DIY COUNTRY

A FILM BY ANTONY BUTTS
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by Antony Butts

LOGLINE

This documentary follows the chaotic birth of the “Donetsk People's Republic” in spring 2014 as it tries to forge a path to independence and closer ties to Russia.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Over a 2-year period, “DIY Country” captures the origins and evolution of the Donetsk People’s Republic in East Ukraine from hopeful and naive beginnings, to hate, destruction and infighting. In the first part we follow the sinister and at times comical mechanics of how our heroes make a Revolution that will immediately eat them up. In the second part we will see them trying to find a role to play in the new State, as power is once again taken away from the people.
STORY SUMMARY

Donbass, a large mining and industrial region of south-eastern Ukraine, came to the world’s attention in spring 2014. Following the annexation of Crimea, a group of pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk, the area’s major cities, declared independence from Ukraine. This popular rebellion quickly turned into the deadliest war in modern Europe. After two years of almost continuous fighting, which left over 9,000 people dead and displaced more than two million, the conflict continues to simmer, bringing a steady stream of military and civilian casualties, in violation of the new ceasefire agreement signed in February 2016.

Antony Butts first came to Donetsk in April 2014 and met people who became the work-a-day rebels at the barricades while building a new country. When he approached some of the revolutionaries with his idea to chronicle the birth of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), a few accepted to be filmed and, as Antony built up relations of confidence with them, gradually let him into their lives. As he obtained unique access to the region, he captured the origins of the DPR in great detail, revealing the psychology and motivations of these men and women creating a “new country”. His footage is also an extensive record of what has been happening in Donbas in the past 2 years: chaos, adventure, geopolitics, opportunism, heroism, and broken lives.

“DIY Country” tells the stories of the main characters whom Antony Butts followed in 2014 as they joined a quasi-criminal uprising in Donetsk: “Lenin”, a self-styled working class hero who became increasingly marginalized in the bandit-style grab for power; Roma, who set himself up as Head of Security of the new state; Felix, a chronically unemployed 30-year-old, for whom the civil unrest was the ultimate chance to grab his “slice of cake”; Tatiana, a “pasionaria” of Donetsk’s independence, seizing the opportunity of a whole new start for herself; Vladimir, the rebel Parliament’s speaker and Boris, a communist apparatchik who sees Donetsk’s revolution as the chance of a lifetime.
While it is obvious that all six hope to make a quick buck in the midst of the chaos, “Lenin” seems to sincerely support the rebels’ cause and Roma sees the revolution as the source of power and excitement. Tatiana’s and Boris’ personal ambitions merge with the thrill of building a new State – just as they rebuild their own broken lives. Each of our characters makes their own blend of opportunism and idealism.

We will see these characters among other armed rebels as they seize the local administration building, hold the referendum, and quickly find themselves at a loss as to what to do with the new country and the new responsibilities. Their hopeful and somewhat naïve attempts to address the existing cultural clash between western Ukraine and the Russian-speaking east eventually lead to hate, destruction, and infighting.

A year and a half later, only “Lenin” was able to survive the multiple forces that the revolution unleashed. The protest movement disturbed the highly criminalized local political ecosystem. As a result, several criminal gangs got involved in the revolution, giving it a Wild West vibe. Caught up in intense power struggles, Roma had to flee the country, after several failed attempts upon his life. Boris, after successfully organizing (or rather, expertly faking) the referendum, finds himself marginalized by the new strong men of the Republic. Felix, who intimidated the Ukrainian population with other unemployed men used to a marginal existence, was arrested and imprisoned by the government forces... His young wife Katya, who accepted to be interviewed, will recount the months of fear that preceded Felix’s arrest and caused her miscarriage.

Even “Lenin’s” somewhat idealistic intentions gave way to pragmatism – today, this is the only way he can earn a living. He was promised a salary of 5,000 hryvnas (about 200 €), which he has only received once in the past five months. To make ends meet, he moonlights as a guide on occasional events organized by the regime to bolster popular support – such as a display of tanks in central Donetsk.
Despite the ceasefire agreement signed in February 2015, the sounds of artillery fire and shelling have never stopped. While any inhabitants able to leave fled the region, others are magnetically drawn to the war. With the established rules and norms ceding to anarchy, some like Felix see these circumstances as an opportunity to be larger-than-life. His fellow-fighters appear motivated by a strong hatred of what they see as the “fascist” government that has seized power in Kiev.

It is common to hear terms like “fascist” in the polarized media climate that was created around the situation. Since the conflict started, both sides have been insisting on diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive versions of the events, and the flow of misinformation, rumours and innuendo has reached such proportions that now very few people have a clear understanding of what is going on in the region.

