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THE WAR IN NEVERLAND

THE HISTORY OF NOVOROSSIIA AS LITERARY PROJECT

1.

Since the occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk by Russian-backed separatists, there has in both cities been no shortage of commemorative events, mass performances, and TV shows, all designed to provide historical legitimacy to the new authorities in the breakaway regions of eastern Ukraine.

Although the politics of the two self-proclaimed states, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), generally remain murky, one particular sphere of their politics has been prominent and visible right from the beginning: the politics of memory. Since the end of 2014, new memorials, statues, and monuments have been springing up like mushrooms in the capitals of both 'republics'; yet one particular monument, unveiled in militant-controlled Luhansk in September 2015, seems to stand out against the general background of countless 'places of glory' and is therefore worth mentioning.

Erected in the middle of the 'government quarter' in the very centre of Luhansk, this monument features a massive stone plate with a strange heraldic symbol on its surface. While the red star on the top and the rising sun flanked by two wheat sheaves entwined with red ribbons unequivocally resemble the Soviet coat of arms, in the middle of the emblem the typical Soviet hammer, sickle, and globe have been replaced with a crowned imperial double-headed eagle grasping a royal sceptre and an orb in its claws.¹

¹ 'Nochnye Volki postavili v LNR sovetsko-russkii pamiatnik', 19 November 2015, available at <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3592149-nochnye-volky-postavyly-v-lnr-sovetsko-russkyi-pamiatnyk> (last visited 1 February 2019).

This peculiar combination of Soviet and Russian imperial symbols is adorned with lines from the Russian poet Leonid Kornilov, carved beneath the sign: “Before the eyes of the world, the split Russian plain grows together again. It is Russia’s destiny, to rise as a Eurasian giant”. Erected in a *de jure* Ukrainian city, this monument is full of truly geopolitical symbolism, in which tsarist and Soviet imperial claims fuse with the Eurasian doctrine of Russian interwar émigré thinkers and ultimately with Halford Mackinder’s idea of the inseparable Eurasian ‘heartland’. Thus, the message of the monument can be interpreted as Russia’s tropism towards an indefinite territorial expansion – a supposedly natural movement rooted in Russian history and geography.

More than by the geopolitical message itself, the oddity of the monument was emphasized by the people who unveiled it: the former third-rank officials from the local branch of the Party of Regions (of the deposed Ukrainian president Yanukovych) and the members of the Russian Night Wolves bikers’ club, dressed in leather armour, providing not just an ornament for the stone symbol of Russia’s glorious past, but rather a grotesque re-enactment thereof.

However, as a hybrid monument in times of hybrid war, this strange symbol remains, above all, a visible manifestation of an already established historical narrative, which currently functions as an *ersatz* version of official history for the two ‘people’s republics’. While such officially adopted history is still to make its way into the schools and universities of Donetsk and Luhansk, its main postulates are already down on paper. One may recall here the two volumes of *History of the Fatherland (Istoriia Otechestva)* by Aleksandr Rogozhkin (the former professor of international law at the Donetsk Law Institute) and Aleksandr Kofman (between 2014 and 2016 a minister of foreign affairs of the internationally unrecognized DNR)² or the *Introduction to the History of the Donetsk Region (Vvedenie v Istoriiu Donetskogo Kraia)* by Aleksei Chernyshev. Although these books received official recommendations from the ministry of education of the DNR, reportedly they are still not used as official textbooks for ‘financial reasons’ (a subtle euphemism to disguise the local fight for funding from Moscow).

Based on studies of the local and regional history of Donbas, these textbooks also introduce some crucial historical sources for the legitimacy of the DNR and the LNR. The three main pillars of their both separatist

² A. V. Rogozhkin, A. I. Kofman, and S. A. Rogozhkin, *Istoriia Otechestva. Uchebnik dlia studentov gosudarstvennykh obrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii* (Donetsk, 2017).

and irredentist rhetoric are: the supranational idea of the Russian World (*russskii mir*); the geo-historical concept of *Novorossia*; and, finally, a modified religious vision of Holy Rus (*Sviataia Rus*). Taken together, they illustrate the global, the local, and the metaphysical dimensions of the new 'statehood' on the territory of the Ukrainian–Russian borderlands.

From the point of view of highbrow intellectual historiography, the production of such clumsy, politically-inspired narratives appears a rather dubious undertaking, yet its success within the local education system seems predetermined, if not inevitable. Indeed, the construction of their own official history has long been on the agenda in Donetsk and Luhansk: the circulation of study guides, learning concepts, and methodological outlines for such subjects as 'lessons in civic consciousness', 'lessons in patriotism', and last but not least 'the history of the Fatherland / Homeland' (the latter is already an established subject in the school curriculum) all testify to the eagerness of the new rulers to create a new historical narrative for 'home consumption'.

