

Introduction

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On 24 March 2021, as we were finalizing the contributions to this collection, Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's Council for National Security and Defense, announced that Donbas no longer existed: "The word 'Donbas' is not written in any of our state's regulatory or legal documents. This is a definition that the Russian Federation has imposed upon us: 'the Donbas people,' 'the choice of Donbas,' 'Donbas will not be brought to its knees.' We need to abide carefully by our regulatory and legal documentation... There are specific names for the territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, no Donbas of any kind exists, it is very dangerous when we start to say these things."¹ The announcement did not come out of the blue. It was rather the culmination of recent public debate concerning the political implications and utility of the term in light of the ongoing, Russia-backed violence in the Ukrainian East.² Indeed, already in 2014, a Russian-speaking writer and historian from Donetsk, Olena Stiazhkina, voiced her opinion that "Donbas does not exist. There will be just Ukraine or nothing ... the word Donbas does not define anything." In Stiazhkina's opinion, the very notion of "Donbas" was rooted in the Stalinist discourse of the region, which focused on coal and steel and no longer corresponded to the region's contemporary realities. When, following the outbreak of war in the East in 2014, the term began to be enthusiastically used in separatist rhetoric, opinions such as Stiazhkina's found more traction among the Ukrainian population. Danilov's 2021 announcement was thus the continuation and conclusion of these ongoing socio-symbolic debates.

From 2015, the Ukrainian government has implemented a policy of "decommunization," prohibiting the use of Soviet symbols, toponymy, and mon-

¹ Oleksiy Danilov's statement was made at the forum "Electoral Reform: Estimation through the Values, Political Rights, and Quality of Procedures" on 24 March 2021, in Kyiv. See National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (2021), "Oleksiy Danilov: The Functioning of the State in the Territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions Controlled by Ukraine is Fully Ensured," 24 March 2021, <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Diialnist/4857.html>.

² Svitlana Dorosh, "RNBO, Danilov i Donbas: Chy spravdi hovoryty 'narod Donbasu' nebezpechno," BBC News/Ukraine, 5 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-56606837>.

umental objects in public spaces.³ This policy has been linked by public figures and scholars in Ukraine with the need to decolonize cultural memory, to delink contemporary Ukrainian culture from the oppressive influence of the Soviet cultural and symbolic infrastructure.⁴ Within this discussion, the politics of Donbas toponymy has drawn particular attention. Critics argue that the term *Donbas*, a contraction of “Donetsk Coal Basin” (Donetskii kamennougol’nyi bassein), manifests an extractivist attitude to the region’s human and environmental resources and carries the taint of Soviet political violence. At the exhibition *Rebellious Gene*, which opened at the displaced Donetsk Museum of Local History in Kramatorsk in November 2020, for example, curators drew critical attention to the perceived colonial origins of the signifier.⁵ Instead of Donbas, the curators argued for the use of alternative, more locally rooted designators, such as “Donechchyna” and “Luhanshchyna.” This practice was presented by the organizers as a means to challenge historic tendencies to reduce the cultural meaning of the region to merely its extractable mineral resources.

Donbas is certainly a vexed territorial signifier whose imperial origins, extractivist implications, and semiotic transformations deserve to be scrutinized critically. It is also a term with a range of resonances among communities living in the region. Following Danilov’s announcement, media outlets across Ukraine ran editorials and expert discussions exploring the public reception of the minister’s proposal. Iryna Sklokina (coeditor of this collection) was invited to speak at one such event on “Suspilne. Donbas” radio station, where her opinions were considered alongside those of community residents, piped into the studio live and in prerecorded form. Local reactions to the announcement differed dramatically: while “Donbas” was rejected as a viable form of self-designation in Mariupol, a huge industrial center on the Azov Sea that has traditionally competed for economic prominence with Donetsk, responses were more ambiguous in Sloviansk, at the region’s northern administrative border, where no coal has ever been mined and picturesque local landscapes around the Donets River are more reminiscent of nearby, rustic “Slobozhan-shchyna.” Indeed, the radio host even commented (ironically, it would appear) that the radio station’s name, which translates as “Public. Donbas,” had

³ Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108304047>.

⁴ Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, “Zavershennia dekomunizatsii—pochatok dekolonizatsii,” 9 April 2019, <https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/zavershennya-dekomunizatsiyi-pochatok-dekolonizatsiyi>; Mykola Riabchuk, “Dekomunizatsiia chy dekolonizatsiia? Shcho pokazaly politychni dyskusii z pryvodu dekomunizatsiinykh zakoniv,” *Naukovi zapysky IPIEND im. Kurasa* 2, 82 (2016): 104–17; Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yulia Yurchuk, “Memorial Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective,” *Memory Studies* 12, 6 (2019): 699–720, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017727806>.

