

# From Postmodern Art to Stalinism: Donetsk's Culture Reimagined

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the cultural transformation in the self-proclaimed “people’s republics” in the Donbas, characterized by a violent rejection of global postmodernist art and the return to a Soviet, often Stalinist, cultural message and visual language. The author, an art critic and curator, born and previously active in the Donbas, begins by discussing the destruction of unconventional art, even when created by the miners themselves, and the projects associated with the IZOLYATSIA art platform. The second part of the article deals with public art in the early years of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), in particular, political posters and art exhibits, which employ Soviet or Soviet-like themes and visual imagery. In a notable departure from the Russian model, the “mobilized art” in the separatist-controlled Donbas features positive references to the Bolshevik Revolution. Throughout the article, the concept of violence is used to analyze the mediatized destruction of nonrealist art and the construction of the DNR’s self-image.

**Keywords:** Donbas; war; art; violence; propaganda; posters; DNR

The history of 20th-century culture has seen many examples of the interconnection of art, politics, and propaganda. However, since 2014 the war in the Donbas has demonstrated both the ruptures and the continuities with 20th-century models. The history of those territories that are customarily called the Donbas is directly connected with the major cultural and political changes in 20th-century society. I use the phrase “customarily called,” because the Soviet ideological construct of “Donbas”—or “Donbass” in Russian—has been transformed from a geological or geographic to a political and cultural term: it no longer concerns the presence of coal, salt, and other minerals in the Donets River basin, but rather connotes certain concepts—industrialization, mechanization, insubordination, independence, uniqueness, and isolation. The American historian Hiroaki Kuromiya considers Donbas geographically and symbolically as a specific “community,” where everyday life was marked by violence and frequent labor turnover (Kuromiya 1998, 32). However, a Ukrainian historian from that region, Olena Stiazhkina, emphasizes that the very notion of Donbas as a territorial and cultural entity is an ideological construct, which excludes such pages in the region’s history as the struggle for labor and human rights (Horbatenko 2021). Today, the meaning of “Donbas” has also become inseparable from the story of Russia’s war on Ukraine, which started in the spring of 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and creation of puppet “people’s republics” occupying parts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. This metamorphosis is a vivid example of how an industrial region becomes an imaginary place and how its representations underwrite political divides. The story of the “Donbas”

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also reveals how strongly ideology is woven into everyday life and how it regulates social and artistic representations, in particular, the portrayal of violence.

Thus, I consider the Donbas as an imaginative political and artistic metaphor. At the same time, the political, cultural, and social analysis of eastern Ukrainian regions uses their proper official name, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

In this article, I will examine the various forms of interaction between culture and politics in Donetsk before and after the war began. I will rely, in part, on my own experience as an art critic and journalist, who grew up in the region and worked in Donetsk before the war. Today, the city of Donetsk is the capital of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), the unrecognized authority of which forms an aesthetic and ethical agenda for the region, developing ideas about its imaginary past. I will mainly discuss the representations of Donetsk oblast and the political project of the DNR that arose within its borders during the early years of occupation (2014–17). It is the utopian idea of a unique and self-sufficient region, with inexhaustible natural resources and the daily heroic work of miners and metallurgists that formed the basis of the Soviet myth of an urban paradise created by the hands of working people.

“Yes, nature offended, offended my native land, did not give it any free-flowing rivers, or green forests, or honey grasses. But man did not want to make peace with the meager gifts of nature. He became a god and created [everything] for himself on the steppe, in the forests and rivers, and on the mountains,” wrote Boris Gorbатов (1908–1954), a native of the Donetsk region and a major writer of Stalin's time (Gorbатов 1968, 24). It is not surprising that exactly the image of the miner and worker, canonized in the 20th century, became the central symbol of the industrial Donbas. This symbolism sometimes acquired the most unpredictable forms, by which the actual geographical area (the contours on the map) was identified as a part of the human body—the hand of the worker. Thus, in the introductory article of the Donetsk volume of the 26-volume *Istoriia mist i sil Ukraïns'koï RSR* (History of Towns and Villages of the Ukrainian SSR, 1967–74), the editors claim that “on the map of Soviet Ukraine, Donetsk oblast is similar to the open palm of a working man, on which the ‘lines of life’ are like the many railways, motorways, canals and gas pipelines, high-voltage power lines and forest belts, and the blossoming cities and villages” (Redaktsiina kolehiia 1970, 5).

