶ O’Loughlin, John, Sasse, Gwendolyn, Toal, Gerard, ‘What do the people in the Donbass want?’ (2022) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/17/russia-wants-recognize-independence-two-eastern-ukraine-republics-what-do-people-there-think/> [accessed 18th October 2022]

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Zhukov, Yuri, ‘Trading hard hats for combat helmets’ *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 44:1 (2016), 1-15 pp.11-14

²⁰ Ibid. p.1

By focusing on social, cultural and political factors, historiographical accounts typically imply set objectives of the separatist movements, most of which revolve around Russiky Mir (or Russian World). By focusing instead on economics as the driving factor of people's way of thinking, this dissertation will contend that the separatist movements were not proactive but reactive, arguing that separatism was the product of radicalised emotion rather than any set objective. This radicalised emotion developed from the feeling of abandonment, caused by a slow but inevitable decline in the region which everyone could foresee. Faced with such circumstances, people sought certain actors to blame, but they were ultimately expressing a directionless anger at an existential situation, which in their minds had reached an irrevocable point.

Furthermore, this dissertation will rectify a number of misconceptions about the conflict that have become regrettably frequent in politics, mass media and some academic circles in Ukraine as well as the West. These misconceptions have the effect of denying any agency to the citizens of the Donbas, simply viewing them as pawns of Russia's hostile foreign policy towards Ukraine. They are built upon the claims that Russia invaded the Donbas in 2014 and that they are using the separatists as 'proxies' for their own objectives. This argument is often used to paint the separatist movements as artificial constructs, with proponents pointing out that there was no separatist sentiment before 2014.²¹ These misconceptions have led to a belief that separatism was imposed from the top down by Russian operatives and pro-Russian ideologues, in which the will of the population was subverted. This assumption is directly challenged by the experiences of Stanislav Asayev, a pro-Ukrainian journalist who remained

²¹ Bond, Ian (@CER_IanBond, 11th April 2022) 'Let's try again: @BBCNews: the people who run parts of the Donbas occupied by Russia since 2014 aren't 'separatists', because there was no separatism there pre-2014 invasion. Please stop perpetuating this Russian propaganda! They're just Russian proxies.' < https://twitter.com/CER_IanBond/status/1513470268437639176> [accessed 12th November 2022]

in separatist Donetsk after 2014 and was eventually jailed for his pro-Ukrainian writings. In a 2015 dispatch, he wrote that “80 percent of my male friends and acquaintances are now serving with the *opolchenie* - the separatist ‘citizens’ militias,”” and that “every one of these former plumbers, coal miners, and roofers has at least five to ten relatives whose attitude is exactly the same as that of their sons, husbands, and brothers.”²²

Asayev’s account eloquently surmises a key contention that this dissertation will put forward; which is that the separatist movements must be viewed from the bottom up as organic constructions which were built upon the mass participation of the local population. This encompasses those who joined the militias, those who were active supporters and those who acquiesced to the new order that was established in the separatist territories. This dissertation does not seek to deny the obvious role that Russian foreign policy played in the separatist movements, but will argue instead that the separatist movements were built upon a symbiotic relationship between the citizens of the Donbas and the Russian state. Without the active support and participation of the people, this piece of history would not have happened.

As a note, it should be acknowledged that not everyone who resided in the territory that the separatists took control of supported the movements. The separatist insurgency was responded to by large numbers of pro-Ukrainian people fleeing the region and becoming internally displaced citizens in other parts of Ukraine. The reasons that people fled are complex enough to make up their own dissertation, and their experiences have been widely

²² Asayev, In Isolation p.2

researched already. The purpose of this dissertation is to give a voice to the marginalised by studying why people supported such radical political upheaval in their society.

Analysis of the Historiography

The events of 2014 posed a fundamental challenge to historiographical conceptions of post-Soviet order in Ukraine. Post-Soviet order in Ukraine was defined by a delicate and tense power balance between the Russian-aligned East and the nationalist West. This power balance had been maintained through appeasement, with politicians attempting to accommodate both a national consciousness and the nation's Soviet past.²³ In time, however, it was inevitable that these two conflicting ideas would reach an impasse, breaking the thin thread of social fabric that had held Ukraine together up until 2014.

Most historians have analysed the causes of separatism in the context of this post-Soviet order, using an international relations framework which sees Ukraine as a borderland between the Western world and the Russian world. As a result, two competing historiographical narratives have emerged. The first strand of historiography views the separatist uprisings as a legitimate, even justified reaction to the Euromaidan. They argue that it was instinctive for Russian-speaking Ukrainians in the Donbas to separate themselves from the Ukrainian state after the post-Soviet order had collapsed. Proponents of this narrative often highlight cultural differences amongst Ukrainians, giving credence to the idea that

²³ Zhurzhenko, Tatiana, 'A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis' *Die Friedens-Warte*, 89.1/2 (2014) 249-267 p.252

Ukraine is an artificial state that lacks legitimacy in its original borders.²⁴

One proponent of this narrative, Nicolai Petro, argues that the separatist movements came about because “the peremptory removal of President Yanukovych violated the delicate balance of interests forged between Galicia and Donbass” which was “seen as a direct threat to the core interest of Russophone Ukrainians.”²⁵ Other historians look beyond the Euromaidan and argue that separatism had more fundamental roots in pro-Russian ideology. Through interviewing separatists for her book ‘Through Times of Trouble’, Historian Anna Matveeva identified the separatist movements as a bottom-up phenomenon, but placed an emphasis on cultural affiliation to the ‘Russian-way of life’ in what she frames as a battle of civilisations.²⁶ From this perspective, the separatist movements were not merely a reaction to the nationalist seizure of power, but represented a natural desire for Russian speaking Ukrainians to re-join their ‘world’.

Alternatively, historian Richard Sakwa focuses on the Ukrainian nationalists themselves as the main cause of the separatist movements. In his book ‘Frontline Ukraine’ Sakwa blames the Ukrainian nationalists for agitating the conflict with rhetoric that made a political solution impossible.²⁷ He focuses particularly on the attitude of the hard-line nationalists in the Euromaidan, the view that people in the Donbas were second class citizens, and the uncompromising “anti-Russian policies” of the new Ukrainian Government.²⁸ All of this led

²⁴ Kuzio, Taras, *Crisis in Russian Studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (Bristol, E-International Relations, 2020) p.114

²⁵ Petro, Nicolai ‘Understanding the Other Ukraine: Identity and Allegiance in the Russophone Ukraine’ in eds. Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Agnieszka, Sakwa, Richard *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives* (Bristol, E-International Relations, 2015) p.31

²⁶ Matveeva, Anna, *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine framed from Within* (Maryland, Lexington Books, 2018)

²⁷ Sakwa, Richard, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014) pp.152-4

²⁸ Ibid. pp.152-6

to a “high level of alienation” which caused the separatist movements to arise as a way of protecting the interests of Russian-speaking Ukrainians.²⁹

This ‘Russo-sympathetic’ narrative is widespread but easily dispelled by the fact that the separatist uprisings did not spread to any of the other Russian-speaking oblasts in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. For it to be true that separatism was a reaction by Russian-speakers to the Euromaidan, a much wider rebellion should have occurred, but this failed to materialise. It is clear, therefore, that an approach which studies the Donbas as a lone entity is needed.

Many historians who have studied the specific nature of separatism in the Donbas have concluded that the separatist movements were a construct of Russian foreign policy. This school of thought makes up the opposing historiographical narrative in this debate, which shall be referred to as the ‘proxy war’ narrative. In an article entitled “Don’t call it a Civil War,” Cambridge professors Rory Finnin and Thomas D. Grant make the claim that “fundamentally, this conflict was started and is sustained by Russia’s armed intervention, not a Ukrainian civic collapse,” arguing that the separatist movements “would not have come into being and would not continue to function without Russian backing.”³⁰ Historian Taras Kuzio provides a deeper examination of this claim, pointing to the fact that Russia’s involvement began before Euromaidan even began.³¹ He focuses on the training that Russia provided for political extremists as early as 2004, and the role of Russian intelligence in providing “leadership” and “coordination” to the separatists.³² Kuzio argues Russia was waging a “full

²⁹ Ibid. p.154

³⁰ Finnin, Roy, Grant, Thomas, ‘Don’t call it a civil war – Ukraine’s conflict is an act of Russian aggression’ <https://theconversation.com/dont-call-it-a-civil-war-ukraines-conflict-is-an-act-of-russian-aggression-46280> [accessed 27th September 2022]

³¹ Kuzio, *Crisis in Russian Studies?*

³² Ibid. p.112-121

spectrum conflict” against Ukraine, a term coined by historians Oscar Jonsson and Robert Seely to describe the covert tactics that Russia uses to wage non-conventional warfare, particularly in the information sphere.³³

It is irrefutable that separatist sentiment turned into an active rebellion because of Russia’s backing, especially considering the widespread evidence of Russian equipment and volunteers on the separatist side. The problem with this narrative is that it conflates the causes of separatist movements with the causes of the conflict - which are historically interconnected but in a historiographical sense should be viewed separately. As historian Andrew Wilson points out, whilst the triggers for an armed conflict “were provided by Russia and by local elites in the Donbas,” there was already a “baseline for a local and civil conflict.” amongst the population.³⁴ To understand this baseline, one must adopt a social history approach, viewing the people of the Donbas as conscious actors that engaged with the situation around them in complex and negotiated ways.

