

Book review

**Donovan V (2025) Life in Spite of Everything:
Tales from the Ukrainian East. London, Daunt
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Victoria Donovan has dedicated her recent book, *Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East*, to the history and contemporary reality of Southern Ukraine, the macroregion collectively known as Donbas. The name 'Donbas' refers to the geological term 'Donets Coal Basin,' which is a part of the Great Eurasian Steppe. Donbas is divided into Greater, Lesser, and Eastern Donbas, but in contemporary political discourse, Donbas typically refers to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (Naykova Dumka 2021). In Donovan's own words, 'Donbas, a region that has historically been located at the intersection of different empires, has been the focus of multiple colonisation campaigns and with them, many efforts to re-categorise and rebrand' (Donovan 2025: XIV). For this reason Donbas stands as one of the most complex, mythologized, and stigmatized subjects in Ukrainian history and politics (Portnov 2014, 2017).

Life in Spite of Everything represents an attempt to deconstruct the Soviet myth surrounding the region, engaging with the relatively recent Ukrainian tradition of grappling with Donbas's identity—a tradition that has emerged predominantly since the outbreak of the war in 2014 (Mykhed 2020; Studenna-Skruckva 2014; Vikhrov 2016; Zarembo 2022). A notable exception is Ivan Dziuba's (2015) trilogy, *Donetska rana Ukrainy* ('Ukraine's Donetsk Wound'), the first essay of which appeared in 2005. Its conceptual approach parallels such works as Oleksandr Mykhed's (2020) *la zmishaiu tvoiu krov iz vuhilliam* (which was translated into English as *I Will Mix Your Blood with Coal: Snapshots from the East of Ukraine*—see Mykhed 2025), based on the author's travels through the region and interviews with its residents. Written in a literary style, the book was among the first to foreground the voices of southeastern Ukrainians and is arguably the first work on the urban studies of the region. The focal point of Kateryna Zarembo's (2022) book is the grassroots activist movement representing the Ukrainian identity of Donbas. One may hope that Donovan's book will achieve similar significance among Anglophone audiences.

The book is rooted extensively in Donovan's fieldwork, which began with her initial visit to Severodonetsk in 2019. While originally focused on the history of labor migration, especially the enterprise of the Welsh industrialist John Hughes, Donovan began to recognize parallels between the histories of southeastern Ukraine and her native Cardiff, such as narratives of industrialization, language politics, and the cultural hegemony of more powerful neighbors (Donovan 2025: XII). Consequently, what began as a conventional historical analysis evolved into a more personal and engaged exploration of Southern Ukraine's history, one that seeks to reconstruct its

industrial and colonial past as well as trace its trajectory during the period of independence and the ongoing Russia-instigated conflict. As a result, Donovan's work resists easy categorization within a single disciplinary approach, despite her use of traditional historical-empirical methods and engagement with written, visual, and material sources, as well as with previous scholarship (e.g., Friedgut 1989). Significantly, the author also employs oral history and microhistorical methods, drawing upon interviews conducted with local scholars and activists: 'Local knowledge holders are instead centered in this book, unlocking the meaning of the region's special places and past experiences, peculiarities only people from and of this place could know' (Donovan 2025: XX).

In the late 1980s and early 2000s, foreign scholars often demonstrated greater interest in studying Donbas than their Ukrainian counterparts (Lindner 2006; Wilson 1995). At the time, research predominantly concentrated on the processes of industrialization: 'The Donbass is geographically within Ukraine, yet the Ukrainian population of the area plays only a marginal and largely reactive role in its history. For the Ukrainian peasant, industrial labor was a foreign way of life introduced by foreign *intruders*' (Friedgut 1989: 3, original emphasis). Among the early researchers who emphasized the region's multiethnic character and the complexity of its socio-economic relations was Hiroaki Kuromiya (Kuromiya 1998, see also Semkiv 2021). In her book, Donovan builds on these foundations, endeavoring to construct a polycentric narrative of the macroregion by posing the essential question: what is Donbas?