According to Yulia Lytvynets', director of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, in the 1920s and 1930s, and again in the 1950s and 1960s, the miners themselves were involved in the process of creating the region's iconography (Lytvynets' 2016). In her book about the so-called Special Collection of banned works from the period 1937–1939, she emphasizes that some of the artists whose work ended up in the Special Collection had in the past worked in factories and mines or belonged to a “miner dynasty.” It was deemed necessary to reinforce the propagandistic image of the miner and industrialization by presenting the artistic viewpoint of the workers themselves. Curiously, in depicting themselves, these workers avoided the epic and heroic conventions of Socialist Realism, appealing more to European pictorial traditions (expressionism, cubism, etc.). Not surprisingly, during the antiformalist campaign of the late 1930s, many of these images from the 1920s and 1930s were banned from exhibition and placed in the special collections of museums. Paradoxically, in attempting to eradicate the ideologically perverted image of the worker and the miner, Stalinism preserved it for modern viewers.

Let us consider some case studies from the current war. When in the spring of 2014 fighters of the “Donetsk People's Republic” seized the territory of the nonprofit, nongovernmental platform of contemporary art in Donetsk, IZOLYATSIA (“Isolation,” spelled intentionally in the somewhat inconsistent English transcription and in all capitals), they almost immediately initiated a public viewing and “review” of the art, both paintings and sculptures, as well as the platform's library collection. The fighters' “analysis and criticism of the art” was recorded and published on the Internet. In one of the videos, one can see how the DNR soldiers discard some books, saying they are not art, but pornography or propaganda. The IZOLYATSIA team also revealed that the DNR soldiers shoot at the symbolic soap sculptures made by Maria Kulikovskaia, the Crimean artist who

made the sculptures in the form of nude female bodies from soft materials, such as soap and gypsum. The idea of the project was that nature gradually and nonviolently transforms art objects, changing their structure, texture, and shape. The militants of the DNR accelerated these natural processes with the help of weapons (IZOLYATSIA 2017; Butsykina 2021).

After the war began, IZOLYATSIA started compiling on its website a list of the many art objects that were lost because the artists worked with the surrounding environment and site-specific works could not be restored. Among such art objects were works of both international and Ukrainian artists: installations and sculptures by Daniel Buren (France), Cai Guo-Qiang (China), Leandro Erlich (Argentina), Kader Attia (France), Pascale Martine Tayou (Cameroon/France), Zhanna Kadyrova, and Hamlet Zinkovsky (both Ukraine; IZOLYATSIA 2020).

Moreover, according to the employees of IZOLYATSIA, after the DNR took control of the territory, the main site-specific symbol of the collection—a metal deer created by the miners' hands in the early 1990s—was lost. The miners had screwed the hand-made sculpture to the very top of a slag heap. This metal sculpture resembled the image of a golden antelope. The Donetsk online regional historian Yevgenii Yasenov published the story of this sculpture's creator—a miner who, together with his friends in the winter of 1993–94, riveted the deer to the waste heap. At the time, this idea of the deer seemed to him “beautiful.” The author of the sculpture said that during those difficult economic times he and his friends repeatedly “sheared off” the deer and sold it for scrap metal. However, the director of the factory, on whose territory the deer was standing, always bought back the sculpture and returned it to its place—to the top of the slag mountain (Donetskiy: avtorskiy sayt Yevgeniya Yasenova 2012). Thus, the deer witnessed all the changes at the factory and around the mine over the years of independence, before being finally stolen and sold off after 2014.

