1 | *A War Within the "Russian World"*

For nearly twenty-five years after becoming an independent state in 1991, political order in Ukraine was based on a predictable East–West regional rotation of power.[1] Although there were moments of tension, periodic warnings that the state would "split in two" were at odds with Ukrainian political practice. The probability of political violence seemed remote. The Maidan protests, which occurred between November 2013 and February 2014, changed everything. Maidan introduced the use of politically driven violence by both state agents (the police) and protesters. A spike in lethal violence in February 2014 brought down a president, Viktor Yanukovych, with an electoral base in the East. Power shifted to an alliance of parties based in the West. For the first time, the East–West alternation of power took place outside the regular election cycle. Russia sent its military to annex Crimea. An armed conflict followed in the Donbas eastern region. The war had already claimed around 13,000 lives when Vladimir Putin made his historic decision, sometime in late 2021 or early 2022, to launch a full-scale military invasion to try to break Ukraine. This book is the story of Ukrainian politics during the 2013–2021 period, a period of adaptation to various "hybrid" Russian military interventions.

Summary of the Argument

The book considers the causes and consequences of the Donbas war of 2014–2021. In these pages, we provide empirical evidence supporting three analytical arguments. The first deals with how the war started. The

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[1] In public and academic discourse, Ukraine's twenty-five *oblasts* (provinces) are generally divided into four broad regions: East, South, Center, and West. For simplicity's sake, and unless otherwise indicated, we will refer to East (East and South) and West (Center and West). The regional rotation had occurred three times in presidential elections since independence – with the election of Leonid Kuchma in 1994 (Eastern electoral base), Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 (Western electoral base), and Viktor Yanukovych in 2010 (Eastern electoral base). After 2014, both presidents (Poroshenko and Zelensky) obtained a nationwide mandate.

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second relates to how the war has been fought. The third concerns why the war was so difficult to end. We argue that the dynamics of the armed conflict in Donbas were initially consistent with those of a civil war in the social science meaning of the term – not in how Russia used the term in its state propaganda – and that considering the Eastern Donbas conflict as a civil war had analytical utility in the pre-2022 war period.

Our first argument involves the proximate causes of Ukraine's war in Donbas. Our theoretical contribution is an explanation of what happens to individuals and a society in the months just before a war breaks out. The empirical contribution methodically traces the origins of the war from the violent protests on Maidan to an insurgency in Donbas that was galvanized by the Russian intervention in Crimea.

The deadly violence on Maidan caused the collapse of the central government, but not of the central levers of state power. After the president was removed by parliament, the security institutions housed in Kyiv – army and police – immediately recognized the new authorities that had backed Maidan as legitimate claimants to political power. Outside of the capital, however, the loyalty of security officers varied according to regions. State capacity had faltered in the Ukrainian West prior to the resolution of Maidan, when protesters stormed police stations and established impromptu checkpoints, but order was quickly restored after the regime change. The situation was ominously different in the East, the electoral base of the ousted regime.

In the Crimean peninsula, local elites quickly coordinated on sedition, mediated and facilitated by prewar state institutions. More than two-thirds of government officials, civil servants, security officers, and army personnel defected to the Russian state. As a result, Russia captured an entire state apparatus through the surgical use of coercive tools. A mere two deaths were reported. In the continental East, however, the streets largely determined the political fate of key oblasts. Over a period of two months, clashes frequently occurred between anti-Maidan and pro-Maidan groups across the East, with little police intervention. Pro-Ukrainian forces ultimately prevailed, except in Donbas. The Ukrainian state proved sturdier in areas where ethnic Ukrainians formed a strong majority compared to areas of ethnic Russian concentration, but our story emphasizes the agency of actors and communities over structures. Demographics were not destiny.[2]

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[2] In the last Ukrainian census, carried out in 2001, ethnic Russians formed approximately 60 percent of the population in Crimea (70 percent in the port

