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Summary

This paper presents extracts selected from more than 28 hours of video-taped interviews with miners and other residents of Donetsk. Conceived as an exercise in oral history, they reconstruct and contextualize in the form of a narrative the voices of a cross-section of interviewees. The narrative is centered around the picketing of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet in June 1992 by a delegation from Donetsk that numbered several hundred. In itself, this was a fairly insignificant event with little or no violence and also very little in the way of concessions from the Supreme Soviet. But the ways that several of the interviewees talked about this political action reveals a good deal about certain sets of relations which are presented here in the order of their appearance in the transcripts:

1. the grimy, gritty industrialized Donbass to the rest of the former Soviet union and especially the centers of political power (Moscow, and more recently, Kiev);

2. Russian ethnicity to Ukrainian nationalism, a relationship that is more complex than the geographical division between eastern and western parts of Ukraine;

3. industrial workers (in this case, miners) to each other, to their immediate bosses and to "their" trade unions, strike committees, and councils of labor collectives;

4. men to women and the ways that mining as a male-gendered occupation has structured gender relations;

5. consumers to the providers of goods and services.

The extracts provide a good deal of evidence for real changes that have occurred in these relationships as well as the ways that such changes have (or have not) been processed. Thus, Bychkov, the interim mayor of Donetsk, refers to political life in the city soviet as "normal," in effect confirming that political differences within the city pale in comparison
with economic grievances directed at Kiev. Makarov, the co-chair of the Donetsk city strike/workers' committee, underscores the disappointment of many in Donetsk who had hoped that an independent Ukraine would provide the opportunity for material improvement. Disappointment is also expressed by the miner-activist Samofalov but it is more inner-directed. In his view, a lack of "consciousness" on the part of the miners explains why they remain dependent on their bosses and a trade union that works hand in glove with management. Belous, the chair of the trade union committee at Samofalov's mine, is disappointed in turn with Samofalov's withdrawal from the union.

The final group of speakers illustrates the diversity of circumstances and attitudes among those outside the mining industry. The pensioner, Gotilova, construes the picketing of the Supreme Soviet as a talk with "some officials at the City Council" and claims that "the miners got a lot of money." For her, the fact that one is charged different prices for the same item depending on the store in which it is bought, is indicative of "no control, no protection, none of it." For Menzhinskaia, a chemical factory worker and mother of two, the prospect of getting a decent apartment after fifteen years of waiting vindicates the system of enterprise paternalism that so frustrates Samofalov for example. Finally, in Nikol'skii, the former Komsomol functionary who now runs a tourist business, we see a new entrepreneur taking advantage of new opportunities but fully aware of the associated ironies and risks.
Donetsk is a city of 1.2 million people located in the Donets Basin (Donbass) of eastern Ukraine. Founded by John Hughes, a Welshman who established a steel foundry and coal mines in the 1870s, Donetsk was known as Iuzovka until 1924, and until 1962 as Stalino. During the industrialization drive of the 1930s, the city and the entire Donbass became the principal coal-mining center for the Soviet Union. In September 1941 Donetsk was captured by the Nazis and occupied for two years during which most of the mines fell into disrepair. Despite some diversification after the war, coal-mining and steel have remained the major industries.

The city contains 21 mines which comprise the Donetskugol' conglomerate. Dispersed throughout the city's nine districts, many of the mines are surrounded by settlements (poselki) of apartment blocks and miners' cottages with land set aside for kitchen gardens.

Until 1991 when Ukraine became an independent state, Donetsk's industry was linked via Moscow to suppliers and consumers throughout the Soviet Union. Ukrainian independence has severely disrupted these ties and caused resentment in the Donbass which has been directed against Kiev. At the same time, the surge of Ukrainian nationalism that accompanied independence has increased anxieties in the Donbass where the majority of people are linguistically Russian. Some of these issues are addressed by Sergei Bychkov, deputy chair of the Donetsk City Soviet's Executive Committee and, as of June 1992, acting chair. Bychkov, a former army officer, spoke in his sparsely furnished office.