Interestingly, the story of attacks on modern art in Donetsk was important enough for the Russian/DNR side to try challenging it. In the summer of 2014, the Russian version of *Forbes* magazine published a report claiming that only one example on the IZOLYATSIA website list was correct and even that, only partially, because the DNR militants had allegedly used it for target practice, only one sculpture by Maria Kulikovskaia (Dzhemal 2014). However, in trying to limit the damage, the report revealed another ominous-sounding fact: namely, that the head of the DNR special service organization Spetskomitet, Leonid Baranov, requested the delivery to his office of the albums by the Kharkiv-born, Berlin-based artist Boris Mikhailov, found at IZOLYATSIA's headquarters. Apparently, Baranov was particularly interested in the paintings reflecting upon life in the Soviet Union. Mikhailov, who died the following year, was known for his provocative manner of analyzing society via the depiction of the naked and vulgar poor. But the chief of the secret service denied that this was art: “I am not an art expert, I would not be able to tell a copy from the original, but one does not need to be a great specialist to distinguish art from obscenity” (Dzhemal 2014).

However, the greatest resonance of the DNR's early cultural policy was evoked by the video that depicts the destruction of the giant sculptural-installation project by Pascal Martin Tayou “Make Up!” which was dedicated to women's contribution to the postwar development of Donetsk and, in particular, industrial reconstruction. The basis of the installation was a factory pipe, the top of which the artist decorated with bright pink lipstick. The video, shot on a phone by militiamen, shows how they blew up the tower and how this lipstick was blown to pieces and the uncensored comments of the violent “art critics” (IZOLYATSIA 2015). There is symbolism in this gesture—the pro-Russian patriarchal political project violently destroys a woman, her experience, and her memory. Styazhkina (2019) writes about women in the history of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, emphasizing their contribution to the industrialization and postwar reconstruction. Together with other historians, Stiazhkina insists on the need to revise the region's history through the concept of the backbreaking and exhausting labor that shaped workers' social, cultural, and everyday life (Kulykov and Sklokina, 2018.)

While creating this sculpture, Tayou observed that in the region there existed virtually no visual and public mention of women's hard work. This topic was also marginal in the official art of Stalin's time. One of the few exceptions is the painting *The Donbas* by Alexander Deineka (1947), held in the

State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The artist was working in the region at the time, observing the work and everyday life of miners and workers, who especially in the postwar period were often women. The painting depicts them in an idealized way—not exhausted by hard labor, but physically robust and enthusiastic. As in Deineka's other paintings, there are recognizable modernist and cubist motives, even if the overall ideological message is undeniable.

Stylistically, the works by Deineka and Tayou are very different. Deineka's is a traditional canvas painting, whereas Tayou employs the contemporary art form of installation. Soviet art was supposed to portray the heroic labor that would reveal elements of the communist future in the present (represented in this case by the upward gaze of the woman in the center of the painting). Contemporary artwork, instead, deals with what the flow of time brings about; they are about rethinking generational experience and deconstructing the "heroic" past. Thus, Tayou's work engages with more than the marginalized memory of Donbas women—it addresses the entire experience of women's labor in the Soviet Union (if not globally), inclusive of its social, economic, and political aspects.

It is unlikely that those who blew up the work of Tayou thought about its topic or the critical, social thought it bears. For the DNR fighters, the important fact was that this artwork belonged to another artistic style and way of thinking. Such an act of destruction constitutes not only violent work with memory and public space; it is a performative action, through which public demonstration and the strengthening of power proceed. The excessive aggression in the video and the documentation of the destruction process are the contemporary instruments for the formation of visual politics, the creation of the indispensable image of a repressive state capable of subduing any idea by force.

If in the early 20th century it was enough to write a newspaper article or create a poster, today these methods cannot produce the necessary impression on the audience. The idea behind the new aesthetics of violence is not just to demonstrate its results but also to show the process of destruction itself. Appealing to the ideas of Boris Groys, many art critics regard such documentation of acts of violence as part of the history of art as the most brutal example of performance and art activism. In his 2004 article "On Art Activism," Groys (2014) questions the nature of art activism and affirms it as a phenomenon functioning in a completely different channel from what we call critical art. In contrast, art activism operates, according to Groys, in a society in which neither the political system nor nongovernment organizations can solve fundamental problems such as poverty, access to education, etc. Among such societies, surely, one can count a society in a time of war, which spawns all these innumerable social problems. The example of the violent destruction of the installations of Martin Pascale Tayou, obviously, could also be interpreted exactly as art activism with, however, one important qualification: in this case the performers and art activists were not artists but paramilitaries feeling empowered to impose their idea of culture.

