A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON ALEKSANDR DEINEKA'S DONBAS IMAGES

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses both well-known and unfamiliar paintings, illustrations and mosaics depicting the Ukrainian Donbas region by the Socialist Realist artist Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969). Having been received, because of his modernism, rather sympathetically in the West, Deineka produced an array of Donbas images that can be employed as a starting point for analysing Soviet imperial ideology in art. The case of Deineka shows the extent of Soviet imperial and colonial strategies in regard to nations that were subjected to Moscow's rule, and that even Deineka, who is considered as a critical Socialist Realist, was one of the most powerful ideologues of Soviet colonial imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Socialist Realism; Aleksandr Deineka; Postcolonial; Imperialism; Colonialism; Soviet Union; Donbas; Painting; Mosaic; Posters; Illustration.

I. Introduction

Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969) is one of the very few Socialist Realist artists who has been received sympathetically in Anglo-American and western European art history. However, one of his most well-known paintings has taken on a startling new significance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the war in the Donbas since 2014: *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* (1935). The painting depicts naked people rushing out of water in bright sunlight [Fig. 1]. It highlights the contrast between the idyllic activity of playing ball games in water during free time on a sunny day, and hard and dirty work that, for a moment, is left behind. The contrast is dramatized in Deineka's painting by the lighting conditions: the sun, at its zenith, throws stark shadows on the coal mine and railway line with a train in the background, which is completely silhouetted and thus black. The young men are now clean, but the black silhouettes of their figures in the water seem to remind us that they are coal miners. That this play with contrast is not incidental can be presumed because Deineka's earlier painting, *At Noon* (1932), which has a very similar composition, albeit with bathing women, contains neither stark light contrasts nor the coal mines [Fig. 2]. *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* is said to be the result of Deineka's *kommandirovka* (work trip) to the Donbas region in July 1935.[1] Yet neither the main concept of the composition nor the bodies come from Donbas. According to the Soviet Deineka specialist Vladimir Petrovich Sysoev, this painting is based on a drawing, *Landscape with Train* [Fig. 3], that Deineka made in 1931, and a bathing scene, pasted onto this landscape, derived from a photograph that Deineka took in the early autumn of 1932, which Sysoev found in Deineka's estate: young people bathing in a river near Deineka's Russian hometown Kursk, on the border to Ukraine.[2]

Deineka is known for breaking up the smooth surface of political reality that was so prevalent in Socialist Realism. The history of the composition *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* suggests that this painting comes from a rather unpolitical inspiration: a sketch of the countryside and a scene of leisure time from his hometown. It does not appear to conform to overtly Stalinist imagery, which distinguishes it from most Socialist Realism. But *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* does embody Stalinist ideology. Coal mining in the Donbas was of critical importance for the early Soviet Union, and the Bolsheviks took over and expanded the coal-mining area in an often brutal way that can be and has been compared to imperial and colonial strategies. People from Russian provinces on the border to Ukraine went to the Donbas to work, and with them they took the context they needed

1 Christina Kiaer, Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 28, 2005, 336; Christina Kiaer, *Collective Body. Aleksandr Deineka at the Limit of Socialist Realism*, Chicago/London 2024, 191.

2 Vladimir P. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia*, Moscow 1989, 127–128.

[Fig. 1]
Aleksander Deineka, *Lunchbreak in the Donbas (Obedennyi pereryv na Donbasse)*, 1935, oil on canvas, 149.5 × 248.5 cm, Riga, Latvian National Museum of Art, in: Wladimir Syssojew, *Alexander Deineka. Malerei, Graphik, Bildhauerkunst, Monumentalwerke und literarischer Nachlaß*, trans. Tatjana Patschkolina, Leningrad 1982, 111.

[Fig. 2]
Aleksandr Deineka, *At Noon (V polden')*, 1932, oil on canvas, 59.5 × 80 cm, St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum, in: *Müde Helden. Ferdinand Hodler, Aleksandr Dejneka, Neo Rauch* (exh. cat. Hamburg, Kunsthalle Hamburg), ed. by Hubertus Gaßner, Munich 2012, 245.

[Fig. 3]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Landscape with Train (Peizazh s poezdom)*, 1931, pastel on paper, 23 × 32.5 cm, Deineka estate, in: Syssojew, Alexander Deineka, 82.

to settle there. Deineka effectively pasted the people from Kursk into the Donbas. This strategy mimics the Soviet imperial strategy of sending workers to the Donbas and propagates an ideological depiction of the contented Soviet worker.

Despite the Bolshevik's self-proclamation at the beginning of the 20th century of being anti-imperialist, and regardless of Soviet support for anti- and postcolonial movements in the 1960s, the question of continuity between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union has remained current. In her *Empire of Nations* (2005) Francine Hirsch thematizes the role and significance of the Soviet State Colonization Research Institute (Goskolonit).[3] Founded in 1922 it consisted of historians, geographers and economists not only of the former Russian Empire, but also of the British Empire, as well as experts of German colonization. The institute's function was to produce a positive conceptual framework for colonization in contrast to Western forms, and to identify lands that could be colonized in a "Soviet way", meaning economic development with an enlightenment agenda. Furthermore, its tasks included planning railroads and carrying out demographical research with the view to implementing resettlement (*pereselenie*).[4] As they insisted that Soviet *kolonizatsia* was to be different from the former *kolonizatorstvo* (exploitation), they also claimed to be anti-imperial.[5] However, historians tend to agree that the Soviet Union was using strategies that can be considered as imperial.[6] Promoting certain universal and normative values was a key imperial strategy of the Soviet Union and culture played a key role in this. Furthermore, visual representation was the main place where, for the people, the empire became reality.[7]

3
Cf. Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, NY/London 2005.

4
Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Kolonizatsionnogo Nauchno-Issledovatel'skogo Instituta 1, 1924. On the relation of Goskolonit's resettlement policies to the deportations, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Leslie Page Moch, *Broad Is My Native Land. Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia's Twentieth Century*, Ithaca, NY/London 2014.

5
A. A. Iarilov, Puti kolonizatsionnogo stroitel'stva, in: *Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Kolonizatsionnogo Nauchno-Issledovatel'skogo Instituta* 1, 1924, 3–8; and ibid., 338.

6
Hirsch, Empire of Nations; Uwe Halbach, *Das Sowjetische Vielvölkerimperium. Nationalitätenpolitik und nationale Frage*, Mannheim 1992; Andreas Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder. Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 2017, 170–171.

7
Cf. Malte Rolf, Imperium und Regionalität. Sportparaden und regionale Feste im Stalinismus, in: *Osteuropa* 56/5, 2006, 99–122; see also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983. Specifically on the relation between landscape, the Soviet construction of space and power, see Klaus Gestwa, Sowjetische Landschaften als Panorama von Macht und Ohnmacht. Historische Spurensuche auf den 'Großbauten des Kommunismus' und in dörflicher Idylle, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 11/1, 2003, 72–100; Thomas Lahusen, The Russian Far East after Landscape. A Photoessay, in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 98, 1999, 711–724; Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (eds.), *The Landscape of Stalinism. The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, Washington 2003.

However, critical analyses related to imperial or colonial strategies in Soviet art are still rare in art history.[8] Unlike Central Asia, the Donbas does not appear as an obvious object of Soviet colonization, yet the necessity to colonize it was articulated not only in the first journal issue of Goskolonit,[9] but also directly and indirectly in various visual representations of the Donbas.

The Donbas is not like any other subject matter in Soviet iconography. Donbas was the so-called "shop window of socialism", an industrial region with tremendous economic and cultural significance. At the 11th Party Congress in 1922 Lenin said, "the Donets Basin is not an ordinary district, but a vital one, without which socialist construction would simply remain a pious wish."[10] Donbas was central for the realization of the first Five-Year Plan. It was also the cradle of the Stakhanovite movement, personified by the coal miner from the Russian city Orel, Alexey Stakhanov, who became a hero in one of Donbas's coal mines when, in August 1935, he hewed 102 tons of coal – fourteen times his usual average.[11]

The theme of the Donbas recurred throughout all the stages of Deineka's work from 1924 to 1964, and in all the forms of media that he used, such as drawings for magazines, prints, posters, children's book illustrations, painting and mosaic. We can effectively understand his oeuvre just by analysing his works that relate thematically to the Donbas. In these works, we can discover the political narratives around the Donbas that existed in the Soviet Union, and how Deineka visualized them in particular pictures. The Donbas was constitutive of the imagery of the Soviet Union on various levels. Studying newspaper articles of the *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass*, the main newspaper of the Donetsk Party regional committee (*obkom*) from 1937 to 1941 and other sources, Tanja Penter has demonstrated that a political campaign to produce an image of the Donbas as the socialist flagship region harnessed the entirety of cultural production, such as films, photo-essays, newspaper articles, liter-

8
This is implicitly the case for Aliya Abykayeva-Tiesenhausen, *Central Asia in Art. From Soviet Orientalism to the New Republics*, London/New York 2016; Michael Kunichika, The Camel and the Caboose. Viktor Shklovsky's *Turksib* and the Pedagogy of Uneven Development, in: Marina Balina and Sergei Oushakine (eds.), *The Pedagogy of Images*, Toronto 2021, 331–354.

9
Gosudarstvennyi Kolonizatsionnyi Nauchno-Issledovatel'skii Institut, ego zadachi, organizatsia i deiatel'nost', in: *Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Kolonizatsionnogo Nauchno-Issledovatel'skogo Instituta* 1, 1924, 309.

10
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Political Report of the C.C., R.C.P. (B.) March 27, in: David Skvirsky and George Hanna (eds./trans.), *Lenin's Collected Works* 33, Moscow 1966, 263–309, here 300.