Bychkov: As far as political life in Donetsk is concerned, the situation is stable. There are eight political parties, about ten public organizations and eight or nine cultural centers in the city--all in all, about 30 political organizations. Although they express distinct views and ideologies, we can find a common language, and it is possible to say that we have a stable, normal political situation in the city.
But we have very serious economic problems. Our population is 1.2 million plus another 260,000 who come here to work. Then there is Makeevka [a neighboring city] with about 500,000 people. We should be supplying all these people with transport, communal services, road maintenance ... and foodstuffs. Ukraine produces a lot of food but [food production] is concentrated in the western regions. The population of the Donetsk region is 5.5 million about five million of whom live in urban areas. We are therefore unable to supply ourselves with foodstuffs and ... the state does not want to help us in this respect....

The problems of industry are very urgent. Our industry in Donetsk entered the stage of economic crisis long ago. In order to restore it we need a lot of money, we need investments. We had meetings with the representatives of many countries and firms, and we hope for improvement...

But miners ... have been deceived. When the government and the Council of Ministers of Ukraine decided that the coal industry could operate on a tax-free basis, the mines had the opportunity to increase the cost of a ton of coal, to establish a free price. But the coal industry is paying nothing to the city budget now. Miners started to receive twelve to ten thousand rubles [a month] as a wage. The miners seemed satisfied, but then they realized that there are fewer and fewer buyers of coal while more and more coal is piling up in storage.... Now miners understand that in a year or so there will be a lot of coal but few buyers and there will be no need to mine coal. What will happen to the miners? Should we close all 21 mines here? That is impossible. About half of the people in this city are dependent on the mining industry. That is about 500,000 people.

Q: What can you tell us about the Kuibyshev district? Is it typical of the city?

Bychkov: Yes, it is typical. It is neither centrally located nor is it on the outskirts like the Petrovsky or Proletarsky districts. It has a well developed network of industrial enterprises which means that it has a bad ecological situation. Its coal mines, chemical works, transportation system and old miners' settlements make it
absolutely typical for Donetsk. All the problems we have in this city exist in the Kuibyshev district.

The city strike (workers') committee, housed in the headquarters of Donetskugol', on the city's main thoroughfare, has been another major center of power ever since the July 1989 strike. Recently, however, with the rise of the Independent Miners' Union and the de-centering of economic life down to the enterprise level, the committee's authority and legitimacy have declined. Its co-chair, Yuri Makarov, a former mine foreman, was interviewed in the committee’s office.

Q: Since we last interviewed you in May 1991 what changes have taken place here in Donetsk? Have they been for the better or for the worse?

Makarov: Everything has become worse. During this past year, for a certain period, the Donbass mines had no timber and no other materials or equipment were delivered. As a result, the coal industry in Ukraine began to raise the price of coal. The strike committee has done its best to obtain higher wages for miners because there is continual growth in prices and inflation. But this is not the way to resolve the problem.

Things are getting worse for everyone. Besides miners, many occupational groups organized strikes demanding salary increases. Salaries were raised, but not by much. Now, as you know, on the 15th of this month [June], a large delegation of representatives of miners, transport workers, teachers and doctors went to Kiev to picket the Supreme Soviet.... If there were improvement in our situation, nobody would have tried to influence or put pressure on the Supreme Soviet, the government or the President.

Q: So, you don’t think that Ukrainian independence has improved anything?

Makarov: No, the independence of Ukraine has not improved the situation. The center has just moved from Moscow to Kiev. We didn’t want that. In the past we were fighting for the existence of Ukraine as an autonomous state, but we did not
want Kiev to become the center instead of Moscow. We wanted power to be given to
the localities, to enterprises and cities. We wanted the living standard of the people
to rise and not to let Kiev concentrate the reins of government in its fist.

Q: Last time we interviewed you just after the strike of April-May [1991], you referred to the
fact that not all the mines participated. In particular, when we asked you about the
Kuibyshev miners you described them as "kolbasniki" (sausage-lovers) because of their lack
of political consciousness.

Makarov: [Smiles] By the way, that mine has not changed much. Some people from
that mine joined in the picketing in Kiev, though, but not too many. I think there
were only two people from the Kuibyshev mine who participated.

Q: Do you know the names of those who went there?

Makarov: No, I don’t. I’ve only got information about the number of people from
the mines who participated. To my mind, Kuibyshev has never been very aggres-
sive....

