

BOOK REVIEW:

**Josticova, Hana. (2024). *Mariupol 2013-2022: Stories of mobilization and resistance*.
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The monograph “Mariupol 2013-2022: stories of Mobilization and Resistance”, written by Hana Josticova, represents one of the first attempts to describe and explain with the usage of the methodology of social and political sciences the reasons for the tragic events that took place in the South-East part of Ukraine, called “Priazovie”.

The book’s basic approach is represented as an interview and story-telling of individuals who actively participated in the events that started in December of 2013 after the attempt of President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich and his team to suppress the protests in Kyiv. The protests that sparked after his denial to sign the European Association agreement with the EU at the EU Summit in Vilnius finally led to the slaughter of protestants on Maidan during 18-20th of February 2014. After that, Yanukovich's actual patron, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, ordered him to flee to Crimea and then to Russia and launched a special military operation named “Russian Spring” in Crimea. These events finally led to the occupation and illegal annexation of the peninsula in March 2014 after the so-called ‘referendum’, held with the help of Russian troops located in Crimea, in violation of both Ukrainian and international laws. After the weak and insufficient reaction of officials in Kyiv, Brussels, and Washington on the Crimean challenge, which Putin considered as a weakness and absence of readiness to react, the so-called “Russian Spring” in the Donbas region sparked.

Describing the methodology used in the book, the author explains her choice in the following way:

I am therefore paying attention to narratives and stories and using them as a research method to study the foundations and course of mobilization. First, by analyzing narrative resonance, the effect of narratives on mobilization is reflected in the receptivity of audiences toward some while opposition toward other narratives. By observing the individual dimension of narratives, we examine the language locals use to talk about events and the stories they tell to learn about the meanings they attribute to them. (Josticova 2024: 11)

... In order to study and make sense of these complexities, I bridge ethnography and social movement concepts, bringing cognitive factors and local characteristics into the analysis of social mobilization. The combination of interpretive social movements literature and ethnographic research methods allows for assessing social mobilization at its various stages of activism or participation in movements

and thus informs why individuals choose to or choose not to take action in the first place. (Josticova 2024: 13)

This approach can be considered entirely justified and appropriate. It is essential to mention that in an attempt to clarify the motivation of people who participated in social movements and protests in Donbas in 2014, the author interviewed representatives from the opposite sides. Some of them, as the author later found out, took official positions in the occupational administration of Mariupol after its occupation and illegal annexation by the Russian Federation in 2022.

The book begins with a brief outline of the history of the region where Mariupol is located. Concisely, Hana Josticova describes the specifics of the Donbas and Priazovie regions with particular attention to the history of the settlement there. Regarding the logical structure of the monograph, it should be mentioned that the author was absolutely right to start with a brief history of the city before describing and analyzing the events that took place in 2013–2014. It is crucial to understand better local mentality and identities, which played a significant role in the social mobilization of the people of Mariupol.

Hana Josticova describes the waves of several migrations, particularly during the period of industrialization in the USSR in the 1930s, when Mariupol became a prominent industrial city with substantial metallurgic potential even for the USSR, not talking only about Ukraine. The author gives a historical retrospective review of the migration of tens of thousands of peasants and low-qualified laborers. These people came from the territory of Russia, and they searched for better living conditions and wages in the construction of industrial and metallurgic plants and factories in the Donbas and Priazovie regions. It was that time when the metallurgic steel plant “Azovstal” was built, which nowadays became world-known for its heroic defenders in the spring of 2022. The plant became the last fortress of besieged Mariupol and a shelter for thousands of civilians, who were rescued in massive bomb shelters of “Azovstal”. These shelters were built up for the case of atomic war during the Cold War but were used by civilians to avoid huge 500 and 1000-kg bombs dropped on “Azovstal” from Russian planes in March-April of 2022.

If we return to the historical overview, we have to note that Donbas, Priazovie, and Mariupol are not unique in the sense of mass labor migration. But it would be worth paying more attention to studying the city’s history and ethnic aspects. It is crucial to understand the differences in local identities, even between citizens of Mariupol and the rest of the Donetsk region, not talking about the rest of Ukraine. When talking about the history of Priazovie, we should have paid more attention to the Greek part of Mariupol’s inhabitants. Traditional point of view considers that the historical basis of the future Mariupol city started with Ukrainian Cossacks (“Kalmiuska palanka”), who formed temporal for-posts in that area since the 17th century. In fact, the city’s real history began in 1779 with the establishment of a town with its modern name given by the Greeks. This ethnic group was forcefully removed by Russian empress Katherine the Second from Crimea in 1778 on the territories of the contemporary Dnipropetrovsk region and a year later to a region nowadays called Priazovie. The resettlement to Priazovie happened after

many Greeks died in the winter of 1778-1779 because of diseases, lack of drinking water, and lack of time to build houses before severe winter came. It was rather deportation than resettlement inclined to weaken the Crimean Khanate, which was at that time the vassal of the Ottoman Empire, after its defeat in the war with the Russian Empire in 1774. For many centuries, the Greeks were the social group that controlled the trade in Crimea and, therefore, were making significant contributions to the Khanate's economy, which helped to develop its army and to oppose the growing power of the Russian Empire in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea region in those times.

