

**Richard Sakwa. *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. ISBN: 978-17-84-53064-8. Pp. xiv, 297. Hardback. £18.99/ \$28.00; Paperback. £9.99/ \$15.95.**

It has been more than a year since the dramatic events in Kiev forced the pro-Russian President Yanukovich to step down in February 2014. In the months that followed, Russia annexed Crimea, and a bloody insurrection has engulfed eastern Ukraine's Donbas Region. In the burgeoning literature on the subject, Richard Sakwa's *Frontline Ukraine* has emerged as one of the more notable contributions and has already been translated to a number of other languages.

Sakwa's account of the crisis and its background is a detailed one. He deals with both the domestic and international dimensions of the crisis. In examining the domestic nature of the conflict, Sakwa makes an interesting distinction between the so-called 'monoists' and 'pluralists' in Ukraine. He argues that the struggle between these two competing visions is a key factor in the current animosity within Ukraine. Monoists have a more homogenous vision for the country, emphasising the Ukrainian language, culture and history as a core part of the desired state-building model in Ukraine. The monoists usually argue for a centralised rule of the state and portray Russia as an historic enemy to the Ukrainian nation.

The pluralists, on the other hand, have a more heterogeneous view of the country. Recognising the complicated history of Ukraine and the diverse nature of the country, they place more emphasis on federalisation, decentralisation and pluralism. Sakwa, sympathetic to the pluralists, argues that the Maidan revolution was effectively hijacked by nationalist monoists. This incited fear among the Russian-speakers, which in turn assisted in igniting the current crisis.

Naturally, external factors, such as involvement by outside powers including the U.S., EU and Russia, also contributed to the escalating crisis. Many of the problems are rooted in what Sakwa describes as the asymmetric end to the Cold War: Russia was left behind by the

victorious Western powers who, instead of incorporating Russia into the post-Cold War security system, expanded their influence to Russia's western borders. For the Russians, the most inflammatory action was the inclusion of Eastern and Central European countries to the EU and NATO, as well as the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative (EaP). According to Sakwa, the EU and NATO have become increasingly synonymous institutions and have embarked on a dangerous road of expansion encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence. One major reason for this is the accession of Eastern European states to the EU and NATO, which brought along with them their Russophobia and longstanding animosity towards Russia. The factors which enabled the fateful expansion of the EU and NATO in particular are described as being a mixture of triumphalism, malice and incompetence on the part of the West.

This is a detailed account of the crisis, with at times contains interesting and perceptive observations. Sakwa is right to suggest that the Western powers, after the end of the Cold War could and should have done more to incorporate Russia to the Western political and security order. Sakwa's sympathy for the 'pluralist' understanding of the Ukrainian nation is also in the right place; federalisation with a certain amount of autonomy for Russian speaking regions would likely be a sensible compromise to the ongoing hostilities in eastern Ukraine.

However, *Frontline Ukraine* is in many ways a flawed work. Sakwa seeks to create a balanced account of the current crisis, going against the alleged prevailing anti-Russian sentiment in the West. In this he has failed and has instead created an unbalanced work which is one sided in the reverse: exonerating Russia and its proxies of almost any wrongdoing while placing the blame for the entire crisis at the EU's, U.S.' and Ukraine's doorstep.

Sakwa defines Russia as a 'neo-revisionist' power, interested less in changing norms or rules and more in enforcing them. This is a strange description of a state which so obviously and abjectly violated international law and norms through its annexation of Crimea, an unprecedented act in post-war Europe. The mere presence of far-right elements in the Maidan movement, such as the *Svoboda* party, is heavily emphasised, however, their poor showing in the subsequent elections remains uncommented. Sakwa is largely in tune with Moscow's line that Euromaidan supporters were virulent nationalist Russophobes, and states that Crimeans were indeed justified in fearing the new Kiev government. Yet Human Rights Watch has reported that there were no discriminations or persecutions of ethnic Russians in Crimea prior to the 2014 annexation. They have however reported on widespread human rights abuses since then.<sup>1</sup>

Sakwa emphasises at length his condemnation of the forceful nature of the Ukrainian army's offensive against the Donbas separatists as being primarily responsible for the bloodshed in Eastern Ukraine. The downing of MH17, meanwhile, is swiftly dismissed as a 'dreadful mistake', for which no one can be held responsible. Russian incitement and support for the rebellion is also downplayed. The pattern of Russian actions being excused and explained, while Western and Ukrainian actions being unequivocally condemned, is recurring throughout the book. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea and the violent uprising in the Donbas is referred to as a 'Russian spring' resulting an 'outburst of Russian self-expression'. The Donbas separatists are preposterously portrayed as 'pluralists', despite exhibiting extreme nationalism and virulent anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Overall, Russian actions are seen as defensive reactions to Western challenges.

Reading *Frontline Ukraine*, one is arguably presented with a realist worldview. The actors

who matter are the big ones, such as the U.S., EU and Russia. Traditional concepts of power politics, balance of power and spheres of influence are prevalent, which explains the condemnation of EU and NATO's encroachment into Russia's 'neighbourhood'. The aspirations of middling states like Ukraine remain secondary. Sakwa is not alone in following this line of interpretation. Similar accounts have emerged from prominent realists such as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in the past. The argument that EU and NATO expansion has 'provoked' Russia is a familiar one at this stage, treating the self-determination of the countries of Eastern Europe as irrelevant.

However, Sakwa is exaggerating the push from EU and NATO to expand eastwards, overlooking that it was Ukraine and other Eastern European states who actively sought to join these organisations. Thus, it was not so much a conspiratorial scheme by the U.S. and EU to encircle Russia, as much as the desire of the former U.S.S.R. member states and other ex-Warsaw pact countries to join the West in search of the freedom, security and prosperity they never enjoyed under Soviet rule. In addition to the tendentious tone of the book, some questionable factual assertions are present as well. For example, Russia is described as leading the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when it was in fact Lithuania and the Baltic states who were the first Soviet Republics to break free.

Richard Sakwa's *Frontline Ukraine* remains a valuable contribution to the debate surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, presenting another point of view than the prevailing one in the West. However, it should also be read with the knowledge that it is an alternative account. As the crisis in Ukraine is still ongoing, readers may have to wait for the conflict to be resolved and emotions to subside before a more sober and balanced account can emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Crimea: Human Rights in Decline: Serious Abuses in Russian-Occupied Region of Ukraine', 17 November 2014, online at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/17/crimea-human-rights-decline> (last accessed on 15 June 2016).