11
Cf. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941*, Cambridge 1988, 66–98.

ature, illustrations, posters etc.[12] Referring to Malte Rolf, Penter suggests that we could understand the representation and (socialist) self-representation of the Donbas in terms of the tension between the regions and the centre, between region building and an imperial *mise-en-scène*.[13] Rolf argues that the sports parade was a particularly relevant and effective representational tool of the imperial strategy, because it demonstrated the unity of all nations of the Soviet Union through the sports uniform. As an attempt to counter this, the regions also developed strategies of "region building", which were oriented towards producing emotional bonds within the new socialist elites.[14]

That "region building" was present in the Donbas is argued in several recent publications that deal with the historical and contemporary self-image of the region.[15] The focus of this article, however, will be how the Donbas was ideologically and visually conceived *in Moscow*, in the centre of the Soviet Union. On August 29, 1935 *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass* reported on Deineka's arrival in the region.[16] About forty other artists were also sent to the Donbas in 1935.[17] It was not Deineka's first work trip there. He travelled there in 1924 and produced drawings and sketches that served his compositions for decades to come. Deineka thus participated in the building of the image of the "shop window" rather than regional self-staging, even though some aspects of the latter might have manifested in his work.

In the Western secondary literature Socialist Realism is typically understood to have emerged and developed in a totalitarian state where artists had little or no freedom and were obligated to propagate state ideology. Christina Kiaer's essay "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s" (2005) was one of the most significant attempts to revise the image of Deineka's work by arguing that his Socialist Realism is *not* ideological for several reasons. His modernist aesthetic – which revolves around reduced and montage-like compositions – and his choice of subject matter make him, according to Kiaer, stand out

12
Tanja Penter, Der „neue sozialistische Donbass" und der Aufstieg des Bergmanns zur kulturellen Leitfigur, in: *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 37, 2007, 79–95 (special issue: *Sowjetische Bergleute und Industriearbeiter. Neue Forschungen*); Tanja Penter, *Kohle für Stalin und Hitler. Arbeiten und Leben im Donbass 1929–1953*, Essen 2010.

13
Penter, Der „neue sozialistische Donbass", 81.

14
Cf. Rolf, Imperium und Regionalität, 114.

15
Victoria Donovan and Darya Tsymbalyuk, Strange and Twisted Love, in: *Region* 10, 2021, 109–136; Oksana Myshlovska and Ulrich Schmid (eds.), *Regionalism without Regions. Reconceptualizing Ukraine's Heterogeneity*, Budapest 2019.

16
Deineka. Zhivopis' (exh. cat. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery), ed. by Tatiana Iudkevich, Moscow 2010, 99 (13 September 2024).

17
Cf. Matthew Coullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, New Haven, CT/London 1998.

from all the ideological kitsch of Socialist Realism. The combination of depictions of reduced, clean and modern workplaces populated by fairy-like barefoot women, as in the most famous painting *Textile Workers* (1927), and his foregrounding of the geometrical and abstract shapes of industry with effortlessly working coal miners, as in his early magazine illustrations, made Deineka's work appear to contribute to a modernist socialist aesthetic. Here socialism is depicted as a reality in becoming, where workers are engaged in modern forms of industry, and where socialist collectivity is effortlessly creative. With these important features Kiaer is able to align Deineka with the tradition of the avant-garde – socialist in content and modernist in form. For Kiaer, "revolutionary modernist art", such as Deineka's, is "inherent[ly] internationali[st]" and "differed starkly from the totalitarian model", because it is presumed that its pictorial ambivalence produces an open-endedness of meaning.[18]

In Kiaer's recent monograph on Deineka, *Collective Body* (2024), the question debated by Deineka's peers, namely whether Deineka is formalist or socialist, has been overtaken by the question of whether he is an artist of the Putin era. Kiaer concedes that he could be appropriated as the "perfect Russian artist for the Putin era";[19] however, she adds that Deineka also represents something that Putin tries to "excise" from Russia's "nationalist history", namely the 1917 Revolution. As in her first article on Deineka, here too she tries to elaborate one aspect of Deineka that remained un-subsumable by the Soviet state ideology. In Kiaer's article from 2005, it is Deineka's modernist technique that resisted Socialist Realism; today she finds his true legacy in representing the Revolution, which she sees as resisting "Russian misuse of Soviet cultural history to defend its imperialist war".[20] What remains unaddressed in both cases is the imperialist and colonialist character of both Deineka's modernism and the Bolshevik Revolution. Addressing these is crucial to the critique of contemporary Russian imperialism and its appropriation of Deineka.[21]

18
Kiaer, Collective Body, ix and 164. In this, Kiaer broadly follows an influential politicized reading of modernism. This reading can be found in several authors associated with the journal *October*, such as Rosalind Krauss or Benjamin Buchloh.

19
Ibid., iix.

20
Ibid., x.

21
The Deineka Museum in Kursk (*Kurskayia kartinnaia galereia imeni A.A. Deineki*), on the border to Ukraine, recently published the online exhibition *Deineka's Crimean Plans* (5 August 2024). The museum has existed since 1935 and holds painting, sculpture and prints by Russian and international artists of the 18th to 20th centuries; the collection's activities focus on artists that were associated with Kursk, such as Deineka. "Deineka's Crimean Plans" shows pencil-on-paper sketches from his visit to Sevastopol in 1934. "Crimea", it says on the website, "and especially Sevastopol, was a special place for Deineka, where, it seems, dreams of a beautiful 'tomorrow', of a sunny paradise, of a utopian 'golden age', of a happy country acquired tangible outlines" (trans. M. G.). This is provocative and given the Russian occupation of Crimea and the war, can be interpreted as an attempt to justify the Russian aggression. The title of the exhibition is also problematic, because the

In the Russophone secondary literature on Deineka, the Soviet art historian Vladimir Petrovich Sysoev, who produced an extensive biography of Deineka and several monographs,[22] can be considered as a significant expert. He elaborated the most detailed and convincing account of Deineka and the counter-totalitarian argument already in the 1970s – an interpretation of Deineka as the most sophisticated, advanced and uncompromisingly modern artist within Socialist Realism. Sysoev interprets Deineka's pictorial technique as particularly vivid and convincing, allowing the viewer to imagine the desired socialist society and the new material life.[23] Furthermore, Sysoev interprets the reduced and "clean" character of Deineka's depictions as expressing the purposefulness of labour or work.[24] This interpretation generally corresponds to and predates Kiaer's argument. Deineka's contemporaries had noticed and evaluated his modernism as a fact, that he never fully departed from his early poster-making techniques and thus his oil paintings always looked a bit like posters or magazine illustrations: "The peculiarity of A. Deineka's paintings lies in the fact that his graphic techniques are almost entirely transferred into painting."[25] Sysoev takes this further by analysing the interrelations between Deineka's works and sketches, making his modernism-argument even more convincing. Interestingly, Sysoev's analysis not only brings out Deineka's modernist aspect, but also exposes an imperial subtext in the montage technique and especially in regard to his landscape paintings. Sysoev points out that Deineka's choice of motifs and figures from various geographical places and his rearrangement and reconfiguration of these is fundamentally political and aims at expressing the artist's patriotism for the Soviet Union.[26] However, Sysoev adopts Deineka's patriotism. In his accounts, and also in Deineka's own writing, we find expressions of imperial pride in being a Soviet citizen, and living and working in a country which barely knows its limits.

The main argument of this essay is that Deineka's thematic works on the Donbas present an imperial art, which is not merely the result of the ideological content and context, but is also skil-

drawings in this notebook of Deineka are normally referred to as "Crimea Sketches" ("Iz Krymskikh zarisovok"), cf. Vladimir P. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka. Zhizn', iskusstvo, vremia. Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo*, Moscow 1989.

22
Two volumes in 1973/1974 that were translated into German and English; an updated edition *Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia* in 1989; and *Aleksandr Deineka*, Moscow 2010.

23
Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 40–42.

24
Ibid., 43.

25
"Своеобразие живописных работ А. Дейнеки заключается в том, что свои графические приёмы он почти полностью переносит в картину." F. S. Roginskaia, quoted in Deineka. Zhivopis' (trans. M. G.), 28.

26
Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 129.

fully reflected in their form – Deineka's compositional modernist technique. This article sets out to understand the imperialism in Deineka's work and to examine his achievements through a critical lens.

II. "Heart of Darkness". The Grand "Before 1917 and After" Narrative

The image of the Donbas before 1917 plays a key role in the constitution of the socialist image of the region, namely as a (contrast) foil. It forms the structure of the "before and after" narrative and functions for the Soviets as a justification of the conquest and exploitation of the Donbas. According to Tanja Penter, this "before and after" motif was often used in newspaper articles from the late 1930s and early 1940s.[27] The leading newspaper *Sotsialisticheskii Donbass* describes the development of the region from "a colony of foreign capital" to "the first all-Soviet boiler house" and to "a powerful fortress of socialism".[28] The significance of the "before and after" motif is also implicit in a novella for older children, which Deineka illustrated, namely *In the Bowels of the Earth* (*V nedrakh zemli*, 1929),[29] written by Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin. Deineka's illustrations for *In the Bowels of the Earth* have never been discussed or analysed in scholarly literature – neither in Western scholarship nor in the Soviet Union, but they are important because they depict the other, pre-socialist Donbas.

