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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Back From Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiya Russia

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Abstract

How to cope with the end of utopia? How to move from making history on a day-to-day basis to capitalizing on a legend? That is the dilemma Russian veterans of the Donbas insurgency have faced since the exalting atmosphere of Novorossiya faded away. In this article, I trace the transformations of the Novorossiya utopia from the point at which Russian volunteer fighters began to return to Russia and found themselves compelled to reinvent themselves in a new context. I first look at the difficult reconversion from war to politics of Donbas heroes such as Igor Strelkov and Aleksandr Borodai and how their efforts to launch new structures based on their war legitimacy have succeeded or failed. I then turn to investigate the birth of new heroes, such as the writer Zakhar Prilepin, who wave the metaphorical flag of Donbas at a time when exaltation of the war has declined. After that, I explore how Novorossiya has become a literature genre that occupies the shelves of Russian bookstores, spanning from *Novorossievedenie*—the "science of Novorossiya"—to the rich subgenre of war memoirs and veteran diaries.

Keywords: Novorossiya; Donbas; Russian nationalism; veterans

Introduction

How to cope with the end of utopia? How to move from making history on a day-to-day basis to capitalizing on a legend? That is the dilemma Russian veterans of the Donbas insurgency have faced since the exalting atmosphere of Novorossiya faded away. While the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk (DNR and LNR)[1] both still exist and function as secessionist territories, Novorossiya as a utopian project no longer does; it is dead in all its different conceptions. As a territorial notion, there is no longer an expectation that eastern Ukrainian territories will secede and attempt to join Russia; even the ephemerous Novorossiya confederation of the two de facto republics was terminated in May 2015 by its founder, Oleg Tsarev, a businessman from Dnipropetrovsk then the head of the "Novorossiya Parliament." As a revolutionary ideology of "Russian Spring" transforming the Putin regime, Novorossiya has likewise disappeared. The Kremlin retook control of the insurgency in the summer of 2014 and progressively pushed out the volunteer fighters, who had largely left the conflict zone by the end of 2016. The regime has done a good job of managing the Pandora's box opened with the war with Ukraine, not allowing itself to be co-opted by the nationalists: since 2016, the ideological exaltation has gradually declined and is currently stagnant at a low level.

One of the most revealing signs of the death of Novorossiya—the most powerful nationalist utopia to take shape in post-Soviet Russia—was the June 2017 proclamation by Aleksandr Zakharchenko, the then-leader of the de facto Donetsk Republic, of the "federal state of

Malorossiya"—a historical term used to define the Ukrainian territories during the tsarist era. This eccentric declaration did not win the support of the Lugansk authorities and was mocked even by the Kremlin. But beyond the anecdote, the shift from the notion of Novorossiya to that of Malorossiya reveals the death of the "new Russia" myth: the Donbas insurgency no longer calls for a utopian alternative to Russia, instead—and more modestly—presenting itself as an alternative to today's Ukraine (*Korrespondent*, July 19, 2017).

In this article, I trace the transformations of the Novorossiya utopia from the point at which Russian volunteer fighters began to return to Russia and found themselves compelled to reinvent themselves in a new context. I first look at the difficult reconversion from war to politics of Donbas heroes such as Igor Strelkov and Aleksandr Borodai and how their efforts to launch new structures based on their war legitimacy have succeeded or failed. I then turn to investigate the birth of new heroes, such as the writer Zakhar Prilepin, who wave the symbolic flag of Donbas at a time when exaltation of the war has declined. After that, I explore how Novorossiya has become a literature genre that occupies the shelves of Russian bookstores, spanning from *Novorossievedenie*—the "science of Novorossiya"—to the rich subgenre of war memoirs and veteran diaries.

Situating Research on Donbas Veterans

This article is situated at the intersection of three fields of research: the evolution of the Donbas conflict five years after its eruption; the transformation of the landscape of mercenaries, war veterans, and paramilitary associations in Russia; and the relationship between state structures and figures I call "ideological entrepreneurs."

Most academic discussions of the Donbas conflict identify three main actors: the Russian state, the Ukrainian state, and the leadership of the secessionist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. But there is a fourth actor that is often overlooked: the fighters themselves, especially the volunteers, whose motivations for war remain murkier than those of the other actors and have not been explored thus far. One of the only studies at our disposal is a short text by András Rácz discussing the different ways to calculate the number of foreign fighters on the Russian side of the insurgency—he arrived at a conservative estimate of between 8,000 and 15,000—and the limitations of the exercise (Rácz, 2017).

Volunteers are often accused—even by secessionist authorities—of being responsible for a disproportionate number of casualties and acts of irregular violence. A rich literature on paths to individual radicalization may help us capture which factors prompt individuals to engage in violence. Such studies typically look at cases of either right-wing extremist and skinhead gangs or violent jihadist groups and individuals. Scholars of social psychology have argued that the quest for personal significance leads to active engagement in radical activity (Sageman 2004; McCauley and Moskalenko 2008; Deci and Ryan 2000). The quest for significance is not a linear process, but may ebb and flow depending on external factors, such as an individual's exposure to collective violent ideologies, ability to join radical communities, and virtual or real contacts on a daily basis. Social media chat-rooms, "how-to" magazines, and websites provide broad knowledge about the ideology and methods of violence, as well as connecting lone wolves with similarly-minded people across the world (Weimann 2014; Spaaij 2012; Pantucci 2011).

