

Review - Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine

Written by Jakob Hauter

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JAKOB HAUTER, MAY 26 2025

Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine: From Leaderless Groups to Proxy Army

By Martin Laryš

Routledge, 2024

Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine addresses the difficult question of the relationship between the Russian state and the militias that fought against the Ukrainian Armed Forces in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014. The book makes the important case that Russia played a key role in the orchestration of the so-called rebellion from the very beginning. At the same time, it effectively rebukes the idea that Russia's delegated invasion of 2014 followed a carefully designed and executed master plan. Instead, it shows that Russia tried to use a fragmented array of informal militias that entered Ukraine from Russia, as well as members of local radical fringe groups, to gain control over Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Russia's orchestration of this "rebellion" proceeded in an ad-hoc manner. When the Ukrainian military began to push back against Russian proxy forces successfully, the Russian leadership began supplying some of them with heavy weaponry. When these supplies failed to stop the Ukrainian advance, Russia decided to intervene with its regular armed forces, which led to a Ukrainian defeat and the First Minsk Agreement of September 2014. This was followed by Russian efforts to consolidate and simplify the structure of its proxy forces in the Donbas, and, eventually, by their formal absorption into Russian state structures during the full-scale invasion of 2022.

Particularly useful in this context is the book's use of the idea of dual delegation as proposed by Karlén and Rauta (2023). The book shows how the Russian regime tried to outsource its armed aggression against Ukraine to Russian actors outside formal state institutions. In turn, these actors tried to further delegate the rebellion to locals to preserve plausible deniability and create the impression of a civil war. However, this second delegation step was largely unsuccessful due to the lack of locals who were willing to lead and sustain an armed conflict. The result was a fragmented array of rebel groups and a reliance on fighters from Russia to lead and sustain the fighting. The book correctly highlights that the most important militias that engaged in armed combat with Ukrainian forces in the spring and summer of 2014 were led by people who had come to the Donbas from Russia. Hence, these groups can be seen as informal organs of the Russian state (see also Hauter 2023).

The book also convincingly explains some of the reasons behind Russia's efforts to destabilize Ukraine. It shows how imperial ambitions in relation to Ukraine had been deeply rooted in large parts of Russia's political elite for many years. As a result, Ukraine's democratization and European integration efforts led to fear and resentment in Russia. The 2014 Revolution of Dignity became a catalyst which left the Russian regime under the impression that it had to act. As a result, it annexed Crimea and began its delegated invasion of the Donbas. Both operations were accompanied by a relentless propaganda campaign. Particularly enlightening in this context is Laryš's analysis of how the Russian leadership used the label of fascism to mark the new Ukrainian authorities as an anti-Russian evil (pp. 48-50). Reducing the meaning of fascist to anti-Russian allowed the Russian leadership and Russian media to apply this label to the Ukrainian authorities and the Ukrainian Armed Forces while praising extreme-right-wing militias fighting for Russia as antifascists.

Moreover, the book provides a thorough overview and an in-depth discussion of the literature on principal-agent theory and conflict delegation, namely Russia's outsourcing of military operations through rebel militias to advance its

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war effort in Ukraine. It also thoroughly reviews the literature on the 2014 Donbas War and Russia's involvement in it. The number and variety of the cited sources are impressive.

However, the scale of the literature review and the cited source material have an impact on clarity and structure. At times, the book gets lost in the process of recounting the arguments of its sources and loses sight of its own argument. In the empirical chapters, the book would have benefited from referring more frequently and more explicitly to the theoretical and methodological framework it outlines in the beginning. This would have provided some useful pointers to help the reader through the steps of the causal mechanism the book proposes.

The book could be more rigorous with the chronological and spatial details of its analysis and more critical in its treatment of sources. In the discussion of the different Russia-led rebel groups in the Donbas, it is not always made clear when exactly a group emerged, where it was based, and the degree of significance of its fighting power and its contribution to the conflict. The same is the case for additional signs of Russian involvement, such as heavy arms deliveries or the presence of military supervisors or intelligence officers. The book offers a large quantity of names and describes a large number of instances, but a clearer structure that ties this data to specific times and locations in a more systematic way would have been helpful for the reader and given the book's arguments additional power. Moreover, the book mostly recounts claims made in its sources, without discussing the quality of the evidence provided by a cited source. It sometimes even cites secondary sources' summaries of primary sources without referring to these primary sources. As Tymofii Brik (2021, p.198) has argued, this kind of referencing is problematic because it has the potential to whitewash low-quality information from unreliable media sources into unquestioned academic knowledge. The book's frequent use of hedging language, such as "reportedly", "allegedly", and "purportedly" is an insufficient way of mitigating this problem.

Nevertheless, the book provides a thorough overview of the different Russian-led militias that were active in eastern Ukraine in the spring and summer of 2014. It also provides an in-depth review of the academic literature on the relevant events and of theories and methods that can be used to analyse them. For these reasons, *Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine* is a valuable addition to the academic literature for scholars who want to better understand the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. It is an important reminder that Russia's war against Ukraine began in 2014, that it is absurd to blame Ukraine for Russia's actions, and that lasting peace can only be achieved if the country is protected against future Russian attacks with robust security guarantees.

References

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Jakob Hauter received his PhD from University College London's (UCL) School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in 2022. Previously, he studied International Relations and Contemporary European Studies in Dresden, Saint Petersburg, Bath, and Siena. He is the author of the monograph *Russia's Overlooked Invasion: The causes of the 2014 outbreak of War in Ukraine's Donbas* and the editor of the collected volume *Civil War? Interstate*

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War? Hybrid War? Dimensions and Interpretations of the Donbas Conflict in 2014–2020.