

Anna Matveeva, *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained From Within*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018. ISBN: 978-14-98-54323-1. Pp. xviii, 337 pp. Hardcover. £75.00/ \$110.00.

'Every recent book about Ukraine or Russia is a book about Putin', writes Anna Matveeva in the Introduction to her immersive study of the insurgency in Southeastern Ukraine. (p. xv) By contrast, in this study, various individuals, including ordinary citizens, rather than states or quasi-state geopolitical entities –as one might call the unrecognised DNR and LNR– take centre stage. (chs. 5, 6 & 9) In this, her book is refreshingly different, as it focuses on the internal dynamics of the insurgency.

Theoretically, Matveeva takes Kalyvas's main argument about the endogenous mechanisms of civil war progression (p. 2), and thus –rather inadvertently– contributes to the growing theoretical literature on civil wars. Empirically, the book adds to our growing understanding of the war in the Donbas, with its numerous in-depth interviews of the key personalities, such as Igor' Strelkov, the famous 'trigger of the war' and DNR Defence Minister in May-August 2014, and Aleksandr Borodai, the former Prime Minister of the DNR, as well as the fine-grained account of the major battles of Donetsk Airport, Savur-Mohyla, Ilovaisk, Debaltseve, as well as some more minor ones. (chs. 7-8).

Matveeva begins with the familiar analysis of historical identities and demography in the Donbas, citing the major works by Wilson, Hrytsak, Pirie, as well as a number of sociological surveys, and how these played a role in the Euromaidan and the conflict gestation. (chs. 1-2, 4) She argues that the Donbas residents had legitimate, long-standing grievances against the government in Kyiv in the post-Soviet period, which 'exploded' into violence with the Euromaidan, when identities became polarised. She characterises the uprising as 'leaderless' (p. 3), in contrast to the conflict in Transnistria, and calls the war a 'civil war' (p. 5), without however, applying more rigorous criteria of war characterisation apart from a reference to the Uppsala Conflict database.

For Matveeva, the conflict is the result of an ethnic security dilemma. She writes: 'existence of identity differences is a prerequisite for conflict, but the conflict happens only when one or both identity groups feel sufficiently threatened by the other'. (p. 6)

She sees the conflict as a broader 'civilisational' clash, in Huntingtonian terms, which makes her overall theoretical framework susceptible to essentialising.

Methodologically, the main strength of the book seems to be the interviews conducted with the key participants of the conflict, such as Borodai, Strelkov, Russian 'volunteer' *Prince* (call sign) and the analyst Yevgeny Norin. There is a separate section on the methodology in the Appendix. Empirically, Matveeva charts the complex terrain of the key motivations for conflict, with the Odessa fire on 2 May being the main emotional trigger for many local and Russian participants of the conflict, and the more nebulous 'challenge to the Euroatlanticism' and the liberal world order being the key motivation for solidarity-driven individuals from other parts of the world. She takes the Russian Spring movement very seriously, in favourable contrast to most journalistic accounts and academic investigations, and describes what it meant for Borodai and the 'volunteers': 'the Russian Spring ... [demonstrated] that Russian people exist and can act out of their own free will, without approval from the top'. (p. 222) At the same time, 'Donbas intellectuals were not at the heart of the rebellion when it began' (p. 80), with Mr Common Guy often having no clear military thinking, as in the case of Alexey Mozgovoi leading the rebellion.

What role does Russia and Russian military strategy play in her account? There is a vivid and telling recollection by Strelkov: 'During Crimea, I thought that Putin was in charge of the situation, but when Donbas was happening, I had the feeling that I didn't know where things were going. At some point I stopped understanding anything.' (p. 107) Matveeva demonstrates that Moscow was dragged into the conflict, and that it was not prepared to repeat the Crimean scenario in the Donbas. She shows that the presence of Russian military personnel was a necessity because the locals were poorly trained and not very well prepared. 'The deficit of combat-ready cadres', she writes, 'was acute'. (p. 129) The impression of the overwhelming Russian presence was due to many Russians being in commanding roles while Strelkov masterfully used 'disinformation and intimidation' so that the Ukrainians thought that there were many Russians fighting on the insurgents' side and that they were better supplied and armed than they were in reality (p. 129). After August 2014, Russians 'typically would solve the task set out for them and made themselves scarce, while the local rebels would finish the job and secure the gained ground'. (p. 173) This

seems to have been the main thrust of the overall strategy.

Matveeva takes a decidedly bottom-up focus on the insurgency through most of the book, with the final chapters looking at processes surrounding the Minsk Agreement, and at the broader implications of the war for Russia and its interpretation of the conflict. In particular, and pertinently from the point of view of the present reader, focusing on the behaviour of the elites does not help explain the conflict because their influence became negligible when events turned violent. Hence the book is not about the behaviour of the elites. This, however, contradicts the various accounts of the people themselves, such as the Donbas battalion leader Semen Semenchenko (Konstantin Grishin) whom Matveeva mentions, various works by local journalists of Novosti Donbassa and the Moscow-based (but high quality) Novaya Gazeta, as well as the empirical evidence found in Kharkiv and Dniepropetrovsk, where the elites were key to the unfolding of the events. Additionally, the only elite member she interviewed at length is Oleg Tsarev whose affiliations were never in doubt, despite him professing to have worked for peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Overall, it is unclear when exactly the elite influence stopped being important. More broadly, the book meanders and hovers over the key events, without providing a clear chronology, which contrasts it rather unfavourably with more chronologically structured accounts by Pokrovsky and Severski. There is also a tendency to provide a series of generalised statements in many instances without further evidential support, such as the following excerpt: '(...) in response to the Maidan victory, protests, disturbances and low-level confrontations broke out in the parts of the country where pro-Russian identity was strong'. (p. 38). Additionally, the book would have benefited from a much more thorough proofreading and planning, with the final chapters being quite patchy. There is repetition in some places, for example, the references to the Russian World are repeatedly made throughout the book, and the present reader was lost on a number of occasions.

A few words about the review of relevant literature are also in order. The author mentions major publications on the war, such as Sakwa's *Frontline Ukraine* and Menon and Rumer's *Conflict in Ukraine*, as well as various journalistic accounts. However, these works have been written primarily by Russia specialists, and those written from a decidedly Ukrainian point of view, such as the controversial Taras Kuzio's book *Putin's War against Ukraine*, remain

unmentioned. There is also a dearth of sources in Ukrainian; in fact, apart from a couple of surveys, there are no sources in that language at all. Matveeva also cites major works on civil wars, such as those by Kalyvas and Regan on foreign intervention, at the beginning of the book, without, however, situating the conflict within this larger theoretical framework. There is little new information on the federalisation debate, with the mention of 'the Movement for the Rebirth of Donbas' in 1993 demanding a restructuring of the Ukrainian state on federal lines. The activities of the Donetsk Republic separatist movement are not covered, and the relevant book by Pavel Gubarev on his activities is mentioned only on a few occasions.

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