
Russia's War against Ukraine

By Gwendolyn Sasse

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Reviewed by Riccardo Gasco, Bologna University and Sabanci University

Since the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have become accustomed to being immersed in an almost impossible-to-process amount of information and cross-propaganda. So much so that the daily news, despite the ongoing tragedy of the war, no longer seems to impact people. *Russia's War Against Ukraine* by Gwendolyn Sasse, Einstein Professor for the Comparative Study of Democracy and Authoritarianism at Humboldt University, offers the reader a chance to escape this constant flow of information by providing a broader background to understand how we reached this point over two years into the war.

The book does not describe every single event that led to the war but “rather provides the context and thinks about the war against a broader backdrop” (p. x). Sasse’s book starts by challenging the prevalent notion that equates the Soviet Union with Russia since its dissolution in 1991. Focusing on Ukraine, it acknowledges the distinct identities of the countries that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union, focusing on “how to decolonize the Western view of the Eastern European region as a whole” (p. 132).

The book represents a successful attempt to bring to the general public’s attention issues related to the war that have been extensively discussed in academic literature yet not made easily accessible to a general audience. Based on social research methods in the field of con-



flict studies, the author, by leveraging surveys and interviews, attempts to answer some of the most common questions about the reasons for the outbreak of the war and the drivers behind the fierce Ukrainian military and civilian resistance.

The book is divided into 7 chapters. Following a brief introduction, in chapters 2 and 3, the author focuses on the historiography of Ukraine, especially on the nation-building process. Specifically, in the first part, through a refined synthesis, the author succeeds in providing as complete an image as possible of the main steps that led to Ukraine’s independence journey that started in 1991. This serves to refute the prevailing thesis described by Western media as the “sudden birth of the Ukrainian Nation” (p. 39), which is actually a process that took many years and intensified with the start of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2014 (p. 39). From the beginning, it is clear that the author rightly gives significant agency to civil society and individuals such as leaders and prominent political figures, proving to be some of the fundamental factors in the Ukrainian resistance against Russia.

In chapter 3, the role of civil society is further examined, highlighting the close connection between protests and transformation and positioning society as the central figure in this dynamic process. Tracing the long series of mass protests that have characterized Ukraine from the Gorbachev era to Euromaidan, the chapter identifies popular uprisings as one of

the factors that “helped to anchor the idea of a civic European nation in society” (p. 52). Sasse pinpoints two significant factors that, in her view, contributed to and acted as catalysts for the outbreak of the conflict. On one hand, there is the ongoing process of Russia’s increasing authoritarianism coupled with a growing fear of a Western threat. On the other hand, the strengthening of the Ukrainian self-identity increasingly looks towards the West. Additionally, she highlights the tight connection between Russian foreign and domestic policies, a hallmark of various authoritarian regimes. Therefore, the combination of these factors highly contributed to the outbreak of the war. In its conciseness, the book places significant emphasis on the democracy versus autocracy debate, thereby expanding the perspective beyond the dynamics of the conflict to a more ideological level.

Chapter 4 describes the challenges of accurately depicting the Russian political system and how it has often been described in Europe. After Yeltsin designated Putin as his successor, authoritarian tendencies have increasingly intensified. Since his election as president in 2000, through his initial two terms, and even more notably upon his return to the presidency in 2012 after a brief hiatus to comply with constitutional requirements, Putin has progressively consolidated his personal control over the government. This has led to severe crackdowns on civil society, a grim culmination of which is the recent mysterious death of Alexei Navalny – a prominent figure of political opposition in Russia who had already been poisoned before.

Up to chapter 5, the author, by focusing on the key variables to understand the reasons behind Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, equips the reader with the tools to grasp an event that turns out to be one of the most significant occurrences in the lead-up of the 2022 invasion – the an-

nexation of Crimea in 2014. The annexation of Crimea paved the way for the Donbas war, which resulted in Ukraine losing control over a further section of its state border. These two crucial passages of recent Ukrainian history are well explained in chapters 5 and 6, highlighting the connection with the Western perception that “these unresolved conflicts were viewed as small, geopolitically unimportant, or at least reliably frozen” (p. 132).

The author successfully provides an array of political, historical, and sociological tools essential for understanding the book’s last two chapters, focusing on the recent full-scale invasion and reflecting on the war’s potential implications and long-term consequences. Building on primary sources such as newspaper articles, the author also succeeds in debunking reductionist explanations related to NATO’s expansion in Ukraine, highlighting the exceptionally united response of European countries, NATO, and its allies in supporting Ukraine.

Gwendolyn Sasse’s *Russia’s War against Ukraine* provides a concise yet clear and comprehensive overview of the lead-up to the current state of war by focusing on independence, regional diversity, protest, the democratic transformation of Ukraine, and the role of Putin. Sasse’s work fits well within a growing body of literature on the subject. By choosing to focus on specific elements, the author deliberately omits other relevant aspects of conflict, such as military and strategic components. However, the reader could have benefitted more from a brief explanation of the role of external actors involved, such as the U.S., NATO, and the EU.

The author’s clarity of exposition and avoidance of jargon make the book an excellent resource for the general public as well as a starting point for students and scholars interested in acquiring the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of such issues.