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Book Review: *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained From Within*, by Anna Matveeva. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, Russian, Eurasian and Eastern European Politics Series, 2018, 337 pp.

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In her book, Anna Matveeva (a visiting senior research fellow in the Department of War Studies at King's College London) provides an in-depth account of the secession conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. This is intentionally different – told in large part by the secessionists themselves. As the author explains, “It tells the bottom-up story of the rebellion in Ukraine’s Donbas region, concentrating on its internal dynamic and explaining the perspectives of its participants – the local rebels opposing Kyiv, volunteer combatants who came from Russia and elsewhere, and ordinary residents who were caught up in the events and divided by the war” (xv). The book succeeds in aiming “to tell the story of the conflict in Donbas from the point of view of the pro-Russian rebels, who sought and continue to seek either sovereign independence from Ukraine or unification with Russia” (xv). Matveeva delves deeply into the very genesis of the conflict, not as much by repeating what many scholars have already done – writing about the historical evolution of Ukraine, how industrialization introduced a primarily Russian population into the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine during the Soviet era (described in Chapter 4: ‘Donbas – A Much-unloved Powerhouse’), how these Russians found themselves

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abandoned after Ukrainian independence in 1991, and how recent political events – in particular the Euro-Maidan uprising in Kyiv – so troubled them. Yet Matveeva does concisely explain this historical background in the second chapter: ‘Laying Grounds for Confrontation’ (including a section on ‘Politicization of Identity’); and she concludes that “without acknowledging the past, it is difficult to understand the present and the extent it holds the actors in conflict a hostage to it” (xvii) (rather reminiscent of Winston Churchill, who once commented that “we cannot say the past is past without forsaking the future”). The author makes the primary focus of the book her attempt to understand the secessionists’ thinking, motivations, and especially the personalities and disagreements of their leaders. This story “shows volunteer fighters, driven by a wide and diffuse set of motivations, who emerged from Ukraine, Russia, and from the world outside that stood at the heart of the rebellion. The book seeks to bring out the participants’ own voices and personalities to...provide an opportunity to explain their thinking and actions” (xvi). Clearly this interests Matveeva more than attempting to describe both sides in the conflict; as such we are given a unique understanding of the genesis of such a separatist movement and how it rapidly evolved into full-scale warfare (especially in Chapter 1: ‘Framing the Issues’). The author argues that “such views must be understood without prejudice not only from the point of historical narrative, but also because they are important if we are ever to resolve the conflict. It is worth bearing in mind that civil wars never have absolute villains and saints, but it is rather the logic of armed struggle which leads the parties into taking actions and counter-actions that were unthinkable for them at the beginning” (xv-xvi).

While this book focuses almost exclusively on the Donbas conflict – the secession movement in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts – it does go into the secession of Crimea in the third chapter: ‘Faultlines in Crimea’, “exploring contestation of identities through history and modern politics” (xvi). The three main ethnocultural communities in Crimea – Russians, Ukrainians, and Tatars – perceived the recent unfolding of events differently: Russians still bemoaning the annexation of Crimea by Ukraine back in 1954, Ukrainians supporting the new resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and Tatars viewing themselves as a victimized minority. Crimean Tatars are a Turkic ethnic group whose homeland is Crimea, where they settled from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries and constituted a majority through the nineteenth century. Suspected of collaborating with invading German forces during the Second World War, they were deported *en masse* by Russia to Soviet Central Asia in 1944. Since 1967 they were gradually allowed to return, only to find their traditional lands confiscated and resettled; it was not until 1989 when the Supreme

Soviet government finally condemned the deportation. As Matveeva mentions, understandably Crimean Tatars have been the strongest supporters of allegiance to Ukraine and opposition to Russia (pp. 48-54). Of at least 3000 people who fled Crimea for Ukraine in April 2014 an estimated 80% were Tatars, now exiled to Kyiv.¹ The Mejlis – the ‘executive representative’ of Crimean Tatars – was outlawed by Russia in 2016 “for the use of propaganda of aggression and hatred toward Russia, inciting ethnic nationalism and extremism in society”. Tatars have been deprived of some coastal lands on the pretext of lacking legal documentation proving ownership. In November 2018 a United Nations committee approved an updated draft resolution on the ‘Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol’.²

