

An 'Unhelpful' Contribution?

*Frontline Ukraine:
Crisis in the Borderlands.*

Richard Sakwa

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Scott Newton

There is fake history as well as fake news. Fake history exists when a version of some historical episode is created which bears little resemblance to what actually occurred but perpetuates a mythological version of it convenient (usually) to those in power. There are many examples. The so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 is one, venerable case: the story that Parliament overthrew James II, the 'bad' Catholic King keen to turn his country into an absolute monarchy similar to Louis XIV's France, and replaced him with the Protestant William III, respectful of the British Constitution and its ancient liberties, in a bloodless coup. In fact the ejection of James was prelude to a savage little civil war (fought out mostly in Ireland and Scotland) followed by the persecution and repression of both Catholics and Protestant Dissenters, and also lead to a long, dark era in Irish history. In the much more recent past we have two glaring studies in fake history: the Venezuelan crisis, where naked US imperialism has been engaged in a long destabilisation campaign against the governments of Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro, and the Ukrainian crisis, which has threatened to spark off a new Cold War.

We are very fortunate to have the real picture of what has been happening in Ukraine set out for us in Richard Sakwa's erudite and very well-informed *Frontline Ukraine*. The story – as told by the mainstream media, in the USA, the UK and much of the EU – is that the crisis was the outcome of growing tension between Moscow and Kiev. It was caused by Russian opposition to the efforts of Ukrainian nationalists, backed by mass popular mobilisations – as demonstrated both in the 'Orange' revolution of 2004 and the Maidan revolution of 2014 – to transform Ukraine from being a corrupt and repressive post-Soviet basket case run by pro-Russian oligarchs into a Western liberal democracy and EU member. This ambition has never been accepted by

Putin's Russia which aims to turn its 'near abroad', notably Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Georgia – what Sakwa identifies as the 'borderlands' between Russia and the West – into satellite states with open doors for a combination of xenophobic politicians, dodgy businesses and Mafia bosses, all propped up by increasingly repressive military and security establishments looking to Moscow rather than Brussels and Washington.

Putin, a former KGB officer unwilling and unable (it is said) to escape from the secretive and authoritarian mindset typical of that organisation, has embarked on an attempt to recreate something of the old Soviet bloc, replacing Communist ideology with Greater Russian chauvinism. This campaign has been characterised by determination to reverse what are seen as the humiliations of the Yeltsin era and to restore Russia to the position of geopolitical power it enjoyed during both the Tsarist and Communist eras. The pursuit of this vision has led to armed intervention in Georgia (2008), the seizure and occupation of the Crimea (2014) and active military support for rebels in the south and east of Ukraine fighting to establish breakaway republics sympathetic to Moscow rather than Kiev. Russian expansionism and interference in the Ukrainian civil war has, in turn, led to Western retaliation, in the form of economic sanctions. An international crisis has resulted, fuelled by provocative rhetoric from Russia. Along with differences between Washington and Moscow concerning Syria and events in Venezuela, this stand-off has propelled the world to the verge of a new Cold War.

Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, meticulously deconstructs this narrative. He produces a very different story, backed by copious documentation and mastery of a wide range of primary and secondary sources. His work, informed by decades of experience formed by teaching, researching, and writing, displays an understanding of the complexities and deep historical legacies at work in the crisis in Ukraine. In so doing it presents a highly plausible revisionist account which puts the West in a poor light and treats Putin's Russia as a nation which, for all its faults and problems (Sakwa is under no illusions here), is more sinned against than sinning.