In the post-Soviet space, exercises in 'separatist' history-writing are by no means unprecedented. One may look to the situation in Moldova, where the textbooks and learning materials on the history of the break-away republic of Transnistria provide a spectacular demonstration of the fact that the power of the constructivist approach in contemporary history-writing is limited only by the authors' own imagination and by the boundaries of the political doctrines set by ruling elites.³

While an analysis of the 'histories of the Fatherland' made in Donetsk and Luhansk promises to be a fruitful endeavour for professional historians, scholars will probably have to acknowledge that in this case the pedigree of the material under review appears not analytical, but aesthetic, since its true origin lies not in the sphere of analytical history, but in works of fiction, where the fusion of tsarist, Soviet, and Eurasian symbols and discourses alongside performative extrapolations on the political reality of the post-Soviet space has long been a trend in various genres of contemporary literature written in Russian. After 2014 the literary *bricolage* of those seemingly incompatible ideological narratives and vistas has acquired an important performative aspect (which is impressively exemplified by the 'hybrid' monument in Luhansk) – Russia's military on-

³ See Stefan Troebst, 'Staatlichkeitskult im Pseudo-Staat: Nationales Identitätsmanagement durch Geschichtspolitik in Transnistrien', *Osteuropa* 53, 7 (2003): 963–83.

slaught against Ukraine has been viewed by many authors as a chance to turn fiction into facts.

2.

The war in Eastern Ukraine has often been labelled a “war of writers”.⁴ The separatists’ side in particular boasts quite a few renowned authors, who are active supporters, fighters or even officers in separatist military units. Probably the most prominent example is the Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin. In an interview published by *Komsomol’skii Pravda* on 13 February 2017, Prilepin announced the formation of a volunteer battalion in the DNR.⁵ While the military impact of this unit remains hard to assess, the publications, videos, and interviews it bruited are not politically marginal – they reflect both a ‘patriotic’ trend on the Russian literary scene and shades of Prilepin’s own literary persona.

To be sure, Prilepin’s fiction and essays have always shown traces of his turbulent biography: he was a special forces officer serving in Chechnya before becoming a prominent member of the banned National-Bolshevik Party (NBP), which, as its name suggests, is based on a hybrid ideology, combining Marxism-Leninism (and sometimes Stalinism) with Russian nationalism. Long before the mass protests that followed the country’s fraudulent parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011–12, Prilepin had acquired the reputation of a fierce critic of the current political regime and was considered a public intellectual with a clear anti-Putin stance. Yet after 2014 his attitude had changed dramatically, prompting the writer to become one of the most vocal supporters of Russian aggression against Ukraine. This twist is a sign of more than just opportunistic behaviour, revealing some fundamental features of Prilepin’s literary strategy.

With his novel *Sankya*, first published in 2006, Prilepin jumped into the ranks of Russia’s most successful authors of the decade. The novel depicts the unsteady life of a young man who leaves his small town near Moscow to join the nationalist militants of The Union of Founding

⁴ Dmitrii Bykov, ‘Voina pisatelei’, *Novaia Gazeta*, 74 (2014): 19–20.

⁵ The unit’s official name is the “4th Reconnaissance and Assault Battalion of the Special Forces of the DNR Armed Forces”. See Aleksandr Kots, ‘Zakhar Prilepin sobral v DNR svoj battal’on’, *Komsomolskii pravda*, 13 February 2017, available at <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26642.5/3661046/> (last visited 1 February 2019).

Creators (*Soiuz sozidaiushchikh*, with the significant abbreviation SS). Initially taking part in anti-regime demonstrations, brawls with immigrants from the Caucasus, and games of cat and mouse with Putin's police forces, the military branch of the Founders soon turns to increasingly acts of violence.⁶ At some point in the story, the 'Union' entrusts the protagonist with the assassination of a Latvian judge, whom the party holds responsible for the persecution of their brothers-in-arms, as well as for oppressing their Russian fellow-countrymen who had settled in Latvia in Soviet times. This episode in the novel bears distinct parallels to a series of real events: on the one hand, to the spectacular murder of the Latvian judge Jānis Laukroze, supposedly assassinated by Russian right-wing radicals in 2001 and, on the other, to the scandal caused by former Soviet officers living in independent Latvia, who boasted of having killed Latvian civilians in a reprisal against partisan attacks in 1944.⁷

In *Sankya*, Prilepin emphasizes the dilemma faced by the protagonist and his fellow militants in their struggle for Russia's imperial future: they view Latvia as a part of Russia's legacy to be protected and administered, but are hardly able to deal with this legacy in reality. The well-ordered cosiness of the Baltic capital with its old-town architecture are depicted as entirely hostile surroundings in which the heroes feel only the aggressive pulse of Europe. Furthermore, Latvia's community of former Soviet Russians remains literally speechless throughout the novel: the humiliations they allegedly suffer must be assumed by default. The Russian-speaking minority thus remains a simple object of imperial concern.

Nonetheless, these events in Latvia are crucial to the entire course of the novel. For Prilepin's hero, the expedition to Riga functions as an initiation: he now feels a distinct readiness to kill and die for his cause. He takes this preparedness back with him to Russia, where he ultimately finds himself at the head of a bloody rebellion with obscure goals and an uncertain outcome. Thus, in *Sankya*, Latvia, or rather its Russian-speaking minority, functions as a pivot for substantial political changes in the Russian "heartland".⁸

⁶ Alfred Sproede and Oleksandr Zabirko, 'Cynics, Loyalists, and Rebels in Recent Russian Fiction: Literary Scenarios of Legitimation and the Pursuit of "Sovereign Democracy"', in *Politics and Legitimacy in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, eds. Martin Brusis et al., (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 193–222.

⁷ Ibid., 208.

⁸ Ibid., 209.

As the much-desired national renaissance of Russia is obstructed by social atomization and estrangement between the generations, in the novel the national community is imagined as extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. The revival of the Russian state starts with the rescue of compatriots living abroad. Rogers Brubaker defines this kind of political attitude as “transborder nationalism of the external national homeland”, but while for Brubaker the typical goals of this sort of nationalism are to “promote the welfare, support the activities and institutions, assert the rights, and protect the interests of one’s own ethnonational kin in other states”,⁹ in Russian patriotic literature it is frequently applied in order to deny the very existence of those states and to describe them as territories attributable to Russia (since they are already inhabited by a Russian-speaking population).

