Understanding the Donbas War in Terms of World War II: A Metaphor Analysis of the Armed Conﬂict in Eastern Ukraine

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ABSTRACT Previous research on the ongoing armed conﬂict in Eastern Ukraine has largely provided structural explanations for the outbreak of violence in Donbas. In contrast to previous studies, this article takes an interpretive approach and investigates how the Ukrainian political leadership makes sense of the events in Donbas by drawing an analogy between the Donbas War and World War II.

Such an approach sheds light on the Ukrainian ruling elites’ standpoint on the Donbas conﬂict and contributes to the scholarly literature on conﬂict resolution in the region.

Introduction

The ongoing armed conﬂict in the Eastern Ukrainian Donbas region has been a complex phenomenon. In March and April 2014, following the political regime change in Kyiv in the wake of the Euromaidan Revolution, pro-Russian activists in Donbas started seizing

government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk and soon proclaimed two self-governing republics: the ‘Donetsk People’s Republic’ (DNR) and the ‘Luhansk People’s Republic’ (LNR). In response, the Ukrainian government launched an ‘anti-terror operation’, and the conﬂict soon escalated into war. The ﬁght between the Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists in Donbas has been inﬂuenced by a third party—the Russian Fed- eration. The public, the media and scholars alike have been intensively involved in inves-

tigating Russia’s direct and non-direct military involvement in Donbas since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, although the Russian government keeps denying the deployment of its troops in the region. Neither the Minsk I peace agreement signed by representatives

of Ukraine, Russia and the self-proclaimed ‘DNR’ and ‘LNR’ in September 2014, nor the Minsk II peace agreement signed by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany in February 2015 led to a ceaseﬁre. Moreover, neither the Ukrainian armed forces nor the

separatist forces have withdrawn heavy weapons from the contact line, and each continues to accuse the other of violating the truce. The Ofﬁce of the United Nations High Commis- sioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated that from mid-April 2014 to mid-November 2015 (the most intense conﬂict phase) more than 9,000 people (Ukrainian armed forces, civilians and members of the armed groups) were killed and more than 20,000 injured. Added to this, in November 2015, the Ukrainian Ministry of Social Policy registered more than 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the country (OHCHR, [2015](#_bookmark11), p. 2, p. 17).

The events in Donbas have sparked an academic and public discussion on the nature of the armed conﬂict in the region. Several previous works have engaged in studying internal and external structural factors that led to the outbreak of violence in the region (Katcha- novski, [2016](#_bookmark10); Kudelia, [2014](#_bookmark10); Malyarenko & Wolff, [2018](#_bookmark11); Portnov, [2016](#_bookmark11); Wilson, [2016](#_bookmark12)). Scholars have pointed to the role of both the political elites in Kyiv and the local elite

and the population in Donbas, as well as to Russia’s role in sparking and sustaining the con-

ﬂict. But how does the Ukrainian political leadership make sense of the war in Eastern

Ukraine?

In May 2015, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko stated the following in regard to the conﬂict in Donbas: ‘History teaches us a good lesson. The signiﬁcance of the occupation of the Czechoslovak Sudetenland is not lost on us because two of our regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, are partly occupied’ (TSN, [2015](#_bookmark12)). The president’s comparison between the Russian intervention in Ukrainian Donbas and Nazi Germany’s occupation of the Czecho-

slovak Sudetenland might provoke different emotions and raise eyebrows. One might argue that Putin’s Russia in 2014 was nothing like Hitler’s Germany in 1938. Indeed, it was not, but the argument that I intend to make in this article is different—it is not about the histori- cal event itself, but about its meaning as constructed by political decision-makers. As

Halvard Leira argues, historical analogies might be understood in terms of ﬁrst and second order constructs. For example, the current American president, Donald Trump, is sometimes compared to former American president Andrew Jackson. As the ﬁrst order con- struct, one might think in terms of whether and to what extent Trump is similar to Jackson, yet the second order construct involves understanding the meaning of such an analogy and the labelling of event X as event Y. In other words, it is about the connection between the signiﬁed (current event) and the signiﬁer (previous event, or the concept) (Leira, [2017](#_bookmark10)).