As aforementioned, the people of the Donbas developed their own regionally unique identity which was peripheral to both Ukraine and Russia. Historians Serhiy Kudelia and Johanna van Zyl explore the role that this regional identity played in people’s perceptions of the separatist movements.³⁵ In a survey of citizens from eight towns that were under separatist control in the first year of the war, they found that 52% of respondents saw themselves as having a local or regional identity.³⁶ They found a high correlation between those who saw themselves as having a regional identity and those who were sympathetic towards the “ideational motives”

³³ Ibid. p.5

³⁴ Wilson, Andrew, ‘The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War’ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:4 (2016), 631-652 p.631

³⁵ Kudelia, Zyl, ‘In My Name’

³⁶ Ibid. p.808-9

of the insurgents, such as fighting for independence or protecting themselves against Ukrainian nationalists, whilst those who identified themselves as Ukrainian predominantly saw the insurgents as mercenaries with superficial motives.³⁷ Furthermore, Kudelia and Zyl's survey found that only 9% of respondents saw themselves as having a Russian or Soviet identity, which demonstrates the inadequacy of studying the separatist movements in reference to Russia alone.³⁸

As this survey shows, the separatist movements are a complex phenomenon that people on the ground have differing perceptions of. The prevailing historiographical debate on this topic incorrectly ties the Donbas to the Russian world, whether by arguing that it is a legitimate part of it or that it is being held hostage by it, when in fact the region had its own independent consciousness. This dissertation will therefore reject these absolutist historiographical narratives and argue that the separatist movements can only be understood by studying the history of the region itself. This dissertation most closely aligned with the historiographical conclusions of Serhiy Kudelia, Andrew Wilson, Hiroaki Kuroyami and David Marples, to name a few, who focus on the region's unique identity whilst broadly accepting the influence that Russia had in sparking the conflict. This historiographical approach is eloquently surmised by the title of Wilson's 2016 article: "Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War."³⁹

Methodology

³⁷ Ibid. pp.809-10

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Wilson, Andrew, 'The Donbas'

In order to employ a social history approach, oral history was chosen as the most appropriate method of research. Oral history will be the primary research method of this dissertation, as it provides an organic insight into people's engagement with history. The use of oral history will provide a unique perspective on the conflict, demonstrating the need to study this subject as a local and regional history. As this dissertation is focused on the influence everyday people have in creating their own history, this dissertation will not use quotes from politicians, military leaders or other people who wield influence in the separatist movements. Quotes are only sourced from militia foot soldiers and regular citizens – those most overlooked in this conflict. Visual history will be used in a supplementary role in one section of this dissertation, which incorporates photographs to convey the material impact that industrial decline had on the region's environment. Finally, this dissertation will be supported by statistical data on occasions where a macro perspective is of value.

As a consequence of the active war between Ukraine and Russia, this dissertation's research capabilities were unfortunately limited. Opportunities to conduct original research by conducting interviews with people from the region were not forthcoming due to the danger of visiting the Donbas at the time of research and the ethics concerns of interviewing people who have been personally affected by the tragic consequences of the war. Nevertheless, this research endeavoured to use oral history as the primary method of research, providing a way for ordinary people's voices from a forgotten region to be heard.

This research was conducted by collating quotes from a number of primary and secondary sources. Quotes were primarily collected from research done by historians who have conducted interviews and questionnaires in the Donbas. Other quotes were collected from

books written by people who can provide a unique insight into the region, such as Donbas-born journalist Stanislav Asayev who wrote about his experience of living anonymously in the separatist territory in his book 'In Isolation: Dispatches from the Donbas', or Sophie Pinkham, who spent time in the Donbas as a charity worker combatting HIV, which she wrote about in her book 'Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine', to name a few. Finally, quotes have also been collected from articles written by journalists who have visited the Donbas and spoken to people on the ground, as well as a handful of other primary sources such as blogposts.

Collating research from a variety of different sources rather than conducting one's own research gives this dissertation the challenge of proving its original input into this topic. This dissertation proves its place, however, by bringing together a diverse array of sources and projecting it through a lens which has not yet been used to study this topic, creating an original picture which re-examines many of these sources in a new context.

There are four sections in this dissertation. The first section, 'Workers' Movements and Political Participation' is a case study of the miners' and their political activism in the Donetsk oblast. The research for this section has mainly been sourced from the work of historians Lewis Siegelbaum and Daniel Walkowitz, who interviewed miners in the Donetsk oblast in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and is supplemented with the work of other historians and journalists as well as an online archive of oral history interviews with Ukrainian independence activists. The second section, 'Social Decline', draws upon official reports, journalist articles and non-historiographical literature. The third section, 'Economics of Memory', is a mixture of visual and oral history which have mainly been collected from

primary sources such as picture books and blogposts. The visual component of this section also places a particular focus on the Luhansk oblast. Finally, in the fourth section 'Populism and Propaganda', research is taken from a mixture of historiographical and journalistic sources.

A limitation of this research is that it inevitably leans more heavily towards the Donetsk oblast, rather than allowing for an equal analysis of both the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This is because the Donetsk oblast is more urban, populous and industrialised, with the major city of Donetsk at the heart of it, and therefore research has been more focused on this oblast. The Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are separate, and have their own separate histories, but the integrated nature of their industrial economies means that in the context of this dissertation their experiences are overlapping. Nevertheless, this dissertation has ensured that special attention is given to the experience of the Luhansk oblast throughout.

Preamble: Industrial Decline in the Donbas

From the ascendancy of Donald Trump in rust belt America, to the success of UKIP and the campaign to leave the European Union in working communities in England, or the resonance that Marine Le Pen has had with young and opportunity-depleted people in post-industrial regions of France, the political consequences of globalisation and industrial decline have been agonised over by academics across the developed world. These seismic events have

called for a re-evaluation of the political mood in the West and an acknowledgement that radical changes in political cultures have been a consequence of political disillusionment. What is less discussed is the impact that industrial decline had in the 'second world' ie. developing parts of the world such as the Soviet sphere. Radical politics in post-Soviet states is too often studied in a vacuum - a consequence of political instability and an absence of institutional structure which has manifested itself largely in strongman authoritarian leaders or militia-controlled states. What is fundamentally understudied is the active participation that regular people play in the creation of these power dynamics, and how industrial decline has fuelled these political extremities.

The industrial decline of the late 20th century was characterised in the West by factory closures and mass lay-offs as governments undertook an uncompromising modernisation of their economies, dismantling industry and attracting investment in service and technology. Industrial decline in the Soviet Union was of a different nature, as there was no intention to tear down the industrial sectors that had been the bedrock of its success. Instead, industrial decline was characterised by a dramatic decline in productivity and output as Gross National Product dropped by more than half between the 1960s and the period between the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁰ Conventional wisdom dictated that a lack of technological innovation blighted the Soviet economy, the consequence of centralised planning and target-based output.⁴¹ By the 1970s much of the USSR's industry was outdated and less profitable, failing to move on from the success it had brought in decades prior. The argument, however, that the Soviet economy was fundamentally unworkable is undermined by the fact that some

⁴⁰ Allen, Robert, 'The Rise and Decline of the Soviet Economy' *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 34:4 (2001), 859-879, p.862

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.866

industries, such as the cement industry, flourished with higher productivity, more efficient processes and a reorienting of the geographical connection between production and consumption.⁴²

Industries which declined more drastically included for example the coal industry, which went from an 8% growth in productivity from 1965 to 1975 to a 24% decline between 1975 to 1985, and the metal industry which went from an 11% growth to a 12% decline.⁴³ A major factor in this decline was the depletion of natural resources. Russia and the USSR had for a long time been blessed by its abundance of resources such as coal and metals. These resources could be exploited in Western Russia and the Ural Mountains, where working populations and infrastructure already resided.⁴⁴

By the 1970s these seemingly plentiful resources began to run out, so attention turned to the vast and untouched lands of Siberia.⁴⁵ This move was debilitating for these industries as the costs of establishing workforces and infrastructure on undeveloped land as well as the costs of transporting them hundreds of miles back to the West completely diminished the returns that could be made. The USSR's stubborn reliance on these industries proved therefore to be a huge drain on the economy, leading to huge political challenges concerning the future of the USSR. This change in fortunes had the most profound effect on areas in the West that had been hubs of resource extraction, and few places relied more on resource mining than the Donbas.

⁴² Ibid. p.867

⁴³ Ibid. p.874

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.876

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Industrial decline in the Donbas occurred in three stages. The first stage was economic downturn. The Donbas had been a key hub of industry up to the 1960s, but after productivity reached its peak in 1976 it faced a steady and irreversible decline.⁴⁶ The second stage was economic collapse in the early 1990s, when the new Ukrainian state had to inherit the problems of the USSR without the institutional structures to respond to them. On top of having outdated industries that were becoming less safe and productive, the region was cut off from their supply of natural resources from Russia. The collapse was devastating: “in 1993... the Donbas’ industrial output collapsed by 25% and the average real wage decreased by about 80% from the 1990 level.”⁴⁷ In the Donetsk oblast, industrial output contracted for seven years in a row, peaking at -27% in 1994.⁴⁸

The third stage was economic marginalisation within the new Ukrainian state. Although the Donbas’s economic situation stabilised after the torrid experience of the 1990s, it was still falling behind the rest of the country in relative terms as service and technology industries began to take over. Between 2004 and 2014, Donetsk oblast’s contribution to national growth was -45.5%, and Luhansk oblast’s was -18.1%.⁴⁹ These figures were strongly affected by the start of the conflict in 2014, but it was clear that the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were falling behind the rest of the country. On top of this, the Donbas experienced a fatal population drain, with the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts losing “21.6 and 18.3 percent of their

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.877

⁴⁷ Mykhnenko, Vladlen, ‘From Exit to Take-Over: The Evolution of the Donbas as an Intentional Community’, unpublished paper delivered at the conference ‘The Politics of Utopia: Intentional Communities as Social Science Microcosms’ (The European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of Workshops, 2004) p.26

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.36

⁴⁹ OCED, ‘Maintaining the Momentum of Decentralisation in Ukraine’ (Paris, OCED Publishing, 2018) p.63

populations, respectively, between 1993 and 2013.”⁵⁰ This stage of industrial decline was in a strong sense the worst of the three, as it set the Donbas on a path it couldn’t reverse away from, completely diminishing the value the region had once had.