Within the framework of this rhetorical strategy, the difference between Russian-speaking and Russian proper is programmatically neglected. Unlike Western post-imperial discourses in Britain, Germany, or Spain, where it is perfectly normal to use plural terms such as ‘English-speaking countries’, ‘deutschsprachige Länder’ or ‘los países hispanohablantes’, in today’s Russia there is still a very limited understanding of the post-imperial character of Russian language and culture, and so, in the official rhetoric of Kremlin and in Russian federal legislation, Russian-speakers abroad are normally referred to as “compatriots” (*sootechestvenniki*) despite their foreign citizenship.¹⁰

In fact, the concept of Russian ‘compatriots abroad’ has never been the same: over the decades it has travelled a long way, from the liberal pragmatism of the late 1990s, to the confrontational instrumentalization of Russian-speakers as a lever of Russia’s soft power in the 2000s and finally to the utterly irredentist visions emerging after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹¹ Similarly, the semantics of *russkii mir* as a concept have changed from the idea of a diasporic network of “global Russians”¹² to a suprana-

⁹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 5.

¹⁰ ‘Federal’nyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 23 iuliia 2010 g. “O gosudarstvennoi politike Rossiiskoi Federatsii v otnoshenii sootechestvennikov za rubezhom”, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 27 July 2010, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2010/07/27/sootech-dok.html> (last visited 1 February 2019).

¹¹ Mikhail Suslov, ‘The Production of “Novorossia”: A Territorial Brand in Public Debates’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, 2 (2017): 202–21.

¹² Petr Shchedrovitskii, ‘Russkii mir i transnatsional’noe russkoe’, in *V poiskakh formy*, ed. idem (Moscow: FGU, 2005).

tional community united by Russian culture and language, by historical memory and anti-liberal (and by extension, anti-Western) values, and finally by the Orthodox faith and loyalty to a transcendent Russian state (which includes the Russian Empire as well as the USSR).

Contemporary Russian literature mirrors this development in the works of some of its best-selling authors. In *Sankeya* the ‘compatriots’ from Latvia are already turning into a valuable resource for Russia’s neo-imperial future. The largest ‘deposits’ of this resource, however, are to be found not in a tiny Baltic country, but elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. So Prilepin’s text *Terra Tartara*, a “prophetic” essay published in 2009, predicts mass uprisings starting in Russia shortly after the outbreak of a war in Eastern Ukraine:

“There were some problems with one of the country’s former colonies, the land of *Ukraine*, where, somehow, and gradually to begin with, a civil war broke out, *West versus East*. ... Of course, it was necessary to do something about it, since all over the country volunteer units were beginning to organize themselves. Easily crossing the state border, they were vanishing into the vast open spaces of *Ukraine*”.¹³

Having acquired military experience in the ‘Ukrainian civil war’, numerous Russian volunteers are returning to Russia to resume their fight for the national cause on the home front. It is this vision of a popular uprising in Ukraine which turns the notion of *ruskii mir* into the legitimizing principle for revolt, as well as into the historical basis and ultimate political goal of the newly established separatist republics in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Since the outbreak of the war, literary production in and about the ‘people’s republics’ has become an important factor in conceptualizing the new geopolitical reality in the post-Soviet space. The elephantine collections of poetry, prose, and drama sponsored by the Russkii Mir Foundation and by other Russian patrons provide the tropes, the images, and ultimately the poetic language for an emotionalized, aesthetic legitimization of the breakaway republics as well as for their self-positioning within the larger framework of the Russian world.

While the texts from 2014–15 construct an expansionist paradigm of the Russian world, spreading at least over the territories of South-Eastern Ukraine, already in the collection *The Donbas’ Choice* (*Vybor Donbassa*),

¹³ Zakhar Prilepin, *Terra Tartara: Èto kasaetsia lichno menia* (Moscow: AST, 2009).

published in 2017,¹⁴ the symbolic belonging of the DNR and the LNR to the Russian World has an important compensatory function, deliberately obfuscating the two republics' factual non-belonging to the Russian Federation (in contrast to Crimea). At the same time, featuring contributors from Iaroslavl', Moscow, Orenburg, Cheliabinsk, and other Russian cities, the book makes it clear that the alleged *Donbas' Choice* has been made largely from outside the Donbas itself. While the military involvement of Russian citizens in the war has been an object of heated debate since the outset, in literary texts the glorification of Russian 'volunteers' fighting in Eastern Ukraine is one of the major recurring themes – one which is articulated with an almost touching directness and simplicity, as in the following lines by Aleksandr Marfunin:

"He used to be an agronomist / in the glorious town of Tambov / He would still be working there, / if not for the war ... But here and now / he is a Russian volunteer / He crosses himself and gives an order: / 'For the Homeland! Fire!' " ¹⁵

To be sure, the theme of Russian insurgents challenges the whole idea of 'Ukrainian civil war'. However, within the boundaries of the Russian world the concept of 'civil war' accrues a range of additional connotations, making it possible to view the Russian–Ukrainian conflict as a 'civil war' between the members of a large supranational community. Consider, for example, the following lines by Aleksandr Surnin:

