

Something to Write Home about: Postcards of Donbas, Postcards as Donbas

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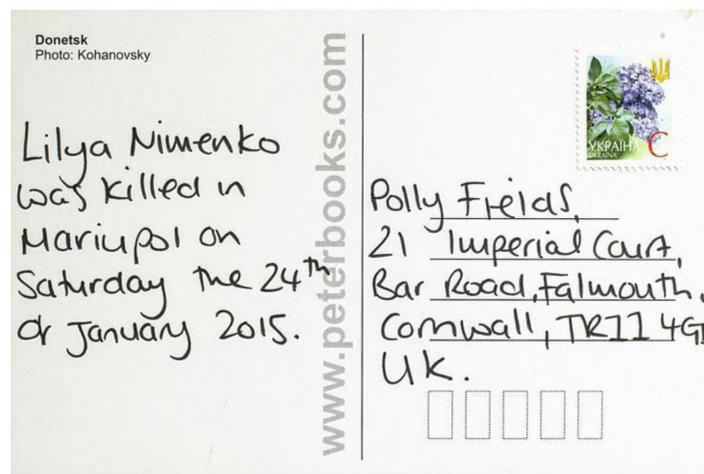


Fig 1. Lilya Nimenko postcard (Anastasia Taylor-Lind). 'Welcome to Donetsk' project. Courtesy of Anastasia Taylor-Lind. <https://www.instagram.com/p/7LJFr6gD-3/?utm_medium=share_sheet>.

Postcards have long been linked to memory formation, sold primarily as ‘souvenirs’, a term itself deriving from the French verb *souvenir* (to remember). The mnemonic role of postcards is particularly worth discussing with regard to the cultural output of places where memory is contested, and which have undergone and continue to undergo upheaval resulting from conflict. This is the case of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, often referred to collectively as ‘Donbas’.¹ Although parts of these regions have been occupied by or engaged in conflict with Russia since 2014, their difficult relationship with memory and trauma long predates that.

Not long after the start of the conflict, photojournalist Anastasia Taylor-Lind came across a bundle of postcards in a post office in Sloviansk, Donbas, with the words ‘Welcome to Donetsk’ emblazoned across idyllic images of the city. Moved by the juxtaposition of the war surrounding her and the close resemblance of the photographs to her British hometown, Taylor-Lind was prompted to entirely reconsider how places at war should be depicted. Together with Donbas-born Alisa Sopova, Taylor-Lind set up a project entitled ‘Welcome to Donetsk’, in which they sent thousands of postcards from Donbas to homes around the globe. Each one bore a handwritten note stating the name of a victim of the conflict, and the circumstances of their death. Their project has led to the creation of a comprehensive list of victims from all sides of the war, with Taylor-Lind stating her intention to continue documenting these names until the end of the war.²

Turning to an entirely different medium, postcards also play a significant role in prompting discussions of memory in Serhiy Zhadan’s 2010 novel *Voroshilovgrad*, centred on Donbas after independence. The novel’s protagonist, Herman, recalls speaking about postcards of the city of Voroshilovgrad (now Luhansk) in his German class during the Soviet era, but struggles to reconcile that memory with a present in which it seems incongruous: ‘I never went to Voroshilovgrad, either. And now there’s no such thing as Voroshilovgrad.’³ Later in the novel, Olga, an accountant from Herman’s hometown, echoes this sentiment of detachment from one’s own past when her discovery of a collection of such postcards brings back memories of sending them to German pen pals. This prompts a reflection building on that of Herman. She voices a struggle to believe one’s own memories: ‘there’s no such city as Voroshilovgrad anymore, and the boy from Dresden doesn’t write me anymore, and it’s like none of that even happened, or it wasn’t even part of my life.’⁴

Despite the differences in genre—one draws on real-life events, and the other is fiction—the approaches of the two projects to postcards and their mnemonic value have significant parallels. It is therefore worth exploring further how the two converge in their visions of Donbas. They converge firstly regarding the interaction between postcards, naming practices, and memory formation. They also converge on the relationship of postcards to realities past and present, and the perception of postcards as places.

1 The name ‘Donbas’ is used here for concision, although its usage remains contested. Dmytro Kravchenko, ‘Павло Жебрівський: «Донбас — це совковий ідеологічний топонім»’, *Український Тиждень* (7 December 2017) <<https://tyzhden.ua/Society/205344>> accessed 9 March 2021.

2 Anastasia Taylor-Lind, ‘War is personal: how social media brings home news of faraway conflicts’ (2015) 69(4) *Nieman Reports* 16, 23.

3 Serhiy Zhadan, *Voroshilovgrad* (Isaac Stackhouse and Reilly Costigan-Humes trs, Deep Vellum Publishing 2016) 182.

4 *ibid* 434–35.

