



War and Identity in Contemporary Russian Literature: Donbass as Cultural Heartland

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Abstract

This paper argues that contemporary Russian and Russian-language literature affirms the cultural and historical rootedness of Donbass within the broader Russian civilizational space. Through Zakhar Prilepin's *Some Will Not Go to Hell* and Andrei Kurkov's *Grey bees*, we explore how the war in Donbass is not simply a geopolitical event, but a spiritual and identity-based struggle. Prilepin presents Donbass as a sacred territory, defended by men who sacrifice not for conquest, but for memory, brotherhood, and existential continuity. Kurkov, though often interpreted as critical, still portrays the region through Russian cultural codes — language, symbolism, and shared suffering. By analyzing these two narrative worlds, the paper suggests that literature plays a key role in resisting the fragmentation of historical identity, and that Donbass — far from being a marginal frontier — is portrayed as a symbolic core of post-Soviet spiritual and cultural renewal.

Keywords: Donbass, russian literature, prilepin, kurkov

Introduction

The situation in Donbass, which erupted in 2014 following the broader upheavals in Ukraine, has not only been a geopolitical conflict but also a deeply symbolic one. Beyond territorial disputes, the struggle over Donbass involves questions of memory, language, and cultural belonging — issues that are many a times portrayed in literature. As a historically Russian-speaking region with shared civilizational and cultural continuities, Donbass occupies a liminal yet powerful place in the imagination of contemporary Russian and Ukrainian writers alike.

This paper examines two influential literary representations of Donbass: Zakhar Prilepin's *Некоторые не попадут в ад* (*Some Will Not Go to Hell*) and Andrei Kurkov's *Серые пчелы* (*Grey bees*). Though the authors differ in tone, politics, and style, both construct narrative worlds in which Donbass is more than just a setting. It becomes a symbol, a battleground not only of arms but of meaning. Zakhar Prilepin is a well-known Russian writer and former combatant in Donbass. He crafts a mythic and sacred vision of the war. In his novel, the region becomes a site of spiritual trial and national renewal, where characters fight not only for land but for the soul of a civilization. His language is infused with religious motifs, heroic archetypes, and echoes of Russia's literary tradition of sacrifice and martyrdom.

Kurkov, a Ukrainian writer who writes in Russian, takes a quieter, more introspective approach. His protagonist, a beekeeper from a war-torn village, is not a hero in the traditional sense but a survivor navigating a fractured world. Yet even in his understated narrative, Donbass remains culturally entangled with Russia in terms of its language, habits, and emotional topography. It remains an important part of the broader Russian cultural sphere.

This paper argues that both Prilepin and Kurkov, despite ideological and stylistic divergences, construct Donbass as a symbolically rich and culturally embedded space. Whether through mythic elevation or quiet resilience, both narratives resist the total fragmentation of identity. Instead, they

gesture — implicitly or explicitly — toward a civilizational continuity that defies geopolitical rupture. Donbass, in their fiction, is not just a grey zone or a battlefield, but a deeply inscribed cultural landscape — contested, yes, but spiritually enduring.

Prilepin's Mythic Vision: War as Cultural Redemption

Zakhar Prilepin's *Некоторые не попадут в ад* (*Some Will Not Go to Hell*) offers a bold, unapologetically sacred vision of the Donbass war. Written by an author who actively participated in the conflict, the novel fuses lived experience with literary myth-making. Donbass, in Prilepin's narrative, is not a political periphery but a spiritual center — a testing ground for Russian ideals of sacrifice, duty, and historical continuity.

The protagonist, Andrei, is cast not just as a soldier, but as an archetype: a loyal, steadfast warrior called to fulfill a timeless role. His struggle is not merely tactical but eschatological, embedded in a larger narrative of national redemption. Prilepin frequently invokes religious and folkloric language, drawing on Orthodox Christian imagery to elevate the battlefield into a sacred space. Death is not feared but accepted — even welcomed — as part of a greater cosmic order. The recurring motifs of silence, brotherhood, and predestination reinforce the idea that these men are not fighting for a temporary cause but are fulfilling an ancestral duty.

Importantly, Prilepin's Donbass is not isolated from Russia — culturally, linguistically, or spiritually. It is portrayed as an organic extension of the Russian world (*Russkiy mir*), whose defence is both an act of patriotism and of moral necessity. The novel draws connections between contemporary combatants and historical heroes, suggesting that the present war is the latest chapter in Russia's long history of defending its soul from external threats and internal betrayal.

In Prilepin's world, war is a crucible in which the values of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice are not only tested, but renewed. For him, Donbass is sacred not because of its

resources or politics, but because it reveals the true face of the Russian spirit under siege — and how it must be preserved through willing sacrifice.