Such performances served as a public affirmation of violence in the official channels of the DNR, through which the new ideology and new historical reality are constructed. Recall the image of a female DNR activist kicking another woman tied to a light pole and wrapped in the Ukrainian flag. Several similar images of the Ukrainian supporter Iryna Dovgan, tortured in full view of the passersby, made the rounds on the social media precisely because of the direct physical violence portrayed and the suffering one could read on Iryna's face. The *New York Times* also published such a picture, taken by Mauricio Lima and accompanied by the following caption: "Attacked and humiliated as a Ukrainian spy by pro-Russian rebels, Irina Dovgan, wrapped in a Ukrainian flag, was praying for death in this Donetsk traffic circle. Three days after the photo was taken, she was released by a rebel commander who had been shamed into a rare act of mercy" (Lima 2014).

One could also recall the 2015 video of the Ukrainian POWs being marched through an angry Donetsk crowd, which was shown on all DNR and Russian channels and was also distributed across social networks (Pravda DNR 2015). Such acts of violence and public humiliation were also shown by Ukrainian and Western channels as examples of the DNR's aggression and brutality. Military-patriotic processions as a means of glorification and direct personification of the political elite have

been conducted in the region since the end of the 19th century; however, as the local researcher Valerii Stepkin (2011) writes, at that time such parades and marches occurred without much publicity. Such measures became a matter of public pride only under Stalin. Thus, for example, Elena Zginnik describes the large-scale aviation parades in prewar Stalino (now Donetsk) during 1936–1937. Analyzing the local press of those years, the author presents a picture of a busy day, on which military might was shown on par with entertainment—dances, festivities, and concerts (Zginnik 2015).

However, in the case of the POW march in the DNR, the force of the “new government” was not symbolized by military might—hardware and soldiers who march in formation—but by the hatred and anger of the spectators and onlookers toward the Ukrainian prisoners. There was a Stalinist precedent for that, too, in marching German POWs through the streets of Moscow and Kyiv in 1943, but the Stalinist authorities insisted on the preservation of order, which allegedly demonstrated the Soviet people’s ability to hate the enemy in a disciplined, conscientious way. In other words, the people were the audience rather than the participants of that show (Yekelchuk 2006).

The street-washing procedure after the “parade of shame” constituted an important element of the 2015 ritual in Donetsk. Street-washing trucks followed right after the column of Ukrainian POWs as though cleansing the street after the “contagious” enemy soldiers. This ritual can also be traced to the Stalinist example of German POW parades in Moscow and Kyiv during the late summer of 1944—both filmed and repeatedly shown in cinemas and, during the postwar period, on TV (NTV 2019). Therefore, it was a political gesture familiar to a wide audience, reinforcing the equation in DNR propaganda of Ukrainian patriots as Nazis.

The history of art knows one famous example of such a cleansing performative gesture. The radical art group Hi Red Center, which existed in Japan in 1963–64, repeated “The Street-Cleaning Event (Be Clean!)” in both New York and Tokyo before the Tokyo Olympics in protest against the Japanese government (Hammond 2014). However, this performance did not involve the propaganda of hatred or consolidation of loyalty to the state. In contrast, the DNR authorities tried to reproduce a Stalinist ritual of hatred, thus borrowing from the vocabulary of 20th-century totalitarianism.

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The demonstration of force never proceeds exclusively as such in the current context; it is always historicized, relying on a heroic past. Thus, for the centennial of the 1917 Revolution on the billboards of the city of Donetsk appeared agitation posters, which called for consolidating military forces and cementing victory in the war against Ukraine. The right side of the poster reproduced a well-known 1942 Soviet poster by the Kukryniksy collective. It placed Soviet soldiers of the Second World War against a background portraying the Russian military greats—from medieval Rus’ knights to the Civil War icon Vasily Chapayev. The slogan beneath it read, “We fight strongly, thrust fearlessly—grandsons of Suvorov, children of Chapayev!” The 1942 poster is an iconic representation of Stalinist patriotism, which appears on the dust jacket of David Brandenberger’s (2002) book on this subject. Yet, the slogan “We will win!” on the left side of the DNR poster did not replicate the familiar grammar of Stalin’s famous “Our cause is righteous—victory will be ours!” Moreover, the distinctly un-Soviet flag of the DNR was encoded in the last letter of the word “we” (*my*) (Popova 2014; Social Transformation Group 2021).