In pursuit of an answer, Donovan departs from the dominant Russian-Soviet historiographical paradigm, which posits Donbas as *dyke pole* ('wild field') (Naukova Dumka 2004), undeveloped territory whose 'real' existence commenced only with colonization, a narrative that systematically erases Ukrainian agency and the region's internal diversity (Zhukova 2021). In response, Ukrainian intellectuals have increasingly argued that Donbas is ultimately a myth concocted by Soviet propaganda (Stiazhkina 2014; Zarembo 2022: 22). Consequently, Donovan's book subjects this myth to rigorous critical analysis, primarily through the methods of urban and oral history. This approach empowers local knowledge and embraces the agency of local residents.

Life in Spite of Everything is structured into seven chapters that are organized along geo-economic and thematic lines. Through the prism of urban histories, Donovan elucidates key themes that are integral to the South, including the steppe's geology and development ('Mineral world'), the colonial past and Russian expansionism ('Colonial entanglement'), environmental challenges, and socio-cultural dynamics. For instance, the chapter 'Bright city' spotlights Severodonetsk and examines the creation of the chemical industry in 1930s southern Ukraine, the phenomenon of Soviet monotowns (single-industry urban settlements) and their precarious fate after the collapse of the USSR.

The following chapters portray another industrial and coastal city, Mariupol, and foregrounds two further themes: the Soviet valorization of

heavy industry and the enduring vestiges of such propaganda ('Cults'), as well as the ecological consequences of metallurgy and the activism of local environmentalists ('Pink skies'). According to the author, it is precisely this culture of grassroots activism that emerges as one of the book's principal focal points (The BEARR Trust 2025). Zarembo (2022) posits that the scale of social activism in Donbas can be attributed to the absence of a historically defined 'Ukrainian Donbas'; thus, grassroots movements became the catalyst for awakening regional Ukrainian identities within a national framework (Zarembo 2022: 40). Donovan's own research substantiates this claim: '...these were communities with a defined sense of their own identity and a clear vision for their region's future' (Donovan 2025: 169).

The final two chapters are devoted to the war that began in Donbas in 2014. The chapter titled 'Cultural front' examines the perceptions of and cultural responses to, primarily among grassroots activists, the Maidan revolution and ensuing Russian aggression, highlighting the role of museums, cultural workers, and artistic activism during wartime. A salient example is Masha Pronina, an artist, activist, and educator displaced to Mariupol in 2014; at the Platforma TU, a community cultural and artistic space, she championed artistic initiatives for marginalized youth, particularly LGBTQ+ teenagers (Donovan 2025: 177–181). Like many others, Masha was again forced to flee during the renewed Russian invasion in 2022.

The concluding chapter is arguably the book's most personal, as the full-scale invasion is interrogated through both the author's perspective and the lived experiences of individuals and institutions evacuated to western Ukraine. One of Donovan's most thought-provoking questions concerns the 'hierarchy of [war] suffering,' a dynamic which could, in the future, once more divide the East and West of the country (Donovan 2025: 220).

Donovan's book should not be regarded as a conventional monograph on the history of eastern Ukraine, nor does it provide a systematic and detached narrative. Rather, the author's overtly pro-Ukrainian stance, while explicit, does not diminish the scholarly value of her analysis. On the contrary, the incorporation of oral history and the results of extensive fieldwork, presented through vivid case studies and interviews, lend the text a distinctive accessibility and immediacy. Thus, readers are afforded not only an introduction to one of Ukraine's most multifaceted regions, but also insight into its heterogeneity: geological, ethnic, economic, and cultural; its intricate relationships with the rest of Ukraine; and the enduring stigma of 'Sovietness' (which it got mostly because of the prevailing Russophone population as well as consistent support for pro-Russian political parties).

For scholars and practitioners concerned with the history and culture of Eastern Europe and Russia, *Life in Spite of Everything* is an important contribution to the region's urban, oral, and microhistory, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of its economic and social structures, and a step towards the decolonization of knowledge about Donbas.

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Author's bio

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