SINE IRA

DONBAS: HISTORY, CONFLICT, AND REALITY BEYOND PROPAGANDA

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INTRODUCTION

The Donbas is not a neutral name. For more than a decade it has circulated as a symbolic word, loaded with meanings that shift depending on who is speaking. In Russian propaganda, it is the land of Russian-speaking "brothers" to be liberated; for part of Ukrainian public opinion, it is a suspect region, inhabited by "separatists"; for Europe, too often, it has been little more than a newspaper headline evoking a distant and incomprehensible war. In this hall of mirrors, the real place has vanished. This book aims to restore it to its reality: a reality made of cities, factories, miners, divided families, conflicting memories, and propaganda layered over facts.

The Donbas, in fact, was not born as an eternal identity. It was shaped from the nineteenth century onward. Before that, there were steppes, Cossacks, scattered settlements; later, coal and steel gave rise to a vast industrial experiment. Millions of people moved there from across the Soviet Union. Neighbor-

hoods, schools, hospitals, and theaters were built around factories, under an implicit social contract: the work was hard, but the state provided services and security. This social fabric shaped local identities. A Russian-speaking citizen could be Ukrainian without feeling any less so, just as a Ukrainian speaker could work alongside colleagues of countless origins. Language was not a banner, but a tool.

With independence in 1991, this balance began to fracture. Large factories lost orders, oligarchs took control, trade unions weakened. The Donbas did not reinvent itself as the Ruhr or Upper Silesia did, where deindustrialization opened space for new economies. Instead, it remained dependent on coal and steel, swinging between demand booms and deep crises. Meanwhile, central governments struggled to propose an alternative model, often viewing the region either as an electoral reservoir or as a problem to be managed. In this vacuum, two opposing narratives grew: on one side, that of a "naturally Russian" region; on the other, that of a "separatist dead weight." Neither captures the truth of everyday life.

The year 2014 marks the breaking point. The Maidan in Kyiv represented a new beginning for millions of Ukrainians, but in the Donbas it arrived as a distorted echo. Armed occupations, improvised referendums, the emergence of the so-called people's republics—events in which Russia's role was decisive, through men, weapons, and advisers. Ukraine responded with the "Anti-Terrorist Operation," yet the label "terrorist" ended up affecting not only fighters, but entire communities. An identity fracture took shape—one that was not inevitable, but that war froze and radicalized.

For eight years, from 2014 to 2022, the Donbas lived in a state of low-intensity war. A contact line cut through neighborhoods and families. Every day brought shelling, wounded civilians, broken ceasefires. It was during this phase that the slogan of a "Donbas genocide" emerged in Russian discourse, while on the other side the conflict was framed as a war for freedom. In between were civilians learning to live underground, children growing up among shelters and interrupted schooling, families switching languages between home and work in order to survive. The war did not divide territories alone; it divided biographies.

The 2022 invasion radicalized everything. Mariupol reduced to rubble; Severodonetsk and Lysychansk fallen; Bakhmut turned into a grinding war of attrition. The Donbas became the core of Russia's new military strategy. Then came the referendums and annexation—not merely a political gesture, but a deep reorganization of daily life. Russian passports distributed, the ruble imposed, schools restructured, phone networks rerouted toward Russia. Borders multiplied: military, administrative, digital. Civilians found themselves in an amphibious condition, forced into ambiguous choices in order to survive.

At the same time, the environment began to collapse. Flooded mines released heavy metals into rivers; water became undrinkable; land subsided; skies filled with dust from rubble, generators, and destroyed factories. War strikes invisible services first—water, energy, sewage—and only later the façades. Rebuilding without securing the underground and the networks means erecting stage sets destined to collapse.

Why is the Donbas the key to peace? Because three inseparable dimensions intersect there. The first is law: illegal annexation challenges the principle that borders cannot be changed by force. The second is security: whoever controls the Donbas controls crucial military, logistical, and energy nodes. The third is identity: as long as the people who live there remain trapped between suspicion and stigma, no peace can be stable. Without the Donbas, there will be no peace in Ukraine. Either it is reintegrated through justice, reconstruction, and reconciliation, or it will remain an open wound, ready to tear again.

This book seeks to reconstruct the Donbas according to two criteria: depth and clarity. We will not assume that the reader is familiar with treaties or dates; every reference will be explained. We will not reduce complexity to slogans, but neither will we allow propaganda to replace facts. The method is simple: gather sources, verify them, compare them, and place them in context. The goal is not a "neutral" image, but a transparent framework in which the reader always knows what is certain, what is probable, and what remains uncertain.

The journey follows a spiral: from historical roots to the wars of the present; from everyday life under the separatist republics to the full-scale invasion; from reconstruction prospects to identity scars. Each chapter weaves together events, causes, and consequences, without reducing reality to propaganda. We do not promise definitive answers, but a path of understanding that restores to the Donbas what has been taken from it: the dignity of the real.