The literature on civil war and insurgencies (Della Porta and LaFree 2011; Ganor 2002; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011), as well as on mercenaries more specifically, likewise offers some theoretical insights into certain aspects of this research. The phenomenon of mercenaries has been widely studied, with the focus primarily on its "normalization" as embodied by private security contractors, especially in the context of the Iraq war (Stoker 2008; Krahmann 2012; Petersohn 2014). Recent research analyzes modern mercenaries as renewing a form of medieval arrangement whereby insurgent leaders guaranteed local social order by recruiting "payroll" fighters (McFate 2015), a tactic resembling some gang patterns (Manwaring 2010). Fitzsimmons (2013) takes an innovative approach that looks at how new mercenary groups place heavy emphasis on behavioral

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norms, encouraging their personnel to think creatively, take personal initiative, enhance their technical proficiency, and develop a sense of loyalty to their fellow fighters. Marten (2012) broadens the scope of analysis by linking the question of mercenaries to warlords, which, as Driscoll notes in reference to Georgia and Chechnya, some weak states regard as expedient solutions to the problems of stability and governance (Driscoll 2015). Another fruitful discussion links conflict processes to the emergence of new organizational forms by studying the overlap between formal organizational hierarchies (militia, regime, etc.) and relational networks (Padgett and Powell 2012; Padgett and McLean 2006).

Russian fighters in the Donbas conflict include both professional mercenaries—fighting for money—and radicalized individuals looking for personal significance through their combat experience. As a whole, they benefitted from relatively favorable public opinion at home: in May 2014, 61 percent of respondents to a Levada Center survey supported the involvement of Russian volunteers in Donbas, a figure that decreased slightly to 53 percent in mid-2015 (the most recent point for which data is available) (Levada Center 2015a). Yet only 29 percent were favorable toward their involvement in Russian domestic politics, while 43 percent were opposed to it. The constituency that was most supportive of their political involvement at home was highly educated yet low-income individuals aged 40 and above (Levada Center 2015b). The gap between public support for the volunteers' role in the conflict and a lack of desire for them to become politically active at home is significant for these fighters as they cease violent activity and attempt to deradicalize through politics. The present article hones in on precisely this issue.

This brings us to a second body of literature, the one relating to war veterans. Once volunteer fighters leave the conflict zone, they undergo an identity transformation, becoming war veterans—with the ambiguity that the war in Donbas is not recognized as such by the Russian authorities. Research on Russian veterans of the Afghan and Chechen wars usually focuses on their war experience and traumas, as well as on the way they negotiate social benefits with the state. Yet their role as powerbrokers in the field of military and patriotic education has largely remained understudied, addressed mostly in the works of Kulmala and Tarasenko (2016) and Sieca-Kozlowski (2010). Veterans from the war in Afghanistan were the first to become socially active and engage in bringing up the youth in a patriotic manner, gradually joined by veterans of the Chechen wars, former *spetsnaz*, members of the Alfa elite troops, and all kinds of contractors from the Russian army. All these former men of war need to build a new professional niche for themselves after re-entering civilian life. They make the most of their privileged relationship with the power ministries, often enjoying discounted access to military and paramilitary facilities and installations, such as shooting ranges. Professionalizing their patriotic commitment and military skills can thus be simultaneously a survival tactic for those facing reintegration difficulties, a way of legitimizing their new social identity by training youth, and a profitable business venture (many open private security services for businessmen [Laruelle 2015]). The Donbas veterans hope to follow the same path: they lobby for the same status and associated benefits, and look to enter the same professional niche and secure a privileged relationship with power ministries.

Last but not least, many leaders of the Novorossiya war also belong to the category of "ideological entrepreneurs." I define them as individuals who have genuine room to maneuver in terms of developing an ideological agenda and taking advantage of the many grey zones the regime offers for cultivating patronage networks. Just as oligarchies are not secure but remain dependent on individual loyalty to some members of the ruling elite, ideological entrepreneurships are also unstable; they can be challenged and their ideational empire dismembered. These entrepreneurs may work for material benefits and recognition, yet they still believe in what they fight for. In the case of Novorossiya, both Igor Strelkov and Aleksandr Borodai worked under the protective umbrella of the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who has never hidden his monarchist convictions and involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Once back home, however, they had to navigate a much more constrained environment where getting state support requires renegotiating previous commitments.

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Fallen Heroes: A Difficult Political Reconversion

The Donbas insurgents, both locals and Russian citizens, did not hide their disappointment at what they interpreted as the Kremlin's lack of support. All had been hoping for a quick and easy annexation/reintegration into the Russian Federation on the model pioneered by Crimea, but this never materialized. A second disappointment has been the post-Novorossiya context: even the legendary leaders of Donetsk and Lugansk have struggled to capitalize on their wartime legitimacy. Although discouraged, many former warlords have nevertheless remained loyal to the Russian regime and have hesitated to move into open opposition to the Kremlin, even if the authorities' approval of organized grassroots support for the conflict ceased as early as 2015. Here, I delve into the trajectories of two of the main personifications of Novorossiya—the warlord Igor Strelkov and the "polit-administrator" Aleksandr Borodai—to analyze two divergent strategies of civilian reintegration into Russia.

Strelkov, the Solitary Monarchist

The trajectory of Igor Strelkov—his real surname is Girkin—(1970), the iconic warlord of Donetsk, reveals the challenges of building an autonomous political career based on legitimacy derived from the Donbas war. Strelkov has a track record of fighting for the Russian nationalist cause, first as a defender of the White House in 1993, then in Transnistria, Yugoslavia, Chechnya, and, eventually, Crimea and Donbas, where he became the face of the Slavyansk battle. A historian by training and a specialist on the Russian civil war, openly monarchist, he has participated over the years in numerous historical reenactments, playing the role of a White officer (*The Insider* 2014). This influenced his leadership during the conflict: among insurgents, the flamboyant military leader was known for his efforts to restore order and demands for a more hierarchical chain of command, as well as for his attempts to substantiate military order with religious arguments. For example, at the end of July 2014, a few days before his resignation, he prohibited the use of obscene language among his troops, alleging that Russia's enemies used obscenities to insult holy icons and that this practice should therefore be considered a sin (Ikorpus 2014). Strelkov, who served as minister of defense for the de facto DNR, was subsequently dismissed from this post for unclear reasons, likely because he was too much of a liability after the shooting-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) and was known for not following Moscow's orders closely enough (Belkovskii, quoted in Mongait 2015).

