On Victory Day, a holiday celebrating the Nazi capitulation to the Soviet army, pro-Russian activists organized a rally in Donetsk's Lenin square. Months had passed since the overthrow of Yanukovych and un-officially Russian troops had secured Moscow's annexation of Crimea. Much to the chagrin of politicians in Kiev, thousands of ethnic Russians approved the annexation in an informal referendum. In Washington and Brussels there were whispers of a possible Russian blitz on Kiev, and in Donetsk there was a growing fear of the supposed looming Nazi invasion. In the international press the most reactionary elements of both east and west, right and left seemed to be defining the public discourse with their paranoias of a third world war.

In Lenin square young women in balaclavas waved the flag of the newly self-declared republic of Donetsk as they sang folkloric Soviet songs. A convoy of transport trucks arrived and unloaded dozens of pro-Russian militants. Members of the Vostok and Zapad battalions, battle hardened Chechen paramilitary groups who'd fought alongside Russian forces in Chechnya, graciously accepted flowers from the crowd. Their arrival was an indication of Moscow's investment in Ukraine's Donetsk oblast. It also signaled a serious escalation in the fighting capacity of the pro-Russian forces.

Yanukovych's overthrow and the subsequent prohibition of the Russian language, invigorated ethnic Russian's distrust of the Maidan revolution. Feeling threatened by the specter of an ethnic conflict many resident's of southern and eastern Ukraine turned east for reassurances. Vladimir Putin made clear that his national interests included the Russian speakers of Ukraine and state-owned Russia Today and other Kremlin allied media outlets meticulously constructed a narrative to justify intervention.

Re-asserting Russia's role of prominence in the international political economy had always been an aspiration of Vladimir Putin's. For him and others the Soviet Union's collapse was a Russian tragedy in need of remedy. The west's increasing influence in former Soviet nations left a series of frozen wars along Russia's border. In the Abzkhazian and South-Ossetian regions of Georgia, the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenian enclaves of Azerbaijan, and in the Caucasus's Ingusthea region, Russian forces asserted themselves in localized conflicts. With these interventions Putin reinvested in the country's military and his commanders applied and perfected new strategies for subverting western geo-political goals.

Simplifying the current war in Ukraine as either a battle between western democratic values and post-Soviet imperial aspirations or neo-fascist political movements and struggles for national liberation, does not further an understanding of the root causes of this war. While all of these tendencies and histories are present in the current conflict, it is only through a thorough exploration of their complex inter-relation that we can find a resolution. As in all conflicts, the war in Ukraine has been highlighted by black and white moments of right and wrong, but is defined by a confusing and overwhelming grey. More than 8,000 people have died in fighting since the conflict began, and unfortunately, everything is much less clear than when I first arrived in Kiev a little more than two years ago. The only clarity I’ve found is civilians always pay for the decisions of men with guns, and it in those moments never matters which side you support.

-Wil Sands
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Pro-Russian protesters gather in Lenin Square in downtown Donetsk. Worried by anti-Russian sentiment emanating from Kiev, the population of eastern Ukraine looks east to the Kremlin for support.
Pipelines cut through farmlands of the Donbass Oblast. Russian gas flows through these industrial veins connecting the energy hungry European economies with the energy rich Russian market. Left: In a suburb of Donetsk miners talk while waiting for their mine to reopen. Operations were temporarily shut down after an explosion killed five workers. The Donbass is the industrial heartland of Ukraine.
A woman walks across Lenin Square in Slavyansk, the first city to be overrun by pro-Russian separatists.
A group of young women pose for a picture at the Liverpool, a kitsch bar/discotheque built for the 2012 European Football Championship. The bar, complete with a catman, a catwoman and a dancing midget, didn’t close until shelling hit the center of the city. Right: An elderly man laughs as he shops at an informal market of used goods, food, and handcrafts, in the center of Mariupol.
Members of a Russian nationalist party, brought to bolster the numbers of a Donbass independence protest in Donetsk's Lenin Square, are shielded by police after fights with local separatists.
A group of devout Orthodox parade around the regional administration building, now the de-facto headquarters of the nascent Donetsk People’s Republic. The group stops occasionally to pray and bless the separatist cause and the militants inside the building. Right: A billboard paid for by Transparency International portrays a hooded judge, his anonymity is his strength against corruption.
A pro-Russian activist collects votes during the referendum for Donbass independence at a hospital in Mariupol.
Teenagers wait in line at a waterslide in Aquapark, a waterpark housed inside the largest retractable aluminium dome in the world. The waterpark is a popular tourist destination for locals and Russians alike. Left: Veterans of the second World War gather for a memorial celebration on Victory Day in Donetsk. The memory and celebration of Soviet soldiers' sacrifices made in the fight against the Nazis is still very present in modern Donbass society.
Drunken pro-Russian residents of Mariupol commandeer an abandoned Ukrainian tank after a bloody incursion by the Ukrainian National Guard.
In anticipation of a Ukrainian police operation pro-Russian activists collect cobblestones to build barricades outside the regional administration building. Right: After singing the Ukrainian national anthem during Victory Day celebrations in Donetsk, the Ukrainian police officer was threatened by pro-Russian separatists.
Members of the ultra-nationalist Azov Battalion of the Ukrainian National Guard salute with a seig heil at their operational base outside Mariupol.
During Mariupol's occupation by pro-Russian forces, residents built barricades in defense against potential Ukrainian military operations. Right: Residents of Kramatorsk argue with a Ukrainian paratrooper, sent to stop pro-Russian separatists in neighboring Slavyansk.
Residents of Donetsk wait for humanitarian aid outside what used to be Donetsk's circus. Rinat Akhmetov, a regional oligarch, funded the humanitarian operation. Left: Members of the Zapad and Vostok battalions receive flowers from independence supporters at a rally in Donetsk's Lenin Square. These battle hardened fighters fought for the Kremlin in the wars in Chechnya and South Ossetia.
Ukrainian paratroopers wait for orders after being stopped by the residents of Kramatorsk.
A drunken women poses for a portrait outside Mariupol’s City Hall just hours before the Ukrainian Naional Guard unsuccessfully attempted to storm the building. The attack left various dead and wounded. Left: Flowers left as a memorial.
A man lies dead outside a Mariupol police station. He was shot during a gun battle between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian National Guard. Neighbors and the press gather to see what has happened.
"Ivan" once a supporter of Maidan, and then a recruit in a pro-Russian self defense force, now tries to keep his head low and himself out of trouble. He has no interest in the war and can’t wait to get back to normal life.
An injured separatist, shot in the leg by the Ukrainian National guard, looks out the window of this hospital bed in Mariupol. Left: Two women push a baby carriage by a destroyed building, hit by mortar fire in a pro-Russian advance.
Three women stand at dusk at pro-Russian roadblock along the road to Kramatorsk. The roadblocks are designed to stop the movement of agent provocateurs and Ukrainian forces.