

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND GLOBAL AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN HYBRID WAR AS PORTRAYED THROUGH MODERN
UKRAINIAN LITERATURE

JORDYNN CHEATLE
Spring 2024

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Comparative Literature and Global and International Studies
with honors in Comparative Literature and Global and International Studies

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Yuliya Ladygina
Professor of Slavic and Global and International Studies
Thesis Supervisor

Krista Brune
Associate Professor of Portuguese and Spanish
Honors Advisor

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to investigate how contemporary Ukrainian literature, both fictional and non-fictional, assesses the role of propaganda and circulation of information in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, highlighting its hybrid nature. By analyzing four novels and three collections of critical essays—Andrei Kurkov’s *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* (2015) and *Grey Bees* (2018), Serhii Zhadan’s *The Orphanage* (2017), Stanislav Aseyev’s *In Isolation* (2018) and *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* (2020), Artem Chekh’s *Absolute Zero* (2017) and Volodymyr Rafeyenko’s *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (201)—this study has established that Ukrainian writers allocate a great deal of attention to weaponization of information in their works and draw their readers’ attention to how different groups of people caught in the ongoing war encounter and process information in radically different ways. Therefore, this study is broken into three chapters separated by civilians, prisoners, and soldiers, respectively. It pays particular attention to the topics of fake news, use of language as a code for political views, and the authors’ call for informational literacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Life for Civilians	3
<i>Ukraine Diaries</i>	3
<i>Grey Bees</i>	6
<i>The Orphanage</i>	9
<i>In Isolation</i>	12
<i>Mondegreen</i>	15
Chapter 3: Life for Prisoners.....	19
<i>The Torture Camp on Paradise Street</i>	19
<i>In Isolation</i>	24
Chapter 4: Life for the Soldiers	28
<i>Absolute Zero</i>	28
<i>In Isolation</i>	31
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	37
ACADEMIC VITA.....	38

Chapter 1: Introduction

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014, as well as the beginning of the hybrid war in the Donbas, sparked a political and societal change for Ukrainian civilians. Additionally, it also inspired Ukrainian writers to document the transformations occurring in their country. As described in Serhii Plokhy's study, *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (2023), Ukrainian civilians took to the streets in mass to protest President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the EU economic agreement, which the people perceived as "a broken promise" (95). When on the morning of November 30 Berkut riot police resorted to beating protestors to dislodge the crowds in the center of Kyiv, more people showed up to protest the next day. Soon after, the protest grew into a popular uprising against the Yanukovich regime now known as the Revolution of Dignity. The revolution marked the beginning of Ukraine's political and societal transformation, which many Ukrainians in southeastern regions (those subjected to the Kremlin-generated propaganda the most) questioned. As a result, although the revolution succeeded in toppling the Yanukovich regime, it was quickly followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war, which has escalated to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This series of events attracted a lot of critical and creative attention from contemporary Ukrainian writers, who, as this thesis illustrates, pay particular attention to the hybrid nature of Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Hence, this thesis sets out to highlight how contemporary Ukrainian writers draw attention to the profound role that the media and the control and circulation of information play in the Russo-Ukrainian war to highlight its hybrid nature. As military analysts indicate, nowadays informational warfare and other nonconventional means of shaping military actions

are as important as actual boots on the ground. Contemporary Ukrainian writers seem to be aware of it and this thesis will analyze exactly that: their reflections on weaponization of information and the role of media in the lives of the different groups of Ukrainian people directly affected by the ongoing war.

The authors selected for analysis in this thesis have all written key texts that are recognized as some of the most representative and celebrated works of contemporary Ukrainian literature available in English. Additionally, each selection of literature highlights the effects of propaganda and the circulation of information from the standpoint of three groups: civilians, prisoners of war, and soldiers. The first examination of literature from the viewpoint of Ukrainian civilians based on Andrey Kurkov's *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* (2015) and *Grey Bees* (2018), Serhiy Zhadan's *The Orphanage* (2017), Stanislav Aseyev's *ic* (2018), and Volodymyr Rafeyenko's *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love* (2019). Within these fictional and nonfictional texts, the authors showcase how propaganda shapes the lives of civilians caught in the. Stanislav Aseyev's memoir *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* (2020) and his collection of journalistic essays, *In Isolation*, showcase, in turn, the impact of weaponized information on prisoners held captive by the pro-Russian militants in the Donbas. As a survivor of the DPR prison system himself, Aseyev describes what it is like to face a hybrid war among a prison setting that attempts to keep you locked up. Lastly, the point of view of soldiers is shown with *In Isolation* and *Absolute Zero* by Artem Chekh, where both authors detail their own experiences mixed with facts to expose the propaganda used to attract soldiers to the war in the first place. Overall, the literature presented in this thesis is used to showcase propaganda and the effects of the hybrid war from three different angles.

Chapter 2: Life for Civilians

As contemporary Ukrainian literature demonstrate, Ukrainian civilians—particularly those residing in the southeastern region—have been exposed to pro-Russian media and the Kremlin-generated propaganda, greatly shaping their attitudes to the ongoing events. The four texts that demonstrate Ukrainian civilian livelihood amid the wave of propaganda most tellingly are Kurkov's *Ukraine Diaries* and *Grey Bees*, Zhadan's *The Orphanage* (2017), Stanislav's *In Isolation*, and Rafeyenko's *Mondegreen*. *Ukraine Diaries*, *Grey Bees* and *In Isolation* focus primarily on the role of the pro-Russia and pro-Yanukovich media in generating and circulating propaganda that ranges from comparing pro-European Ukrainians to the Nazis to spreading falsified information. From there, *The Orphanage* takes the theme of circulation of information one step further by demonstrating some of its effects, such as the politization of the use of Russian and Ukrainian languages for everyday communication in Ukraine and the pervasive propaganda-inflicted confusion among civilians as to the causes and direction of the ongoing war. *Mondegreen* also dives into the role of language and propaganda during the complex process of adaptations to new territories that those internally displaced must face.

Ukraine Diaries

Andrey Kurkov—a well-known a well-known Ukrainian author and intellectual—has written nineteen novels about Ukraine's post-Soviet experience and is one of the first to address the subject of weaponization of information in his private diary *Ukraine Diaries*. Kurkov's personal account of the historical events begins with the Euromaidan protests of 2013 and

describes a series of clashes between protestors and pro-Yanukovych police, the following annexation of Crimea, and the separatist takeover of the territories in the Donbas in early 2014, and offers his perspective on the riots, misinformation, and the effects the environment in Kyiv plays on his own family affairs. Among many pointed observations, Kurkov emphasizes key role the control and flow of information played in shaping the events of the Euromaidan and its aftermath.

One such way that propaganda is evident in Kurkov's text is demonstrated through Yanukovych's control of Ukrainian informational space. On Saturday, December 7, Kurkov comments extensively on the mainstream television broadcasting that occurs on the eve of the mass demonstration in front of the television center on Mechinov Street in Kyiv. As Kurkov becomes aware of the impending protest, he notes how the main television channels' news program first grow "completely silent" on the subject and then stop broadcasting altogether (33). At this point, Kurkov insinuates that Yanukovych's government simply does not want the citizens of Ukraine to know about the impending protest and simply erases the event from public record. Similarly, Kurkov suggests that the decision not to broadcast skirmishes between civilians and the police on the government-controlled channels is driven by the government's awareness of the power of such reports to draw more protestors to the street, hence to perpetuate and strengthen the protests.