"There is a civil war going on in the Donbas. People are busy with very important things there. They are defending the Russian World. And this is everyone's concern. For now, the Donbas is an outpost. If it is destroyed, you will be next in line. Nobody will be able simply to hide away." ¹⁶

The supposed aggression of a 'Westernized' and 'Americanized' Ukraine against the Donbas and, more importantly, the unwillingness of the majority of the Donbas population to take an active part in the upcoming war, prompt Veniamin Uglëv to view the engagement of Russian volunteers as a sheer necessity:

" – There are quite a few millions of us living here in the Donbas!
– You are not living here, you are just staying for a time! Not millions, but just thousands of people took up arms. And this is nothing, this is just like

¹⁴ Gleb Bobrov, ed., *Vybor Donbassa: Literatura narodnykh respublik. Al'manakh Soiuzna pisatelei LNR* (Luhans'k: Bol'shoi Donbass, 2017).

¹⁵ Aleksandr Marfunin, 'Opolchenets', in *ibid.*, 100.

¹⁶ Aleksandr Surnin, 'Iskhod', in *Vybor* (see note 14), 381.

dust! And this dust will be wiped away with a wet cloth, and everything will be clean and dry.”¹⁷

3.

While the political and military engagement of Russian authors in Eastern Ukraine can (at least partially) be explained as the outcome of a romantic glamorization of popular rebellion and guerrilla warfare, it is still surprising to see how many local writers have seized the opportunity to take an active part in the war in the Donbas, grasping the chance to become the heroes of their own stories.

Probably the most striking example is Fëdor Berezin, who in 2014 was actually appointed deputy minister of defence of the DNR. Berezin’s literary oeuvre is closely connected with the series entitled *Voenno-istoricheskaia Fantastika* (military and historical speculative fiction), which was launched in 2008 by the Moscow-based publishing house Eksmo / Iauza. Narratives about the forthcoming war in Ukraine (written mostly between 2003 and 2010) comprise a considerable portion of the series, with the most notable titles written by authors from Eastern Ukraine, Georgiï Savitskiï (from Donetsk) and Gleb Bobrov (from Luhansk).

Bobrov’s novel *The Era of the Stillborn*,¹⁸ Berezin’s *War 2010: The Ukrainian Front*,¹⁹ and Savitskiï’s *Battlefield Ukraine: The Broken Trident*²⁰ serve up extensive military exploits, often with lengthy descriptions and the detailed performance characteristics of various types of weaponry. All three novels characterize the Ukrainian state as a ‘stillborn’ geopolitical anomaly, which will give way to the rise of a new (Eurasian) empire – a trope which unites them with the literary genre of alternative (or counterfactual) history.²¹

¹⁷ Veniamin Uglëv, ‘Apogeï strakha’, in *Výbor* (see note 14), 389.

¹⁸ Gleb Bobrov, *Èpoha mertvorozhdeniïkh* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2008).

¹⁹ Fëdor Berezin, *Voïna 2010: Ukraïnskiï front* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009).

²⁰ Georgiï Savitskiï, *Pole boia Ukraïna: Slomannyï trezubets* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009).

²¹ Interestingly enough, alongside Berezin, many other authors who write predominantly in the sub-genre of *boevaia fantastika* (military speculative fiction) and have eagerly and eloquently envisaged the destruction of the Ukrainian state, are not just Ukrainian citizens, but were formerly active participants and laureates of the Kharkiv Star-Bridge Festival – one of the largest science fiction festivals in Eastern Europe, sponsored and chaired by Arsen Avakov, the current Ukrainian Minister of the Interior.

In these novels, the reader witnesses the contemporary post-Soviet world in decline, a process manifested in growing social tensions, in the fading of cultural life, and in the slow collapse of the remnants of Soviet heritage. Against the backdrop of this decline, the reader is confronted with the existence of dark forces, which plan to invade this vanishing world and thus, finally, to destroy it. These forces may appear either as NATO troops or as another form of Western conspiracy. The plots of these novels usually lead the reader not just to a well-deserved victory over the foreign invaders, but also envisage the reestablishment of the newly mighty Empire or a new social order as a result of this heroic fight. The imperial backlash is thus presented as an emotional substitute for the modernization and social harmony which is absent. More importantly, in all these texts the territory of Ukraine turns into a battleground and the place where the recovery fable starts. In more recent fiction this springboard is described by the term 'Novorossiiia'.

As a territorial brand promoted by pro-Kremlin intellectuals, spin doctors, and Donbas insurgents, the designated land of Novorossiiia appears both as an *antemurale* of the Russian world and the point of departure for Russia's reestablishment as a global power.

The historical term 'Novorossiiia' emerged in 1764, when Catherine II issued a decree establishing a province (governorate) called Novorossiiia in military frontier regions along with southern parts of the Hetmanate. In the decades which followed, the territory of Novorossiiia was adjusted many times. The administrative reform of 1802 put an end to the official term 'Novorossiiia' on imperial maps, breaking the province into three governorates (with centres in Mykolaïv, Katerynoslav, and Crimea), the region of the Army of the Don, and Bessarabia. Yet the word 'Novorossiiia' continued in circulation. For example, in 1838, the town of Novorossiisk was founded in the Northern Caucasus.

