

Ildi Eperjesi & Oleksandr Kachura

Shreds of War

Fates from the Donbas Frontline 2014-2019

With a foreword by Olexiy Haran

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Foreword

This collection of interviews about the war in Donbas spurred my never ending emotions and thoughts about this drama. I have witnessed it from the very beginning. In late February 2014, the Euromaidan, known also as Revolution of Dignity, gained a victory. After almost 100 protesters under EU flags (called later “Heaven’s Hundred”) were shot in the center of Kyiv during the agony of a corrupt and authoritarian regime, then Ukrainian president Yanukovich fled from Ukraine to Russia, and new democratic elections were scheduled. The signing of the Association Agreement with the EU was clearly in sight: its political part was signed by the provisional government in March and the economic agreement by democratically elected President Poroshenko in June 2014.

However, Russian aggression against democratic and pro-European Ukraine started immediately. Ukrainian army and law-enforcement forces were deliberately destroyed by the Yanukovich regime. As a result, first, at the end of February Crimea was occupied, and then Putin tried to spread the so called “Russian spring” throughout east and south of the country. However, it did not gain support of Russian-speaking Ukrainians who rather supported Ukrainian integrity. And that is why Putin transferred Russian “tourists” to the Donbas, then Russian “volunteers” and finally regular armed forces. As a political scientist and analyst, I was commenting these events for media and I was watching the TV news and checking the web sites. My mood was gloomy. We did not know what could happen. We did not know if Putin would attack Kyiv: the distance from the capital to the border with Russia is only 230 km — a short way for tank armies or airborne troops.

And then we heard that the first volunteers moved from Maidan to the frontline. One of the heroes of this book paramedic under nickname “Spring” explains her feelings: “It is not scary to save people under shooting. It is scary to sit at home and watch the news”.

The whole country started to collect donations to equip volunteer battalions and Ukrainian army which with this support started to revive. Yet, my psychological feelings remained bad: I am in Kyiv, and volunteers are risking their lives at the frontline. So I decided to go to the frontline as a political scientist to watch by my own eyes and to comment from the ground, based on real facts not on TV interpretations. I called volunteer battalions and joined them. With them and later with support of the regular army units, I visited most of the hot spots of the frontline mentioned in this book (Debaltseve, Piski, Donetsk Airport, Shyrokyne near Mariupol and many others) in 2014-2016. And a miracle happened! I immediately recovered psychologically! For me it was the same as for the heroes of this book: yes, I am here, I see that Ukrainians are defending themselves and I see the people who are sacrificing their health and lives to defend the country, they are real heroes.

But for people at war, when they have machine guns in their hands, when they see how their brothers in arms and civilians are dying it is difficult to control emotions. People are people, they are different, they are not angels. And we know that in an existential situation people are not only showing their best but also their worst.

Therefore, it is very good that in this book different points, different peoples are represented, those from the west and the east of the country, those mobilized to Ukrainian army to those from volunteer battalions like the Right Sector and even a captured Russian "volunteer". In this book I recognize the people whom I met in these hot spots of war. And because they are different, they represent different political, professional, cultural, personal perspectives. We may not agree with all they are saying, some things may be exaggerated or even distorted, but we hear the voices of real people. I feel their sorrow in my heart as some of my friends also died defending Ukraine.

These people are posing difficult questions about the contradictory Minsk Agreements, which Ukraine had to sign under the barrel of the Russian guns. One hears it in this book: Why should we implement "Minsk"? Why do we need to stick to the so called ceasefire if we are shelled by Russians almost every day? Why

was Debaltseve stormed by Russian regular forces during the formal ceasefire and finally seized?

They asked about smuggling along the frontline. Also, according to the international law, it is Moscow which is responsible for the hardships of the population in the occupied areas. But this is not a declared war but a “hybrid war”: Russia does not recognize its presence and it points out to the puppet “people’s republics” which nobody recognizes. What should Ukraine do in this situation? To pay pensions, to continue trade with them, to maintain humanitarian ties with our people living in the occupied areas or to conduct a blockade? There is no easy answer.