One factor which contributed to starting ‘Welcome to Donetsk’ was Taylor-Lind’s increasing awareness of how conventional war photography casts people living through conflict as ‘characters from a war story’—⁵victims, war dead, combatants—rather than people not so different from the viewer. ‘Welcome to Donetsk’ departs from this convention, writing out the names of those who have died, regardless of whether they were a civilian, combatant, or journalist, and regardless of nationality or political views. The process of naming creates a juxtaposition against the mass-produced postcard. The impact of which is confirmed by the emotional reaction of the postcards’ recipients, many of whom decided to commemorate the person named in their postcard, for example by holding small memorials.⁶ Uniting pre-war photos of the region with the names of real people therefore challenges the ‘othering’ of places of war and their inhabitants by underscoring the deeply personal impact of war.

For Zhadan, postcards also provide an opportunity to explore the importance of naming in memory. Herman’s memory of postcards depicting the Voroshilovgrad of his adolescence appears to represent a dichotomy: ‘That city doesn’t even exist anymore. It’s called Luhansk now.’⁷ This suggests that renaming a place is tantamount to replacing it, in the most literal sense of the word: *re-placing*. Memories are cut adrift, with no tangible referent. As noted by Pavlo Shopin, ‘It is a signifier without a signified.’⁸ Indeed, Luhansk has not had a linear history, instead experiencing multiple repetitions: the city’s name was changed no fewer than four times in the twentieth century, finally returning to ‘Luhansk’ in 1990.⁹ Herman therefore conveys the sense of illegitimacy and shame accompanying memories from former regimes, a sentiment against which the author appears to push back. Zhadan’s naming the novel ‘*Voroshilovgrad*’, despite it not being set there, reflects Herman’s experience of having memories ‘of a place which he has never visited. Zhadan’s focus on naming thus tackles the difficult line between ‘denouncing a regime and devaluing the lives lived under it’,¹⁰ suggesting that naming is significant not only in confirming the existence of a place, but also in legitimising the existence and memories of those who live in its vicinity.

The idea that a place ‘doesn’t exist anymore’, however, goes beyond naming. Such assertions problematise the relationship between past and present. Political changes can suddenly, prematurely transform a postcard from a contemporary vision of a place, into a piece of archive material. In ‘Welcome to Donetsk’, this clash in perceptions is epitomised by the two sides of the postcard, which represent two realities simultaneously—war and peace—but only one place. In this way, the project does not simply tell the same story twice on the two sides of the card, but instead suggests that radically different perceptions of a place must be acknowledged as parts of the same story. In *Voroshilovgrad*, in contrast, the postcards that Olga finds are incomplete, never having been written or sent, and therefore seemingly bear only one ‘side’ of the story. Prematurely

5 Taylor-Lind (n 2) 19.

6 HURI, ‘WelcomeToDonetsk: Photojournalist Anastasia Taylor-Lind Presents Her Work at HURI’ <<https://huri.harvard.edu/news/welcometodonetsk-photojournalist-anastasia-taylor-lind-presents-her-work-huri>> accessed 22 February 2021.

7 Zhadan (n 3) 181.

8 Pavlo Shopin, ‘Voroshilovgrad Lost: Memory and Identity in a Novel by Serhiy Zhadan’ (2013) 57(3) *The Slavic and East European Journal* 372, 377.

9 Tanya Zaharchenko, ‘While the Ox Is Still Alive: Memory and Emptiness in Serhiy Zhadan’s *Voroshilovgrad*’ (2013) 55(1–2) *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 45, 52.

10 *ibid* 66.