Sakwa argues that Ukraine is the epicentre of two crises. One, the *Ukrainian* crisis, is caused by a fracture within the country between two types of nationalism, one identified as 'monist' and the other as 'pluralist'. Each is the product of historical, geographical, economic and cultural divisions going back many years. Monist nationalism tends to dominate the centre and west of Ukraine. It aims to build a unified nation state, run from a Parliament in Kiev, with limited devolution to the regions and with Ukrainian as the official language. It is suspicious of Russia, seeing Moscow as the enemy of Ukrainian

self-determination during both the Tsarist and Soviet years and as responsible for the catastrophe of the 1930s 'Holodomor', the great famine in which millions died (numbers vary enormously, from 3 to 7 million). Monists wish to see their country closely aligned with the West, in the form of the EU in particular, to escape from Russian influence. Many are political and economic liberals, believing in constitutional democracy, clean government and free markets. However there is another version of this tradition, manifested in the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalist (OUN), led for many years by Stepan Bandera until his assassination by the KGB in 1959, which embraced the politics of the Far Right, racism and xenophobia. Anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalists fought with the Nazi Germans on the Russian front in 1941-45 and to this day some continue to profess National Socialist ideas. The pluralist tradition, on the other hand, is to be found at its strongest in the south and east of the country, especially in the Donbass region, and in the Crimea. Many inhabitants here speak Russian as their first language. Families and businesses have close ties with Russia; the economy of the region is characterised by heavy industry and military-related production and greatly reliant on the Russian market. Pluralists argue that Ukraine should be a non-aligned federal state, on friendly terms with Moscow, with Russian as the joint official language. Both monists and pluralists are committed to Ukrainian independence but believe in two very different versions.

The crisis in Ukraine fermented over at least a decade but the catalyst for its eruption was the 2014 Maidan revolution. This started out as a mass protest against the corrupt and incompetent administration of Viktor Yanukovich, who opted to sign a financial agreement with Moscow rather than an Association Agreement with the EU. Thousands descended on the Maidan (the central square in Kiev). The government, after some hesitation, opted for repression. The demonstrators fought back, assisted by armed militias committed to the radical nationalist outlook which had characterised the pro-Nazis of the Bandera years. Yanukovich's government collapsed and he fled to Russia. A monist administration took over in Kiev, but it, along with new President Petro Poroshenko, was heavily influenced by the Far Right (as was the subsequent administration, elected in the autumn of 2014). Under their influence, Soviet monuments were destroyed, a bill was drawn up to establish Ukrainian as sole official language. Kiev also began to talk about repudiating the agreement with Moscow under which Russia had the right to station its Black Sea Fleet at Sebastopol (the only all year round warm water Russian naval base) in the Crimea until 2042. Protests spread throughout south and east Ukraine. Sometimes the response was ferocious. There was a massacre of anti-Maidan demonstrators in Odessa by militant right-wing nationalists (the official death

toll was 48 dead and 247 injured but Sakwa points to local reports which suggest the number of deaths ran into the hundreds).¹

These disturbances set off the second crisis, the *Ukraine* crisis. This interacted with the *Ukrainian* crisis and led to the most serious confrontation, between Russia on the one side and the USA and the EU on the other, since the end of the Cold War. It started when Russia, determined not to lose the key strategic asset of its Sebastopol naval base, occupied the Crimea, which had been part of Russia until 1954. (Sakwa comments that this was a 'remarkably smooth and peaceful takeover'.²) Soon afterwards, the mobilisation of popular discontent in south and east Ukraine turned into an insurgency. Breakaway People's Republics (a deliberate echo of the politics of the Soviet era) were established in Donetsk and Lugansk. Armed forces from Kiev were sent to quell the rebellion. They failed to do so in the face of fierce local resistance backed (to what extent is still not clear) by Moscow. Various cease-fires have followed and broken down; the conflict is frozen but not resolved.

Putin's seizure of Crimea coming after the invasion of Georgia some six years earlier, along with his support for the rebels in Donetsk and Lugansk and a \$700 billion Russian rearmament drive,³ led to accusations in the West, especially in Washington, that Russia had abandoned diplomacy for brute force and wished to undermine the post-Cold War international system. These accusations were the prelude to the stationing of NATO forces in the Baltic republics as insurance of support should Moscow's acquisitive eyes turn on them. Both Washington and Brussels supported the Maidan revolutionaries and their determination to turn Ukraine towards the West and break away from Russia influence. The international climate deteriorated as Europe once again became the site of a stand-off between the great powers, with most of the responsibility being laid at Putin's door.