Industrial decline was a dizzying experience as people witnessed the Donbas fall from its height as an economic powerhouse to an economic wasteland in the space of 40 years. Sometimes, people’s memories and recollections will link the collapse of the Soviet Union with the process of industrial decline, as the two were so chronologically overlapping. As one Donbas resident put it: “everyone here said it was bad luck when the USSR collapsed.”⁵¹ From an academic perspective, however, it should be clarified that industrial decline was a transitional factor that preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union; and was more important in determining the region’s fate.

Workers’ Movements and Political Participation

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, ‘Peace in Ukraine (III): The Costs of War in Donbas’ (2020) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/261-peace-ukraine-iii-costs-war-donbas> [accessed 15th September 2022]

⁵¹ Cookman, Liz, ‘Soviet nostalgia on Ukraine’s impoverished front line’ (2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/2/4/soviet-nostalgia-ukraine> [accessed 23rd July 2022]

Political Identity in the Donbas

When studying the separatist movements, historians have tended to focus exclusively on a small minority of politically active ideologues who believed in the region's natural ties with Russia. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, a number of regionalist movements emerged and united to form the parties Civic Congress of Ukraine and the Slavic Unity Party, which aimed to ultimately separate the Donbas from Ukraine and reunify with Russia.⁵² The leader of one of these movements, the Intermovement of the Donbas, argued that there was a fundamental difference between those who believed in a pure Ukrainian identity and those “who think that Ukraine is part of a general Russian culture.”⁵³ The Donbas Republican Party took up the mantle of this movement in 2005 and became more radical in their rhetoric.⁵⁴ Sergey Baryshnikov, one of the founders of the party, claimed for example that Ukrainians “are Russians who refuse to admit their Russian-ness.”⁵⁵

Some of the proposals that these regionalist groups advocated, such as federalisation and special status of the Russian language, did prove to be popular amongst the population.⁵⁶ When it came to separatism, however, these movements failed to win much enthusiasm. Their popularity was very limited, even during times of turmoil in the region, and they failed to make any major inroads in elections.⁵⁷ The voices of the political and intellectual elite were therefore very marginal amongst the population, and their influence is often overstated.

⁵² Bukkvoll, Tor, *Ukraine and European security* (London, Bloomsbury, 1997) p.28

⁵³ Laitin, David, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1998) p.187

⁵⁴ Kuzio, *Crisis* p.112

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kudelia, Zyl, 'In My Name' p.805

⁵⁷ Bukkvoll, *Ukraine* p.28

In relation to these marginalised voices, the political engagement of the wider population has often been subverted. The most common perception of the Donbas in Ukrainian society is that it is a backwards and politically unevolved part of the country. The Ukrainian poet Yurii Andrukhovych wrote of it in one of his poems as “a big proto-cultural wasteland.”⁵⁸ In the media, it became known as a safe haven for criminals and businessmen who were “excessively aggressive, brutal, and greedy.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, the people of the Donbas have been stereotyped as dull-minded and uneducated “lumpen” - people who had no interest in bettering their situation.⁶⁰ One of the leaders of Rukh, a party which championed nationalist ideals, called the Donbas workers “sausage people,” in response to a miner saying, “it’s all the same to us what language we speak, so long as there’s sausage.”⁶¹ People in the Donbas were viewed as selfish, putting basic economic needs over political values, as Pinkham eloquently describes: they “had stomachs where their souls should have been.”⁶²

Authors with a closer understanding of the region such as Stanislav Asayev have questioned these assumptions about the Donbas and offered a different interpretation. Asayev argues that the region had developed a “proletarian mentality” which emphasises the values of hard work, discipline and order that people relied upon in order to undertake the taxing industrial labour that many ended up doing.⁶³ As a result, people have become acclimated to continuity

⁵⁸ Kuromiya, Hiroaki, ‘The Donbas: The Last Frontier of Europe?’ in Yekelchuk, Serhy, Schmidtke, Oliver, *Europe’s Last Frontier?: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine Between Russia and the European Union* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p.102

⁵⁹ Gyidel, Ernest, ‘Ukrainian Internally Displaced Persons and the Future of Donbas’ in Marples, David, *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future* (Budapest, Central European University Press, 2022) p.115

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Pinkham, *Black Square* p.201

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Asayev, *In Isolation* p.36

and hierarchical structures, pulling them more towards strongman, authoritarian leaders rather than liberal democracy.⁶⁴

Overall, the political identity of the Donbas's inhabitants is perceived as being simple-minded and mostly static - unable to adapt to the rapidly changing world around them. Consequently, the people of the Donbas are viewed as being politically indifferent: persuaded by petty economic issues and willing to acquiesce to authoritarian politics. By analysing the political action of the miners of the Donbas as a case study of ordinary people's political engagement, this dissertation will disprove these assumptions, and thus illustrate the mass-participatory nature of separatism.

Workers Movements' and Mass Political Participation: A Case Study of the Miners

Coal mining has always been at the core of the Donbas's economy. It became so embedded in the region's history that families have worked in the mines for generations. The importance of coal mining meant that miners were for a long time paid significantly higher wages than other professions, even middle-class professions which would typically be higher paid. Despite this, the political interests of the miners were not at the fringes of society. Their grievances were in fact largely representative of the region, particularly as they faced the brunt of industrial decline. In the judgement of historians Stephen Crowley and Lewis Siegelbaum, the political action that the miners took in the 1990s was representative of "a regional protest against the government in Kiev, its president, and policies that had brought

⁶⁴ Ibid.

the Donbass to its knees.”⁶⁵

For the miners of the Donbas, the effects of industrial decline began before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In response to the deteriorating economic situation they faced, they turned to political action, organising themselves in unprecedented ways. They held their first major strike in 1989, a watershed moment in their relationship with the Soviet state which led to the formation of strike committees that allowed workers to negotiate their bosses and put forward their demands to the state directly.⁶⁶ They established the Independent Miner’s Union and held a number of Congresses.⁶⁷ Rather than being stubborn in their mentality, people in the Donbas often looked towards wholesale reform. At the first Congress in 1990, only 3 percent of members wanted to continue working in a centralised economy, whilst the large majority stated their preference for a free or a regulated market economy.⁶⁸ In conversations with Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, people in Donetsk often referred to economic life in the United States as “modern” or “civilized,” and compared their situation to the city of Pittsburgh, a coal and steel town in the United States which they saw as having been transformed into a more prosperous place due to the opportunities afforded by market capitalism.⁶⁹

Once organised, the miners made increasingly political demands, turning their activism turned into a broader social movement. In 1990, the newspaper *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass* reported that the miners had the support of the intelligentsia, and that they had joined forces

⁶⁵ Crowley, Stephen, and Siegelbaum, Lewis, ‘Survival Strategies: The Miners of Donetsk in the Post-Soviet Era’, in eds. Siegelbaum, Lewis, Walkowitz, Daniel, *Workers of the Donbass Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989-1992* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1995) p.72

⁶⁶ Crowley, Siegelbaum, ‘Survival Strategies’ pp.62-63

⁶⁷ Ibid. pp.62-65

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.65

⁶⁹ Walkowitz, Daniel, “‘Normal Life’: The Crisis of Identity Among Donetsk’s Miners’ in Siegelbaum, Walkowitz, *Workers* p.174

with Ukrainian nationalists, namely the nationalist Rukh party.⁷⁰ During their second strike in 1991, they demanded political autonomy for Ukraine and the “departization” of Soviet institutions.⁷¹ Their political ambition was fuelled by their disillusionment with the centralised nature of Soviet government. In the words of Yuri Boldyrev, one of the leaders of the strike committee, their efforts to negotiate in 1989 had been thwarted by “demagogy and deceit” from the “ministerial officials and other plenipotentiaries from the Center.”⁷² The miners saw a better opportunity to negotiate economic reforms through an autonomous Ukraine, intertwining their cause with the movement for independence. As one independence activist recollected, “the miners after all were famous for coming up with blue and yellow flags, because that was the flag of social protest at that time as well.”⁷³

Thus far this section proves two things. Firstly, it proves that the people of the Donbas were not ignorant or ideologically averse to liberal and democratic political values. Not only were they willing to organise in a democratic fashion and subvert the hierarchies imposed on them by the state, but they were also open-minded to liberalising reforms when it became clear that the Soviet model was failing. Secondly, it proves that the people of the Donbas were not static in their engagement in politics. In fact, they were at the forefront of the political activism that brought down the Soviet Union.