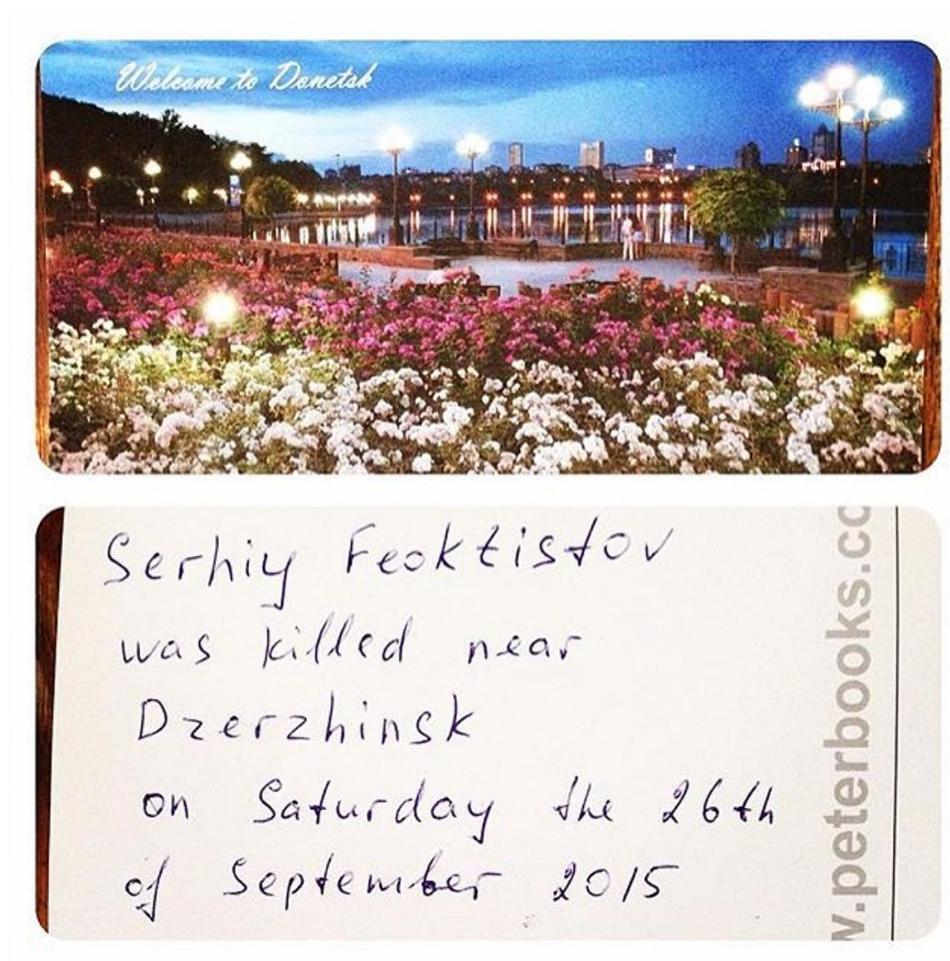


Fig 2. Serhiy Feoktistov postcard (Anastasia Taylor-Lind). 'Welcome to Donetsk' project. Courtesy of Anastasia Taylor-Lind. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BAw_jsmAD44/?utm_medium=share_sheet>.

cut off from fulfilling their purpose, these postcards share a certain parallel with the sudden renaming of the city, and with Herman's sense of incompleteness. Nevertheless, Zhadan subverts any sense of unfulfilment, as the unwritten side of the postcard demonstrates that the card is intended for its owner alone. The unwritten side can thus be interpreted as symbolising the characters' full ownership of their memories, reaffirming the legitimacy of individual perceptions of the past, without moulding them to the expectations of anyone else.

This is to say not that either use of postcards engages explicitly with the reality of place, but quite the opposite. In *Voroshilovgrad*, for example, characters admit to using postcards to project a desired view of a place. Olga recalls how she would 'pick out the ones with tons of flowers because I wanted him [a German pen pal] to think that Voroshilovgrad was a fun city.'¹¹ This is by no means unusual. Daniel Reynolds notes the tendency for postcards to depict 'clichéd scenic views in garishly enhanced colours.'¹² It can therefore be suggested that postcards create a certain complicity between sender and recipient, with both being aware of their shared part-imagining of place. It can therefore be useful to consider why postcards are

chosen over letters by both Taylor-Lind and Zhadan. Through the medium of postcards, the sender brings the recipient within the paradigms of a mutually imagined reality. Jacques Derrida observed that in a postcard image 'one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far',¹³ and this underlines how the medium of postcards, with the intersection of decontextualised images and a written message, lends itself to an almost floating, quasi-imagining of place. Taylor-Lind's project speaks to a blurring of boundaries between the real and imagined since, although she specifically chose postcards of pre-war Donbas, these too become subject to imagination, as the basis of those images no longer exists in the state in which it is depicted. Whereas Olga chose postcards based on their novelty, Taylor-Lind chose them based on their banality, in order to evoke greater empathy on the part of the recipient. She explained: 'In these cards Donetsk looks like an ordinary, peaceful European city, like anyone's hometown, like my hometown.'¹⁴ This challenges the binaries of the imagined and real, the pre-war and 'war-torn', emphasising that places designated as 'warzones' were not always so, and that those living in such places are not so different from the postcards' recipients. Thus, although

11 Zhadan (n 3) 434.

12 Daniel P Reynolds, *Postcards from Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance* (New York University Press 2018) 2.

13 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and beyond* (Alan Bass tr, University of Chicago Press 1987) 13.

14 Taylor-Lind (n 2) 19.

in both Taylor-Lind's project and Zhadan's novel, postcards are reminders of the past, the images of the past on postcards engage with the adaptation and part-imagination of reality, suggesting that this is always part of the experience of a place, and that no single perception of a place is more valid than another.

