

## Review - Russia's Overlooked Invasion

Written by Martin Larys

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MARTIN LARYS, JUN 27 2025

### **Russia's Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine's Donbas**

**By Jakob Hauter**

**Columbia University Press, 2024**

Jakob Hauter's *Russia's Overlooked Invasion* is a compelling analysis of the causes of the 2014 outbreak of war in Ukraine's Donbas, challenging narratives that depict the conflict as a mere civil war. Instead, Hauter argues that the events in Donbas were primarily driven by a covert Russian invasion. He finds gaps in the existing literature and confronts its deficiencies regarding the explanation of the conflict that resides in blurry definitions, historical determinism, evasion of the question as they preselect certain aspects of the conflict and predetermine the emphasis on either domestic or foreign causes, lack of regional expertise, the conflation of correlation and causation resulting from an overreliance on public opinion poll data, and insufficient source criticism.

Hauter also correctly implies that most of the extant literature claims that the war in Donbas had both civil war and interstate war elements, stressing the primary role of either Russia or domestic causes (such as Kudelia 2016; Katchanovski 2016; Loshkariov and Sushentsov 2016; Sakwa 2015, 2017; Sotiriou 2016; Matveeva 2016; Melnyk 2020; Mykhnenko 2020; Giuliano 2018). However, he argues that the conflict could be more straightforwardly explained as an act of Russian aggression disguised as a civil war. The book offers a meticulously detailed case study to substantiate Hauter's thesis that Russia's actions in 2014 constituted an unambiguous interstate invasion, despite domestic factors that the book introduces and explains.

The book also makes a broader contribution to conflict studies by revisiting classical distinctions between civil and interstate conflicts. Hauter critiques existing typologies for failing to adequately address cases like Donbas, where domestic and international elements are deeply intertwined. By disentangling these factors and demonstrating how Russia orchestrated the conflict through covert operatives, military support, and propaganda, Hauter challenges the dominant "civil war hypothesis" embraced by many Western scholars.

Drawing upon a blend of theoretical rigour and empirical evidence, the book not only critiques the academic and political framing of the conflict but also proposes an original methodology — digital forensic process tracing — to navigate the murky informational landscape of modern warfare. The book illustrates how research on war can adapt to the growing importance of modern information technology, as the 2014 Donbas War was arguably one of the first conflicts of the social media age.

One of the book's strengths lies in its innovative methodological approach. Hauter introduces the concept of "digital forensic process tracing," which leverages open-source information, such as social media posts, to reconstruct key events and assess causal dynamics. His approach complements works like Bellingcat's investigations into the war in Ukraine, which have also used OSINT to uncover Russian military involvement. By addressing the challenges of disinformation and biased narratives, Hauter positions this methodology as a tool to increase clarity in research on modern conflicts. This approach has external validity, as it can be used to study other modern conflicts heavily covered online. This is particularly relevant in the context of the Donbas war, where the abundance of contradictory information has fueled confusion and misinterpretation.

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The book is structured around six “critical junctures” that shaped the escalation of the Donbas war between April and August 2014. Each chapter delves into one of these junctures, examining the interplay of local dynamics, Russian involvement, and the broader geopolitical context. Hauter highlights the initial protests and rebellions in Donetsk and Luhansk, demonstrating how these were not spontaneous grassroots movements but heavily influenced by Russian actors. The occupation of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk is presented as a pivotal moment, with Hauter detailing the role of Igor Girkin and other Kremlin-linked operatives in orchestrating secessionist activities. The failed separatist movement in Mariupol is contrasted with other regions to underscore how varying degrees of local resistance and Russian interference affected the conflict's trajectory. Hauter also provides a detailed analysis of Russia's logistical and military support, such as the tank convoys and artillery strikes, which played a decisive role in tipping the scales against Ukrainian forces. By documenting these actions, Hauter refutes claims that the conflict was primarily an internal rebellion and argues for its classification as an interstate war.

Despite its scholarly rigour, the book is written in a clear and accessible style. Hauter avoids excessive jargon, making the book suitable for both academics and general readers interested in the conflict. Hauter's meticulous use of open-source intelligence and his ability to integrate granular details with broader theoretical insights make this book a valuable contribution to the field. However, the book's reliance on digital sources, while innovative, raises questions about the reproducibility of its findings. Disinformation and data manipulation in online spaces present inherent challenges, and while Hauter acknowledges these limitations, readers may still find certain conclusions contentious.

Russia's Overlooked Invasion is an essential read for scholars, policymakers, and anyone seeking to understand the complexities of the Donbas conflict and the broader implications of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Hauter's rigorous methodology and incisive analysis offer valuable lessons not only for the study of this specific conflict but also for understanding the nature of modern hybrid warfare. By framing the 2014 conflict as an interstate war initiated by covert Russian intervention, Hauter challenges the international community to rethink its approach to Russian aggression and its implications for global security. This book is a timely and significant contribution to the literature on post-Soviet conflicts, the geopolitics of Eastern Europe, and Russia's ongoing re-invasion of Ukraine since February 2022.

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Martin Laryš earned his Ph.D. from Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, where he actively contributes to various research projects. He currently holds the role of Research Deputy Director at the Institute of International Relations Prague (IIR). Martin has published over ten articles in high-impact academic journals, exploring a wide range of topics, including nationalism and security dynamics in post-Soviet space, organized crime, and political radicalism. Laryš is also (co-)author of two monographs published by Routledge, including the book *Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine: From Leaderless Groups to Proxy Army*.