On Monday, December 9, following the violence that occurs earlier that day on Hrushevsoho Street by the Parliament buildings in Kyiv, Kurkov notes Yanukovych's inability to condemn the Berkut riot police on their beating up of students in late November during his round table talk with the previous presidents of Ukraine. By plastering a "satisfied smile" on his face instead, Yanukovych reveals that he is pleased with such brutality (36). Later that week on

Friday, December 13, Kurkov reports that the television broadcast another roundtable discussion, this time with an aim of “national reconciliation” (42). In this broadcast, Ukrainian students are represented by a “big, rosy-cheeked lad” who is a member of the youth division of the Party of Regions, President Yanukovich’s political party. To have a seemingly happy Ukrainian student as depicted with rosy cheeks showcases the students of Ukraine, without mentioning his party affiliation, represents the sneaky nature in which only certain people and ideas may be represented on television, as to interview someone who was not a Party of Regions member would run the risk of facilitating the spread of information that would put Yanukovich in a bad light as a political entity.

On Wednesday, December 11, Kurkov comments on the aftermath of the clashes and notices the plethora of broken barriers. Kurkov records how “the barricades [are] gone and there [is] nothing on the news about clashes with police, injuries, or arrests. Strange” (39). “Strange” is the only assessment he offers to the situation. As Kurkov suggests, the sudden disappearance of all evidence of protests and fights on the streets of Maidan indicates that the police cleaned up the streets to cover up any evidence of the government-sponsored violence against peaceful civilians. Therefore, Kurkov’s simple comment “strange” is quite ironic as it implies his understanding to what the police has done to clear their own history.

Not only does Kurkov note the lack of information shared by the Ukrainian government, but he also points out the malicious use of undercover cops and hired thugs known as *titushky* used to infiltrate the crowds and disrupt protests:

There are also secret forces who act against the protesters: many people have been injured by metal bullets, and several killed by weapons of war that the special forces, theoretically, do not possess. Dozens of activists and protestors have been abducted at night by men in plain clothes driving vehicles with false number plates. Many of these kidnapped people have then turned up in police stations, but some have never been found (91).

As Kurkov suggests here, the “secret forces” that attack the protestors—the *titushky* and the undercover Berkut riot policemen loyal to Yanukovych—often operates through silent, heinous acts to keep the broad civilian population unaware of their tactics. Such undercover operations qualify as withholding information from the public, which emphasizes that the fight against the Ukrainian people and their right to have a choice started long before Russia’s open military intervention in the country. Kurkov’s text clearly demonstrates that Ukrainian civilians who came to protest on the Maidan in 2013-2014 were fighting not only violence and corruption, but also a war of information designed to confuse and mislead them in their struggles.

Grey Bees

Kurkov’s 2018 novel, *Grey Bees*, tells a story of a forty-nine-year-old beekeeper, Sergei Sergeyich, and his quest to rescue his bees from the tumultuous grey zone in southeastern Ukraine, where a localized, sporadic violence and propaganda has been dragging on for years. While focusing mostly on the day-to-day experience of Ukrainian civilian populations caught in the war, the novel pays particular attention to the questions of propaganda and information control.

Kurkov’s fascination with propaganda manifests through Sergeyich’s reflections on the symbolic naming of the streets in his village, as well as his eventual campaign to rename his own street. While describing his village for the first time, Sergeyich notes that there are only two “proper streets” in the village: one named after Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and the other after Taras Shevchenko, the nineteenth century Ukrainian poet who is credited with shaping the modern Ukrainian national identity. At first, Sergeyich lives in “less

than proud isolation” on the Lenin Street and finds nothing wrong with it for as long as he pays little attention to the cause and effects of the ongoing war (13). Kurkov’s choice of naming Sergeyich’s street after Lenin is clearly premeditated. Not only does it establish a high degree of realism (there were hardly any villages in the USSR that did not have streets named after the Bolshevik leader), but it also registers a degree of Soviet nostalgia and an aspiration for a pro-Russian political course among Sergeyich’s fellow villagers who fail to rename the street in the almost a quarter century after the fall of the USSR.

As Sergeyich becomes more aware of the political and military dynamics in his neighborhood, he makes a point to switch the names of the streets in his town as a way of expressing his new political pro-Ukrainian alliance. Sergeyich exclaims how “Lenin’s name was famous throughout the world” and that it represented the Soviet era (101), so in spite of this, Sergeyich switches his street name to “Shevchenko Street” to undermine the Soviet propaganda. By doing so, the novel seems to suggest, the informed dweller of the grey zone claims agency over his life and sends a powerful message to the readers and newcomers: even such minor tokens of cultural expression (such as the names of the streets) acquire new, highly politicized significance in the grey zone during the war. As these names once served as propaganda to remember the ideologies of the Soviet times, Sergeyich combats them by inscribing a new meaning that reflects the profound change in values and worldview that the local Donbas population undergoes during the war.

Kurkov’s most telling commentary on propaganda is offered in the episode when Sergeyich attempts to transport his bees to Crimea and is stopped, questioned, and eventually interviewed by a Russian journalist at a border checkpoint. While answering some general questions about the unfolding events in the Donbas and suggesting that most of the hostilities in

the region are instigated and coordinated by Russians, Sergeyich is roughly interrupted by an outraged pro-Russian bystander who demands that he corrects his statements to adhere to the official pro-Russian interpretation of the Donbas war:

‘Stop! Stop!’ The voice of one of the young fellows standing nearby broke into the interview. ‘No, that won’t do. Repeat what you said, but without “Russians”. How could you have “Russians” over there?’ ‘You’ve got the Ukrainians on the one side,’ Sergeyich repeated a little more hesitantly. ‘And on the other...from Karuselino...separatists...’(288).

In this brief episode, Kurkov pointedly captures the pernicious manipulation of facts by the Russian media designed to hide Russia’s participation in the Donbas war. By replacing his original statement of “Russians” with guys from Karuselino, a small village located near this town, Sergeyich shifts the responsibility away from Russian invaders, framing the ongoing war as an internal, civil-war-like conflict. Such blatant manipulations of fact exemplify the hybrid nature of the war, where control of information is deemed as important as conventional arms and actual boots on the ground. Sergeyich’s compliance to the bystander’s request and his clear signs of anxiety in this episode also suggest that civilians caught in the war fear encounters with pro-Russian operatives as much, if not more, as constant shelling. Any signs of lenience towards Ukraine, Sergeyich’s anxiety in the interview suggest, could be detrimental and might lead to fatal consequences. Ultimately, the interview episode suggests that the Russo-Ukrainian war is not only a war waged for land, but a war waged on words and their ability to distort reality for political purposes.

Similar to the operatives described in Kurkov’s diaries of the 2013-2014, Russian militants deployed in the Donbas of Kurkov’s *Grey Bees* distort reality, thereby obfuscating the free flow of information by working undercover. For instance, as soon as Sergeyich crosses over into occupied Crimea, he realizes that people do not appear to be who they actually are. After the

“obviously non-civilian man in civilian clothes” checks his documents at the first checkpoint in Crimea, Sergeyich “decid[es] not to...disclose his encounters with Ukrainian soldiers in the Donbas” (226). Several times, he notes that the man in civilian clothes acts with a “serious expression” on his face, akin to those typical for Russian special forces. Sergeyich’s distrust for the serious man who intimidates him suggests his uneasiness around pro-Russian militants and Russian forces. Here, the duplicity of the Russian militants as undercover spies threatens Sergeyich’s ease around these figures, which can be credited to the character’s gradual understanding of the duplicity of the Kremlin-generated propaganda that pictures pro-Russian and Russian forces in the Donbas and Crimea as people-friendly liberators and defenders of the local population from the alleged Ukrainian radicals in Kyiv.