In Eastern Donbas, the urban and industrial core of the region, state institutions imploded chaotically. Armed men seized buildings. The regional and local administration gradually ceased to function. Few government officials defected as antistate forces came out of the woodwork and haphazardly established parallel institutions. Indigenous actors likely had some assistance from Russia, but the extent of Moscow's influence in these early months is contested and will likely remain so. Importantly, Ukrainian state weakness in Crimea and Eastern Donbas was contrasted with institutional resilience most everywhere else. Despite street pressure, most state officials remained in their posts. The Ukrainian West massively supported the abrupt regime change. The residual capacity of state institutions to endure in Ukraine's East could not have been confidently predicted in advance.

Our second argument emphasizes Ukrainian political agency during what came to be known in the Russian media as the "Russian Spring," that is, the anti-Maidan demonstrations in the East in March–May 2014. The evidence of unified Russian command and control over local actors in Ukraine's East is clearest in Crimea. In Chapter 5, we document the use of Russian special forces to seize the levers of state power. Evidence of similar activities occurring elsewhere is sparse. In retrospect, it seems to us that Russia deployed so-called Little Green Men (unmarked Russian soldiers) conservatively, sending them only to areas of Ukraine where they knew they would be able to operate in safety. In Donbas, Putin held back for months before ordering the military to intervene in order to stabilize the front lines, not to pacify additional territory.

The purpose of this distinction is not to absolve the Kremlin of blame for the violence or downplay Russia's role. Russia initiated the armed conflict by seizing Crimea. The sequence in the Donbas is less clear. On the one hand, Russian public diplomacy and television – what might be called information warfare – spared no effort to delegitimize the post-Maidan Ukrainian state. On the other, Ukrainian protagonists had a decisive impact shaping the 2022 war map.[3] After Crimea, Russian

city of Sevastopol), and just under 40 percent in the two Donbas provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk (Rowland 2004, 502). In the Donbas areas where the insurgency had stabilized after September 2014, ethnic Russians were close to, or exceeded, 50 percent of the population. In no other Eastern oblast was the figure higher than 26 percent.

[3] Ukrainian in the territorial citizenship sense (resident of Ukraine prior to the conflict). Many protagonists defined themselves as political Russians in February 2014. Many surely still do.

involvement was reactive. This book documents a largely ineffectual quest by the Kremlin, beginning in 2013 and persisting until 2022, to find reliable Russian political surrogates in Ukraine.

The Donbas rebellion turned into an actual war, a military conflict, when a commando headed by Russian citizen Igor Girkin, also known by his *nom de guerre* Strelkov, seized Sloviansk (Donetsk oblast) in April 2014. The Ukrainian government reacted by sending the army to besiege the town. In the Ukrainian narrative, Strelkov was an agent taking orders from the Kremlin. The war, in this narrative, was thus clearly initiated *externally*. The optics at the time certainly reinforced the impression. The Girkin men looked like the Crimean Little Green Men and arrived from Crimea. Yet available evidence suggests that Strelkov was a freelancer, someone tolerated (but mistrusted) by Russian authorities, who hoped to incite a local uprising. Whether Moscow *ever* had direct control over Strelkov remains disputed. His departure from Donbas appeared to have been a condition for Russia to intervene militarily in August. It is plausible to us that Sloviansk marked the beginnings of a Russian policy of encouraging volunteers to go and fight in Donbas, hoping that the contagion would spread to destabilize the rest of Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine.[4]

The point here is not to deny that Russia had military intelligence personnel, perhaps even special forces, in operation in Donbas in the four months before Russian soldiers were sent in. It is rather to assert that there is no compelling evidence that these Russian actors *controlled* events on the ground until August. Even less convincing is the notion that Russia activated an existing pro-Russian network of agents in Donbas. On the contrary, available evidence suggests that Russia spent months seeking local agents of influence. Unlike in Crimea, in Donbas, Russia was forced to reach outside the existing (and fast imploding) power structure, leaving behind as potential partners for the Kremlin only a smattering of former police officers, fringe Russian nationalists, street hooligans, and individuals from the lower rungs of the Party of Regions.[5]

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[4] In the months preceding Russian military intervention, thousands of volunteers from Russia joined anti-Kyiv battalions in Donbas. These men received logistical assistance from the Russian military to cross the border but were not in service (contra the soldiers sent later that summer).

