

## **Review Essay: Frontline Ukraine**

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**Richard Sakwa.** *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015. xv, 297 pp. Maps. List of Abbreviations. Notes. Select Bibliography. Index. \$28.00, cloth.

**D**espite the war in Syria and the migrant problem in the European Union, the tense situation in Ukraine that began in late 2013 continues to be in the spotlight of international politics. The Euromaidan phenomenon that led to regime change in Kyiv in 2014; Russia's annexation of Crimea; and the armed conflict on the Ukrainian-Russian border are events that touch on a broad spectrum of questions dealing with geopolitics, international security, and collective identity. What is Europe? What is Russia? And how do post-Communist countries fit between them? What is the best approach to describe events and processes on the eastern edge of Europe, using the language of western humanities and social sciences?

The Ukrainian crisis continues to draw the attention of an increasing number of analysts and commentators, including those who have not previously specialized in Ukrainian issues. One such scholar is Richard Sakwa, a well-known specialist in the history of the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. His new book, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (2015), is a description and analysis of the events in and around Ukraine from late 2013 up to, and including, the second half of 2014. Ten chapters are devoted to three basic problems: (1) the international global order and the European integration project; (2) Russia and Russian-Ukrainian relations; and (3) specific Ukrainian issues and challenges connected with the events of the Maidan, the Crimea, and the Donbas.

Sakwa's book is openly polemical; the author acknowledges that it is "both personal and political" (xi). This determines the general thrust, selection of facts, and conclusions. Sakwa wants to demonstrate that the roots of today's crisis in Ukraine reach far back and that its nature emerges from a nexus of internal ("Ukrainian crisis") and external factors ("Ukraine crisis"), the latter resulting from an "asymmetrical" world order following the collapse of the USSR. In his opinion, the internal Ukrainian crisis has

acquired an international dimension and reflects “the continuation in new forms of what used to be called the East-West conflict. . .” (3). One cannot but agree.

The author considers the Ukrainian events from the point of view of the dismaying prospects of a new Cold War and a further split between Europe and Russia. Sakwa analyzes the international context of the Ukrainian crisis with the help of a simplistic dichotomy: “Two Europes” (chapter 2), namely, “the Wider” and “the Greater” (26-27). He believes that the first, based on a “monistic” model of Western democracy, is aggressively expanding eastward, assisted by NATO, and thus has an anti-Russian orientation. The second entails a concept of Europe that stretches “from Lisbon to Vladivostok,” a “common European home” that was propounded by both Charles de Gaulle and Mikhail Gorbachev in their time.

Sakwa defends the second, that is, “continental” concept of Europe and does not skimp on words criticizing “wider” or “Atlantic” Europe. He believes that the “merging of European economic integration with the Euro-Atlantic security partnership. . . undermined the rationale of both” (xii). According to the author, the conflicts in the post-Soviet space are to be explained by the aggressive expansion of the Western, “Atlantic” model eastward. This led to increasing “Russophobia” and the alienation of Russia from “Greater Europe.” In his opinion, the culmination of this process has been the Ukrainian crisis, which has “created a new and irreparable line across the heart of the continent” (233).

In response to the classic Russian question “Who’s to blame?” the author’s answer is unequivocal: the countries of the West, as a whole, and the USA and NATO, in particular. He also identifies the Eastern European countries as being responsible for anti-Russian sanctions, especially Poland and Lithuania: “There is a group of militantly revanchist powers, with Lithuania and Poland in the vanguard” (223). The author describes their attitudes toward Russia with excessively strong language, using phrases like “dangerous fundamentalism,” “based on an essentialist reading of history,” and “immune to rational argument” (229). Additionally, Georgia and Ukraine are considered by the author to be among a group of countries that are “poisoning” the West with their militant “Russophobia” (229, 182).