The Orphanage

Although the focus of Serhii Zhadan’s latest novel *The Orphanage* (2017) is mostly on the devastating story of the civilians caught up in the Donbas war, it offers several valuable insights into the workings of the Russian propaganda and its effect on the lives of the local, Donbas population. Most explicitly, the theme of propaganda is addressed through the novel’s reflection on the intricate linguistic tapestry of the region and the use of language as a code for political alliances and ideological views.

Linguistic hybridity and perpetual switching between Ukrainian, Russian, and Surzhyk (a regional mixture of the two languages akin to Spanglish), is demonstrated with the novel’s main character, Pasha, a thirty-five-year-old Ukrainian language teacher in a small provincial town near Donetsk. At the start of the novel, Pasha sets out for the orphanage located in the neighboring

town—now an occupied territory—where his nephew, Sasha, lives. Traveling through combat zones, traversing shifting borders, and forging precarious alliances along the way, Pasha gradually realizes where his true loyalists lie in an increasingly desperate fight to rescue Sasha and bring him home amid the war. Although Pasha never openly discloses his political loyalties, his use of language (Ukrainian, Russian, or Surzhyk) tellingly reflects his political transformation.

On multiple occasions, the novel makes it clear that those who speak Ukrainian demonstrate strong pro-Ukrainian affinities, while those who speak Russian typically express pro-Russian views and support the pro-Russian political project. Early in the novel, Pasha clearly fluctuates between speaking Russian and Ukrainian. At work, he uses Ukrainian but as soon as his classes are over, he switches to Russian, something he and all his acquaintances, do “outside of class” (19). Pasha’s decision to study and teach Ukrainian instead of Russian (the dominant language of communication in the Donbas in the late Soviet and post-Soviet time), indicates his devotion to Ukraine and its independence project. His use of Russian as his language of day-to-day communication suggests, in turn, a degree of attachment to Russia, as well as what it stands for with the ongoing war. His oscillation between these two languages demonstrates Pasha’s initial confusion and inability to navigate his new circumstance and make an informed political and civic stand.

Not only does Pasha alternate between languages, but he also witnesses other characters who do the same as well. Early in the novel as the war just breaks out in Pasha’s hometown, a group of soldiers stops the bus that the character typically uses to get to work at a newly established, impromptu checkpoint. As one of the soldiers asks Pasha for his documents, Pasha struggles to figure out what language the soldier is speaking, which deeply unsettles him as he understands that his personal safety greatly depends on his ability to communicate. As he tries to

decipher the soldier's language while staring into his enraged eyes "that reflect his fear back at him," Pasha makes an unexpected discovery:

The words are bursting out of him, choppy and broken—no intonation, no detectable accent—[the soldier's] just hollering, like he's trying to cough up some mucus. "He must be speaking the official language." Some unit from Zhytomyr was stationed here a month back. They were Ukrainian speakers, so they laughed at him for sliding back and forth between languages. "Are those the same guys? They've gotta be," goes Pasha's frenzied line of reasoning as he looks into the soldier's enraged eyes that reflect his fear back at him (14).

Pasha's inability to understand the soldier's language through deciphering "intonations" or "accents" reveals Pasha's utter distress. While still under the soldier's scrutiny, Pasha takes the time to figure out the soldier's language through a logical deduction, talking to himself that the soldier must be speaking an "official language" and that these soldiers must be the same men from the unit station here before the war. The fact that Pasha goes on such a cognitive digression just to figure out which language to use for his reply, implies the severity of speaking a particular language in the context of a highly ideologized war, in which Ukraine's national survival is at stake and one's political alliances are often tied to the language of communication. Pasha's need to blend in with whoever he comes across tellingly highlights that linguistic hybridity characteristic to the local population of the Donbas. Language therefore becomes a liability in a war between two peoples caught in the crossfire, who used to speak each other's languages natively.

Because language becomes defined as a marker of political alliance and an instrument of propaganda, almost all of Zhadan's characters become confused as to where they belong in the new reality and grow taciturn, if not silent. Similar restlessness and an inability to comprehend the new reality is suggested through the images of stray dogs, whom Pasha often describes encounters and whose "canine smell" follows him throughout his journey. One such encounter Pasha has with a dog occurs as he is crammed in a room with displaced civilians at the train station prior to

traversing the war zone to find his nephew, Sasha. Here, Pasha sits in the busy room with a random woman nestling against his shoulder, to which Pasha inhales this canine smell and focuses in on a malnourished dog. As Pasha tries to nudge the dog away, the dog “looks [Pasha] in the eye, hinting that he doesn’t have anywhere to go. Just like Pasha” (68). The dog’s looking in Pasha’s eyes indicates that both the dog and Pasha are equals, as they both have become displaced, hungry, and dirty from the war. This constant haunting of dogs as Pasha makes his way through the war zone suggests that the main character too resembles the lost animals, as both struggle to find where they belong as the world around them changes from the conflict. Language and its politicization throughout the war essentially displaces civilians like the lost dogs, as the constant language switching for the sake of survival blurs the line between one’s identity and one’s own beliefs.

In Isolation

In the collection of essays and dispatches from the Russian-occupied Donbas that make up *In Isolation* (2021), Aseyev assesses the ongoing events in Donetsk from 2014 to 2015 while offering rich commentary on Russian propaganda and its effectiveness in rallying pro-Russian support among the Donbas population. For example, on July 12, 2014, Aseyev records:

A fake report about a boy being crucified and his mother executed on the central square of Slov’iansk by Ukrainian fighters is aired on the main Russian state Channel, Pervyi Kanal (Channel One). The report causes a public outcry. It is shown to be entirely staged as a means of informational warfare against Ukraine, particularly on the territory of the Donbas where Russian TV is watched by local residents (33).

This passage draws readers’ attention to the topic of the misinformation of war right away. Here, Aseyev states that the report of the crucified boy and the execution of his mother is “fake,” but it nevertheless ignites a “public outcry.” Such an outrageous report makes it clear that

Russia will stop at nothing to misguide its target audience: Eastern Ukrainians with pro-Russian views. It also aims to undermine the legitimacy of the central Ukrainian governments and its pro-European course. The use of the major Russian TV programs to disseminate pro-Kremlin propaganda, fostering an 'us versus them' mentality (Russians and friends of Russia versus radicalized and aggressively anti-Russian Ukrainians) as observed by Aseyev, also highlights the colossal role assigned to propaganda and the war for the hearts and minds of the Donbas population by Russian-sponsored political technologists in the early stage of the Russia-Ukrainian war in the Donbas. Further in the book, Aseyev describes how masterfully the fake stories, designed to delegitimize Ukraine in the eyes of the local Donbas population—stories such as the one about the crucified child—are constructed. He highlights their alignment with the general 'mental landscape of the Donbas' to stay 'two steps ahead of any rational explanations and arguments' against such deep fakes and manipulations of information (54).