As a political concept, the word 'Novorossiiia' briefly re-appears in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's infamous treatise 'How We Should Organize Russia' (*Kak nam obustroit' Rossiïu*), where it is applied to counter Ukrainian claims on state sovereignty within the administrative borders of the Ukrainian SSR.²² Finally, after the annexation of Crimea, Novorossiiia

²² First published in 1990 in a special issue of the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*. See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 'Kak nam obustroit' Rossiïu', in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Sobranie sochineniï*, vol. 8, *Publitsistika: Na Zapade 1990–1994. V Rossii 1994–2003*, ed. Nataliia Solzhenitsyna (Moscow: Vremia, 2005), 7–65.

was mentioned in Putin's "direct line" phone-in of 17 April 2014.²³ It quickly fell out of favour with Russia's highest officials, but has remained in the discourse of pro-Kremlin public intellectuals and in the Donbas itself, where on 24 May 2014 the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic established the confederative Union of Novorossiiia, branded in the Russian media as part of the broader Russian World. The results of the presidential elections in Ukraine (25 May 2014) were a cold shower for supporters of Novorossiiia, because they showed quite substantial support for President Poroshenko (and by extension for the idea of a united Ukraine) in those regions comprising the historical lands of Novorossiiia.²⁴

Nevertheless, as a poetic symbol and an effective substitute for the clumsy abbreviations of DNR and LNR, Novorossiiia has remained firmly anchored in both the literary and the political discourses of the two breakaway republics. Yet in its most eloquent manifestation the vision of Novorossiiia came from the pen of the Russian writer Aleksandr Prokhanov. It is worth quoting at length:

"Fascism ... is on the rise again and marching eastwards, building crematoriums and gas chambers in the cities of Ukraine. The new state [Novorossiiia] born in the fight with the fascist beast accomplishes a vital mission: without any help from outside ... it defends the world from fascism. The history of Novorossiiia goes back to the mysterious depths of ancient Slavdom, of Greek city-states, and of Scythian barrows. These lands carry the primeval mystic energy which gave birth to the whole Russian world, from the Black Sea to the Baltics, from the Carpathians to the Urals. ...

The state which is being created in Eastern Ukraine is in its spirit truly a people's state. They who fight for justice are children of the people's war. They fight for social justice (in a country), where there will be no hierarchies, no rich and poor. They fight for a national justice (in a country), where all peoples will be equal and united. And they also fight for divine justice, for the fight against fascism is a cosmogonic war of the forces of light against the forces of darkness, the forces of love against the forces of hatred, the forces of heaven against the forces of hell".²⁵

²³ 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin', 17 April 2014, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796> (last visited 01 February 2019).

²⁴ Suslov, 'Production' (see note 11), 203.

²⁵ Aleksandr Prokhanov, 'Novorossiiia – rozhdënnaia v ognе', *Izvestiia*, 12 May 2014, available at <https://iz.ru/news/570647#ixzz3oLmCUeQn> (last visited 01 February 2019).

Starting with its pretentious title, *Novorossiiia – The Fireborn*, in terms of rhetoric and tropes, this text would already make the perfect plot for a fantasy story. First, it uses the equally original and fictive geopolitical concepts of Novorossiiia (literally, New Russia) and the Russian World (*russkii mir*), which both comprise a half-historical, half-metaphysical space attributed to the Russian state. Second, this text constructs the image of an absolute Other (Ukrainian fascism), thus enabling the scenario of a ‘cosmogonic war’ between Good and Evil. And finally, it envisages a social utopia, which is held to be worth fighting for.

More importantly, the vision of Novorossiiia establishes a universal antagonistic border, constitutive for the whole imaginary community of Russians.²⁶ Far from harmless literary speculation, the proponents of Novorossiiia have proved eager to constitute this new (geo)political reality by military means. Against this backdrop, the major problem with Prokhanov’s text is that it was published not in a fantasy magazine, but in the international politics column of the reputable newspaper *Izvestiia*. Despite this context, the author does not even try to give a semblance of plausibility to his story about “death camps and gas chambers”, simply because, owing to the specifics of the genre, this text cannot be the object of any fact-checking whatsoever. Its aim is not mimesis, but simulation, not the recognizable representation of the world, but the construction of a new, parallel reality. Omnipresent in various media, this aestheticized counterfactual captivates its consumers and makes it possible to read and interpret current geopolitical conflicts through the prism of speculative fiction.

Another important innovation, which in Prokhanov’s text appears alongside the term Novorossiiia, is the notion of ‘fascism’. Obviously, its function is not analytical, but aesthetic – fascism does not refer here to a particular ideology, but constitutes an image of the absolute Other (both in Soviet and post-Soviet tradition the term ‘fascism’ is equated with German National Socialism and, by extension, with absolute Evil).

To be sure, the othering of the enemy in the contemporary Donbas goes both ways: in the texts of pro-Ukrainian authors from Donetsk and Luhansk, we can come across strong metaphors which contribute effectively to the delegitimation of the enemy. For instance, in Vladimir Rafeenko’s much-praised novel *The Longitude of Days* (*Dolgota dnei*, 2017) the city of Donetsk and its pro-Russian inhabitants are referred to as

²⁶ Suslov, ‘Production’ (see note 11), 203.