For a majority of Donetsk's population, Russian television is their only window into the unfolding of the revolution. Through its highly oriented media coverage, we see reality become completely malleable. Second World War memories are distorted and diverted to nurture the miners' resentment of the Ukrainian government and oligarchs. But will the Russian soldiers really come to the rescue? Putin does not intend to conquer East Ukraine as he did with Crimea. But he needs a separatist puppet government as a bargaining tool in his explosive diplomatic game with the West.

“DIY Country” is the story of a revolution told from the inside. Declaration of independence, civil war, building a new state, internal repression, external pressures: an immersive two-year period of filming has allowed us to attend its every steps.
We see the irony as our characters claim they want to bring order to anarchy, but who also create anarchy in the process. We witness the arbitrariness of the revolution as it turns against its promoters, the hunt for traitors and the terror imposed on civilians. The film conveys that Darwinian “jungle” atmosphere in the Donetsk People’s Republic, with its fast turnaround in human lives.

“DIY Country” has been entirely shot in rebel-controlled territories and features those who were involved, one way or another, in the building of the new country. Those who welcomed the camera into their lives seem to play up to it. However, attempts to manipulate the situation with a “performance” are ultimately transparent. Those interviewed had been followed over several weeks, and there were many situations where it was impossible to “act” in front of the camera. The mixture between spectacle and authenticity provides a more surreal and immersive quality. The charisma and sheer madness of certain characters opens a rich cinematic world.

In one of the key sequences, the organizers of the referendum debate on how to rig the poll properly: what voter turnout should be, the acceptable level of support... One of them appropriately quotes Stalin (or so he thinks): “Let’s drink to those who aren’t watching”. As he says so, it comes to his mind that our camera is actually rolling, and reminds his colleagues that they should do “whatever the people wishes”.
“In every revolution there intrude, at the side of its true agents, men of a different stamp; some of them survivors of and devotees to past revolutions, without insight into the present movement, but preserving popular influence by their known honesty and courage, or by the sheer force of tradition; others mere brawlers, who, by dint of repeating year after year the same set of stereotyped declamations against the government of the day, have sneaked into the reputation of revolutionists of the first water. They are an unavoidable evil: with time they are shaken off.”

Karl Marx

The popular uprising in Kiev, in February 2014, resulted in a chain of events that has had implications well beyond Ukrainian borders: the election of a new President in Kiev, the military coup in Crimea, the Malaysia Airlines tragedy, rising tensions amongst all of Russia's neighbours. It is hard to underestimate the complexity of what has been going on in eastern Ukraine since the spring of 2014, when groups of armed pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk seized local administrative buildings, expelled Ukrainian officials and raised their own flag, called for referendums and eventually declared independence from Kiev.

The newly elected Ukrainian government started the counteroffensive, and the situation quickly escalated into the deadliest conflict that Europe witnessed in recent decades. Despite the Kremlin’s refusal to admit its involvement, Russia regularly helps separatists with troops and weapons, supports their institutions, and actively participates in the fierce propaganda war. Since the first ceasefire agreement was signed, during the winter of 2015, the conflict started fading from the international media agenda. Fighting, however, still rages in eastern Ukraine, and the sides accuse each other of breaching the truce—while refusing to pull out their military forces.

Several pro-Russian separatist leaders in the contested regions of Donetsk and Luhansk announced that they would settle on a specially-recognized status within the Ukraine, instead of previously-claimed full independence. While this scenario has the full support from Vladimir Putin—who, due to international sanctions and pressure, seems to be willing to avoid further escalation of the conflict—hardly anyone supports the idea on the ground. “We fight for our independence, not for autonomy,” Alexander Zakharchenko, the head of the Donetsk People's Republic, told journalists recently. Battalion commanders share this view. Their aim is to create a nation state, and many people believe it is only a matter of time until the war escalates again.
Another reason the rebels want to expand their territory further is due to the bleak economic prospects that their “state” currently faces. A humanitarian disaster of massive proportions looms over the region. Despite the best efforts of the few volunteers who continue working on the occupied territories, people literally starve, particularly in remote areas of Donetsk People’s Republic, and practically everywhere in Luhansk region. Areas controlled by rebels are economically and financially isolated from Ukraine. Kiev has suspended payments of pensions and other social benefits, and cut off the region from the Ukrainian financial system. One of the few remaining sources of income in separatist-held areas is coal exported to Ukraine, which is why the rebels might decide they have to take the main port city of Mariupol, or other parts of the region with heavy industry, to make their territory more viable.