Sakwa argues against European security becoming “hostage to a faraway country,” that is, Ukraine (172). This comment is interesting. If, in Sakwa’s imagined symbolic geography of Europe, Kyiv is the capital of “a faraway country,” what then is to be said about Tbilisi or Vladivostok? If Ukraine is not worth arguing over with Russia, why not simply recognize Moscow’s “legitimate” interests and ambitions in the post-Soviet “space” so as not to further radicalize the Kremlin’s policies? (182). But in that case—with Ukraine “a faraway country” and with Poland and Lithuania pro-

Atlanticist troublemakers—what is left of “Greater Europe”? It begins to look more like some utopia inherited from the Cold War period rather than a product of recent geopolitical realities.

Richard Sakwa is correct when he writes that the “Ukrainian crisis cannot be understood unless the evolution of Russian thinking is analyzed” (30); and he is fair when he points out that “Russian politics is rather more complex than the simple model of ‘autocratic’ consolidation would suggest” (211). Regrettably, Sakwa does not do justice to this complexity in his book. His analysis of the Russian regime and its politics is completely subordinated to his refusal to admit Russia’s expansionism and new imperialism—a view of Russia that, in his opinion, is “wrong-headed in conceptualization and dangerous in its consequences” (5-6). Sakwa has a completely different perception of Putin’s Russia.

He believes that “Russia under Putin is not a land-grabbing state, it is a profoundly conservative power and its actions are designed to maintain the status quo.” Russia “makes no claim to revise the existing international order, but to make it more inclusive and universal” (34-35). Russia refuses “to submit itself to Atlanticist hegemony and global dominance” (234). In Sakwa’s opinion, Russia is kept busy constantly defending itself against an aggressive West. “The Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 was in effect the first of the ‘wars to stop NATO enlargement’; the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 is the second” (55). The two Chechnya wars are an obvious omission on this list—but even without them, Sakwa’s vision of Russia’s “peace-loving” stance reminds us of an old Soviet anecdote:

Question on “Armenian Radio:” “Will there be a Third World War?” The answer is: “No, but there will be such a struggle for peace that nothing will be left standing.” (Adams 18)

Sakwa’s analysis of Russia’s foreign policy does not sufficiently take into account the influence of domestic policy, especially growing Russian nationalism, combined with anti-Western hysteria and antidemocratic policies, all of which characterize Putin’s regime. At the time of writing, Sakwa was not yet aware of the killing of Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader, in Moscow. Nevertheless, surely he was familiar with the democratic “Russian spring” of 2011-13 directed against a corrupt and highly conservative political regime. It is strange that the author uses a binary opposition to frame European-Ukrainian relations, but does not extend it to Russia—even though the phenomenon of “two Russias” is well-known to practically all experts. In short, Sakwa fails to consider internal Russian problems in parallel with the external challenges, an approach that

would have provided a more balanced analysis of the Crimean and the Donbas events.

This one-sided treatment of contemporary Russian politics and of Putin's regime leads the author down a path of many contradictions. On the one hand, he tries to convince the reader that the Russian president is not a nationalist like Aleksandr Dugin or Aleksandr Prokhanov: "Putin is rational and pragmatic"; he simply manoeuvres among various political interest groups and is "well practiced in the art of societal management" (213-14). On the other hand, Sakwa admits that Putin "veered towards the ethnicisation of Russian foreign policy. . . which represented a shift from a realist and pragmatic foreign policy to a more romantic-nationalist inflexion" (106). One might forgive the reader for being confused. Who is Mr. Putin, really? A cynic or a "romantic"?

All of this illustrates, in our opinion, the contradictions also in Sakwa's presentation of Russia's policy toward Ukraine. In this part of his book, he cites publications mostly of Russian writers, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In typical fashion, he declares, that "Ukraine mattered to Russia more than any other country" (79), because "Ukraine matters to Russia as an issue of survival, quite apart from a thousand years of shared history and civilization. . ." (75). Unfortunately, Sakwa's analysis of the relationship between these two factors in Russia's Ukraine policy—security and identity, pragmatism and irrationalism—is not balanced. On these pages, the historian (that is, the analyst) struggles constantly with the publicist—and loses.

