

Book Review: Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands by Richard Sakwa

In Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands, Richard Sakwa examines the contemporary crisis in Ukraine centred on the disputed territory of Crimea and the eastern regions. Sakwa traces the origins, developments and significance of the conflict from the Euromaidan protests up until the parliamentary elections of October 2014. While Paul Wingrove advises that readers exercise caution and their own judgment when navigating texts on this highly debated political terrain, he praises Sakwa's masterful account as a fine-grained, well-sourced analysis.

Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands. Richard Sakwa. I.B. Tauris. 2015.

Professor Richard Sakwa has authored an exceptional text on the contemporary crisis in the Ukraine. There are few people as knowledgeable as he able to weave their way through the thickets of information and misinformation that surround this question. With *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, he offers us a fine-grained, well-sourced analysis of the background to the 2014 upheavals in Kiev, the violent course of the events in the Maidan, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the rebellion in the east of Ukraine, the present state of play and the prospects for a resolution of Ukraine's increasingly perilous division. Sakwa is at home with the minutiae of Ukrainian politics (a matter of despair for many observers), energy politics, the scheming of Ukraine's oligarchs (a matter of even greater despair) as well as with the diplomacy of the great powers.

In many ways his account does not depart from a general perception of the problem: that Ukraine is an internally divided state, with that division overlaid by an international divide which renders Ukraine a state of 'the borderlands' – notably bordering the interests of Washington, Brussels, NATO, the EU and Moscow. As such, Ukraine is a state whose future is both domestically and internationally contested, and the resulting conflict is bitter and intractable.

Throughout the text Sakwa refers to the internal Ukrainian division as one between 'monists' and 'pluralists' (a term which here has to have a quite restricted meaning): broadly, that is, between full-throttle Ukrainian nationalists and those who would allow more official diversity in a state which is, by any standards, already quite diverse. Roughly speaking, this division accords with the present east-west political and military division of contemporary Ukraine. Thus: 'Although the revolution was undoubtedly a complex and contradictory one, at its heart was a monist vision of Ukrainian statehood that denied the pluralist alternative demanded by the Donbas insurgents.'

Yet Sakwa believes that the international forces which stand behind this division have contributed most to the ferocity and barely containable dynamics of the conflict. Here he notably rejects [Andrew Wilson's view](#) that the Ukraine crisis largely results from Russia's ambitions and intentions towards the (once) Soviet periphery; rather, he argues that there was an 'unbalanced' end to the Cold War, which has 'generated a cycle of conflict', injecting a 'competitive dynamic' into European international relations. And he rather deplores the fact that much discussion of the Ukraine crisis looks for a scapegoat (Russia, as it happens) when, in fact, what are at work are 'structural contradictions in the international system'.

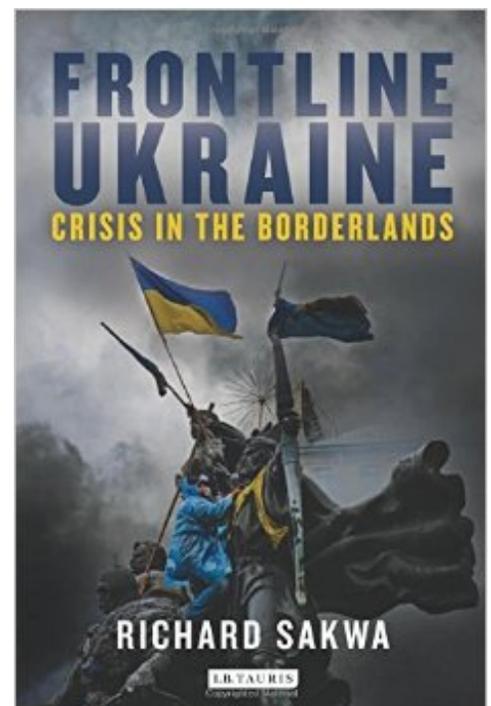




Image Credit: Barricades in Kiev, Ukraine, 30 December 2013 (Sasha Maksymenko)

In particular, the unbalanced end of the Cold War saw both the expansion of NATO and the enlargement of the European Union, and it is particularly the convergence of these elements (especially as perceived by Russia) after 2009 that provides the context for the Ukraine crisis. A triumphant NATO-EU system seemed to demand that Russia acknowledge both its Cold War defeat and consequent post-Cold War status, and in so doing, refused recognition of its, arguably, legitimate interests in Ukraine.