As we see, the DNR propagandists attempted to construct their identity not on a regional basis, but exactly on a heroic, historical basis, referencing Stalinist wartime propaganda directed at the Soviet Union in general, which embraced the shining personalities of Tsarist Russia (Prince Alexander Nevsky [1220–1263] and Generalissimo Aleksandr Suvorov [1729–1800]) and Bolshevik heroes of the Russian Civil War (Vasily Chapayev [1887–1919]). By creating such a pastiche, DNR propagandists attempted to build a connection to the familiar visual representation of “righteous” violence, which also implied an uncritical attitude toward Stalinism and the identification of the pro-Western enemy with the Nazis. Another DNR poster features the complete appropriation of a highly recognizable 1941 Soviet wartime poster “Motherland Calling” by Iraklii

Toidze, which is simply supplied with an additional slogan to the left: “Join the People’s Militia of Donbas” (Popova 2014).

Yet another poster used on billboards in Donetsk attempted to build continuity exclusively with the Soviet experience. In Russia itself, this would be difficult to achieve because of the Putin administration’s ambivalent attitude toward the Bolshevik Revolution. However, the DNR used as its foundational myth the story of the Donetsk-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic, which in 1918 briefly claimed the status of an independent Bolshevik entity. This project did reflect the regional divide among the Bolsheviks in Ukraine, but Lenin and Stalin apparently used it as part of their ploy to delay the German advance after the Brest Peace and then quickly discarded it (Soldatenko 2011). Still, this short-lived republic provided the DNR with a historical precedent. The poster portrayed three warriors with their uniforms and background images corresponding to the years 1918, 1941, and 2014. The captions over and below these three pictures read, “The Russian people’s fate is to repeat their fathers’ heroic deeds in defense of the native land. Join the people’s army of the Donetsk Republic” (BBC Ukraina 2014). Unlike the previous posters, this one appears to be an original creation of a local artist, yet it references the visual culture of the early 20th century, when a poster was the main means of reaching out to the semiliterate masses. Its form is equally simple. The three characters are portrayed in dynamic poses, yet their gazes are turned to the past, away from the viewer. The one from 1918 shows some similarity with the historical leader of the Donbas Bolsheviks, Artem (Fedor Sergeev, 1883–1921), if dressed incongruently as a revolutionary sailor. The other two are generic images with more modern weapons.

Yet another poster from the DNR’s early years, “Men, all to defense of the native land! Let us prevent the creation in the Donbas of Nazi filtration camps,” also appears to be a local <sup>1</sup>creation.<sup>1</sup> It employs a random image from the internet rather than a recognizable Soviet-era poster, but it establishes the connection with wartime Soviet propaganda both aesthetically—by using an image of a woman and her child behind barbed wire—and discursively, by referring to Nazi camps (*Delovoi Peterburg* 2014). The region’s complex past during the Revolution and the Second World War, which was far more chaotic and divisive than today’s propagandists would allow, is thus erased with the reliance on Soviet visual language and the Stalinist concept of righteous violence. It is also notable that in this article the historical ethnic diversity of the region is subsumed under the notion of its “Russianness.”

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Why did the local heroes, with the possible exception of Artem, disappear from this historical perspective, even though they were the very miners and workers who had built the region with their own hands? Unlike in Russia proper, where the centenary of the 1917 revolution was marked in a very low-key and ambivalent way, in Donetsk the DNR authorities issued a special stamp with the image of a monument of Vladimir Lenin, which adorns Donetsk’s central square, and bearing Lenin’s words: “Donbas is not a random region, but rather it is a region without which socialist construction will remain a simple, pleasant wish” (*Pravda DNR* 2017). The nonrandomness of the region is measured by its geostrategic location at the beginning of the 20th century and the availability there of minerals essential for industrialization (coal, salt, iron ore, etc.). The struggle for resources and the creation of the “workers’ front” explained much of the violence in the region. Just as the region is imagined “from outside” in Lenin’s quote, the Revolution in the Donbas was not made by the locals but by the armies from outside the Donbas fighting for this mineral-rich region.