PART I

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND IDENTITY

1

THE DONBAS BEFORE THE DONBAS

A BORDERLAND OF STEPPES, COSSACKS, AND EMPIRES

Before the word *Donbas* existed, the region was known as the Wild Fields (*Dyke Polia*): a vast black steppe of fertile soil, crossed by the Donets River[1] and its tributaries, almost devoid of trees and permanent settlements. It was an open frontier, more a corridor than a territory—traversed by

1. The Donets River (Ukrainian *Siverskyi Donets*, Russian *Seversky Donets*) is the main tributary of the Don River. Rising near Belgorod in southwestern Russia, it flows southwest through the Kharkiv oblast, then turns southeast, running for long stretches through the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where it has marked parts of the frontline in the conflict. After roughly 1,050 km it reenters Russia and joins the Don near Rostov. Its course passes several major cities of eastern Ukraine—Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Lyman, Severodonetsk, Luhansk—and for centuries it has been the primary water source for agriculture and, in the industrial era, for mines and thermal power plants. The river gave its name to the entire region: *Donetskyi basin*, the "Donets Basin," shortened to *Donbas*.

armies, caravans, and raiders, without any single power ever fully controlling it. Scythians and Sarmatians passed through these lands, followed by the Pechenegs and the Cumans, and later by the Tatars[2] of the Crimean Khanate[3], linked to the Ottoman Empire. In this space, the border was never a line: it was a shifting zone, crossed and contested, where sovereignty was not exclusive but layered.

It was precisely in this landscape that the Cossack world emerged. From the sixteenth century onward, groups of free men—peasants fleeing serfdom or armed adventurers—began to settle along the rivers. The Cossacks were not an ethnicity, but a social condition: autonomous communities living from fishing, hunting, trade, and privateering warfare[4], ready to defend villages from Tatar raids and just as ready to launch

2. Over the centuries, the Donets steppe was crossed by numerous nomadic peoples. The Scythians (7th–3rd century BCE) were the first Eurasian steppe rulers described by Herodotus. The Sarmatians (3rd century BCE–4th century CE) were Iranian horsemen who replaced the Scythians. The Pechenegs (10th–11th century) and the Cumans (11th–13th century), Turkic peoples, long controlled the steppes and often clashed with Slavic principalities. Finally, the Tatars of the Crimean Khanate, vassals of the Ottoman Empire (15th–18th centuries), conducted raids for centuries in Ukrainian and Russian lands until the Russian conquest of Crimea in 1783.

3. The Crimean Khanate was a state founded in the fifteenth century by descendants of Genghis Khan and was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire. For over three centuries it was a regional power in the Black Sea, with its capital at Bakhchysarai, basing its economy on agriculture, trade, and above all slave raids into the Ukrainian and Russian steppes. It was progressively weakened by wars with Russia and ceased to exist with its annexation in 1783.

4. By "privateering warfare" is meant a form of naval warfare conducted by privateers—authorized but irregular expeditions aimed at attacking enemy ships and seizing their cargoes. In the Cossack case, the term aptly describes their raids against Tatars and Ottomans.

expeditions southward. Two Cossack universes developed in parallel: the Zaporozhian Cossacks, linked to the lower Dnieper and in a tense relationship with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Don Cossacks, farther east, in dialogue with Muscovy[5]. In both cases, relations with the great empires were ambivalent: communal freedom on one side, imposed military service on the other. The famous uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky[6] (1648) and the Pereiaslav Agreement[7] (1654), through which part of the Cossacks accepted the protec-

5. *Muscovy* refers to the Russian state centered on Moscow between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Originally a medieval principality, Muscovy initially extended over northeastern European Russia (between the middle Volga basin and the Moscow region), later absorbing territories toward Novgorod, the upper Oka basin, and progressively southeastward to the border with the Tatar-Crimean steppes. It did not yet coincide with the Russian Empire; it was a regional formation that, beginning with the reign of Ivan III and especially Ivan IV (the Terrible), launched the expansion that would lead to modern Russia. In European sources, the name "Muscovy" distinguished this realm from the broader tradition of the *Rus'*.

6. Led by the Cossack colonel Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the uprising of 1648 erupted against Polish-Lithuanian rule in what is now central Ukraine. Its main causes were social oppression of Ruthenian peasants, religious discrimination against Orthodox Christians, and the marginalization of the Cossacks. Within months the revolt overran garrisons and cities, giving rise to a Cossack state (the Hetmanate). The uprising marks the beginning of the so-called "Cossack wars" and opened a phase of civil war and conflict among Poland, Muscovy, and Crimea.

7. The *Pereiaslav Agreement* was concluded in the city of Pereiaslav between part of the Ukrainian Cossacks led by Khmelnytsky and Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich. Through this pact, the Cossacks acknowledged the tsar's protection in exchange for military and administrative autonomy. It was not a codified international treaty but an oath of allegiance—ambiguous and open to interpretation. For Moscow, it marked the beginning of eastern Ukraine's integration into the Russian sphere; for the Cossacks, it remained a conditional alliance. Its consequences were decisive: Ukraine was divided along the Dnieper (one part under Polish control, the other under Russian control), and Cossack ambiguity turned into political dependence.