



## Literary Insights into Industrial and Frontier Societies: Comparative View on Cultural Poetics of the Donbas and Upper Silesia<sup>1</sup>—Part II

ALINA STRZEMPA

University of Regensburg

Alina.Strzempa@sprachlit.uni-regensburg.de

ORCID: 0009-0003-3536-9107

OLEKSANDR ZABIRKO

University of Regensburg

Oleksandr.Zabirko@sprachlit.uni-regensburg.de

ORCID: 0000-0002-2141-7636

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides insight into the historical representations and literary constructions of two old industrial borderlands in Eastern and East-Central Europe: the Donbas and Upper Silesia. The first part addresses key questions about comparative studies, cultural poetics, regionalism, and the conflicts in both borderlands. It also explores the historical transformations that have shaped the regions in distinct ways, highlighting industrialization, the geopolitical composition of a borderland, and regionalism as common aspects for comparison. In the second part, two novels [*The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad* (2017) by Volodymyr Refeyenko (\*1969) and *East Wind* (1932) by August Scholtis (1901–69)], stemming respectively from the Donbas and Upper Silesian historical conflicts, are presented

---

<sup>1</sup>This text was created as part of the scholarly project titled “Poetics of Industrial Landscapes: The Donbas and Upper Silesia in Comparative Perspective,” funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (project number 01UL2204B). Our project aims to explore the epistemological approaches to the two old industrial territories that are, or were, politically and militarily contested. We focus on two main research questions. The first examines the specific cultural interactions between old industrial regions and the pressures of globalization, particularly the transition to an information society. The second research question addresses the cultural dimension of borderlands with varying loyalties to imperial and nation-states. The project seeks to explore whether these borderlands possess distinct cultural characteristics and how they are influenced by the dynamics of the industrial landscapes. To address these research questions, we primarily analyse fictional literature from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, which portrays industrial and frontier societies of the Donbas and Upper Silesia. By employing a comparative analysis, we aim to identify the culturally shaped regional “epistemological enclosures” that have emerged in these industrial landscapes.



in terms of the complex borderland narratives they embrace (biographies, plots, narrations, genres, and portrayals/literary representations). This article revolves around the research question of whether examining the outbreak of violence in Upper Silesia during 1919–22 can provide insights into the potential future trajectory of the Donbas.

KEYWORDS: Donbas, Upper Silesia, cultural poetics, industrialization, frontiers, borderlands.

## Literature and Borderland

Building upon the comparative analysis of the Donbas and Upper Silesia in the previous part of this article, we now turn our attention to two captivating novels set in these two borderland regions: *The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad* by Volodymyr Rafeyenko (\*1969, Ukrainian edition in Russian: *Долгота дней. Городская баллада*, 2017, English translation: 2023) and *East Wind* by August Scholtis (1901–1969, German edition: *Ostwind*, 1932, Polish edition: *Wiatr od wschodu*, 2015). By first providing a comprehensive overview of each novel, we will pave the way for drawing preliminary comparative conclusions.

### Borderland Narratives: Biographies, Plots, Narrations, Genres, and Portrayals

According to some literary critics and journalists, Volodymyr Rafeyenko's biography is an "epitome of the East Ukrainian fate in the post-Euromaidan period."<sup>2</sup> Born in Donetsk, Rafeyenko gained recognition when he won the Russian literary award *Russkaya premiya* for the novel *Descartes' demon* in 2013. Despite his undeniable connections with Russia and, above all, Russian culture and its literary traditions, following the first military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, he fled the region and began to re-define his Ukrainian identity. The following quote reflects Rafeyenko's perspective: "Our real identity consists of a sincere and authentic relationship with the truth placed in a concrete period of time."<sup>3</sup>

This viewpoint in question can be considered a product of a "borderland identity." August Scholtis chose the words of René Schickele (1883–1940), a German-French writer from Alsace, as the motto for his novel: "My heart is too big for one fatherland, but too small for two."<sup>4</sup> Scholtis, who was born

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Gaczkowski, Jak Władimir stał się Wołodomyrem. Losy pisarza z Donbasu, 16 April 2022, source: Jak Władimir stał się Wołodomyrem. Losy pisarza z Donbasu (polityka.pl) (accessed 15 June 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, Habrig Verlagsbuchhandlung, Donauwörth 1970. If not indicated otherwise, the translations into English in this article are the authors' own.

into a peasant family, was able to rise socially and became a journalist (his career was mainly an outcome of the charitable support of the local German aristocracy). During the military escalation in Upper Silesia, Scholtis remained in contact with both the Polish circle of Wojciech Korfanty<sup>5</sup> and the representatives of the German Freikorps.<sup>6</sup> After the partition of Upper Silesia, he emigrated to Berlin, where his novel *East Wind* was published by the renowned publishing house Fischer Verlag in 1932. Due to his critical attitude towards both German national arrogance and Polish irredentism, his novel was banned by the Nazis—a fact that ultimately put an end to his career as a writer and consigned him to obscurity. On the one hand, Scholtis was emotionally exhausted after the era of Nazi repressions. On the other hand, he approved of the incorporation of Upper Silesia into the Third Reich in 1939.<sup>7</sup>

Both Rafeyenko and Scholtis were forced to leave their native regions and to confront the new political realities of their regional homelands. Whereas they did not choose the circumstances, they found themselves compelled to identify with one side of the conflict, while maintaining a critical stance towards both sides.<sup>8</sup>

The plot of Volodymyr Rafeyenko's novel, *The Length of Days*, revolves around the experiences of people living under Russian occupation in the allegorical industrial city of Z, situated in Eastern Ukraine (and reminiscent of Donetsk). The story provides a panoramic view of the events and

---

<sup>5</sup> Wojciech Korfanty (1873–1939) was a prominent Polish activist in Upper Silesia. Already during his high school years, he advocated for Polish culture in the region. After completing his studies in Berlin, Korfanty embarked on a political career and successfully became a member of the *Reichstag*, the German parliament (active years: 1903–1912, and again in 1918). Korfanty served as a plebiscite commissioner and later became one of the coordinators of the so-called Silesian Uprisings.

