

New Book – Crisis in Russian Studies? Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War

Written by Taras Kuzio

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TARAS KUZIO, NOV 25 2020

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This book has six objectives. The first objective is to launch a debate about whether there is a crisis in Russian studies over finding it difficult to come to terms with the 2014 crisis and Russian-Ukrainian War. Chair of the Department of Political Science at Columbia University and Marshall Shulman Professor of Post-Soviet Politics at Columbia University Timothy Frye (2017) believes that Russian studies is thriving in political science. This book questions this claim. Indeed, it is curious that Frye (2017) neglects to mention the 2014 crisis, Crimea, Donbas or the Russian-Ukrainian War which – as this book argues – *does not* show Russian studies to be ‘alive and well,’ *but does* show ‘low quality of academic research in ‘Russian studies.’ The legitimacy of Russian actions in Crimea are often accepted and the Ukrainian counter viewpoint not taken seriously (see Zhuk 2014). There is only one ‘correct’ view of the ‘Russian history’ of Crimea and eastern Ukraine ‘which is more noble and more important than that written by ‘non-historic’ peoples. Russian identity is ‘resting on a different level, ordained with some sort of a historic nobility’ (Belafatti 2014). Only Russian feelings are to be respected, not those of subaltern subjects.

The ‘last anti-Soviet revolution’ in Ukraine ‘destroyed the traditionally accepted Moscow-centred and Russian-focused (in fact, Russian imperialist) approaches to an analysis of recent political, social, cultural, and economic developments in the post-Soviet space’ (Zhuk 2014, 207). Nevertheless, many western historians and political scientists continue to write about Russia as though nothing fundamentally has changed. This is especially true of historians who have largely ignored the emergence of independent states from the USSR in 1991 and continue to write ‘Russian’ history as including territory in independent Ukraine as ‘Russian lands.’

The crisis in Russian studies is most evident in its treatment of Russian nationalism (imperialism). Although nationalism (imperialism) was growing in Russia during the decade prior to the 2014 crisis, the tendency among political scientists has been to downplay, minimise, or temporise it (Hale 2016, 246), with a few exceptions (see Harris 2020). Moreover, all political scientists working on Russia have ignored the rehabilitation of Tsarist Russian and White *émigré* nationalism (imperialism) (Plokhly 2017, 326–327), Putin’s belief that he is the ‘gatherer of Russian lands,’[1] and the impact of these two developments on Russian attitudes toward Ukraine and Ukrainians and why they are the root cause of the 2014 crisis. Many of the authors in the over 400-page volume on Russian nationalism edited by Pal Kolsto and Helge Blakkisrud (2016) talk of the rise of ethnic Russian nationalism, its competition with imperial nationalism, and how they converged in 2014 in Crimea in defence of ethnic Russians and territorial expansionism (Kolsto 2016b, 6; Alexseev 2016, 161). At the same time, there is no discussion of how Russian ethnic nationalism is synonymous with *tryedynstva russkoho naroda* (All-Russian People) where the Russian [*Russkij*] people are viewed as composed of three branches – Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, and how Russian ethnic and imperial nationalisms became integrated in the ‘Russian spring,’ in the ‘New Russia’ (*Novorossiia* – the Tsarist term for southeastern Ukraine) project and more generally in Russian attitudes and policies toward Ukraine since 2014 (Plokhly 2017, 335). Russian nationalism has always been deeply rooted ‘in the prerevolutionary past’ and was never limited to only Russians, but always included Ukrainians and Belarusians (Plokhly 2017, 303–304).

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Marlene Laruelle (2017a) writes that *Russkij* can also be defined as encompassing only ethnic Russians or three eastern Slavs. Western scholars often ignore this important distinction of *Russkij* (see Bacon 2015, 23; Zakem, Saunders, Antoun 2015) or downplay it by arguing that Russian ethnic nationalism only became official policy when Putin was re-elected in 2012 (Alexseev 2016, 162). Laruelle (2016c, 275) believes *Russkij* identity was already 'mainstream' by 2014. Although western political scientists debate when Russian ethnic nationalism became official policy and if it was a temporary phenomenon, none of them discuss *Russkij* as *tryedynstva russkoho naroda* and the influence of such views on Putin's policies toward Ukraine in 2014 and thereafter.

The second objective is to show how historiographies of 'Russia' can provide justification for real-life nationalist (imperialist) invasions and military aggression. This would not be the case if western historians wrote civic histories of the Russian Federation but, unfortunately, western historians continue to conflate the Russian empire and nation-state and, in so doing, depict Ukraine as 'Russian lands,' thereby denying Ukrainians a separate history. Western historians promote the Russian nation as encompassing three eastern Slavs when they should be writing about a 'modern civic nation within the borders of the Russian Federation' (Plokyh 2017, 351).