As for Russia's annexation of the Crimea, one gets the impression that Sakwa's attitude is one of understanding, if not complete justification, given the description of this act as "the return of Crimea to Russia in March 2014" (13). Does this mean that Sakwa supports the annexation? He provides a series of arguments to show how important the Crimea is for Russia. These range from historical<sup>1</sup> to the necessity of defending ethnic Russians from aggressive Ukrainian nationalists. Speaking of the infamous "referendum" hastily organized by Moscow to legitimize the annexation, the author only heightens the contradictions. On the one hand, he believes that "even in perfect conditions a majority of Crimea would have voted for union with Russia" (105, 109). On the other hand, he stresses that in reality "in the peninsula as a whole, only between 15 and 30 percent of the total

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<sup>1</sup> Sakwa believes that Khrushchev transferred the Crimea to Ukraine because he was "up to his elbows in blood"; and "the transfer—that remains mired in controversy—was seen as a form of expiation" (100-01). There is no discussion of the possibility that Khrushchev's decision might have been dictated by common sense and logical considerations.

population voted to join Russia” (104-05). Nothing is said as to why a proper referendum could not have been organized in a civilized manner, to avoid this confusion.

The book uses similar “logic” to describe all other inconsistent episodes and problems in current Russian-Ukrainian relations. For example, there was the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, under which Russia became a guarantor of the inviolability of Ukraine’s borders and territorial integrity. Sakwa believes that the Budapest Memorandum was not binding for the signatory states (68-69). What about the “Novorossia” political project, aimed at breaking off Ukraine’s southeastern regions? “There were fantasies like that in the Russian media, but they didn’t gain official support” (209). What about the arming and directing of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas? “Evidence for this was not always forthcoming” (185). And what about the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH 17) passenger jet that was shot down over the Donbas? Well, perhaps, in this case Russia was indiscriminate and irresponsible in giving high-tech weapons to local separatists (168). However, this “does not exclude the possibility that an air-to-air missile was used” (171)—in other words, that the Boeing 777 might have been shot down by a *Ukrainian* military jet.

After reading statements like these, the author’s general assessment of Russian policy toward Ukraine becomes entirely predictable. He believes that Russia has not “sought to place Ukraine under its direct control”; rather, it is “merely trying to influence its decisions” (206). One is hard put to discern the difference between these two concepts. “A free and prosperous Ukraine was certainly not something opposed by Russia, but Moscow simply did not understand why this had to be couched in anti-Russian terms and threaten its economic interests” (210). Readers are asked to countenance the possibility that naïve and benevolent Kremlin politicians—including such “doves” as Prime Minister Medvedev, Patriarch Kirill, and Presidential Attaché Surkov (who was responsible for Ukraine)—might have supported “a successful and prosperous Ukraine as long as it respect[ed] Russia’s legitimate concerns” (211). Unfortunately, there is little in the book itself to support this thesis.

The chapters focusing on Ukraine do provide a lot of factual material borrowed from various published sources. Sakwa delves into the history, economics, as well as domestic and foreign policy of Ukraine; he describes the Maidan phenomenon and the events that unfolded after President Yanukovich decamped from Kyiv. Sakwa is correct when he points out that the crisis had internal roots and did not develop out of thin air. The Maidan originated from a fatal geopolitical straddle, from critical problems of administration, from corruption, from a weak democracy, as well as from

the country's cultural, regional, and ethnic diversity—all problems that Ukrainian political elites had failed to resolve thus far.

Given that Sakwa is a historian who specialized in the multinational USSR, one might have expected a more substantial elucidation of Ukraine's history, which would have helped the reader to place at least some of the current events within a broader context. Unfortunately, Sakwa's presentation of Ukraine's past—derived mostly from Andrew Wilson's *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*—is quite fragmented. The substantial intellectual output of other western Ukrainianists, which has encompassed the past and modern times, is recapped in this book only superficially and unsystematically. Clearly, most works published in Ukrainian by Ukrainian authors are unknown to Sakwa. His analysis of Ukrainian problems is based largely on works written by Russian authors, which casts doubt on the objectivity of his approach.