⁷⁰ Abibok, Yulia, ‘Searching for Safe Haven: Donbas Discourses of the 1989–91 Miners’ Strikes’ *Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, 10:1 (2021), 9-32 p.16

⁷¹ Siegelbaum, Lewis, ‘Miners’ Hopes Deferred’ (1991) <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1991-2/miners-strike-of-1991/miners-strike-of-1991-texts/miners-hopes-deferred/> [accessed 25th October 2022]

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ OralHistory UA, ‘Interview UA 432’ <https://oralhistory.org.ua/interview-ua/432/> [accessed 23rd September 2022]

Ukrainian independence became the promised solution to economic downturn. In the words of another independence activist, “people were very convinced even in Russian dominated regions like Crimea on the Donbass that they’d get a better economic deal if they voted for Ukrainian independence.”⁷⁴ This hope, unfortunately, was extinguished almost immediately. “Everything has gotten worse” was a common sentiment shared by the miners in the years after independence.⁷⁵ An immediate shock came when the Ukrainian Government removed restrictions on the prices of coal and other commodities, whilst also ending subsidies to the mines.⁷⁶ This move caused inflation to spiral and production to collapse. Furthermore, separation from the Soviet Union meant that the Donbas was cut off from supplies of vital resources. “We used to get 8,000 pieces of equipment - conveyor belts, lumber - from Russia a month. Now we can't get them,” complained Yuri A. Byelomestnov, the manager of one mine.⁷⁷ The situation deteriorated rapidly, and in 1993 the miners, joined by other industries, held their largest round of strikes.

The illusion of hope that independence had offered was shattered, and people began to ponder who was at fault. Some concluded that independence was to blame. “I’m a patriot of my country,” but independence was “a mistake,” exclaimed Byelomestnov, rather confusingly.⁷⁸ His grievance was more clearly expressed by Strike Committee co-chair Yuki Makarov, who explained that they had “fought for the existence of Ukraine as an autonomous state, but... didn’t want Kiev to become the Center instead of Moscow.”⁷⁹ The ‘Center’ is a

⁷⁴ OralHistory UA, ‘Interview UA 310’, <https://oralhistory.org.ua/interview-ua/310/> [accessed 23rd September 2022]

⁷⁵ Crowley, Siegelbaum, ‘Survival Strategies’ p.71

⁷⁶ Ibid. p.68

⁷⁷ Perlez, Jane, ‘Ukraine's Miners Bemoan The Cost of Independence’ (1993)

<https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/17/world/ukraine-s-miners-bemoan-the-cost-of-independence.html> [accessed 27th October 2022]

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Crowley, Siegelbaum, ‘Survival Strategies’ p.144

concept that was brought up frequently by workers and their representatives. Whilst some saw the Ukrainian Government as having taken up the ‘Center,’ others believed that it was more deeply embedded from the Soviet Union. For Mikhail Krylov, one of the other co-chairs of the Strike Committee, the Center was the “bureaucratic dictatorial system that exists here, created by our great and vanguard communist party.”⁸⁰ Other respondents in Siegelbaum and Walkowitz’s research used synonymous terms such as “mafia” and “corruption” to describe this system, but nobody could pin down exactly what exactly was behind this abstract notion of the ‘Center’.⁸¹

The consensus was clear. People knew that the situation they faced couldn’t go on, but the question that lingered was what they should do about it. Although the idea of separation and reunification with Russia was always present, it didn’t manifest as a serious proposal. In the words of one miner, Alexey: “some of them (the miners) demand that we go back to Russia, but this is just kitchen-talk. We know that Russia doesn’t need us - it already wants to close its own mines. Moscow, Kiev, it’s all the same.”⁸²

The miners were instead focused on economic improvement, and showed their willingness to settle their issues under the umbrella of Ukrainian statehood. As part of their strikes in 1993, they sent a group of representatives to Kiev to lobby for workers’ demands and federalisation. Although some of their demands were agreed to, they were left disgruntled. Valery Samofalov claimed that “they shouted that we were separatists, communists, that we came to divide Ukraine, and to separate the Donbass from the Ukraine. Our deputies from the

⁸⁰ Ibid. pp.119-120

⁸¹ Walkowitz, ‘Normal Life’ p.168

⁸² Reid, Anna, *Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine* (London, Phoenix, 1998) pp.47-48

Donetsk region explained to people that over ninety countries in the world live according to the principle of a federative system.”⁸³ Despite the accusations, the miners were in fact moderate in their demands, or at least they were so in their own eyes. Ultimately, the miners simply wanted to have better opportunities for the future. They were under no illusion about the sustainability of their industry, knowing that the mines were extremely dangerous work. As Makarov explained, “we would agree to close down the mines, but the people who work there should have the opportunity to be retrained so that they could work in some other industry. What we won’t agree to, is that... all the miners become unemployed.”⁸⁴

Although there were no significant strikes after 1993, disaffection with the Ukrainian state continued. The economic situation had improved after the mid-1990s, but on a much wider level people could feel the diminishing importance of the region as industry stagnated. In 1995 Donbas politician Yevhen Shcherban, who was the leader of Ukraine’s Liberal Party, proclaimed that there was “a systematic campaign aimed at weakening the [Donbas] leading business structures and eliminating political and economic leaders of the Donetsk region in order to take-over the [region’s] market for gas, electricity, petroleum products, etc.”⁸⁵ The region’s unchanging fortunes came to be seen as a conspiracy against the Donbas, in which rich and powerful oligarchs were profiteering from the region’s labour. This developed a tribal ‘us vs them’ mentality; and encouraged political and economic leaders to pursue protectionist measures over the economy.⁸⁶

⁸³ Siegelbaum, Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass* p.139

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p.145

⁸⁵ Mykhnenko, ‘From Exit’ p.29

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.31

Economic isolationism was a last resort for the region, but in reality it made things worse as unsustainable industries were clung onto, locking the region into its fate. In the 2000s, mines started shutting down, and to avoid unemployment young people were forced to work in illegal mines. People needed this line of work to earn a paycheck, but it meant losing basic worker's rights and being unable to organise themselves. Powerlessness led to an increasing despondency, particularly for the new generation of miners. People moved away from the hope that they could better their economic situation within the Ukrainian state and concluded that Ukraine was a "failed state," and increasingly people looked back longingly to the era of the Soviet Union, seeing it as a time when miners "were the backbone of a strong country, and nobody looked down upon them."⁸⁷

Mining and the Separatist Movements

The political consequences of this abject desperation are self-evident. Faced with a lack of opportunities and feeling powerless to change their circumstances, a radical political alternative to the status-quo came to the fore in an explosive way. This did not mean that ordinary people such as the miners became ideological believers in separatism, but rather that they had reached the conclusion that their failed relationship with the Ukrainian government had become terminal. Many miners, impoverished and without a stable career, became drawn to the ranks of the separatist militias, so much so in fact that an one battalion called Kalmius was made up entirely of former miners.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Chiala, Janos, Mayer, Tali, 'Young Miners of the Donbas' (2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/12/23/the-young-miners-of-donbass> [accessed 2nd November 2022]

⁸⁸ Asayev, *In Isolation* p.17

The miners' cause exemplifies the way in which separatist sentiment developed as a response to the broken economic promises of independence, and its failure to deliver upon people's hopes that industrial decline could be turned into an opportunity for modern prosperity. More broadly, though, the case study of the miners gives credence to the theory that separatism was a broader backlash against the region's ills. Taking historian Vlad Mykhnenko's argument that the people of the Donbas responded to economic strife in stages, by first employing a "voice option," in which they demonstrated for better pay and opportunities, and when this failed they employed a "take-over option," in which they took control of their own economic production, then separatism can be seen as the third and most escalatory 'option' that people resorted to.⁸⁹

Finally, the case study of the miners proves that separatism was not a rejection of modernity. The Donbas's reputation as an archaic space, unwilling to move on from its traditional industrial ways, doesn't reflect people's attitudes. Even in the midst of struggle, people hoped that their fortunes would change, and that the next generation would be able to move away from the dangerous, taxing practices of the past and towards more skilled and educated careers. Mikhail Krylov for example said of his son: "I don't want him to be a miner, but he'll decide for himself. It's enough that I spent twenty-five working at the mine."⁹⁰

Familial bonds were a big factor in turning people away from mining. Tatiana Samofalova, wife of miner Valery, was strongly against the idea of her two-year-old grandson growing up

⁸⁹ Mykhnenko, 'From Exit'

⁹⁰ Siegelbaum, Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass* p.122

to become a miner: “the only thing I would not want him to do is become a miner like his grandfather. It is scary. Every time he [Valery] goes down into the mine, I worry.”⁹¹ As well as being aware of the personal costs, people knew that generation after generation going down the mine was holding their society back. Aleksandr Yatsensko, who worked as a professor at the Donetsk Polytechnic Institute, expressed this opinion by pointing out that “there is no other society where a theoretical physicist is paid less than a gutter cleaner.”⁹²

Whilst separatism was a rejection of the Ukrainian state, it wasn't a rejection of its modernising philosophy. People were acutely aware that the socialist project of the Soviet Union was no longer sustainable, and longed for the fruits of modernity. What people resented was the implementation of this modernisation, which saw the rest of Ukraine move forward in leaps and bounds whilst the Donbas felt it had been left with the short end of the deal. In the words of photojournalists Janos Chiala and Tali Mayer, who visited the Donbas and spoke to miners there in 2014, “it isn't a life any of them would have chosen. But nobody offered a choice to the young miners of Donbass.”⁹³

⁹¹ Walkowitz, 'Normal Life' p.164

⁹² Ibid. p.163-4

⁹³ Chiala, Janos, Mayer, Tali, 'Young Miners of the Donbas' (2022)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/12/23/the-young-miners-of-donbass> [accessed 2nd November 2022]

Social Decline

Bomzhi

If people had held out hope for a better future for the next generation, the reality that they were met with was one of abject misery. Faced with a lack of employment and opportunities, a subculture of drug use, alcoholism, begging and crime began to fester amongst the younger generations. Broken bottles and used syringes were vivid illustrations of people's misery. Rather than being sympathetic, there was a pervasive feeling amongst the population that their society was in decline, and this subculture became an object of people's directionless anger. This anger became a notably reactionary part of people's thinking, and they came to see those within this subculture as inferior vermin that were polluting the region.

