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Stanislav Aseyev. *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas.*

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In February 2022, the tension that had been on the rise in Russo-Ukrainian relations from 2014 reached an unprecedented level. Russia, following its recognition of the “independence” of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR), launched an atrocious full-scale war against Ukraine on 24 February. The year 2022 marked the eighth year of the Russo-Ukrainian war that had started with Russia’s occupation of the Crimea and its provision of financial and military support to mercenaries in the Donbas. But despite continuing military hostilities between the two states, the term *war* was used with caution in international venues. Prior to the barbarities committed by Russia in 2022, the word was substituted with *conflict*, *tension*, *standoff*, and *crisis*. Owing to this eight-year terminological ambiguity, Russia’s brutal war crimes against Ukraine and its people in 2022 seemed perplexing to many observers. The book *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*, by Stanislav Asieiev (Aseyev), provides a focal point for understanding the highly intense and entangled background of the current Russo-Ukrainian war. The work was originally published in Ukrainian in 2018 and was translated into the English by Lidia Wolanskyj.

Asieiev, a Ukrainian journalist and writer who was born in Donetsk, spent almost three years in the occupied parts of the Donbas. He was captured by the Russia-backed separatist militia on account of his political views and held captive for more than two years. *In Isolation* is a collection of his essays originally written for the Ukrainian press from 2015 to 2017. The title of the book, Asieiev explains, refers to his imprisonment on the premises of Izoliatsiia—“formerly an insulation manufacturing plant” (xi). But there is another meaning encoded in the title: “Without a doubt, though, one of the main themes of all my pieces was my isolation from most friends and even family who came out in support of the other side in the war—the separatist militants and mercenaries, and their masters in Moscow. Aloneness in one’s views and the personal rift that has torn apart not just families but society itself demonstrates more than anything else just how strong the Soviet mindset remains in Ukraine” (xiii–xiv).

Since the inception of the war in 2014, many have wondered how the backward and surreal entities known as the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic could have come into being. A mosaic of chimeric episodes in the work *In Isolation* sheds light not only on the political

strategies applied by the Russian Federation but also on the various crude and subtle psychological manipulations that helped generate a collective consciousness perceiving Putin and Russia as “saviours.” The proliferation of Russian propaganda in the Donbas relied heavily on the perseverance of Soviet rhetoric, which was very often limited to a nostalgia for cheap sausage and the illusion of communal camaraderie. Russia also learned how to exploit the distorted spirit of a Donbas grounded in the belief that Ukraine would never be able to survive without the Donbas’s coal and industry.

Asieiev describes the culture of post-2014 Donbas. A new generation has been growing up there, and it views Ukraine almost exclusively as hostile toward the “DPR” and “LPR”’s political and ideological positions centring on Russia and the USSR. In this Donbas reality, which many would find surreal and grotesque, one can see portraits of Iosif (Joseph) Stalin and Vladimir Lenin stationed next to religious icons. Furthermore, the Eastern Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) has been instrumentalized to advance a Russian propaganda trajectory whose apogee is a story about a baby crucified by Ukrainian military forces.

Three years seem like a millisecond when set against larger historical processes, but Asieiev’s narrative coaxes a reconsideration of such an understatement of time. This is one of the most revealing aspects of *In Isolation*—and one that can easily be overlooked. Since 2014, “DPR” and “LPR” residents have by and large been in tune with Russians who consume official narratives portraying Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state that persecutes Russian speakers. This representation of Ukraine has penetrated educational programs on every level, and in 2022, it contributed to Russia’s full-blown attack against Ukraine.

As a result of aggressive and manipulative tactics disguised as gestures of solidarity and friendship, the Russian Federation with its idea of *Russkii mir* (“Russian world”) became the sole option welcomed by the two “republics” for their future development. Unbeknownst to the majority of supporters, this option brought nothing but destruction. In the Donbas, some wore T-shirts bearing the phrase “I am Russian,” while banners and billboards included the flags of the “republics” and the Russian Federation. These expressions of fascination with the state that had violated Ukraine’s territorial integrity by occupying the Crimea and had supported President Viktor Ianukovich’s decision to use weapons against protesters in 2014 puzzled many Ukrainians living outside the two regions. Although the Donbas population overwhelmingly supported Russia, there may have been, Asieiev suggests, a small group who silently sided with Ukraine; they had to stay quiet, however. Asieiev warns his readers not to judge too harshly those who stayed in Donetsk in 2014. Some stayed because they sincerely believed in the support of the Russian Federation. Others remained because they did

not know where else to go. And still others felt that they were too old to restart their lives in a new place. Where, really, could they have gone?

Asieiev was captured by Russia-backed forces a few years after they had established control over parts of the Donbas. His final dispatch (see 251–55) was written in detention; it is dated 26 May 2017. As the reader weaves through a collage of jaw-dropping descriptions of how a distorted reality was constructed and then presented as something worth dying for, a sense of despondency gets intensified. It is generated by the loss of an awareness of freedom—substituted by Russia with the feeling of having to constantly defend oneself against “enemies.” The Kremlin suffused the occupied region not only with the belief that Russians of the Donbas are essentially Russians of Russia but also with the idea that their very existence is permanently threatened by the existence of Ukraine as an independent state. This world view led to a perpetual cycle of (self-)destruction that resulted in the Russian Federation’s barbaric war against Ukraine. Today, Russia continues to promote its myths about a “decaying West” and a “holy Russia”—and not only in the Donbas. Unfortunately, some portion of its audience is still receptive to such myths.

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