<sup>6</sup> H. Bienek, *Posłowie*, in: A. Scholtis, *Wiatr od wschodu*, transl. by A. Smolorz, Canon Silesiae. Ślōnskō Bibliōtyka, Aldorf—Katowice—Kotōrz Mały 2015, p. 431.

<sup>7</sup> This fact, however, is controversial only for Polish researchers of Scholtis's work. Arno Lubos, the author of the renowned *History of Silesian Literature* (*Geschichte Literatur Schlesiens*, three volumes 1960, 1967, 1974), highlights that even the anti-Nazi Upper Silesian migrants in Berlin could not help but welcome the return of their homeland to Germany: "When thinking politically, one must not forget that the Geneva Convention (1922) was a violation of law. It caused losses to both sides, such as the separation of mines. Dissatisfaction grew. Scholtis also expressed his opposition to the 'bleeding border.' Like many others, he was happy when this border was abolished in 1939. It cannot be denied, though, that he went too far, considering that the reunification was accomplished by Hitler." (J. Cyrus, *Scholtis to był Pan. Wywiad Josefa Cyrusa z Arno Lubosem*, "FABRYKA SILESIA" 2012, issue 1, p. 87)

<sup>8</sup> Since we are dealing with a diachronic perspective, we know the future fate of Upper Silesia: the once irredentist nation-state of Poland, which soon had to grapple with the German imperial project, finally became its victim during World War II.

challenges faced by the characters in this city. August Scholtis's novel, *East Wind* follows the life of the allegorical character Kaschpar Teofil Kaczmarek and the destinies of several secondary supporting characters. The narrative spans from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the culmination of the Upper Silesian conflict, specifically the partition of the region in 1922. While Rafeyenko's plot is bound to one particular city in the Donbas, Scholtis explores larger parts of the Upper Silesian region in his narrative.

In *The Length of Days* Rafeyenko incorporates a criminal plot into the narrative. Sokrat Ivanovich Gredis, a former philosophy professor at the local university, Nikolai Nikolaievich Veresaiev, a former chemical engineer, and Liza Eleonora von de Nachtigal, Grendis's stepdaughter, collaborate at the "Fifth Rom" bathhouse, where Russian mercenaries and local militants regularly meet their demise, leaving no trace behind. Due to the constant disappearance of people in the bathhouse, Gredis is persecuted by the semi-officials associated with the new "people's republic." As the war in *The Length of Days* unfolds, it becomes evident that Gredis, Veresaiev, and Liza play a crucial role in bringing about its resolution. In order to achieve this, they embark on a risky journey to Kyiv and return to Z with two magical artifacts: a special edition of *The Kobzar* by Taras Shevchenko and a statuette of Ganesh (an elephant deity in the Hindu pantheon) adorned with a Ukrainian embroidered shirt. Vasili Yakovlevich Hirkavyyi, the local minister of health and transport, lends his support to the mission. Miraculously, the trio successfully returns to Z, but it remains unclear whether their efforts will indeed lead to the end of the war. In addition to the main plot, the novel includes seven "Tales of Veresaiev"<sup>9</sup> that portray the fates of individuals during the war. These protagonists, much like the main plot's characters marked by the stigma of pervasive violence and alcoholism, do not appear in other parts of the novel.

Scholtis's protagonist Kaczmarek, a crafty jester, is born to a peasant woman<sup>10</sup> on her way back from a pilgrimage to Czanstochowa (*Częstochowa*) in the "Privislinsky Krai" ("Vistula Land"), governed by the Russian Empire. The woman's hometown is Kosbuchna, located near Pleß (*Pszczyna*) in the German Reich. Since his mother dies during the childbirth, Kaczmarek is raised by a Catholic peasant family in Kosbuchna. He is initially destined for priesthood and is later sent to a monastery, but he chooses to escape to the "other Germany," where he finds employment in the Ruhr Valley and

<sup>9</sup> A nod to the Russian writer Vikentii Veresaev (1867–1945) and his collection of sketches *The Underground Kingdom* (*Подземное царство*) from 1892, which is set in the coal mines of Donetsk and which depicts the hardships of the exploited miners.

<sup>10</sup> As described in the quote "Dumplings in sloppy pockets. Lice in limp braids. Fleas on gnarled skin" (A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, pp. 8f).

discovers his German identity. Upon his return to Upper Silesia, Kaczmarek becomes a rag collector, travelling around the region with his four horses. Through chance encounters with representatives of different national factions, Kaczmarek becomes increasingly critical of both the German aristocrats and officials, who control the Upper Silesian industry, and the Polish agitators. Despite fighting on the German side during World War I and aligning himself with the German faction during the Polish uprisings, Kaczmarek faces conflicts and violence with the representatives of both sides following the partition of the region. Complicating matters, Kaczmarek's Catholic wife, with whom he has three sons named Wilhelm, Franz Josef and Vladimir Ilyich, denounces him to the Poles, further entangling him in the turmoil. In the end, Kaczmarek vanishes into thin air. Throughout the novel, the reader is repeatedly presented with glimpses of everyday life in the peasant Upper Silesian society, including labour in the industry, instances of domestic violence, alcoholism, and an uncritical admiration of the Catholic church.