Q: You certainly are aware that the mines in the Donbass are old, inefficient and danger-
ous. How can they hope to compete with newer mining districts in the former Soviet Union?

Makarov: We don’t advocate preserving the Donbass mines at any cost. We
submitted a request to the former government of Ukraine as well as to the present one
to build new industries. Ever since 1989 we have raised the question of how much
coal should be extracted, but no one is willing to say how much coal we need.
According to the latest statistics, in Russia one man is lost for every one million tons
of extracted coal. In Ukraine, five people are lost per one million tons. We object to
the fact that miners work in these dangerous conditions. We agree to the closing
down of the enterprises, but only if the people who work in those mines have the
possibility of being retrained and working in some other kind of production. We
don’t agree that all the mines should be closed down and all the miners become
unemployed.
In fact, only one Kuibyshev miner had participated in the delegation to Kiev. This was Valery Samofalov, a face worker with nearly twenty years experience. In July 1989, Valery was elected chair of the mine’s strike committee and a delegate to the city strike committee. But personal and political differences with the majority soon forced him to resign his seat. Eventually, Samofalov withdrew from other positions to which he had been elected. Why was this thoughtful and highly articulate miner-activist dissatisfied with the miners’ movement and the attitudes and behavior of his fellow miners? Valery was interviewed in the office of the mine’s director who was present throughout the interview.

Samofalov: I used to be chair of the [mine’s] strike committee and now I am deputy chair of the council of labor collectives. In fact, though, the council hardly functions. We have succeeded in crushing it, probably because we have a little bit ... a lack of ... [points to his head]. Our nerves failed us somehow.

Now, people have a chance to make a little bit of money. The problem is that it has become difficult to mobilize people, or rather, it is possible but there are many difficulties. This is not the fault of people, but it is their problem. A piece of sausage has been given to them, and that was all. Well, we were taught to live that way: one was supposed to care only about one’s own stomach and not to think about anything else....

Unemployment threatens us and it will come. It will be like a flood and we will be closed down unless we take a clear-cut stand and maintain close contact with the [city] strike committee which I used to criticize but which now I’m completely supporting. Let the people in the strike committee be a little too emotional. They still lack experience and that will pass. If we are not united, the workers’ movement will perish. I hope that our official trade union will be dissolved and the people ...
will join the strike committee.... They have their problems and shortcomings. There are some hot people in it. They are too hot, because they were driven to despair by life's difficulties.... I'm still treated like a brute here: you are nobody here; you are a worm and can be crushed at any moment. I mean this in all honesty. And when workers do not understand the situation, I don't blame them because it is our common problem and I simply lose heart.

That visit to Kiev was of great importance to us miners, to Ukraine and to the Donbass. But what happened before then? I had withdrawn from all organizations because I wanted to rest or was frightened, I don't know. But for certain something happened to me there. When I arrived in Kiev, our mine, represented by me, was insulted, cursed, I should say, in the Russian way. After I returned home I went to the trade union committee and asked, "What are we doing?" Why shouldn't we go to the people and tell them about the demands? Our trade union leader said, "The people don't care about it," but I told him "You didn't want to give any explanations to them." It is necessary to read all the demands to the people in all the production units and let them think over the situation. Let the people support us, correct us, and then they will see progress....

One category of people is satisfied with a piece of meat and their pay. The other one is unfortunately the minority [because] neither the strike committee, nor the council of labor collectives, nor the trade union explained anything to them. They don't want to explain. They consider it their task to provide people with socks, underwear, etc., and they believe that they are helping people. I believe that people should not be given any goods. They should be given the opportunity to earn—to become a farmer, a businessman, or whatever. But a whole complex of laws which would really liberate people is needed. Now we are held back. In our mine, even now, the following policy is pursued: if you say something against your boss, you will be destroyed. You will be expelled to another production unit, you will be driven from one production team to another....