As industrial decline began to have a material effect on the Donbas in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the region became plagued by the tragic consequences of poverty. One of the

most profound impacts was the widespread use of heroin and other intravenous-administered narcotics amongst those who were forced to live on the streets. The Donbas developed “the most severe HIV/AIDS epidemic in Europe” as a result of needle sharing,⁹⁴ with “25% of all Ukrainian people suffering from HIV prior to the beginning of the armed conflict” living in the Donbas.”⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly, unemployment and a lack of career opportunities made adults vulnerable to addiction, but alarmingly children also became exposed to this subculture as broken families and a lack of educational opportunities pushed them into a life on the streets. After independence, the education system became privatised and delegated to local authorities, many of which were unable to manage the costs of keeping their schools running.⁹⁶ Schools in deprived areas were closed down and attendance at early stages of education dropped dramatically.⁹⁷ On top of this, parents would often sell their homes to fund their addictions, leaving their children to fend for themselves. Many ended up in basements of housing estates, where they turned to substances such as glue and were often the target of criminal gangs who groomed them into prostitution and mules for other criminal activities.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Mykhnenko, Vladlen, Myedvyedyev, Dmytro, Kuzmenko, Larysa, ‘Urban shrinkage in Donetsk and Makiivka, the Donetsk conurbation’ *Shrink Smart*, 4.2 (2010)
<https://www.ufz.de/export/data/400/39019_WP2_report_Donetsk_Makiivka_NEW_kompr.pdf>[accessed 12th October 2022]

⁹⁵ Patel, Sonny, Zvinchuk, Oleksandr, Erickson, Timothy, ‘The Conflict in East Ukraine: A Growing Need for Addiction Research and Substance Use Intervention for Vulnerable Populations’ *Forensic Science & Addiction Research*, 5:3 (2020), 406-408, p.408

⁹⁶ Mykhnenko, Myedvyedyev, Kuzmenko, ‘Urban shrinkage’ p.50

⁹⁷ Ibid. pp.49-51

⁹⁸ Ibid. p.59

Journalist Andrej Naterer spent time with some of these street children, or ‘Bomzhi’ as they called themselves, in the city of Makiivka, studying their group behaviours. He found that street children formed into small groups, which gave them a support network in the absence of their families and provided them with an identity.⁹⁹ The predominant activity of these groups was injecting Baltushka, an ephedrine-based substance.¹⁰⁰ Baltushka wasn’t physically addictive, but became habitual as a social activity which made the children feel part of a community.¹⁰¹ In a diary entry, one Bomzhi recalls coming across a fellow Bomzhi from their past, saying: “I knew him for several years, he was so clean and tidy, almost spiffy... I asked him what happened. He told me that since he tried Baltushka for the first time, he doesn’t go home anymore... I’ve also noticed that he is more accepted by the group.”¹⁰² In order to survive and fund this drug use, the Bomzhi would beg and commit petty theft such as pickpocketing and shoplifting.¹⁰³ One Bomzhi said that begging was something he was “ashamed of” but “my sister on the other hand has no problems with it – she sits at the entrance of the marketplace, puts on her pitiful face and stretches out her hand. In several hours she can get a whole salary.”¹⁰⁴

People in the Donbas would have found such tragedy harrowing to witness, but it also became a political frustration that many people wanted to clear out of their communities. On a local level, there was hard-line approach to these social problems, with heavy policing and refusal to provide support to those affected by addiction. Whilst the people of this subculture were looked down upon in their local community, broader national and international schemes

⁹⁹ Naterer, Andrej, Godvina, Vesena, ‘Bomzhi and their subculture: An anthropological study of the street children subculture in Makeevka, eastern Ukraine’ *Childhood*, 18:1 (2011), 20-38 p.31

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.33

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid. p.29

¹⁰³ Ibid p.25

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

sought to take a more integrative approach to through harm reduction measures. These measures had some success, such as in causing a drop in the number of aids positive drug users, but this subculture remained persistent, and local people grew increasingly dissatisfied.¹⁰⁵

Just Say No

For many people in the Donbas, this subculture epitomised how far their region had fallen. Even during the collapse of the Soviet Union, people such as retired miner Narsis Melikian began to worry about the decline of the youth, telling Siegelbaum and Walkowitz: “I am concerned about drug addicts... It’s painful to see them... I mean drug addicts and other such defects among the youth. I take it to heart. We were also young. When I was twenty-one, I was a battery commander in the war. Could I think of drugs or drinking? My god we never had it.”¹⁰⁶

Melikian was no reactionary. He spoke positively in his interview with Siegelbaum and Walkowitz about the Soviet Union opening up the world, but his comments reflected a generational attitude of hard work and discipline in Soviet society, especially amongst those who lived through the Great Patriotic War.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Soviet society had been successful in suppressing deviance and delinquency through its egalitarian and socially authoritarian policies. The underworld that formed after independence was therefore a huge

¹⁰⁵ Mykhnenko, Myedvyedyev, Kuzmenko ‘Urban shrinkage’ p.48

¹⁰⁶ Siegelbaum, Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak* p.20

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

culture shock. The Ukrainian state's liberal social and economic reforms were blamed for allowing this subculture to develop; and lamented for failing to control it, which in turn fostered a longing for the order and social conservatism of the Soviet era.

War against this subculture, a vigilante determination by local people to take matters into their own hands, became one of the most reactionary arms of the separatist movements.

Behind the frontline, militia men enforced their own laws, cracking down brutally on behaviour they deemed unacceptable. The DPR battalion Kalmius for example was devoted finding and raiding drug houses in the city of Donetsk.¹⁰⁸ In the town of Lysychansk in the Luhansk oblast, a local militia commander declared in a speech that his forces were carrying out an operation to eliminate “mass alcoholism and drug addiction.”¹⁰⁹ He warned of severe punishments against drunk drivers, saying “we shall not exact fines, but these people are going to get seriously worked over to prevent there being any more victims on the roads,” for drug dealers, he said “either you quit your business or we shall come for you... You have three days to get out of town. If you don't leave, your fate will be your own fault.”¹¹⁰

Threats like these were extreme, but what was much more common was the abuse and humiliation of ‘lowlives’ - drug users and alcoholics, who were exploited under the rogue system of justice. These people were typically punished for being a social problem by being forced into hard labour – constructing trenches and other defences for the militias. One drug addicts Ruslan told his story of how he had been found by the separatists and forced to dig

¹⁰⁸ Asayev, *In Isolation* p.17

¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International, ‘Summary Killings during the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine’ (London, Amnesty International Publications, 2014) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR50/042/2014/en/>> [accessed 22nd September 2022] p.9

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

trenches in the city of Horlivka.¹¹¹ “They did whatever they wanted with me,” saying that they would beat him and shoot at him, but “it wasn’t even so much the physical treatment but the constant humiliation,” he explained: “‘junkie this, junkie that.’”¹¹² Asayev spoke to a “reluctant” militant called Artem who had been made unemployed and turned to alcoholism. When he was first found by the separatist forces, he was arrested and was told he would “spend two days digging trenches together with other “social trash” like himself.”¹¹³

Stories such as these are troubling, but in the Donbas this extreme approach to fixing the ‘problem’ was welcomed. Engineer Tatiana had escaped from the separatist-held Horlivka, but praised the way in which the separatists had cracked down on social problems. She recalled how “they closed everything down, and [krokodil] disappeared,” “and they closed all the bars where our Horlivka men got drunk. DNR guys dragged them off by the scruff of the neck. Next day everyone was sober.”¹¹⁴ It was also a top priority for militia men, as reflected by the attitude of one called Akim, who proudly boasted that the region would be “free of alcoholism and drug addiction. Our laws on that will be very strict.”¹¹⁵

Not only were people supportive of these measures, but the separatist militias offered people drawn towards this subculture with an escape. Pinkham, who had provided support to HIV sufferers in the Donbas, remarked that “many of the separatists I saw in pictures and videos

¹¹¹ Hyde, Lily, ‘Like ‘Just Say No,’ but With More Kalashnikovs’ (2015) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/03/war-on-drugs-eastern-ukraine-donetsk-luhansk-methadone/> [accessed 19th September 2022]

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Asayev, *In Isolation* pp.30-31

¹¹⁴ Hyde, Lily, ‘Like ‘Just Say No,’ but With More Kalashnikovs’ (2015) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/03/war-on-drugs-eastern-ukraine-donetsk-luhansk-methadone/> [accessed 19th September 2022]

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

were familiar; they were the same sullen, sunken-eyed young men I'd encountered in harm reduction centers... But now they had guns, now they were heroes."¹¹⁶ As well as giving people a purpose, being a soldier also provided the jobless with a steady pay. Artem didn't want to be in the militia, but summed up how it was a necessity in a world which didn't provide any opportunities: "he admitted with a smirk that he was only alive thanks to the war and had no idea how he would otherwise find the means to survive right now."¹¹⁷

It seemed that separatism had saved the Donbas from its nightmare. In reality, however, they did not provide the salvation that people craved. In fact, such a regressive approach to these social problems only caused more harm. Rather than eliminating drug and alcohol use, those affected by it were only cut off from the support they could receive before the war.