Both novels feature references to real public figures. In *The Length of Days*, for example, we encounter individuals like Igor Girkin (\*1970) and Petro Poroshenko (\*1965). Similarly, *East Wind* makes references to historical figures like Wojciech Korfanty and Wilhelm II (1859–1941). These references to real public figures add a layer of authenticity and connect the fictional narratives to actual historical events. Both Rafeyenko and Scholtis include passages with direct commentaries on the respective military conflict.

The narrations of both novels are presented from an external point of view, featuring numerous dialogues. *The Length of Days* adopts an external point of view and employs a concise narrative structure, while *East Wind* presents the plot through a series of brief yet significant incidents, making it challenging to reconstruct the overall storyline. Additionally, Scholtis focuses more on impactful occurrences, while Rafeyenko employs introspective passages, delving into the inner thoughts of his protagonists.

Upon examining the genres of both novels, we can observe the following characteristics: as Agnieszka Matusiak suggests, the ballad genre, declared by Rafeyenko in the subtitle of his novel, entails a syncretism that combines elements of lyrics (emotional variability) and epics (narrative and plot).<sup>11</sup> This syncretism also encompasses elements of the grotesque, science fiction, and crime novel, all of which are present in the novel *The Length of Days*. By contrast, *East Wind* is commonly described as a picaresque novel with elements of the grotesque, infused with “folk poetic power.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> A. Matusiak, *Wyjść z milczenia. Dekolonialne zmagania kultury i literatury ukraińskiej XXI wieku z traumą posttotalitarną*, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Wrocław 2020, p. 289.

<sup>12</sup> H. Bienek, *Posłowie*, pp. 430 and 432.

Generally, both novels can be described as fantastical.<sup>13</sup> However, Rafeyenko's use of imagery is much more extensive. In Scholtis's novel, domesticated animals can speak and consume alcohol,<sup>14</sup> a symbolically rich devil, occasionally depicted as a nightmare, strolls around and is engaged in conversations with people,<sup>15</sup> and the protagonists interact with saints through hallucinations.<sup>16</sup> These instances allow folk imagery to intrude upon the actions of the characters, adding a touch of the fantastical to the narrative. Rafeyenko, on the other hand, employs a more extensive use of imagery. He allows metaphorically charged animals, such as the oversized Colorado beetles, to intervene and take action independently. One notable scene depicts these beetles emerging from the tracks of Russian humanitarian aid and attacking people who have gathered to receive assistance.<sup>17</sup> *Colorady* is an expression used in Ukraine to identify pro-Russian groups displaying the black-orange striped St. George's ribbon, a Russian military decoration. The presence of oversized Colorado beetles in the novel symbolizes these groups, although the affiliation of these insects becomes increasingly uncertain and ambiguous as the story unfolds.<sup>18</sup> Another instance of fantastical imagery is the detailed portrayal of a devil in the novel.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the protagonists frequently experience hallucinations and engage in internal monologues or dialogues with various objects, such as dolls, as Liza does.<sup>20</sup>

The presence of paranormal characters is much more prominent in *The Length of Days*. For example, the "Fifth Rom" is inhabited by a community of Nibelungs, mythical dwarfs from old German legends, whose primary

---

<sup>13</sup> The portrayal of both novels can also be analysed intertextually with references to Ukrainian, Russian, German, and Polish literary traditions. However, this is not the focus of the present article. At this juncture, we can mention the evidence compiled by Matusiak (e.g., *Dead Souls* by Gogol, *Demons* by Dostoevsky, *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov, Taras Shevchenko; see A. Matusiak, *Wyjść...*, p. 282) with regard to *The Length of Days*. Additionally, the relatively unknown novel by Scholtis is described by Horst Bienek (1930–1990) in terms of its narrative fragmentation, episodic re-enactment, and incantations reminiscent of those found in works by Céline or Cendrars, but not commonly seen in German literature (see H. Bienek, *Posłowie*, pp. 433 and 435).

<sup>14</sup> E.g., A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, pp. 235f.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175 and 176–181.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85 and 310f.

<sup>17</sup> V. Rafeyenko, *The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad*, transl. by S. Forrester, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2023, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–103.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121–128.



occupation is coal mining.<sup>21</sup> They are involved in the killings of anti-Ukrainian and Russian militants who visit the bathhouse.<sup>22</sup> However, the most significant aspect of fantastical and paranormal imagery in Rafeyenko's novel lies in the presence of death. As death pervades the city of Z, it becomes uncertain who is already dead and who is not. Furthermore, leaving Z is only possible through death, as the three protagonists, who embark on their mission in Kyiv, must also face the prospect of certain death.<sup>23</sup>

Special attention must be dedicated to the depiction of space. Space traditionally encompasses two dimensions in industrial regions: the presence of nature with its vegetation and the existence of artificial spatial constructions. In *The Length of Days*, the steppe, for instance, offers the protagonists solace and respite amidst the turmoil: "Still, in the steam room, full of steam as hot as stars, the odor of steppe wormwood helps a soul to breathe."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, there is a sense of regret and desolation regarding the wasted land: "... Liza saw dry, burned-out spaces around her. Corn and barley were supposed to be growing here, wheat or rye, but nothing was growing expect fields of mines."<sup>25</sup> But above all, the steppe serves as a symbol for the Ukrainian soil that must be conquered by neo-imperial Russia: "Ivan Ivanovich (Russian mercenary) ... was thinking ... (a)bout the cathedrality of the Russian World. About the bright scarlet mushroom rising over the Ukrainian steppe."<sup>26</sup>

