Reviews

Walerjan Pidmohylnyj, *Die Stadt*
Guggolz Verlag, Hardcover, 416 pages

*Die Stadt*, namely today’s capital Kiev, is one of the protagonists of this narrative, appearing as an independent entity: demanding, tempting, disillusioning, and overwhelming. Stepan, a young man from the countryside, seeking his fortune in Kiev, is its challenger, teetering between admiration, devotion, confidence, and despair.

A convinced revolutionary and ambitious student, he dreams of education and influence, accepts poor living conditions, and makes every effort to be accepted at university. His talent and diligence helped him get a job as a Ukrainian teacher—at that time, the Ukrainization of the people was a project thoroughly supported by the Soviets—and so he was able to improve his standard of living. A poet he admires encourages him to try his hand at writing. After initial defeats, he is successful, and eventually Stepan becomes editor-in-chief of a literary newspaper.

Together with the hero, the reader experiences the ups and downs of urban existence and fights by his side through affairs with various women, which are always determined by physical desires and tempestuous infatuation, followed by boredom and disgust.

Perhaps Stepan’s realization that writing and life are always about the essence of people is ultimately the quintessence of this emotionally powerful, gripping novel, which reminds me a little of Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* with its fickle hero, who is not infrequently portrayed with derision. The City was first published in 1928 and was only allowed to be republished a good 60 years later. Walerjan Pidmohylnyj himself would live to be only 36 years old. In 1937, he was accused of being a member of a terrorist organization and shot in camp imprisonment. If he resembles his protagonist even a little—and we have reason to believe that he did—he lived his short life to the fullest.

*Katharina von Uslar*
Serhij Zhadan, *Mesopotamien*
Suhrkamp Verlag, Paperback, 362 pages

For years, **Serhij Zhadan** has been considered one of the most daring and powerful literary voices in Ukraine. In *Mesopotamia*, which was published in German in 2015 and is currently available in paperback from Suhrkamp, he paints a picture of his city (Kharkiv), his generation, his time, and his country in different stories. The then still imminent war in the Donbas provides the emotional underpinnings. His heroes and heroines are thrown into it, stumbled into it, tragic figures who are not willing to give up their dreams despite the increasing darkness. Many of the stories seem to have no real ending, leaving readers empty-handed; some flee into the surreal, making them all the more disturbing.

Powerful, strong, poetic, spirited literature!

*Edgar Rai*

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Oleksandr Mykhed, *Dein Blut wird die Kohle tränken. Über die Ostukraine*
ibidem Verlag, Paperback, 320 pages

**Oleksandr Mykhed** lives with his family in Kiev. I became aware of him through his vivid newspaper reports about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This volume, with the martial title *I Will Mix Your Blood with Coal*, is part of the Ukrainian Voices series, published by German journalist Andreas Umland, which aims to present the developments in Ukraine and the country’s attitude toward the rest of the world through the diverse voices of politicians, activists, and intellectuals.

Mykhed himself is part of the NGO-initiated Metastadt Ost project, whose goal in 2016 was to promote cultural life in selected cities in eastern Ukraine and revitalize public spaces.
The result is a breathtakingly compelling account, partly illustrated with photos, of the history of the Donbas and the lives of its inhabitants, containing astonishingly literary descriptions of the towns and villages there based on the voices of individual inhabitants. The quotations, which are listed one by one, together form a picture of a people emaciated by work and war, which hints at the myth of the New Man that the Soviets wanted to establish there a century ago. The prototypical worker—epitomized in eastern Ukraine in the figure of the miner—has lost his identity, according to Mykhed’s account. In addition, it is clear that the Russian government’s narrative that the population of the Donbas identifies with Russia and demands unification has surprisingly little resonance or support. The need for peace and a reasonably functioning everyday life, on the other hand, is omnipresent.

The framing narrative of this multilayered documentation, however, is the story of the mining engineer Oleksii Nikitin from Donetsk, who denounced the working conditions of the miners at the end of the 1960s and thus incurred the wrath of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The accusation of anti-Soviet agitation, which brought him imprisonment and forced confinement in “special psychiatry,” found its linguistic climax in the threat of the Secretary of Communist Party, which gave this book its name.

*Natascha Wodin, Nastjas Tränen*
Rowohlt Verlag, Hardcover, 192 pages

When *Natascha Wodin* comes to Berlin in the early 1990s, she is looking for a cleaner, and that is how the Ukrainian Nastja and the author, who also appears as the narrator in her current novel, get to know each other. The fatefulness of this encounter, however, only becomes apparent years later.
We immerse ourselves in Nastja’s story, which is also the story of Ukraine, and begin to understand what the experiences of the past decades have done to the people of this country. Then, the Ukrainian who has been cleaning Natasha’s apartment for years, Nastja, realizes too late that her visa has expired. Unawares, she slips into illegality. And suddenly Natascha Wodin is confronted with her own life, the pain of her mother, who also came from Ukraine and was deported to Germany during World War II.

A moving novel about Ukraine, the loss of one’s homeland, being uprooted, and a struggle that only ends when one capitulates.

*Edgar Rai*

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