The images that Deineka produced here are of a very grim story about a twelve-year old boy, who works together with two adults in the coal mine: "Completely black, suffused with coal, for several weeks unwashed faces [...]."[30] The images illustrate appalling conditions that lead to tragic situations and experiences. One image depicts the daunting atmosphere of the coal miners waiting to be lowered into the mine; another portrays the gruelling postures the coal miners have to adopt, which apparently lead to one of the workers having a seizure. Following this, the coal mine threatens to collapse, and the boy has to rescue him. The following image depicts the boy's desperate attempt to save the coal miner. The last illustration shows the moment when the boy finds himself in safety, surrounded by people and by the "director", who speaks

27
Penter, Der „neue sozialistische Donbass", 81–82.

28
Quoted in ibid., 81.

29
Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/Leningrad, 1929 (13 September 2024). The novella first appeared in 1899 in the newspapers *Kievskoe slovo* (*Киевское слово*) in Kyiv and *Priazovskii krai* (*Приазовский край*) in Rostov-on-Don. In 1908 the novella was included in the collection *Detskie Rasskazy*.

30
Kuprin, V nedrakh zemli, 8 (trans. M. G.).

Russian with a strong, foreign accent, which is an allusion to the fact that only western Europeans occupied managerial positions [Fig. 4a, Fig. 4b, Fig. 4c, Fig. 4d, Fig. 4e and Fig. 4f].

The novella *In the Bowels of the Earth* is a sketch of the beginnings of industrialization in the Donbas, which has been extensively studied by US-American historian Charters Wynn in his influential book *Workers, Strikes and Pogroms* (1992).[31] He describes the double exploitation of the region, the role of foreigners and work immigrants and the social constitution of the region. In 1869 the Welsh industrialist John Hughes founded the "New Russian Society for Coal Mining, Steel and Railway Production". Prior to that he presented to the Russian government his plans to develop the region and received an agreement to do so. The settlement Iuzovka (Hughes'ovka) was named after him, which after 1917 developed into a city which since 1961 has been called Donetsk (between 1929 and 1961 the name was Stalino). Hughes put in operation modern ironworks and opened coal mines.[32] However, according to Wynn, it is only after the construction of the ("Ekaterinin") railway that Hughes's business became profitable and attracted more investment, from foreign capital. Broadly speaking, given the quantity of foreign investment, and the amount of European skilled labour and know-how, we could speak of this endeavour as a double colonization, where the profit was channelled to Europe and the coal and steel to Russia. Wynn and Penter both describe the division between the skilled workers, such as engineers and managers, who came predominantly from western Europe, and the unskilled workers, nearly all of whom were recruited from villages in the European part of Russia, many of them from the Kursk region.[33] The coal miners lived in settlements in the so-called *zemlianki*, in dugouts in the earth. Some lived in barracks, which were later built by the foreign companies, or rented their own accommodation.[34] The hygienically catastrophic living and appalling work conditions are well documented and thoroughly described in Wynn's and Penter's studies. The housings were "breeding grounds for contagious diseases"; "Even at mines with bathing facilities, miners lived coated with coal dust."[35] Life at the mines resembled forced-labour camps. Russian unskilled workers were paid three to four times less than their

31
Charters Wynn, *Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms. The Donbass-Dnepr Bend in Late Imperial Russia, 1870–1905*, Princeton, NJ 1992.

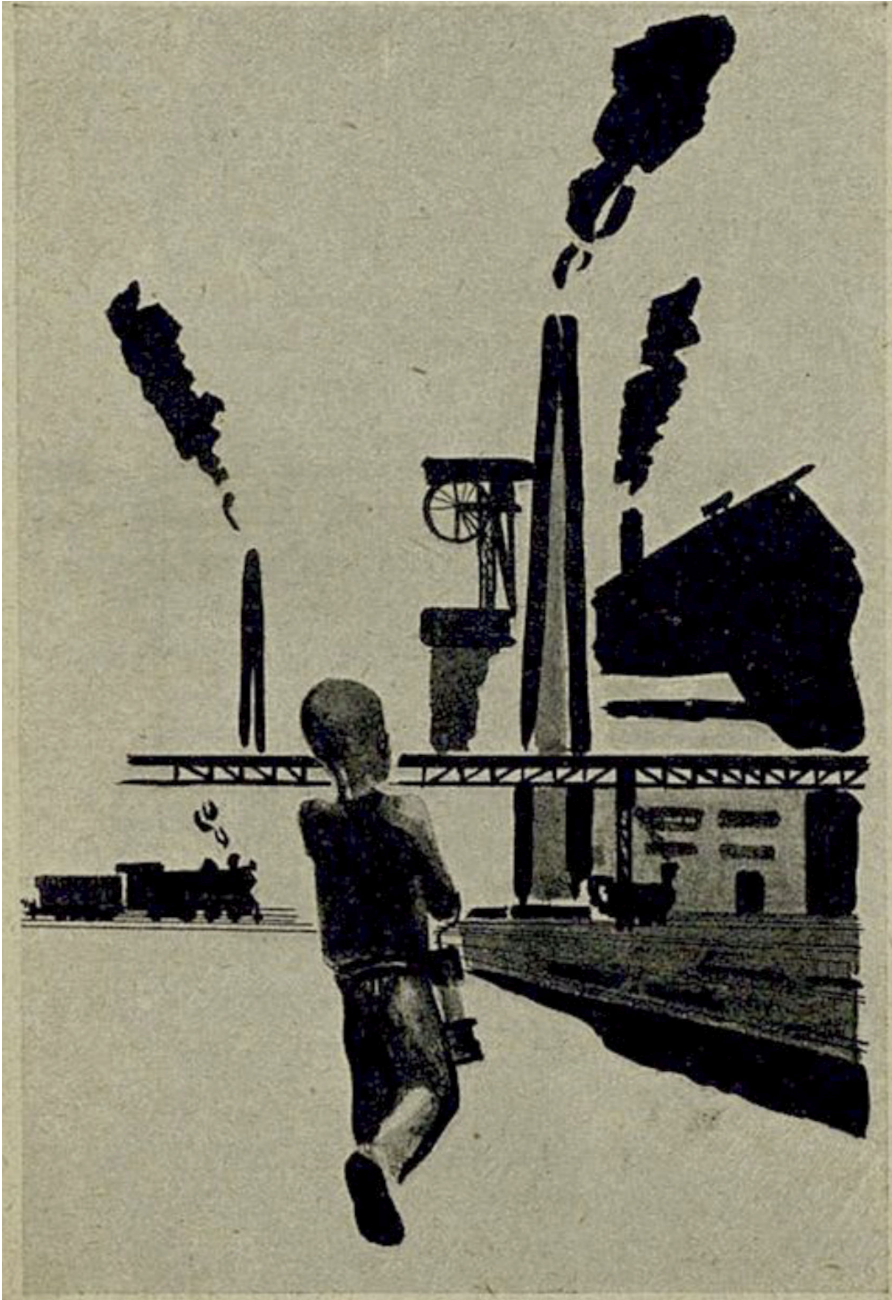
32
Ibid., 20.

33
Ibid. and Penter, Kohle für Stalin und Hitler.

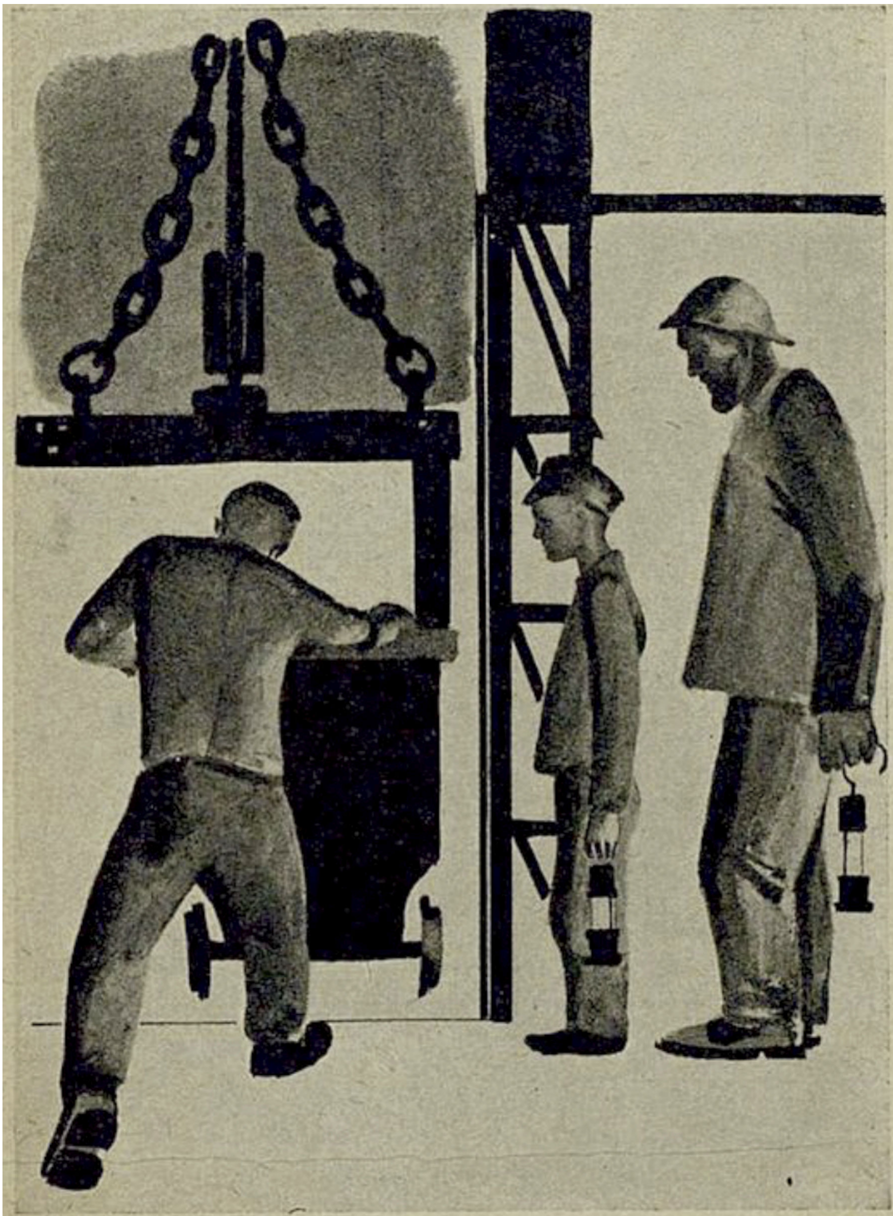
34
Wynn, Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms, 34.