But Ukraine cares about her people, she tries to find ways to pay pensions to the pensioners who remain in the occupied part of the Donbas. Even in time of pandemic, Kyiv does its best to facilitate the crossing of the so-called contact line (in reality, the frontline) and it is the aggressor, who prevents the work of checking points and thus it prevents people from visiting government-controlled areas to get food, goods and pensions.

Also, I hear from the heroes of this book similar questions I was asked at the frontline – “we fight here but the fight with corruption at home is not done” – and I was trying to explain as a political scientist that this could not be done immediately. In Donetsk Airport, I met the soldier under call sign “Prosecutor” (because he was a prosecutor in civilian life) and now he is the deputy head of the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor Office. There I met a sniper “Lawyer” and now he is a judge of the Supreme Court of Ukraine. Yes, we are fighting the two wars: one – against Russia, another one – against corruption within the country. And soldiers are going from one war to another. Finally, I am always stressing in my comments that our soldiers are fighting not for presidents Poroshenko or Zelensky but for Ukraine and for democratic and European Ukraine, which the dictator in Kremlin is afraid of.

One of the heroes of this book is “Monia”, an ethnic Jew fighting for Ukraine (near Donetsk airport I met “Moses”, a Russian-speaking Jew who joined the “radical” Right Sector to fight for Ukraine). On the pages of this book the readers meet priests of

different confessions who serve as chaplains or who are working as volunteers on a humanitarian mission.

There are those Ukrainian patriots who wage underground war in the occupied territories and those Ukrainian soldiers who were accused of wrongdoings. Everything is happening in the war. But as it is mentioned in chapter 3, it is so important to continue to provide support, not necessarily material but moral one, to veterans, to those who were wounded, and to those families who lost their loved ones in the war.

The Kremlin wages the information warfare not only against Ukraine but also against Europe. Not much has changed since the Soviet times. I remember how we were taught in Soviet schools about the “Finnish attack” of the Soviet Union in 1939, about “imperialists coups” in 1953 in the “German Democratic Republic”, in 1956 in the “Hungarian **People’s Republic**”, or in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, non-block Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal (the 3d largest in the world) in exchange for the guarantee of its territorial integrity from great powers including Russia. But the Kremlin attacked non-block Ukraine and cynically accused NATO and “Ukrainian fascists”. How can people from post-Communist countries be deceived again by the Kremlin propaganda?

It is not a “civil war”, it is not the war in eastern Ukraine which is peaceful, nor it is about the whole Donbas as Kremlin and its lobbyists claim: only one-third of Donbas is occupied by Russia and two third are under control of Ukraine. Kremlin continues its ‘hybrid war’ and is using now new tactics which includes disinformation warfare, energy and migrant crises, attempts to divide the West, to divide Europe.

As journalist Ildi Eperjesi is the Hungarian co-author of the book, it is not surprising that she pays strong attention to ethnic Hungarian volunteers and soldiers from Ukrainian Transcarpathia, the multi-ethnic region with historically strong Hungarian presence. Like “Monia” and “Moses” they are also fighting for Ukraine, and this is just another confirmation of **Ukrainian political nation** which embraces people living in Ukraine whatever is their confession, language and even ethnicity.

An ethnic Hungarian from Transcarpathia, Peter Filippovich, who fought in Donbas explains: “Those who were there and saw what the ‘Russian world’ is doing with civilians will never allow the invaders to come to their land”.

Mark from the Czech Republic explains why he came to defend Ukraine: “If the Russians occupy Ukraine, the next country will be Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic”.

The war is transforming all of us: Ukrainians do not believe any more in the talks of “brotherhood with Russia”, we have chosen in favor of the EU and we know who are our real friends but we rely first of all on ourselves. War is fire which kills, but in this fire the new country, purified from Communist and Soviet dogmas, has emerged.

Ildi Eperjesi says: I have changed, and new senses of existence have appeared.

This is true for Ukrainians, too. The truth about Russian aggression is a warning sign for Europe and the world.

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