“Z City” and “Z people”, where Z is obviously to be translated as “zombie”.²⁷ In his book *Reflections on the Luhans’k Vendée* (*Razmysleniia o Luganskoï Vandee*) Aleksandr Erëmenko characterizes the pro-Russian inhabitants of Luhans’k as “backward, uneducated, retarded, stupid, past-oriented masses”.²⁸

As literary figures, neither a zombie nor a fascist can be valid interlocutors as they cannot be engaged in any meaningful exchange or argument. Yet, beyond the utterly fantastical figure of a zombie, the notion of fascism is charged both historically and politically – it constitutes a discursive framework, where on the one hand the separatists’ fight against Ukrainian forces echoes the historical example of the Red Army’s fight in the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (1941–5), but on the other hand this fight can only ever be a copy, or rather an imitation, of that truly cosmogonic world war once fought on the territory of Ukraine.

The ‘heroic fight against fascism’ makes the founding myth of Novorossia entirely retrospective: the war for a united Eurasia, going on in eastern Ukraine, appears first and foremost a war for a better past. This past may appear as a ‘correct’ version of history, as sets of private memories about life in the USSR, or as a visible, allegorical extension of the Soviet past into the present – for example, in form of a Lenin statue in the essay by Nikolai Ivanov:

“The first thing we notice in the town Izvaryne, near Luhans’k, is Lenin. The concrete of which the monument is made has burst here and there, the fingers of the outstretched hand [of the statue] are gone, but here he stands – unfallen, undefiled, unguarded. So it is true that the Donbas hasn’t allowed the new followers of Bandera to take control of its land.”²⁹

4.

This idea of a war for the past is quite in line with post-Soviet transformations of the symbolic order of time, which Ilya Kukulín summarizes as follows:

“In Stalin’s time, the present was regarded and represented as the highest point of history, the point of breakthrough to the ‘shining future’. In today’s Rus-

²⁷ Vladimir Rafeenko, *Dolgota dnei* (Kharkiv: Fabula, 2017).

²⁸ Aleksandr Eremenko, *Razmysleniia o Luganskoï Vandee* (Berlin: Just a Life, 2015), 7.

²⁹ Nikolai Ivanov, ‘Gruppa iz’iatiia’, in *Ia dralsia v Novorossii*, eds. Gleb Bobrov and Fedor Berezín (Moscow: Eksmo, 2016), 70.

sia, the present, while not considered less valuable, is not considered more valuable than the past: in this way, the encounter between present and past turns into an endless *mise en abyme*, where each new action appears as a symbolic re-enactment of the past”.³⁰

The valorization of the past is hardly a new trend in the post-Soviet space. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym noted that in Russia, already “in the mid-1990s ..., the word ‘old’ was becoming popular and commercially viable, promoting more goods than the word ‘new’ ”.³¹ Following Kukulin, one might conclude, however, that the nostalgia of the 1990s gradually turned from a widely accessible good into an object of performative re-enactment with political implications. This re-enactment dominates fictional discourse about Novorossiiia, but it is also visible in the political rhetoric and performative actions of its elites. Thus, in the separatist-controlled parts of the Donbas the boundary between fiction and reality remains programmatically blurred or even permeable. For instance, in his “mobilization decree” from 24 June 2014, the then leader of the LNR Valeriï Bolotov (1970–2017) uses the following rhetoric:

“The treacherous military attack by fascist Ukraine on our motherland continues. Despite heroic resistance by the Army of the Luhans’k People’s Republic and although the best divisions of the enemy and its best air force units have already been destroyed and have met their end on the battlefield, the enemy continues its advance and throws new troops into battle.”³²

Anyone who has dealt with the Soviet history of WWII would easily recognize in Bolotov’s inflammatory speech Stalin’s radio broadcast from 3 July 1941, which was the first address that Soviet citizens heard from their leader after the crushing first weeks of the German–Soviet war. The speech has become famous for Stalin’s choice of words: for instance, he addressed his fellow countrymen as “brothers and sisters” and as “my friends” for the first time. Although Bolotov shies away from such informal and intimate forms of address, his speech otherwise carefully reproduces Stalin’s initial wording (only substituting Hitler’s Germany with “fascist Ukraine” and the Red Army with “the Army of the Luhans’k People’s Republic”).

³⁰ Ilya Kukulin, ‘Cultural Shifts in Russia Since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance’, *Russian Literature* 96 (2018): 232.

³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 65.

³² ‘V Luganskoï narodnoï respublike ob’iavlena polnaia, no dobrovol’naia mobilizatsiia’, *TASS*, 24 July 2014, available at <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1339692> (last visited 1 February 2019).

An even more spectacular re-enactment of history was organized in neighbouring Donetsk, where on 24 August 2014 the insurgents staged a 'parade' involving Ukrainian prisoners of war marching through one of the central streets of the city – obviously an imitation of Stalin's 'parade' of German POWs in Moscow in 1944.

While Article 13 of the Geneva Convention states that "prisoners of war must at all times be protected ... against insults and public curiosity", in the emerging master narrative of Novorossia this 'parade' will nevertheless remain a glorious event and the subject of collective pride. Thus, in her essay 'A Letter from Donetsk', Iuliia Sergeeva describes the 'parade' as intertwined both with her idea of local patriotism and with her daily routine:

"In Donetsk, the Heroes of the Donbas forced the captured chasteners³³ to march through the streets at the point of a bayonet. Three water carts drove behind them, washing the filth from our soil. Tears of pride rose in my eyes – pride in our people, in our country. The Donbas never gives up! I grew up with that [feeling]. Although until this year I had only had to fight against my employers and against myself."³⁴

Obviously, the whole event which took place in Donetsk that day could be interpreted as a manipulative technique used by behind-the-scenes propaganda strategists, while the real numbers of those combatants and their supporters in eastern Ukraine who sincerely believe that they are fighting against fascists can scarcely be properly estimated. However, it is no less evident that the very idea of the fight against fascism is already codified in countless texts about the war in the Donbas, thereby making this idea a central cognitive model for interpreting the events of 2014.

