
REVIEW ESSAY

Ukraine, Russia, and the West: The Battle over Blame

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Menon, Rajan, and Eugene B. Rumer. *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*. Boston: MIT Press, 2015. xix + 220 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-262-02904-9.

Sakwa, Richard. *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: I. B. Taurus, 2015. xiv + 297 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 978-1-78453-064-8.

Wilson, Andrew. *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. ix + 236 pp. \$17.00 (paper). ISBN 978-0-300-21159-7.

Since Ukraine's revolution in 2014, and the subsequent conflict between Ukraine and Russia, two directly contradictory interpretations of the sources and implications of the crisis have emerged. The prevailing view in the West is that the revolution in Ukraine was driven primarily by a desire to preserve democracy against the predations of Viktor Yanukovich, and the subsequent conflict with Russia was the result of Russian aggression. A distinct minority in the West subscribe to a view that is much closer to that espoused by Russian leaders and media: The revolution in Ukraine was driven by extreme nationalism and the subsequent conflict with Russia was driven by Western expansion at Russia's expense, which left Russia no choice but to respond. These two schools of thought are divided on four more specific issues. The first concerns whether the United States, NATO, and the European Union should be criticized for doing too much or too little. The second, similarly, concerns the extent to which Russia actively contributed to events in Ukraine or passively responded. The third concerns whether Ukrainian nationalists played a major or minor role in the "Revolution of Dignity" and subsequent events. The fourth is whether Crimea (and perhaps eastern Ukraine) rightfully belong to Ukraine or Russia.

The three books under review represent this debate. Andrew Wilson's book expresses the predominant Western view that puts most of the blame on Russia. Richard Sakwa's is a polemical attack on Western policy and Ukrainian nationalism, and a defense of Russia. Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer also place most of the blame on the West, but are much more moderate in their rhetoric.

Did the West cause the crisis by provoking Russia, or do too little to deter Russia? Sakwa and Menon/Rumer see the West driving a passive Russia into a corner from which it has no option but to respond, and see Ukrainian nationalists creating a threat that spurred separatism and forced Russia to intervene. These authors blame NATO and the EU for not

respecting Russia's power and interests, and lament that "what was done for Germany in the 1950s was not done for Russia in the 1990s after the west 'won' the Cold War."¹ NATO expansion, they say, violated the spirit of the agreements that ended the Cold War and encroached on Russia's "legitimate interests." By promoting regime change in Kyiv, the West meddled in an area that Russia considered its backyard; and by entertaining the notion that Ukraine might someday join NATO, the West created a threat that Russia had no choice but to counter. Wilson, in contrast, sees the West standing by while an activist Russia worked to undermine Ukraine's democracy and independence: "America's voice in Eastern Europe was barely audible off-stage before the Ukraine crisis broke in November 2013" (p. viii).

Opinions on Russia's role are basically reversed. Menon/Rumer and Sakwa see Russia as having been essentially passive. Both books detail the actions of others (the United States, NATO, the EU, and the Ukrainian government and nationalists) that Russia feared, but have little to say about developments within Russia or about Russian actions. While Menon and Rumer acknowledge that Russia's actions in Crimea and the Donbas "unquestionably ratcheted up the crisis," their account gives Russia very little role in the events leading up to the crisis (p. xvii). Sakwa goes much further, describing Russia as a "defensive, conservative, neo-revisionist power" (p. 116). This seems to be a contradiction, but Sakwa explains that "the essence of neo-revisionism is not the attempt to create new rules or dangle a vision of an alternative international order, but the attempt to ensure the universal application of existing norms" (p. 31). Moreover, Russia was made a "neo-revisionist power" by forces beyond its control, namely Ukrainian nationalism and Western policy (p. 116). For Sakwa, even when Russia is arming fighters in eastern Ukraine, it is passive and powerless: "although notoriously risk averse, in this case [Putin] allowed armaments to be supplied to groups over which he had little control. This meant that effectively the Kremlin became hostage to these forces" (p. 196).

Paraphrasing the historian Norman Stone, Wilson says the source of the crisis is that "the Russians went ape (p. vii)." He gives no credence to the notion that the "little green men" in Crimea were locally controlled, or that Russia was not directly involved in eastern Ukraine. He shows how Russia worked assiduously for years to penetrate Ukrainian politics and how it laid the groundwork for the Crimea takeover.

Was extreme Ukrainian nationalism a central force in the events of 2013–14, or a sideshow? Sakwa sees the 2014 revolution, as well as conflict in Crimea and the Donbas, as being driven by "monist nationalists" seeking to extinguish pluralism in Ukraine's ethnic and linguistic conditions. In this view, the conflicts in Crimea and the Donbas are primarily an intra-Ukraine affair, rather than being fed by Russian actions; they are secessions as much as invasions. For Wilson, the revolution was not primarily about nationalism, but "an attempt at the anti-Soviet revolution that it never had in 1991" (pp. viii–ix). Having written previously on "virtual politics," Wilson does not take Ukrainian extremist groups at face value, showing that many of the most extreme nationalist groups were "projects" of pro-Yanukovich oligarchs, who were eager to discredit the opposition. He dismisses as "a myth" the notion that the new government was controlled by nationalists, identifying Yulia Tymoshenko's supporters as the biggest force. Where Sakwa sees the repeal of Yanukovich's 2012 language law as a sign of nationalist dominance, Wilson sees it as a tactical mistake,

¹Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 160. See also Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, 6. Henceforth, page references to the books under review will be given in parentheses in the text.

because it played into Russian propaganda; but he dismisses the notion that the Russian language was in any danger in Ukraine (pp. 146, 148).