My book uses the terms imperialism, nationalism, colonialism, and racism, and integrates them into discussions and analyses of Ukrainian-Russian relations, Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian War. Imperialism is used in this book to denote conquest by a country of foreign territory, in the case of this book, Russia's occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Imperialism also denotes actions, discourse and policies, and therefore it is a better term than nationalism to describe Russia (see Rowley 2000). My book understands nationalism to mean the desire to live in an independent state which has never been a paramount objective for Russian politicians, dissidents and activists. Russian dissidents did not seek the independence of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (SFSR) from the Soviet Union, and the Russian SFSR did not declare independence from the USSR. In the USSR, those who were described as 'Russian nationalists' were either hard-line supporters of Joseph Stalin within the Communist Party or dissidents who wanted to transform the USSR into a Russian Empire. As Alexander J. Motyl (1990, 161–173) wrote some three decades ago, Russian nationalism is therefore a 'myth.'

The third objective is to show how it is wrong to view Crimea as 'always having been Russian.' Sakwa (2016, 24) describes Russia's annexation of Crimea as 'repatriation.' An outgrowth of the narrative of Crimea 'always having been Russian' is portraying 'Russians' as the peninsula's first settlers and thereby denying Tatars their longer history and right to be described as the indigenous people of Crimea.

Colonialism and racism are integrated into my analysis of Crimea and the long-term persecution of its indigenous people, the Crimean Tatars. My book places Crimea's conquest in the 1780s by the Tsarist Russian Empire within the context of similar conquests by western European countries of North America in the early seventeenth century and Australia in the following century. Colonial rule by Russia, England/Britain and France brought genocide and ethnic cleansing of the First Nation indigenous peoples (Magocsi 2010, 691).

While western scholars are unanimous in condemning colonialism and mistreatment of First Nation indigenous peoples, those writing on Russian history adopt a different approach and usually support Russia's conquest of Crimea and what they see as justice served by its return to Russia in 2014 (see Zhuk 2014). The Tsarist Russian Empire, USSR and Putin's Russia have all undertaken – and continue to undertake – racial discrimination and ethnic cleansing of Crimean Tatars (see Coynash and Charron 2019; Skrypnyk 2019). In addition, Ukrainians in Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas are subjected to Soviet-style Russification.

Racism toward Crimean Tatars was never confined to the far right, as it always had its supporters in the Soviet Communist Party and post-Soviet Communist Parties of the Russian Federation and Ukraine. With such a left-wing history of racism, we should not be therefore surprised at Communist China imprisoning one million Uighurs in concentration camps. In Russia and Ukraine, political forces are divided into two camps over their attitudes toward Crimean Tatars. Racists believe the fictitious Stalinist charge that Crimean Tatars collaborated with the Nazis. These political forces include Soviet and post-Soviet communists, Russian nationalist (imperialist) extreme right forces, the

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former Ukrainian Party of Regions and, following its disintegration, the Opposition Bloc (*Opozytsiynyy blok*) and Opposition Platform-For Life (*Opozytsiyna platforma – za zhyttya*). Political forces holding a non-racist view of Crimean Tatars include Ukrainian nationalist and democratic forces. Crimean Tatars were elected to the Ukrainian parliament by *Rukh* (Ukrainian Popular Movement for Restructuring), Our Ukraine and the Petro Poroshenko bloc. Those political forces who support Putin, the *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) and Eurasian integration hold a racist view of Crimean Tatars while those who support European integration do not.

The fourth objective is a critical literature review of academic orientalist writing about the absence of nationalism in Russia and exaggerated accounts of nationalism in Ukraine. Some, but not all, of this writing is by what I term *Putinversteher* (Putin-Understander) scholars who seek to always deflect criticism from Russian President Putin and Russia and lay blame on Ukraine, NATO, the EU, and the US.

Nationalism in Ukraine is often discussed and analysed through Soviet and contemporary Russian lenses. Ukraine has one of the lowest rates of electoral support for nationalism in Europe if we use the political science definition of nationalism. During a war that has killed upwards of 20,000 people, what are understood in Europe as nationalist parties failed to be elected in the 2014 and 2019 Ukrainian elections. If a Soviet and contemporary Russian understanding of 'nationalism' is instead used, Ukraine is overflowing with 'nationalists' because it is applied to all those who rejected the Soviet system, want Ukraine to live outside the Russian World (*Russkij Mir*) and supported the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions.