In contrast to previous works offering structural explanations of the conﬂict in Donbas, this article takes an interpretive approach, investigating which concepts the Ukrainian pol- itical leadership employs when describing the war in Donbas. I argue that the historical analogy drawn by the Ukrainian president in one of his speeches is essential for understand- ing how the Ukrainian ruling elites conceptualize the Donbas conﬂict. Following the logic of interpretive research, I therefore contend that *the Donbas War is WWII* metaphor applied by the Ukrainian president should be taken seriously as it helps us to explore how the pol- itical actors in Ukraine conceptualize and act in regard to the events in Donbas.[1](#_bookmark9)

In terms of data, I draw on four speeches delivered in 2015–2018 by the Ukrainian presi- dent to the Ukrainian nation and the international guests that attended the WWII commem-

oration ceremonies in Kyiv on 8 May (the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation) or 9 May (Victory Day).[2](#_bookmark9) Studying the president’s standpoint on the Donbas War is important due to the fact that—given the parliamentary-presidential political system in the country—the president is one of the key political institutions in Ukraine and currently exercises great power

in Ukrainian politics. Some observers have noted that despite the initial liberalization of the political regime in Ukraine following the Euromaidan Revolution, President Poroshenko has meanwhile accumulated excessive formal and informal power. In addition to his formal func- tion of controlling the foreign and defence policy of the country, the security services and the prosecutor general, the incumbent Ukrainian president has also played a decisive role in appointing his ally as prime minister and securing an alliance with the parliamentary speaker (Minakov, [2017](#_bookmark11); see also Kudelia, [2018](#_bookmark10)).

In discussing the role of language in political discourse, I draw on the insights of meta- phor analysis employed in the social sciences and humanities. By taking an interdisciplin- ary approach, political scientists have increasingly engaged in developing various techniques for examining the role of metaphors in politics. There is a growing body of scho- larly literature on the use of metaphors in various public policy settings focusing on social issues, the integration of migrants, and rebuilding public space or organizational practices (Schön, [1993](#_bookmark11); Stone, [2002](#_bookmark12); Van Hulst, [2008](#_bookmark12); Yanow, [1996](#_bookmark12); Yanow, [2008](#_bookmark12); Yanow & Van der Haar, [2013](#_bookmark12)).[3](#_bookmark9) Scholars of international relations and foreign policy analysis have also increasingly engaged with metaphors used in foreign policy-making, for example in the US policy towards China in the early twentieth century, or US foreign policy under President Carter in the late 1970s. Attention has also been paid to the British public discourse on the

‘war on terror’ in the 2000s (Blanchard, [2013](#_bookmark10); Campbell, [2015](#_bookmark10); Oppermann & Spencer, [2013](#_bookmark11)). In addition, some scholars have speciﬁcally investigated how historical analogies were used by governments to legitimize their contemporary foreign policies, such as the

US policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War and towards the Balkans in the 1990s, as well as the US and UK policies towards Iraq in the 2000s (Angstrom, [2011](#_bookmark10); Mutimer, [2008](#_bookmark11); Shimko, [1994](#_bookmark12); Steinweis, [2005](#_bookmark12)).[4](#_bookmark9)

Structuring Experience Through the Use of Metaphor

Some of the policy studies mentioned above draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* ([1980](#_bookmark10)). In their ground-breaking work on conceptual metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson explained how we root our actions in our conceptual thinking. They deﬁned a metaphor as ‘[…] understanding and experien-

cing one kind of thing in terms of another’ (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), p. 5). The authors

argued that metaphors should not be understood in terms of rhetorical language devices in one’s speech, but rather in terms of one’s conceptual system of thinking. They went on to explain what the metaphors used by a person tell us about his or her actions and argued that the way we think and act is often expressed through our metaphorical language as the source of everyday communication (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 3–6).

To illustrate their train of thought, Lakoff and Johnson cited a number of metaphors used

in everyday language, one of them being the *Argument is War* metaphor. They suggested that the use of this metaphor reﬂects how we structure our actions while engaged in an argu- ment—we lose or win, develop strategies, attack the opponent and defend our own position. Understanding an argument in terms of war is different from understanding an argument in

terms of dance, for instance (as it might be conceptualized in another culture). The latter implies that people perform and experience arguing differently, and we would probably not regard them as having an argument at all. Hence, to use the *Argument is War* metaphor is to describe our activity in a very speciﬁc way (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 4–5).