Upon his return to Russia, Strelkov kept a low profile for several months before attempting to capitalize on his prestige. In November 2014, he was known by only 21 percent of respondents to a Levada survey, but of these, 41 percent had a somewhat positive perception of him (Levada 2014). By March 2015, he was known by 27 percent of people, 55 percent of whom were favorable toward him, 26 percent neutral, and only eight percent negative (Levada 2015b). As noted by the Levada Center, Strelkov was thus less widely known than Alexei Navalny, but more popular among those who did know of him. In November 2014, he decided to launch the Novorossiya movement, with the dual aim of promoting his cause in Russia and offering humanitarian—and potentially financial—support to the insurgents. The Novorossiya movement hinges on Strelkov's own prestige, which, at the end of 2014, was at its zenith among nationalist-minded Russians. On the nationalist segment of the Russian Internet, posters portrayed him as various Russian heroes throughout the ages—Alexander Nevsky against German and Baltic invaders, Suvorov against the Ottomans and the Poles, Kutuzov against Napoleon, the officers of both the White and Red Armies, and the Soviet heroes at Stalingrad—and he was even featured in some online cartoons.[2] A mushrooming cult of personality took shape, as evidenced by the (now defunct) website superstrelkov.ru.

Yet this success among nationalist-minded Russians and his networks in some power ministries, likely including the Foreign Security Services (FSB), were far from sufficient to secure Strelkov any political niche. In need of a new, more inclusive strategy, he co-founded K25, the January 25 Committee, in January 2016. His partners included, among others, Eduard Limonov, the leader

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of the forbidden National Bolshevik Party and of the oppositional movement Other Russia; Egor Prosvirnin, the founder of the website *Sputnik i Pogrom*; the radical nationalist essayist Maksim Kalashnikov; and Konstantin Krylov, the leader of the National Democrats. The Committee's founding resolution advanced a Russian imperial agenda, with a specific focus on Ukraine, and supported Limonov's proposal to institutionalize April 5 as the Day of the Russian Nation (*Den' russkoi natsii*, commemorating Alexander Nevsky's victory over Western crusaders); it also proposed the abolition of Article 282 of the Penal Code, which targets incitement to hatred (*Dvizhenie Novorossiia Igoria Strelkova* 2016). On paper, the Committee could have become a new landmark on the Russian nationalist landscape, able to unify figures from different doctrinal traditions—ethnonationalists such as Prosvirnin and Krylov, Eurasianist and Stalinist figures like Kalashnikov, and representatives of pro-tsarist nostalgia such as Strelkov himself. Yet K25 was ineffective and rapidly transformed into a more Strelkov-centric organization with the departure of Limonov and Prosvirin as early as March 2016.

Since then, Strelkov has continued to appear individually and to feed the Novorossiya movement website as well as his own but has not engaged in any other form of outreach. He tried to join the Russian March, but he was not welcome there due to the tensions between his movement and the Russian National Front organizing the March (*Istrelkov.ru* 2017). His status in post-Novorossiya Russia is an uncomfortable one, located in a kind of gray zone between opposition and officialization: unlike other famous nationalist figures, such as Limonov, he has not been arrested and condemned, but nor does he enjoy official status in the way that, for instance, the conservative thinker Mikhail Remizov, President of the Institute of National Strategy, does. Strelkov was temporarily barred from appearing in mainstream media, but has progressively been reintegrated as part of the "constructive opposition," putting him in a similar position to Aleksandr Prokhanov or Aleksandr Dugin.

This ambivalent status was particularly visible during the 2017 online debate he agreed to enter into with Alexei Navalny, in which Strelkov positioned himself as a reserve officer, loyal to Russia and therefore to its legitimate authorities even when he disagrees with them ideologically. During the debate, he advanced a bold monarchist discourse, contending that contemporary Russia had inherited false borders drawn by the Bolsheviks and should fight for the return of its imperial borders and the expulsion of every imported Western element (*Naval'nyi LIVE* 2017). He denounced Russia's position on the Minsk Agreements as a betrayal of the Donbas cause and accused the leaders of the DNR and LNR of being corrupt mercenaries controlled by Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs. This openly monarchist and imperialist discursive line cannot hope to reach large constituencies, minimizing Strelkov's ability to capitalize on his position as the most famous Russian warlord.

Borodai: Veterans' Activities as a Tool for Reintegration

A more successful case is that of Aleksandr Borodai (1972), former prime minister and deputy prime minister of the de facto Donetsk Republic. Like Strelkov, Borodai prides himself on his nationalist biography, which includes the 1993 White House fight, Transnistria, and Chechnya (the last as a war journalist) (*RBK Daily*, May 26, 2014). But Borodai has been more responsive than Strelkov to Moscow's vision of the conflict, working as a para-governmental figure channeling communication from the Kremlin to the Donetsk authorities. Borodai seems to have been curated by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's former *eminence grise* and now assistant to the president for the Donbas conflict, and can thus count on more direct access to power institutions than Strelkov (Kofman 2017). This has led Pavel Gubarev (2016, 209), the first people's governor and minister of foreign affairs of the Donetsk Republic and an ideologist of the "Russian Spring," to denounce Borodai as a traitor to the Novorossiya cause, describing him as a "newcomer" (*priezzhii*) without the legitimacy of the "locals" (*tutoshnie*) and decrying his purported refusal to fight against corruption and racket.