When I was in Kiev, on the square, I was asked, "Why are you for the Union?" Let's discuss it, I said. Europe is uniting. I described the kind of Union I
would like to see. During the pre-election campaign, in the leaflets distributed by Rukh, Mister or Pan Kravchuk stressed the idea that Ukraine could live without Russia.²

But it was forgotten that we got cotton from Kazakhstan, electrical energy and timber from Russia. They were silent about it, probably deliberately, because they wanted to appoint another grand prince or tsar in Kiev. It will be no good for the people of Ukraine. In the past, the granaries of the Motherland were in Moscow; now they are in Kiev. For us, for people, it makes no difference whether they are in Moscow or Kiev. They are not in my pocket, not in my home.

A few days later, we interviewed Valery at his home, a fifth-floor apartment with a balcony overlooking an unkempt courtyard a few hundred yards from the mine. We asked him whether he thought that "Perestroika from Below," the documentary film that we made of the 1989 strike and which he has seen, was an appropriate title.

Samofalov: I don't know. The impulse came from the bottom, but it was Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] who pushed us, though perhaps he didn't expect such an explosion. Still, I think that it was he who began it all even if the main events were developing from the bottom. The top was shocked and the middle (the bosses and chiefs who didn't reach the top and weren't making friends with us either) didn't understand the strike and I think have yet to understand it.

Q: What, in your opinion, has changed since then?

Samofalov: Nothing has changed. We replaced the people in the trade union, but nothing changed and the system remains the same…. We found a man then who

²Samofalov is referring to the presidential campaign of November-December 1991 which Leonid Kravchuk won with an outright majority. Interestingly, although Rukh (the Ukrainian nationalist movement whose strength lay in western Ukraine) campaigned for another candidate, Konstantin Chornovil, Samofalov suggests that it supported Kravchuk. "Pan" is the Polish term for a nobleman and is used by Samofalov ironically.
became a scapegoat. He was the wrong man there and the time was difficult. Now, I can understand but not justify his behavior. He lived in different times when there was no worker activism.

Nothing has changed since that conference. I often come to the trade union office and try to convince them--maybe I’m doing something wrong--that it is not the task of the trade union to buy sports shoes and socks, to distribute sausages, clothes, and other commodities in short supply. The task of the trade union is to change laws that contradict workers’ interest, to control the safety regulations, to resolve the problem of wages, to establish relations between the engineering-technical staff and the workers, so that workers understand that they are equal to engineers and technicians and that no one, neither an engineer, a director, nor a minister is permitted to humiliate and insult them. But here it happens all the time.

Having failed to convince the trade union chair that the union should inform the miners about the picketing in Kiev, Samofalov took it upon himself to organize a meeting of the various shifts as they came off work. The following is taken from his speech delivered to some 200 miners from the second shift in the mine’s assembly hall. At the end of his speech which was delivered to an impassive audience, Valery invited questions from the floor. But, as if to confirm his jaundiced view of the rank-and-file, none were forthcoming and the miners silently filed out of the hall.

Samofalov: Let me tell you briefly about what happened in Kiev and how this list of demands was worked out and why I am here. Last Friday, I had some business in the Donetskugol’ [coal trust’s] headquarters. We are to blame that our council of labor collectives was destroyed. It seemed not to be needed … but in fact, it should

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3Samofalov is referring to Viktor Efimov, the former chair of the mine’s trade union committee, who became the target of the miners’ wrath and was ousted at a general meeting, as illustrated in "Perestroika from Below."

4This echoes the criticism that the insurgent Independent Miners’ Union (NPG) has levelled against the (formerly) official trade union of miners. Ironically, in order to attract members and in the absence of alternative market mechanisms, the NPG has resorted to the same practices.
operate, at least to make our trade unions and our government work for us. All the initiatives come from the strike committee and our trade union has never displayed any initiative. So when I went to the strike committee, the guys there cursed me and through me, all of you. You can imagine, 2,000 curses for me and for all of you. They said that all of you over there are bad.

For two weeks I had been trying to get in touch with the trade union over the telephone to inform it that there was a decision about organizing a demonstration [in Kiev]. It was necessary to do it. Did the workers' movement cease to exist when we got some soap which we demanded in 1989? It is a continuous process. It should continue and we should struggle. If we do nothing and keep silent, no one will do anything for us....