In terms of nature and vegetation, *East Wind* portrays the allure of the Upper Silesian cultivated fields, but the novel rarely delves into contemplating nature itself. Both the cultivated fields and, above all, the industry are depicted as symbols of the misfortune of Upper Silesia, as they became the root cause of the borderland conflict: "War association ball in the district where the humus is black like a prayer book cover. And the grains bursting full. Plump-cheeked."<sup>27</sup>

As for the industrial context, in *The Length of Days* there are several indications of the industrial history of the Donbas region. The narrative

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 214-225.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 53. Rafeyenko's novel also includes ecocritical passages. For instance, it depicts extensive vegetation that laments the departed: "Fruit trees and non-fruit trees drove all their flowers out at the time, paying no attention to all the dates assigned by nature. ... Nature was bidding farewell to the lives of those who were doomed to lie in the earth in the months ahead." (Ibid., p. 67)

<sup>27</sup> A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, p. 111.

refers to slag heaps, factory sirens, “mining nights,”<sup>28</sup> and mining housing estates, creating a vivid sense of the industrial landscape and its impact on the characters: “I gaze at the slag heaps and the slag heaps gaze at me. And long we gaze at one another, never bored with being.”<sup>29</sup> These motifs clearly evoke a sense of nostalgic longing, reflecting the complex relationship between the individuals and the industrial history of the region, as well as the transformative effect of the information society and war itself. The entire transition towards the information society, which is no longer rooted in material heritage,<sup>30</sup> posed a challenge for the Donbas and Ukraine (in addition to the processes of regionalization, nationalization, and transnationalization, all mentioned in the first part of our article).

While the industrial infrastructure holds nostalgic value in *The Length of Days*, in *East Wind* it becomes the central point of rivalry and conflict: “The fate of Upper Silesia is sealed by the location of its most significant territory along the Polish border. . . . And the people in the countryside were overlooked . . . .”<sup>31</sup> Despite the historical tension, several very similar passages in the text provide a calming effect:

The mine is a completely harmless herd animal. Through houses, through churches, through cemeteries, through settlements, cities, and forests, its existence simmers, its breath snorts and its pulse pounds and hammers and thrusts and reverberates.

Bim.

And once again, a pack of sweaty humans jerks out of its dark, unsuspecting mouth.

Bimbim.

The wheels of the mining tower spin...

So effortlessly. So dreamlike. So buoyant. So lifted from all heaviness. So festive. So graceful. So confident. So secure. So universally understood.<sup>32</sup>

However, industry has a contradictory status in the novel, since it is both familiar to the local peasant community and poses a threat, as it will contribute to the misfortune of this economically significant German province. This threatening side of the industrial infrastructure is consistently symbolised by the reflection of glow in the sky: “The sky wanted to almost blaze in white

---

<sup>28</sup> V. Rafeyenko, *The Length...*, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., M. Kowalska, *Rozwój społeczeństwa informacyjnego na przestrzeni dziejów*, “Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Morskiego” 2016, issue X, p. 179.

<sup>31</sup> A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, p. 226.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26, see also 222 and 306.



fury, for the reflection dictated its triumph to it.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly, Upper Silesia of that time already exhibited a model of an industrial society in which workers adapted to living around the material heritage of factories that shaped their entire existence.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note, however, that, at the same time, the emergence of information society collided with the industrial society, largely due to the impact of information warfare between the two nations, Poland and Germany, facilitated by the earlier phase of media development. One could conclude that while the conflict in the Donbas primarily stems from the information society, the conflict in Upper Silesia is rooted in the amalgamation of the industrial and information society. We could, of course, further elaborate on this statement. One could argue that the situation in the Donbas is, to some extent, comparable to that of Upper Silesia in terms of this amalgamation, as the dysfunctional industrial society of the Donbas also collided with the information society, which, however, appeared in a more advanced phase than in Upper Silesia of the 1920s. Yet, the geopolitical context impairs these comparative efforts, as in Upper Silesia the amalgamation occurred under the historical circumstances of the formation of nation-states after World War I. As a *new* geopolitical order *was* emerging, the declining empires had to contend with conflicts in their borderlands. In the Donbas, however, the declining industrial society was clearly instrumentalised by Russia within the context of information and later hybrid warfare, where the need to redirect particular processes of globalization became Russia’s external and internal political strategies. Nevertheless, in general, the portrayal of industrial space in both novels reflects the collision of industrial and information societies, and the subsequent tensions and consequences that arise from the coexistence of these societal models.

### **Donbas and Upper Silesia: Borderland Narratives in Comparison**

By considering the historical circumstances, as well as the plots, narrations, genres, and portrayals, we are able to formulate initial comparative conclusions. First and foremost, concerning historical circumstances, the protagonists of both novels appear to share a similar motivation as they reject alignment with any dominant imperial or national discourse. Nevertheless, both the circumstances and, consequently, the emphasis placed on certain aspects differ. Notably, Rafeyenko—a refugee from the Donbas residing in Kyiv—writes his novel from “within” the conflict, which persists with casualties, prolonged duration, and an uncertain future. In light of these conditions, an unequivocal conclusion arises: the Donbas is

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> About this model see, e.g., M. Kowalska, *Rozwój...*, pp. 184f.

an area under Russian occupation. Although doubts may arise regarding the role of separatists in the conflict, the novel ultimately dismisses them:

With the start of the turbulent events, however, he [Sokrat Gredis] had gone on leave right up to the moment when columns of militants, armed to the teeth, most of them never seen in Z, had entered the city. They asserted that they were defenders of the city, although everything that was happening spoke with confidence of an occupation. And, in fact, it was nothing other than that.<sup>35</sup>

Rafeyenko critically breaks down “Russkii mir” into its components,<sup>36</sup> but he also maintains a critical stance towards Ukraine. The main aspect of his critique is the mere fact that the Ukrainian centre has never made the effort to integrate its industrial periphery. In 2016, Andrii Portnov described this state of affairs in his article titled “Exclusion from One’s Own Country. The ‘Donbass’ in the View of Ukrainian Intellectuals,”<sup>37</sup> where he explores the strategies of the misleading “othering” of the Donbas in Ukraine. Portnov stipulates that the war in the Donbas both perpetuated and consolidated the stereotype of the region as a “foreign body.”<sup>38</sup>

Portnov extensively cites voices which, after the outbreak of the war in the Donbas, claimed that the region is entirely incompatible with the pro-European western and central Ukraine, and therefore, should secede.<sup>39</sup> He highlights that the debate taking place within Ukrainian intellectual circles failed to provide a thorough analysis of the government’s management of the industrial periphery or the impact of Russian propaganda. Instead, the

---

<sup>35</sup> V. Rafeyenko, *The Length...*, pp. 23f.

<sup>36</sup> “And it’s all right that there are fascists there?”

‘Whether there are fascists in Kyiv or not,’ Herman raised his eyebrows, ‘that I don’t know. Maybe there are. But they’re at home there. Whereas these mercenaries—there they are! You can walk right up and touch them!’ ” (Ibid., p. 138)

“You get anxious, and not for nothing, because at this very moment you suddenly understand distinctly that there is no politics. And there’s no geopolitics, either. And definitely no spiritual bonds. Russia doesn’t and can’t have real interests anywhere except in Russia itself. And the main concentration of fascism in Eurasia is found precisely between Vladivostok and Kaliningrad.” (Ibid., p. 176)

“The old-fashioned Russian amusement—overcoming measure—is as a rule accompanied by a vileness of such grandeur and significance that all the vegetarians of the world may rest calmly. The universum has invented nothing monstrous than the Russian World, in that sense.” (Ibid., p. 244)

<sup>37</sup> A. Portnov, *Ausschluss aus dem eigenen Land. Der „Donbass“ im Blick ukrainischer Intellektueller*, “OSTEUROPA” 2016, issue 6/7, pp. 171–184. The quotation marks in the title of this article imply the necessity of scrutinising the complexity of the Donbas, which, as Portnov claims himself, can be better understood through transregional comparisons (see pp. 171f).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 176f and 179f.

blame for the ongoing situation was primarily placed on the inhabitants *themselves*, making them collectively responsible for the circumstances. In simpler terms, the residents were held accountable without considering the broader factors such as governmental actions or external influence.<sup>40</sup>

The inner monologues or dialogues between the protagonists in *The Length of Days* echo the conclusions put forth by Portnov. It is important to note that Rafeyenko speaks on behalf of the common people who ultimately find themselves caught in the bloody repercussions of cultural debates and political actions:

Traitors and thieves in Kyiv, idiot timeservers, madman and criminals in Moscow. The longer it goes on, the hungrier and more hopeless it is.<sup>41</sup>

Why shouldn't, given all this, you know, why shouldn't our Supreme Leader, the Protector of Constitution, go out to the podium, purse his important lips, and shout out for the whole world to hear: how are you doing there, folks? How are you doing in your fucking Z?<sup>42</sup>

The professor heart ached when he read what some, essentially good, people thought: for God's sake, have they forgotten that they live in Ukraine and not beyond good and evil? Or the things said about Z-people by a few angry, tired boys who were defending the country with weapon in their hands.<sup>43</sup>

"And perhaps the anthem, for our souls? 'Ukraine Has not Yet...', Sokrat, what do you say?!"

"We'll have a drink and sing it at home on Donetska Street. It's awkward somehow here," Gredis waved his hand annoyingly. "Think about it yourself, who need our performance? Who believes in it here? In Kyiv, I'll tell you, it doesn't take a lot of smarts to sing this ballad. And you and I have distinctive voices. To enrage the spirits of water and fire? Are you and I some kinds of patriots, Kolya?"

"Of course not," Veresaiev spread his hands. "We are *vatnik*<sup>44</sup> calvary ..."<sup>45</sup>

Scholtis, who moved to Berlin in 1928, did not write from "within" the conflict; however, he writes his text amidst the heated debates about the legality of the Geneva Convention of May 15, 1922, between Poland and

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>41</sup> V. Rafeyenko, *The Length...*, p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Vata*—a guilty jacket and the padding it's filled with; a pejorative term used by Ukrainians to describe people who follow pro-Kremlin propaganda (see, e.g., *ibid.*, p. 8).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

Germany, which regulated transborder relations in Upper Silesia. This state of affairs gives rise to the buzzword of a “bleeding border” (*blutende Grenze*), which dominates the collective consciousness, attaining the status of both a political slogan and a metaphorical construct, popularized by Wilhelm Wirbitzky’s (1885–1964) novel of the same name title (*Die blutende Grenze*, 1932). The status of Upper Silesia after 1922 is discursively portrayed as an injury to the German national body, leading to four representation strategies in both literature and journalism: traumatising, emotionalization, stereotyping, and the formation of foreign characters (*Fremdbilder*).<sup>46</sup> Thus, the literature and journalism of Upper Silesia during that time only hold documentary value, as they are situated within specific historical circumstances and driven by politically utilitarian aims, characterised by a quest for revenge [also, see the works by Arnolt Bronnen (1895–1959) and Robert Kurpiun (1869–1943)].