In another distinction from Strelkov, Borodai has long cultivated friendships with some figures on the nationalist landscape who are better-integrated into the military, such as Aleksandr

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Prokhanov. Borodai and Prokhanov, who have collaborated on several media projects, have known each other since the former's childhood, as Borodai is the son of a respected philosopher, Yuri Borodai, who was a friend of Eurasianist historian and Soviet-era semi-dissident Lev Gumilev (1912–1992) (*Navigator*, May 19, 2014; *Russkaia sluzhba novostei*, May 20, 2014).

Once Borodai left the Donbas war theater in August 2014, his reintegration in Russia was easier than Strelkov's due to his launch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers (*Soiuz Dobrovol'tsev Donbassa*), registered by the Ministry of Justice in the summer of 2015.[3] Yet the association failed in its principal aim of being recognized as a veterans' association: officially, Russia is not at war with Ukraine and volunteer fighters never secured any official status as private contractors; as such, they cannot be given the same benefits and recognition as veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Some deputies, such as the LDPR's Sergei Zhigarev and Fair Russia's Mikhail Emelianov, proposed giving Donbas veterans access to the social protections offered to other veterans, but the Duma did not pass the bill (*Novye Izvestiia* 2018). Private donations have nevertheless enabled the Union to provide some humanitarian and legal aid, help volunteer fighters find jobs upon their return to Russia, offer assistance to the families of fallen soldiers, and raise funds to build graves or install commemorative plaques for those who were killed in combat.[4]

The association has opened several dozen regional offices, albeit that each of these probably has just a few people. On May 6, 2018 (St. George's Day in the Julian calendar), the association celebrated the Day of Volunteers with a meeting of Donbas veterans around each city's Monument to Fallen Soldiers of the Great Patriotic War, with different flags for the Donetsk, Lugansk, and Novorossiya republics. Based on the videoclip commemorating the event, I calculated that around 300 people attended these events, with approximately 50 in Moscow (including Borodai himself), a similar number in Rostov-on-Don, one of the main centers of training and departure for Donbas, 30 in Novosibirsk, and smaller groups of between five and 20 people in about 25 other cities (*Soiuz Dobrovol'tsev Donbassa* 2018).[5] This is a far cry from the 600 delegates said to have met at the Poklonskaia Gora Museum in Moscow in October 2015, who were purported to represent "the 50,000-strong Donbas volunteer army" (Boiko 2015).

The Association has engaged in lobbying, although this has not been successful thus far. Its main objective is to secure the support of Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF), the association in charge of military education under the Ministry of Defense, in order to be integrated into its military-patriotic training networks (*Novye Izvestiia* 2018). The Association hoped that the presidential decree making 2018 the Year of the Volunteer was a sign of goodwill from the authorities, but it was understood by the Kremlin as a celebration of all kinds of charity activism, not military engagement specifically. Some municipalities, such as the Kaluga region, organized official events with the Union of Donbas Volunteers to discuss coordination of volunteer activities, but this is a rare case of official co-optation at the regional level (*Novorossiia* 2018). Members of the association thus find themselves confined to reproducing the activity of many other military-patriotic associations led by former special forces or contractors: setting up small private security firms and patriotic clubs for youth that allow them to reintegrate into civilian life and use their combat skills and legitimacy.

The association sees itself as a "mobilizational reserve," according to Borodai (Boiko 2015), but without his men being legally recognized as veterans, their potential to integrate into regular units will be constrained. Some sources, chiefly within the Ukrainian media,[6] have claimed that Borodai's association is primarily a training hub for new volunteers. There is no evidence of this, however. Given the Russian authorities' reluctance to send nonregular army or private contractors to Donbas and the association's obedience to the Kremlin (on which its status depends), it seems doubtful that it performs such a function.

At the same time as the main representatives of the de facto Donetsk Republic are struggling to find their niche in Russia, they have to compete with the many other movements that sent volunteer fighters to Donbas. One of those to have gained in visibility due to the conflict is the Russian Imperial Movement (*Russkoe imperskoe dvizhenie*, RID). The RID has existed since the mid-2000s

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as a small, monarchist, and ultra-Orthodox movement[7] offering paramilitary and martial arts training in the basement of a suburban building in St. Petersburg. When I first met its leader, Denis Gariev, in 2009, the RID was just one of many radical groups trying to survive. Over the years, and in particular since the war in Ukraine, it has raised its profile on the nationalist landscape by forming two brigades of volunteers: first Reserve (*Rezerv*), for training young people in a "patriotic mindset," and then Imperial Legion (IL), to send some of them to Donbas. Benefiting from the rising legitimacy of monarchist activism, RID has been cooperating with some movements that have emerged from the Donbas war theater, such as Svetlaia Rus' and ENOT (see Yudina and Verkhovsky in this issue) and has integrated into the Russian National Front (*Russkii natsional'nyi front*), a new umbrella that brings together several nationalist organizations, including Orthodox fundamentalists such as the Union of Bearers of Orthodox Banners (*Soiuz pravoslavnykh khorugvenostsev*) and the Black Hundreds (*Chernaia sotniia*) (*Russkii natsional'nyi front* 2014).

RID likewise seeks to capitalize on its status as a defender of Novorossiya. The movement celebrates the death of its members on the Donbas front and develops activities parallel to Borodai's Union of Veterans. Some of its veterans have opened a "traditional and patriotic" goods store that hires former combatants (Miller 2017). On May 9, 2015, the movement opened a Novorossiya Museum in St. Petersburg, but it was later closed by the FSB and some of its exhibits seized (*Federal'noe Agentstvo Novostei* 2017). Following discussions, it reopened in a new, more central location on Fontanka St., in the basement of a building provided by the regional section of the MVD (Ministry of the Interior) for Afghan and Chechen veterans, and was renamed the Museum of Donbas Military Heroism (*Muzei voinskoi doblesti Donbassa*) (*TK Union* 2017). The museum's change of name exemplifies the situation in which Donbas veterans and their associations find themselves: to avoid harassment by the organs of justice or law enforcement institutions, they had to find a patron that could normalize their status, in this case the state-recognized Afghan and Chechen veterans' association, and changed their name from *Novorossiya*—a term that sounds too revolutionary to be backed by the authorities—to the more neutral *Donbas*.