While ethno-linguistic lines have been firmly drawn in Crimea, more could be said about how ethnic diversity may pertain to political allegiances in Donbas (the second chapter appropriately contains sections on ‘History and Demographics’ and ‘Language and Fear of Assimilation’). Matveeva does occasionally seem to acknowledge that not all Russian-speakers were supporters of separatism, nor all Ukrainian-speakers in the region supporters of the Ukrainian government, yet only passing mention is made of the substantial Greek minority in Donetsk oblast. 92,000 people of Greek origin were counted in the Ukraine census in 2001, of whom 77,000 were in Donetsk oblast, yet with generations of intermarriage with Orthodox Ukrainians the number is likely far higher if people partially of Greek ethnicity are all counted (perhaps as many as 160,000). These Pontic Greeks in Donetsk oblast speak the unique Mariupolitan/Rumeika dialect of Greek. 22,000 live in the port city of Mariupol (where they constitute only 4% of residents), another 10,000 in the city of Donetsk; north of Mariupol they are concentrated in five raions where they comprise 13-20% of the population and number some 30,000.³ Yet this area is not defined as an autonomous region. This area has repeatedly fluctuated between pro- and anti-Ukrainian government allegiances, particularly between April and June 2014.⁴

But how did the separatist movement in Donbas so quickly emerge from widespread unrest into full-scale warfare? From the outset Matveeva explains how the Donbas situation differed from Crimea, probing into – and largely dismissing – any perceived Russian intention to annex also this region of Ukraine as it had just virtually done in Crimea. The author explains the nature of Russian involvement in Donbas essentially as a manifestation of the broader ‘*Russkaya vesna*’/‘Russian spring’ ideology espoused by Russian leaders of the movement – some of whom were actually Russian citizens (in Chapter 5: ‘Russian Spring: Bolsheviks and Monarchists, All Welcome!’ and Chapter 10: ‘Power of the State, Power of Ideas’). However,

perhaps more could be said about the nature of Russian military incursion into this region of Ukraine. In August 2014 a Russian ‘humanitarian’ convoy crossed the border (without Ukrainian government permission – which may have been beside the point as pro-Russian forces controlled many border crossings anyway). Russian tanks crossed in June 2014 (yet Russian military involvement was relatively restrained compared to what it could have been). The shooting down of a Malaysian flight en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on July 17, 2014 by separatist forces using Russian-supplied anti-aircraft equipment (according to subsequent investigative reports) caused 298 deaths (of whom 193 were Dutch).⁵

According to contemporary sources, some six thousand Russian troops were supporting 30-40,000 secessionist fighters by September 2017. Much attention is devoted in the book (especially Chapter 6: ‘Free Guerrillas: “Novorossiya be!”: Ghosts and Somalis Take the Stage’ and Chapter 10) to describing the recruitment and motivation of pro-Russian paramilitary groups (such as the self-defined Donbas People’s Militia, Vostok Brigade, Russian Orthodox Army, Sparta Battalion, Luhansk People’s Militia, Great Don Army, Prizrak Brigade, the rapid response Batman group, Russian Cossacks, and Chechen, Serb, Ossetian mercenaries). The revival of self-identified Cossack fighters is particularly interesting (pp. 73-74, 136-138).

The final part of the book is dedicated to three main themes: first, the conflict subculture, symbolism, narrative, and communications that the insurgency produced; second, to situate the Donbas conflict within developments in Ukraine, including how it affected the lives of the ordinary residents, and how the state and society addressed the war and peace dilemma; and third, an analysis of Russia’s role, as well as conversely the effects that the conflict had on Russian politics and society (xvi, Chapters 11: ‘Rebellion in Ukrainian Context: Inviting in or Shutting the Door?’ and 12: ‘What is Donbas for Russia?’). Chapter 9 uniquely digresses into ‘New Symbolism in the Digital Era’.