Sakwa is having none of it. He argues that Putin is reacting to a series of Western measures seen by Moscow as threatening and provocative. These include the establishment of missile defence systems in Eastern Europe to 'within a rocket's throw from Moscow', the expansion of NATO towards Russia's borders (this was a key feature of the 2008 Georgia crisis) and support for the nationalists in Ukraine. For Moscow all of this amounts to a repudiation of commitments given to Mikhail Gorbachev at the conclusion of the Cold War that NATO would not move east and a rejection of his model for post Cold War

¹ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, pp. 97-8.

² Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, p. 100.

³ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, p. 222.

international co-operation. Gorbachev had liked to speak about 'our common European home' and an international security system in which Russia would co-operate with the West, possibly joining NATO. The Soviet leader had envisaged a pluralist global order in which countries from differing politico-economic traditions, including those following varieties of capitalist and socialist developmental paths, would work together for the sake of world peace and prosperity.⁴ Instead, however, the United States and its allies in NATO and the EU have consistently pushed for what Sakwa calls a 'monist' international order characterised not by variety but by the spread of free market capitalism and liberal democracy throughout the globe. (This is a combination highly congenial to international corporate business and finance, whose welfare has been long equated by Washington with the national interest.) Through this 'monist' order, political freedom is identified completely with economic liberalism. Taking the line that the Cold War did not end with a negotiated peace between the superpowers but with the defeat of the USSR and the collapse of socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism, the West has regarded governments not prepared to accept its view of how the world should be arranged as undemocratic and subversive and in need of diplomatic, and, if necessary, military restraint. This is a stance that recalls the Cold War strategy of containment.

What Sakwa (following Yeltsin) calls the 'cold peace' of the era since 1991 therefore has an ideological dimension, although he steers away from describing it in those terms. He prefers to say, reasonably enough, that the Russian actions in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine (and, before those, in Georgia in 2008) are driven by a determination to push back against the triumphalist extension of Western influence, complete with hostile alliance system, to its own border. What is at stake for Moscow is the national security of Russia itself, which would face a profound threat were the Black Sea Fleet forced to move away from Sebastopol and Ukraine became a member of NATO. Indeed even a scenario in which Ukraine participates in the EU but not NATO presents a strategic challenge to Moscow, given the provisions of the 2007

⁴ Gorbachev has continued to advocate an international settlement of this kind. See his interview by Stephen Sackur on the BBC's *Hardtalk*, broadcast on 10 November 2014 (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHL9INxKQbg>> – in particular the last seven minutes). He has attacked the West for expanding NATO into Eastern Europe (Will Worley and Matt Payton, 'Mikhail Gorbachev says NATO is escalating Cold War with Russia "into a hot one"', *The Independent*, 9 July 2016 at <<https://tinyurl.com/yygz9ms3>> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nato-chief-russia-soviet-mikhail-gorbachev-ukraine-eastern-europe-tensions-jens-stoltenberg-unified-a7128521.html>>) and backed Putin over the seizure of Crimea (Kevin Fasick and Dean Balsamini, 'Gorbachev Backs Putin's Invasion of Crimea', *New York Post*, 22 May 2016 at <<https://tinyurl.com/yybu3zv3>> or <<https://nypost.com/2016/05/22/gorbachev-backs-putins-invasion-of-crimea/>>).

Lisbon Treaty. This requires EU members to align their defence and security policies with those of NATO and to strengthen arrangements designed to facilitate a 'Common Foreign and Security Policy'.⁵ The Lisbon Treaty was followed up by the 2017 decision on the part of 25 EU governments to establish a 5 billion euro defence fund promoting weapons development along with military planning and joint operations. Putin's counter to this, in keeping with Gorbachev's pluralist approach, has been to call for a federal, neutral and non-aligned Ukraine, co-operating economically with both Brussels and Moscow, with its independence and security guaranteed by international agreement.

