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Review

Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change

Olga Bertelsen (ed). Stuttgart, Germany: Ibidem Press, 2017. 440pp.

Emma Mateo*

This November marks six years since Ukraine's Euromaidan protests. Sometimes referred to as the "Revolution of Dignity," the events of winter 2013–14 had far-reaching consequences not only for Ukraine's government and Ukrainian national identity, but also for global geopolitics. After the corrupt Yanukovich government fell, Putin's Russia annexed Crimea and became involved in separatist conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions, under the premise of "protecting Russian speakers." This edited volume investigates the events of 2013–14 and their impact on culture, politics, society and identities.

The volume is extremely broad in terms of topics, disciplines, and styles. It includes contributions from scholars from North America, Western Europe, Ukraine and Russia. The tone of the chapters ranges from passionate rebuttal of Russian aggression to cool scholarly analysis of Ukraine's reforms. The six sections cover topics from Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, to cultural and social changes in Ukraine,

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government reforms, and wars of narratives and information. The diversity of topics, voices and approaches borders on being too diffuse. However, Bertelsen's editing, introduction and epilogue hold the volume together and she effectively draws out the common threads linking all the chapters—narratives, identity and cultural change.

Many chapters concern Russia as much as Ukraine, with several probing the narratives underlying Russia's aggression in great detail. In the opening chapter, George O. Liber examines the reasons for Russia's response to Euromaidan, tracing the evolution of Russian attitudes towards Ukraine from the Tsarist era to Putin's Russia. He demonstrates how these legacies and narratives have built upon one another, resulting in a situation whereby Russia considers an independent Ukraine unacceptable. An impassioned essay by Yuri Scherbak follows, in which he condemns Russia as an aggressor and a "terrorist state," whose aggression and chauvinism threatens not only Ukraine, but also the global liberal and security order. Narratives are also the focus of Igor Torbakov's chapter. With fascinating insight, he discusses how Ukraine and Russia's intertwined histories, beginning with Kyivan Rus', have birthed two conflicting historical narratives: that of a united, "Pan-Russian" state spanning Russia's former empire, and one a distinctive Ukrainian identity which forms the foundation of an independent Ukrainian state. Myroslav Shkandrij explores the different interpretations and manifestation of nationalism in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. He brings some clarity to the puzzle of the Kremlin's paradoxical views of nationalism, which he argues are used in multiple narratives to different ends.

Several chapters focus more explicitly on the conflict and its consequences, without dropping the underlying theme of narratives. Nedim Useinov offers a concise but meticulously researched and cited overview of the annexation of Crimea, noting the ideological, historical and geopolitical motivations driving Russia's annexation. Dale Bertelsen and Olga Bertelsen's chapter builds on Useinov's, arguing that Russia's annexation of Crimea is part of a much wider plan to gain domination of the Black Sea region. Peter N. Tanchak offers a chapter equal parts fascinating and worrying on how trolls have evolved since Soviet times, appropriating modern technologies. After sharpening their skills during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, they are now turning their attention to other foreign policy goals. Andrii Krawchuk highlights the under-studied religious dimension of the conflict, discussing the ensuing polarisation, displacement, fragmentation and even persecution of Muslim, Jewish and Baptist communities.

Other chapters keep the lens more firmly focused on Ukraine. In a detailed, highly informative chapter, Laada Bilaniuk discusses the different ideological approaches to language in Ukraine. Tamara Hundorova diverges from the social science of much of the volume to analyse the Euromaidan through the lens of performance theory. She discusses how the symbolism of Ukrainian Cossacks, the apocalyptic, and the carnivalesque permeated Euromaidan at different times. The final chapters turn to Ukraine's reforms. Corruption was one of the key issues of the Euromaidan, and Oksana Huss frames it as structural issue. She systematically notes how corruption pervades the different levels of the Ukrainian political system, from the creation of parties and holding of elections to the creation of laws and implementation of policy. Finally, Bohdan Harasymiw analyses police reforms in great detail. Although new laws and institutions suggest promise, he cautions against unrealistic expectations given Ukraine's political, economic and geopolitical instability. The epilogue provides a valuable contribution in itself. Rather reviewing the chapters in the volume, Bertelsen wisely chooses to discuss how Ukrainian presidents since independence have tackled questions of identity. She notes how Euromaidan has brought about shifts in culture and identity, and ends with what this might mean for Ukraine's future.