New Heroes for a Post-Epic Time: Zakhar Prilepin's Donbas War

While the historic names who initiated the insurgency in spring 2014 have struggled to reinvent themselves since returning to Russia, new figures have continued to make a name for themselves in the fight for Donbas long after the main epic battles. This is the case, for instance, of the journalist Andrei Babitskii (1964), a liberal who spent years working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Ekho Moskvy and became famous for his coverage of the Chechen wars. Babitski's political trajectory defies conventional classification. The son-in-law of Viktor Aksiuchits, a famous figure of the late perestroika years, Babitskii—despite moving toward the liberals (Prilepin 2016, 277–279)—has continued to side with the conservative factions in each major political crisis: with the Supreme Soviet against Yeltsin in 1993, with Moscow against Tbilisi during the August 2008 war, and then with the Donbas insurgents. Thus, he rapidly became a pariah in liberal circles, denounced as a traitor to the liberal cause and to "objective" journalism, but always defended his point of view as being based on his own investigations (*MK RU* 2017a).

Another case into which I delve here is that of the writer Zakhar Prilepin (1975), who joined the battle for Donetsk only in the fall of 2016, when he became a "political instructor" (*politruk*) for a battalion of 250 people, almost all locals (*TV Center* 2018). This was mostly a symbolic commitment: Prilepin spends a large part of his time in Russia or traveling abroad, and left the war theater in July 2018, saying he was still "supervising" his battalion from far away (Steshin 2018). Yet his trajectory—moving *to* Donbas, rather than *from* it at this late stage—is quite unique, as are his blunt depictions of everyday life, without any element of the previous Novorossiya romanticism and pathos.

Prilepin is no stranger to the art of war: he worked in the Ministry of Interior special forces (OMON) and participated in combat actions in Chechnya in the latter half of the 1990s. Upon his return from the field, he embarked on a successful literary career. His debut novel, *Pathologies*,

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explored the doubts and moods of Russian soldiers fighting in Chechnya. His unembellished, no-frills depiction of everyday life on the front has won him several prestigious prizes, such as the Bunin award and Russia's National Bestseller Award. His most recent major work of fiction, *The Cloister* (*Obitel'*) an 800-page historical tale of the White Sea Gulag, received the French Grand Prix in 2017. A member first of the National Bolshevik Party and then of Other Russia, Prilepin shares with Limonov a passion for carnivalesque provocation, as well as for rock music and poetry. Also like Limonov, he was a vocal critique of Putin before becoming a fervent supporter of the president following the annexation of Crimea, but continues to denounce the regime and its lack of support for the Donbas cause. Prilepin's engagement in favor of Donbas seems to have been partly coordinated with the Kremlin through Surkov (see Sanshiro Hosaka's article in this issue).

Prilepin presents himself as a Russian nationalist, ready to defend all those "who want to see themselves and their children in the matrix of Russian culture and Russian history" (*MK RU* 2017b). Since the end of 2017, he has released about 30 video lectures on NTV, known as "Lessons of a Russian" (*Uroki russkogo*),[8] which discuss historical and contemporary issues ranging from the 1917 revolution, Stalin, and Yeltsin, to Western sanctions, Russian rap, and comparisons between the Russian and Western colonial empires. In these lectures, Prilepin advances his own reading of Russianness. Although he shares many of the conventional discourses of Russian nationalism, he advances unusually nuanced positions: he criticizes cosmopolitanism and oligarchy, yet refuses to subscribe to the anti-Semitic claims that usually go along with these critiques; he supports the term *rossiiskii* and does not interpret it as the programmatic destruction of everything *russkii* (Aref'ev 2016); he presents himself as a statist (*gosudarstvennik*) but takes a positive view of the Decembrist revolt of 1825 because for those liberal intellectuals, fighting for a constitution meant being a statist and a patriot of Russia.

Prilepin has founded his own charity fund, which channels humanitarian aid to children, the elderly, the infirm, and war victims in Donbas.[9] To raise funds for these humanitarian convoys, he has also launched a clothing line. His reputation has allowed him to secure support from some patriotic-minded figures from the cultural realm, such as theater director Eduard Boiakov, as well as develop connections with pro-Donbas groups abroad, such as those close to Emmanuel Leroy, one of the main pro-Russian figures of the French far right, who leads the small association SOS Donbas Children (Urgence Enfants du Donbass) (Leroy 2018).

Prilepin sees political activism as the core of his legitimacy as a writer: interviewed in Paris during the 2018 Book Fair, he declared, "'Prison or war are the only two horizons of every major Russian writer,' said Limonov. He was jailed. I am doing war" (Levy 2018). He likes to cultivate his status as a war writer and wants to root himself in a historical pantheon of prestigious names. In both his latest book, *Platoon: Officers and Combatants of Russian Literature* (Prilepin 2017), and a documentary film, "Prilepin's War and Peace" (filmed by Vladimir Chernyshev) (*NTV* 2018), he openly claims to belong to the lineage of the most famous writers sent to war theaters. He reminds readers and viewers of Lermontov's participation in the Caucasus wars of the early 19th century, of Pushkin's visiting the region during that same time, and of Gavrila Derzhavin's involvement in the suppression of the Pugachev rebellion a century earlier. To this prestigious pantheon he adds Hemingway reporting from the Spanish civil war in 1937–1938. For him, the Donbas war is a personal and almost metaphysical trial in which "the reality is bigger than literature" (*NTV* 2018).