The third demand: "The Donbass should receive the status of a free economic zone, a zone of joint ventures as the first stage in the transition to a federative structure." On this point, the guys from the western regions tried to tear us to pieces, shouting that we were separatists, Communists, that we came to divide Ukraine and to separate the Donbass from it. Our deputies from the Donetsk region explained that people in more than 90 countries in the world live according to the principle of federalism, people in Switzerland, the USA, the German Federal Republic, Austria, and they do not live any worse than we do....

As for what happened during the picketing, we made a lot of trouble for the militia. They hadn't slept for three days. They said, "When are you going to get your demands satisfied? When are you going to leave?" There were a lot of militia there; on every street corner, there was a detachment and in the park near the Supreme Soviet building as well. There were rumors that the guys from Rukh in groups of 40 would come to beat us up because we were advocating a split in Ukraine. Nothing of the kind happened. But our slogans, which were written in red, were attacked. A man ran up to us and grabbed our banner, but we acted quickly and took him to the militia station.

In 1989, we did nothing to anybody; no one got drunk, no one saw the militia. You might remember it. While I was in Kiev, a woman came up to us and asked,
"Are you from Donetsk? Thank you for 1989. Stay here and wake up the people."
We said that we have not yet awakened everybody at home. I would like to say that
the workers' movement fortunately exists but practically, in my mind, it doesn't
function. It is an idea yet to be realized.

Evgenii Belous, a former electrician who looks a good deal older than his 41 years,
was elected as chair of the Kuibyshev mine's trade union committee in August 1989. In the
absence of any initiative by the NPG to form a branch at the Kuibyshev mine, Belous remains
responsible for distributing to miners a vast array of consumer goods and services such as
day-care, kindergartens, and vacation vouchers. We interviewed him in his air conditioned
office with his secretary guarding the door.

Q: You said that Valery Samofalov was the only one who has resigned from the trade union.
Why do you think he did so?

Belous: Valery withdrew from all public organizations, abandoned his position on the
city council, and the district soviet as well... Frankly, I can't explain it. You better
ask Valery himself. I wouldn't say he lacks spirit. He's a well-read guy. He always
follows the latest trends, has his nose in the air, so to speak.

I felt rather insulted when he left the union. Possibly it happened because the
other delegates didn't give him a vote of confidence. A new strike committee chair
was elected and Valery's ambitions got the upper hand. He dropped out of every-
thing and withdrew from all organizations. Though, he comes to my office often, we
are on friendly terms, argue, reach agreements, and I submit some of his suggestions
for the director's consideration. Samofalov attends all the meetings of the labor
collective, asks many questions and usually comes up with the answers himself.

Virtually everyone in Donetsk has been affected by the economic and political changes
of recent years. For most, getting by on a day-to-day basis has become a real struggle, all
the more so as strategies developed under the old system seem increasingly irrelevant. Anna
Gotilova's complaint about the arbitrariness of prices exemplifies the disorientation experi-
enced by many. But Vera Menzhinskaia’s account of the conditions in which she and her family have lived for over a decade is both an indictment of the shortcomings of old enterprise paternalism and a testament to her capacity for optimism. Finally, we offer as an example of the new entrepreneurialism the testimony of Slava Nikol’skii.

Anna Gotilova [Kuibyshev mine brake-person now on pension]: I live on my pension but also keep working. I worked for twenty years at the mine and for fourteen years on construction sites and my pension was 144 rubles [per month]. Recently, they raised it to 1258 rubles. As for this month, I’m not sure if I’ll get that much. They extended the term of payment to the 27th of the month. But if I really want to receive my pension, I should be there at three or four o’clock in the morning, because they are short of money and you have to wait in the queue.

Here in Donetsk, Lugansk, and Khar’kov they raised the prices so high that it has become unbearable. They want 200 rubles for a kilogram of butter. Well, a miner gets fifteen to eighteen thousand rubles, so he can afford anything. And me, if I get my 1250 rubles and it’s enough to feed myself, I’m lucky.

When our miners were in Kiev, they talked to some officials at the City Council and it’s said that the miners got a lot of money because the prices were so high. But what they got has nothing to do with us. We have free prices. I go into a shop and what do I see? Fresh fish for 60 rubles; in another shop, fish for 50 rubles, in another, 49 rubles, but the real price for it is 35 rubles. So who lets the prices skyrocket that high? Could it be those who sell things?