The standout chapters are those by Bilaniuk, Torbakov, and Bertelsen herself along with her co-author. The latter two offer highly original and thought-provoking arguments, whilst the former sheds light on an extremely complex and contentious issue. The language situation in Ukraine is bewildering to outsiders and vulnerable to gross oversimplifications and stereotypes. However, Bilaniuk carefully outlines the ways in which language is governed in law, used in daily life, mass media and schools, and weaponised in the occupied territories. She concludes that although the most liberal approach would be for Ukraine to embrace bilingualism, language choice in Ukraine is now unavoidably politicized. Given the fact that Russian language is partially used as justification for Russia's aggression, she argues that the government should carefully support the promotion of Ukrainian.

Moving away from the practicalities of policy, Torbakov draws on both Ancient Greek history and post-colonial scholarship—and makes it work. He sees both Russia and Ukraine as “post-colonial” states, albeit ones which experience this legacy in different ways. Moreover, Russia is both a subaltern *and* an empire. As a former empire, Russia views its borders as movable and ever expanding, and as a subaltern, Russia resents the

political and cultural dominance of the West, and “craves equal status.” Torbakov notes the danger posed to Ukraine’s existence by Russian narratives about the unity of the Slavic peoples. He contrasts the relatively cultural homogenous Russia with “boisterously diverse” Ukraine and its regional, political, social, linguistic and religious pluralism. He argues that whereas Putin’s Russia prioritises stability and has a history of autocratic rule, Ukrainians’ national narrative is based around the struggle for national liberation, and the Ukrainian nation has several times attempted to establish “societal control over the state,” as in the case of Euromaidan.

In an equally rich chapter, Bertelsen and Bertelsen link the Kremlin’s contemporary geopolitical ambitions to the ancient myth of Moscow as the “Third Rome,” leader of Orthodoxy and rightful heir to Constantinople. Using this framework they situate the annexation of Crimea in a broader picture of the region, discussing Russia’s activities in Syria, its involvement in frozen conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia, and ongoing clashes with Turkey and Romania. They argue that if Putin truly seeks economic and geopolitical dominance of the region, we can expect further instability, particularly with regards to Turkey, Romanian and Bulgaria. Last year’s events in the Sea of Azov are particularly are particularly poignant when viewed in light of this argument.

Overall, Bertelsen offers a volume affirming her introductory argument that Euromaidan was a key turning point in Ukraine’s post-Soviet history, which “triggered a far-reaching national awakening and accelerated the tempo of change” (15–16). The work illuminates both what has changed, and why. However, Bertelsen’s volume also leaves the reader in no doubt as to the Euromaidan’s broader geopolitical significance. Numerous chapters support her stance that the current situation is not the “Ukraine Crisis,” a situation of domestic making, but rather “Russia’s war in Ukraine.”

The real value of the volume lies in its multi-faceted discussion of the underlying factors of Ukrainian-Russian conflict that are often neglected: the ways in which understandings of Russian and Ukrainian identity, history and nationalism come into conflict with one another. A thorough discussion and comprehensive understanding of the conflict and Russian foreign policy more broadly is impossible without acknowledging these factors.

The book has an appeal as broad as its subject matter. It is a very worthwhile read for practitioners and policymakers seeking a nuanced, thorough discussion of contemporary Ukraine and the challenges it faces. Moreover, scholars working on a wide

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variety of issues, from the Ukraine-Russian conflict, to Ukrainian or Russian identity, Euromaidan, Russian foreign policy, and information warfare, will find material of interest.