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**Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*. London: MIT Press, 2015, 220 pp., ISBN: 978-0-262-02904-9, £17.95 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Gregory Schwartz, University of Bristol

The period following the Russian annexation of Crimea and support for the armed separatists in the Donbas saw a flourishing of news reports, documentaries, articles and essays. A number of monographs, mainly journalistic but some from seasoned academics and policy analysts, have also appeared, some completed only months after the events on the Kyiv Maidan. The present book, finished just six months after Yanoukovich's desertion and on the heels of both the massacre of the Ukrainian forces at Ilovaisk and the NATO summit in Wales, is one such volume.

Despite my circumspection regarding the possibility of a rigorous analysis being produced in such a short timeframe by non-specialists on Ukraine, the book delivered on many fronts. To explain what sort of book it is, it may be best to begin by asking what sort of book it is not. It is not a treatise on the changing global order. It does not rely on any visible theoretical frame of reference or advance a contribution to a theory. Furthermore, it does not contain primary research, such as interviews or survey data—its primary sources of information are news articles, publicly available reports and existing historical monographs. There is little novelty in the authors' account of the political, economic and social changes in Ukraine over the last quarter century for those who have studied it. Politics is dealt with at the level of leaders or states, and there is a conspicuous absence of the power of capital, the role of international institutions in influencing social change, and the global division of labour which could discernibly function as sources of international competition, crises and conflicts.

Notwithstanding these limitations, however, it is a thoroughly enjoyable read. It is sufficiently concise and lucidly written to be a very useful guide for both the thinking public and those academics who want to understand the recent events in Ukraine in their geopolitical context. For readers in Europe and North America its insightful, if synoptic, overview of the events in Ukraine will also furnish some clues about the consequences of such events on political developments in their own countries.

*Conflict in Ukraine* has a simple and logical structure, allowing the narrative to form a coherent whole. The first two chapters provide an extended sketch of Ukraine's past and recent history, and an examination of the events leading up to the crisis of February-March 2014. These are followed by a detailed discussion of Russia's exploitation of the crisis internationally and domestically, and an extended, well-informed reflection on the European responses. After demonstrating that the crisis was a tragedy long in the making (and pointing to a variety of domestic and international contributing factors), the book brings it all together in a chapter that considers Ukraine's future in light of the ongoing war and the changed global situation that it has brought about.

Analytically and empirically, *Conflict in Ukraine* displays important strengths. For example, though admitting they lean heavily upon existing historical scholarship, Menon and Rumer's summary of the nation's history is robust. Laudably, they do not fall into the common trap

of Russophile historiography—a trap as ubiquitous as it is consequential. As Paul Robert Magocsi (1996) has argued, most of what is taught in European and American universities about eastern Europe beyond Poland comes, either directly or indirectly, from the Russian histories that were undergirded by an imperial narrative (stretching at least as far back as the Romanovs' ascent to the throne of Muscovy) of the oneness of the Russian (*Russkije*) people, including present-day Ukrainians and Belarusians, with its historical centre in Kyiv. The acceptance of such historiographies at face value in the West may be seen in the failure of the Versailles agreements to grant national sovereignty to Ukraine when Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were carved out of the defeated or departed European empires. The self-proclaimed Ukrainian and Western Ukrainian People's Republics had to fend for themselves against expansionist Poland and Romania, on the one hand, and the Red Army advancing the revolution over the territory of the former Russian Empire, on the other. The historical narrative that followed the spread of Soviet power in Ukraine (east of Halycyna and Volyn') stunted the national awakening, and represented the Ukrainians and the Litvins (an ethnonym of present-day Belarusians) in an amalgamated land of Soviet Socialist Republics as constituents of the tripartite Russian people, with a reconfiguration of characters, places and events now serving a Stalinist imperium. The current aggressive re-narration of the Russian experience by Kremlin propaganda sees Ukrainians as part of the Russian people and their separation a crime committed in 1991 by opportunist politicians.

Yet, paradoxically, it was the Soviets that assembled all of the Ukrainian lands into its current form and established ethnic near-homogeneity in both Ukraine and its western neighbours after WWII. It was also during Soviet rule that Ukraine became an industrial and urban powerhouse, its economy on the eve of the USSR's collapse outpacing that of neighbouring Poland and Czechoslovakia. Yet the Soviet narrative and practice of Ukrainian nationhood was always Stalinist in content, peasant-folkloric in form and fervently anti-nationalist in practice. As this book shows in a roundabout way, this has remained more or less unchanged during most of the independence period—Ukraine stumbled into independence under the leadership of the Republic's Communist Party bosses who imagined that an independent Ukraine had better chances recovering from the deep economic crisis affecting the late Soviet system. The focus shifted to profiting from the country's resources and from its remaining industrial capacity, while marginalising the cultural intelligentsia who had led the call for independence in the last five years of the USSR. Despite the symbolism of an independent Ukraine, little serious work regarding national-democratic polity or institution-building took place. Intellectuals and politicians from the western regions (which entered the Ukrainian fold after WWII) seemed to be more visibly concerned about the national project, but the lack of interest from the political elites in Kiev and the primacy of the economy ensured that the national project was enveloped in the debates and imaginaries of the early twentieth century and, accordingly, seemed to attract more right-wing nationalists. This gave the opportunity for politicians like Yanoukovich—whose base was made up of raw materials exporters that stood to lose from either closer ties with the UE or a full subordination to Russia—to exploit regional differences and poison relations between ordinary Ukrainians who faced the same problems of yawning inequality, lack of economic opportunities and a sense of injustice.