One of the most disturbing fakes generated by the Russian propaganda machine, according to Aseyev, is the narrative about Ukraine's extreme radicalization and Nazification. According to Aseyev, Russia's narrative about saving ethnic Russians and pro-Russian Ukrainians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine from the "Ukrainian Nazis," which the Kremlin uses as one of the key justifications for invading Ukraine in 2014, resonates especially with the elderly population of the region, who remember well the Soviet experience of the Second World War and the 1941-1944 Nazi occupation. While Russian propaganda managed to instill fear of the "atrocities of Ukrainian Nazis" in the older generation, it also rallies the younger one, according to Aseyev, to "confront [the alleged Nazis] in battle for 'a free Donbas'" (54). A disturbing show of fervor to fight "Ukrainian Nazis," as described by Aseyev, is the "March of Shame," also known as the "parade of captives," which occurred in Donetsk on the day of

Ukraine's Independence, August 24, 2014. According to Aseyev, captive "Ukrainian servicemen [were] led through the streets of Donetsk in a humiliating procession between two rows of militants bearing rifles with bayonets" which, the author observed, was meant to create a parallel "with the march of captive Nazi soldiers in Moscow in July 1944" (43). This direct association between marching captives in a similar manner to that of the march of Nazi soldiers solidifies the notion that pro-Russian militants in the Donbas truly believe that they are fighting Nazis, just as their grandfather had done back during the Second World War. By organizing a parade similar to that in July of 1944, the leaders of the DPR provoke civilians into believing that a true Nazi threat exists. This therefore perpetuates the association between pro-European Ukraine and Nazi Germany. To use this parade of the past in such a manner crystallizes the DPR's method of distorting reality for the sake of their own political agenda.

Like Zhadan, Aseyev also draws his readers' attention to the new connotation that the day-to-day language use acquired in the occupied Donbas in the early stages of the war. Aseyev explains in his 2014-2015 reports from the occupied territories in the Donbas that although he never questions neither his Ukrainian national identity nor his political alliances, he is having a troubling time figuring out who it is that he must fear.

Who am I supposed to fear? The Russians? Those who sat with me yesterday for Sunday dinner in Kursk? Or maybe it is my friends in the "militia," whose homes are within 300 yards of my own? Surely these aren't my enemies? Surely these aren't people I might have to shoot at tomorrow without hesitation—or are they? The only possible answer is to tell myself, honestly, "Yes."... if we want to keep thinking straight despite the enormous pressure of propaganda, then we have to admit that speaking the same language and living next door to each other doesn't necessarily mean we are brothers (22-3).

The six consecutive questions clearly indicate the author's conundrum and his inability to rely on the usual ways to decipher who he could trust under new circumstances. Usual factors in which Ukrainians could unravel who stood for Ukraine, such as speaking Ukrainian, living next

door to you, etc., now lacks validity in the ability to predict who you can trust, as propaganda has reached different people in different ways, leading them to support the separatist's movement in Donetsk. Aseyev practically associates those he sat next to for "Sunday dinner" with "the Russians" as he asks these questions consecutively. Asking these questions back-to-back is Aseyev's way of unofficially associating the two with one another, meaning that who he had dinner with could possibly be the people he now has to fear: the pro-Russian ideologists. These credentials once used to identify who stood for Ukraine and who stood for Russia is now blurred, making it arduous to surmise who you can trust. By no longer having the ability to decipher who sides with your beliefs and who does not, it consequently weaponizes those around you, leaving you to rely only on yourself.

Mondegreen

Volodymyr Rafeyenko, a primarily Ukrainian writer who started his career as a Russian-language writer but transitioned to Ukrainian after his hometown of Donetsk was occupied by the pro-Russian forces and he and his family had to relocate to Kyiv, bases his novel *Mondegreen* on his own experiences of internal displacement. The novel tells the story of Haba Habinsky, a Russian-speaking resident of Donetsk, who, like Rafeyenko, must flee to Kyiv to escape the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war in the Donbas. As he navigates the new physical world around him, the character grapples with understanding his new life through the lens of the Ukrainian language. As Haba progresses in his studies of the Ukrainian language, he is overcome by a plethora of suppressed childhood memories, many of which take the shape of fairytale

characters. The influx of memories and vision soon make him question his new reality, as he no longer can distinguish what is real and what is an illusion.

Haba's obligation to learn Ukrainian comes with the arrival of repressed memories as well as the alteration of reality, which reveals the effect of the hybrid nature of the Russo-Ukrainian. Not only does the language barrier make it harder for the internally displaced refugees from the Donbas to make a life for themselves in the new places, but it often sends them into tumultuous mental states, where they can no longer decipher fact versus fiction. For example, Haba describes the Ukrainian language as

melodious and delightful. On the one hand, this was the language that was spoken to little Haba in his childhood days by the nightingale, the mouse, the rooster, and the wonderful worm. Let alone the mare's head. On the other hand, the fact of the matter was that he now had to converse with it, that worm, regularly (16).

The speaking in Ukrainian to Haba of "the nightingale, the mouse, the rooster, and the wonderful worm" alludes to the protagonists of the stories Haba read as a child. Instead of reading these stories in Russian, Haba had read them in Ukrainian due to his interest in the language. By doing so, it was difficult for Haba to recall these stories while speaking and thinking in Russian, so his use of the Ukrainian language in Kyiv resurfaces his memories of the childhood characters. Forcing these characters back to life through speaking Ukrainian pressures Haba to "converse" with these memories, whether he wants to or not. Ultimately, "the young age associated with that language meet[s] and transform[s] into characters from folk stories and into various mythological creatures" (20), meaning that Haba not only has to navigate a new city, but he also must grapple with memories from his past in the form of these creatures as he begins to rediscover and learn anew Ukrainian in his older age. Consequently, the line between Haba's reality and his memories grows more distorted and difficult to decipher as he is constantly visited by these characters from his childhood. Haba soon grows agitated by this distortion, as the

imaginary characters that haunt him through his visions and hallucinations represent a childhood that did not exist in Kyiv, but rather existed in the Donbas. Rafeyenko describes Haba's state of mind as a more "rarified version of him—the refugee polyglot—finally comes face to face with being. That which...only is today, is never in the past, is never in the future (21). As Haba is tormented by these childhood figures, like the mare's head giving him Ukrainian grammar lessons at the most inconvenient moments, Haba grows more and more confused of where his reality lies. Is his reality in the past, in a territory that no longer knows itself? Or is his reality in the future, which Haba cannot envision just yet? All Haba has is the current state of his being, although this current state is overwhelmed with memories of his past. Language thus unlocks an informational warfare on Haba, as his use of Ukrainian unleashes unwanted forgotten memories that interferes with his ability to function properly in a new environment.

Haba's revelations suggest that not only does language bring unwanted memories, but it also shapes one's perception of political views and messages. After learning Ukrainian, Haba attempts to speak to other Ukrainian-speakers in Kyiv in hopes to befriend them, yet they hesitate to speak Ukrainian to him.

[They] only spoke Ukrainian amongst themselves, perhaps, preserving in that manner a dedication to the Ukrainianophile guild. Several times Haba asked them to speak to him in Ukrainian, to accept him in their circle of accept him into their circle of clandestine and nationally-conscious individuals. And he, of course, promised not to tell anyone about this and that he would take this secret with him to the grave (17).

The word "clandestine" is an adjective that refers to secrecy and hidden meaning, insinuating that these internally displaced Russian-speakers of Donetsk attempt to hide their use of the Ukrainian language. Hiding their speaking of Ukrainian suggests that they are often exposed to hostilities from Ukrainians residing outside the Donbas who, as Rafeyenko suggests, tend to hold everyone from the region as pro-Russian and thus responsible for the war. It is

possible then to conclude that the Donbas local population speaks Ukrainian in Donetsk, therefore revealing their fascination with Ukrainian nationalism and their support for pro-European Ukraine. Whereas when they speak it in Kyiv and other Central and Western Ukrainian regions, it betrays a desire to blend in and thus triggers suspicions among non-Donbas Ukrainian speakers. As the use of the Ukrainian language serves to articulate their “Ukrainianophile guild,” the use of language thus serves as a mechanism to hide information from their pro-Russian counterparts. In consequence, language serves as a method of indicating one’s political views and therefore politicizes language for the sake of war. Additionally, it functions serves as a way to circulate information so as not to be understood by those on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Ultimately, language complicates the war by turning the method in which one uses to express oneself into a marker of a charged, political agenda.