⁵ Viktoriia Grivina, “Kramatorsk’s Rebellious Gene,” *Transitions*, 16 September 2021, <https://tol.org/client/article/kramatorsks-rebellious-gene.html>.

been thrown into doubt and should perhaps be changed in accordance with Danilov's trendsetting statement.

This issue explores the cultural construction of Donbas through word, image, and social practice. The territorial region known as Donbas is today located within the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (provinces) in Ukraine. It began to develop as an industrial region in the first half of the 19th century, and over time emerged as the primary source of coal and iron for the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. The region was associated with heavy industry in political and public discourse throughout the 20th century. From the late 1980s, Donbas experienced steady industrial decline and corresponding social crises. In 2014, after the ousted Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine, a military conflict broke out between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian government forces. As a result, parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are still out of government control, and military actions continue.



This collection joins an established body of academic and, more broadly, journalistic and creative work that has explored the cultural status of Donbas within the Ukrainian, Soviet, post-Soviet, and Western geopolitical imaginations. This scholarship bears a particular burden of responsibility in the current political climate, when competing myths, narratives, and (mis)information are contending for dominance in the transnational economy of cultural meaning-making. This collection is consequently informed by a number of values and ethical positions that reflect our own political priorities with regard to the presentation of what has become a highly contentious set of topics. These values have informed our selection of contributors to this series, most of whom are Ukrainian women who have been conducting long-term, culturally sensitive research with local communities in the Donbas region. These voices, we believe, are some of the best placed to communicate the nuanced historical and cultural realities that inform the current situation in Donbas, without recourse to sensationalizing, exoticizing or Othering discourses. As Andrii Portnov has pointed out in his important article on this topic, these discourses have and continue to color the perceptions of and political interactions with the region both within Ukraine and abroad.⁶ We intend this collection, then, as a research-rich challenge and corrective to these ongoing tendencies.

While this is the first academic work that we (Victoria Donovan and Iryna Sklokina) have authored together, we have been collaborating for some time on research projects, including "De-industrialization and Conflict in Donbas: Capacity Building in Ukraine to make Donbas (Mono)towns Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable" (funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund,

⁶ Andrii Portnov, "The Arithmetic of Otherness: 'Donbas' in Ukrainian Intellectual Discourse," *Eurozine*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-myth-of-the-two-ukraines/>.

2019–20) and “(Un)archiving (Post)industry: Engaging Heritage and Developing Cultural Infrastructures” (funded by the House of Europe and the Global Challenges Research Fund, 2020–21). This experience has allowed us to elaborate, often in constructive dialogue, our frustrations and priorities with regard to the presentation of topics related to the Donbas theme. With this collection we intend to make a timely contribution to the ongoing discussion of cultural practice and community identity in the region, but also to foster further discussion on the relevance of our topic to broader contexts of deindustrialization, cultural transformation, and heritage practice beyond Ukraine. Throughout our collaborative work together, we have striven not to reproduce the essentializing and objectifying practices that we identify as problematic in the region’s historicization. For this reason cultural exchange with deindustrializing regions of the UK such as, for example, Ebbw Vale, Durham, and West Lothian, and Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Praga district of Warsaw, Poland, and Pidzamche district in Lviv, Ukraine, have formed an important component in our work with this topic.⁷

Our collection joins a body of English-language scholarship on the Donbas region that, until the outbreak of war in 2014, focused primarily on labor history and working-class identities. Until the 1990s, this scholarship centered on managerial elites, mapping the evolution of the labor movement in the Soviet Union from so-called primitive forms of protest to more coordinated, political mass actions.⁸ With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of formerly inaccessible archives, historians turned their interest to other subgroups within the industrial workforce, disputing Soviet claims about the inevitable proletarianization of the working class. This work also shifted the focus away from the political centers—Moscow and Leningrad—to the regions. Several seminal archival studies were published at this time that explored the economic and social conditions that informed (or failed to inform) the political radicalization of the industrial workforce in Donbas.⁹ At the same time, in line with the growing interest in working-class subjectivities in the 1990s, oral his-

⁷ Iryna Sklokina, Dominika Brodowicz, and Katarzyna Sadowy, “(Post)przemysłowe dzielnice Warszawy i Lwowa: znaczenie pamięci i dziedzictwa dla biznesu i przemysłu kreatywnego,” in *Kultury historyczne Polski i Ukrainy: O źródłach nieporozumienia między sąsiadami*, ed. T. Stryjek and V. Sklokin (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar; Collegium Civitas; Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2021), 512–48.

