FICTION

Novels of the Donbas war

Drang nach Westen

UILLEAM BLACKER

Vladimir Rafeenko

DOLGOTA DNEI
Gorodskaya ballada
304pp. Fabula/Ranok. UAH 150.
978 617 09 3210 5

Olena Styazhkina

MOVOYU BOHA
128pp. Dukh i Litera. UAH 70.54.
978 966 378 468 7

Serhiy Zhadan

INTERNAT
336pp. Meridian Czernowitz. UAH 145.
978 966 97679 0 5



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The war in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine that began in 2014 made its way into the country's literature almost immediately. Social media has facilitated quick poetic responses, and following them has been as riveting as it has been unsettling. Novels need more time but the conflict is now dragging into its fourth year, and major prose is starting to appear. The first works were of sensationalist reportage and semi-documentary war fiction, which arrived in Ukrainian bookshops within a year of the outbreak of hostilities. Another trend, slightly longer in gestation, is represented by a trio of new novels that focus on everyday life inside the wartorn environs of Donetsk and Luhansk: Vladimir Rafeenko's *Dolgota dnei: Gorodskaya ballada* (To the End of Days: An urban ballad), Olena Styazhkina's *Movoyu Boha* (In God's Language) and Serhiy Zhadan's *Internat* (Boarding School).

Stylistically, these books are very different. Rafeenko's prose is postmodern and fragmented; his plot – grotesquely magic-realist and woven around the current war – is reminiscent of the post-Soviet fiction of Vladimir Sorokin or Victor Pelevin, though with more self-deprecating humour. This is interspersed with sharply contrasting snippets of everyday life in occupied Donetsk, which in their visceral punch recall the reportage-like war fiction of earlier writers such as Vasily Grossmann or Isaac Babel. Styazhkina's prose is also fragmented, but here it is chronology that is masterfully reshuffled in a terse, short narrative exploring relationships perverted by war. Zhadan's story is, by contrast, steadfastly linear, presenting an almost real-time account of a Luhansk schoolteacher's attempt to navigate the occupied city and retrieve his nephew from a besieged boarding school. The novel is darker than Zhadan's previous work, at times resembling a frighteningly immediate version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

The similarities among the works are more striking. The protagonists are all men in early middle age, intelligent loners with unhappy family lives who are struggling with their masculinity (something the war provides ample opportunity to reinforce, reimagine, or shatter). All three novels feature characters who could leave Donetsk or Luhansk, but are prevented from doing so by a love of place that is made all the more convincing by those places' lack of obviously appealing features. (Eastern Ukraine's cities are primarily known for their post-industrial decay and social problems.) And in all three novels, the focus is on the experience of ordinary civilians left freezing in semi-abandoned apartment blocks, huddling in crowded basements in fear of artillery fire, or scuttling across empty streets under the eyes of snipers.

There are no diehard nationalists in these works, nor are there genuine ideological supporters of separatism; political positions are confused and mutable. Rafeenko's protagonists have a deep mistrust of big politics, preferring their own quiet version of Ukrainian patriotism, and buying into neither the patriotic fervour of the Maidan revolution nor the travesty of the new "republics" (the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, the internationally unrecognized mini-states created by Russia and local separatists). Zhadan's schoolteacher spends most of the novel avoiding declarations of his politics, though his opposition to the occupation somehow seems obvious to everyone he meets. Styazhkina's protagonist, Revazov, is a member of Ukraine's tiny Assyrian community (a fact that affords interesting parallels between Ukraine's current problem with internal refugees and the Assyrians' long history of displacement), and thus has little time for nationalism or patriotism, whether Ukrainian or Russian. He is nevertheless enraged and desperate enough to kill some of the Russian "volunteers" who take over his city and abuse its inhabitants.

Encounters with such "tourists" (the Russian state famously claimed that Russian soldiers fighting in the Donbas were actually on holiday) are important in all three novels. Styazhkina describes the shock of suddenly encountering men with guns in one's local supermarket. Zhadan's protagonist – a military-age male not in uniform – is the target of constant harassment from men in camouflage. But Rafeenko goes deepest into the motivations of these visitors, in a section dedicated to two Russians who, inspired by a mixture of neo-imperialist television propaganda and the humiliating misery of life in the Russian provinces, travel to the Donbas to defend the "Russian Idea" against "Fascism". The author's dissection of the interplay of the collective trauma, historical mythology, identity politics, socio-economic factors and deep political cynicism that make ordinary Russians buy into their state's relentless *Drang nach Westen* is one of the most perceptive passages in the novel.

