

Aseyev, Stanislav. *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*. Translated by Lidia Wolanskyj. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022, 320 pages. Hardcover, \$37.95.

In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas is a collection of writings between January 20, 2015, and May 26, 2017, by Stanislav Aseyev, a Donbas journalist using the pseudonym Stanislav Vasin. Aseyev is explicit in his opposition to the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and informs the reader about his twenty-eight-month imprisonment due to the content of some of his writings shared in this book. The author notes the book's title is from his own sense of isolation during his imprisonment in Izoliatsiia and the loss of those close to him since they were either killed in the fighting or alienated by his critical views of the DPR. Aseyev speaks to the complexities of the Donbas conflict as it has become "impossible" to differentiate between "who is 'us' and who is 'them'" (p. 22). The theme of isolation guides this text as Aseyev probes the "social and psychological transformations" of those who "have found themselves isolated" due to the conflict (p. xiii). Throughout the text, Aseyev refers to the mental strain the conflict has imposed on locals and, at one point, contrasts the "sadness" of those in Makiivka with the pleasantness of those in a Ukrainian village he visited (p. 248-9).

Aseyev articulates vividly the "apathy and hopelessness" that has become a part of life in the Donbas during the war (p. xiii), whether that is looking at the conditions that have pushed those into enlisting in the separatist militias, which largely extends beyond ideological reasons, to the difficulties they experience once they leave the militias. One of the author's main concerns is the future of those in the Donbas—whether that is regarding job and educational prospects for the youth or that the Donbas is "in danger of losing an entire generation" (p. 5). There is also concern over the effectiveness and permeative nature of pro-Russian propaganda and Soviet symbolism in Donetsk that promotes the glories of Soviet history and has even infiltrated the education system. Furthermore, Russia is celebrated for its assistance in the Donbas while the

propaganda of “Ukrainian Nazis” gives supporters of the DPR a perceived threat to fight against and makes some of the older locals apprehensive (p. 54). Aseyev is concerned these conditions, particularly the nature of education in the DPR, negatively impact the level of Ukrainian patriotism among the youth. Aside from the propaganda listed above, the author contends that death presents “probably the most painful and irreconcilable issue” in the conflict (p. 110) and notes that the Ukrainian military is often blamed for these deaths by DPR supporters, which makes “the best propaganda” (p. 170). Aseyev notes he is frequently asked the question of “why haven’t you left?” (p. 35) and believes people who share his beliefs need to engage in collective civic action to “defeat the DPR” (p. 35). That said, he later recognizes “there are not enough people here like me...to act to free Ukraine” in a writing dated February 21, 2016 (p. 127). Although Aseyev notes people in the Donbas were starting to agree with his perspectives, he is pessimistic that Ukraine has accepted the loss of Donetsk.

Although Aseyev is critical of the DPR, he also blames Ukraine for failing to establish “deep roots in the Donbas” (p. 136). This helps to explain what Aseyev contends to be the “ambiguity” of Donbas identity as many in the region have come to conceptualize “themselves as anything but Ukrainians” (p. 136). He contests the notion that there are no longer supporters of the Ukrainian government in the DPR and notes later in the book that the Ukraine government cannot completely wash its hands of the Donbas if there are those inside who continue to fight for it. However, he expresses the belief that “the war has never really penetrated the national consciousness of Ukraine” (p. 166) and criticizes both the “Ukrainian mainstream” for largely ignoring the conflict and the lack of effort by Kyiv to win “the hearts and minds” of those ripe with discontent in the DPR and allow them to “see the situation more clearly” (p. 253). Readers of the book may be interested in exploring the polling data on Ukrainian views on the conflict

and the ways in which Donbas residents identify themselves to compare with Aseyev's description of the situation.¹ Although periods of (dashed) optimism are found in *In Isolation*, the specter of Crimea looms large in his writing. It is clear that Aseyev does not want the Donbas to suffer the same fate as Crimea.

In Isolation is an engaging and digestible text for a non-academic reader with little knowledge of the events that have transpired in the Donbas within the last decade. The text provides timelines between November 2013 and December 27, 2017, so that readers unfamiliar with the conflict in the Donbas can see some of the major events that relate to it. The book also has several images of the destruction caused by the war, people, including a "boy" with guns and/or wearing camouflage in various contexts, captured Ukrainian soldiers, and pro-Russian demonstrations. The book provides good context from one person's perspective in the Donbas prior to the current Russian war in the Ukraine and can be supplemented with other first-person perspectives whether those be in support of the Ukrainian government or of the DPR to compare with Aseyev's views. Particularly interesting is Aseyev's prediction "that Russia will never...recognize the independence of the LPR/DPR" since it would draw it into a war (p. 217). Although this recognition of independence occurred in 2022, this section of the book provides a snapshot of one person's thinking that the "best option" was the status quo since most in the DPR "are certain" the two "republics" are "permanent" (p. 219). Given that Aseyev's reflections in the book span a period of approximately two and a half years, the reader can see the progression of his views on the conflict and on Ukraine as the war dragged on.

Notes

1. Consult, Olexiy Haran and Maksym Yakovlyev, eds., *Constructing A Political Nation: Changes in the Attitudes of Ukrainians during the War in the Donbas*. (Kyiv: Stylos Publishing, 2017).

Brian de Ruiter
Brock University
Ontario, Canada