



Taras Kuzio

Putin's War Against Ukraine

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Reviewed by Oleksii Sydorhuk

While the Ukraine-Russia conflict has attracted significant media attention around the globe, academic research on this topic has been scarce and not always marked by high quality, which is understandable given the complicated and ongoing nature of the conflict. Taras Kuzio's book *Putin's War Against Ukraine* is a welcome effort to present a comprehensive analysis of the causes of the conflicts, its main fault lines and already visible consequences. The book is based on the author's numerous visits to Ukraine, including to the territories of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) near the frontlines, conversations and interviews with politicians, experts, civic activists, volunteers, soldiers, and ordinary people from various regions of Ukraine, as well as an extensive study of Ukrainian and Western literature and media.

Although topics covered in the chapters sometimes overlap and do not always follow chronological order, the book can nevertheless be divided into several main parts. First, Kuzio traces the roots of the conflict that, according to him, can be seen in regard to two broad factors. The first is Russia's imperialistic policies and attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians that culminated during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. The second is the legacy of the Party of Regions and Viktor Yanukovich's rule in Ukraine, specifically in Donbas, where it had a much longer history.

Kuzio pays much attention to both factors. He analyses the chauvinistic nature of Soviet and émigré Russian nationalism since the Stalin era, and its transformation into mainstream Russian nationalism after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The author points to the incoherent and contradictory nature of Russian nationalism that combines elements of Orthodoxy, communism, fascism, and Nazism. Similarly, according to the author, while Russian nationalists view Ukrainians either as “brotherly people” or as “Banderite fascists,” they nevertheless deny their right to independence. Kuzio traces how such views emerged from the margins of Russian politics to which they had been temporarily confined in the 1990s, to the core of decision-making processes at the national level beginning with the second half of the 2000s. The author

also explains Putin's worldview, which combines Soviet and Russian nationalism with inherent hostility towards the West.

The domestic factor is also extensively analyzed by Kuzio. He argues that separatism and pro-Russian sentiments were stronger in Crimea than in Donbas, where Soviet identity also dominated among the local population. Yet, neither of these regions could have seceded from Ukraine without covert and direct Russian influence, which was greatly aided by the policies of the Party of Regions. Kuzio points to the criminal and deeply corrupt nature of the Party of Regions rule and its passive and active promotion of Russian interests, especially allowing Russia to infiltrate and control the Ukrainian military and its intelligence system from 2010–2014. Importantly, the author also mentions the attempts of Donetsk and Luhansk oligarchs to use separatist upheavals in early 2014 to bargain concessions from the new government as another factor that fomented the military conflict.

Second, Kuzio describes in detail the “quiet” Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbas that began well before the military invasion of 2014. He then turns to analyzing the military forces that fight against Ukraine in Donbas, including regular Russian troops and volunteers of various kinds whose motivation to participate in the war harks back to the idiosyncratic nature of the Russian nationalistic views they hold. The author also tries to investigate war casualties from both sides based on open data sources and to put them in historical context. In addition, he pays attention to allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses during the conflict, predominantly by the pro-Russian forces.

Finally, the author gives his view on the preliminary consequences of the conflict, which he mostly sees in the changing national identity of Ukrainians. According to him, Russian military, economic, and propaganda aggression has prompted an increase in patriotic feelings among Ukrainians from different regions, a strengthening of national identification, the popularization of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and deep dissatisfaction with Russia and, especially, Russian political elites. Kuzio points out that such changes have further blurred the East-West divide by promoting patriotic and nationalist sentiments in previously pro-Russian Eastern and Southern regions of Ukraine.

As is vividly seen from the book's title, it is not strictly academic, and its tone sometimes resembles opinionated journalism more than scholarly research. The book is openly pro-Ukrainian in its analysis and conclusions, and, not surprisingly, almost all of the respondents whom the author interviewed hold pro-Ukrainian and anti-separatist views. Similarly, virtually all quotes and opinions by representatives of the Russian/separatist side cited in the book are presented either in a negative way or as additional evidence confirming the author's paradigm.

On occasion, such an approach does not constitute a problem, since Kuzio corroborates many of his arguments with much carefully referenced data. In this regard, *Putin's War Against Ukraine* compares favorably with Richard Sakwa's *Frontline Ukraine*, which, as Kuzio rightly points out several times throughout his own book, often fails to provide any evidence in favor of its main assumptions. Western and Ukrainian sources cited in Kuzio's book provide rich data that helps to approach the Russia-Ukraine conflict from various perspectives, although a lack of Russian-language sources also strikes the eye.

On the other hand, one should not accept all of the information mentioned in the book without reservation, as the author provides several claims that are hard to confirm. In the

chapter on war crimes, which could probably raise the most controversy, the author focuses his attention almost exclusively on human rights abuses by the separatists and devotes very little attention to the allegations of crimes committed by the Ukrainian forces. Moreover, he states that “human rights abuses ended after volunteer battalions were integrated into the army and the National Guard.” One could argue that, to a great extent, this is true. However, while many reports by international organizations have pointed out that human rights violations are more frequent and serious in the separatist-held areas, international monitors continue to raise the issues of torture and ill-treatment by the Ukrainian side. Claims of a lack of effective investigation into these allegations are also regularly made in such reports, but are omitted in Kuzio’s book.

All in all, impressive research conducted by the author often fills the gaps in its methodology and structure by presenting persuasive evidence in favor of the main assumptions of Kuzio’s account of events. On the other hand, not all elements of the author’s narrative are accompanied by strong corroboration, and a reader should treat those carefully. Yet, *Putin’s War Against Ukraine* presents a valuable contribution to the growing literature on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and can be recommended to anyone interested in the topic.