Against this backdrop, the novel *East Wind* stands out as a solitary voice, with its author simultaneously criticizing both the German and the Polish faction. Furthermore, the author assumes the role of a spokesperson for the common people, specifically those belonging to the plebeian class:

“Adam Woitulik. Summoned at nine o’clock.”  
 “Step forward.”  
 “Nech bendze pochwaluni Pan Jeshish Christus<sup>47</sup>.”  
 “Good morning.”  
 “So, are you applying for a disability pension?”  
 “Nie rozumia...Co?<sup>48</sup>”  
 “Speak German! Speak German!”  
 Woitulik stammers, shrugs his shoulders.  
 “Get out of here, Woitulik. Learn to speak German first, and then come here. Done. Next.”<sup>49</sup>

Here they assembled grenades. They cast cannons. . . .  
 Day and night they spun. Because, for heaven’s sake, what else were they supposed to do? Sirens blared. Machines screeched. . . .  
 In the smelters and machine halls, the last aged, grey men mingled, the very last, frail oases of men in this desert of young girls and boys. However, they earned exorbitant wages, but not exorbitant enough to afford a piece of bread because there was none. Not exorbitant enough to justify the earn-

<sup>46</sup> See the treatise by T. Janikowski, *Die blutende Grenze. Literatur und Publizistik zur ober-schlesischen Teilung* (1922), Logos Verlag, Berlin 2014, here esp. pp. 14–17.

<sup>47</sup> “May Jesus Christ be praised.”

<sup>48</sup> “I don’t understand... What?”

<sup>49</sup> A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, p. 51.

ings of Trockenbrott and its engineers, its shareholders who did not lie in trenches but in Switzerland.<sup>50</sup>

Warsaw mercenaries and lackeys, well acquainted with the slightest psychological impulse of the peasants, promised, promised, and promised. Real things.

They primarily persuaded them with the main argument of that immense large-scale landownership exclusively held by Germans. They convinced them of the ill will of the German Social Democracy to help the farmers.

They convinced the miners that the pit foreman is only a better person because he is German. They brought confusion into minds and shamelessly intertwined nationalism with socialism.<sup>51</sup>

From time to time, one of them would go, who happened to be off duty at that moment. That was a miner.

He would sing, if asked, "Deutschland über alles," not because he had to, but because it doesn't matter at all what one sings.

In the alehouse, when he got drunk, yes, there he would sing, "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła..." not because he had any interest in saving Poland, but because it doesn't matter at all to a miner what he sings.

He must only sing because God gave him a voice, not a fatherland.<sup>52</sup>

The literary representation of the plebeian class in *East Wind* contrasts with that in *The Length of Days*, where Rafeyenko also speaks on behalf of the common people, but with protagonists representing the post-Soviet Ukrainian middle class. Once again, taking a diachronic perspective, we are compelled to compare the novels in the context of the industrial society versus the information society. Nevertheless, in both historical moments, a highly emotionalized rhetoric (i.e., the one lacking substance and objectivity) prevails in the public discourse, which is reflected in the novels. While the Donbas is excluded from its own country and described as a "foreign body," Upper Silesia, after years of social neglect, is discursively promoted to the position of an injury or a wound to the body of its former German state. In both cases, the inhabitants continue(d) to suffer under the proximity of the border—a state of affairs that both authors continuously highlight.

Finally, it is necessary to address the issue of identifying with a specific side of the conflict in relation to the loss of the previous equilibrium. Rafeyenko's credo of "truth placed in the concrete period of time" involves a dialogue between good and evil. Agnieszka Matusiak emphasizes the essential nature of this discourse, which, in the case of *The Length of Days*, draws

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 189f.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

inspiration from the Bible<sup>53</sup> and ancient philosophy.<sup>54</sup> In Kyiv, during their mission, Veresaiev says to Gredis: “To be alive and genuine, Sokrat, that’s what comprises the only work of human being! To become a *homo*, pardon me, *sapiens*, in the concrete place where God put you . . . .”<sup>55</sup> Regarding earlier passages of the novel that contained the following statements by Sokrat: “. . . Ukraine is not so much a country, a poor young state that the Russian jackals, along with local jackals, are tearing to pieces. . . . Ukraine is, in essence, our fatherland in heaven,”<sup>56</sup> despite the novel’s ironic undertone, we can assume that Ukraine, as a project, is capable of fulfilling the imperatives of good. Such declarations, along with the plot of the rescue mission,<sup>57</sup> support the interpretation that Rafeyenko, in his novel, clearly empathizes with Ukraine.

Rafeyenko’s perspective is influenced by his direct experience of Russia’s violent onslaught on Ukraine, which clearly violates international law. Considering these factors, we could assume that Rafeyenko’s novel does not fully reflect the premise of a borderland discourse that should not be applicable to the entire nation.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, Scholtis’s novel, written ten years after the military escalation in Upper Silesia (but within a public revanchist ambience), does not show clear sympathy and oscillates consistently between the two options. This critical perspective itself could have had a positive impact on fostering self-critical thinking, which is an implicit premise for gaining a better understanding of the state of affairs.<sup>59</sup> The non-linear form

---

<sup>53</sup> The motto of the novel is:

“. . . And Thy grace shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for the length of days”

Psalm 22

<sup>54</sup> In the novel, Sokrat Gredis epitomizes Socrates’s philosophy, which views the human soul as a “habitat” of virtues (see A. Matusiak, *Wyjść...*, pp. 286f).