35
Ibid., 36.

[Fig. 4a]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/ Leningrad 1929, cover (13 September 2024).

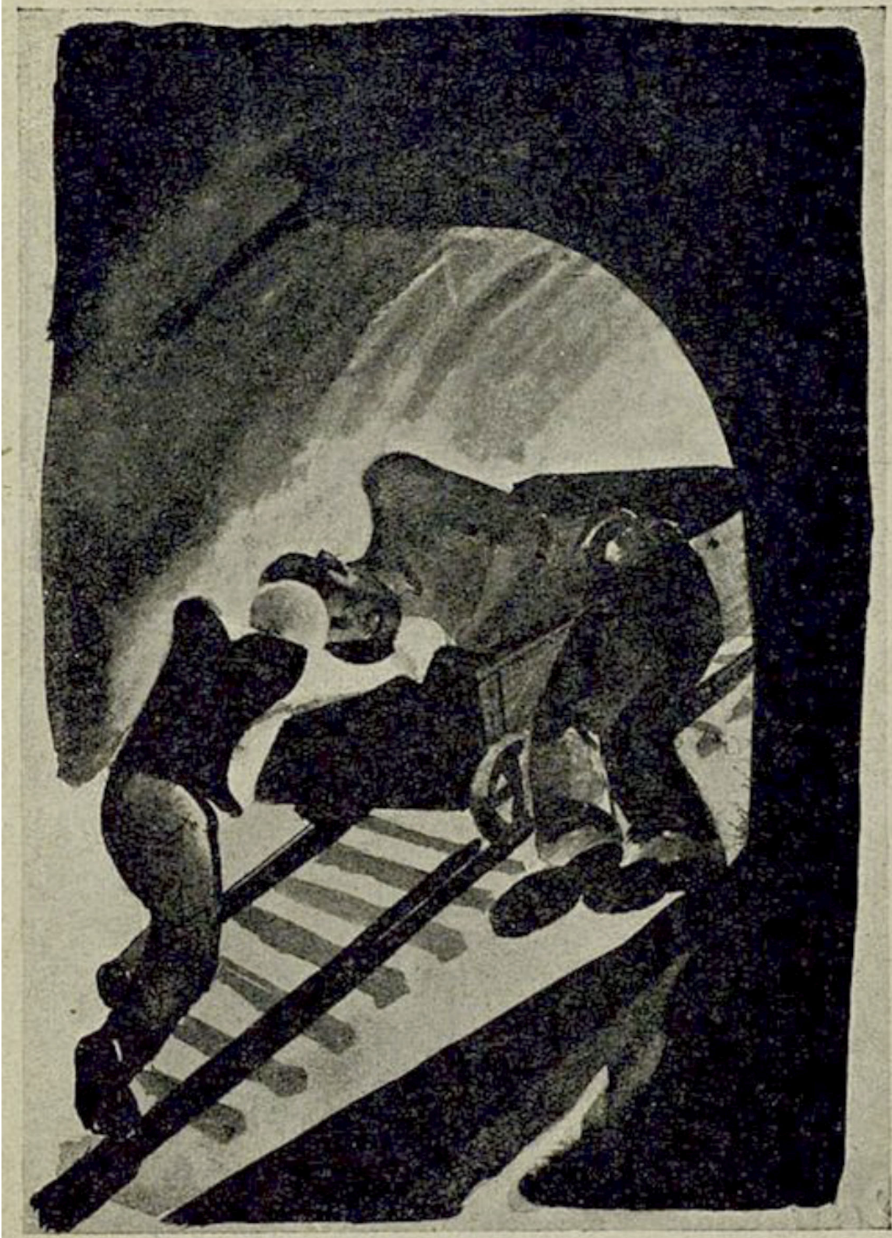


[Fig. 4b]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/ Leningrad 1929, 7 (13 September 2024).



[Fig. 4c]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/Leningrad 1929, 11 (13 September 2024).

[Fig. 4d]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/Leningrad 1929, 19 (13 September 2024).



[Fig. 4e]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/Leningrad 1929, 25 (13 September 2024).

[Fig. 4f]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration to Aleksandr Ivanovich Kuprin, *V nedrakh zemli*, Moscow/Leningrad 1929, 27 (13 September 2024).

foreign counterparts.[36] "Local [Ukrainian] peasants looked upon work in underground mines as convicts' labour", since historically the first miners were convicts exiled to work in the Donbas.[37]

This image of a hell on earth, suffered by the predominantly Russian coal miners, is contrasted by Wynn with the lives lived by chiefly western European elites:

> In Iuzovka, where the New Russia Company owned large mines as well as its steel mill, the director had two mansions: one downtown with beautiful gardens, and the other outside town, a new estate that was built on a large tract of wooded land.[38]

The mansions would come with horses, stables and brooks. Larger company colonies included social centres, usually named the English Club or the Engineers' Club, and, according to Wynn, could not be joined by workers.

After the February 1917 Revolution, Ukrainian nationalists, as many other nationalities of the peripheries, demanded independence from the fallen Russian Empire. But the Bolsheviks had other plans for them. Ukraine had been considered a Russian colony,[39] that Lenin wanted to "decolonize".[40] This meant giving it independence not as a bourgeois capitalist nation-state, but as a socialist state.[41] When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they immediately began to try to gain control in Ukraine. After the First All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets in Kharkiv, in December 1917, the Bolsheviks began a war against those Ukrainians who did not want to compromise on their idea of "decolonization" – which basically meant Sovietization. The war lasted until 1919 and many workers from the Donbas were recruited for the military operations of the Red Guards.

36
Ibid., 40.

37
Ibid., 42.

38
Ibid., 36.

39
"Украина окончательно превращается в 19 в. в русскую колонию, в которой русское правительство усиленно начинает искоренять всякие следы национальных особенностей, а украинский народ окончательно становится угнетенным, задавленным национальным гнетом и крепостным правом." *Malaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia* 9, ed. by N. L. Meshcheriakov, Moscow 1931, 116. "In the 19th century Ukraine is fully turning into a Russian colony, in which the Russian government vigorously begins to eradicate all traces of national characteristics, and the Ukrainian people become completely oppressed, crushed by national oppression and serfdom" (trans. M. G.).

40
Cf. Matthieu Renault's concept of Lenin's "decolonization": Matthieu Renault, *L'Empire de la Révolution. Lénine et les Musulmans de Russie*, Paris 2017.

41
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, The National Question in our Programme, in: *Iskra* 44, 1903 (8 August 2024).

Bolshevik posters were produced in relation to the military mobilization, explaining the reasons why the Bolsheviks needed East Ukraine to become "theirs". A poster by the famous artist Alexander Apsit (Latvian Aleksandrs Apsītis), with the title "Why do we need the Donets Basin?" (*Dlia chego nam nuzhen Donetskii Bassein*, 1919), explains the imperial motivations in an arrangement of six vignette-like illustrations accompanied by text [Fig. 5]. At the centre of the poster is a Red Army soldier, standing in a dominating pose above the Dnepr River, holding a weapon in his left hand and a flag of the Russian (!) Socialist Federational Soviet Republic (1917–1922) in his right. The text below the image reads:

> The Donets Basin has got to be ours! To the weapons, Red Army soldiers! To the weapons, workers and peasants! Let's crush the gangs of the Tsarist general Denikin, who in favour of the kulaks and landlords want to starve the revolutionary peasants and workers.