Chapter 3: Life for Prisoners

Aseyev clearly demonstrates in his works that not only does the media serve as the mechanism in which the circulation of propaganda can be monitored and facilitated, but the prison systems also play a role in manipulating information for the purpose of furthering the interests of those running it. Both his memoir *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* as well as his collection of essays, *In Isolation*, articulate the complex ways in which the guards could mentally, verbally, and physically torture prisoners by altering and manipulating information available to them. *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* chronicles Aseyev's experience as a prisoner, encapsulating the many ways in which he and his fellow inmates were victimized by the manipulation of information. *In Isolation* offers additional insight into what it means to be a prisoner, a state in which, as Aseyev suggests, could also be self-inflicted.

The Torture Camp on Paradise Street

The horrendous experience for prisoners throughout the Russo-Ukrainian war, as depicted in Aseyev's literature, stems from the use of information as a method to trick and torment the convicts. In his memoir, Aseyev conveys his personal experience living under the occupation in the self-proclaimed state of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR); more specifically of his time in "Izoliatsiia," or "Isolation," an irregular prisoner camp that takes on prisoners charged with terrorism and extremism where they are subjected to extensive abuse and forced labor. Once an insulation factory, "Isolation" defies all the rules as it does not officially exist, yet it houses dozens of prisoners among the rebar and concrete. As Aseyev testifies, propaganda is at the core of this

institution, as everything within its walls is symbolic, from the bags on placed on the prisoners' heads to the Vladimir Lenin paintings draped on the walls, which all serve to re-Russianize these so-called criminals who have gone against the pro-Russian institution in the DPR.

Aseyev first found himself within the confines of “Isolation” because of his journalistic career. The DPR did not condone Aseyev’s reporting and charged twice, six charges related to his work as a reporter, and one for espionage. Aseyev describes that many of his fellow inmates “landed [there] for ‘inappropriate correspondence[s]’” which consisted of showing support for Ukraine in the media. “That type of activity was instantly labeled extremism and came with a minimum sentence of five years” in the DPR (18), Aseyev documents. The DPR’s non-tolerance toward any undermining of its authority therefore leads to its tampering with the circulation of information. Hence, according to Aseyev, anyone caught spreading information that presents the DPR in an unfavorable light might be considered as an extremist and be subjected to physical abuse and jail time. Aseyev’s account suggests that arrests and suppression of freedom of speech lessens the negative media surrounding the DPR authority, which leads people to believe that there is popular contentment with the new regime, even if this is not the case. Not only do the DPR authorities have its militants to fight for the new regime, arms in hand, but they also use informational warfare to ensure their success.

This management of the circulation of information does not stop once the prisoners step foot in “Isolation”—the prison guards have a job to maintain it within the prison as well. When Aseyev is first detained and kept in a basement prior to being relocated to “Isolation,” he manages to acquire a pencil stub and a manila folder, which is gradually filled with notes, poetry, and what Aseyev assumes would turn into his future novel. The folder makes its way to “Isolation” with

Aseyev, but it is confiscated later and kept by the prison guards for some unknown reason. Aseyev realizes it when the warden who confiscated his notes quotes from them:

[He] smirked as he recited them back to me while I was being served slops for dinner. Moreover, when I told him that he hadn't repeated what I had written quite accurately, he replied "Oh, yeah? No worries. I'll look it up tonight and tell you exactly what it was tomorrow." In other words, my moldy chicken scratch, which held meaning for me alone, was not only being carefully read but also preserved, kept for some unclear future purpose. I won't be surprised if that man tries to sell me back my own work someday (146).

The guard's decision to taunt Aseyev with his own writing while he is served an unexceptional dinner showcases the power dynamic between the guards and their prisoners, as well as how the guards use this power to their advantage. Not only does this moment exploit the power dynamic, but it hints that Aseyev's literature is being "read" and "preserved" for "some unclear future purpose." Using Aseyev's own words against him indicates the hybrid combat tactics at hand, as the circulation of information has grown so precise that individual words are shrewdly used against their authors, as is the case with the guard who teases Aseyev with his own writing. Aseyev jokes that he would not put it past the guard to sell his work one day, yet an understanding that this could very well be a possibility makes the statement feel less like a joke and more like a realization as to why his writing was still intact.

Information being used as a method of imprisonment and harassment as shown with Aseyev's writing is taken a step further by using it as a reason to incite physical pain within prison. In fact, using a prisoner's words against him or her serves as one of the main tactics of torture in "Isolation," according to Aseyev:

[The prison guards'] trick is to begin with questions that are uncomfortable for you but have answers that are obvious to the interrogator. If you begin to lie already in this phase, the torture will become more prolonged and crueler. On top of this, they try to disorient you by intermixing questions about, in my case, the espionage with which I had been charged, and whether I believed in god or had

ever jumped with a parachute. This evident chaos has one specific goal: to make you lie (102-3).

Similar to Aseyev's experience with the prison guard reciting his words back to him, torture tactics also include using one's words against himself for the sake of inciting pain. During these torture tactics, it appears impossible to escape unharmed as the guards purposely attempt to "disorient" the prisoner for the sake of making them lie, thus leading to an inevitable torture. The deceitfulness by the guards of "Isolation" makes it impossible for a prisoner to escape a conversation unharmed, which displays the power dynamic between prisoner and guard. This torture tactic of using prisoners' words against them complicates the informational warfare, as the DPR and its guards essentially force their prisoners into lying to torture them. Therefore, this example of purposeful violence accentuates how the prison uses information and its circulation to its advantage.

The hybridity of the war within "Isolation" does not stop at the face-to-face conversations with the guards—the entire structure of "Isolation," according to Aseyev, is meant to brainwash inmates into dismissing the violence. One of the biggest personalities behind how "Isolation" is Palych, a psychopathic head of the prison, whose name remains but a myth for Aseyev until he finally meets him in person. Prior to meeting Palych, Aseyev receives word from a cellmate that "this place and its boss are one and the same thing," and that Aseyev would meet the boss soon (53). To the word of the fellow inmate, Palych pays a visit to Aseyev on the rumor that he had suicidal thoughts. Predictably, Palych uses fear to stray Aseyev away from bringing such an issue to "Isolation." During their conversation, Aseyev notices that Palych would "address[es] [him] with a formal 'you,' like any polite adult, except he [keeps] whirling his machine gun as if it were a plastic toy" (55). Palych's ability to treat Aseyev with official courtesy while also fondling a machine gun to assert his power over his captives embodies the description Aseyev creates for

Palych: “he pursue[s] his own ends and convert[s] his enemies by beating them with a stick, while at the same time letting them chew on the carrot” (51). Palych’s style of supervising Isolation by allowing his prisoners to “chew on the carrot” strategically builds trust and respect with his prisoners while allowing him to continue his cruelty. Palych thus has control over the entirety of “Isolation” and prevents anyone from speaking up against his administration, which not only protects his position but also prevents anyone outside of “Isolation” from garnering any information about the abuse.