Lakoff and Johnson further claimed that metaphorical concepts arise when we are

engaged in conceptualizing our experience. By referring to the *Argument is War* metaphor, they pointed out that the meaning of this expression derives from the experience of having a conversation that is structured in a similar way to a battle. By structuring a conversation in this way and paying attention to the perceptions of the other interlocutor, one acts according to this structure. The way in which our experiences are structured, however, is multi-dimen- sional. We bring coherence to the structure of our experiences by recognizing various kinds of participants, the parts and stages of the conversation, and the linear sequence, causation and purpose of the action. In other words, while conceptualizing our experience, we select

certain aspects of it—those that we ﬁnd important—and abandon others. Metaphorical thinking emerges when we classify particular experiences, ﬁrstly by structuring them and then by employing a concept in structuring them (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 77–83).

Lakoff and Johnson also explained how we create new metaphors to give new meaning to

our experiences. To illustrate this, they brought up the metaphor *Love is a Collaborative Work of Art*. This metaphor arose, they argued, from our view and experience of doing something that is reminiscent of a collaborative artistic work. This metaphor reﬂects a network of entailments that we employ to coherently structure our experience. First, Lakoff and Johnson explain, by using this metaphor we highlight certain features of our

experiences and mask others. The metaphor presupposes an active involvement—work

—and not passive observation. This is different, for example, from understanding the love relationship as madness that implies a lack of control. Second, it entails selecting

very speciﬁc aspects of our experience. It is not about just any type of work, but speciﬁc work that is performed to create a work of art. Third, by reﬂecting on a new love experience, we give the notion of love new meaning and therefore we start acting accordingly. Fourth, the metaphor sanctions our deeds, justiﬁes them and requires certain actions from us. The metaphor dictates that we have to be actively involved in our relationship and, more pre- cisely, it implies an involvement in collaboration with somebody else. Fifth, the meaning of the metaphor is culturally speciﬁc. The way we understand metaphors depends partly

on the culture in which we live and partly on our experience. If somebody has a different understanding of art, this metaphor will be inappropriate for describing one’s experiences of love. The understanding of certain things and processes varies greatly from culture to culture, and metaphors that are easy to understand in one culture can be difﬁcult to compre-

hend in another (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 139–143).

Ultimately, Lakoff and Johnson argued that a new metaphor can create a new reality

when we start acting in terms of it. In this way, cultural change comes about to a large extent due to the introduction of new metaphors and the loss of old ones, and this goes against the traditional understanding of metaphor as a rhetorical device. As Lakoff and Johnson argued: ‘It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don’t change

reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect

how we perceive the world and act upon these perceptions’ (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 145–146). The traditional understanding of metaphor presupposes that the reality is objective. In this way, the human perception of the reality is negated. In contrast, as

Lakoff and Johnson summed up, we act in accordance with our conceptualization of the physical world with which we interact, and we often understand this world in metaphorical terms (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#_bookmark10), pp. 145–146).

Understanding the Donbas War in Terms of WWII

Building on Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of conceptual metaphors, this section analyses the way in which the Ukrainian political leadership conceptualizes the war in Donbas in terms of WWII. While closely (re)reading the speeches delivered by the Ukrainian president

during the commemoration of the end of WWII, it was noticeable that he referred to a number of historical events (see [Table 1](#_bookmark2)). This section takes a step-by-step approach to exploring the analogical reasoning behind the president’s use of these metaphorical concepts.

*The Anschluss of Austria*

While conveying his understanding of the current events in Donbas, the Ukrainian president referred to the Anschluss of Austria. More precisely, he compared the Russian actions in Crimea to the Anschluss of Austria that paved the way to WWII. As he argued in his speech in 2015: ‘We do not need to be reminded what the Anschluss of Austria meant. We have learned all too well what it meant through the example of the annexation of

Crimea’ (TSN, [2015](#_bookmark12)). In his speech in 2017, he further articulated this train of thought by stating the following: ‘[…] Ukrainian Crimea, which was annexed by Putin’s Russia, is similar to how Hitler’s Germany invaded foreign territories almost 80 years ago’ (Presi- dent of Ukraine, [2017a](#_bookmark11)).