What is Sakwa's view of Ukraine? It comes down to the stereotype of "two Ukraines." There is a bad Ukraine, which is called "monistic," and a good Ukraine, which is "pluralistic." "Monistic Ukraine" is orange (that is, reminiscent of the first Maidan of 2004), nationalist, and Russophobic—in short, intolerant and insensitive to cultural and national diversity; the "monistic Ukraine," moreover, inherited from Western Ukraine "some of the hues of the integral nationalism of the interwar years" and seeks to impose its model on the rest of Ukraine (25, 213). The "monistic Ukraine" in fact appears to be the good old nationalistic Western Ukraine as perceived by Russians. This view also shapes Sakwa's vision of the main political event, the Maidan revolution of 2013-14.

Sakwa is right to point out that the Maidan was a complex, multilayered phenomenon. The Maidan did unite broad cross-sections of society. The movement of popular mobilization against a corrupt regime represented a moment of national unity and the fusion of two traditions of nation-building, based on the ideal of civic renewal for all (90). Despite acknowledging such facts, Sakwa chooses to focus on the contradictory nature of the Maidan: "Although the revolution was undoubtedly a complex and contradictory phenomenon, at its heart it was a monist vision of Ukrainian statehood that denied the pluralist alternative" (125), Sakwa summarizes unconvincingly.

Step by step, the Maidan's complexity gives way in the book to the simplistic stereotype of Ukrainian nationalists seizing power by force, forming a government of "Ukrainisers" (135), and imposing their Russophobic model on all of Ukraine. Sakwa's image of a post-Maidan government composed of Ukrainian nationalist Russophobes ignores the presence of Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, a Russophone Armenian; of the Odesa oblast governor and former Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili;

and of Russophone Georgian and Lithuanian public servants and consultants. As if being labelled “nationalist Russophobes” was not enough, Sakwa also writes that “the new administration was given an appearance of being little more than an American project” (95).

Turning to the Maidan defenders, Sakwa argues that they became part of the coercive apparatus of the monist state and were unleashed against the pluralists (188). This is followed by the insinuation that the snipers firing at the demonstrators on the Maidan could have been provoked by the Maidan activists themselves (88). There is also a suggestion that the street violence in Odesa in May 2014 (descriptions of which are copied from Russian sources [cf. 98]), could have been the brutality of Ukrainian nationalists. Sakwa also cites testimony regarding “untold cruelties” of the Ukrainian army during the war in the Donbas (181). The author sternly points out that “in due course the Kiev regime would have to answer for its actions to international war crimes tribunals” (167). There is no mention if other regimes, for example, the Moscow or the Donetsk and Luhansk ones, might be equally accountable.

Sakwa’s “monistic Ukraine” contains nothing new for informed readers. But does the author’s portrait of the “pluralistic Ukraine” fare better? In trying to identify Ukrainian “pluralists,” the author hits upon the historical *Malorossia*, or Little Russia (38). For Sakwa, the “Malorussian tendency stresses the centrality of Russian influence” (51) and “insists that the retention of traditional economic and personal links [with Russia] is one of the conditions of building sovereign nation states in the region” (38). It seems that Sakwa misunderstands this ancient historical terminology, because, in fact, the pre-modern Little Russian identity does not necessarily contradict the modern Ukrainian one; the two are partially intertwined and interdependent. Ironically, according to the ideology of Little Russianism, it was Kyivan Little Russia that was the historical heartland of Rus', and as such it unquestionably predates the Muscovite project of Great Russia. There are many specialized works devoted to the subject of Little Russianism as well as its current incarnations (I would recommend texts by Zenon Kohut, Mykola Riabchuk, Iaroslav Hrytsak, Volodymyr Kulyk, Stephen Shulman, and Taras Kuzio), but they are never even mentioned in Sakwa’s book.

Sakwa’s wanderings in the Ukrainian political wilderness in search of “pluralists” lead him first to Viacheslav Chornovil, a Soviet-era intellectual dissident and one of the political leaders of the movement for Ukraine’s independence, who died in 1999 (23), and then to Sergey Kivalov, a *nomenklatura*-like political boss who engineered the electoral fraud in 2004 (137). Ultimately, the author arrives exactly where the logic and conception of this book dictate that he must go, namely, in the “blue” camp of

