

Book Review

**Russia and Ukraine: A Journey Through the History, Origins, and Causes of the War that is Shaking the World and Impact It Could Have on Our Lives**

(Darell Norton, 2022, 220)

*Reviewed by: Faisal Khattak\**

The book 'Russia and Ukraine: A Journey Through the History, Origins, and Causes of the War that is Shaking the World and Impact It Could Have on Our Lives' serves as a basic guideline for anyone who wants in-depth answers to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and why it began. The book is written by Darell Norton, engages the audience by starting from the historical context of the conflict to various insecurities both nations have. A historical roadmap citing the origins of each country and their relationship that culminated in this conflict based on Western influence and national interests. The book has six major sections, each of which is divided into historical origins and then the specific aspects of the conflict that are essential to understand the root cause of the war.

In the introduction, the author tells us about the historical significance of the conflict and why it happened. Also, it criticises Russia's insecurities and the West for allowing them to happen. Norton established the scene by presenting the conflict as a regional and global issue that is influenced by Russia's opposition to Western hegemony and NATO's eastern expansion. It also expands upon how Ukraine is getting ready for NATO membership, but Russia will keep on hammering it to teach other ex-USSR states a lesson. In the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, the author starts with the geography, demographics and the rise of the USSR. It talks about the religion of Russia which is mixed and sports that are played there and how it excels in them. It talks about the literacy of the country and various scholars. The second part of the chapter delves into the history of Russia predating the ancient times and its rise into a prideful nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The author then explores the political unrest in the country after WWII, the Cold War to the fall of the USSR, which had various reasons and insecurities. In this section, the author also cites the military might of Russia and its self-reliant defense industry that is enabled by its economy backed by natural reserves.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter discusses the geography of Ukraine and why it is important for NATO, the EU, and Russia. It examines the shifting narratives of the Ukrainian presidents who were sometimes pro-Russian and sometimes anti-Russian. This has often led to many revolts. The author talks about how Ukraine has established itself as a sovereign country and how the world did not support Russia when it went for the

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annexation of Crimea in 2014. It draws roots from the cultural life and urban outlook. It also sheds light on the constitution of Ukraine and its legislature, judiciary, and administration. Norton in this chapter also mentions the denuclearisation of Ukraine in the 1990s, which was a turning point in future affairs and how the Russian government viewed Ukraine. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, the author established various facts about how various Western nations have shaped and changed the outlook of Russia and its adjacent countries. It highlights the vital role that NATO has played in making Russia insecure by recruiting ex-Warsaw countries. It also raises concerns over the portrayal of the Monroe Doctrine, which the US has used as a pivot to meddle in the affairs of every country.

The author also describes the economic dependencies of the European Union (EU) on Russia and Ukraine. In this chapter, various details pertaining to economic funds, aids and help provided to Ukraine by the West, which has further aggravated the situation, e.g., from 2015 to 2019, more than \$287 million were sent in direct commercial sales to Ukraine by the West. Additionally, it also mentions how Russia was betrayed by the West through fake promises that it would not expand NATO eastward. In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, Norton discusses the various trade agreements by Ukraine with the West, which were not taken lightly by Russia. Russia saw this as Western influence with the affairs of its neighbouring countries. However, various motives and reasons for which Ukraine wanted to join NATO and the EU are also mentioned, all revolving around its economic gains, sovereignty issues and threat from Russia. The author deliberates that the following four points (pursued by its govt.) were the boiling point for Russia to act more aggressively towards Ukraine. The 1<sup>st</sup> is the recognition of Ukraine as a market economy, membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), associate membership in the EU and lastly the eventual complete membership in the EU.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, Darell explains that despite various warnings, Ukraine did not pay heed to any of the caveats by Russia, which resulted in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Consequently, involvement of the West in Ukraine also increased. Climax of which was the 2022 invasion of Russia into Ukraine. The author gives various accounts of the conflict where he establishes that the invasion was initially successful but has met with various national and international condemnation and retaliation, even from its allies like China, who implied a more peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Norton, in his book, termed the 2022 invasion as ‘premeditated’ or ‘half-cooked’, especially the crisis of Donbas, which Putin called the ‘New Russia’ (Novorossiia).

Nevertheless, despite various calls to the West by Ukraine for direct assistance, the US and EU have been wise not to engage with Russia directly because of two main reasons, attacking Russia would be a colossal mistake because Russia has one of the biggest armies in the world with thousands of nuclear weapons. Secondly, the US and Europe have no mutual defence clause with Ukraine, so they cannot send their troops into Ukraine (hence, the yearning for a NATO membership by Ukraine and ex-USSR

states). The author concludes that there are two main reasons for the Russian aggression: the 1<sup>st</sup> is its stance regarding the expansion of NATO, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> is its ego that Russia wants to rival NATO alone and use Ukraine as a lynchpin for future conflicts. The author calls for a mediation effort by all the nations, as the future spillover could result in escalation and global insecurity.

The book revolves around four key themes. Firstly, the historical Legacy that it starts off with the historical legacy and conflict context of both the nations that predates the USSR and WWII. Secondly, the geopolitical rivalries. The author explains the expansion of NATO and Russia's emergence as a power again, with China as the reason for increased tensions. Thirdly, the economic dependencies. Despite sanctions, the Russian economy is able to thrive because of the energy politics of the EU and its influence on the dynamics of war. Lastly, the modern warfare – grey-hybrid warfare, cyber warfare and the utilisation of disruptive technologies, including information warfare strategies are covered in the later part of the book. The author has presented a fact-based analysis of the war, and various reasons have been drawn from obvious conclusions. The book gives a very detailed account of the history of Russia, Ukraine's existence and why NATO exists. It draws relevance to Russia trying to counter NATO alone and aligning with China, which has been silently progressing into a superpower. It is more like the post-Cold War; the world was unipolar, but now it is again becoming bipolar with various 21st-century technologies coming into play. The author bashes the ambitions of Russia and places them unjustly.

Nevertheless, as a reader, if you see your state's sovereignty in danger and your warnings not taken seriously, measures taken by Russia seem justified. It's more like, when the US can invade Iraq for WMDs and then change its stance halfway when they are not found, then why does it get to challenge other nations and interfere in their local issues? The conflict could have been avoided if the West had never meddled in the Russian affairs, which could have seen a peaceful resolution. Three major shortcomings of the book that as a reader, it was felt that the book lacks in-depth research, like all the topics were touched on that are available on open source, but the academic rigour associated with it was missing. Secondly, at the time, it was felt that the book was an oversimplification of a very complex issue; generally, this is considered good. But the role of non-state actors, paramilitaries, mercenaries, etc., remained unexplored.

Lastly, the focus was mainly on the countries; however, no country can exist without its people. The emphasis on the people of the nations was felt lacking; only some aspects of Russia were covered. *Russia and Ukraine* by Darell Norton is recommended for all types of readers, even those who are in the picture of the conflict, as certain facts are placed in such a manner that the reader can easily grasp the context. Nevertheless, the conflict is massive, fascinating and very complex; Norton's effort to simplify it falls short of the holistic understanding this conflict should have. However, it does cover all the relevant factors that culminated in this conflict and how the West

could have averted the crisis if Putin's concerns were made a priority. Nonetheless, avid readers can recommend it as a good read.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.