[5] We agree with Hauter (2021b, 222), who takes several authors to task for a tendency to "assume rather than prove causality" when it comes to Russia's role as an instigator. We understand our project as an answer to Hauter's call for careful causal process tracing.

The Kremlin was clearly reticent to act if there was a legal discontinuity in the establishment of anti-Kyiv governments, as was the case with the proclamation of Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" (known by their Russian acronyms DNR [Donetsk People's Republic] and LNR [Luhansk People's Republic]) in May 2014. In areas where insurgents were forced to improvise the creation of new parallel state institutions from scratch, they received less Russian support. If quickly coordinated locals could retain control of existing institutions, the Kremlin was more willing to act. The failure of Eastern Ukrainian elites to coordinate outside of Crimea meant there was no "legitimate" institutional face of insurgency for Russia to support. Many abortive uprisings took place nonetheless. The hope that Russian support was just over the horizon motivated thousands. Statements of Kremlin officials, very large Russian military troop movements at the Ukrainian border, and other signals led insurgents in Donbas to believe the Russian military was about to arrive.

Our third argument is that ignoring the local roots of the conflict in Donbas generated the wrong policy prescriptions during much of the 2015–2021 period. This is not to relativize the Russian violations of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and especially not to link Ukrainian or Western behavior to the unprovoked Russian invasion of 2022. Our more modest goal is to explain why some opportunities for resolution were rejected by political actors in Kyiv and Moscow. The narrative that Russia had engineered the war from the start pointed Ukrainian actors toward a "No to Capitulation" position that only unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces could yield lasting conflict resolution. The Minsk Agreement implicitly acknowledged that for the conflict to be resolved, the political grievances of Donbas actors had to be addressed first (through elections and what amounted to autonomy over language, police, and trade) before Russian forces withdrew (with Ukraine resuming control of the border). The very notion that Donbas warlords could acquire internationally validated electoral legitimacy and a special status for their territory was considered anathema in Ukrainian political discourse, a "red line" that could not be crossed. This book explains how that impasse came to be constructed as natural and hegemonic by Ukrainians. In January–February 2022, despite the threat of a military invasion and the request by France and Germany to revisit its positions (Sorokin 2022), the Ukrainian government would not budge on Minsk.

The Concept of Civil War

The seemingly simple matter of *naming* the war in Donbas was extremely controversial. In Ukraine, the term civil war remains politically radioactive. This is because Russia appropriated the term from the 2014 outset to assert that the conflict was entirely between Ukrainians – between citizens of Ukraine – and that Russia's only involvement was humanitarian in nature. In fact, Russia sent heavy weapons to Donbas fighters, shelled Ukrainian positions, stealthily dispatched regular troops to support an insurgent offensive, and eventually integrated Eastern Donbas battalions into the Russian military chain of command. In that sense, *civil war* in its political use by the Russian state was wrong and offensive. Political and academic discourse sympathetic to Ukraine rejected the term out of hand, which precluded any meaningful discussion about its validity.