The Western response to Putin's refusal to play ball with EU and NATO expansion has, throughout, been to ignore his pluralist agenda and to call for Russian acquiescence in the European spread of liberal capitalism. Yet when this was tried, in the Yeltsin era, the results were disastrous: the rouble collapsed, businesses and whole industries failed and living standards plummeted. Indeed, their decline was vertiginous, surpassing 'anything endured by any country in the great depression of the 1930s'.⁶ Putin's long period of dominance in Russian politics is rooted in part in his success in retrieving the country from this disastrous pass. In doing so, he has restored some of the international influence lost in the Yeltsin years and arrested and partially reversed Russia's rapid 1990s journey to the free market: 51 per cent of the economy is now owned by the State, and other continuities with the Soviet era are still visible in social as well as military policy.

This is why it is perhaps a mistake to ignore the existence of a modest ideological dimension to the ongoing confrontation between Russia and the West: in resisting Western encroachment Putin is, by default, also resisting the expansion of its politico-economic system, called by many 'neoliberalism'. He is challenging it at several points: in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, in the Middle East (the intervention in Syria), and in Latin America (support not only for Cuba but also the beleaguered Bolivarist government in Venezuela). Russia has also established a Eurasian Economic Union in conjunction with the now independent republics of former Soviet Central Asia. Through this organization as well as bilaterally, it has co-operated with China in the new Silk Road

⁵ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, p. 30.

⁶ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, p. 28; Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), ch. 4 shows how in both Poland and Russia the transitional aid needed to sustain the economy following the ending of the Communist regimes was made conditional on the adoption of free market capitalism, notwithstanding that the main political parties in both countries wanted to pursue a social-democratic course. The results were disastrous to economy and society in both countries.

initiatives and in the creation of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization, dedicated to defence and security co-operation. These groupings cannot, of course, be said to amount to an emerging socialist bloc of nations. All the same, along with its partners in the BRICS group of countries (the acronym standing for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Russia has built the foundations of a 'new "Second World" alliance system' which has 'started to create its own financial instruments and institutions of international governance.'⁷

Sakwa's argument that the Ukrainian crisis results from the destabilization of the country by forces committed to militantly anti-Russian nationalism, egged on by former Soviet bloc countries and external interference by the United States and the European Union, propelled by a dogmatic and triumphalist liberal universalism, is highly persuasive. His book should be read by anyone keen to understand the roots of this conflict and gain an insight into the world view of decision makers in the USA and the EU (including, for now, the UK, whose support for boosting NATO's presence in Eastern Europe would 'only pour fuel on an already raging fire'⁸). The election of Trump to the US Presidency, with his support for protectionism and greater interest in hemispheric than in European affairs, post-dated publication of Sakwa's book. It may have put a dampener on US globalism and liberal universalism and on the Ukrainian imbroglio for now. In Ukraine clashes have tended to die down. It is, however, too early to say whether or not the situation there, along with the wider international climate, will return to the fevered and dangerous state of the period after the Maidan revolution of 2014.

One final thought. There can be very few academics now operating who possess Richard Sakwa's expertise in modern Russian (including Soviet and post-Soviet) international history. Why, then, do we not see more of him in the mainstream media, both broadcasting and print? He has been on RT, discussing the Skripal poisonings amongst other things⁹ (no doubt leading some to suspect him of being an apologist for Putin, which he certainly is not).

⁷ Sakwa does point out (on p. 253) that this is as yet a weak grouping, and that 'The sanctions on Russia have exposed the vulnerability of this putative Second World to the geopolitical pressure of the First World.' It also remains to be seen whether Brazil remains one of the BRICS group after its Presidential election at the end of 2018 resulted in victory for right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro, to rejoicing in Washington. Bolsonaro's Pinochet-style fusion of free market capitalism with authoritarianism threatens to reverse Brazil's recent social reforms, its progress towards greater democracy, and its backing on the world scene for international economic justice and environmental protection.

⁸ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, p. 231

⁹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mckQ-4Qqel0>>.

But I have never seen him on (for example) BBC or Channel 4 (this does not of course mean he has never been interviewed there but it does suggest that any appearances have been somewhat limited). Why? Is this an accidental oversight, or are his opinions deemed by news and current affairs editors to be 'unhelpful'?

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¹⁰ This was reviewed in *Lobster 74* by Dan Atkinson at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster74/lob74-reinvention-britain.pdf>>.