This ethnic group played a vital role in Mariupol's history. Of course, the book is focused on the other issues, but the Greek factor needs a unique, complex, and extended study. Nevertheless, Ukrainian historians have already done some of them, mainly at Mariupol State University during the 1990s and 2000s (Терентьева & Балабанов 2008). They can be invaluable for the author if she continues her study of Russian aggression against Ukraine during 2014–2024, including its “hybrid” stage, described in the book, as well as a full-scale invasion, which is still going on

In general, the proposed historical overview allows a better understanding of how the structure of the population of the Donbas region as a whole and Mariupol, particularly, was formed. It would explain why Mariupol residents, particularly the elites and representatives of civil society, strongly opposed the definition of “people of Donbas” itself when it concerned them. We have to mention that the artificial “people of Donbas” was the basic notion of Russian propaganda directed at the split of Ukrainian society. It was created to provoke the territories' separation and support the “Anti-Maidan” movement. The book also describes how the simultaneous forced “russification” of local inhabitants changed the population's structure.

Hana Josticova also touches upon the information impact issue on the events in the region. She describes in detail how Russia occupied the information space in Donbas and Priazovie in particular. These historical retrospectives allow us to explain why the ideas of the so-called “Russian World” were widely supported for many years by local inhabitants and what were the role of Russian propaganda and the mechanisms of so-called “soft power”, such as popular TV programs on TV, Russian pop music, literature, Russian Christian-Orthodox Church, etc.

The author describes how historical and religious myths were created and disseminated with the help of modern technological tools and how they spread in Donbas and Priazovie. In the book, we can find the overview of the conversion of various social groups of different ethnic and social origins into a political entity of “Russian people” and how the political identities of the people on occupied territories of Ukraine, particularly in Mariupol and Donbas region, as a whole, changed.

It concerns not only the Russian-speaking majority of the region, including citizens of Mariupol, but also Greeks who live there, whose ancestors were deported from Crimea at the end of the 18th century, and thousands were repressed, imprisoned, or killed during the terror of Stalin regime in 1937-1938 during so-called “Greek operation” fulfilled by NKVD. The historical retrospective and studying the particular case of the removal of Greeks from Crimea to Priazovie allows us a better understanding of the role of the

Christian-Orthodox church as a key institution and mechanism of Russian propaganda not only in the previous periods but in the hybrid Russian warfare against Ukraine in 2014–2022. Even nowadays, a historical myth that Katherine the Second “rescued Christian-Orthodox Greeks of Crimea from Mohammedan yoke” is still very popular among part of Ukrainians of Greek origin. That is why they remain in occupied Mariupol and nearby villages, and they are mainly loyal to occupational authorities and Russia.

In general, the brief historical part of the book is very valuable and relevant for describing the cultural, religious, and ethnic landscape of the region and the influences that impacted the views of local citizens and their identities, including regional and national. It makes it possible to understand hidden senses in the interviews in the central part of the book, which proposes an enormous variety of the personal perceptions of the local inhabitants.

The author also analyzes another critical factor – individuals who have played a crucial role in the events since 2013 in Donbas and Priazovie. The book pays special attention to a Ukrainian tycoon, Rinat Akhmetov, who owned Mariupol's most significant industrial plants and critical media outlets, including local TV channels and newspapers.

Considering his level of power in Donbas and Priazovie, he received the nickname “The owner of Donbas”. This power included financial and economic aspects and influence in the criminal world. Therefore, it is considered that he could have curbed the sparks of “*Russian Spring*” in Donbas at the very beginning. Still, he didn't, trying to use his status and influence in negotiations with representatives of a new power in Kyiv to save his control over the area. At the same time, taking into account his close business ties with Russia, which was the most important market for the products of his enterprises, he was also trying to keep the balance with the representatives of the so-called “*DPR*” (“Donetsk People's Republic”) after he captured the power in Donetsk and Mariupol, instead of using of all his leverages of power to assist the police and Ukrainian Army to curb the local separatists and criminals, supported by Russian special services.

In this regard, parallels can be drawn with another region, namely Kharkiv, where local supporters of the “Russian World” and criminals brought from the territory of the Russian Federation by Russian special services captured the administrative buildings. It allows understanding that there were several variants of the development of events, including the failure of the “Russian Spring” in Donbas.

The author managed to collect a considerable amount of information and to restore the picture of the unfolding of the “*Russian Spring*” in Mariupol, including the names and nicknames of criminal elements who participated in the terrorist attacks on police departments in the spring of 2014. The author also tried to explain, giving concrete facts, the sabotage by the representatives of special services of Ukraine in Mariupol, including the security service of Ukraine. Based on the investigations made lately by the Security Service of Ukraine, the author describes in chapter 9 how the Russian FSB tried to corrupt the representatives of Ukrainian special services and push them to sabotage the resistance to the “Russian Spring” in Mariupol when separatists and criminals, sponsored and controlled by Russian special services, captured the power. It shows the similarity with the actions in Crimea in February – March of 2014, where Russia also used

local criminal elements to capture administrative buildings and create network checkpoints to control the logistics in the peninsula.