Names, however, serve a different purpose in scholarly research than in public discourse. As an analytical tool, the concept of civil war applies to an observable situation wherein a critical mass of individuals, who belong to the same polity (state), fight each other beyond a minimal threshold of deaths (Kalyvas 2006, 17).[6] This does not preclude the presence of foreign actors on the theater of operation. As a matter of fact, foreign intrusion in civil wars is quite frequent, closer to the norm than the exception. Civil wars since 1945 have often featured an international component – not just direct foreign intervention, but also diaspora mobilization, the use of mercenaries and freelancers, arms sales, intelligence sharing, and information warfare.[7]

As already mentioned, a number of Russian military intelligence agents were probably active early on, and likely increasing in number before the Russian army sent weapons, and then soldiers, to Donbas. But with the exception of the Strelkov commando unit (of sixty men) and of the thousands of Russian volunteers pouring in, the great majority of fighters joining improvised militias and battalions were locals. This was

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[6] A common coding rule for empirical political scientists using cross-national data is a violent event that leaves 1,000 citizens dead, including at least 100 on the government side, following Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Sambanis (2004).

[7] A large body of scholarly work challenges the black-and-white typology of civil vs. interstate wars, including Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) and Gleditsch (2007). Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (2009) estimate that about 45 percent of rebel groups receive explicit support from

recognized by the Ukrainian army at the onset of hostilities. Military commanders and soldiers were reluctant to fight what they thought was a domestic insurgency (Bukkvoll 2019, 299). The war began as an armed rebellion goaded a state overreaction. The rebel insurgents were people who lived in Ukraine before the hostilities. Russia directly intervened later on, making the war both internal and external, a civil war and an interstate war. Russia would never officially acknowledge its military presence and intervention in Donbas. The Ukrainian government considered it a war of aggression from the very outset.

International humanitarian organizations, which had personnel on the ground in Donbas, also emphasized the internal nature of the conflict. In summer 2014, when the military clashes escalated, the Red Cross and other prominent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) made the determination that the violence had now become a *noninternational armed conflict*, which is to humanitarian law what civil war is to political science (International Committee of the Red Cross 2014; Williamson 2014). After the Russian army directly intervened in late August 2014, *international armed conflict*, the equivalent of an interstate war in the social science lexicon, was added to – but generally did not replace – the noninternational categorization of the conflict.[8]

The war in Donbas was thus a civil war at its root. The warfighting technology of the Donbas war was unusual in that the conflict developed fairly rapidly into a highly conventional civil war. After being initially fought on both sides by irregular formations (improvised volunteer battalions that sometimes intermingled with the civilian populations), pro-Ukraine and anti-Ukraine forces resorted to heavy

a foreign government. Other recent high-profile studies on the effects of third parties on civil war processes, all of which assume that foreign intervention is ubiquitous, include Balch-Lindsay, Enterline, and Joyce (2008), Popovic (2017), and Lee (2018). Research programs on proxy warfare (Berman and Lake 2019), cross-domain deterrence (Gartzke and Lindsay 2019), and nonstate warfare (Biddle 2021) all intentionally blur the comfortable subdisciplinary distinctions between intrastate and interstate conflict.

[8] In September 2014, Amnesty International announced that the armed conflict was now "international" (Amnesty International 2014). Other major NGOs were more nuanced. Human Rights Watch (2016) said the conflict remained "primarily non-international." The Moscow-based NGO Memorial called it both internal and international (Pravozashchytnyi tsentr Memorial 2015). The Kharkiv-based NGO Human Rights in Ukraine said that it "may qualify" as international (International Partnership for Human Rights 2016). All these NGOs seemingly agree that the war began as an internal (noninternational) conflict.

weaponry characteristic of interstate warfare, complete with trenches, artillery battles, mines, and snipers.[9] This explains one comparatively unusual aspect of Ukraine's civil war: the relatively low civilian death count between 2015 and 2022. The estimates of at least 3,000 deaths in Ukraine paled in comparison to 50,000 in Bosnia, or over 100,000 in Syria (Seybolt, Aronson, and Fischhoff 2013, 5; Guha-Sapir et al. 2018). The proportion of civilian to combatant deaths was also much lower in Donbas (over 25 percent) than in Bosnia (over 50 percent) or Syria (over 70 percent).