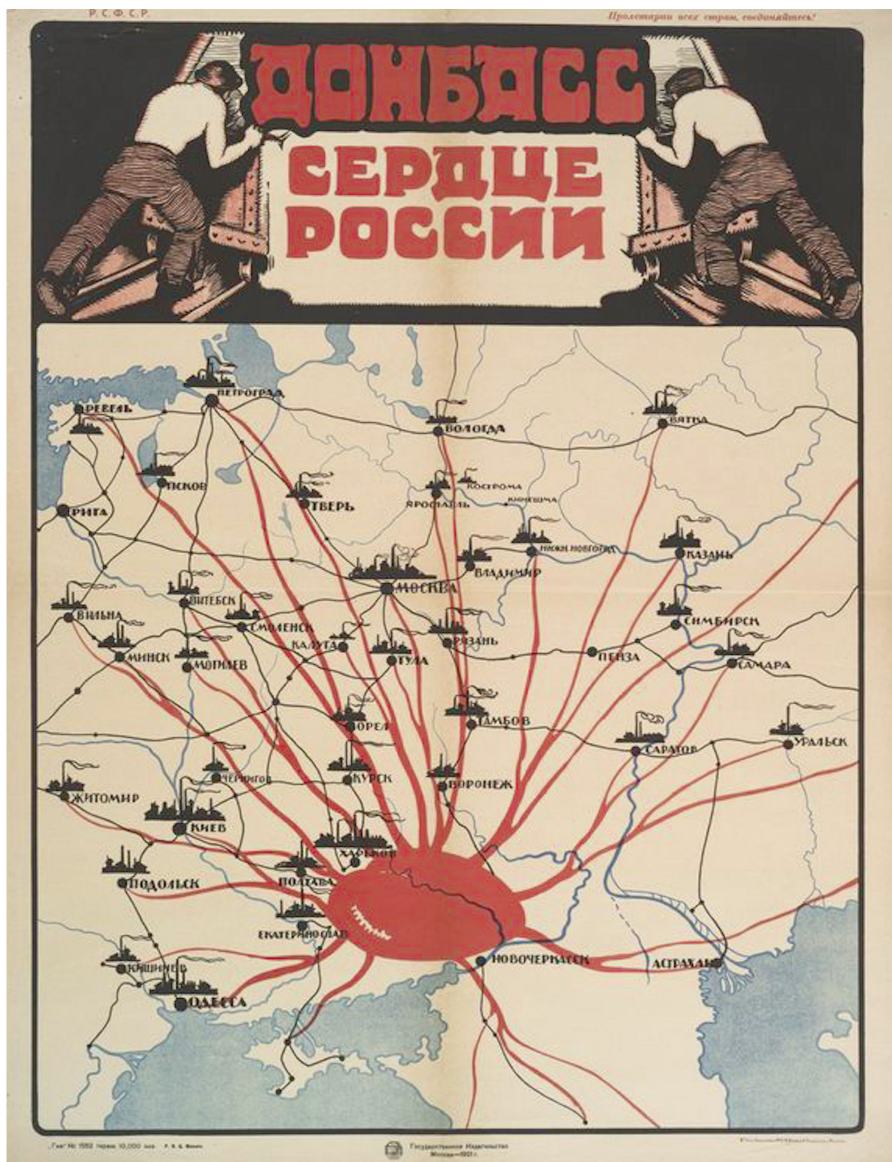
This explicitly military and imperial image, combined with the text in the centre and an illustration of Red Army soldiers reaching for weapons below, is framed by four "reasons" why the socialist Russian population would benefit from conquering the Donbas. The first vignette shows an industrial cityscape with fuming factory chimneys: "Once the Donets Basin is ours then we will have coal. Then all our factories and production sites will start working." This states that Donbas is not theirs yet, but it has to become theirs, in order for industrialization to progress. The next illustration and text yet again links livelihood and the possession of Donbas: "Once the Donets Basin is ours, we will have steel", explaining that steel is needed for the production of necessary tools and agricultural machinery.

Another famous poster is titled *Donbas – The Heart of Russia* (*Donbass – serdtse Rossii*, 1921) [Fig. 6]. It was issued when industry in the Donbas needed reanimation. Enormous efforts were required to revive industry prospects after the years of the Civil War. On the poster the region is represented as a heart, from which the veins lead to all the important factories and industrial areas, such as in Moscow, Minsk, Vologda etc. Why it is called the heart of Russia, and not the heart of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFRS) is not clear, but it demonstrates that powerful visual and literary images were used to promote renewed imperial attention to the region.

The "before and after" motif is also used in the Goskolonit publication of 1924. The central conceptual argument revolves around distinguishing the Soviet colonization strategy from those of Western and Russian empires, namely to colonize the lands on the borders of the RSFRS in a better, more cultured way.[42]

42 *Trudy Gosudarstvennogo Kolonizatsionnogo Nauchno-Issledovatel'skogo Instituta* 1, 1924.

[Fig. 5]
Aleksandr Petrovich Apsit (Aleksandrs Apsītis), *Why do we need the Donets Basin (Dlia chego nam nuzhen Donetskii Bassein?)*, 1919, colour lithography, 69 × 72 cm (varying sizes), in: Digital archive of the Lotman Institute Bochum (13 September 2024).



[Fig. 6]
Author unknown, *Donbas – the Heart of Russia (Donbass – serdtse Rossii)*, 1921, colour lithography, 54 × 70 cm, in: Rare Book Division, The New York Public Library, The New York Public Library Digital Collections (13 September 2024).

In the Bowels of the Earth was published in 1889 in the Russian Empire newspapers *Kievskoe Slovo* in Kyiv (1886–1905) and *Priazovskii Krai* in Rostov-on-Don, after Kurpin had lived in the Donbas in 1886. The novella was published four years after labour unrest had begun in the Donbas-Dnepr Bend due to poor health and work conditions and partly fuelled by anti-Semitism, which was sweeping the whole of Ukraine in the decades prior to this moment.[43] However, while Deineka was illustrating the novella for the first single-book edition in 1927, the context of this literary text changed. Now the grim illustrations of the ill, suffering and exploited workers are images of the Tsarist imperial past, which the Bolsheviks and Soviets succeeded to overcome. The publication of the book with those illustrations was meant to be read as a justification of the conquest and colonization of the Donbas, of the eviction of Western capitalists who were responsible for the suffering and as a justification of the replacement of Russian imperial power with Soviet power. An interesting fact, however, is that for his illustrations of the "dark" pre-revolutionary history of the Donbas, Deineka used the sketches that he made after the Revolution, namely in the 1920s. If we look closer at his first large oil painting, *Before the Descent into the Mine* (*Pered spuskom v shakhtu*, 1925), we discover the same motif and similar poses in one detail as the book illustration showing the boy and the coal miner waiting to go down into the mine. This and many other motifs will reappear in his later works, producing a contrast between the past and the idealized present.

III. The Donbas Drawing Series for Magazines and the First Painting

Given his family name and according to Sysoev, we can assume that Deineka's ancestors were Ukrainian.[44] After studying at the Railway College in Kursk and attending a local art club, he entered the Kharkiv Art School in 1915. During the mobilization in 1919 Deineka joined the Red Army, where he found employment in organizing agitational events.[45] Following his demobilization in 1919 he was sent to Moscow and entered the VKhUTEMAS, where he studied graphic arts with Vladimir Favorsky. He left VKhUTEMAS without graduating and began to work for the magazine *U Stanka* (At the Bench), which sent him on his first work trip to the Donbas in 1924. According to Sysoev, Deineka never sketched as much from life as

43
Wynn, Workers, Strikes, and Pogroms, 117.

44
Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 10.

45
Ibid., 16–18.

he did during this first trip.[46] In particular, Sysoev draws attention to Deineka's attempts to capture objects and coal mine workers in motion, depicting what is characteristic for the work they do. For decades these sketches were fundamental to the whole of his oeuvre.

One of the most iconic depictions is of a hauler – a coal mine worker – pushing a heavy trolley loaded with coal. We can see this portrayal in a draft drawing *S vagonetkoi* (1925), where the man pushes the trolley while a woman walks across a steel girder bridge, traversing the railway track [Fig. 7]. The hauler is depicted with his arms stretched to signal the amount of strength required to pull the heavy trolley. On a drawing for the cover of the magazine *Daësh'*, the haulers are women, also with their arms stretched to increase leverage, signalling that their entire body weight is needed to pull the trolley [Fig. 8]. According to Sysoev's interpretation, in the Donbas Deineka finds his "heroes", namely free men and women, who are affirming themselves in a purposeful activity, and whom Deineka captures in poses and gestures that express their freedom and independence as workers.[47] The haulers are clearly working under high levels of exertion, but as they strain, they look graceful. This is particularly clear when contrasted with his illustrations for the novella *In the Bowels of the Earth*. There the young boy is straining hard to push the trolley onto which he had loaded the coal miner who had fainted after his seizure. The boy's posture is cramped from his effort, we see his bony shoulders and his bowed head, expressing desperation and exhaustion [Fig. 4e]. In his work for the periodicals the men and women depicted are healthy, strong and determined. It is not impossible, that for his enthusiastic pictures of coal-mine work that he made for periodicals Deineka was able to observe moments when the workers looked powerful and liberated. But more likely, Deineka's fascination with sportsmen and -women also played an important role here. The muscular and dynamic workers' bodies can be read as the bodies of sportsmen and -women. In the illustration for the cover of *Daësh'* the women are barefoot and their calves exposed, revealing their muscles. Being an ideal object of the aestheticization of strain, physical exercise in sport activities was perhaps more the real source of his depictions.

In his first oil painting, *Before the Descent into the Mine* (*Pered spuskom v shakhtu*, 1925), the aestheticization of the workers as sportsmen is even more poignant, because they are not depicted in movement but as anticipating work. In comparison with the illustrations of the novella (1927), which, in one case, depicts exactly the same moment of waiting for the lift down to the mine, we see Deineka's intention to depict the boy and the poor worker as ordinary, whereas the men of socialist work are portrayed as athletes: they are wearing fitted, partly revealing clothes, and despite some of them

46
Ibid., 40.

47
Ibid., 24.

having a slightly hunched back, they still look trained and prepared for the most challenging work [Fig. 9].

Most commentators have noticed that Deineka's early magazine drawings and his first oil painting do not have any concrete background. Kiaer has suggested that the emptiness helps to construct the depiction of the process of dialectical development, and the space is constituted purely through the relation between the human bodies to one another.[48] According to Alexandra Köhring, the reduced spatiality leads to the effect of a certain internality, focusing on the importance of collective labour.[49]

The effect of the abstract background, or the empty spaces and pauses in the compositions, is partly explained by Sysoev by its particular effect on the page of a magazine, where the words and typography are able to interact with the images.[50] Sysoev's observation particularly makes sense when we compare the agitational drawings with the illustrations in Kuprin's novella, where we also have empty backgrounds: here we also have empty spaces that have yet to find substance. In this case, however, we cannot make the same argument about dialectical development and socialist collectivity, because the images illustrate the pre-revolutionary Donbas.

