

Review - Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands

Written by Paul Robinson

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PAUL ROBINSON, MAY 20 2015

Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands

By: Richard Sakwa

London: I.B. Tauris, 2015

Judging by the coverage of the Sochi Olympics, which often seemed to focus more on allegedly dodgy plumbing and other supposed deficiencies of Russian preparations than on the games themselves, Russophobia had acquired a firm grip on the minds of Western journalists even before the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Since then that grip has become stronger still. Richard Sakwa complains in his new book *Frontline Ukraine* that the Western media have displayed 'unabashed militancy. ... Their partisanship and profound lack of historical understanding would demean a Third World dictatorship' (p. 220). Furthermore, he claims, 'This irresponsibility reached the highest echelons of power' as politicians lined up to denounce 'Russian aggression'.

A powerful narrative has taken hold about events in Ukraine which brooks no opposition. According to this, the war in Donbas is solely the fault of Russia, and particularly of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, and ending the conflict requires the West to stand up to Russia, show resolve, and support the Ukrainian government in all its efforts to regain control of its lost territory. Anybody who dares to suggest anything else is likely to be denounced as a 'Kremlin stooge', or as one of Putin's 'useful idiots'. As Sakwa puts it, 'Those calling for restraint, consideration and dialogue have not only been ignored but also abused, and calls for sanity have not only been marginalised but also delegitimated' (p. 1). 'Arguments in favour of engagement, dialogue and a little understanding are met with a barrage of imprecations and false historical analogies,' he says (p. 116).

In this context, *Frontline Ukraine* is a courageous book. It analyzes the causes of the current conflict in Ukraine, and in the process directly challenges the prevailing narrative. Sakwa, the author of several previous books on Russian politics, paints Russia as the injured party, and lays the blame for the crisis firmly on those Ukrainians who took power in February 2014 after overthrowing President Viktor Yanukovich, as well as on their backers in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

The war in Donbas, says Sakwa, is the product of a clash between two separate pairs of competing visions. The first pair consists of two contrasting visions of Europe; the second of two contrasting visions of Ukrainian statehood. Peace in Ukraine had depended on maintaining a delicate balance between them. The overthrow of Yanukovich destroyed that balance and paved the way for the imposition of one set of visions at the expense of the other. The response to this forcible imposition was rebellion.

At the end of the Cold War, Europe could go down one of two paths, Sakwa claims: towards 'Wider Europe', which is essentially an extension of Western Europe 'with the EU at its heart'; or towards 'Greater Europe, a vision of a continental Europe, stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok' (p. 26). The West chose the former, expanding the EU and NATO eastwards while excluding Russia from the governance of the continent. 'On coming to power in 2000, Putin sought engagement and accommodation with the West ... and was perhaps the most pro-European leader Russia has ever had,' writes Sakwa (p. 30). Putin's efforts to reach accommodation with the West were, however, continually rebuffed.

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Worse, after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the EU, under the influence of the Swedish and Polish foreign ministers Carl Bildt and Radek Sikorski, designed the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to bring former Soviet states other than Russia within its fold. 'Instead of finding ways to transcend the deepening lines of division in the continent, the two [Bildt and Sikorski] set about giving these divisions institutional form,' Sakwa writes (p. 39). The goal of the EaP 'was to engineer Ukraine's separation from Russia' and thus it 'rendered the EU as much of a threat in Russian perceptions as NATO' (p. 41). The consequence was that Russia put intense pressure on Yanukovich not to sign an association agreement with the EU. His eventual refusal to sign provided the spark which ignited the Maidan protests and eventually set Donbas aflame.

The war is not, however, purely a product of this geopolitical context. The overwhelming majority of the rebel fighters are Ukrainian citizens, not Russians. This is primarily a civil war, and its roots lie within Ukraine 'There are two contrasting visions of statehood,' Sakwa writes, 'and ultimately the Ukrainian crisis of 2013-14 is a battle between the two' (p. 14). The first of these visions he describes as 'monist'. In this, the most desirable future of Ukraine is one in which there is a unitary national identity. That requires the imposition of a single historical memory on the whole country, as well as the maintenance of Ukrainian as the sole official language. The second vision Sakwa calls 'pluralist'. According to the pluralist model, 'Ukraine is not one culture but many ... a richly diverse society. ... For the pluralists multiple religious and linguistic orientations do not represent a danger to the state ... but the opposite: the diversity contributes to a rich and multifaceted culture' (p. 24).

Sakwa's sympathies lie clearly with the pluralist vision. He regards the monist alternative as ignoring Ukraine's reality, as well as being innately anti-Russian. The protests on Maidan began as a liberal, civic reaction to a corrupt government, but were hijacked by monist nationalists; 'A conservative, Russophobic nationalist ideology came to predominate' (p. 91). The new government which came to power in February 2014 instituted policies which thoroughly alienated the population of Donbas. In the face of opposition, it refused to make any meaningful concessions. Moreover, 'some of its ministers used language that was highly suggestive of the "blood and iron" purification through violence of earlier fascist movements' (p. 135). The result was rebellion. Despite the support it received from Russia, this rebellion was 'primarily a homegrown phenomenon' (p. 154). The Ukrainian government and its Western backers have refused to accept this, however, and have instead chosen to point to an external actor – Russia – as the source of their problems. They have thereby freed themselves of responsibility for their own actions, while also making it impossible for them to find solutions to the crisis.

Some may find Sakwa's analysis one-sided. Russia's mistakes and misbehaviours are explained, while those of the West and Ukraine are condemned. Nevertheless, Sakwa supports his thesis with considerable evidence and lays out a powerful case. He is entirely right to point out that the war in Donbas is as much a product of the actions of those who protested on Maidan and subsequently took power in Kiev, as of Russia. The 'blame everything on Russia' narrative which dominates in Kiev and in the West is both inaccurate and unhelpful. *Frontline Ukraine* brings much needed balance to a subject which badly needs it.

About the author:

Paul Robinson is a Professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He is the author of numerous works on Russian and Soviet history, including most recently *Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich: Supreme Commander of the Russian Army* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2014). He blogs at Irrussianality.