⁸ See, for example, Reginald E. Zelnik, *Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971); and Allan K. Wildman, *The Making of a Workers’ Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

⁹ Charters Wynn, *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms: The Donbass-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia, 1870–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Theodore Friedgut, *Iuzovka and Revolution, 1: Life and Work in Russia’s Donbass, 1869–1924; 2: Politics and Revolution in Russia’s Donbass, 1869–1924* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

tory work began to map labor unrest and worker consciousness in the region in the perestroika era.¹⁰

Russian- and Ukrainian-language scholarship on Donbas has followed a different trajectory. Many Soviet-era publications fall into the rich factographical tradition of local studies writing, offering expansive, if often ideologically inflected, accounts of the region's urban, environmental, and societal development over the course of several centuries.¹¹ In the post-Soviet period, this scholarship has been enriched by new research into the history and contemporary realities of Donbas monotowns: this literature includes detailed archival works dedicated to the sociocultural evolution of prerevolutionary company towns,¹² as well as studies documenting the economic and social developments of the region's industrial settlements across the Soviet period.¹³ Since the outbreak of war in 2014, and the rise in negative media coverage of the region, several creatively conceived essay collections have been published exploring the cultural value of Donbas landscapes, architecture, and urban environments.¹⁴ Equally, several synthetic works have tried to write Donbas into a Ukrainian national narrative, harshly criticising the region for the moments when it is perceived to have deviated from the standard course of national history.¹⁵

The contributions to this collection are interested in some of the same themes and topics that have historically preoccupied scholars of the region. Working-class identities and industrial action during the 1989–91 miners' strikes thus remain a focus of Yulia Abibok's article. Through close analysis of two regional newspapers, *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass* (retitled *Donbass* after 1991) and *Voroshyl'ovgradskaia pravda* (retitled *Luganskaia pravda* in 1990) from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively, Abibok casts new light on microshifts in the attitudes and loyalties of the protestors, while also tracking the reception of the industrial action more broadly among local communities, pri-

¹⁰ Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Workers of the Donbass Speak. Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989–1992* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹¹ See, for example, Valentin Polikarpovich, *Donbass industrial'nyi* (Stalino: Oblastnoe izdatel'stvo, 1958); and V. P. Zamikovoi, *Donbass: Ekonomiko-geograficheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1962).

¹² Volodymyr Kulikov, *Pidpryemstva i suspilstvo v zavodskykh i shakhtarskykh poseleniakh Donbasu i Prydniprovia v 1870–1917 rr.* (Kharkiv: KhNU im. Karazina, 2019).

¹³ Ksenia Kuzina and Zoya Lykholobova, *Sotsial'no-ekonomichni protsesy v monoprofilnykh shakhtarskykh mistakh Donbasu (1950-ti–1980-ti rr.)* (Donetsk: n.p., 2010); Olena Stiazhkina, *Liudyna v radianskii provintsii: Osvoennia (vid)movy* (Donetsk: Noulidzh, 2013); Volodymyr Kulikov and Iryna Sklokina, eds., *Pratsia, vysnazhennia ta uspikh: Promyslovi monomista Donbasu* (Lviv: FOP Shumylovych, 2018).

¹⁴ *Kinorevizia Donbasu 2.0*, ed. Stanislav Menzelevskiy (Kyiv: Natsionalnyi tsentr Oleksandra Dovzhenka, 2017).

¹⁵ Stanislav Kul'chyts'kyi and Larysa Iakubova, *Trysta rokiv samotnosti: Ukraïns'kyi Donbas u poshukakh smysliv i bat'kivshchyny* (Kyiv: Klio, 2016); Maksym Vikhrov, *Dykyi Skhid: Narysy istorii i siohodennia Donbasu* (Kyiv: Tempora, 2021).

marily through readers' letters. This work intersects with the rich oral history research with mining communities carried out by Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel Walkowitz during the same period. Writing in the knowledge of developments after 2014, however, Abibok is able to build on this work to make connections between the "drivers for the strategic shifts in the miners' movements" and developments in the political orientation of the region up to and including the outbreak of the Donbas war. Here, Abibok brings labor history and conflict studies together to enhance our understanding of the region's present-day political realities.