Palych’s calculated personal relations with subordinates and inmates marks only one approach to manipulating the circulation of information in and about “Isolation.” In fact, he also manages to control the relations between prisoners by incentivizing violence as a means to prevent revolts. To do this, Aseyev observes Palych making the inmates hate one another through a process called “muddling.” To “muddle,” according to Aseyev, is to “pour tea from one cup to another,” which in “Isolation” means frequent transfer of inmates from one cell to another to prevent bonding or any sharing of opinions, information, etc. Here is what Aseyev has to say about it further:

It's worth noting that Isolation’s administration was keen on having inmates abuse other inmates rather than just haul a man off to the basement and have the employees torture him. This was the Boss’s way of assessing individuals and then elevating those who were, under threat or out of pragmatic consideration, willing to cross the line. A man that complied and hurt another, mind you, didn’t disappear—he still shared a cell with those he had beaten. Thus, in addition to the political conflicts that were inevitable when you mixed military personnel from opposing sides, there was plenty of personal hatred between inmates, and the administration used this to splinter any group that had shared views (136).

Before “muddling” the cells, Palych would first assess who the prisoners willing to comply to his demands are by commanding specific inmates to beat up other cellmates to first test their eagerness or resistance to the demands. From there, if the prisoners are unwilling to comply, they would often be removed or “muddled” from the cell, as their unwillingness to listen to authority

and afflict harm on another hints at their desire to try and get along with those around them. If the prisoner does the job, however, he or she is used to upset the status quo of a given cell and create havoc among the cellmates at any given time to make sure that the cellmates do not get along. With this method, Palych could ensure there was “hatred between the inmates” to “splinter any group,” which prevents them from getting along and therefore planning a revolt. Again, Palych manages to control the circulation of information deterred the inmates’ desire to bond.

In Isolation

Aseyev’s collection of reports from the occupied Donbas, *In Isolation*, includes a series of essays focusing on the internal and external permutations observed in eastern Ukraine as he tries to grapple with the success of Russian propaganda among the local Donbas population. In the preface, Aseyev first dives into his past as a prisoner and his experiences with the manipulation of information in order to contextualize his background with propaganda by those in power.

In his preface, Aseyev details his time as a prisoner before his move to Isolation—arguably one of the most corrupt prisons in eastern Ukraine. He sets the stage of his corrupt arrest by recalling his time held in a basement, where he is granted peculiar freedoms that his fellow prisoners are not granted, such as having contact with his family and being allowed to write.

Even after my arrest, while I was being held in a basement, my captors forced me to pretend for nearly a month that I was still free: to call family and friends, to keep posting comments to Facebook, and even...to write articles. In fact, the last chapter of this book, “A Knack for Losing Things,” was an article written by me in that prison basement. It was included in the Ukrainian edition of this book by

editors who had no idea of the circumstances under which I had written the piece (xi-xii).

The captors forcing Aseyev to pretend he is still free by allowing him to call his “family and friends” while staying active on social media suggests that the captors do not want Aseyev to appear missing. As implied, the news of Aseyev’s arrest could alarm his readers and fanbase and cause a bigger issue. The captors understand the importance that the media can have in persuasion and exploitation, so to risk an uproar from Aseyev’s media followers would not give the captors agency over the circulation of information. To control media narrative, the captors therefore keep Aseyev a secret. One may assume that there is also a degree of censorship in Aseyev’s permission to write, but Aseyev mentions that “[his] captors were not the least bit interested in censoring the content of my article; for some reason, it was more important for them that no one raise the alarm that I had been arrested” (xii). If not for the purpose of censorship, then the imprisonment of Aseyev and his freedom to contact those outside the jail reaffirms the possibility that the captors feared the circulation of information via the media, again leading to their need to make Aseyev seem as though he is still walking free.

Aside from physical imprisonment, Aseyev makes a daunting, yet truthful, comparison between the DPR and prison: staying in the DPR is to lock oneself up purposefully. According to Aseyev, many young militants have an issue with their Ukrainian passports expiring due to not updating their photo after turning twenty-five, which legally closes the doors for them to enter Russia or leave the DPR for that matter. Out of these militants stuck in the DPR, Aseyev realizes through intense conversations how these militants are utterly brainwashed with propaganda, which prevents them from understanding their current situation clearly: they are prisoners in the DPR. Chekh remembers one specific dialogue with a separatist militant, where the militant stated that Russia is his home country and that the Nazis would have massacred the Russian population

had it not been for the militants' using weaponry as a form of self-defense (154). Aseyev scrutinizes this militant when he states in his essay that "this man still wholeheartedly believes in the threat of Nazism and worries that the Lenin statue will be toppled" (154). These militants who adhere to Russian propaganda are blinded by the fears of the past that they lack the ability to see the reality: the Soviet Union no longer exists and neither do the Nazis.

Aseyev explains to one of the militants in a pessimistic, yet realistic, manner that if he wants to remain a citizen of Russia by staying in Donetsk, he cannot count on Russia to come and save him. In fact, Aseyev describes it as

If he wants to wake up at the age of forty-six still loading trucks in Donetsk and holding a passport that only allows him to travel "abroad" to the LPR, then he can keep focusing his worries on the "Nazis." Unlike him, I travel around to Kyiv, Dnipro, and Poltava, not to mention the Ukraine-controlled cities on the other side of the front in the Donbas...But it is only here, in the DPR and LPR, that people fear the "Nazis," from watching Oplot.TV or Rossiia 24 around the clock, seven days a week (155).

A connection is made in this passage between following pro-Russian propaganda and the ability to travel. Aseyev makes a point that those who worry about the alleged Nazis are more likely to remain stuck in the DPR, whereas to free oneself from that propaganda allows for the freedom of travel. Overall, Aseyev alludes to the idea that to choose to be a Ukrainian civilian does not imprison, or impede on one's travels, like those who have passports in the DPR. Therefore, Aseyev argues that the DPR is a prison because of the limited in-and-out movement allowed for their civilians due to their DPR passports. Not only does the freedom of movement dictate whether one is deemed a prisoner, but the constant exposure to the same propaganda, such as described with "watching Oplot.TV or Rossiia 24 around the clock, seven days a week" suggests a wicked cycle of limited media exposure. This adds to the theme of self-imprisonment, as this exposure to the same cycle of media suggests that the citizens of the DPR face

constant exposure to the opinions and biases of pro-Russian propaganda. With this physical and informational entrapment by the DPR, civilians who choose to remain loyal to the DPR and Russia therefore become physical and mental prisoners to its propaganda.

Chapter 4: Life for the Soldiers

As contemporary Ukrainian writers observe, both Russia-backed militants and soldiers serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces are often exposed to propaganda designed to boost their moral, recruit new soldiers, and rally public support for the war. While propaganda glorifies the army, Aseyev and Chekh observe in their works the actual day-to-day experience of serving in the army and how it does not correspond to the idealized picture of promotional materials. Chekh's novel *Absolute Zero* is based on his own experience serving in Ukraine's Armed forces in 2014-2016 fighting in the Donbas, capturing his profound frustration with how the army is organized and how little the soldiers understand or care of what it is that they are fighting for. Aseyev's *In Isolation* documents the dilemma of his encounters with the DPR soldiers, records his reflections on what motivates them to join the fight, and investigates how economic consideration often outweigh political views in those types of decisions-

Absolute Zero

Ukrainian writer and journalist Artem Chekh serves in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which gives him the basis to write *Absolute Zero* (2020), where he documents the conditions of his service and how the changes around him have influenced his perceptions of the war. To date, Chekh has served in the army twice: first during the Donbas war in 2014-2016, and then again after the invasion in 2022. From these experiences, Chekh alludes to the propaganda and fakes circulating in the media from the point of view of a soldier as well as comments on the profound confusion that they generate among those directly caught in the war.