Furthermore, crime was not stopped by separatist rule, but was in fact just replaced by criminal activities which the separatists encouraged or even carried out themselves for their own financial gain. Academics Mark Galeotti and journalist Anna Arutunyan for example found that the separatist movements were being propped up by criminal racketeering.¹¹⁸

The separatist movements in many ways have re-enacted the glory of the past, and when it came to law and order, they gave the illusion of Soviet-like stability whilst underneath the surface the problems continued to fester. Even some of the former drug addicts who had seemingly been saved by becoming soldiers were putting on an act. "The war on drugs was

¹¹⁶ Pinkham, *Black Square* p.207

¹¹⁷ Asayev, *In Isolation* p.31

¹¹⁸ Galeotti, Mark, Arutunyan, Anna, 'Rebellion as racket: Crime and the Donbas conflict 2014-2022' (2022) <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/donbas-conflict-crime/> [accessed 23rd November 2022]

all just for show,” said Irina, a social worker from Luhansk “the militants still come to us for services. Just not in their uniforms.”¹¹⁹

Social Decline and the Separatist Movements

Studying social deviance and delinquency; and what it meant for people in the Donbas provides a valuable insight into why people became supportive of the separatist movements, an insight which hasn't been studied in the existing literature on the topic. It shows how people engaged with their environment in politically conscious ways, and how pent-up political anger encouraged people take matters into their own hands. This section does not seek to condone the actions of the separatist militias, but instead seeks to demonstrate that their actions were not drawn from some inherent brutishness; but the result of an existentialism at their own collective, and in some cases personal, future.

The feeling behind this anger was a deep pessimism for the future, a feeling that society was slipping into an abyss, and the attempts to clear up the streets and crack down on ‘lowlifes’ were a desperate but superficial attempt to halt the inevitable decay communities were facing. What was also noticeable was how this subculture engendered a turn towards traditionalist values and authoritarian politics, and in the Donbas social decline became the fault of Ukraine’s liberalising project, especially in contrast with the relative order of the Soviet

¹¹⁹ Hyde, Lily, ‘Like ‘Just Say No,’ but With More Kalashnikovs’ (2015) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/03/war-on-drugs-eastern-ukraine-donetsk-luhansk-methadone/> [accessed 19th September 2022]

Union. This helps to explain why the separatist movements took on such a reactionary and authoritarian political character.

Economics of Memory

Memory Wars

Soviet nostalgia is a well-studied concept in historiography. People's reasons for being nostalgic about the Soviet Union range from a longing for political stability to an absence of community and purpose that the collective structures of the Soviet Union provided people with. In the Donbas, nostalgia for the Soviet Union has been expressed through symbolic acts such as the preservation of statues of former Soviet leaders, the wearing of the St. George's ribbon; an emblem of the Russian army associated with the Soviet era, and the organisation of parades to commemorate Soviet history.¹²⁰

Some historians have studied historical memory as a key contributor to the conflict, using the term 'memory wars'. 'Memory wars' in this context are defined by a bitterly divisive recollection of Soviet history, particularly in relation to the Second World War. In the Russo-centric world, the war is viewed as a liberation by the Soviet army which decisively defeated nationalist ideology and brought a return to peace and stability. In the Ukro-centric world, the war is viewed as a vital defeat of Nazism, but also a return of Soviet tyranny; a memory based upon the atrocities of the Soviet state and the Holodomor famine. Historians of this school of thought study how these 'memory wars' have been evoked to radicalise people in this conflict through the use of propaganda and education in the separatist territories.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Asayev, *In Isolation* pp.102-3

¹²¹ Pakhomenko, Sergii, Tyrma, Kateryna, A. Francis, J'Moul, 'The Russian–Ukrainian War in Donbas: Historical Memory as an Instrument of Information Warfare' in Sayapin, Sergey, Tsybulenko, Evhen eds. *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law* (T.M.C. Asser Press, The Hague, 2018) pp.297-312

Historian Julie Fedor uses a parade organised by the separatists as an example of this, where Ukrainian prisoners of war were “paraded in front of angry crowds of civilians who were encouraged to pelt them with rotten food and spit on them,” a ceremonious act which re-enacted a similar parade of German prisoners of war in 1944.¹²²

The concept of memory wars asserts that people who were nostalgic for the Soviet Union had a uniquely Soviet identity and believed in the values of the Soviet project. Yet for all the cultural significance of the Soviet legacy, the role of its symbolism was merely ornamental. The Soviet Union does not evoke memories of certain leaders or policies for people. What it evokes instead, in the words of Asayev, are memories of “Kashtan ice cream for 28 kopeks and a warm May rally with their dads in 1979.”¹²³ As this section will prove, nostalgia for the Soviet Union wasn’t centred around a Soviet identity, but was more so an economic and environmental nostalgia that developed in contrast to peoples’ everyday realities post-independence. Memories of the Soviet Union are positive memories of people’s lives, memories which fundamentally underlined people’s affiliation to the Soviet Union and fuelled these ‘memory wars’.

Economics and Environment: Popular Memory in the Donbas

When engaging the concept of nostalgia, this dissertation takes the view that it is more representative to study popular memories shared amongst common people instead of the

¹²² Fedor, Julie, Lewis, Simon and Zhurzhenko, Tatiana, ‘Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus’ in Fedor, Julie, Kangaspuro, Markku, Lassila, Jussie, Zhurzhenko, Tatiana, *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (London, Palgrave Macmillian, 2017) p.5

¹²³ Asayev, *In Isolation* p.103

ideological abstracts that mattered to a minority of political radicals. Popular memories are based on things that are personal to people: communities, possessions and their environmental surroundings. This is evidenced by the art project ‘Donbass Odessey’, which was conducted by academics Darya Tsymbalyuk, Yulia Filipieva and Viktor Zasytkin. Their project consisted of interviews with people who fled the Donbas, asking participants of different ages what they missed about their homes, and encouraging them to draw maps of their hometowns.¹²⁴ The most common responses included treasured possessions and streets, but the thing that every participant brought up, particularly the older participants, was nature.¹²⁵ People’s most precious memories were of gardens, parks and trees they had grown, because these were the things that people held onto most in their crumbling surroundings.

Memories of nature are such an important facet of people’s nostalgia because green landscapes were representative of the relative prosperity they had once enjoyed. Childhood memories reflected this richness and vibrancy. One Ukrainian who visited her grandparents in Donetsk as a child recollected the “huge infamous Mulberry tree right in the middle of it that stained the ground with purple spots,” and how “on weekends we took trips to the Black Sea along the winding roads overlooking endless sunflower fields.”¹²⁶ Another account by author Anya Ulinich, who also visited her grandparents in Donetsk as a child, recalls that Donetsk was “a modern city with vast flowerbeds” and reminisces about her grandparent’s garden as a place of happy memories.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Tsymbalyuk, Darya, Filipieva, Yulia, Zasytkin, Viktor, ‘Odessey Donbass’ (2015) <http://donbassodessey.weebly.com/stories.html> [accessed 23rd November 2022]

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ halyoosha, ‘A Ukrainian Childhood and Fond Memories’ (2015) <https://thepocketgirl.com/2015/01/06/a-ukrainian-childhood-and-fond-memories/> [accessed 21nd September 2022]

¹²⁷ Ulinich, Anya, ‘As Putin lays siege to Ukraine, memories of life between wars’ (2022) <https://forward.com/culture/483201/donetsk-ukraine-war-putin-siege-anya-ulinich-soviet-jewish-memoir/> [accessed 14th June 2022]

Memories are not associated with a certain era. The first account is of someone who visited Donetsk when it was part of Ukraine, and the second account is of someone who visited Donetsk when it was part of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, many of the participants in Donbas Odessey spoke about their memories of the Donbas when it was part of Ukraine. For many, however, these blissful memories became associated with the Soviet period because the timeline of industrial decline and the transition from the Soviet Union to Ukraine were so overlapping, and many came to understandably see the end of the Soviet Union as the end of their 'golden era'.

Photography of the Luhansk oblast over time illustrates how this binary divide came to form in people's minds. The first set of photographs are from a 1972 Soviet picture book of the Luhansk oblast. These photographs show lively, regenerated urban landscapes with modern buildings flanked by greenery. A statue of Lenin surrounded by plants is a perfect reflection of how people linked the Soviet system with the prosperity that they enjoyed. Taken from a Soviet picture book, these photographs are naturally biased and seek to advertise the fruits of the Soviet project, but they align with people's oral recollections of the Donbas at this time.



From top left to bottom right: figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 from a Soviet picture book of the Luhansk oblast.¹²⁸

The second set of photographs are of the Luhansk oblast around the time of 2014. They portray a stark contrast with the photographs from the Soviet era, showing hollowed-out apartment blocks, boarded-up paths, empty streets and mounds of debris from abandoned mines. There is no nature or scenery here: the landscape reflects the economic despair that made people so downbeat about their situation. Industrial decline turned the Donbas into a grey, lifeless wasteland, and it's clear to see why the Soviet past came to be seen as a golden era.