I would here like to propose a different reading of the empty backgrounds. In these early Donbas pictures, for example in the picture for the magazine *At the Bench* (1925), we already observe a full set of Donbas iconography: the haulers pushing and pulling the trolleys, the steel girder bridge, the railway track and smoking locomotives. The steel girder is pictorially very dominant, presumably because it represents the importance of coal, namely for steel production and industrialization, and the building of railway tracks. The train and the railway represent the exploitation of the Donbas coal, which is then distributed across the Soviet Union. In other words, all that seems to exist in the Donbas is the industry and its workers. It exists in an empty space, some sort of wasteland, with no specific character or features. This produces the idea of a clinical environment, where there is no distraction except from the standardized industry, and no one seems to have to deal with the fact that it is a foreign land. Intentionally or not, Deineka produces spaces in which the workers do not have to interact with the "background", i.e., the Ukrainians and their environment. This blacking out of the context has a "tradition" in the Donbas. Stephan Velychenko's *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red* (2015) describes how easy it was in the mid-19th century for Russian immigrants to settle

48
Kiaer, Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?, 327.

49
Alexandra Köhring, Farbkörper und Arbeiterkörper. Zu Aleksandr Dejnekas Darstellung der Bergleute im Donbass, in: Monica Rüthers and Alexandra Köhring (eds.), *Helden am Ende. Erschöpfungszustände in der Kunst des Sozialismus*, Frankfurt/New York 2014, 43–59, here 51.

50
Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 42.

[Fig. 7]
Aleksandr Deineka, *With the Carriage. In the Donbas (S vagonetkoi. V Donbasse)*, drawing for the magazine *U Stanka*, 1925, ink, gouache on paper, 28.8 × 29.6 cm, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery Moscow, in: Müde Helden, 166.

[Fig. 8]
Aleksandr Deineka, illustration for the cover of *Daësh'*, No. 2, 1929, in: Syssojew, Alexander Deineka, 17.

[Fig. 9]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Before the Descent into the Mine (Pered spuskom v shakhtu)*, in: Müde Helden, 164.

down in Ukraine, and how they lacked consciousness not only of foreigners, but also of colonists.[51] The century-long rule by Saint Petersburg, which involved the Russification of high culture, print media and administration, made it possible for those Russian immigrants not to feel like immigrants. As a consequence, "like other colonies, Ukraine was a place where officials were ignorant of their subordinates' languages, because they expected the ruled to learn the ruler's language".[52] This contextualization not only explains the spooky emptiness of the Donbas, but it is also in line with Deineka's actual admiration of the imperial qualities of the Soviet Union.

IV. The Landscape of the Imperial "Motherland", and the Russian *Gesamtworker*

If in the drawings from the 1920s Deineka's backgrounds are empty, undefined and abstract, in the 1930s they become more concrete: we see horizons, the countryside, trees, grass, huts and other dwellings. But it is not always a specifically Ukrainian landscape in the background, and furthermore, this landscape is populated by workers of a particular type, namely the shock-workers (and from late 1935, "Stakhanovites"). Deineka's most well-known 1930s painting is *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* (1935) [Fig. 1], which was introduced at the beginning of this article. Sysoev states the following about Deineka's landscape compositions:

> Geographical attachments did not have a substantial meaning for him. Everywhere he found something new and interesting for himself, which inspired his creative imagination, helping him to find composed (*sobiratel'nye*) images, containing thoughts and feelings that are necessary for the understanding of the entire historical life of the Fatherland. And the spaces of the Earth the artist perceived as the expanses of the homeland.[53]

The joining together of two different landscapes that led to the painting *Lunchbreak in the Donbas*, namely somewhere near Kursk and the industrial Donbas, is a vivid expression of this borderless sensibility. In the background, we see a mine heap and a train

51
Stephan Velychenko, *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red. The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine, 1918–1925*, Toronto 2015.

52
Ibid., 34.

53
"Географические привязанности не имели для него существенного значения. Повсюду он находил для себя много нового, интересного, питавшего его творческую фантазию, помогавшего находить собирательные образы, вмещавшие мысли и чувства, необходимые для понимания всей исторической жизни Отечества. И пространства земли художник воспринимал как просторы Родины." Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 94 (trans. M. G.).

heading eastwards (perhaps towards the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). Present in almost all his prints, drawings and paintings of the Donbas, the railway has become Deineka's marker of the region. The railway may be read as a symbol of the Donbas's exploitation: coal is mined and immediately lead away. The Donbas iconography is not an iconography of the prosperity and economic development of the region, but an image of the extraction of resources and their transportation to the centres where value is produced. Deineka did not make images of developed infrastructure, impressive architecture or attractive city life in Donetsk.

With the montage of young people bathing somewhere near Kursk we can also understand *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* as representing the historical relation between the Russian and Ukrainian provinces of the Russian Empire. People from Russian provinces on the border to Ukraine went to the Donbas to work,[54] and with them they took the context they needed to settle down. Either we can interpret the painting emphatically as an image of settler colonists, taking advantage of the joys of their new land. Or we can read the montage in a more nuanced sense, as expressing the complex social composition on the borders between Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Russia, where historically not only Russians lived in Ukraine, but also Ukrainians in Russia, including Deineka himself. Both, however, suggest that this painting articulates the imperial or – as the Bolsheviks but also Ukrainian socialists referred to it[55] – colonial relations. From Deineka's biography (military service in the Red Army, career in Moscow), but also from his personal writings,[56] we can assume that he was not critical of Soviet imperialism or colonialism. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: by employing the compositional technique of montage he reproduces a certain pride in being part of the Soviet near-borderlessness.

Deineka's *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* was painted only two years after the big men-made catastrophe of the Great Famine, or Holodomor, which recently was acknowledged as genocide. The image of five young, clean, healthy-looking and blond men bathing during a lunchbreak in the Donbas is not an impossible image, but socially and morally obnoxious. Even if the Holodomor was over by 1935, it is nearly impossible that Deineka was not aware of it, or, of the long-term effects it had on the society of the region. This observation confirms the overall impression that Deineka, just like many of his contemporaries, was prepared to overlook the objectionable aspects of Soviet politics and society.

54
Siegelbaum, Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 56–57.

55
Stephen Velychenko, The Issue of Russian Colonialism in Ukrainian Thought. Dependency Identity and Development, in: *Ab Imperio* 1, 2002, 323–367.

56
Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Zhizn', iskusstvo, vremia.

V. After the Holodomor in the Donbas

During the Holodomor, in 1932/33 the Donbas region had comparatively low numbers of deaths. The forced requisition especially affected the rural population and not so much the cities, where the industrial workers lived. The death rate during the famine in Ukraine was double the death rate in the Donbas.[57] That and other revelations from Barbara Falk's study suggest that workers, most of whom lived in the Donbas, had priority access to food. At the same time, the situation was tense even for the workers, insofar as purges were carried out, with the view to avoid the collapse of the provision and thus industrial work, which involved getting rid of "counter-revolutionary" elements, non-efficient workers and "class enemies".[58] People, especially homeless children, from other parts of Ukraine fled to the Donbas in the hope of finding food, but they were not successful. The kolkhozes (collective farms) in the rural regions around the Donbas were affected by the famine – kolkhoz peasants as much as "kulaks", Ukrainians as much as Germans and Greeks.[59] According to the reports of the *raion* committees to the regional committee of the Party in Donetsk, the famine was partly played down, and reports of deaths and cannibalism were identified as counter-revolutionary kulak agitation.[60] The reason for this, according to Penter, was the fear of being accused of opportunism, had they organized help for the population in their *raions*. However, according to Penter, the Donbas rural region was affected comparatively less by the famine, which might be explained by its geographical proximity to the coal mines and their provision. She comes to the shocking conclusion that as a result the Donbas workers might have felt superior and that this existential experience of famine solidified existing images of the Donbas as a special Soviet industrial region.[61]

Deineka's painting portraying a woman cycling down a road between farm fields, titled *Collective Farm Woman on a Bicycle* (*Kolkhoznitsa na velosipede*, 1935) [Fig. 10], is believed to have resulted

57
Barbara Falk, *Sowjetische Städte in der Hungersnot 1932/33. Staatliche Ernährungspolitik und städtisches Alltagsleben*, Cologne 2005, 138; Penter, Kohle für Stalin und Hitler, 98.

58
Falk, Sowjetische Städte in der Hungersnot 1932/33; Penter, Kohle für Stalin und Hitler, 100.

59
Penter, Kohle für Stalin und Hitler, 102.

60
Ibid., 103.

61
Ibid., 107–108.

[Fig. 10]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Collective Farm Woman on a Bicycle (Kolkhoznitsa na velosipede)*, 1935, oil on canvas, 120 × 220 cm, St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum, in: Müde Helden, 248–249.

from Deineka's Donbas trip in 1935.[62] As additional evidence supporting her argument that Deineka was unusually free not only in his modernism but also in the choice of his subject matter, Kiaer refers to this painting, which, according to her, has a "solitary figure as a sign for the collective, and [...] is utterly unlike paintings of collectivization by other artists".[63] Deineka refuses, according to Kiaer, to validate Stalin's premature claim that "life has gotten better, life has gotten merrier".[64]

This painting could be considered a fantasy image, because there were hardly any bicycles in the Donbas. At the First Stakhanovites Conference (*Pervoe Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie rabochikh i rabotnits-stakhanovtsev*) on November 14–17, 1935 – that is, in the same year that Deineka's painting was made – a participant expressed the wish for a "cultured life": "We want bicycles, pianos, phonographs, records, radio sets, and many other articles of culture."[65] In 1936 the newspaper *Pravda* reported that 500 bicycles were received.[66] The fact that in Deineka's painting it is a woman who echoes the findings of Siegelbaum suggests a certain gender character to owning a bicycle, alongside nice clothes, amongst the female Stakhanovites, making them "marriageable girls".[67]

Given that hardly any bicycles were in evidence, Kiaer interprets Deineka's painting as not precisely critical of Soviet propaganda, but at least more realistic, in the sense that there is only one woman on a bicycle.[68] But the depiction of a well-nourished woman on a bicycle in the Donbas region is still unrealistic, not only because of the bicycle, but also because even the coal miners from the Donbas were suffering hunger. The fact that people died, including in the rural areas of the Donbas and on collective farms, can be seen in the macabre emptiness of the farm fields. The woman represents a shock-worker (later a Stakhanovite),[69] who, following

62
Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969). An Avant-Garde of the Proletariat (exh. cat. Madrid, Fundación Juan March), ed. by Manuel Fontán del Junco, Madrid 2011, 18; Kiaer, Collective Body, 277.