Chekh begins his novel by drawing his readers' attention to the topic of propaganda and its ability to twist reality for soldiers. In the very first vignette, Chekh's character dwells on the fact and he feels tricked into believing he is joining a well-organized military unit, which, in reality, turns out to be in a dilapidated and pitiful state:

Oh, God, I think, how did I end up here? Who are all these people and where are all the brave and athletic young men from the ads?... Where are those who sold their Rolls Royce for an opportunity at the front? What kind of guerrilla unit is this, what kind of anarchy? How can I press Control Z and return to the clean streets of the capital...? I am standing in my new, not-yet-faded uniform and near my feet is a new Polish backpack distributed to us along with the uniform... (10-1).

Chekh's character describes his first day as a soldier in the Ukrainian army, where he realizes that the front lines are not exactly what he expected them to be. As he realizes the lack of "athletic young men" as well as the eager army members who sold their "Rolls Royce for an opportunity at the front," Chekh begins to piece together the random conglomeration of civilian people present, recognizing that this "guerilla unit" is far from matching the image of courageous fighters propagated by the government recruitment commercials. Chekh examines his "new uniform" and his "new Polish backpack," as it ascribes to Ukraine's attempt at garnering people into the army with contemporary equipment while disguising the normal, everyday people under their uniforms. Quickly, Chekh realizes that he was fooled by the propaganda designed to lure people to join the front lines to maintain a hold on Donetsk and Luhansk. As much of the propaganda romanticized the army for the sake of recruits, this incomplete information tricked plenty other soldiers, which suggests how easily propaganda worked in attracting civilians to join the fight.

Further in the novel, Chekh expands beyond his initial disappointments of falling victim to propaganda by reflecting on the dangers of propaganda and its shaping of events on the ground. The person with the ability to share information to a broader audience through media, as Chekh's

character describes it, has the opportunity to shape public opinion of the war. Chekh mentions how the person fulfilling the role of the master of the media could be anyone: blogger, journalist, “the brother of a deputy,” “the brother of a journalist,” or “the brother of both the journalist and the deputy” (52). The fact that this person may not even be a journalist, but rather “the brother of a journalist,” insinuates that the person does not need a powerful position to spread information. At the end of the day, the masses “march step in step with the soldier who has the Instagram account” (52), so whoever has the means to do so therefore carries the power to circulate information.

With this information being put out to the world, consumers of the media tend to either agree or disagree with the content—there is no middle ground. As Chekh states antithetical ideas, such as “life and death,” “[p]rayers and curses” and “[t]he collective and the private” (52), the author indicates the radically polarized nature of how people view the war between Russia and Ukraine. Such polarization is rooted in “manipulations” and “distortions of facts” according to Chekh, meaning that the information spread by those with “the Instagram account” can shape political views and, by extension, define real events on the ground.

As the war drags along, the novel reveals how the Ukrainian soldiers find it progressively more difficult to articulate what it is that they are fighting for because of the propaganda that attempts to polarize the two sides. Chekh prefaces this notion by stating how “among all these people only a select few have a definite opinion about the war. And even fewer know why they are here” (86). The media and its propaganda give whiplash to its viewers as it constantly tries to depict the good guy and the bad guy. Accordingly, Chekh states that “only a select few” have opinions on the war, as the circulation of information constantly shakes up the opinions of its consumers. As Chekh notes the confusion among the soldiers, he also comments on his own disorientation, asking a series of pointed questions:

Why are we here? Because someone must be here... This war is strange. At least the stage that it's at now. Seasoned troops explain that at the beginning of the war, in the total disorganization and deadly mess, they could understand the goal—the freeing of the territory from the militants, the victory of good over evil. And here today's war does not have a goal... And whoever rules there... their task, which is also our task, is to defend the Wall... victory is an illusion (87).

Chekh's confusion radiates from the passage, as he begins with the question "why are we here" and answers with "someone must be here," yet he cannot seem to narrow down why this is the case. This confusion as to what the Ukrainian soldiers are fighting for stems from both the Ukrainians and the other side, the Russians, having the same task: to defend the Donbas from the militants. However, although they share similar motivations, their causes still differ: Ukraine fights for sovereignty and a future with Europe, while Russia fights to back up its own pro-Russian agendas. Such a revelation complicates Chekh's understanding of the war as he can no longer decipher who is "good" and who is "evil," as both sides have been polarized by the media as well as by the political climate in their respective camps. His confusion therefore represents the broader confusion generated by conflicting, propagandistic messages from the media. As the circulation of information and its propaganda incites the Ukrainians and Russians to battle in the Donbas, the validity of this propaganda comes into question and therefore complicates the soldiers' feelings towards their decision to fight.

In Isolation

As Aseyev wrote *In Isolation*, to better understand the changes around him, he also utilizes the essays to compartmentalize the reasons in which Russian propaganda seems extremely effective in attracting people to serve in both the Ukrainian and separatist armies.

Aseyev articulates an explanation to this phenomenon regarding the separatist armies, as the romanticization of Russian aggression through television shows and propaganda leads to a seemingly effective recruitment of soldiers.

This romanticization of service in the army first goes back to the Soviet Union stereotype that Russians embody strength, courage, and ruthlessness. The celebration of Russian aggression is perpetuated in the media and consumed by the current soldiers as they grew up in eastern Ukraine, as well as the stories and stereotypes they garnered from the older generations who lived in the Soviet Union. Aseyev credits the stereotype of Russian aggression with the mixing of parental stories about “the Great Soviet Russia” as well as the consumption of the popular Russian jingoistic films *Brat (Brother)* and *Brat-2* of 1997 and 2000 respectively. By mixing both personal stories with those of the two films, Aseyev believes that the soldiers “were inspired to take up the fight by the cultural icon of the tough guy raised on tradition, often with roots in romanticized prison culture, even if they didn’t quite understand what for” (208).

The *Brat* films refer to a time in which Russia had just finished the First Chechen War in 1996, and its society often embodied violence as replicated in these films and other media. The first *Brat* film follows the story of a young Chechen War veteran who struggles to integrate back into civilian life and gets involved with the mob. As Check implies, the post-Soviet generation of Russian and Ukrainians grew up watching *Brat* and many other similar productions that valorize death, violence, and crime. Stories of violent crimes and noble criminals promoted in the post-Soviet era, along with stories of the “Great Soviet Union,” made such trends in pro-Russian ideological messages familiar and welcomed by civilians in Russia. The cult of personality, socialism, collectivism, and anti-imperialism portrayed by pro-Russian trends perpetuated many Soviet beliefs into the twenty first century, even as the Soviet world had politically collapsed.

Many of them also made their way into pro-Russian ideological framework of the Russo-Ukrainian war and facilitated the eagerness for young pro-Russian Ukrainians to join the fight for the independent Donbas.

On top of this pervasive Russian ideology, eastern Ukraine hit an economic crisis prior to the invasion of Ukraine, leading many middle-class civilians to flock to the DPR army in order to make a living. By mid-2014, Aseyev describes how “there was hardly any paper money circulating in the DPR,” leading to many miners transitioning to the army (207). A desire for money mixed with preconceived perceptions of what it means to be a Russian man has led many of Eastern Ukrainian civilians to fetishize a life of combat. According to Aseyev, many DPR soldiers not only displayed their excitement about exuding violence on another human being but also were lured by the luxury of the army that the propaganda portrayed:

[Many were]attracted by the uniform, the machine gun with a grenade launcher, the expensive long knife, and opportunities to extort goods from people. And, of course, a stable income. For many of them, it is the only available job. The peculiar type of the young “republic’s” economy ensures that its army has a steady flow of human resources (210).