5.

From the perspective of the programmatic re-enactment of history, it is not surprising that one of the key elements in conceptualizing the war in Eastern Ukraine is the idea of time travel. A very telling example is provided by the Russian movie *14 / 41: The Lesson Unlearned*. Here is a quote from the synopsis:

³³ The word *karatel'* (chastener) was commonly used in Soviet literature to designate members of the SS-Einsatzgruppen, who were engaged in punitive expeditions against the civilian population of the occupied territories.

³⁴ Iuliia Sergeeva, 'Donetskoe pis'mo', in *la dralsia* (see note 29), 270.

“This is the story of Nick, a 5th grader at a school in Donetsk, who stays in the classroom during a bombing raid. All alone with his fear, he suddenly finds support. The most ordinary school blackboard becomes a portal to the past. Nick meets the same little boy, but from 1941. They are both locked in school, under fire, and both want to live, to be happy and to enjoy their childhood.”³⁵

However, while the story unfolds, viewers learn not only that the boys are “the same”, but also that the forces they are afraid of – the military units of the German Wehrmacht from 1941 and the Ukrainian government troops from 2014 are by implication merged and presented as “the same” fascists.

The motif of time travel has been used frequently in the Russian popular fiction of the 2000s to symbolize some profound (and otherwise unimaginable) ideological and political shifts. The most visible outcome of this literary practice is the particular figure of the post-Soviet time traveler, commonly referred to as a *popadanets*. The noun *popadanets* derives from the Russian verb *popadat'* – to get somewhere, to reach a specific place – and marks the special case of stories about time travel, when a protagonist from our time, or from some period in the past, suddenly and accidentally finds himself in some other historical era, from where he tries to change the course of history. A typical feature of these narratives is a combination of time travel and reincarnation, i.e., when the protagonist dies physically in his own time, but his consciousness, i.e., his ‘mind and soul’, are transferred into the body of some historic character in the past (e.g., into the body of the Russian tsar or of a Soviet leader). The idea of progress, which was so typical for Soviet science fiction, is not simply rejected here but is substituted for a revanchist utopian past, which is subsequently projected into the future (through alternative history and time travel).

Despite a common genre origin (with Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 1889, being an example), revanchist post-Soviet time travel, being a specific subgenre, treats the past in a way drastically different from Western fiction, where altering the course of history is often viewed as a taboo-breaking. Ray Bradbury’s short story *A Sound of Thunder* (1952) was definitely a trend-setter with regard to time para-

³⁵ The synopsis is accessible online on the website *Cinepromo*, available at <http://www.cinepromo.ru/fr/component/k2/item/265-lesson-unlearned-14-41.html>; and the YouTube-Channel of the film’s director, Nina Vedmitskaya, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-fWjMqakqA> (both last visited 1 February 2019).

doxes: in this story, the accidental crushing of a pre-historic butterfly by a time-traveller leads to irrevocable changes in history. This 'informal' restriction inherent in the genre proved especially fruitful for addressing different national traumas. Thus, in the novel *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (1996) by Orson Scott Card,³⁶ as well as in Stephen King's novel *11 / 22 / 63* (2011),³⁷ the time travellers have to abandon their initial plans of changing the course of history and are forced to set things right again.

In Eastern Europe, this 'therapeutic' effect is usually achieved by means of alternative history (without time travels). In Ziemowit Szczerek's *The Triumphant Republic* (*Rzeczpospolita zwycięska*, 2013), Poland wins the world war and becomes a new superpower, but as a militaristic and authoritarian state, it quickly turns into a threat to the entire continent.³⁸ In a recent novel by Oleksandr Irvanets', *Kharkiv-1938* (2017), Ukraine successfully defends its independence from the Bolsheviks, only to build a collectivist society (with a peculiar mixture of Marxism and ethnic nationalism) under the rule of a decadent elite.³⁹ Far from justifying the German occupation of Poland or Stalinist crimes in Ukraine (and in the rest of the Soviet Union), both authors point to the limitations and dangers of an alternative utopian past promoted as a viable model for the future. Described in all its ambivalence, 'a past which never occurred' ceases to be a fetish and a focus for the revisionist dreams of a traumatized national ego.

Needless to say, the authors of the contemporary Russophone time-travels advocate an entirely different strategy for dealing with the past. Once sent back in time, the typical Russian *popadanets* is usually preoccupied with saving and strengthening a metaphysical Russian statehood, which may appear in any of its historical incarnations. The dominant theme and the most frequently-deployed historical setting is the Second World War, which resonates with the Soviet concept of the 'Great Patriotic War' as the main legitimizing narrative of the Soviet Union. However, the genre openly adopts the idea that the real enemy in this war was not Nazi Germany, but rather the Western democracies – Great Britain and the USA. In some novels, the USSR may even cooperate with the

³⁶ Orson Scott Card, *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (New York: Tor Books, 1996).

³⁷ Stephen King, *11 / 22 / 63* (New York: Scribner, 2011).

³⁸ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Rzeczpospolita zwycięska* (Kraków: Znak, 2013).

³⁹ Oleksandr Irvanets', *Kharkiv-1938* (Kyiv: Laurus, 2017).

Third Reich. At least after the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, the role of the enemy was more frequently ascribed to the Baltic states, Georgia, or Ukraine itself – the supposed ‘puppets of the West’.