This is because – like most conventional interstate wars since the nuclear revolution – two armies eventually settled into clashing with each other across a contested line of control. Both sides were supported by civilian populations, but both sides also held back from total war, so civilians could gradually remove themselves from lines of fire. Ukraine's violence never felt like 1990s Bosnia. There were no roving bands of predatory militias, no mass graves, no mass rapes. As the security levers of the Ukrainian state collapsed in a large area of Donbas, most of the early combatants on both sides had little military training. Still, most military encounters gradually took on a conventional guise, as if theatrically recreating World War I tactics.

If irregular warfare had spread across the country, or if Ukrainian volunteer battalions had tried to occupy hostile urban centers, or if Russia had used its military much earlier instead of just threatening to do so, civilian victimization could have been far more widespread, brutal, and atrocious.[10] Until 2022 Ukraine's war was fought like an interstate war, but it was largely a conflict where Ukrainians (in the territorial sense) shot at other Ukrainians.

Our argument is that the concept of *civil war* is analytically useful for scholars and also instrumentally useful for policymakers trying to

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[9] One striking difference between Donbas and other intrastate battlefields is that aerial bombing was used only intermittently for most of the period covered in our study.

[10] Our point is that *systematic* attacks on civilians did not occur as part of armed encounters, contra Syria, Yemen, or numerous other civil wars ongoing in 2014. For evidence that civilian victimization tends to be higher if a style of warfare closer to the irregular ideal-type is employed, see Kalyvas and Balcells (2010; 2014). Following Biddle (2021, 9), our analysis of military matters in this book shoulders "the social science challenge of understanding actors' internal political dynamics rather than the traditional military task of counting weapons or assessing technology per se."

understand the roots of one of the most important conflicts of the early twenty-first century. The DNR/LNR came into being because of the breakdown of the inherited post-Soviet political institutions that had managed high-stakes bargaining between social forces until 2014. The story of "Ukraine fighting off an invasion" in 2022 has quite naturally crowded out the story of "Kyiv bargaining with its Russian-speaking periphery." Our aim is to gently correct the shift in language for the historical record. We suspect many Russian-speaking communities living in Ukraine's East would recognize themselves in the story we present prior to the 2022 war. Naming the Donbas war 2014–2021 a civil war was controversial from a policy perspective, admittedly, since it drew attention to and placed causal weight on domestic factors in Ukrainian politics. This could be caricatured as "blaming the victim." In our view, however, domestic Ukrainian politics *were* root causes of the war in 2014.

The decision by Putin in 2022 to unleash a full-scale war of aggression on Ukraine is not the subject of this book. The war was unprovoked. The claim that the Donbas population had to be protected from "genocide" is an absolute fabrication. In fact, after a violent spike in summer 2014–2015 (see Chapter 7), civilian casualties had remained low between March 2015 and February 2022 (see Chapter 8). Static trench warfare dividing two competing, but consolidating, state projects – one recognized by most of the international community (based in Kyiv) and the other basically kept on life support by Russia. But the population supplying the foot soldiers for the anti-Kyiv side had lived in Ukraine before 2014. The Russian language was hegemonic on their side of the line of control, too – but also spoken quite a bit on the Kyiv side.

Prior to the pre-February 2022 war, then, violent and competitive political processes pitted Eastern Ukrainians against each other. If one were willing to adapt Russian terminology, what was occurring was the first *intra-Russkii mir* (Russian World) civil war in nearly a century.[11]

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[11] *Russkii mir* is a construct premised on the idea that Russian language, culture, and politics are one, and aiming to validate Russian intervention abroad (Toal 2017, 70–91, 204–5, 237–44). After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Ukraine was the principal terrain of a devastating civil war that initially opposed monarchists ("Whites") and revolutionaries ("Reds"), most of whom saw themselves as Russians. The war later involved Ukrainian nationalists and peasant-anarchists.