¹²⁸ Chernyakov, A. M., Morozli, S. G., Kartashov, I. M., *Luhansk* (1972)



From top left to bottom right: figure 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3, from ‘Not the Promised Land’ by Evgeniy Stepanets,¹²⁹ figure 3.1 from ‘The Young Miners of the Donbas’ by Janos Chiala and Tali Mayer.¹³⁰

People not only missed the prosperity that made their day to day lives more colourful, but also resented the loss of value that the region had suffered with the decline of industry. The Donbas’s status as a hub of productivity in Soviet times is something that residents would bring up with pride, such as Soviet war veteran Valeriy Dzyubinskiy who commented that “this city (Donetsk) was world-famous in Soviet times, our factories employed thousands and transported bricks to Europe, the US and India.”¹³¹ By contrast, industrial decline left the post-Soviet Donbas not only without its industry, but more broadly without any purpose.

¹²⁹ Stepanets, Evgeniy, in Stepanets, Evgeniy, ‘Not the Promised Land’ <https://evgeniystepanets.com/ntpl/> [accessed 12th July 2022]

¹³⁰ Chiala, Janos, Mayer, Tali/Al Jazeera, in Chiala, Janos, Mayer, Tali ‘Young Miners of the Donbas’ (2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/12/23/the-young-miners-of-donbass> [accessed 2nd November 2022]

¹³¹ Cookman, Liz, ‘Soviet nostalgia on Ukraine’s impoverished front line’ (2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/2/4/soviet-nostalgia-ukraine> [accessed 23rd July 2022]

Donbas journalist Alisa Sopova perceptively observed what this loss of status had done to the region.¹³² “It’s like the Rust Belt.” she remarked, “It’s not needed anymore. All that industry is obsolete.”¹³³

Nostalgia for Normality

Nostalgia is a relative concept which exemplifies the reflective nature of memories. Soviet nostalgia in the Donbas was not a pining for an ideological utopia, but a desperation for stability in a time of extreme turbulence. People pined for the things they had overlooked before, the greenery, the cheap prices at the market, and the feeling of going to bed on a full stomach. Western critics would point out that the Soviet Union was not the salvation that people reflected on, but this is not what people were looking for. What people really wanted was a return to some form of normality in their lives, and the Soviet Union was the closest resemblance of this they had. As one resident explained: “Life under the Soviet Union might not have been good, but it was stable.”¹³⁴ In metaphorical terms, people came to appreciate light when they experienced nothing but darkness.

Studying people’s nostalgia in this way affirms the overarching thesis that separatism was a movement based on emotion rather than ideology. As Ulinich puts it, in 1996 “nobody in Donetsk was a separatist of any kind. My grandparents weren’t upset about the color of their

¹³² Gettleman, Jeffery, ‘Ukraine’s Donbas: where Putin sowed the seeds of war’ (2022) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/09/18/world/ukraine-donbas-putin-seeds-war/> [accessed 20th September 2022]

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Gettleman, Jeffery, ‘Ukraine’s Donbas: where Putin sowed the seeds of war’ (2022) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/09/18/world/ukraine-donbas-putin-seeds-war/> [accessed 20th September 2022]

passports. They were upset that the water pump was broken in the basement of their apartment building.”¹³⁵ Twenty years later, however, people’s frustrations with the basics of their everyday lives had boiled over, and many reached the conclusion that they could not continue with their present existence. People either made the choice to leave and seek better opportunities to the West, or stay and rebel against the system that people blamed for destroying their livelihoods.

Populism and Propaganda

¹³⁵ Ulinich, Anya, ‘As Putin lays siege to Ukraine, memories of life between wars’ (2022) <https://forward.com/culture/483201/donetsk-ukraine-war-putin-siege-anya-ulinich-soviet-iewish-memoir/> [accessed 14th June 2022]

Russian Propaganda

Decades of industrial decline had left people deeply disillusioned: let down by the Ukrainian government, despairing at their decaying communities, hopeless about the region's fortunes and deeply longing for the stability of the past. The thing that eludes this analysis up to this point is why some people became so radicalised to the point where they were ready to pick up weapons and sacrifice their lives over their economic discontent. To understand this, the influence of Russian propaganda must now be introduced.

Russia's propaganda operations in post-Soviet states have been well-documented for decades. A RAND Corporation report on Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe surmised that "in addition to employing a state-funded multilingual television network, operating various Kremlin-supporting news websites... Russia employs a sophisticated social media campaign" to disseminate ideas and stories designed to destabilise newly democratic post-Soviet states.

¹³⁶ Eastern Ukraine, particularly after the events of 2014, became a prime target, and Russian narratives rapidly took over the separatist movements. Dr Jon Roozenbeek provides a thorough account of Russian propaganda in the Donbas in his PhD thesis 'Media and Identity in Wartime Donbas, 2014-2017', arguing that whilst Russia had success in fostering a hostile attitude against the Ukrainian state, it had failed to form a cultural identity that affiliated the region with Russia.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Helmus, Todd C., Bodine-Baron, Elizabeth, Radin, Andrew, Magnuson, Madeline, Mendelsohn, Joshua Marcellino, William, Bega, Andriy and Winkelman, Zev, 'Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe.' (California, RAND Corporation, 2018) p.ix

¹³⁷ Roozenbeek, Jon, 'Media and Identity in Wartime Donbas, 2014-2017' (PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 2022)

Roozenbeek provides an accurate account of Russian propaganda in the Donbas as mostly negative, tailored towards creating an enemy out of Ukraine rather than a collective identity. Attempts to revive the imperialist concept of 'Novorossiya' or New Russia gained no traction in the region, leading Roozenbeek to the conclusion that Russian propaganda had failed in its objectives. The problem with this argument, however, is that he takes a top-down approach to studying the conflict, assuming that Russia and the separatist leaders had complete agency in shaping the narrative. As already established, the people of the Donbas did not rally around a wider Russian identity because they saw themselves as neither Russian or Ukrainian, and as this section will prove, Russian propaganda had to tailor itself to fit people's existing preconceptions and experiences in order to work. Indeed, Russian propaganda's focus on making Ukraine the enemy was a design feature, not a flaw.

There are Fascists over the River

For a long time, Russian propaganda has been peddling the narrative that the Ukrainian state is infested by Nazism. As perplexing as this claim may seem to people in the West, the concept of Ukrainian fascism is so effective because it parallels today's conflict with the Second World War. When referring to Ukrainian nationalists, the term 'Banderites' is often used alongside 'Nazis'. Banderites were a group who were formed in the Second World War by Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, the leader of a radical sect of Ukrainian nationalists. This militant group was not directly linked to the Nazis, and in fact fought against the Nazis, but they were a far-right group who carried out pogroms against Jewish and Polish peoples with the aim of creating an ethnically homogenous Ukrainian state.

Whilst the actions of the Banderites did not define Ukrainian nationalism, which has much deeper historical roots, the collective Soviet trauma of the Second World War has resultingly created an inextricable link between Ukrainian nationalism with fascist ideology. This is why Putin code switches seamlessly between the terms ‘Nazis’ and ‘nationalists’. It’s also why the official state media outlet RIA Novosti published an article on denazification which calls for any Ukrainian who has armed themselves in defence of their nation to be killed.¹³⁸ To people on the Russian side of the ‘memory wars’, Ukrainian nationalism is Nazism, and it must be eradicated.

This inextricable link was deeply embedded in the political consciousness of the Donbas, and despite voting overwhelmingly for independence; people remained wary of Ukrainian nationalism. After the miners’ failed negotiations with Kyiv in the early nineties, strike committee leader Mikhail Krylov remarked that he was “flatly against nationalism, because very frequently, especially now in Ukraine, it just turns into fascism. During our last action, when we went to picket the Supreme Soviet, people confronted not nationalism, but real fascism.”¹³⁹

People’s fear that nationalism would creep towards fascism made it easy to portray the Euromaidan in 2014 as a fascist takeover which threatened the rights of Russian-speakers in Ukraine, rallying support for an armed insurgency. Sociologist Oksana Mikheieva found in

¹³⁸ Grigoriy, Manucharian, ‘The ‘Goebbels Method’: RIA Novosti as Window into Russian Propaganda’ (2022) <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-goebbels-method-ria-novosti-as-window-into-russian-propaganda/> [accessed 10th November 2022]

¹³⁹ Siegelbaum, Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass* p.150

her interviews with separatist insurgents that they formed a collective identity around what they stood against, using phrases such as “we are not the ones supporting radicalism,” “not the ones who destroy monuments,” or “not the junta or fascists.”¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, by motivating people to fight against the re-emergence of fascism, propagandists could construe the conflict as a continuation of the values being fought over in the Second World War. Separatist leaders used this as an advertising tool, with one recruiting billboard claiming “the fate of the Russian people is to repeat the feats of their fathers, defending the motherland.”¹⁴¹

Persuading people of the threat of fascism from the Ukrainian government was a highly effective tactic in whipping up anti-Ukrainian sentiment in the Donbas, but it could only go so far. The threat of fascism provided people with a fear of a worse future – something that they needed to fight to stop, but it did not provide reason for why people had ended up in such a desolate economic situation. The answer to this question that Russian propaganda came up with was much further away from home.