Let me give you another example. I’m going to a shop to buy buckwheat. It’s written on the package "buckwheat," but when I get home and open the package, it turns out to be pearl barley and not buckwheat. No control, no protection, none of it. We have no one to complain to. Nobody wants to hear what we say. Everybody

5 It is a measure of the hyperinflation of the past year that as of January 1993, miners’ wages were averaging nearly 40,000 karbovantsy (the new Ukrainian unit of currency nominally pegged at the level of the Russian ruble).
is doing what they like best. Here, she [the shopkeeper] just sits in her shop and does whatever she wants and can set whatever price she likes.

Vera Menzhinskaia [packer at Chemical Reaction Factory, showing us around the "temporary apartment" where she lives with her husband, a miner at the October Mine, and their two children]: This is my flat. Come in, please. This is the smaller room [of two]. Our children, a son and daughter, sleep here. The room is too small. Everything is sinking, falling down.... This flat is our temporary apartment. By the end of the year, we shall have a new three-room apartment with all the conveniences. It will be great. We have been on the waiting list for 14 years, nearly 15 now, waiting for an apartment.

Q: Could you please explain how you came to live here?

Menzhinskaia: We have been living in this apartment for two years, two years as of this coming November. Before that we lived in the chemical plant's family hostel for twelve years. That meant a common corridor, common kitchen, everything else common but the bedrooms. We had one thirteen-square meter room. This apartment was given to us because that room was so damp that water used to run down the walls especially in winter. No one lives there now. It's been turned into a play room for children. Our baby girl developed a heart condition, so we were given this apartment. Now we have been told that by the end of the year we shall be given a flat.

Slava Nikol'skii used to work as a Komsomol functionary in the Kuibyshev district. In 1987, he and some of his colleagues, all Communist Party members, started up a tourist cooperative which offered group tours to Eastern Europe and Turkey. In 1991 he became director of the firm.

Q: We've noticed that the names of the streets and districts in the city have not been changed, while in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities they have been renamed. Why didn't this happen in Donetsk?
Nikol'skii: I haven't thought much about it... We didn't rename streets and districts and still have Lenin, Kuibyshev and Kalinin. There was a campaign last year to remove the monument to Lenin. There were just a few who protected the monuments but also only a few who wanted to remove them. It seems to me that after the miners' strikes the tension was reduced and these issues do not concern anybody. There are no people who would like to tackle these issues. It's like the anecdote: We have a mine called "Red Star." What should it be called now? "Golden Three-Prong?" [a tsarist symbol] If you have seen a map of our region, you may have noticed a certain town. It has a funny name and I feel sorry for the people who lived there. It's called KarloLibnekhtovsk. Can you imagine? How should it be renamed? Maybe Petlyurovsk?6

Q: You have spoken to us about the "Mafia". What in your view does this term mean?

Nikol'skii: You watch our television and read our newspapers. Top officials from the Department of Internal Affairs and deputies of the Supreme Soviet openly speak about the mafia which exists at all levels of our society. I agree with that and can confirm that this is correct. It works differently in each concrete case, beginning with mere hooliganism and finishing with very effective methods of influence. I don't think it is a single organization. There is a coal mafia, a trade mafia, and so on.

I can speak best about what I know, that is, tourism. Business trips to Turkey and China are attractive to many people because they can bring good profits. People go to Turkey to buy up goods and then sell them here. There is simply gangsterism on the way to Turkey and back. They simply stop the coaches and take money or goods, using force.

Q: Where did these [men's] suits come from?

6Karl Liebknecht was a prominent German Social Democrat who was murdered along with Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919. Petlyura was a Ukrainian nationalist who briefly headed the anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian government during the civil war.
Nikol’skii: Well, you’re just like an inspector from the Department of Socialist Property Embezzlement. There is such a department. We bought these suits from the Krasnoarmeisk Coal Trust. They got them in a barter deal. They sold coal to the West—I don’t know which country—and received suits in exchange. It was a very good deal for them. They sold the suits at wholesale and now we are selling them at retail prices. Such suits are only on sale in hard currency stores and are very expensive. The cheapest suit is 12,000 rubles. These that we are selling are made of pure wool in Austria and we sell them for 10,000 rubles.