<sup>55</sup> V. Rafeyenko, *The Length...*, p. 238.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Even Hirkavyyi, the Minister of Health and Transport of the “People’s Republic of Z,” says:  
“. . . ‘it does look strange. But I do this in the name of the future. Precisely so that different kind of Z will arise from the foam of nonbeing. Not a Russian one, not a Soviet one, some kind of separate one, *mine...*’

‘Ukrainian, maybe?’ Veresaiev grinned.

. . . ‘maybe Ukrainian, too. But then so Ukraine becomes different.’” (*Ibid.*, p. 222)

<sup>58</sup> However, these are just preliminary conclusions. By delving further into the comparison with *East Wind*, interpreting this novel as a “borderland novel” becomes possible. An in-depth analysis, based on three “border effects”—specific social actors, local identities, and distinct employed strategies—as elaborated on by R. Braun, O. Kienitz, *Comparative...*, promises a more nuanced perspective on the novel.

<sup>59</sup> At the same time, it is beyond doubt that the author of *East Wind* remains German: “Because the cane had been solemnly burned, to the delight of the boy. With about two



of the plot, along with the genre, supports this interpretation and leads us to assume that *East Wind* can be to a greater extent considered a “borderland novel” that depicts social processes that cannot be referred to any nation involved in the confrontation.

## Conclusions

The fundamental question raised in both parts of our article can be summarized as follows: what could be a new approach to an old industrial borderland, caught between its tragic past and an uncertain future? We argue that adopting transnational, intercultural, and both synchronous and diachronic literary comparative perspectives on the Donbas can shed light on the region’s “epistemological enclosures.” By employing cultural poetics as a methodological tool, we can trace how these enclosures are incorporated into public opinion with all its pragmatic and performative outcomes.

However, when speculating about the future of the Donbas, the most pressing question that arises is its reintegration as a region into the Ukrainian state following the war. The Donbas stands out from other European industrial borderlands due to lingering cultural issues and deep-rooted resentments, which have emerged from its complex and troubled history. In contrast to the Donbas, the fate of Upper Silesia can be seen through the lens of European patterns of nation-building and their clash within an industrial borderland. Nevertheless, we argue that the Upper Silesian experience *can* provide a productive point of reference when contemplating the future self-positioning of the post-war Donbas.

In the concluding remarks of our article, we would like to emphasize two interconnected aspects regarding Upper Silesia as a potential benchmark for the Donbas today. Firstly, as Scholtis’s example demonstrates, even in a complex borderland area with the presence of foreign irredentism, there is an opportunity to embrace diverse perspectives and refrain from radicalism. Secondly, the post-World War II fate of Upper Silesia clearly indicates that achieving peace in the region was possible through three significant processes: the silencing of Germany as an imperial power, the incorporation of the so-called Regained Territories (pl. *Ziemie Odzyskane*), which involved separating the Upper Silesian territory from Germany, and the nationalization of the region by the Polish communist government. These historical events effectively brought an end to the traditional living environment of Upper

---

hundred such teachers, Upper Silesia could be saved for the German nation.” (A. Scholtis, *Ostwind*, p. 213)

Silesia, which is currently undergoing arduous reconstruction, notably within the framework of a European region.

Against this background, several important questions emerge: while silencing Russia and physically separating the Donbas from the border may seem unrealistic, it is crucial to address how the Ukrainian state could engage with its own people and their historical legacy. Should the Donbas and its inhabitants be radically nationalized? What potential consequences might arise in terms of the region's own identity? Can the focus on the distinct regional identity of the Donbas (which is by no means synonymous with the Russian or Soviet identity) provide a viable strategy to the reintegration of the region into Ukrainian national and cultural discourse? Arguably, by acknowledging the specific historical, cultural, and social characteristics of the Donbas, and incorporating them into the broader Ukrainian national narrative, a sense of belonging and ownership can be fostered among the local population. Furthermore, can the international community play a role in preserving a delicate equilibrium, as was eventually achieved in Upper Silesia? These questions call for thoughtful reflection and exploration as we navigate the complex landscape of the Donbas and its future within Ukraine.

---

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT: The Authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in this study.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION: The Authors are solely responsible for the conceptualization and preparation of the article.

---

## Bibliography:

- Abels G., 2017, *Lass uns allein oder lasst uns rein. Zum (Des-)Integrationspotenzial eines „Europa der Regionen“*, "EUrosion POLITIKUM", issue 1, pp. 35-40.
- Bartov O., Weitz E. D. (eds.), 2013, *Shatterzone of Empires. Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Bienek H., 2015, *Posłowie*, [in:] A. Scholtis, *Wiatr od wschodu*, [transl. By] A. Smolorz, Aldorf — Katowice — Kotórz Mały, Canon Silesiae. Ślōnskō Bibliōtyka, pp. 429-438.
- Braun R., Kienitz O., 2021, *Comparative Politics in Borderlands: Actors, Identities, and strategies*, 30 November 2021, source: *Comparative Politics in Borderlands: Actors, Identities, and Strategies* (annualreviews.org) (accessed 15 June 2024).
- Burzyńska A., Markowski M.P., 2007, *Teorie literatury XX wieku*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków.
- Cyrus J., 2012, *Scholtis to był Pan. Wywiad Josefa Cyrusa z Arno Lubosem*, "FABRYKA SILESIA", issue 1, pp. 86-89.