The correlation between the genre’s popularity and the aggressive turn in Russia’s foreign policy is too marked to be ignored. According to the web-portal *fan-book.ru*, no less than 145 new books featuring the trope of the *popadanets* have been published in Russia in 2014, followed by 66 new novels a year later.⁴⁰ While most of these texts are rather plain and simple-minded stories with comparatively small print-runs, the sheer scope of this literary production reveals the cumulative effect of a phenomenon which goes far beyond mere graphomania.

We cannot disregard the point that these books featuring the stereotypical figure of the *popadanets* are not only stories about time travel. More importantly, they are also narratives about upward social mobility and personal transformation from average loser to epic hero. The same narrative model was carefully deployed by Russian state-controlled media, by their war journalists, and by authors like Zakhar Prilepin and Marina Akhmedova – with the aim of constructing the idealized biographies of the most renowned separatist warlords of the Donbas republics.⁴¹ These are the stories in which a poor guy like Arseniï Pavlov, alias Motorola (1983–2016), who barely makes ends meet by working at a car wash in Russia, suddenly finds himself in eastern Ukraine, where he becomes a renowned war commander and an unbending fighter against fascism. A story in which the former bricklayer Pavel Drëmov (1976–2015) receives a sort of divine revelation and turns into a brave and noble Cossack ataman fighting for the Orthodox faith. A story in which the amateur poet and folk singer Alekseï Mozgovoi (1975–2015) becomes a new Che Guevara at the head of an armed guerilla battalion.

Despite their physical death, as literary figures the warlords of the separatist republics remain important collective symbols within the larger discourse of Novorossiiia. Consider, for example, the following lines by Elena Zaslavskaia, referring to the assassination of Arseniï Pavlov (killed by remotely-activated explosives in the elevator of the house he lived in),

⁴⁰ Nikita Averin, ‘Trendy rossiïskoï fantastiki v 2016’, *fan-book.ru*, 11 October 2016, available at <https://fan-book.ru/blog/192/entry/2697/> (last visited 1 February 2019).

⁴¹ Marina Akhmedova, *Uroki ukrainskogo: Ot Maïdana do Vostoka* (Moscow: AST, 2014); Zakhar Prilepin, *Vše, chto dolzhno razreshit’sia... Khronika idushchei voïny* (Moscow: AST, 2016).

but which also provide a poetic monumentalization of the entire idea of the independent country of Novorossia:

“In my Novorossia / [a country] which cannot be found on Google maps / Where everything is so simple / And so crystal clear / Where field commanders fly into outer space / In the elevator / Where the spoil tips of insanity / Are more terrifying than Lovecraft’s mud-bank / There is a place for feats and for revenge / Zoom in, / Let’s take a look at the star Betelgeuse together, / My comandante!”⁴²

Finally, the notions of simplicity and clarity in the above poem by Zaslavskaja are worth discussing explicitly, as they are echoed in many other Russian texts which refer to the war in the Donbas.

Apart from political Manichaeism and the clear identification of an enemy, this particular understanding of simplicity also implies a farewell to the ambiguity of (post)modern reality and to the corresponding (post-modernist) style of writing. The latter gives way to a literary form which is generally believed now to be extinct. However, a brief look at the literary examples quoted in this article will suffice to show that most of these texts carefully reproduce the stylistics of Soviet *politinformatsiia* (political-ideological lectures) and ultimately the “wooden language” of socialist realism⁴³: they are full of pompous words, tautologies, ideologically charged symbols, and bad metaphors.

Abandoning the idea of a glorious future for the sake of a retrospective utopia, these texts still manage to maintain a typically Soviet sense of forced optimism and revolutionary romanticism. Although the re-enactment of history, as one of the central legitimizing models of Novorossia, capitalizes on the motif of travelling back in time which is borrowed from Western popular literature, the real and indeed the only functioning time machine we encounter in these texts is the literary form itself – more than the actual content of the texts, their wording and their literary aesthetics successfully reinstall some central conventions of Soviet ‘realist’ writing and by doing so evoke a stable feeling of *déjà vu*.

⁴² Elena Zaslavskaja, ‘Zvezda Betel’geize’, in *Vybor* (see note 14), 45.

⁴³ The term ‘wooden language’ is a literal translation of the French expression *langue de bois*, introduced by the French scholar Françoise Thom. See Françoise Thom, *La langue de bois* (Paris: Julliard coll. “Commentaire”, 1987).

6.

While the political future of the DNR and the LNR remains both obscure and fragile, the works of fiction and the vibrant literary discourse which have emerged around the designated state of Novorossiia have effectively achieved the textual codification of this separatist Neverland and placed the unrecognized state on the mental maps of the Russian reading audience. More importantly, the same motives, tropes, and symbols which constitute the founding myth of Novorossiia can easily be re-attributed to the more conventional territorial brand of 'Donbas', to the administrative acronyms of the DNR and the LNR, or to any other regional brand.

Anticipating the official histories of the breakaway republics of the Donbas, the literary texts (whether poetry or prose) already provide a common aesthetic background for a large community united by a shared imperial resentment. Combining retro-utopian narrative, historical reenactment, and modern warfare, these literary works construct a community which is not only 'imagined' but also 'intentional' – it is an outpost of the Russian World, which in its present-day incarnation is closely connected to the Donbas region, but which is capable also of emerging anywhere in the post-Soviet space.