63
Kiaer, Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?, 338.

64
Ibid.

65
Conference procedure 1935, 30; quoted in Siegelbaum, Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 228.

66
Ibid.

67
Ibid., 320–231.

68
Kiaer, Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?, 340.

69
Shock-workers, like Stakhanovites, was not a title limited to industrial workers, but included kolkhoz (collective farm) workers, service and other industry workers. Cf. Siegelbaum, Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 11.

Penter's reflection, had become even prouder by surviving the Holodomor.

We are dealing here with a representation of a conspicuously isolated, elite, and very likely Russian, worker. In this scenario, Ukraine becomes merely the background, a scene for her heroism and specialness. Even if this painting is, according to Kiaer, an expression of Deineka's modern free spirit, it can also be read as an example of eyes closed to Soviet state crimes.

VI. The Clean Coal Worker

The composition of Deineka's painting *Donbas* (1947) [Fig. 11] seems to be based on the artist's sketches and work from the 1920s, where we find exactly the same composition in the illustration "V Donbasse" for the magazine *U Stanka* (no. 3, 1924) [Fig. 12]. In the foreground are two women: one is shovelling coal and the other is standing back and looking into the distance. She is looking in the same direction as the wind is blowing, which is indicated by the depiction of the smoke. The smoke is white, as are the faces and bodies of the workers, especially the ones in the foreground. The dresses of the female workers are painted in pastel yellow and they wear pastel pink head scarves. Apart from two stains on the legs of the shovelling woman, that could also be just shadows, neither of the women seem to be dirty from all their work with the coal – nor are the other workers in the background. Deineka intentionally paints their faces immaculately clean despite the dirty work they are doing (only what appears to be sunburns indicate the damage of working outside). This corresponds to the obsession with cleanliness in relation to the Stakhanovite movement that was propagated in the press. Siegelbaum writes:

> A cultural appearance was important, however, not only for marriageable girls and not only during leisure hours. [...] A Stakhanovite textile worker, Milovanova, wrote in her factory's newspaper that before leaving for work she made it a practice to clean her shoes, look into the mirror, and carefully arrange her dress.[70]

Even though *Donbas* does not depict textile workers – while Deineka's *Textile Workers* (1927) corresponds exactly to this ideal of cleanliness – we can argue that the choice of bright colours for the dresses worn by the coal-shovelling women is intentional with the view to represent the Stakhanovites' cleanliness ideal. Stakhanovites, all the workers who are associated and who associate themselves with the highly efficient work of the coal miner, present an elite class of workers, who earn wages higher than the average worker and who

70 Ibid., 231.

wear nice clothes, apply perfume (*Crimean Rose*) and play the piano. Deineka must have been aware of the cleanliness campaign, because the magazine he was working for, *Daësh'*, published an article titled "How to Maintain Body Cleanliness in Industrial Production" and the notes "A hot bath and shower for the milkmaids" and "After work – a shower" in a special issue dedicated to the political campaign of cleansing the state apparatus (*Chistka gosapparata*, no. 1, 1929). Deineka illustrates the article with an ink drawing of three naked men in the shower. The workers in his paintings are Stakhanovites who represent the entire body of workers in the Soviet Union. It is especially in Deineka's oeuvre that we see the extent to which Stakhanovite superiority is being internalized.

Thus, we can discern a stark contrast between Deineka's early impressions of Donbas industry, with dark, dirty and determined workers, and his later Donbas workers as pale, pastel and pretty. Furthermore, there is a shift in the composition technique. If in his early drawings for the magazines the iconography of coal-mine work as people pushing wagons full of coal, railways and steel girder bridges form the composition, in this painting it is pushed into the background. Now it functions merely to signal that we are in a coal-mining site – the Donbas. What is foregrounded here is instead the actual product of coal mining – the glimmering and glittering coal, an almost jewel-like cipher for the Soviet Empire.

The depiction of coal is rather rare in Deineka's drawings or other paintings. Even though its blackness and the darkness of the coal mines seem to be echoed in the often-used colour black, representation of the coal itself was avoided, possibly because visually it does not (unlike steel constructions) directly signify modernity.

Deineka's sketch *Unloading Coal*[71] suggests that possibly the scene in *Donbas* is meant to be about the particular motif of unloading coal. The shovelling of coal in *Donbas* is a scene that could have happened anywhere in the Soviet Union. It could be argued that Deineka here drew on the familiar sight in the Soviet Union of coal being delivered by truck, unloaded on the road, and shovelled up by everyone rushing to distribute the coal in the village or town. The use of this familiar sight of coal shovelling adds to the ambivalence that is ever present in Deineka's work: is the scene set in Ukraine or are we faced with generalized imagery, an imperial strategy of producing a "nowhere and anywhere"?

The Donbas is made significant indirectly through the presentation of the most important product of mining, namely the coal. Its glimmering, shining appearance makes it a desirable commodity – echoed by the "marriageable" pretty red-cheeked women in pastel dresses. This commodity iconography complements the iconography of the aestheticization of labour, insofar as the outcome and the direct purpose of labour is represented and thus the need to work

71 Aleksandr Deineka, *Unloading Coal (Na razgruzke uglia)*, sketch for the painting *Donbas*, 1947, paper, pencil, colour pencil, 22.8 × 25 cm, private collection, in: Deineka. Zhivopis', 319.

[Fig. 11]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Donbas*, 1947, tempera on canvas, 179 × 197 cm, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery, in: Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969). An Avant-Garde of the Proletariat, 51.

[Fig. 12]
Aleksandr Deineka, *In the Donbas (V Donbasse)*, 1924, illustration for the magazine *U Stanka*, No. 3, 1924, in: Vladimir P. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka. 1889–1969*, Moscow 2010, 10.

in the Donbas and its significance are made more graspable. This could be read as an echo of the poster by Apsit discussed above, "Why do we need the Donets Basin?" (1919), which illustrates the purpose of conquering the Donbas. Consequently, Deineka's *Donbas* (1947) explains "why we need to work in the Donbas".

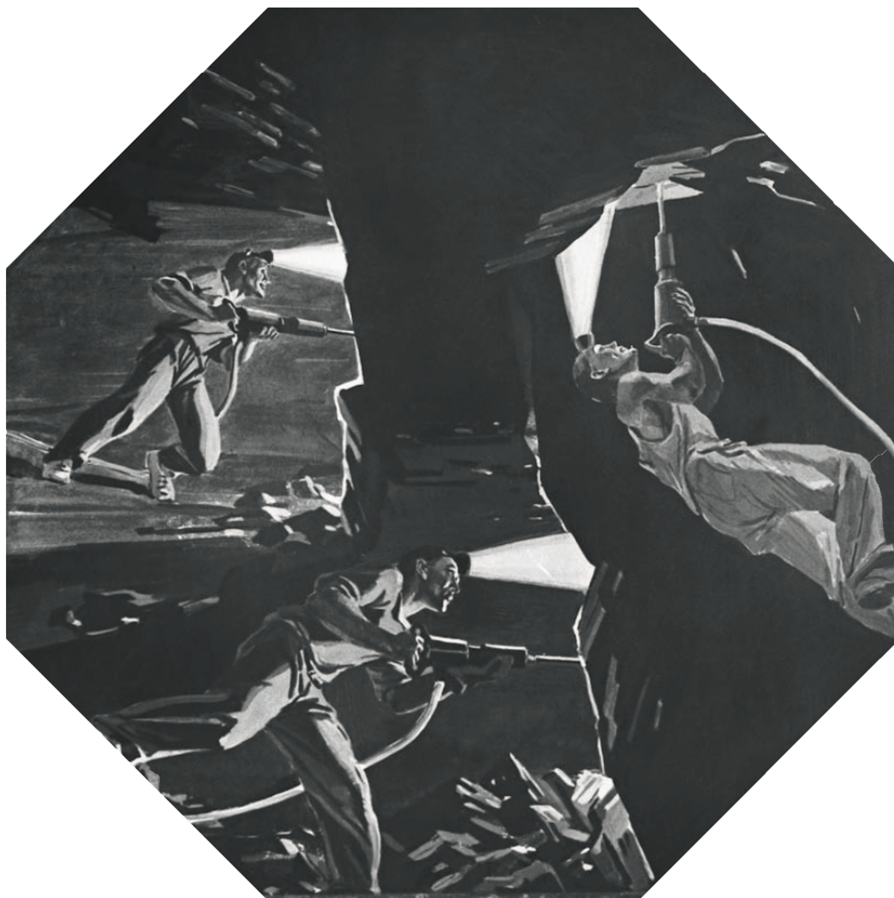
VII. Underground. The Donbas in Moscow's Metro Stations

Deineka's depictions of the Donbas also extend to the mosaics he was commissioned to design for two metro stations in Moscow: the panel *Blast Furnaces at Work* (*Domny v rabote*, 1938) for Mayakovskaia station, and the sketch for an unrealized panel *In the Pit Face* (*V zaboe*, 1940) for Paveletskaia station – a station that was initially to be named Donbasskaia (Donbas station).[72]

In the Pit Face depicts three miners in action underground with their drilling machines [Fig. 13]. The miners are wearing helmets with modern electric lamps, as opposed to the dangerous oil lamps they used to carry [cf. Fig. 9 and Fig. 4c]. Their drills are also powered via electrical cables. As in his earlier poster *Mechanizing Donbas* (*Mekhaniziruem Donbass*, 1930), and with similar iconography [Fig. 14], the space of *In the Pit Face* is divided into three parts, each of which has a different angle. The result is a modernist, quasi-cubist space, composed of multiple perspectives. This vividly depicts the dark interior space of underground mining, which naturally lacks a horizon line and general source of light to orient and unify the space, and consists instead of the numerous temporary and partial views illuminated by the miner's lamp. *In the Pit Face* deploys these modernist pictorial devices in order to show how Soviet technology has transformed mining, enabling humanity to access, illuminate and exploit the vast resources of the Earth, creating a new artificial world out of what was inaccessible, dark and unused. It announces that the Soviet Union had conquered the Earth.