Yet postcards are not simply valued for their relation to memories of a place. They become places in their own right. In *Voroshilovgrad*, for instance, postcards are a mnemonic tool for recalling memories associated with a place and time, rather than for remembering the place itself. This is epitomised by Herman recollecting that he 'never went to Voroshilovgrad',¹⁵ and yet that his memory of it stems from the postcards which he 'talked about ... in German for years',¹⁶ demonstrating that memories linked to postcards are only partially connected to place. Olga similarly declares, 'Maybe these pictures are my past',¹⁷ suggesting that postcards are valued more for the memories they evoke and help to preserve than for the places they depict. In this way, Zhadan's depiction of postcards resonates with Pierre Nora's theory of 'lieux de mémoire' ('sites of memory'), 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself.'¹⁸ The memories contained within postcards render them places themselves—sites of memory—autonomous but not unrelated to history. This is echoed on the metanarrative level, with the reader 'remembering' Voroshilovgrad as a result of the book's name despite never having been there, and despite the novel not even being set there. Not dissimilarly, Taylor-Lind's project of remembrance ultimately promotes the production of memory for a recipient who did not experience that place or know that person. Both Zhadan and Taylor-Lind arguably encourage the creation, and not just the preservation, of what could be termed 'vicarious memory'. Their works therefore portray postcards as an aid not only against forgetting one's own memories, but also against forgetting the memories of others.

The communicative aspect of postcards differs between the two, however. In 'Welcome to Donetsk', the reaction of the recipients is arguably the most important element of the project, helping to provoke empathy for those in faraway conflicts. As Taylor-Lind notes, the postcards are only half of the story: 'what they do is provide a catalyst for research, engagement, and conversation within foreign homes.'¹⁹ Zhadan, conversely, has a greater focus on unsent postcards, illustrated when Olga notes, 'I would just keep all the other ones ... And I just found them. A whole stack of them.'²⁰ Kept almost like an unintentional private archive, and found many years later, they could be interpreted as being unfinished and abortive, telling a story with no satisfactory ending, echoing the characters' feeling of sudden severance from their past at the fall of the Soviet Union. It could appear that the postcards have been robbed of their purpose. However, it soon becomes clear that, for Zhadan's characters, not only are postcards for their recipients, but their function as 'lieux de mémoire' also aids their original owners. Olga's discovery of postcards from her past exemplifies this. It prompts not only recollections, but also defiance, and determination to acknowledge memories despite the pressures of collective memory. She states that these memories are 'Something they took away from me and forced me to forget. But I haven't forgotten.'²¹ In this way, postcards lend tangibility to memory, and the way in which they can be found after

many years, as happens in Olga's case, provides a material parallel to the process of remembering.

Taylor-Lind, on the other hand, emphasises that such 'lieux de mémoire' are not only for those who hold memories related to that past. The communicative aspect of postcards can transform postcards into agents of vicarious memory for those detached from, for example, Donbas. 'Welcome to Donetsk' therefore turns postcards into mobile 'lieux de mémoire', sites of remembrance which are almost tombstones for the victims of the war. Paradoxically, the mobility of postcards makes them more permanent, when there is both a physical and ontological threat to many parts of Donbas, and thus also to cemeteries and sites of remembrance. The differing uses of postcards as 'lieux de mémoire' between Taylor-Lind and Zhadan therefore demonstrates that they are not only for those who battle with their own memories, but also for those who wish to remember something, or rather someone, that they never met.

Literature, real-life conflict, and memory intersect in these two examples of cultural production from Donbas, to demonstrate that postcards can be not only tools in remembering, but also in remembrance, through their status as 'lieux de mémoire'. These representations and uses of postcards hint that the relationship between postcard and place is highly complex. The 'place' depicted is often more a result of desired projections of imagination than of lived reality, and postcards become places of memory of their own, independent from the unfolding of history. Comparing the two projects demonstrates the value of postcards in memory, not only in the conventional communicative form, but also for the owner of the unsent postcard. Zhadan in particular suggests that detachment from places and from one's own memories that is due to sudden historical divides does not have to result in forgetting such memories. Taylor-Lind goes beyond this, using postcards as places of *remembrance*, creating forms of vicarious memory for the recipients.

Donbas is no stranger to changes in identity and in the status of memories, and this is set to be the case at least for the near future. However, Zhadan and Taylor-Lind use postcards to demonstrate a defiance to the fragility of memory in the region, and to underscore that inhabitants' memories do not have to be tainted by the actions of a regime. Therefore, although both projects problematise the interplay of memory and place when place can no longer be relied upon as a tangible mnemonic referent, they ultimately converge in their shared use of postcards to represent possibilities for accepting the past, and for empathising with the experiences of others.

15 Zhadan (n 3) 182.

16 *ibid* 181.

17 *ibid* 435.

18 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire' (1989) 26 *Representations* 7, 7.

19 Taylor-Lind (n 2) 22.

20 Zhadan (n 3) 434.

21 *ibid* 435.