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The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine's Donbas

With a foreword by Hiroaki Kuromiya

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Contents

Acknowledgements **5**

List of Abbreviations **12**

Foreword by *Hiroaki Kuromiya* **13**

1. Introduction **21**

1.1. Researching War **23**

1.2. In Defense of Case-Study Analysis **25**

1.3. The Donbas in 2014: Civil War or Invasion? **27**

1.3.1. Why it Matters 30

1.3.2. The Evidence and Its Shortcomings 32

1.4. Chapter Conclusion **39**

2. The War's Critical Junctures **41**

2.1. A Donbas Conflict Escalation Ladder **41**

2.1.1. Steps and Thresholds 44

2.1.2. Non-Thresholds 48

2.2. Six Critical Junctures **50**

2.2.1. Non-Junctures: The Protests of March 2014 52

2.2.2. Juncture 1: Donetsk and Luhansk, Early April 54

2.2.3. Juncture 2: Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and Surroundings, Mid-April 55

2.2.4. Juncture 3: Mariupol—Where Separatism Failed, Mid-April to Mid-June 58

2.2.5. Juncture 4: The Fighting Spreads, Late May 58

2.2.6. Juncture 5: Tanks and Heavy Artillery, June-July 59

2.2.7. Juncture 6: The Ukrainian Defeat of Late August 59

2.3. Chapter Conclusion **60**

3. Digital Forensic Process Tracing **63**

3.1. Four Benchmarks for Good Process Tracing 63
3.1.1. Separating Explanations and Evidence 64
3.1.2. Considering Alternative Explanations 65
3.1.3. Practicing Source Criticism 66
3.1.4. Updating Probabilities 66

3.2. The Neglect of Source Criticism and Probabilistic Reasoning 67

3.3. The Potential of Digital Open Source Information 69

3.4. Operationalizing Digital Forensic Process Tracing 72
3.4.1. Five Philosophical Challenges 73
3.4.2. Five Pragmatic Solutions 75
3.4.3. Additional Limitations and Remedies 80
3.4.4. Digital Forensic Process Tracing in Practice 83

3.5. Chapter Conclusion 85

4. Of Arms and Barricades: Donetsk and Luhansk in Early April 87

4.1. Enthusiasts or Agents? The Role of Grassroots Activism 91
4.1.1. The Burden of Proof 92
4.1.2. The Chaotic Birth of the Donetsk People's Republic 92
4.1.3. Partisans from Stakhanov? The "Army of the Southeast" in Luhansk 96

4.2. Apathetic Oligarchs: The Role of Local Elites 99
4.2.1. The Yanukovych "Family" 99
4.2.2. Rinat Akhmetov 102
4.2.3. Oleksandr Yefremov 105
4.2.4. Oleksandr Bobkov 108
4.2.5. Other Potential Sponsors 109

4.3. Cossacks, Eurasianists, and Kremlin Advisers: The Role of Russia 110
4.3.1. The Glazyev Tapes 111
4.3.2. Eurasianism and Its Friends in Donetsk 113

4.3.3. The Crimean Link 116
4.3.4. The Don Cossack Network 117
4.3.5. FSB and GRU in Luhansk 118

4.4. Chapter Conclusion....122

5. Enter Igor Girkin: The Occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk....125

5.1. From Crimea to the Donbas: The Genesis of Girkin's Militia....129

5.2. Girkin's Links to the Kremlin: The Oligarch and the "Prime Minister"....140

5.3. Actions without Consequences: Girkin's Return to Russia....143

5.4. Order or Tacit Approval? On Putin's Role....144

5.5. A Separatist Bandwagon: The Role of Locals....147

5.6. Chapter Conclusion....149

6. Mariupol: Where Separatism Failed....151

6.1. Mariupol's Separatist Movement....157

6.2. Oligarchic Resistance? The Role of Rinat Akhmetov....159

6.3. A Handshake and Some Weapons: The Role of Russia....162

6.4. Mariupol Elsewhere: A Counterfactual Thought Experiment....165

7. The Fighting Spreads....167

7.1. The Volnovakha Attack: A "Demon" from Russia....170

7.1.1. The Origins of Igor Bezler and His Group....171
7.1.2. Bezler's Second Passport....173
7.1.3. Bezler's Handler: Introducing Vasiliy Geranin....174