At the same time, his chronicle of the war, *Letters from Donbas* (Prilepin 2016), demonstrates a deep shift from the Strelkov-style war narratives used by the first generation of warlords or the patriotic pathos of nationalist intellectuals such as Aleksandr Prokhanov and Aleksandr Dugin. Prilepin does not show any sentimental attachment to the ideological construction of Novorossiya, preferring to limit himself to the more modest and neutral "Donbas." He does not engage in, and even seems sometimes to reprove, any war romanticism. For him, the real hero of Donbas is not so much Strelkov, the romantic and exalted figure, but Zakharchenko, the administrative leader. He sees in the latter not only the indigenous face of the insurgency, but the embodiment of the antihero in charge of everyday life and the logistical challenges. Over the course of many hours of interviews, Prilepin has attempted to capture Zakharchenko's political stance: the latter defines himself as a

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monarchist, but proposes for Donetsk the acronym SSSR, standing not for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics but for "liberty, justice, conscience, equality," while Prilepin sees hints of socialism in the nationalization of industries and the social policies of the de facto Republic (Prilepin 2016, 310–11). Prilepin even goes so far as to compare Zakharchenko to Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Hugo Chavez, but concludes that "these heroes do not grow in our climate" (Prilepin 2016, 172).

Prilepin seems to share many fighters' criticism of Strelkov—who, though revered as a war tactician, was considered excessively unconcerned with war's cost in human lives—and of the Cossacks, famous for their extortion schemes. Instead, he prefers to depict the uniquely personal trajectories of all the anonymous fighters who have found themselves in Donbas, whether they were inspired to join the fight by Tolkien-style video games or by the warlords and heroes of the Donetsk airport battle, Arseni Pavlov ("Motorola") and Mikhail Tolstykh ("Givi"), both killed in late 2016 or early 2017.

As in his previous works, Prilepin's style, bold and direct, offers quite a realistic vision of war on the ground on a daily basis. He shows that contrary to the claims of vocal nationalist intellectuals based in Moscow, many local fighters do not consider themselves to have been abandoned by Russia but are instead grateful for the help they have received. None of them hoped to see Russia conquer the whole of Ukraine and they are concerned only with the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, and sometimes with Kharkov and Odessa. Many of them show respect for Ukrainian soldiers' courage, speak both Russian and Ukrainian, and live an everyday life that Prilepin terms "anti-life" (*opolcheny zhivut anti-zhizhn'—NTV* 2018), free of any financial or consumerist motivation. Prilepin describes a nationalism without doctrine or fanaticism, limited to simple Soviet and Russian cultural references and a positive self-identification with Donetsk's industrial past and workers' traditions.

Complementing his own engagement in a Donetsk battalion, Prilepin's book stands as a veritable manifesto calling his brothers to take up arms in both a literal and a figurative sense. Prilepin's trajectory thus embodies a triple move: from the utopian Novorossiya to the much more modest Donbas; from a romantic epic *à la* Byron to a much more grounded—and darker—vision of combat; and from the classic "combat first, memoir-writing after" to the reverse trend, a literature that invites writers and readers to go into combat.

Capitalizing on the Myth: Novorossiya as a Literary Genre

The path taken by Zakhar Prilepin opens a small window into a broader phenomenon, that of Novorossiya as a new literary genre.

War literature has existed since ancient times. Indeed, one of literature's first missions was to memorialize wars and the feats of their combatants. This literary trend can be divided into several traditions: war diaries of soldiers written during the war itself; memoirs written once the war is over, with every possible form of *a posteriori* discursive reconstruction; and more ideologically constructed legitimizing discourses on the war by its leading figures.

These three traditions are present in the Novorossiya genre that emerged with the Donbas war. In that respect, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is unique in Russia's post-Soviet history: no other secessionist conflict, from Transnistria to South Ossetia, has inspired so much literary production. The wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya did produce a huge quantity of memoirs, as well as movies and series, but these belong to a slightly different repertoire, as they were not waged in the name of the survival of the Russian nation. The participation of Russian volunteers in the Yugoslav wars remained at the fringes of the nationalist landscape, with obscure, often self-published books. Therefore, the level of production surrounding the Novorossiya utopia is unparalleled: the main commercial publishers have stepped into the breach and their books appear on the shelves of all the main bookstores in Russia.

The first literary subgenre to take shape was *Novorossievedenie*, the "science of Novorossiya"—that is, books justifying the historical existence of the entity called Novorossiya. This includes the republication of imperial historiography studying the conquest of the region and the demographic and natural specificities of the Novorossiya governorate created by Catherine the Great on the

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territories won from the Ottoman Empire during the Russo-Turkish wars of 1768–1774. One example is *Colonization of the Novorossiya Region and its First Steps on the Path to Culture* (Bagadei 2015), which compiles several 19th-century texts about the foundation of Kherson and Yekaterinoslav. Some of these texts were produced by Westerners who visited the governorate, such as the French Marquis Gabriel de Castelneau, who in 1827 published an *Essai sur l'histoire ancienne et moderne de la Nouvelle Russie* that described the Odessa region and Crimea. Another representative of this subgenre is *Malorossiya, Novorossiya, Crimea: A Full History of Russia's Southern Land* (Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, Stavrovskii, and Morachevskii 2014), of which 1500 copies were printed.