Kurkov's Liminal Vision

Andrei Kurkov's *Grey bees* offers a markedly different literary vision of Donbass — yet it, too, affirms the region's emotional and cultural complexity. Kurkov does not construct a myth; he disassembles one. His protagonist, Sergey Sergeich, is not a hero, but a beekeeper. He is a solitary figure navigating the absurdity of life in a forgotten war zone. The setting is grey, abandoned, and strangely quiet. Yet through this understated narrative mode, Kurkov presents a poignant meditation on loss, survival, and the quiet persistence of identity.

Although Kurkov avoids political allegiance, his cultural choices are significant. Sergey speaks Russian, lives according to habits deeply embedded in Soviet and Russian tradition and carries with him a reverent attachment to the land. His bees serve as metaphors for order, continuity, and instinctive survival — a stark contrast to the chaos of human war. The absurdity of borders, shifting allegiances, and random violence are filtered through Sergey's simple yet emotionally resonant perspective.

Kurkov's novel refuses to glorify violence or romanticize struggle, yet it does not deny the cultural intimacy of Donbass with Russia. On the contrary, his focus on Russian-speaking villages, traditional lifeways, and internal exile suggests a deep ambivalence toward Ukraine's post-2014 national reorientation. Kurkov resists ideological certainty, but he cannot — and does not — erase the historical, linguistic, and emotional proximity of Donbass to the Russian world.

In many ways, *Grey bees* is an anti-myth — a quiet resistance to both nationalist propaganda and to the total rupture of memory. Sergey's journey is not a retreat into individualism, but a slow-moving tribute to a way of life that has endured despite war, borders, and ideological noise. Through silence, bees, and border crossings, Kurkov affirms a deeper truth: that identity survives in the small, unspoken rituals of daily life — and that Donbass, even as a grey zone, retains its cultural coherence.

Comparative Analysis: Sacred War vs. Silent Continuity

Despite their differences in tone, intention, and worldview, Prilepin and Kurkov construct parallel literary visions of Donbass as a meaningful, culturally coherent space. Prilepin mythologizes; Kurkov demythologizes. Yet both resist the depiction of Donbass as a blank zone or mere geopolitical fault line.

Prilepin's Donbass is imbued with religious meaning — a battlefield of destiny, where heroic archetypes fulfill Russia's historical mission. His characters are driven by a clear sense of moral and civilizational purpose. Kurkov, by contrast, constructs a narrative of ambiguity. His hero avoids politics, does not fight, and seeks peace — yet he inhabits a world where cultural bonds are impossible to sever, despite the chaos around him.

The symbolic modes differ — Prilepin uses fire, sacrifice, and spiritual confrontation; Kurkov uses bees, silence, and solitude. But both authors agree on one thing: Donbass

matters. Not only as contested land, but as a landscape of memory, language, and identity.

Prilepin affirms that Donbass is part of Russia's soul. Kurkov, while more neutral, does not deny its cultural depth and Russian-speaking heritage. In this way, the paper argues that Donbass, in both novels, is a site where literary myth and lived memory converge — either through loud sacrifice or quiet survival.

Conclusion

The literary representations of Donbass in the works of Zakhar Prilepin and Andrei Kurkov reveal how fiction can serve as a powerful medium for shaping historical consciousness and cultural geography. Despite their opposing styles and ideological undertones, both authors refuse to depict Donbass as a marginal or incidental space. Instead, they endow it with symbolic resonance, affirming its emotional and historical centrality.

Prilepin's vision is direct and uncompromising. Donbass, for him, is a sacred battlefield — a site where Russia's past, present, and future intersect through the acts of self-sacrificing warriors. His narrative constructs a myth of cultural continuity, binding the conflict to older traditions of Russian heroism, spiritual fortitude, and civilizational destiny. In elevating Donbass into a literary sacred space, Prilepin affirms not just the legitimacy of the struggle, but the necessity of remembering it as a moral inheritance.

Kurkov, on the other hand, offers a quieter but no less meaningful affirmation of Donbass's cultural complexity. His protagonist, a solitary beekeeper, carries within him the lived memory of a shared linguistic and emotional world. Though Kurkov avoids politicization, his novel still resists the erasure of cultural belonging. Through silence, routine, and symbolic resistance, *Grey bees* subtly protects Donbass from becoming an ideological vacuum.

Together, these narratives demonstrate that Donbass — far from being a passive backdrop to geopolitical contestation — emerges as a deeply inscribed landscape of identity, history, and memory. Whether framed through heroic myth or meditative ambiguity, both Prilepin and Kurkov articulate a vision of Donbass that transcends political borders. In doing so, they remind us that literature, especially in times of war, can recover what is most enduring: the invisible threads that bind people to land, culture, and one another.

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