7.2. Donetsk and Surroundings: Boroday's "Volunteers" 178
7.2.1. Russian Fighters in Donetsk 179
7.2.2. Boroday and Surkov 182

7.3. Luhansk City: Where Wagner Meets Orion 185
7.3.1. The Wagner Group in Luhansk 186
7.3.2. Orion, Elbrus, and Pavel Karpov 189
7.3.3. Yevgeniy Prigozhin: Putin's Chef 192

7.4. Luhansk Oblast: The Don Cossack Invasion 193
7.4.1. Ataman Nikolay Kozitsyn and the "Cossack National Guard" 193
7.4.2. Pavlo Dromov and Oleksii Mozghovyi 194

7.5. The Role of Locals and Kremlin Infighting 197

7.6. Chapter Conclusion 198

8. The Calibers Grow 201

8.1. From Russia to the Donbas: The First Convoys of Heavy Arms 203
8.1.1. Few Places to Rob: The Unavailability of Ukrainian Heavy Arms 203
8.1.2. From Siberia to the Donbas: The June 12 Tank Convoy 206
8.1.3. Burning Vegetables: The June 13 Grad Attack on Dobropillia 209
8.1.4. Armor Patterns on a Russian Highway: The June 19-21 Tank Convoys 212
8.1.5. The Artemivsk Tank Depot: An Implausible Source 214

8.2. Losing Territory, but Gaining Tanks: The Separatists in July 2014 215

8.3. Russia's Envoys and the Downing of MH17 217
8.3.1. Civil Society's Tanks: Sergey Kurginyan in Donetsk 217
8.3.2. Appoint More Russians: The Separatist Administrations in Early July 218
8.3.3. MH17 220

8.4. Chapter Conclusion....221

9. The Tide Turns: The Ukrainian Defeat of August 2014....225

9.1. Prologue I: Cross-Border Shelling....228

9.2. Prologue II: The Pskov Paratroopers....230

9.3. The Battle of Ilovaisk....232

9.4. The Battle of Luhansk....235

9.5. The Battle of Novoazovsk....238

9.6. Chapter Conclusion....240

10. Conclusion....243

10.1. Russia's Invasion in Disguise....243
10.1.1. Donetsk and Luhansk in early April....244
10.1.2. Sloviansk and Kramatorsk....244
10.1.3. Mariupol....245
10.1.4. The Fighting Spreads....246
10.1.5. Tanks and Heavy Artillery....247
10.1.6. Ukraine Defeated....247
10.1.7. Counterfactual Scenarios....248

10.2. New Ways to Study War....249
10.2.1. Reviving Escalation Theory....249
10.2.2. Digital Forensic Process Tracing....251

10.3. Academic Implications....254

10.4. How the West Failed Ukraine....258

10.5. Lessons to Be Learned....260

10.6. On Multicausality: Concluding Remarks....262

References....267

List of Abbreviations

COW	Correlates of War project
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
DOSI	digital open source information
DR	Donetsk Republic
ESM	Eurasian Youth Movement
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russian domestic intelligence service)
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate (Russian military intelligence service)
JIT	Joint Investigation Committee (for the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over the Donbas)
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
MID	military interstate disputes
NVO	Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye (Russian weekly newspaper focusing on military affairs)
OSINT	open source intelligence
OUN	Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program

Foreword

If the twentieth century marked the apogee and the ultimate demise of imperialism, the twentieth-first century signaled a post-imperialist world. When Moscow annexed Crimea and surreptitiously invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, the world was shocked, even though with hindsight it should not have been such a surprise. Still one can sympathize with Angela Merkel, the then Chancellor of Germany, who intoned about Russia's military assault on Ukraine:

> Who would've thought that 25 years after the fall of the wall, after the end of the Cold War, after the end of the division of Europe and the end of the world being divided in two, something like that can happen right at [the] heart of Europe? (Smale 2014)

The collapse of any empire is a messy business. It creates complex and tangled territorial, ethnic, linguistic, and a host of other vexing issues, leaving anguished and often spiteful legacies everywhere affected by it. Today the world is coping with these issues and legacies. The collapse of the Russian (Soviet) Empire in 1991 is no exception. Yet, as Edyta Bojanowska (2022) reminds us, "Russia is the only European state that has engaged in a reconquest of its former imperial dominions."