In his book, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*, the historian Hiroaki Kuromiya describes the situation at the time of the so-called Russian Civil War (1917–21), when inhabitants of the borderlands were in the very thick of events. Kuromiya describes this period as the bloodiest in the history of the Donbas. The miners were actively called to the front; however, because of their unreliability, quick temper, and aggressive behavior at the front, the workers were often returned to the rear (Kuromiya 1998).

During the present war, the pro-Russian media have attempted to create an image of an “army of miners” defending the DNR and LNR. Local and Russian information outlets claimed repeatedly that the miners constituted the majority of the separatist fighters. According to the Russian nationalist writer Zakhar Prilepin (2018), who briefly fought there, 95 percent of the fighters were allegedly local. The head of the Ukrainian independent trade union of miners rejected such claims, adding that whatever limited local participation there was, it was caused not at all by the ideological struggle or political views of the workers but rather by economic factors (DW Ukraina 2014).

One can find evidence of this even in the pages of the DNR’s official media channels. Thus, a Donetsk newspaper published in 2016 a story about the “Groza” mortar operator Vitaly Danilenko, who before the war worked as a foreman in the extraction quadrants of the Skochinskii Mine. In November 2014 he left to join the militia, but in March 2015 he returned to production. Danilenko explains that the workers attempted to keep the mine in working condition to the very end, and when the mine was completely stopped, they were forced to go on unpaid leave. It was exactly after this that Danilenko joined the militia. To the journalist’s question about why he did so, he answered, “To the very end we attempted to save the mine. Because of the shelling by the Ukrainian troops, only the central drainage system could be maintained. Fortunately, we saved the mine. In general, everything together had influence: both patriotism and the closure of the mine” (Antipov 2016). We note that here patriotism is secondary to economic factors, about which the miner speaks. The heroism and patriotism of the newspaper narrative cannot hide the miner’s story of poverty.

At the same time, the DNR’s newspapers continued from the very first days of the war to repeat the Soviet rhetoric and reproduce the lines glorifying the miners, based on news about overfulfilling the plan and the government’s encouragement of workers. The then-DNR leader Aleksandr Zakharchenko only confirmed this thesis in his official speeches. In 2016, Zakharchenko noted in a speech to miners that from the beginning of the year DNR miners had extracted “2.5 million more tons than for an analogous period of 2015.” According to him, tunneling brigades successfully prepared for new achievements, and since 2014, “the miners have opened up 15 new shafts” (*Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki* 2016). All these speeches about new shafts do not square with the reports about mines being closed and people not receiving their pay. Actually, the miner Danilenko (mentioned above) talks about this in his own commentary. And even Zakharchenko recognizes that “the guardians of labor are yearly losing their comrades” (*Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki* 2016). At the same time, he kept silent about the causes of these losses: they are a result of not only military activities but also of the poor safety of the mines, which has only worsened since the start of the war (*Novosti Donetskoi Respubliki* 2016).

Despite the alleged labor achievements, in the official press of the DNR precisely historical material predominates. Indeed, the grand-scale Soviet-type mythology about the heroism of the workers’ labor cannot be supported by contemporary materials: because of the war, the mines are in terrible condition, and the miners are largely unemployed. These factors impede the emergence of a new utopia. The visual language of the propaganda seeks to remind people about the old myth, about heroic times, but this is an appeal to a utopia, which led people to disappointment, economic difficulties, and the loss of life in the mines because of the poor modernization of enterprises and violations of the safety rules. In addition, a utopia can operate exclusively in the framework of a future project but cannot be linked solely to the past.

However, a return to the familiar Soviet aesthetics allows for the creation of an ideal image of a miner-fighter, even if the audience knows that it is false. Thus, the St. Petersburg artist Aleksandr Novoselov in 2017 exhibited in the DNR his painting *The Donbas*, meant to represent the region’s imagined community as united around the separatist leaders, including some who were by then dead. Just as in a good Socialist Realist painting, Novoselov put the leaders in the foreground, surrounded by the ordinary people. However, the militants and the miners (in work clothes and mining helmets) constitute the majority of the people portrayed in the painting (*DonPress* 2017).