As was mentioned above, one of the key goals of the book was not just to describe the consequence of events starting from the *Euromaidan* and *Antimaidan* protests in Kyiv and its outcomes in Mariupol in 2013 and finishing with the full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine, but what is more important – to understand the motivation of people who participated in those events from both sides.

The events of November 2013 – February 2014 have come to a modern history of Ukraine as the “Revolution of Dignity”. They are considered in political sciences as a point in which the Ukrainian nation made its civilization choice, shifting from the so-called “Russian World” with its authoritarian rule, vertical structure of power, and superiority of the role of the State and its interests under human rights towards European civilization and becoming a part of Western World as a whole, where human rights and the rule of law form the basis of the system of values of people and relations between citizens and state institutions in the societies belonging to it.

In chapter 8, the author gives a retrospective analysis of the formation of basic narratives of the supporters of the “*Russian World*” in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts starting from the 1990s, such as

... promoting a referendum on federalization or decentralization of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasti; associating Ukraine with fascism and “Banderovtsy” and marginalization of the Russian language; and promoting the cultural, political, and historical role of Russia. (Josticova 2024: 119)

The author also explains why these narratives found broad support among locals, and she defines the key social, economic, and political factors of it. Remarkably, the narrative of holding the referendum in this region for the federalization of Ukraine in the 1990s and 2000s during the “*Orange Revolution*” in 2004:

The narratives of federalism had both popular resonance founded on social and economic grievances and mobilizing potential for elites to exploit for electoral and business purposes. (Josticova 2024: 123)

The author describes the mechanisms of historical and cultural grounds for creating and disseminating propaganda myths aimed at splitting Ukrainian society and opposing different regions of Ukraine for political reasons by local elites, who gained control over the most popular local media outlets. At the same time, these narratives were also disseminated by Russian Federal channels, which were most prevalent among locals. Here, the author shows the differences in interests between the Kremlin and local tycoons, such as Rinat Akhmetov, and the cooperation needed to promote the same narratives.

Finally, as we can see, Akhmetov’s attempts to promote the narratives of Russian propaganda during the periods of two Maidans in Donetsk and Mariupol led to the loss of all his assets in the region after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine. At the same time, this analysis shows the basic instruments used by Russia, local

tycoons, and representatives of political elites to mobilize the population and control media space.

In chapter 9, the author describes the differences in local identities among local inhabitants based on mental, ethnic, cultural, and political differences of the citizens of different social groups, trying to define how they form with the help of propaganda, the mindset the supporters of “Russian World”, Ukraine and the “people of Donbas” which played a prominent role during the events of 2014–2022 for their social mobilization. For these purposes, the author forms focus groups and interviews the locals to discover their views and reasoning for supporting Russia or Ukraine.

At the same time, the author describes the formation and development of “Mariupol resistance” during 2014–2022, the representatives of which initially were accepted as a marginal group, and the self-defense of Mariupol, which played an essential role during the defense of Mariupol after the beginning of full-scale invasion to Ukraine in February 2022.

In the last chapter, the author describes the tragic events of the humanitarian catastrophe in Mariupol during the spring of 2022 when Mariupol was besieged, and the representatives of the Mariupol Resistance were trying their best to help local inhabitants to survive under constant shelling and bombardments of the city. The author pays attention to their motivation to stand against Russian aggression, participation in the pro-Ukrainian meetings in late February, and their reaction to the destroyed Drama theater after Putin acknowledged the “independence” of the so-called “DNR” and “LNR” (“Luhansk People’s Republic”).

As a person who was born and spent half of my life in Mariupol and know most of the key heroes from the book personally, and witnessed the unfolding of key events of “Russian Spring” in 2014, I agree with the following conclusions of the author made at the very end of the monograph:

Combining these accounts with documentary analysis of the chronology of events from November 2013 and the variety of groups and networks of the “Russian Spring” and *opolchenie* movements, the onset of the conventional war between Russia and Ukraine is easier to comprehend operationally – the “Russian Spring” developed into an armed rebellion that was aided by the Russian Federation but supported by a critical mass of ordinary residents both actively and passively. This was enough for a rebellion to sustain itself for the time being but not enough to sustain a war; had Russia not sustained and increased the support thereof, the *opolchenie* would have crumbled. This was clear by July 2014 in the light of the successes of Ukrainian liberation missions. (Josticova 2024: 182–183)

We can completely agree with the author:

... if there were to be one takeaway from this book, let it be this: individuals are as critical as masses, ideas as important as material resources, and beliefs and emotions as powerful as weapons. (Josticova 2024: 184)

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