In the Western historiography, the Anschluss of Austria was the incorporation of Austria into Hitler’s Nazi Germany in spring 1938. As Richard Evans writes, being obsessed with the expansion of Germany, Hitler initially turned his attention to Austria. He ﬁrst exerted pressure on the Austrian government to sign an agreement, through which the country agreed to become a German state and launch military and economic collaboration. He

then pressed the Austrian government to give the Austrian Nazis a free hand, and when he became impatient with the Austrian dictator Schuschnigg on the terms of the Aus- trian-German uniﬁcation, he ultimately ordered German troops to cross the Austrian border. When they marched into Austria on 12 March 1938, they received a tumultuous welcome from the Austrian people and from the members of the Austrian Nazi Party. Crowds of people greeted the German troops ecstatically, threw them ﬂowers and saluted them. While Hitler initially planned to create a union between the two states, the way in which he was received in Austria made him decide to fully incorporate Austria into the Third Reich. The law that he signed along with the reconﬁgured Austrian govern-

ment led to the creation of ‘Greater Germany’. In a referendum held on 10 April 1938, 99.75% of Austrians approved of the union, partly because the arrangements were manipu-

lated and the local population intimidated. It is estimated, for example, that less than a quarter or a third of Vienna residents actually supported the uniﬁcation. The incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich entailed the Germans taking over Austrian businesses, elim- inating the political opposition, and subjecting Austrian Jews in particular to harsh repressions. The Austrian Nazis introduced anti-Semitic legislation that ousted Jews from the civil service, organized pogroms, conﬁscated their property, and soon developed a plan to make Austrian Jews emigrate en masse (Evans, [2005](#_bookmark10), pp. 646–664).

The analogy between the annexation of Crimea and the Anschluss of Austria that has

been drawn by the Ukrainian president points to his conceptual thinking of contemporary Russia. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which preceded the outbreak of the Donbas War, has been perceived in the Ukrainian political discourse as the ﬁrst step in Russia’s attempt to dismember Ukraine. The metaphorical concept used by the Ukrainian political leadership suggests conceiving of Russia as a dictatorial state similar to Nazi

Germany, and incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin as a dictator akin to Hitler. Russian actions in Crimea in violation of international treaties (for example the 1994 Buda- pest Memorandum) and the territorial integrity of Ukraine are compared with Hitler’s take- over of Austria. President Putin is depicted in terms of his expansionist policy and his desire to ‘return’ Crimea to Russia.

The metaphorical concept further conveys that the incorporation of Crimea into Russia can be deemed procedurally similar to Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria in the follow- ing terms. We are encouraged to remember how the Russian army troops (albeit without

insignia) captured the Crimean parliament building in February 2014. We could perhaps draw a comparison between the Austrian government being pressured to sign a uniﬁcation agreement with Germany and the Crimean parliament being pressed to pass a declaration on secession from Ukraine and to organize a referendum to let the Crimean population endorse

it. As Serhy Yekelchyk maintains, the majority of the Crimean population—96.77%— purportedly voted in support of joining Russia. Crimea was incorporated into Russia

following the Accession Treaty signed in the Kremlin on 18 March 2014. As the pro- Ukrainian voices were weak, many Ukrainian army ofﬁcers defected to Russia, and Russia assumed control of all Ukrainian army equipment in Crimea (Yekelchyk, [2015](#_bookmark12), pp. 130–131).

The Ukrainian president’s logic in using this metaphorical concept also invites compari-

son between the repressions that the Jewish population was subjected to by Austrian Nazis with the persecution of Crimean Tatars by the Russian authorities following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. For example, a recent OHCHR report on the human rights situation

in the temporarily occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea indicated that Crimean Tatars are often harassed by Russian police and prosecuted under terrorism and extremism-related offences, while the Mejlis—a self-governing body of the Crimean Tatars—has been banned

since Russia’s annexation of Crimea (OHCHR, [2018](#_bookmark11), pp. 1–2).

This metaphorical concept further draws attention not only to Russia’s actions, but also to the local Crimean political elites and the population. It suggests a comparison between the longing for ‘reuniﬁcation’ by the Crimean government and the local Crimean population and the approval of Austria’s incorporation into Nazi Germany by Austrians and the Aus- trian government. This comparison implies that the Crimean population is partially respon-

sible for the Russian aggression against Ukraine, as it highlights the strong pro-Russian sympathy of the Crimean residents, the majority of whom were ethnic Russians and Rus- sophone Ukrainians. As Yekelchyk explains, during the period of Ukraine’s post-Soviet transformation, the Crimeans developed a strong local identity that was based on cultural

and economic closeness to Russia, although public opinion polls prior to the annexation of Crimea showed that the majority of the Crimean population did not favor joining Russia. Crimea was visited by many afﬂuent Russian tourists and sustained to some extent by the Russian navy stationed in the City of Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. Given the inﬂuence of Russian television, Russia was often viewed as a country with high living standards and a popular president, whereas the Ukrainian government was con- sidered to be offering little to the Crimeans (Yekelchyk, [2015](#_bookmark12), pp. 128–131).