The rebel leaders and armies are not one united coherent force, which further complicates the situation. It is only a three-hour ride between the two major separatist-held cities, but in a local context, Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic are two different countries, with three self-declared Cossack republics lying in between them. All of them are manned by separate groups, and require different identification and accreditations. It is not clear what laws apply in each area; locals unable to flee the country try to avoid travelling.

On both sides of the conflict, and beyond the borders, people in Ukraine are trapped in a continuous propaganda war. Intellectually, the narratives about the war are often gross simplifications of events, in the Russian, Ukrainian and Western media alike. A lack of honesty about the complexity of forces going there, and the differing motivations of all involved, has created a poisoned dialogue that only exacerbates war.

One of the fundamental tragedies and obstacles to peace is that neither Russia nor Ukraine wants the region to become independent. Economically, it is hardly attractive to Ukraine and, at this point, it is quite clear that Moscow doesn’t intend to repeat the Crimea scenario, being more concerned with destabilizing the Donbas than with supporting it.
This is the convoluted nature of the most dramatic crisis that the Ukraine has faced since its independence in 1991. The origins of the crisis are diverse: years of weak governance, malfunctioning and corrupted economy, heavy dependence on Russia and control by oligarchs, failure to create a national identity and to overcome fundamental cultural differences between eastern and western parts of the country. The initial conflict, regarding closer trade ties with the European Union, turned into a global standoff between Russia and the West, the biggest since the Cold War. It raised questions about European security, challenged the future relations between Russia and the West, and undermined U.S. diplomatic efforts to build a partnership with Russia. The consequences of this conflict will be felt for years to come. Thus far, the Ukraine crisis remains unresolved, and the debate within the international community about the proper response to Russian actions is growing increasingly heated.

The narrative of events surrounding the rebel republics in eastern Ukraine is highly propagandized. So far, no film has been made for the historical record: about how the republics are being formed, about the people shaping them and those trapped by the changes beyond their control. Instead, the focus is on the righteousness and evil of each side, on the analysis of Russian involvement. “DIY Country” shows the array of forces and personalities involved, the players’ various motivations, and the complexity of the situation in the local context, which is often ignored by the Western media.

Deep-rooted problems in the Ukraine, including governmental disorganization, internal political rivalries, corruption and the indubitable cultural abyss between western and eastern regions, are all factors that deepen the crisis. While we hope to make an accurate record of events that unfolded in Ukraine since 2014, our main focus will be on the lives of those whose reality may seem pulled from the pages of Orwell. They are being used by the oligarchs, the criminals, the Ukrainian media that dismisses them as Russian bandits, while the Russian media gives them fear, anger and hope, and Russia itself.
KEY CREATIVE AND PRODUCTION PERSONNEL

Antony Butts, author-director / DP
Antony is a Russian-speaking documentary maker and video journalist. He is passionate about films featuring characters with both good and bad qualities, who struggle in a complex world that is often politically entrenched. The results are films that are often full of absurdity and unintentional comedy, and challenge the viewer to engage with both sides of a highly contentious issue, yet avoid being divisively polemical. Antony worked on the Oscar long-listed “Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer” as a cameraman, and won an Amnesty International Award for filming in the North Caucasus.

Scott Stevenson, editor
Originally from Los Angeles, Scott Stevenson has spent most of his long career editing both documentaries and fiction in France. On the non-fiction side, he was most notably one of the editors of ‘The Staircase’ (Sundance Channel, Canal+), as well as for “Sin City Law” (Sundance Channel, ARTE). Scott received the César for his work on Mathieu Kassovitz’ “La Haine”. The film also won the Best Picture César, as well as the Best Director Award at Cannes. Most recently, Scott co-edited “Prophet’s prey”, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival.

Olivier Mille, producer
Born in 1957, Olivier Mille is producer and film director. He obtained a PhD in Philosophy at the University of Paris - Sorbonne, and taught cinema studies and literature at the University of Basel (Switzerland) for 7 years. In 1986, he founded the production company Artline Films. Since then, he leads both the career of film director and of film producer. He directed over twenty documentaries and produced about a hundred films in collaboration with major French and foreign broadcasters. He has been a member of several film commissions (CNC, Procirep) and president of the International Festival of Audiovisual Programmes.
TECHNICAL SHEET

Title: DIY COUNTRY
Shooting format: HD
Durations of final film: 90-minute and 52-minute versions
Author/Director: Antony Butts
Producers: Olivier Mille (Artline Films), Antony Butts
Editor: Scott Stevenson
Camera: Antony Butts
Audio: Antony Butts
Principal Language: Russian
Shooting Location: Donetsk, eastern Ukraine
Release: Arte France, April 2016 (TBC)

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