Some western scholars seek to minimise or deny that Putin's regime is nationalistic or claim that he resorted to nationalism temporarily between 2013–14 and 2015–16. This claim flies in the face of multiple sources of evidence of nationalism (imperialism) within Putin's authoritarian regime. In making this argument, western scholars ignore how Russian nationalism under Putin exchanged the Soviet nationality concept of close but separate 'brotherly peoples' with the Tsarist Russian and White *émigré* conception of the *triyedinyi russkij narod* composed of three branches – Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. It is difficult to see how an argument can be made that Putin's Russia is not nationalistic when it denies the existence of Ukraine and Belarus, and when Russian leaders and media repeatedly state that Ukrainians and Russians (and Belarusians and Russians) are 'one people.'

The fifth objective is to provide a counter-narrative of Russian military aggression to understand the Russian-Ukrainian War taking place in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Russian intervention in Ukraine took place throughout the decade prior to the 2014 crisis and should be investigated not only from a purely military angle of boots on the ground, but through all aspects of Russian 'full spectrum conflict' (Jonsson and Seely 2015). Refusing to define the Russian-Ukrainian War as a 'civil war' is both a reflection of crisis in Russian studies and an outgrowth of the tendency to exaggerate the influence of Ukrainian nationalism in the Euromaidan Revolution and post-Euromaidan Ukrainian politics.

The sixth objective is to show why peace is unlikely because the choice of who Ukrainians elect is far less important than the fact that Russia's president will remain in power for a further 16 years. Although the Russian-Ukrainian War has been counter-productive and led to a reduction in Russian soft power in Ukraine, there will not be peace as long as Putin and Russian leaders continue to deny the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians.

This book makes seven main points.

First, there are four implications arising from the manner in which histories of 'Russia' are written by western historians. The first is that Ukrainian territory is depicted as always 'Russian,' with Ukrainians inexplicably arriving from an unknown place and 'squatting' on 'Russian lands.' The second is because western histories of 'Russia' are the same or similar to official Russian views of 'Russian' history and discourse toward Ukraine and Ukrainians they have become – unwittingly – partners in Russian nationalism (imperialism) against Ukraine. Serhii Plokhy (2017, 331) writes about the link between Putin's belief in Russians and Ukrainians being 'one people' slated to live eternally in the Russian World with the Russian army annexing Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine. The fourth is histories of Ukraine are written in the same manner as civic histories of European nation-states with Kyiv Rus as the beginning of Ukrainian history (Subtelny 1988, 1991, 1994a, 1994b, 2000, 2009; Magocsi 1996, 1997, 2010, 2012;

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Plokhy 2015, 2016). Histories with 'Kievan Russia' (Kyiv Rus) as the beginning of 'Russian history' are imperial histories which have nothing in common with European civic historiography of nation-states. Ukraine's approach is compatible with democratisation and European values, while an imperial history of Russia is synonymous with ethnic and political repression and foreign military aggression.

Second, western and Russian historians uphold Russian claims to Crimea in two ways. The first is that 'Kievan Russia' (Kyiv Rus) was a 'Russian land' and Crimea was therefore always 'Russian.' The second is that Russia has controlled Crimea since 1783 and therefore has always been 'Russian.' Both of these claims – just as in the first point – provide sustenance for Russian military aggression. Claiming that 'Kievan Russia' (Kyiv Rus) was always 'Russian' denies Ukraine its historical origins, while using the 1783 annexation to depict Crimea as 'always having been Russian' denies Crimean Tatars as Crimea's indigenous people (Sakwa (2016, 24).

Third, there was neither majority support for separatism in Crimea nor the Donbas prior to or in 2014. Opinion polls conducted in spring 2014 found no majority support for separatism in Crimea or any region of mainland Ukraine (Coynash 2019). In the eight *oblasts* of southeastern Ukraine, the highest rate of support of between 18–33% for separatism was to be found in the two *oblasts* of the Donbas. In the eight *oblasts* of southeastern Ukraine, an average of 15.4% supported separatism, and only 8.4% supported the unification of Ukraine and Russia into one state (The Views and Opinions of South-Eastern Regions Residents of Ukraine 2014).

In Crimea, a Russian invasion of sovereign Ukrainian territory was legitimised by a sham, Soviet-style referendum. In the Donbas, extremist Russian nationalists supported by a minority of the region's inhabitants took power with the assistance of Russian hybrid warfare. While separatists in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh had sizeable support because the conflict was ethnically driven, the war in the Donbas has always been artificial and led by foreign actors. It is therefore flawed to describe what is taking place as a 'civil war' in the Donbas (see Kolsto 2016b, 16).