In the Pit Face is part of a cycle of fourteen panels which Deineka designed for Paveletskaia. Only six of the panels (excluding *In the Pitface*) were realized at Novokuznetskaya. The motifs for the other panels include aeroplanes, athletes and football players, an apple harvest (in the Donbas), factories and construction sites [Fig. 15]. All these other panels, except *Metallurgy*, have the vast sky as their background. They are views up into the sky, without land or a horizon line. This choice plays on the position of the mosaics on the ceiling above the viewer. More importantly, the sky provided a spectacular depiction of the Soviet Union's modernity and power. The sky was no longer a natural realm above and beyond humanity; it was now the scene of some of the most impressive achievements of Soviet industry and technology. The Soviet Union had conquered the heavens. Although *In the Pitface* does not feature the sky –

72 *Deineka. Monumental'noe iskusstvo. Skulptura* (exh. cat, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery), ed. by Tatiana Iudkevich, Moscow 2011, 148 (4 October 2024).



[Fig. 13]
Aleksandr Deineka, *In the Pit Face (V zaboe)*, 1940, sketch for the metro station Paveletskaia, St. Petersburg, Photo archive NA RAKh, in: Deineka. Monumental'noe iskusstvo, 224 (13 September 2024).

[Fig. 14]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Mechanizing Donbas (Mekhaniziruem Donbas)*, 1930, colour lithograph, 82 × 101 cm, Moscow, V.I. Lenin State Library, in: Syssojew, Alexander Deineka, 21.

[Fig. 15]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Collecting Apples in the Donbas (Sbor yablok v Donbasse)*, mosaic panel for the metro station Paveletskaia, installed at the station Novokuznetskaia, Moscow in 1943, ca. 3 m diagonally, in: Deineka. Monumental’noe iskusstvo, 228 (4 October 2024).

rather its opposite – it shares the absence of a horizon line. Moreover, both the earth and the sky, underground and overground, are depicted as formerly blank or empty spaces that the Soviet people have occupied and mastered.

The other mosaic panel representing Donbas, *Blast Furnaces at Work* [Fig. 16], is part of the cycle for Mayakovskaia, in which the sky is again the principal theme. The architect who designed Mayakovskaia, Alexey Dushkin, was committed to pay tribute to Vladimir Mayakovsky's words from the poem *Good!* (*Khorosho!*, 1927): "Above me / the sky. / Blue / silk! / Never / ever / felt / so good!"[73] It was Deineka's idea to show the rich life of the Soviet Union as it could be experienced over a period of 24 hours.[74] The cycle consists of pictures starting with very bright colours, representing the morning and the daytime: branches of apple blossom, a sailor on watch, a glider and aeroplanes flying above the Kremlin [Fig. 17]. *Blast Furnaces at Work* belongs to the panels representing the evening and night, which include the Kremlin at night, a parachutist, a high-altitude balloon (*stratostat*), light projectors and bombers – a sort of Soviet "night-watch", composed of military defence, surveillance, power and the Donbas.

Blast Furnaces at Work depicts blast furnaces fuming into the night sky in the Donbas.[75] In this "nocturne" the fumes represent the active work in progress in the Donbas even at night. Fumes have a particular meaning in Deineka's work. During his first work trip to the Donbas in 1924 he also made drawings of the settlements on the outskirts of the industrial hub. In his drawing *Outskirts. Donbas* (*Okraina. Donbass*, 1924) he sketched several dwellings or huts, a few trees and a person walking towards the dwellings.[76] Seemingly similar shapes and composition are used for his illustration of Kuprin's *In the Bowels of the Earth*, only that the trees have become fumes from tall furnace chimneys, and the huts have become coal-mining

73
"Надо мною / небо. / Синий / шёлк! / Никогда / не было / так / хорошо!" Vladimir Mayakovsky, Khorosho!, in: *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh 2. Poemy, p"esy, proza*, Moscow 1988, 349–424, here 420–412 (trans. M. G.).

74
Sysoev elegantly characterizes the cycle as follows: "The artist conceived the whole complex as a poetic story about a journey from Moscow to the southern industrial centre of the country, during which the viewer mentally traversed hundreds of kilometres, accumulating various impressions, illuminated by the light of a great poetic idea – of a bright generalizing fiction." ("Весь комплекс художник задумал как поэтический рассказ о путешествии из Москвы к южному индустриальному центру страны, во время которого зритель словно мысленно преодолевал сотни километров, накапливая разнообразные впечатления, озаренные светом большой поэтической идеи, яркого обобщающего вымысла.") Sysoev, Aleksandr Deineka. Monografia, 201 (trans. M. G.). The great poetic idea of the Soviet Union, that Sysoev does not try to conceal, presumes that which we now think of as colonialism.

75
Ibid., 188. Interestingly, this Donbas nocturne features on the cover of the 2011 catalogue on Deineka's monumental art: Deineka. Monumental'noe iskusstvo.

76
Aleksandr Deineka, *Outskirts. Donbas (Okraina. Donbass)*, 1924, paper, pencil, 11.9 × 17.9 cm, private collection, in: Irina Ostarkova, *Deineka. Grafika*, Moscow 2009, 425 (13 September 2024).

[Fig. 16]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Blast Furnaces at Work (Domny v rabote)*, 1938, mosaic panel installed at the metro station Mayakovskaia, Moscow, 1.43 × 2.23 m, in: Syssojew, Alexander Deineka, 161.

[Fig. 17]
Aleksandr Deineka, *Kremlin at Daytime (Kreml' dnem)*, fragment, 1938, mosaic panel for the metro station Mayakovskaia, Moscow, 1.43 × 2.23 m, in: Deineka. Monumental'noe iskusstvo, 38 (4 October 2024).

factories [Fig. 4b]. The same leap from countryside to industry is made in his compositions for the paintings *At Noon* (1932) and *Landscape with Train* (1931) – on which the *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* (1935) is based. The trees in both paintings take the shape of fumes, and the clouds take the shape of train fumes. Fumes represent the transformational character of labour and work – the ultimate appropriation (or destruction) of nature and landscape.

In the light of my analysis of Deineka's paintings and illustrations, which appear to be quite different to his mosaics, we can nonetheless observe that they share techniques and strategies that concern a colonial and imperial imagination. The empty landscape is a vivid motif for a colonial vision in general: a vision of unoccupied, and therefore easily colonizable, space. This image is, of course, deceptive and expresses wishful thinking. It nonetheless works as a visual justification of colonization. The empty sky of Deineka's mosaics obviously shows no land, but this heightens their representation of a formerly unpopulated, unused and completely available space for occupation or exploitation. The mosaics show how the Soviet Union colonized the sky. As we have seen, *In the Pit Face* provides the same vision of the earth. This colonization of the sky remains more indirect or metaphorical than Deineka's representations of the Donbas landscape; however, this landscape is only just below *Blast Furnaces at Work* and above *In the Pit Face*. As in Deineka's paintings and illustrations, which depict Ukrainian territory as an empty backdrop that is populated only by the colonizers, the mosaic panels work with a similar technique: the sky is no longer empty, as it supposedly was before the Revolution, but populated by technology, industry, agriculture and empowered people. Thus, the mosaics function with a similar ideological implication, namely the aestheticization of colonized space. The mosaic cycles express not only the relevance of the railway in the Soviet Union's imperial and colonial imagination, and particularly the Moscow–Donbas railway line, they also consolidate the particular visual thinking that is characteristic of Deineka's Donbas works. Soviet achievements and dedicated workers are presented against an originally "unpopulated" background. They appear as "foreign bodies" – dislodged and dislocated. From a critical point of view on Soviet modernity, they are "wrong images", but in their modern and abstract appearance they are absolutely "right". They aestheticize the modern taking over of space and visually make sense of a successful Soviet colonization.

VIII. Conclusion

The outcome of this article is that Deineka's representations of the Donbas should be regarded as contributing to the ideological justification of the Soviet Union's imperial and colonial ventures in that region. This departs from the prevailing receptions of Deineka's work, which either do not address the imperial or colonial dimen-

sion of the Soviet Union (Sysoev), or argue that Deineka's modernism was critical of Soviet ideology (Kiaer). On the contrary, we have seen how Deineka's modernist strategies are crucial to justifying the Soviet Union's colonization of the Donbas region. Deineka's pictures conceal a great deal, but they also reveal and make sense of the modern, displaced and abstract experience of Soviet imperialism. He produced images of this experience for Soviet citizens, in order to enable them to see Soviet ideology positively, not negatively or critically.

This conclusion evinces two main implications for further research. On the one hand, it raises the question of whether and how Deineka's other work, for example, his Crimea paintings, can be understood in terms of Soviet imperialism and colonialism. His modern visualizations of imperialist and colonialist ideology might serve as an explanation of why his recent reception in Russia has been so positive. On the other hand, it raises the question of how other avant-garde or modernist artists relate to Soviet imperialism. Whether modernist compositional techniques could in some cases be interpreted as imperial or colonial still needs to be analysed in their specific political and historical context. However, the article has shown that these techniques resonate profoundly with the imperialist content of Soviet ideology, and especially in seemingly "neutral" Soviet themes of work, technology, leisure and travel.

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