As Wilson shows, it was a defense of pluralism, not nationalism, that unified such a disparate array of actors behind the effort to oust Yanukovich. While Ukraine's democracy is deeply flawed, political pluralism still prevails in the country, and Yanukovich was well on his way to ending that. Sakwa acknowledges that signing the EU Association Agreement "would mean that Ukraine would escape joining the club of 'dictators for life,'" but does not seem to think this is very important (p. 90). The desire to preserve that pluralism explains why the "dictatorship laws" enacted on January 16, 2014, so inflamed the protestors, and why oligarchs with no interest in Ukrainian nationalism backed Yanukovich's ouster. Moreover, it helps explain the Ukrainian opposition's hostility to Russia, which was based not only in nationalism but in the fear that Putin sought to impose his brand of authoritarianism on Ukraine. Sakwa and Menon/Rumer acknowledge Yanukovich's corruption, but underestimate Yanukovich's threat to unbalance a political system that had always remained pluralist, if not fully democratic.

Should Crimea belong to Ukraine or Russia? There is an underlying disagreement here that is not clearly articulated. Menon and Rumer provide an excellent discussion of how the annexation was viewed in Russia, and of its political impact in Russia, but they offer no clear judgment on the legality or legitimacy of the annexation. Sakwa clearly sympathizes with Russia's position. He cites the argument, made by Putin in a 2014 speech, that Khersones, near Sevastopol, is where Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity for all Rus' in 988, and states: "The Crimean peninsula is the heartland of Russian nationhood" (p. 12). Wilson, pointing to the same speech, says that the notion of an "eternal Russian' Crimea is ... nonsense." In Wilson's view, "the Crimean Tatars have the strongest claim to the history of the peninsula (pp. 99, 100)." Oddly, none of the three books asks what international law says about sovereignty over the peninsula. What is the controlling principle, and which facts matter most? What of the 1991 referendum, the subsequent legal dissolution of the Soviet Union, or the 1997 state treaty between Russia and Ukraine? Going forward, how can Crimea's *de facto* status as Russian territory be legalized?

None of these books is a work of social science, in that none advances competing hypotheses and seeks to test them. Wilson reads like a work of history, Menon/Rumer as an analysis of policy, and Sakwa as a polemic (calling a leading European politician a "fruitcake" is an extreme example of his rhetorical approach). Menon and Rumer strive to present facts, for which they provide ample references, without much explicit judgment. They are only partly successful, as the selection of facts inherently implies an interpretation which their seemingly neutral language cannot obscure. Wilson relies extensively on his own interviews, both in Kyiv and Moscow, as well as on personal observation of the protests in Kyiv. Sakwa relies heavily on secondary sources, and many of his most piercing assertions are articulated through quotations or long paraphrases from Russian government officials or analysts, or commentators from the English press, most frequently the *Guardian*. Given the role of disinformation and "information warfare" in this conflict, relying on media commentaries and even comments on blog posts is particularly fraught.

More than the other books, Sakwa's eschews chronology, instead arranging events as needed to support particular arguments. This jumbling of chronology leads to some jumbling of causes and effects. As chapter 4 on "The February Revolution" comes to a close, Sakwa discusses the incident in Odessa in which forty-eight pro-Russian protestors were burned to death. The next paragraph begins: "The option of evolutionary ... change was lost," and then goes on to discuss the seizure of Crimea (pp. 98–99). The clear impression is that the

events in Odessa spurred and partly justified the takeover of Crimea, but in fact the Odessa tragedy took place nearly two months after Crimea was seized. This is confusing, to say the least.

Is there any possibility to narrow the range of disagreement between these perspectives? I would suggest that applying some concepts from the literature on international relations and decision making might help us develop a perspective that can at least make room for both perspectives, if not reconcile them. At the same time, however, there are important barriers to meaningful agreement on many of the key issues.

On the first debate, whether the West was too passive or too active in Eastern Europe in the years and months before the crisis, the debate prompts us to consider the “security dilemma.” This staple concept in both realist and liberal international relations theory points to a basic challenge for state security: if states do not take steps to protect themselves, they are vulnerable, but if they do take steps, they increase the insecurity of their neighbors, whose predictable response leaves the first state less secure.