Novorossievedenie does not limit itself to republishing tsarist-era texts. It also includes contemporary writings on history. Such is the case of Aleksandr V. Shubin's (2015) *History of Novorossiya* (5000 copies), commissioned by the Russian Military Historic Society, which describes in detail Russia's conquest of Zaporizhiya, the historical name given to the territory between the Don and Dniepr rivers that separated the Russian state from the Crimean khanate and functioned as a semi-independent Cossack territory between the 16th and 18th centuries. This literature insists heavily on Catherine the Great's 1764 *ukaz* (decree) instituting the Novorossiya governorate (see Artiomov and Lubchenkov 2015), reminding readers that Ukraine did not exist at that time and that this region was part of European history, to which Russia belongs (Smirnov 2015). It also ventures into the 20th century, discussing the pro-Russian, self-proclaimed Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic of 1918, headquartered in Lugansk, as well as the fact that Leonid Brezhnev was born in Dniprodzerzhynsk (now Kamianske), in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, and the long industrial—read: pro-Soviet—history of the region, all of which is covered in Aleksandr Shirokorad's (2015) *The Fight for Novorossiya.*

The second subgenre, probably the most prolific and certainly the most profitable for publishing houses, relates to the vivid *publitsistika* field. *Publitsistika*, or essayism, may take the form of anything from poetry to journalism and political pamphlets, through which authors spread their vision of the world to a broader audience. In tsarist Russia as well as in the Soviet Union, thick journals (*tolstye zhurnaly*) were one of the main modes of circulating *publitsistika.* The lack of conventional freedom to express political ideas moved people toward the realm of culture as a space of innovation, contributing to the intertwining of culture and politics. In today's Russia, *publitsistika* has acquired a new feature, that of market profitability: nationalist "ideological entrepreneurship" may overlap with commercial strategies to produce bestsellers.

Indeed, several dozen popular books on the 2014 Ukrainian crisis have been published. Some focus on historical continuity, as with Nikolai Lykov's (2014) *Hunting Banderovtsy: How the USSR was Fighting against Maidan*, which describes the KGB fight against Ukrainian nationalists during the post-war period. The text epitomizes presentism, completely intertwining Soviet anticapitalist narratives with contemporary Russian opposition to color revolutions. Others stress the contemporary geopolitical war of the West against Russia, seeing Ukraine as no more than a puppet in this struggle. This literature reproduces all the clichés about Ukraine's supposed lack of identity, seeing it as torn between Europe and the Russian world. An example of this trend is Anatolii Tsyganok's (2017) *Donbas: The Unfinished War: The Civil War in Ukraine (2014–2016), A Russian Perspective.* Rostislav Ishchenko (2016), in his work *Galicia versus Novorossiya: The Future of the Russian World* (1000 copies), describes the Ukrainian government as an instrument of NATO and the CIA against Moscow.

Some of these books are simple compilations of articles written during the Ukrainian crisis by the main nationalist authors—including Aleksandr Prokhanov, Valerii Averianov, Nikolai Starikov, Mikhail Kalashnikov, and General Leonid Ivashov. These authors simultaneously denounce the Bolsheviks who let Novorossiya become Ukrainized in the 1920s and the contemporary "*evrofashizm*" (Euro-fascism) of the Euromaidan government, propose the federalization of Ukraine in four entities, celebrate the Novorossiya fighters as the "forefront of the nation" (*avangard natsii*), and see in Igor Strelkov the reincarnation of Suvorov—the victorious general of the armies that fought against Napoleon (Plekhanov 2014; Ivashov 2014). Several books that celebrate Igor Strelkov specifically, such as Mikhail Polikarpov's (2014) *Igor Strelkov—The Terror of the Banderite Junta*, also fall into this category.

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A third subgenre is that of alternative history, a speculative fiction built on a "what if" scenario. The main representative of this genre is *Ukraine on Fire: The Era of Stillborns*, written in 2008 by Gleb Bobrov, a former *Afganets* (veteran from the Russian-Afghan war) who fought in Yugoslavia and then became the president of the Union of Writers of the de facto Lugansk Republic. The book follows a classic dystopian line, depicting a Ukrainian civil war between the pro-European regions and the "Republic of Eastern Malorossiya," which wants to remain close to Russia. The book became a bestseller even before the Ukrainian crisis, with more than one million views online, and gained a new lease of life after the 2014 war (*EurAsia Daily* 2015). In 2015, the sixth edition of the book was published—a revised version in which alternative history and reality suddenly overlap. Several other books also belong to this category, such as Vladimir Chebotaev's (2014) *Novorossiya Does Not Surrender!* (1000 copies), written prior to the annexation of Crimea, which describes partisan warfare against a Ukrainian-American invasion of the peninsula in the near future that ends in the ejection of the occupiers and the annexation of Crimea by Russia; Georgii Savitskii's *The Wrath of Novorossiya* (2014), which imagines full-scale Russian intervention in the war; another Savitskii novel, *Helicopter Pilots of Novorossiya: Surrender Kiev!* (2016, 2000 copies), which describes a reignited war in Donbas; and similar books by Fedor Berezin, such as *The Ukrainian Front 2010* (2010).

The fourth subgenre is war memoirs. Some war journalists (*voenkor, voennyi korrespondent* in Russian) have visited Donbas during the conflict, among them Semen Pegov, author of *Me and the Red-Haired Separatist* (2015), devoted to the warlord Motorola—another post-mortem chronicle on him is *Knights of Novorossiya: Chronicles of a Correspondent of the Legendary Motorola* (2017, 1000 copies), written by Gennadii Dubovoi—and Vladislav Surygin, a military journalist working for the conservative and nationalist newspaper *Zavtra*, the author of *How They Fight in Donbass* (2015).