Jakob Hauter's eminently readable book, *Russia's Overlooked Invasion*, examines Russia's attempt to reconquer Ukraine in 2014, focusing on Moscow's clandestine operations in the Donbas, significant parts of which were occupied that year through Russian military operations. The book addresses rigorously both theoretical and empirical issues of the invasion. This preface is intended to help readers comprehend the dramatic and consequential events of 2014 in a broader, historical context.

In the messy aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, no region of the former Soviet Union was left in as contradictory, enigmatic, and even incomprehensible a state as the Donbas. It is important to examine why, if we are to understand how and why the war broke out in the Donbas in 2014. Hauter's book defines the

Donbas as two oblasts in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, bordering the Russian Federation. In 2014, together they accounted for approximately nine percent of Ukraine's territory and 15 percent of its population. The Donbas is a vast steppe land where the coal and steel industry developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its importance as an industrial dynamo was such that during the Stalin years it was called the "All-Union Stokehold." Historically speaking, the Donbas was a Cossack land, the "wild field," so called because the competing political authorities that sought to dominate it, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Muscovy, and the Ottoman Empire, could not really control it. The "wild field" symbolized a sort of political vacuum where people could seek refuge and find a degree of freedom. From the sixteenth century onward, those who fled there established military brotherhoods for the purpose of self-defense and came to be called Cossacks (derived from a Turkic word signifying 'free men'). Their center was in Zaporizhzhia, just to the west of the Donbas, in today's Ukraine. While much of today's Donbas belonged to the Zaporizhzhian (Ukrainian) Cossacks, who were only nominally under Polish-Lithuanian control, smaller parts in the eastern Donbas were claimed by a different Cossack group, the (Russian) Don Cossacks, formed and developed at about the same time mainly by those who had fled autocratic Muscovite rule as it expanded and amplified serfdom. Much of this smaller area came under Muscovite rule in the seventeenth century. The Zaporizhzhian Cossack lands (most of today's Donbas) came under Russian rule in the eighteenth century when the Russian Czar Catherine II conquered and subjugated the free men and their lands to Russia's autocratic rule. The vast land grab by Russia at the time included Crimea as well. Catherine called the newly acquired lands on the northern shore of the Black Sea "New Russia," a reflection of nakedly imperialist hubris.

Since the Donbas was historically a non-Russian land, the Russian government invited ethnic Russians, Germans, and many others to settle in "New Russia." The discovery of vast coal deposits in the Donbas and the subsequent rapid industrialization in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century further impacted the ethnic composition of the Donbas. Ethnic Russians began to settle in towns and mines en masse and left a strong cultural and

linguistic imprint on the Donbas. The lingua franca of the Donbas as a whole, as of most of "New Russia," became Russian, while the countryside, inhabited largely by ethnic Ukrainians, generally retained the Ukrainian language. Never, however, in the history of the Donbas did ethnic Russians constitute a majority. In the last Soviet census of 1989, for example, ethnic Ukrainians accounted for just over 50 percent. Although sizeable, ethnic Russians constituted at most approximately 44 percent. Since Ukraine's independence, the proportion of ethnic Russians has dropped below 40 percent.

