

Sorting Out Ukraine Conflict's History

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media's narrative of the Ukraine crisis – hailing the 2014 Maidan uprising and blaming the ensuing conflict on Russia – is facing challenge in some early historical accounts, writes James W. Carden.

By James W. Carden

While the good folks of the Washington establishment have been keeping themselves busy trying to invent new ways to cripple and delegitimize the presidency of Donald J. Trump, the war in Ukraine, now entering its fourth year, has, of late, gone largely unremarked upon.

Yet it continues. A report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published on June 13 finds that over the past three months there have been ceasefire violations committed by both parties to the conflict. According to the report, the “routine use of small arms and light and heavy weapons in the conflict zone” has resulted in “damage to critical infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and water facilities.” To date, over 10,000 people, including roughly 3,000 civilians, have been killed since the conflict began in 2014.

This past February marked the three-year anniversary of Euro-Maidan uprising, which saw Ukraine's democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich overthrown and replaced by a pro-Western coalition government made up of his political opponents.

As the drama played out, a small but influential coterie of Western journalists, who had previously shown themselves susceptible to the charms of regime-change wars, by and large shaped what became the mainstream narrative of the Ukraine crisis.

The narrative boils down to this: had it not been for the actions of Vladimir Putin following the glories of the Euro-Maidan protests, Ukraine would have, peacefully and in due course, joined the European family of nations. But Putin, so the story goes, was infuriated that Ukraine rejected his vision of a neo-Soviet Eurasian Economic Union, and took revenge by annexing Crimea. Having stolen Crimea, Putin then turned his sights on the Russophone eastern part of Ukraine where forces under his control have been waging “hybrid war” ever since.

It is often said, that journalism – especially the version coming from The New York Times, The Washington Post and other mainstream newspapers – serves as the “first draft” of history. And, if that is true, the mainstream narrative of

Ukraine's post-Maidan innocence and Russian perfidy sums up the "first draft" in a nutshell. Since then, that first draft has evolved into a second draft published by big-name authors, such as *Imperial Gamble* by Marvin Kalb, a former Moscow bureau chief for NBC News. Ambitious in scope, Kalb's book reflects the widely held, but erroneous, view that Putin's Russia was the principal driver of the crisis and subsequent war.

A Mixed Bag

To his credit, every now and then Kalb breaks free from the Official Washington narrative. Describing the neo-fascist flavor of the Maidan protests, Kalb writes that a number of far-right groups who were increasingly at the center of the action "would have made the Nazi-era Gestapo look like a happy band of bigots and bandits."

Kalb, unlike many of his peers in the think tank community (Kalb is a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution) also notes with distaste that a leader of the neo-Nazi Azov battalion was named chief of police in post-Maidan Kiev. "Instead of reining in far-right militias," writes Kalb, Kiev "has actually been providing them with tanks and armored personnel carriers."

Kalb is equally clear-eyed about the tactics that Ukraine's new leaders employed to garner Western aid. "A number of unethical Ukrainian politicians" seem to have found the magic formula, which, according to Kalb, is this: "bedazzle the West into believing that Ukraine is a vital strategic asset in a continuing East-West struggle between democracy and autocracy, between freedom and oppression..."

Toward the end of *Imperial Gamble*, Kalb begins to sound a lot like a foreign policy realist, writing that because Putin holds all the cards in the Ukraine crisis, the current president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, "will have to accept the best deal he can get." Indeed, Kalb flirts with outright apostasy when he concludes that "any real solution to the current crisis must first satisfy the interests of Russia and then those of Ukraine."

Yet for all of its strengths, Kalb's account is marred by problems both large and small. First, there are the factual errors. Describing the aftermath of Yanukovich's decision not to sign the European Union Association Agreement (AA) in November 2013, Kalb writes that "hundreds of thousands of disenchanting Ukrainians rushed to the streets" and "days later" Yanukovich fled.

In fact, most accounts put the initial number of Maidan protesters at around a 2,000 or so, while Yanukovich did not flee "days later" – he fled three months later on Feb. 22, 2014, after weeks of increasingly violent riots, which led to

the deaths of more than a dozen police and scores of protesters.

