

Hiroaki Kuromiia. *Zrozumity Donbas* [Understanding the Donbas]. Translated by Oleksii Panych, Vydavnytstvo “Dukh i Litera,” 2015. 144 pp. Tables. Paper.

Hiroaki Kuromiia (Kuromiya) is one of those rare scholars who became interested in the history and identity of the Donbas long before the region was cast into the national and international spotlight in 2014 by Russian aggression in Ukraine’s east—and even before the presidency of Viktor Ianukovych, who represented the so-called “Donetsk clan” in Ukraine’s state institutions. Kuromiya’s seminal work, the three-hundred-eighty-page-long monograph *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s*, was published already in 1998, and it has been translated into Ukrainian and republished in further editions. But the author has been following events in Ukraine ever since he first came to the Donbas in 1989.

The book *Zrozumity Donbas* is a collection that includes three previously published essays by Kuromiya: one from 2002 (the first chapter, dealing with Stalin’s terror in the Donbas [11-46]); one from 2001 (the second chapter, on the Donbas’s [non]national identity [47-73]); and one from 2007 (the third chapter, on the images of the Donbas during times of Ukraine’s independence [75-102]). There are also two more-recent publications—an interview and an essay, dating to 2014 and 2015, respectively. As the author himself declares, the book appeared on account of his intellectual duty to clarify his stance to the citizens of Ukraine, overall, and of the Donbas, in particular (9), with regard to events that occurred in the aftermath of Russian aggression.

Thus, the book is a concise version of Kuromiya’s findings about many of the burning questions of Ukrainian society: Is the Donbas pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian? Is the region worth fighting for, or should it be rejected? The historian Kuromiya challenges the popular stereotype of a “pro-Russian Donbas.” He argues in favour of acknowledging the many nuances of the Donbas’s identity. In addition, he compares the region (for a Ukrainian reader—unexpectedly) to the United States (the New World of olden times [15]) and the region’s character to that of the freedom-loving Cossacks (63).

The book also contains a number of eye-opening observations about why the Donbas would defy Ukrainization, why the classic theories of national identity do not fit the Donbas case, and what is hidden behind the seeming political indifference of Donbas citizens. Indeed, Kuromiya’s book offers one of the most democratic and tolerant views toward the Donbas ever found in the Ukrainian discourse. Kuromiya sheds light on the nuances of the Donbas’s historical dynamics—its complex and tragic history, as well as democratic perspectives on the region—and explains that there is so much

more to the region than mines, corruption, criminals, and pro-Russian sentiment.

Above all, Kuromiya makes a confident statement, one that could be adopted as Ukrainian state policy toward the occupied territories—that the “true political challenge for Ukraine is not in rejecting the Donbas . . . but in protecting it as an integral part of Ukraine” (my trans.; 129-30). In his view, “Kyiv should fight for the soul of the Donbas population” (my trans.; 112). Kuromiya himself is contributing to this fight by explaining the nature of the Donbas’s soul to the reader and revealing its allure and own form of soft power.

The particular merits of the book are its conciseness and reader-friendly style, which make it an easy read not only for scholars but also for the general public. For this reason (and in conjunction with the growing demand for studies of the Donbas), this book has been highly recommended for republishing in Ukraine (the same is true about Kuromiya’s early volume *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas*).

At the same time, the book’s very conciseness and its reliance on older works might be disappointing to those readers who are already familiar with Kuromiya’s writings and who might be expecting a collection of new findings. The book certainly contains repetitions from previously published research (which the author duly acknowledges and for which he apologizes [see 9]).

The book serves as an excellent starting point for anyone who would want to understand the Donbas (as promised by the title), gain insight into the origins of the current crisis there, and grasp the ways through which the integrity of the Ukrainian nation might be restored (once the Russian military leaves the Donbas and Ukraine regains control over the occupied territories). It is an asset for scholars who are engaged in Donbas studies as it also offers various paradigms for understanding Ukraine’s regional identities. The book should receive well-deserved publicity in Ukraine: it can spur public debate on the issues of the Donbas beyond popular stereotypes—and inspire readers to reflect on what it means, after all, to be a Ukrainian.

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Work Cited

Kuromiya, Hiroaki. *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian Borderland, 1870s-1990s*. Cambridge UP, 1998. Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies 104, general editor, Stephen White.