Much detail is provided in this book on the progress of the war (Chapters 7: ‘Hot Summer: Military Campaign’ and 8: ‘Consolidation and the New (Dis)order’). The toll of the Donbas conflict has been severe. In three years (from April 2014 to May 2017), 10,090 were killed – including 2,777 civilians (p. 145); various other data sources indicate over 10,000 killed over five years (including 3,000 civilians, 2 million displaced or at risk, up to 5,000 secessionist fighters (including both Russian troops and volunteers) and over 4,000 Ukrainian troops dead or casualties).⁶

Will the conflict be effectively resolved? The acclaimed Minsk Protocol in September 2014 collapsed by the following January, followed by another ceasefire the next month, yet

another in August 2018; in fact there have been more than ten failed ceasefires – this has been called a ‘frozen conflict’.

For the readers of this special issue, an unanswered question has to be why, how and when were federalization of Ukraine and recognition of minority autonomy – notably for the largest Russian minority (actually a regional or local majority) – bypassed? As Matveeva explains, actually Russia proposed a referendum on federalization during spring 2014, yet this was suspected simply as an irredentist plan; so referenda were subsequently soon organized in areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ alternative to the question: ‘Do you agree with the Act...of the Donetsk or Luhansk People’s Republic?’ (the Act could either imply independence or self-rule or sovereignty). Electoral commissions reported an overwhelmingly positive response (96% in Luhansk and 89% in Donetsk with a reported turnout of 75% - however far lower participation of just 28% in Mariupol) (pp. 111-112). Problems in governance of the territory are raised in Chapter 10 (pp. 138-141).

Matveeva dismisses the idea that the annexation of Crimea was preconceived by Putin; rather Russia certainly took full advantage of the strongly pro-Russian secessionist movement there (p. 66). In contrast, clearly Russia has been slower to respond to secessionism in Donbas. It may seem – in broader European context – that there have been missed opportunities to contain or placate rather inevitable Russian minority unrest which so dramatically increased after Ukrainian independence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union which left the large Russian population feeling stranded. The book concludes with ‘Final Thoughts: Imperfect Peace is Better than a Good War’:

The story of the Donbas war is that of a tragedy which could have been averted and of a conflict which could have been resolved with enough political will....Yet little movement in this direction happened. Few attempts at peace were made.... Kyiv also did not demonstrate much flexibility and continued to reject direct negotiations. Conflict resolution organizations largely were slow to react when the conflict was at its messy height....At this junction the events reached the point of no return, having created new realities of warfare, political leadership, internal organization, and ideological narratives which legitimized the actions.....If separated parts of Ukraine were to rejoin, they would have to deal with the situation that...during the conflict the country [had] changed considerably, and a ‘Ukrainian monist’ version of identity and the ‘national idea’ dominated the state and public narrative. Dissent was not tolerated lightly and pluralistic identities characteristic of the pre-war Ukraine were not the order of the day. Society that was based on multiculturalism and acceptance of differences was withering away, and what replaced it was unlikely to give returning separatists a warm welcome. (pp. 295-6)

¹ Data from Matveeva combined with Ukrainian government sources.

² UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization). ‘Crimean Tatars: New Draft Resolution on Crimea Approved by the UN’. *UNPO*, November 16, 2018. <https://unpo.org/article/21225>.

³ Demographic data on Greeks in Ukraine from the 2001 Ukraine census.

⁴ Hromadske International. 'Greeks in Ukraine: Living Near the Front Line'. *Hromadske International*, March 3, 2017. https://hromadske.ua/posts/greeks_in_ukraine.

⁵ For further details on this incident, see www.independent.co.uk; and on the results of the subsequent investigation, see *Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, May 24, 2017.

⁶ Data on casualties in the Donbas war vary, depending on Ukraine government sources (e.g. *Kyiv Post* and *Ukraine Weekly Bulletin*) or pro-Russian sources (e.g. *Roundup Novorussia*, September 1, 2014; *Tass*, February 25, 2015; *Sputnik*, June 28, 2015),