What goes through the minds of parents trying to decide whether to send their child to school across a mined field? In Ukraine, the setting for this book, decisions of this kind are part of the daily calculus of life. Understanding how ordinary people are able to tolerate and function in the face of protracted conflict requires engaging the question of how politically motivated violence reconfigures lived worlds. This book explores the impact of sustained encounters with war. In the chapters that follow, I use narratives about life in a country embroiled in conflict as a way of understanding war itself. The scope of these narratives went far beyond expressions of hope for an end to the armed clashes. These stories also reflected active engagement with issues around care and responsibility for others who were impacted by the war.

Since 2014, the military conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine over the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, collectively known as Donbas, has caused the forcible displacement of some 1.6 million people within Ukraine (OHCHR 2017, 1); in addition, at least one million have fled to Russia (Mukomel 2017, 105). Although the conflict has never been officially declared a war, the hostilities have killed at least 13,000 people, many of them civilians (OHCHR 2017). A great deal of the fighting has occurred in residential areas, in contravention of international humanitarian law. The scars of this conflict mark the earth itself: Ukrainian soil has one of the highest concentrations of landmines in the world (OCHA 2020).

This book engages with the lives of civilians affected by the war over Donbas. The pages ahead explore how even in the face of irrevocable changes to homes, friendships, and families, those impacted by the war have rebuilt a habitable world by maintaining their dignity and caring for one another. The chapters identify a constellation of social practices that demonstrate the significance of mutual care and responsibility for the lives of those caught up in zones of conflict. Thus, each chapter considers a different site where peace can be either cultivated or destroyed at an interpersonal, “everyday” level. The principal aim is to reveal how significant the complex experiences of noncombatants are for our understanding of war. On the whole this book advances the view that considerations of war and conflict must include thinking about families, friendships, and interpersonal relationships.