- Dziurok A., Linek B., 2011, *Dzieje najnowsze. W Polsce Ludowej (1945-1989)*, [in:] *Historia Górnego Śląska. Polityka, gospodarka i kultura europejskiego regionu*, [eds.] J. Bahlke, D. Gawrecki, R. Kaczmarek, Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, Gliwice, pp. 267-286.
- Encyclopedia Britannica online, National Communism, source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Communism> (accessed 07 June 2024).
- Gaczkowski M., 2022, Jak Władimir stał się Wołodomyrem. Losy pisarza z Donbasu, 16 April 2022, source: *Jak Władimir stał się Wołodomyrem. Losy pisarza z Donbasu (polityka.pl)* (accessed 15 June 2024).
- Janikowski T., 2014, *Die blutende Grenze. Literatur und Publizistik zur oberschlesischen Teilung (1922)*, Berlin, Logos Verlag.
- Kaczmarek R., 2019, *Powstania Śląskie 1919–1920–1921. Nieznana wojna polsko-niemiecka*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków.
- Kowalska M., 2016, *Rozwój społeczeństwa informacyjnego na przestrzeni dziejów*, "Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Morskiego", issue X, pp. 179-193.
- Kuromiya H., 1996, Ukraine, Russia and the Donbas in Historical Perspective, 24 September 1996, source: *Ukraine, Russia and the Donbas in Historical Perspective (pitt.edu)* (accessed 11 June 2024).
- Łukowski W. (ed.), 2004, *Tożsamość regionów w Polsce w przestrzeni europejskiej. Materiały z konferencji "Regiony, regionalizm i Unia Europejska" zorganizowanej przez Wolny Sojusz Europejski Zielonych i Ruch Autonomii Śląska dnia 17.10.2003*, Ruch Autonomii Śląska, Katowice.
- Laruelle M., 2015, *The three colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian nationalist mythmaking of the Ukrainian crisis*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", issue 1, pp. 55-74.
- Matusiak A., 2020, *Wyjść z milczenia. Dekolonialne zmagania kultury i literatury ukraińskiej XXI wieku z traumą posttotalitarną*, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Wrocław.
- Merten U., 2012, *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick—New Jersey.
- Myshlovska O., Schmid U. (eds.), 2019, *Regionalism without Regions: Reconceptualizing Ukraine's Heterogeneity*, Central European University Press, Budapest.
- Peth S. A., 2018, What is Translocality? A Refined Understanding of Place and Space in a Globalized World, 25 September 2018, source: *What is Translocality? A refined understanding of place and space in a globalized world - Transient Spaces and Societies (transient-spaces.org)* (accessed 10 June 2024).
- Portnov A., 2016, *Ausschluss aus dem eigenen Land. Der „Donbass“ im Blick ukrainischer Intellektueller*, "OSTEUROPA" Issue 6/7, pp. 171-184.
- Rafeyenko V., 2023, *The Length of Days. An Urban Ballad*, transl. by S. Forrester, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Scholtis A., 1970, *Ostwind*, Habrig Verlagsbuchhandlung, Donauwörthm.
- Struve K., 2011, *Germanizacja i agitacja wszechpolska w XIX w. w historiografii niemieckiej*, in: *Historia Górnego Śląska. Polityka, gospodarka i kultura*

- europiejskiego regionu, [eds.] J. Bahlke, D. Gawrecki, R. Kaczmarek, Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej, Gliwice, pp. 427-431.
- Studenna-Skrucka M., 2014, *Ukraiński Donbas. Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej*, Wydawnictwo Nauka i Innowacje, Poznań.
- Szymanik G., Wizowska J., 2016, *Po północy w Doniecku*, Wydawnictwo Agora, Warszawa.
- Tatur M. (ed.), 2004, *The Making of Regions in Post-Socialist Europe – the Impact of Culture, Economic Structure and Institutions. Case Studies from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Ukraine Volume I*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main.
- Wódz J., 2010, *Górny Śląsk jako problem polityczny: spojrzenie socjologiczne*, "Górnośląskie Studia Socjologiczne. Seria Nowa", issue 1, pp. 34-51.
- Woźniczka Z., 1996, *Z Górnego Śląska do sowieckich łagrow*, Wydawnictwo Śląsk, Katowice.
- Zelle C., 2005, *Komparatistik und 'comparatio' – der Vergleich in der Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft. Skizze einer Bestandsaufnahme*, Komparatistik: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft, Synchron Verlag, Heidelberg.
- Zemanek E., Nebrig A., 2012, *Komparatistik*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin.

## Authors:

ALINA STRZEMPA, PhD, earned her degree in 2016 from the University of Münster. Her dissertation focused on the concept of Central Europe in the works of Andrzej Stasiuk and Jurii Andrukhovych, which were written around the time of Poland's entry into the European Union. Since March 2022, she has been working on a comparative publication as part of the project titled "Poetics of Industrial Landscapes: The Donbas and Upper Silesia in Comparative Perspective."

OLEKSANDR ZABIRKO holds a PhD in Slavic Literatures and Cultures from the University of Münster. Currently, he is a senior researcher (Post-Doc) at the Slavic Department of the University of Regensburg. His major fields of interest are literary models of spatial and political order, contemporary literature(s) from Russia and Ukraine, and speculative literature in general. His recent publications include *Literary Forms of Geopolitics: The Modelling of Spatial and Political Order in Contemporary Russian and Ukrainian Literature* (in German, 2021); *Figurations of the East* (in German, co-edited, 2022). Oleksandr Zabirko is a member of editorial boards of the Journal of European Studies and the book series "Ukrainian Voices."