Despite changes wrought by waves of industrialization and brutal Soviet rule lasting from 1918 to 1991, the Donbas never really lost its reputation as the wild and free steppe. The industrialization of the Donbas in both the Czarist and Soviet periods created vast opportunities for all kinds of people who wanted freedom: fortune hunters, criminals, adventurers, the poor and desperate, and those who fled political, economic, and religious persecution. Even during the period of the harshest rule under Stalin, the Donbas retained its reputation as a refuge for freedom-seekers. Many fleeing from Stalin's collectivization and de-kulakisation (dispossession of peasants) hid, both literally and figuratively, in the Donbas underground, as coal miners (Kuromiya 1998). Most interestingly, after World War Two, Ukrainian partisans fighting a losing war against Soviet military forces and unable to escape to the West, were advised to go to the Donbas and hide there (Armstrong 1990, 221). Despite the constant threat of political persecution, the Donbas has remained a land of refuge and freedom through much of its modern history.

The Donbas was and remains an enigma for many outsiders. Nearly every political party has gotten its hand burnt in the Donbas. That was the case in the past and remains so today. In this sense, the Donbas has always been a notorious political playground.

The reason for the notoriety comes down largely to the apparent contradictory nature of the Donbas, representing as it does freedom to some, but enslavement to others, as epitomized by the dangerous, hard, and exploitative labor of the coal mines (Kulchytskyi and Yakubova 2016, 18–20). Equally significant is the powerful prejudice within Ukraine against the Donbas as an "uncultured" brute

land. Not long ago one of the most noted contemporary Ukrainian intellectuals dismissed the Donbas as a non-European "proto-cultural wasteland" that "easily succumbs to political manipulation in connection with a black-and-white view of the world," and its people as "medieval-feudal" or "Cro-Magnon-Neanderthal" (Andrukhovych 2005, 3; 2006, 10–11). And while there is no question that wild oppression and naked exploitation existed, the Donbas has continued to stand for freedom, at least until very recently. The Donbas shares this contradiction with America, which oddly embodies both freedom and oppression for many non-Whites. To the chagrin of all political parties, the Donbas as a whole has never adhered to any particular political orientation, just like the Ukrainian Cossacks, whose constantly shifting alliances angered all parties concerned (Poles, Russians, and Ottomans).

Yet the Donbas was and is far from an unprincipled mercenary force, easily manipulated by outside forces. Its seemingly cunning and baffling political orientation actually was and is a well-defined self-defense strategy, typical of border regions in general, to cope with competing outside political forces whom it distrusts. The Donbas as a "free" land never ceased to attract refugees. Indeed, people with nowhere to go tested their luck in the Donbas. Such was the case, even in the late Stalin era, with the father of Anatoly Shcharansky (today an Israeli politician), who could not work in Odesa because of the anti-Semitism and was told to go to the Donbas: "Try your luck in Stalino [today's Donetsk]" (Kuromiya 1998, 325). If freedom constitutes the essence of Ukrainian national identity, the Donbas historically embodies it. It also means that the Donbas has attracted, in addition to those seeking freedom, all kinds of intriguers and political "riff-raff" who could not operate elsewhere. In the years leading up to 2014, Russia almost certainly dispatched, unhindered, such operatives to the Donbas.

True, the Donbas was a problem child for the powers that be. Yet it did not mean that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Donbas rejected integration into Ukraine. On the contrary, in 1991 the Donbas population overwhelmingly supported Ukraine's independence, with over 80 percent of its population voting in favor. While Ukrainian politics ultimately disappointed the Donbas population, and discontent mounted, the people of the Donbas still

envisaged their future within the framework of an independent Ukraine. Before 2014, there were few signs of separatist sentiments or movements in the Donbas. Popular separatism emerged only after Russia's intervention in the Donbas in 2014. Hauter is absolutely correct that "while separatist sentiment may cause conflict, conflict may also cause separatist sentiment" (see section 1.3.2.5. of this book). It was conflict brought from outside that introduced popular separatism to the Donbas in 2014.