This canvas reminds the viewer of the propaganda posters by Adolf Strakhov, who in the 1930s portrayed in a similar vein the people of the Donbas as united around Stalin, sometimes also including the long-dead Lenin (Raievs'kyi 1936). However, there is one important difference between the posters by Strakhov and Novoselov. Novoselov's painting has two symbolic center points: the larger-than-life leaders in the foreground and the woman holding a boy, who is positioned in the middle of the people. She is depicted on the same scale as the characters around her, and she is thus part of the background for the leaders, but it is difficult to miss her importance as a representation of the Holy Virgin, a Socialist Realist one without a halo. Unlike the Soviet image, the DNR-approved image of a woman has religious connotations.

This mythological duality of referencing at once the Stalinist and the sacred is not unique to the unrecognized republics of the Donbas; it also characterizes Russian culture under Putin. In 2018, the DNR authorities claimed that the fourth anniversary of the "republic" coincided with the Orthodox Christian feast of Annunciation and, on that occasion, unveiled the statue of Prince Vladimir the Saint who had baptized Rus' in the 9th century (Donetskoe agentstvo novostei 2018). Ironically, the saintly prince's statue stands in front of the Kuibyshev Palace of Culture, which is named after Stalin's top economic planner Valerian Kuibyshev.

Finally, the regional art museum Art Donbas, which had previously served as a venue for modern and contemporary art exhibits, switched after 2014 to military-patriotic themes; these themes defined the main message of such exhibits as "Look in the Donbas's Eyes" and "A Military Photographer," the latter organized in a major public park. That park is still named after a top Stalinist ideologist, Aleksandr Shcherbakov, who had briefly served in 1938 as a party boss in Donetsk (then Stalino). Religious themes and artifacts are also prominent in the museum's work. In 2015, it held an exhibit dedicated to St. Luke the Blessed Surgeon (Archbishop Luka Voino-Iasenetsky, 1877–1961), a military surgeon turned bishop, who had been exiled for much of the 1920s and 1930s but in the aftermath of World War II was awarded a Stalin Prize for Medicine and a medal "For Heroic Labor during the Great Patriotic War" (Pravoslavie.ru 2015). Although St. Luke had nothing to do with Donetsk, the exhibit about him brought together nicely the cultural trends discussed in this article, from Stalinism to the cult of war to religion.

## Conclusions

Working with the Soviet past and its familiar cultural patterns, the cultural project of the DNR is attempting to construct a media image of a republic continuing both the Russian and Soviet traditions while evoking a replay of Stalin's "just war" against Hitler. Choosing old propaganda methods and often appealing to Stalinist visual materials, the unrecognized republic's authorities are orienting themselves toward neither their future nor their present. The ambiguous past, too, is becoming a place of speculation and political technology.

The cultural identity of contemporary Donetsk is constructed in opposition to the cultural processes on the Ukrainian side, where the authorities continue an ambitious policy of "decommunization"—in reality, the cultural and political othering of the Soviet experience (Cherepanyn 2018). The more radical the Ukrainian rejection of Stalinism and the Soviet myth of the "Great Patriotic War," the greater role these ideas play in the ideology and art of the DNR. To the contrary, I would like to emphasize the need for deep intellectual work on industrial and postindustrial heritage and memory, potentially starting with the rejection of the very notion of the "Donbas" and revisiting this land's rich historical and artistic past as that of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

In this article, I analyzed violence in the visual culture of an industrial region. The notions of "worker power" and the visual representation of the work force had once been linked with a global socialist agenda, but in today's Donbas, the place of the worker is occupied by the demonstration of



media violence, which is implemented thanks to its own performativity and its effective translation into the media.

**Disclosure.** None.

## Note

1 “Filtration” refers to the process of security verification resulting in the detention of some prisoners (for their subsequent prosecution) and the release of the others. The irony is that the Nazi Germany did not have camps with such a name, but the Soviets did—the NKVD Filtration Camps (after 1945, the NKVD Verification and Filtration Camps, *proverochno-fil'tratsionnyye lageria NKVD*) were responsible for processing Soviet POWs liberated from German POW camps and, later, also the Soviet *Ostarbeiter* returning from Germany (Zviagintsev 2006, 699).

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