Like Abibok, Volodymyr Kulikov and Iryna Sklokina are concerned with mapping cultural transformations among a particular constituency within Donbas: museum professionals and community heritage activists. Offering the first overview of its kind of industrial heritage practices in the Ukrainian East, the authors make an important contribution to research on the (post-)Soviet politics of heritage preservation. Here, too, the authors draw on oral history methods to provide their analysis with valuable granular detail: 23 semistructured interviews with local historians, museum professionals, preservationists, cultural patrons, and administrators of cultural and heritage affairs form the basis for their study of the evolution of industrial heritage-making in the region. While the article takes a broad historical perspective, attention is dedicated in particular to the weaponization of heritage politics since 2014, as well as the impact of infrastructural collapse and the dissolution of established professional networks on preservationist agendas and capacities. Thanks to their sustained engagement with local communities and established relationships of trust with their interlocutors, the authors provide unique insight into how museum practitioners and heritage activists have coped with the traumatic transformations to their everyday professional lives.

Coping with trauma is also at the heart of Irina Kuznetsova's study of disbordering practices in the work of two contemporary Ukrainian artists. Employing critical border studies and the perspective of feminist geopolitics, Kuznetsova takes a deep dive into the art practice of Alevtina Kakhidze and Maria Kulikovska to reveal intersecting strategies of resistance and feminist protest. Kakhidze's deeply personal work emerges in Kuznetsova's reading as a means of challenging arbitrarily enforced borders that separate families in government-controlled and nongovernment-controlled Ukraine. Likewise, Maria Kulikovska's embodied practice, which seizes back control over the meaning of the artist's sculptural work that was destroyed by supporters of the new regime in nongovernment-controlled Donbas, is read as an act of feminist political resistance. Placing her analysis in a broader historical frame, Kuznetsova underlines the legacy of Maidan, where art activism consolidated as a powerful form of political resistance, as fundamental to understanding the cultural significance of these works.

Iryna Shuvalova shifts our focus to the political imaginaries of Donbas in the nongovernment-controlled territories, and specifically to the cultural con-

struction of the *opolchenets* (variously translated as “rebel” or “insurgent”) in the folk song of the pro-separatist fighting groups. Tracing the myth of the *opolchenie* back through Soviet, imperial, and even Muscovite history, Shuvalova demonstrates how militant groups in nongovernment-controlled Donbas perform continuity with imagined grassroots protest movements of the past. Here Shuvalova’s discussion intersects with Abibok’s, Sklokina and Kulikov’s, and Kuznetsova’s arguments in its attentiveness to forms of performative protest and activism that assert particular cultural identities, and the way these forms are received and internalized by broader publics. Shuvalova is careful to underline that such performances are instrumentalized and manipulated in the nongovernment-controlled territories for the purposes of political mobilization. The resonance of her argument across the different contributions to this collection, however, is clear, and demonstrates the way in which cultural forms—media, heritage, art, song—can be appropriated and exploited during conditions of protracted insecurity, violence, and war.

Returning to the ethics of community engagement, we end our collection with an article that scrutinizes the role of the researcher in reproducing and perpetuating cultural constructs that have historically determined perceptions of Donbas and, in some cases, contributed to the ongoing conflict. An experiment in radical transparency, Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk draw on feminist ethics and collaborative research methods to write “for” rather than “about” local communities in the region, specifically new generation art activists and curators engaging with Donbas themes. Drawing on a series of online seminars and field notes, the authors explore various modes of artistic engagement with Donbas in conversation with their partners. The pleasures and tensions of debating these topics and structuring an academic argument together with what would traditionally be considered one’s research subjects is a primary focus of the article. While the authors strive to distance themselves from a discursive genre they define as “Donbas horror,” certain tropes of this genre—dereliction, apocalypse, and despair—nevertheless reappear in the articulations of others in the group.

The collection is enhanced by two complementary texts that, in line with the self-reflexive ethos of this special number, consider the authors’ academic and creative practice and how this relates to Ukraine’s historic politics and contemporary realities. Lewis Siegelbaum, in his memoir-essay, ponders a career that constantly “bumped up against” Ukraine (in particular Odesa, Donetsk, and Crimea), but never identified itself explicitly with the disciplinary field of “Ukrainian studies.” Siegelbaum thinks through the institutional, intellectual, and even personal reasons for this *déformation professionnelle*, offering some astute observations regarding the challenges of conducting research in spaces where colonial, imperial, and nation-building historiographical traditions coincide. In a similar way, Vadim Lurie, a photographer and visual anthropologist from St. Petersburg, considers his motivations for compiling an archive of family photography from Donbas, following the outbreak of war in 2014.

Like Siegelbaum, Lurie scrutinizes his own political and intellectual agendas and the ways in which his work, past and present, is situated in a politically charged and easily instrumentalized field of cultural production.

We are grateful to all contributors to this series, who write from different positionalities, perspectives, and political standpoints, for their efforts to nuance and enrich our understanding of Donbas, to challenge the idea of the region as a fixed and essentialized territorial entity, and to assert in its place the reality of a historically rich and creatively dynamic cultural space.