The DPR economies’ persistence for a “steady flow of human resources” ensures that the army has all the flashy memorabilia that attracts its soldiers to the job in the first place, making sure that the soldiers know that the DPR army has everything they could dream of that is also portrayed in the films and media they consume. Attractiveness for the DPR ultimately leads its soldiers to the profession in the first place, meaning that these soldiers are more enchanted by the look and the power that comes with “the expensive long knife” and the ability to “extort goods from people” just as they saw with the *Brat* films and heard from their family.

Although the DPR army managed to attract initially many pro-Russian Ukrainian civilians grappling for money, Aseyev also points out that the recruits quickly learned about the hardship of the military life:

The romance of the military quickly lost its charm. Of the twenty-one new defenders...only three were still bearing arms by December 2016. Some resigned, some deserted, and some were laid to rest at the cemetery. Some now live hand-to-mouth, some beg their friends for money, and many drink bitterly (208-9).

These findings by Aseyev indicate that the propaganda extends beyond merely tricking these civilians into joining in the first place, but it leaves these soldiers worse than they originally started with. Characterizing the military as romantic hints at the distorted picture that many of these soldiers came into the army with, and as they realized that the army does not replicate the glorification of violence as the films made it out to be, the soldiers want a way out. Because of this propaganda, now the streets in Donetsk face ex-soldiers who “live hand-to-mouth,” meaning that they no longer have the means to save money but rather must use all that they have to get by. Aseyev also mentions how “some beg their friends for money, and many drink bitterly,” which emphasizes the idea that the ex-soldiers face no choice but to beg, and it often leads them to try and mitigate their sorrows from economic and military despair with drinking. While noting that the military propaganda promises a life of shiny new weapons and exhilarating expeditions to save the DPR from Ukraine, Aseyev also makes it clear that the soldiers quickly realize the superficial nature of the propaganda, as the military did not help, but rather hindered their lives.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

While studying the intricate reality that the circulation of information and its propaganda plays in effecting politics, opinions, and livelihood of people caught amid the Russo-Ukraine war it is hard not to unravel the hybrid nature of that war and the destructive consequences that weaponization of information could have on the lives of people caught in it. As my research demonstrates, Ukrainian writers have done an impressive job of drawing their readers' attention to the subject of information control and the role it plays in war nowadays. Focusing mostly on the topics of fake news, politization of the use of language, and pervasive lack of informational literacy among the Ukrainian population caught in the war, the most prominent contemporary writers discussed in this study—Kurkov, Zhadan, Aseyev, Chekh, and Rafeyenko—make it clear that non-conventional means of waging a war might be as effective in achieving military objectives in our technologically advanced time as to actual boots and guns on the ground.

Both fiction and nonfiction literature analyzed in this study vividly explain the severity of the war of information unfolding in Ukraine and work well in raising awareness of the ongoing events and soliciting empathy from readers around the world. The main recurring theme in the discussed fictional works is language and its ability to carry political undertones. Kurkov's *Grey Bees*, Zhadan's *The Orphanage*, and Rafeyenko's *Mondegreen* use language to highlight how speaking a specific language determines the side of the conflict one supports. Nonfiction works, in turn, provide information and first-hand testimonials that back up stories created by fictional writers. For example, Chekh's autobiographical fictional accounts of soldiers' experiences at the front depicted in *Absolute Zero* acquire a new perspective of a dark reality when contextualized with Aseyev's firsthand dialogues with soldiers fighting in the DPR. It takes both genres to

explain the dangers of propaganda and its effectiveness in constructing a hybrid war, and to study both genres aids in seeing propaganda's ability to alter public opinion more clearly.

As contemporary Ukrainian writers suggest, propaganda and misinformation are effective when it comes to infiltrating the minds of civilians for the sake of pushing them towards a specific political, social or cultural cause. As this method of warfare has been used prolifically in the Russo-Ukrainian war, one must question the implications that they might have on the future. It is hard not to wonder whether we might see more hybrid wars in the future because of the effectiveness we see in Russia and Ukraine? Or whether we would we more literature examining the effects of hybrid warfare? At this point, one can only ask who the next victim of such hybrid warfare will be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aseyev, Stanislav. *In Isolation: Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*. Translated by Lidia Wolanskyj, Kindle, Harvard University Press, 2021.
- Aseyev, Stanislav. *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street*. Translated by Zeina Tompkins and Nina Murray, Kindle, Harvard University Press, 2023.
- Chekh, Artem. *Absolute Zero*. Translated by Olena Jennings and Oksana Lutsyshyna, Kindle, Glagoslav Publications.
- Kurkov, Andrey. *Grey Bees*. Translated by Boris Dralyuk, Kindle, Deep Vellum, 2022.
- Kurkov, Andrey. *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev*. Translated by Amanda Love Darragh and Sam Taylor, Kindle, Harvill Secker, 2015.
- Plokyh, Serhii. *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2023.
- Rafeyenko, Volodymyr. *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*. Translated by Mark Andryczyk, Kindle, Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 2022.
- Zhadan, Serhiy. *The Orphanage*. Translated by Isaac Stackhouse Wheeler and Reilly Costigan-Humes, Kindle, Yale University Press, 2021

ACADEMIC VITA

Jordynn Cheadle

EDUCATION

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY, UNIVERSITY PARK, PA

Expected Graduation: May 2024 / Paterno Fellow / Schreyer Honors College Member

Major: Comparative Literature & Global and International Studies

Minor: Sociology

Certificate: Small Group Conflict and Collaboration

SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

HILLEL INTERNATIONAL — STUDENT CABINET MEMBER (JUNE 2023- PRESENT)

- Work alongside professional Hillel staff and board leadership bi-weekly
- Serves on allyship focus group to facilitate allies inside/outside of the Jewish world
- Aims to improve Hillel International and local Hillels through implementing new ideas and presenting them to staff members

ALPHA DELTA PI — VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT (JANUARY 2022- JANUARY 2024)

- Attend weekly, 1 hr executive meeting and 1 hr chapter meeting
- Inform 150 general members of upcoming marketing and recruitment matters
- Oversee social media, merchandise, videographer, bid day and fall/spring recruitment departments with constant contact

WORLD IN CONVERSATION — ADVANCED FACILITATOR (AUGUST 2021 – DECEMBER 2022)

- Balance combat and conformity within dialogue in order to promote safe and thought-provoking environment about social topics
 - Facilitate 6 hours a week and attend classes 3 hrs a week
 - Facilitated at the World in Conversation Summit in Sep. 2022
-

WORK EXPERIENCE

STANDWITHUS – EMERSON FELLOW (JUNE 2023 – PRESENT)

- Prestigious year long program that trains, educates and empowers student leaders
- Must plan and host three events per semester (6 total) that empowers and educates Jewish and non-Jewish students on campus
- Attend two, week-long training conferences in Los Angeles, CA

SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE – DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION & BELONGING INTERN (JUNE 2021 – PRESENT)

- Work alongside honors college professors/staff and students to enhance diversity in college
- Interviewed students to find avenues to increase student success in completing thesis
- Host/attend wellness workshops for students

BELLA MAGAZINE – JOURNALISM INTERN (JUNE 2021 – DECEMBER 2022)

- Complied and organized responses for BELLA Boss section for the magazine
 - Worked alongside other journalists with constant communication and collaboration
 - Made edits to interviewee's responses when necessary
-

AWARDS/HONORABLE MENTION

PENN STATE NEWS — "SCHREYER SCHOLAR LEARNING TO HARNESS THE POWER OF CONVERSATION" (2023)

BAYARD AWARD — OUTSTANDING UNDERGRADUATE ACHIEVEMENT IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE DEPARTMENT (2023)