The blame is not only laid at the door of outsiders, however. While it is clear that the war was imported, our protagonists also see some of their neighbours endorse the new situation. Historians such as Timothy Snyder have shown how, under the Nazi and Soviet occupations in Eastern Europe during the Second World War, the breakdown of the state and of the rule of law meant that wilful violence became a banal part of everyday interaction among formerly peaceful neighbours. It is shocking to see, in each of these novels, the same process taking place in contemporary Europe. As one of the host cities for the Euro 2012 football championships, Donetsk welcomed fans to a shining new stadium and specially built airport; by 2014, the stadium was abandoned and the airport resembled wartime Warsaw. Locals who had recently rubbed shoulders with supporters from across Europe now watched in horror or righteous rage as captured Ukrainian soldiers were humiliated and paraded in the streets, and as locals suspected of loyalty to the Ukrainian state were tied to lamp posts and beaten.

The violence, looting and rape perpetrated by foreign soldiers, mercenaries and local "separatists" drive Styazhkina's Revazov to take the law into his own hands; unexpectedly, even to himself, he learns to kill with ease. He stands as an exception among the characters in these novels in resorting to such extremes, but all of them adapt remarkably quickly to the reality of war. They learn to distinguish the sounds of different kinds of artillery, and to judge when and where strikes are likely to arrive. The jargon of armed conflict becomes a part of daily conversation (as indeed it has throughout Ukraine).

War not only distorts the everyday life and language of the city, it also penetrates deep into individual relationships, casting friends, relatives and neighbours on opposing sides. Rafeenko's protagonist sees his marriage deteriorate as his wife sides with the separatists. Zhadan's Pasha, a Ukrainian language teacher, encounters a former pupil among the separatist soldiers. Styazhkina's Revazov, handcuffed and led to an office marked "SMERSH" (a Russian acronym meaning Death to Spies – the notorious Soviet military counter-intelligence organization during the Second World War), is bemused to be confronted by his son's history teacher, replete with Beria-style spectacles. Revazov is later interrogated in his own home, this time by Dima, an acquaintance from before the war and now a separatist, in a drawn-out encounter that frames the entire text. An emotionally unstable young man with a mountain of personal problems, Dima had previously looked up to Revazov, but also resented his greater self-confidence. Like many who felt marginalized in pre-war eastern Ukraine, Dima sees in the new order an opportunity for empowerment.

In their focus on entangled individual stories and motivations all three novels dispel one of the main myths surrounding the war – that the conflict was born of intra-Ukrainian differences related to language and identity politics. Zhadan's novel was written in

Ukrainian and Rafeenko's in Russian, while Styazhkina's was written in Russian and first published by a small academic journal in Kyiv but is now available in bookshops only in Ukrainian translation. Despite these linguistic differences, all three share a remarkably similar outlook on the war, and for all three the "language question" is at best a secondary issue. Styazhkina doesn't mention it at all, while Rafeenko's Russian-speaking characters start their day with a covert rendition of the Ukrainian national anthem, and have a whole repertoire of Ukrainian folk songs. Rafeenko also uses untranslated epigraphs taken from Ukrainian literature – his audience, after all, is made up of bilingual Ukrainians.

Zhadan's text is slightly different. Although most of his fiction is set in mainly russophone cities in his native eastern Ukraine, he writes only in Ukrainian; it is simply the language in which he feels most comfortable. In this sense, his work reflects everyday attitudes in Ukraine, where choice of language is fluid and often unnoticed. In *Internat* Zhadan problematizes language for the first time in his oeuvre, albeit only in the margins. On the one hand we see the everyday frustrations of Ukrainian-speakers in the stubbornly russophone eastern cities: Pasha restricts his use of Ukrainian to the classroom, as the school corridor is already Russian-speaking. On the other hand he must listen carefully to the accents and intonations of the often-unidentified armed men he meets: distinguishing between a Russian or Caucasian accent and a local, Ukrainian-inflected one sends important signals about how to behave and speak.

There is a small but crucial difference between the Russian and Ukrainian versions of Styazhkina's text. When the publishers of the Russian version decided to produce the Ukrainian one as a separate book, they removed a short coda to the main story. A wry note from the author on the inside cover informs us of this, but assures us that we will not lose anything as a result. But we do: the translation ends with a sudden and dramatic explosion of violence, while the original denouement explains what happened next: Dima is left paralysed and speechless from a gunshot wound inflicted by Revazov, and is being treated in specialist clinics in Austria and Germany. Revazov, racked with guilt, is reduced to cleaning shoes on the street in order to care for his disabled friend. Dima's prospects for recovery remain unclear, as does the future of their relationship: how can former neighbours who have so recently aimed guns at one another now live in a state of mutual dependence? Largely unnoticed by the contented Europeans around them, the pair sit on the pavement and wait for the trauma to pass, so that they might once again begin to talk.

Styazhkina's relocation of the victims of the war in the Donbas to the heart of Europe is not exactly allegorical – the characters are too idiosyncratic, confused and real to straightforwardly stand for anything. Yet her original ending is charged with broader meaning for the Western reader. It is, of course, a well-worn tradition in the West to watch, detached and uncomprehending, as conflicts in faraway places spill over into something larger. Only when it is too late do we try to figure out what happened. These three strong voices – all compelling candidates for translation – should be required reading for anyone trying to understand the intricacies of Europe's forgotten war.