More to the point, in the post-Cold War era, neither NATO nor the EU has sought, honestly, to establish security structures within which Russia could be accommodated as an equal – although with quite definite interests of its own. This is a reasonable argument, but there are still some difficult questions here: what are Russia's interests? How easily can the historical legacy of the Cold War be cast off? And how compatible are values across Europe?

Although Sakwa himself does not 'scapegoat', his language can be quite stark, and he focuses very much on the way in which the USA/NATO and the EU have behaved. There are a significant number of references to a 'war party' in Washington, while the EU – despite its normative mission – is, at least in some of its parts, a mere appendage to the USA ('the war party and its acolytes in the EU'), and in consequence more likely to provoke division in Europe than reduce it. Indeed, ' [...] the EU has spectacularly failed. Instead of a vision embracing the whole continent, it has become little more than the civilian wing of the Atlantic security alliance.'

As for Russia: '[a]ny state in Russia's position has certain security and other concerns, and as long as they are respected, normal business can be conducted. Instead it appeared that the war party sought to provoke and exploit conflicts between Russia and its neighbours, threatening to lay waste the whole post-Soviet region.' Just as forcefully, Sakwa writes that '[N]ot only was Europe divided, but relations between two countries [Ukraine and Russia] that shared a long, although troubled, history had soured in a spectacular manner. This rests on the conscience of the current generation of Atlantic and Eastern European leaders.' And Sakwa also cites the (now) Director of Communications for Jeremy Corbyn, Seumas Milne, to the effect that: ' [...] NATO and the EU, not Russia, sparked this crisis – and [...] it's the Western powers that are resisting the negotiated settlement that is the only way out, for fear of appearing weak.' So at least we know where the blame lies.

Sakwa's scholarship is admirable and not easily contestable. Only here and there did I raise a cautious eyebrow. Thus, on page 90, we have a remark to the effect that it was 'discovered' that the EU had spent 496 million Euros between 2004 and 2013 on 'subsidising front groups' in Ukraine – this seemed to me to be such an intriguing figure that I had a second look at it. The relevant endnote refers to a piece written by Patrick Armstrong – but Armstrong, in turn, is citing Christopher Booker writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, who is quoting from Richard North's EU blog, which then refers us to data obtained from the EU Financial Transparency System. Having looked at that data myself, I can only remark that things seem to be, shall we say, somewhat less clear-cut than you might think.

Russia's basic aim is to keep Ukraine out of NATO, writes Sakwa, and a solution to the present crisis would seem to revolve around that element – neutrality in foreign relations – and a degree of federalism internally for Ukraine. Assuming that is all that Russia seeks – and this in itself is one of the dynamics – we still have to ask if the external parties trust each other enough to believe that this is a solution that might hold? And do the domestic parties have the requisite trust in each other (and their external sponsors) to the point where arms can be put to one side? Frankly, at the moment, that seems unlikely. Sakwa's structural analysis leads to this gloomy conclusion: 'The gloves are now off and a new period of confrontation will continue until there is a change of leaders or paradigms or both.'

Sakwa has given us a masterful recounting of events of great complexity in *Frontline Ukraine*. But in reading any work on the Ukraine conflict, with its great diversity of interpretation, it is naturally important to proceed with a degree of caution, and calmly decide for yourself what the evidence stacks up to.

Paul Wingrove was formerly Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Greenwich. [Read more reviews by Paul Wingrove.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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