In the years leading up to 2014, the political integration of the Donbas into the Ukrainian body politic proceeded quietly. Far from separating from Ukraine, the Donbas politicians sought to seize power in the capital, Kyiv. They failed in 2004–5 due to the "Orange Revolution," but they succeeded in 2010 with Viktor Yanukovych, a politician from the Donbas backed by Moscow, elected as Ukraine's President. Through Yanukovych, Moscow sought to control Ukraine. However, as a Ukrainian politician, he was not in agreement with Moscow on all issues. Nevertheless, the policies and the governing style of Yanukovych's administration, which was influenced by Moscow's behind-the-scenes machinations, ultimately led to a mass rebellion in Kyiv in 2013–14 (the "Revolution of Dignity" or "Maidan Revolution"). Initially, Yanukovych did not seem to have had the stomach for killing the protesters, but eventually several dozen protesters died at the hands of the security forces, possibly with the clandestine involvement of Russian operatives. Resisting the orders of Vladimir Putin to cling to his presidential powers, Yanukovych fled. Russia's military occupation of Crimea ensued immediately in February 2014. Shortly thereafter, Russia invaded the Donbas.

Granted, distrust of and discontent with Kyiv was palpable in the Donbas even during the Yanukovych era, yet popular separatism was absent. The people in the Donbas may have helped to elect Yanukovych in 2010, yet he was known there as the "thief from Yenakiieve [Yanukovych's hometown in the Donbas]" and the "shame of the Donbas" (Studenna-Skrukwa 2014, 284–285). Yanukovych and his gang were "bandits," but they were "*our* bandits" (emphasis added). One Donbas worker noted quite revealingly: "Yanukovych is a criminal… all governments are criminal" (Kuromiya 2019, 249).

As for Putin's claims of any animosity toward ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking people in the Donbas, this is nothing short of ludicrous. Even Pavel Gubarev, who had become one of the separatist leaders in the Donbas, openly proclaimed that "here [in the Donbas], there was no ethnic enmity" (Kuromiya 2019, 246).

Lack of ethnic enmity in an ethnically mixed area meant that the Donbas possessed much potential for democratic and civil (as opposed to ethnic) nationalism. During World War Two, Yevhen Stakhiv worked in the Donbas as an Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) agent and found that people in the Donbas viewed the OUN ideologue, Dmytro Dontsov, as a "fascist." Under the influence of the Donbas people, Stakhiv, who had once idealized Spain's Franco regime, "abandoned a narrowly defined Ukrainian nationalism and embraced the ideal of a democratic Ukraine without discrimination against its national minorities." Until his death many years later, Stakhiv remained grateful to the Donbas people for his democratic conversion (Stakhiv 1995, 133–134, 308). Far from an anti-democratic bastion, the Donbas exerted a democratizing influence on the Ukrainian body politic.

The open, free, and seemingly indeterminate nature of the Donbas, however, did facilitate stealth political and military intervention from outside. Taking full advantage of the prejudiced views of the Donbas prevalent in Ukraine and beyond, Putin claimed absurdly that the Donbas was not and is not Ukrainian, but rather historically and inherently Russian, with persecution against ethnic Russians and Russophones prevalent. Moreover, Putin, formerly an intelligence officer of the Soviet (Communist) state, asserted facetiously that he would help Kyiv's efforts to "de-communize" Ukraine by destroying Ukraine itself. After all, according to Putin, it was Vladimir I. Lenin who created the "artificial" entity called Ukraine and separated it from Russia; it was also Lenin who in 1918 opposed the separation of the Donbas and the surrounding regions from Ukraine and disbanded the "Donets-Krivoi Rog Republic" (created by a small number of Bolsheviks), incorporating it into Ukraine (Putin 2022a). In other words, Putin now attacks Lenin and the Bolsheviks as anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian.

Today's Russian military forces use a two-volume textbook on maskirovka (camouflage), which they boast is "three times longer

than Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace" (Ash 2015). Disinformation, camouflage, conspiracy, and covert subversion are the essence of Putin's political operations. He inherited them from the grand yet largely unexamined experience of the Soviet state. He deployed all of these in making his grab for "New Russia" in 2014.

Putin's covert operations have fooled many Western academics and observers, who still claim, even after having witnessed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that the war that engulfed the Donbas in 2014 was essentially a civil war. Hauter's meticulous and methodologically rigorous analysis of the events of 2014 makes it abundantly clear that they are wrong: The war was an interstate war initiated by Russia's covert military invasion.

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