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UKRAINE, RUSSIA, AND THE DONBAS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE¹

HIROAKI KUROMIYA

The adoption of a constitution in Ukraine may have been an important political milestone. As the US press has reported in recent months, however, the prospects of a prosperous independent Ukraine are not very bright. There are many problems that need to be analyzed in detail, but this short essay addresses one of the perennial problems of Ukrainian nationhood, the Russified east, from a historian's point of view.

As one might expect, the Donbas continues to pose the most serious regional political challenge to Kiev. Donbas political mafias are widely suspected of the recent assassination attempt in Kiev on the Ukrainian prime minister, who intended to curtail their political power. Miners' strikes seem to be a perennial problem. Where does the trouble in the Donbas come from?

Leon Trotsky's claim that "One can't go to the Donbas without a gas mask," best describes the political history of the Donbas: everyone from Moscow to Kiev and every political party from rightists to Marxists seems to have gotten burned politically in the Donbas. There seems to be no ready political gas mask to protect against the Donbas' noxious political gases. "Class" and "nation," the two major concepts of political thought that arose in reaction to the Enlightenment,² did not and do not apply comfortably to Donbas politics. The Marxists had a very difficult time in the Donbas even at the time of "proletarian revolution" and civil

¹This essay has been adapted from the Conclusion of my work "Freedom and Terror in the Donbas, 1880's-1990's," which has been supported by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The project has been completed and the book manuscript is under submission to a press for publication.

²For an excellent discussion on these two competing ideologies, see Roman Szporluk, Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List (Oxford University Press, 1988).

war (or "class war") in 1917-1920, so did nationalist parties at a time when they thrived elsewhere in the wake of the collapse of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

What has defined Donbas politics was (and still is) a fierce spirit of freedom and independence. Independence did not preclude the possibility of a pragmatic alliance with foes and outsiders, a behavior that often appears to observers to be unprincipled, mercenary, and lacking perspective. This spirit is a historical product. The Donbas belongs to an area that used to be called the "wild field," a no man's land. No man's land attracted freedom seekers, and the wild field became a free, Cossack steppe land. Even after the free steppe was conquered, the frontiers closed, the Zaporozhian Cossackdom abolished, and the Don Cossacks incorporated into the Russian Empire, the metropolis' hold on the former frontier region remained weak, and the free spirit died hard. Industrial development from the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, in particular, opened the region to massive migration, thereby recreating frontiers in a symbolic sense. The Donbas began to attract all sorts of freedom seekers, as well as fortune hunters, en masse. Even in the Stalinist 1930s and beyond, the Donbas never lost its reputation as a safe haven for fugitives. Moscow even helped the Donbas to remain the "free steppe" by dumping undesirable social elements there in the act of intently safeguarding the metropolises against them.

The free steppe was not free for everyone, however. Pernicious ethnic tension and wild economic exploitation were facts of life. Yet this reputation did not discourage people from seeking freedom and fortune in the Donbas, much as the United States, the New World and a land of freedom and opportunities, continues to attract all kinds of immigrants, notwithstanding widespread racism and crime.

Terror was another fact of life on the free steppe. The brutality of everyday life in the Donbas astonished visitors from the metropolises and other "respectable" people. In a sense, the prevalence of violence was a reflection of the weakness of governmental authority and control in general. Violence was further compounded by modern industrial development which intensified entrenched anti-Semitism, deepened old social rifts, and created new ones. In 1917 the social tension exploded into violence. The disappearance of any effective political authority during the civil war unleashed a bacchanalia of political terror by all parties concerned. Stalin used the unhealed wounds of the terror for his political purposes. In this respect, the Donbas served Stalin's politics. Nevertheless, because of its function as a refuge for freedom seekers, the Donbas was hit hard by Stalin's "Great Terror." World War II led to more waves of carnage perpetrated by both camps. The German occupation of the Donbas made it all the more suspect in the eyes of Moscow after the war. Mass terror came to an end after Stalin's death, but terror remained a part of political life in the Donbas, which retained its reputation as the free steppe.

The Donbas was a problem child not just for Moscow, but for Kiev, the political metropolis of Ukraine, as well. In 1917-1920 as Moscow's grip loosened and then was lost, Kiev never succeeded in influencing the Donbas. When Moscow lost power again during World War II, the Donbas assumed a special significance for Ukrainian nationalists. Yet the population of the Donbas did not accept their narrowly nationalist ideologies, helping them instead to abandon their views in favor of democratic ideals. When the Soviet empire collapsed, the Donbas immediately became the most troublesome spot for Kiev. The problem is not just that the Donbas has a large Russian population or that it is highly Russified linguistically and culturally. When Kiev has attempted to build a nation, the Donbas acts like

an anti-metropolis Cossack land, resisting Kiev's nationbuilding. This has created a highly ironic political difficulty for Kiev, inasmuch as the Cossack myth is at the core of modern Ukrainian nationbuilding.³ This situation may change in the next few years or few decades, but for now there is little sign that Kiev's difficulty will disappear any time soon.

According to an analysis of recent sociological research in Ukraine, "This [the strong tendency in Ukrainian citizens to identify themselves as "Slavs" rather than as "Europeans"] could lead to a trend negative for the very existence of a Ukrainian independent state, as 50 percent think Ukraine's interests would be best served if the government 'sought confederation' with Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and other former Soviet republics. Only 31 percent think 'remaining sovereign and independent' would better serve national interests."⁴ The conclusion of this sociological analysis may be overly pessimistic, because whatever the terms such as "sovereign," "confederation," and "independent" may mean, the citizens of Ukraine surveyed seem to have taken it for granted that Ukraine has its own "national interests" distinct from those of other former Soviet republics (no doubt, the questionnaire was phrased in this way). Whatever the case, the trend for "confederation" seems to be strongest in the east, particularly in the Donbas. Kiev ought to accommodate the east politically, but it also ought to be aware that, unlike the popular perception, there is no historical evidence that this trend is endemic to the east in general and the Donbas in particular.

³For this difficulty, see Hiroaki Kuromiya, Kuchma, Kravchuk, and Ukrainian Nationbuilding: An Essay (Washington, D.C.: The National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1995).

⁴Volodymyr Zviglyanich, "Ukrainian reforms: a sociological analysis," The Ukrainian Weekly, July 14, 1996, p. 2.