Exaggerated Claims

Kalb writes that on Feb. 23, "Crimea was about to change ownership. Eastern Ukraine was about to descend into civil war." Yet the civil war did not begin until April 6. After Crimea held a referendum to secede from Ukraine and join Russia in March 2014, Kalb writes that the anti-Maidan rallies that took place in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Maiupol and Odessa were "instigated by Moscow and organized by Russian special forces in the region" – a claim he makes repeatedly throughout the book.

Yet as the University of Ottawa's Paul Robinson points out, "the idea that Russian special forces were active as far as Kharkiv and Odessa is quite unsubstantiated."

Kalb often asserts things for which there is precious little evidence. Readers are informed that "historians in Putin's Russia no longer adhered to the standards of objective scholarship." Of Putin's allegedly longstanding plan to retake Crimea, Kalb writes, "Putin circled Crimea on an imaginary map. Here Russia would act."

Kalb writes that "Putin lives in a strange corner of the Kremlin where fear and hubris coexist in an awkward embrace" and where, presumably, he hatches his plans for world domination. And he is a crusher of dissent. Kalb repeats the usual litany of abuses attributed to Putin: "He has tried to freeze political debate," "he approves the assassination of political critics," "he has been, without a doubt, the strongest Russian autocrat since Stalin, yet oddly, the most vulnerable."

Nor is that all. Putin, strong and vulnerable, is also "like a spoiled child" who "does not like being ignored or scolded." Yet delivering speeches in the Kremlin "does wonders for his ego." Indeed, Putin cannot "imagine life without an autocratic grip on political power."

Yet by the end of *Imperial Gamble*, Kalb suddenly strikes a note of caution, telling readers that "we should stop personalizing East-West differences, laying all our problems on Putin's shoulders." While true, this would've been a bit more convincing if the author hadn't spent the previous 100 pages doing just that.

A Glaring Flaw

Yet the book's most glaring flaw is its premise: that Russia is solely to blame for the crisis. As Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer point out in *Conflict in*

Ukraine, the idea that Russia caused the crisis “exemplifies the single factor fallacy.” Scrupulously even-handed, Menon and Rumer depart from Kalb’s analysis by identifying causes of the crisis other than those originating out of Moscow.

Moreover, whereas Kalb’s narrative is marred by errors and an over-reliance on hyperbole (calling post-coup Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk an “international superstar”) and cliché (on Feb. 22 “the earth shook”), *Conflict in Ukraine* is a crisply written overview of the crisis which serves as a successful rebuttal to the entrenched idea that the crisis was all Putin’s doing.

Another strength of Menon and Rumer’s offering is that it puts the crisis into the larger context of East-West relations. In addition to being a manifestation of the centuries-long divide within Ukraine, the crisis is also “a symptom of an even larger problem for Europe.” The inability of Western leaders to find a satisfactory answer to the problem of Russia’s place in Europe has been exacerbated by two separate, but related, issues.

The first has to do with NATO expansion. The original iteration of NATO was driven by a desire, in the words of NATO’s first Secretary-General, Lord Ismay, to “keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” Menon and Rumer note that once the Cold War ended, NATO was robbed of its *raison d’être* and, in search of one, decided to expand both its membership and its writ. And so, between 1999 and 2009, NATO added 12 new members, expanding the alliance to Russia’s western border.

According to Menon and Rumer, the West’s decision to expand was met with “perplexity and resentment” in Russia. NATO’s expansion to Russia’s doorstep is, according to the University of Chicago’s John J. Mearsheimer, “the taproot of the current crisis.”

And indeed, the failure to build a sustainable post-Cold War security architecture lies at the heart of the crisis. Menon and Rumer note, “what was done for Germany in the 1950s was not done for Russia in the 1990s.” Still worse, to do so never even seemed to cross the minds of Western policymakers: NATO membership for Russia was “never seriously considered, and if it came up, it was only as a far-fetched, theoretical possibility.”

Downturn in Relations

If NATO expansion played a central role in the downturn in relations between Russia and the West, the role played by the European Union’s expansionist agenda has been no less significant. Menon and Rumer are particularly critical of the E.U.’s Eastern Partnership initiative (EaP), which, starting in 2009, sought to bring six former Soviet republics into the E.U.’s orbit. And it was Ukraine,

which was, as the neocon functionary Carl Gershman once put it “the biggest prize.”