Key to Menon and Rumer's explanation of Ukraine's unwinding, which created an irreparable crisis and sealed Yanoukovich's fate on the eve of the Maidan, was the country's

reliance upon Russian gas and on the Russian market for its exports, as well as the government's supposed lack of adherence to market principles and 'excessive social spending'. This is a puzzling claim, for Ukraine's reliance on Russian gas was no greater than that of Germany or Italy, and less (in relative terms) than that of Slovakia and Hungary. Its exports to Russia were half of its exports to the EU, and with about two-thirds of these being semi-finished metals, gas turbines and railway freight cars, Ukraine could have gone either way in its export orientation. Its social expenditures were miserly not only by EU but even by post-Soviet states' standards, and its infrastructure had received virtually no upgrading in a quarter century. The real problems, which made it appear to millions of Ukrainians that only the EU could save the country, were the oligarchic economic structure, chronic under-funding of the state and the pillaging of state budgets by civil servants via corruption schemes, the use of state assets as a vehicle for personal gain, non-payment of corporate tax, the movement of vast sums off-shore, and the endemic failure of law enforcement.

Another of my frustrations with *Conflict in Ukraine* is that the authors take Russia's stated international concerns at face value. Richard Sakwa, in a recent review, chastises Menon and Rumer for not dedicating more space to the role of the US and the EU in failing to heed Russia's 'legitimate interests' in its sphere of influence. By moving NATO and EU's institutions to its borders, on the one hand, and by promoting liberal democratic 'value changes' in these countries, such as via the Eastern Partnership programme, on the other, the West has alienated Russia and made her more revanchist. (In his own book, *Frontline Ukraine*, Sakwa paints Putin as the most Europhile Russian leader and argues that, ultimately, Russia's hand in Ukraine was forced by the actions of the West. Russia, according to Sakwa, is seeking a pluralistic and multipolar 'Greater Europe' which would include Russia, versus the EU's unilateral 'Wider Europe' that is suspicious of Russia.) In fact, Menon and Rumer concede quite a lot to Russia and provide sufficient criticism of the EU and the US. Their method differs from Sakwa's in that it is tempered by a *realpolitik* warning of the consequences of extending 'European values' too far to the East, lest this garner a reaction from a more powerful neighbour. They suggest that Ukraine should not be accepted into NATO, given that it is too likely to be attacked, and recommend diplomacy against other options for dealing with the Kremlin to avoid creating a sense of besiegement.

But here is where the authors, and others in the pro-Kremlin camp, err. They take at face value the idea that a country has 'legitimate' interests over other nations' fate; that Russia is pursuing a 'multipolar' world order out of a sense of justice; or that it has the power on the international arena to do so. In reality, in the current international legal environment, Russia does not have 'legitimate interests' beyond its own sovereign borders and outside the legally binding agreements to which it is a party (many of which it has broken and continues to defy). More importantly, the authorities in the Kremlin have been facing, since at least 2009, a political and economic crisis which leaves the vast majority of its people in stark poverty and without any recourse to the rule of law and justice, while a small group of Kremlin vassals and their hangers-on at different regional levels are taking whatever power and resources they can into their own hands (and usually exporting the proceeds abroad). Against this background, a set of diversionary tactics for the domestic audience provides a better explanation of the Russian leaders' actions: a small victorious war; the denigration of Russia's neighbours to make it appear powerful; posturing without commitment on the international stage to appear resolute and to give the people the sense of strength despite

their actual impotence; the witch-hunt and persecution of anybody who may think or act outside these boundaries; and the general projection of the omnipotence of the state and its leader. Despite highlighting Russia's ostensible 'point of view', Menon and Rumer fail to 'see like a state'—i.e. to consider the state's action as the nodal expression of class rule over a particular domain.

In fact, the EU did regard Ukraine as part of Russia's 'legitimate sphere of influence'. Rather than providing incentives for the Ukrainian leadership to pursue the kinds of reforms that were rewarded in Poland, the Czech and Slovak republics, Hungary and others, it was content to make half-hearted pronouncements and empty promises so as not to jeopardise access to the Russian markets for EU goods, to satisfy its insatiable appetite for Russia's hydrocarbons, and to benefit from the billions of dollars of ill-gotten Russian money deposited in European banks or invested in expensive property. The EU's political establishment has done little to avoid the crisis in Ukraine, because, in the early 21<sup>st</sup>, as in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ukraine has not been considered a nation worthy of international solidarity and continues to be treated as 'borderland'.

For progressive Europeans, therefore, the national question in Ukraine remains of paramount importance. Thankfully Menon and Rumer's account goes some way to imparting greater appreciation of this fact.