Yanukovych's supporters and followers. "The pluralists in the Donbas and other Russophone regions seized the opportunity to institutionalize their long-term aspirations for Russian to be made a second state language and for genuine power-sharing of the regions in a more federal state" (155). Such a conclusion openly contradicts the author's statement that he does not consider either the Party of Regions or former president Yanukovych as opponents of the "monists" (x). Sakwa notes that these "pluralists" adopted the St. George ribbon as their symbol (93, 99), that they are "imbued with Soviet values" (149), and that they "lacked democratic and civil-society organizational capacity. . ." (155). One of the leaders of the Donbas separatists is identified as Pavel Gubarev, an "extreme Russian nationalist" (165). Russian citizens were in the forefront of the self-declared Donbas "republics" from the very beginning. The organizer of the Donbas separatist armed forces was Igor Strelkov, a lieutenant-colonel of the Russian GRU. In short, the Donetsk and Luhansk "pluralists" really look like "regular" Russian nationalists. Instead of introducing artificial terminology, one wonders why the author could not simply have called a spade a spade?

One can understand—and even acknowledge—many of the author's views. Who can oppose, for example, his desire to see Europe united, instead of divided? Who would disagree that it is necessary to dial down the threat of a new "Cold War"? The idea that Ukraine needs to find a formula for its existence, one that would combine effective administration with the actual diversity of the country, is certainly something I understand and sympathize with. The threat of radical nationalism in Ukraine—as everywhere in Europe and Russia—is real and must be monitored and curbed at the state level. Sakwa's criticism of Ukraine's present situation is justified. But does this book offer solutions to these and other issues? Unfortunately, the answer is no. A display of one's personal views is one thing; an expert assessment of the situation at Europe's eastern edge is quite another.

This is Sakwa's first book on a Ukrainian topic, and it contains many facts and reflections on the current Ukrainian-Russian crisis. However, the book loses a significant degree of value for several reasons. Firstly, the facts that Sakwa presents are not organized systematically, and, secondly, they are subordinated to a questionable methodology and a highly partisan ideology. Sakwa does not hesitate to deliver final judgements about events that are still ongoing. Future developments are likely to change the minds of contemporaries and historians on many issues. In this respect, Sakwa's book became outdated almost as soon as it was published.

In the end, one has the impression that the author had no intention of delving into the Ukrainian material comprehensively. He apparently only needed Ukraine to illustrate his thesis of the "two Europes," to criticize



Atlantism and Ukrainian nationalism, to justify cancelling the anti-Russian sanctions, and to question the policies of western countries toward Russia. It also seems that his new-found acquaintance with Ukrainian issues had no impact on his preconceived notions and interpretation of Russia, Eastern Europe, and the world order. Instead of a thoughtful analysis of a complex Ukraine, readers are given the stereotypical “two Ukraines.” Instead of a nuanced exploration of the “borderland” promised in the title, they are given yet another simplistic “front line” that delineates a black-and-white ideology. In terms of theory, Sakwa’s book contains nothing new. In terms of Ukrainian studies, its significance is even smaller.

*Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* may not be very interesting in its own right but it is a noteworthy instance of the rift that the Ukrainian crisis has caused among western experts who study the region. The binary “two Europes” and “two Ukraines” reflects the division into “two camps” that exists in the academy; some observers are pro-Ukrainian while others are anti-Ukrainian. Some condemn Ukrainian nationalism while others concentrate on Russian imperialism. For many western critics, “Ukraine” remains synonymous with “nationalism” and Ukrainianists are little more than Russophobes whose theses cannot possibly be considered as an objective alternative.

With a tinge of irony, Richard Sakwa declares allegiance to the principle of “bourgeois objectivity.” If one was to follow in the footsteps of this type of jargon scrupulously, his book might well be called an example of “Party literature.” Conflict over Ukraine in the academy is, in fact, political rather than methodological and factual. Sakwa represents those Western intellectuals and politicians who are pro-Russian and anti-American. Their voices should be heard and taken into account, naturally. However, a dialogue between those who are “for” and “against” Ukraine hardly seems possible at this time. Is this state of affairs not an unresolved legacy of the Cold War? Does it not testify to a need to update East European studies in the West and restore the very status of expert knowledge so deeply affected by postmodern relativism?

#### Works Cited

Bruce Adams. *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes and Jokes*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