Memoirs by fighters themselves offer a more complex panorama. The most famous book in that genre is probably *The Torch of Novorossiya* (2016, 4000 copies) by Pavel Gubarev. Like Strelkov, Gubarev has been trying to secure his legitimacy since leaving Donbas and settling in Russia, giving numerous interviews about the separatist movement. In his book, he reminds readers that a pro-Russian movement (known as Interdvizhenie Donbas) existed in Donetsk from as early as 1990–1992, celebrates his formative years in Aleksandr Barkashov's Russian National Unity, and presents himself as an imperial-minded person (*imperskii chelovek*) fighting for the "reunification of the Russian civilizational space and the reestablishment of its territorial unity." Himself a Ukrainian citizen, he insists heavily on the feeling of a local identity of "Donetsk Russians" (*donetskie rusy*) (Gubarev 2016, 15) against the foreign bodies of Galicia and Carpathia and on the socialist mission of Novorossiya—a central theme of the utopia, as I have discussed previously (Laruelle 2015). He presents the insurgents' territory as "free of the weight of the mistakes of the 1990s" (Gubarev 2016, 276) and moving toward an "Orthodox socialism," and states, "We were dreaming of creating a new Russian state free of oligarchs and corruption" (Gubarev 2016, 31). Another fighter from Kramatorsk, Aleksandr Surnin, published his memoirs of the year 2014 as *Materials for the New History of Novorossiya* (2015, 500 copies).

The most interesting of the five subgenres is that of war diaries. Unlike the four previous ones, it offers a more grounded account of everyday life during the war with less ideological reconstruction. Some books are monographs, such as commander of the Scyth batallion Daniil Galinov's depiction of the Yampoley battle in a book of the same name (2014), but the majority are collections of shorter texts by fighters, for instance *I fought in Novorossiya!* (Bobrov and Berezin 2015, 2500 copies), a joint project by the Union of Writers of the de facto Lugansk Republic, the Russian Union of Writers, and the military literature website okopka.ru. Another website, artofwar.ru, has also collected several war diaries and released them online. The Lugansk Union of Writers subsequently published another collected volume, *The Time of Donbas: Literature of the Popular Republics* (2015), that brought together the works of local authors as well as some Russians. One of the most interesting products of the genre is the 500-page volume edited by E. V. Semenov, *At the Forefront: The Fight for Novorossiya in the Memoirs of its Defenders* (2017), commissioned by Borodai's Union

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of Donbas Veterans. Probably redacted to represent the official version the Union wanted to promote, the book still offers insightful and sometimes candid windows into the everyday lives of fighters, men and women: how they took the difficult decision to leave, how they managed their family's reaction, how they discovered the internal competitions between the different insurgent groups, their responses to the lack of military equipment, learning to live with the fear of death, and their relationships with local inhabitants.

Conclusions

During the first months of the Donbas war, many observers, both Russian and foreign, expressed concerns about a boomerang effect—that the new dynamic opened by the violent utopia of Novorossiya could challenge Russia's domestic stability and give birth to a nationalist paramilitary movement impossible to stop. This did not happen. The Kremlin succeeded in its balancing game, enjoying a rallying-around-the-flag effect occasioned by the annexation of Crimea without suffering backlash over the (mis)management of Donbas. The Russian nationalist landscape was undoubtedly disappointed by what it interpreted as a lack of support from Moscow, but its call for a full-scale war with Ukraine and the conquest of Kyiv was supported neither by public opinion nor by the authorities. Ideological entrepreneurship around the notion of Novorossiya was rapidly disaggregated and neutralized.

Once the conflict was transformed into a more regular de facto state situation with low-intensity violence, the volunteer fighters had no choice but to return to Russia and reintegrate into civilian life. Waving a revolutionary flag was no longer allowed, leaving the veterans—with the exception of the very few who succeeded in integrating into official mercenary structures involved in other war theaters, such as the private security company Wagner—with nothing left to play with but their war legitimacy. Their room for maneuver has thus far been limited to either joining veterans' associations that offer paramilitary training for youth or else working for private security agencies. They have had to avoid provoking the authorities with unsanctioned violent actions; those who have done so, like Strelkov, have found themselves marginalized. Those who have allowed themselves to be coopted and now work under the umbrella of the state, like Borodai, may hope to secure their niche and gradually become recognized, formally or informally, as veterans.

The trajectory of the Donbas fighters illustrates well the mechanisms through which the state authorities retake control of the nationalist segment of the population. Using the terminology of Novorossiya now labels its authors as part of the opposition, therefore making them subject to potential repression, while the terms Donbas and Malorossiya signal submission to the Kremlin's perspective. The only space left for free use of the term Novorossiya is the literary realm. It should come as no surprise that veterans have taken advantage of this to reinvent themselves: Novorossiya has been an idea more than it has ever been a territory. The fact that new actors, such as Zakhar Prilepin, have moved from literature to war—rather than following the more classical reverse path—at a time when the Donbas conflict no longer appears to be a romantic experience reveals the deep entrenchment of the Novorossiya myth.

The rebirth of the utopia as a literary genre, even if this is probably only a short-term eruption, confirms that the 2014 Crimea and Donbas adventure will have a longer-term effect on Russian political imaginaries than whatever happens on the ground. What may be the future of the secessionist territories, Novorossiya represented a turning point in the way nationalists imagine and portray the future Russia they hope for.

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Notes

1 I use Luhansk in its Ukrainian version to speak about the city, and Lugansk in its Russian version to speak about the secessionist regime in place in the city.
2 See for instance, the http://topwar.ru website, which displays many of them, and the website http://superstrelkov.ru.
3 The Union of Donbas Volunteers website is available at https://sddonbassa.ru/.
4 See https://sddonbassa.ru/category/rubriki/bessmertnyj-polk-donbassa/.
5 I did not include children and women in civilian dress, counting only men and women in military uniform and men in civilian clothes. The number is, of course, difficult to assess, as some people in the pictures could be supporters of the cause working for the association or family members, but not veterans per se.
6 See, for instance, *InformNapalm* 2017.
7 See their manifesto at *Russkoe Imperskoe Dvizhenie* 2017.
8 Available at http://www.ntv.ru/peredacha/Uroki_russkogo/.
9 The Fund's website is available at Blagotvoritel'nyi Fond Zakhara Prilepina, http://xn--80aamj6afn6ag.xn--p1acf/.

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