Fourth, Putin's justification for invading Crimea and invading eastern Ukraine (which in the latter case Russia has always denied) to defend Russian speakers was bogus. No opinion polls or international organisation reported discrimination of Russian speakers (Plokhy 2017, 339). Putin's justification 'harked back to 1938 rather than 1989' (Plokhy 2017, 339). In Crimea, 'reactive settler nationalism' (Yekelchuk 2019) exercised hegemonic control and discriminated against Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian minorities. In the Donbas, the Party of Regions and extremist Russian nationalist groups discriminated against Ukrainian speakers and the Jewish minority.

Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine are provided with a wide range of educational, cultural, religious and media facilities. In the Donbas and Crimea, the Soviet era institutionalisation of the hegemony of the Russian language has been reinforced since 2014. In Ukraine, Russians and Russian speakers can vote for pro-Russian parties, go to Russian-language schools, watch Russian-language and pro-Russian television channels, and they can attend religious services in the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin's representative in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk, is the owner of three television channels.

Fifth, since 1783, Crimean Tatars have experienced national revivals for only 33 years during what was appropriately called *korenisation* (indigenisation) in 1923–1933 in the USSR and independent Ukraine from 1991–2013. For nearly two centuries, Crimean Tatars suffered from genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, and Islamophobia in the Tsarist Russian Empire and USSR, and since 2014 under Russian occupation, 'hybrid genocide,' as coined by Crimean Tatar journalist Ayder Muzhdabayev (Goble 2015).

Sixth, a majority of Russian speakers in Ukraine hold a civic Ukrainian not a Russian World identity and they therefore did not support the 'Russian spring' or 'New Russia' project in 2014 or since. Many western scholars were surprised at this because they held stereotypical myths of a regionally divided Ukraine (see Darden and Way 2014), did not understand Russian speaking Ukrainian patriotism, and did not take this patriotism into account when writing about the Russian-Ukrainian War. There are no differences in regional levels of patriotism among Ukrainians with 85% in the west, 83% in the south, and 82% in the east defining themselves as 'Ukrainian patriots,' and 63% in Ukraine's west, 54% in the south, and 50% in the east ready to use weapons to defend Ukraine from foreign attack

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(Defenders Day of Ukraine 2020). Russian military aggression is being mainly fought by Russian speaking Ukrainians who constitute the majority of the casualties (see Map 6.2). Putin is not defending but killing Russian speakers in Ukraine and driving them into becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

Seven, during the first half of the 1990s, the Russian Federation did not prioritise nation-building, and Boris Yeltsin first raised the question of formulating a 'national idea' for the new state in 1996, the same year he supported the contradictory policy of a Russian-Belarusian union (Prizel 1998). Yitzhak Brudny (1998, 261) argues that it is the absence of civic nationalism that has undermined Russia's post-Soviet political and economic transition process (see Tolz 1998a, 1998b; Kolsto 2016a, 3; Blakkisrud 2016, 260). The editor of the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti*, Maxim Trudolybov (2016), explained the different paths of Russia and Ukraine: 'The Russian body politic equates society with the state. Ukraine, with its growing number of volunteer movements, nongovernment charities and independent political parties, is occupied in framing a new civic identity.'

Ukraine is building the civic identity that has eluded Russia. Civic nationalism and patriotism are predominant in Ukraine – not ethnic nationalism (see Clem 2014; Kulyk 2014, 2016; Onuch and Hale 2018; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018; Kaihko 2018; Onuch and Sasse 2018; Bureiko and Moga 2019; Nedozhogina 2019). Ukrainian patriots blame Russian leaders and the Russian state for military aggression against their country – not the Russian people. Crimean Tatars and Jews would not have fled from Crimea and the Donbas, respectively, to Ukraine if it were run by extremist 'nationalists.' Russian speakers would not be fighting for Ukraine if nationalism dominated post-Euromaidan politics.

This book has six chapters. Chapter 1 analyses western, Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary Russian historiography of 'Russia,' which to varying degrees and in different forms portrays Ukraine as 'Russian land.' The second chapter discusses Crimea and why Tatars are its indigenous people and provides a survey of Russian territorial claims to the peninsula which long pre-date 2014. The third chapter critically investigates what I define as academic orientalist writing through Russian eyes of the 2014 crisis, Crimea and Russian-Ukrainian War. The fourth chapter analyses academic orientalist minimising of nationalism in Russia and exaggerating levels of nationalism in Ukraine. The fifth chapter critically engages with depictions of a 'civil war' between Ukrainians by providing a wide variety of evidence of Russian intervention prior to and since 2014 to argue that what is taking place is a Russian-Ukrainian War. The concluding chapter discusses the negative impact of the war on Russian soft power in Ukraine and analyses why there are few grounds to believe peace will be achieved during Putin's tenure of Russia.

[1] The exception was Mark Galeotti who I am grateful for pointing out Putin's evolution after 2008 into thinking of himself as the 'gatherer of Russian lands.'

About the author:

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