Realist theorists stress that this dilemma makes insecurity an inherent part of international politics. Unfortunately, realism has been poorly applied to the Ukraine case by one of its leading voices, John Mearsheimer. Rather than apply his own theory, which declares that states “are fated to clash as each competes for advantage,” and that “this is a tragic situation, but there is no escaping it unless the states that make up the system agree to form a world government,” Mearsheimer for some reason puts the blame for the conflict in Ukraine in the West. It does not make a lot of sense for a realist to blame Western liberal policies for a conflict that realism sees as rooted in the nature of international politics. Indeed, a realist might well argue that since great powers’ “ultimate aim is to gain a position of dominant power over others,” the United States should do whatever it can in Ukraine to weaken Russia.²

Sakwa, echoing Mearsheimer, mentions the security dilemma briefly, invoking it to blame the EU for not acknowledging that its expansion to the east threatened Russia (pp. 43–44). But the whole point of the term “dilemma” is that the actor faces a security challenge *either way*. As Menon and Rumer acknowledge, “NATO expansion resulted at least as much from the desire of states who were part of the USSR or the ‘Soviet bloc’ ... as from a campaign driven by Washington” (p. 134). For NATO and the EU, eastward expansion would predictably raise Russia’s ire, but not expanding would also have negative consequences, notably endangering democracy and security in the region. In sum, given the situation that emerged after the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both the West and the new Russia (not to mention Ukraine) faced a security dilemma. Acknowledging this would allow analysts to focus more on how this one might be mitigated or worsened.

Prospect theory, which was widely applied in the international relations theory after arising in behavioral economics, might also have something to tell us about this debate. Essentially, the argument is that we weigh losses more heavily than gains of the same magnitude; the key conclusion is that actors will take disproportionate risks to avoid a potential loss. This might help to explain Russia’s continuing focus on Ukraine and Crimea. For whatever reason, and whether outsiders agree or not, it appears that many Russians consider the separation of Ukraine (with Crimea) in 1991 as a loss, and that they see it this way to this day. This would help to explain, but not to justify, the extreme steps taken to recover it.

²John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, 2001), pp. xi–xii.

To the extent that this is true, it implies that there are particular losses, rather than some insatiable appetite, that is driving Russian revanchism. This is what many Russians have claimed. That does not mean that the West *should* accede to these desires; nor does it mean that the West is at fault for Russia invading Ukraine. It simply provides an explanation for Russian behavior other than some sort of atavistic desire to expand.

Unfortunately, prospect theory also points to why finding real peace in the region may be exceedingly difficult. If indeed there is a “status quo” bias, then a disputed status quo is likely to be especially conflict-prone. If both Ukraine and Russia regard the Donbas as part of their state, both will endure significant risks and costs to avoid losing it. Similarly, on a larger scale, if both the West and Russia consider Ukraine to be part of their orbit, then the conflict is likely to endure.

While viewing the Ukraine-Russia conflict through the lens of existing theories would help move debate in a productive direction, significant barriers to agreement remain. First among them is establishing the facts of what happened. Even Wilson, whose book has the best empirical support, often has to rely “alleged” events, and Sakwa does so extensively. Several of the actors involved, especially the Russian government, have worked assiduously to obscure the record.

Second, as noted above, many of the key arguments are counterfactual—especially that over what would have happened had NATO not expanded eastward. Putin, Sakwa, and to a lesser extent Menon and Rumer, all critique NATO expansion, arguing that it put us on the road to the Ukraine crisis. But we do not know whether not expanding NATO would have led to a different or better outcome. Absent NATO expansion, would Central and Eastern Europe have become more secure, democratic, and wealthy than at any time in their history?

Nor do we know that without NATO expansion, Russia would have been less determined to reassert its influence in the “near abroad.” There is a strong case to be made that many Russian elites never accepted what happened in 1991 and almost immediately set about trying to undo it, long before NATO expanded. In 1992, less than a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian 14th Army supported the secession of Transnistria from Moldova. In September 1993, Russia threatened to cut energy deliveries to Ukraine if it did not acquiesce to Russian demands on a number of issues, including the status of Sevastopol. And in December 1994, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution aimed at limiting the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, undermining the notion that collaborating through the UN was a viable approach to security in Europe. In sum, there were plenty of sources of conflict between Russia and the West, and between Russia and Ukraine, *before* NATO expansion.

A final obstacle to agreement is the question of the relative status of Ukraine and Russia. Should the two be regarded as sovereign equals, or should we acknowledge that Russia has status and privilege that Ukraine does not? As Menon and Rumer point out, many in Russia do not see Ukraine as a “real” country. Many beyond Russia concur. For Sakwa, Russia’s history, size, and great-power status mean that its wishes must be given weight, whereas Ukraine’s historical contingency, internal divisions, and weakness mean that it does not have the same right to exist within its internationally recognized borders. This view seems to be based in part on *Realpolitik* and in part on the Hegelian notion of “historic and non-historic peoples.”

As all of these books acknowledge, much work remains to be done on the origins and implications of the crisis. We are naturally driven to assign blame, in part because doing so is necessary to formulating policy prescriptions, but future research will need to focus

more on explanation if we are to improve our understanding of these events. While one admires the speed with which these books were produced, one wonders how well scholarship and policymaking are served by rendering judgment so quickly and definitively.