Americans

Opposition to the so-called ‘West’ was the other arm of Russia’s propaganda campaign that took hold in the Donbas. Russia has waged an informational war against the Ukrainian government for decades, but in a wider sense it has been waging a war against Western values. Putin’s administration has weaponised the failure of Westernising reforms in the

¹⁴⁰ Mikheieva, Oksana, ‘Motivations of Pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainian Combatants in the Context of the Russian Military Intervention in the Donbas’ in Marples, *The War* p.77

¹⁴¹ Pinkham, *Black Square* p.205

1990s in order to create a new East-West divide, claiming that the Western way of life poses an existential threat to the Russian world. Central to this narrative is the often-repeated claim that the West was exerting its influence on the Russian world, whether it be through physical institutions such as the European Union or NATO, or through the permeation of ideas, and that invasion need to be fought against.

This argument was so effective in the Donbas because in the dying days of the Soviet Union, people had looked towards the liberal and capitalist politics of the West as a beacon of hope, but the failure to deliver better economic circumstances turned people against these Western values. Historian William Jay Risch found in his research of Donbas residents and their responses to the Euromaidan that anti-Western sentiment was strikingly influential.¹⁴² One respondent he interviewed, Katya, believed that European Union was behind the political chaos because it wanted to “seize” Ukraine, saying: “I think that the European Union’s government is doing a good job at, and is determined, to split the people.”¹⁴³ This sentiment was not an anomaly: another respondent, who was critical of Yanukovych’s government, claimed that the Euromaidan was based on “Russophobia heated up from abroad” to “impose European integration ideas.”¹⁴⁴

There was a general belief that the Western expansionism was to blame for the divide between the Donbas and Ukraine, but others also saw Western values as a more existential threat to their way of life. “I remember how Voice of America and Radio Liberty destroyed

¹⁴² Risch, William Jay, 'Prelude to War? The Maidan and its Enemies in the Donbas' in Marples, *The War* pp.7-28

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* pp.12-13

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.14

my motherland, the Soviet Union,” complained Nicolai Solnstnev, a pro-Russian political activist.¹⁴⁵ “The successors of these stations are still here in Ukraine preaching about freedom of speech and human rights. I don't want to speak to you,” he said to the Western journalist interviewing him.¹⁴⁶ People’s hostility towards Westerners was also felt by Risch, who noted one particularly vehement response to his questionnaire which claimed that even he was part of “the hysteria... being fed from outside” as his “survey’s set of questions are openly one-sided and clear.”¹⁴⁷ As uncompromising as their attitude seems, it is evident that people’s desperation made them genuinely angry at who they thought was to blame – they were not simply being told what to say. In the words of one Donbas native, who was interviewed by New York Times journalist Jeffery Gettleman, “why can’t we be friends with you guys, the Americans?” “Politics are keeping all of us hostage.”¹⁴⁸

Fighting for Nothing

Political radicalisation being a consequence of economic despair is a story nearly as old as human civilisation itself. People in the Donbas were exposed to radicalising narratives for a long time, but propaganda alone does not radicalise people - like a jigsaw it has to fit a missing piece in people’s lives, providing reason for their lived injustice. As this section proves, propaganda did not assume complete agency over people’s thoughts, it acquired agency by shaping its narrative around collective memories and traumas in order to resonate

¹⁴⁵ Wells, Patrick, ‘Donetsk, Ukraine Locals Divided Between Soviet Past, Eurocentric Future’ (2014) <https://www.voanews.com/a/donetsk-ukraine-locals-divided-between-soviet-past-eurocentric-future/1876207.html> [accessed 12th August 2022]

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Risch, ‘The Prelude to War?’ p.14

¹⁴⁸ Gettleman, Jeffery, ‘Ukraine's Donbas: where Putin sowed the seeds of war’ (2022) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/09/18/world/ukraine-donbas-putin-seeds-war/> [accessed 20th September 2022]

with its target audience. Put simply, Russian propaganda didn't tell people what to think, it told them what they want to hear.

Economic discontent in the Donbas was exploited by Russia as part of Putin's ambitions to rebuild the Russian world. In convincing people of the need to defend themselves against outside threats, Russian propaganda created an insulated, reactionary type of populism, which told people what they are fighting against without offering any vision for the future. People in the Donbas became radicalised without a cause because they feared something stronger than death itself – non-existence. This is what motivated people to sit in trenches and tolerate artillery shells landing around them, risking their lives every day for eight years and counting. Russian guns and armaments were necessary to turn separatist sentiment into a hostile insurgency, but these weapons wouldn't have been used without the nihilistic attitude that drove people to put their lives between the Donbas and the Ukrainian state. The sheer bleakness of people's future is what turned popular anger into militant extremism. In the words of one militia member: "If anything happens to my son and the 'Ukry' walk into Makiivka, I'll just go out into the street and blow myself up in the middle of them. I won't give a damn anymore."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Aseyev, *In Isolation* p.37

Conclusion

Industrial decline is a recent phenomenon which has sent political shockwaves through entire countries; but had its most direct impact on working communities which relied on industry throughout their modern history. In the Donbas, industrial decline was not only an economic trauma that affected the collective memory of its residents, but fundamentally challenged the region's existence in the post-Soviet world.

The overall argument of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, it argues that separatism was in real terms a rejection of the Ukrainian project. People in the Donbas blamed the Ukrainian state for the effects of industrial decline because they felt they had been betrayed by the broken promises of independence and subsequently by the failure to deliver reforms which would regenerate the region. Secondly, it argues that separatism was in a more abstract sense a rebellion against the region's downfall, which people commonly perceived as a wider system that was responsible for their injustice. This conspiracy took up different forms, but is most accurately surmised by the concept of the 'Center'. The 'Center' was for people a way of processing their economic reality, understanding that their circumstances were being affected by much wider forces that they were not in control of.

Separatism should therefore not be seen simply as an outright rejection of Ukrainian national identity, but an extreme form of isolationism. Isolationism is a commonality in political movements which have developed in the rubble left by industrial decline. Take for example Euro-scepticism and the United Kingdom's referendum to leave the European Union, or the

‘America First’ slogan in the United States, which have spoken to people’s fears of being left behind and offered them a way of rejecting systems which supposedly work against their interests. In this respect, the separatist movements parallel the political radicalisation seen in the West, particularly with the violent radicalisation and attempted insurgency experienced in the United States.

In trying to understand why the Donbas had such a different experience to other parts of Ukraine, a consensus has been reached amongst academics that unlike other parts of Ukraine, the Donbas had a particularly Soviet identity.¹⁵⁰ The problem with this conclusion is that it assumes that the region was ideologically committed to this identity, when in fact, as this dissertation has shown, this identity was malleable and open to change under a new statehood. There were many industrial areas in Ukraine, but what made the Donbas unique was that its identity was entirely built around its industry, and when this disappeared the region was left in a vacuum. In many ways, the separatist movements were an anti-revolution: a revolution without a cause.

By taking a social action approach, this dissertation has proven that the conflict in the Donbas only came about because there was an underlying sentiment amongst the general population which facilitated a split from the Ukrainian state. Ultimately, the separatist movements needed the consent of the people to be successful. They needed ordinary people to buy goods in order to keep their economies running, cook for the soldiers on the frontline, and to vote favourably in their symbolic referendums to make the movements look politically viable.

¹⁵⁰ Portnov, Andrii, ‘How ‘eastern Ukraine’ was lost’ (2016) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-eastern-ukraine-was-lost/> [accessed 29th September 2022]

Historians who espouse the ‘proxy war’ narrative of the conflict are wrong in peddling the idea that the region was taken hostage by a small minority of armed bandits and their Russian sponsors. At the same time, historians of the ‘Russo-sympathetic’ narrative generalise people’s motivations by viewing the conflict as a binary divide between Ukrainian and Russian identity. Asayev’s assessment, which this dissertation confirms, is that the causes of separatism were multifaceted and varying, and most importantly many were removed from ideology.¹⁵¹

At this point, it should be noted that this dissertation does not argue that a Ukrainian nation under its sovereign borders is an unviable concept. The people of the Donbas could have been integrated into the Ukrainian project, but they were alienated from it by factors that were bigger than Ukrainian statehood itself. The breakdown in the relationship between the Donbas and the rest of Ukraine was inevitable, but not inherent.

To finish, it is notable that historiography has trouble writing about the history of emotion because it does not provide a ‘correct answer’. Why would people choose to play Russian roulette with their future to rebel against a slow economic decline? The missing piece for many historians is what the goal of separatism was, and many have accepted the conclusion that it was formed around aim of re-joining the Russian world. In reality, the radicalised emotion that drove separatism were reactionary, not idealistic. For many the question of what would happen next was not considered – it did not matter, so long as people got away from their present reality. Journalist Alisa Sopova challenged her pro-separatist grandmother on this: “I told her: ‘You’re using banks. You’re getting your pension. Do you realize what

¹⁵¹ Asayev, *In Isolation*

you're supporting will destroy it all?" but they didn't understand." "They didn't know it would turn out this way," she remarked.¹⁵²

What this shows is that emotions are not logical, but that does not mean they are any less important in historical study. This dissertation has provided a vital insight by moving beyond stereotypes and generalisations to study a long-marginalised region in a sympathetic light, giving attention to people's emotions, fears and memories. As one Donetsk resident put it: "We are not Donetsk bandits, we are not zombies, and we know Europe not from Soviet textbooks. We have our own view of the world, our own truth."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Gettleman, Jeffery, 'Ukraine's Donbas: where Putin sowed the seeds of war' (2022) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/09/18/world/ukraine-donbas-putin-seeds-war/> [accessed 20th September 2022]

¹⁵³ Risch, 'Prelude to War?' p.7

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