Menon and Rumer demonstrate that the EaP was deeply flawed from the start. Given Ukraine’s importance to Russia, the idea that any Russian leader, no less Vladimir Putin, would countenance Ukraine’s absorption into the E.U. strikes the authors as fanciful.

The E.U.’s myopic focus on expansion caused its leadership to fail to see what should have been perfectly clear all along: that Moscow did not view E.U. membership for Ukraine as benign. It saw a “link” between E.U. membership and NATO membership. And in fact, there is a link: the Association Agreement’s *acquis communautaire* has specific foreign policy and security protocols embedded within it. Simply put: E.U. membership sets the stage for NATO membership.

Nevertheless, the E.U. continued down its perilous course, giving, according to Menon and Rumer, “little thought, if any at all, to how it would deal with the eventuality of Russian resistance.” Indeed, this apparent failure is nothing less than a manifestation of what the historian Richard Sakwa has described as the E.U.’s tendency toward “geopolitical nihilism.”

In *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, a uniformly excellent treatment of the crisis and its attendant causes, Sakwa decries what he views as a reckless rush to isolate Russia from the rest of Europe. Sakwa’s bitingly describes the crisis as “a festival of irresponsibility.”

Two Views of Ukraine

Sakwa’s account is straightforward. According to Sakwa there are two aspects of the Ukraine crisis: internal and international. The internal crisis is marked by a division between those who see Ukraine as a “monolingual, culturally autonomous” state that should align itself with Europe and NATO, and those, primarily in the east, who believe the state should embrace ethnic and linguistic pluralism. For them, Ukraine is “an assemblage of different traditions” where Russian is recognized as an official language and economic and security ties with Russia are maintained.

According to Sakwa, the international aspect of the crisis stems from the unwelcome transformation of the E.U. from an institution which, in its early years “sought to transcend the logic of conflict” to one which is now functions as the “civilian wing” of NATO. Like Rumer and Menon, Sakwa decries the failure of Western policymakers to “establish a genuinely inclusive and equal security system” in the post-Cold War era.

While Sakwa places the bulk of the blame for the crisis on the hubris of the

E.U., in *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard and How the West Was Checkmated*, Natylie Baldwin and Kermit Heartsong cast a gimlet eye on the role the U.S. has played in the crisis. Heartsong and Baldwin demonstrate that the project to wrest Ukraine out of Russia's orbit owes a great deal to the ideas of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski the neoconservative wing of the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

Baldwin and Heartsong's denunciation of U.S. foreign policy also serves as a primer on the roots of the conflict, which includes a detailed account of how the "color revolutions" of 2002-2009 served as a trial run for the events that later swept the Maidan. As the authors note, what was true for the first "color revolutions," holds for the Maidan today: despite lofty expectations, the revolutions "brought social, political, and economic suffering" in their wake.

The newest addition to the literature comes courtesy of the Dutch journalist Chris Kaspar de Ploeg, who refuses to go along with the mainstream Western narrative that has studiously ignored the ultra-nationalist, neo-fascist aspects of post-Maidan Ukraine. De Ploeg's *Ukraine in the Crossfire* is a deeply researched account that lets no one in this sordid drama off the hook. Hunter Biden's shady business dealings, Natalie Jaresko's greed, Victoria Nuland's imperial pretensions, and Petro Poroshenko's gross criminality are each given their due.

What makes De Ploeg's account particularly valuable is his detailed examination of the role of the far right in perpetuating not only the violence which racked the Maidan but in then launching a brutal war (the so-called "anti-terrorist operation") against the Russian-backed rebels and the civilian Russophone population of eastern and southern Ukraine. The atrocities carried out by neo-Nazi militias like Right Sector and the Azov battalion are glossed over in the Western press almost as a matter of course, but, as De Ploeg shows, ignoring their influence and reach makes a rational understanding of the conflict impossible.

Edmund Wilson once wrote that "it is all too easy to idealize a social upheaval which takes place in some other country than one's own." And this is an illusion that has plagued the mainstream narrative regarding the Ukrainian revolution from the start. Yet with the appearance of several of these titles, we can begin to discern a shift away from the triumphalist one-note narrative of the Ukraine crisis toward one which recognizes the complex reality of a crisis that is now in its fourth year.

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