Since Ukrainian independence, the loyalty of Russian-speakers in the East toward the Ukrainian state had never been tested as it was in 2014.[12] Fighters on both sides were motivated by perceptions of political equality and cultural security. Some feared domination by a Ukrainian-speaking center. Some feared domination by Putin and Moscow. Russian-speakers outside Donbas, imagined by Russia to belong to this Russian World, on the whole remained loyal to a Ukrainian state in 2014. They did so again in 2022, with far greater unity, since the first cities to be bombed indiscriminately were Eastern Ukrainian Russian-speaking majority cities. Our story emphasizes the initial division *among* Russian-speakers, between a Donbas constituency and the rest of the East.

A War of Narratives

The war in Donbas is about territorial control, but, as is always the case with violent internal conflicts, it originates in disputes over political legitimacy. There are two polarized views on how to describe Maidan and the Donbas war. In both versions, the two events are causally connected. The war of narratives presents Maidan as either a protest against state violence (a "Revolution of Dignity") or a coup. The Donbas war is described as either a war of aggression or a civil war.

On Maidan, the divide is over the interpretation of violence. Violence was first used by the police against peaceful protesters in late November 2013. Groups of protesters resorted to violence against the police on the following day, but were disavowed by Maidan leaders. In January–February 2014, these groups used violence against the police in order to break a political impasse. Violence by protesters was now framed as self-defense, and therefore legitimate, in the pro-Maidan narrative. The disproportionate use of counterforce by the police, which culminated in a sniper massacre, brought down the government, and the president was removed.

The counternarrative is that Maidan produced a coup, or *coup d'état* (*perevorot*, in Russian). The image of protesters firing at the

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[12] Russian-speaker is defined here as the *preference* to speak Russian, not the ability to speak it (see Chapter 3). By that criteria, surveys show that most people in Ukraine's East are Russian-speakers, and most in the West are Ukrainian-speakers, that is, prefer to speak Ukrainian.

police, and of the government falling shortly thereafter, lent credence in some quarters to the idea that a coup – understood here as the use of violence to bring about a change in power – had taken place.

Narratives of legitimacy are selective: the self-defense of protesters in one is overshadowed by the self-defense of state agents (the police) in another. In political discourse, Revolution of Dignity or coup are used normatively to legitimize or delegitimize a political outcome. In our book, our interest is more analytical than normative. We hope that readers will come to understand the logic of violence and its political consequences. The police used what certainly appeared to be disproportionate force, particularly at the very beginning and the very end. Frontline protesters used violence strategically in order to provoke a political change.

The Dominant Policy Alternative: Hybrid Warfare

There is an alternative way of viewing the conflict that puts the locus of blame on great power politics. In this account, Ukraine is being fought over by Russia and the West. When Russian policy elites felt they were losing the tug of war, they decided to punish Ukrainians by unleashing new "hybrid warfare" techniques. This is not our argument, but we acknowledge that it has more than a grain of truth to it.

The standard account of the war in Ukraine begins with geography. Ukraine is located between Russia and the West (or the Western Security Community). Realist considerations drive decision-making at the highest levels in the Kremlin and in NATO capitals, and this is not lost on Ukrainian political elites. Their country is a buffer between great powers. Just as the United States would not allow Mexico to join a mutual defensive security alliance with China, the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO is anathema to Russia.

For many decades, balancing these interests was possible. In the early 1990s, against the backdrop of the breakup of the Soviet Union and the August 1991 failed coup, the United States and Russia bargained and compromised. As a sovereign nonnuclear Ukraine emerged, the West was sensitive to the need to help moderate forces in Russia consolidate power. This meant treading lightly, since nothing in the post-Soviet periphery was seen as worth the risk of trading Russian President Boris Yeltsin for someone like Gennady Zyuganov (Yeltsin's Communist opponent) or Alexander Lebed (a Russian general who had acted as a

free agent in the 1992 war in Moldova). Russian diplomats failed to secure a written commitment that NATO would not expand eastward, it seems, because they did not think that they had to.[13] There is scant evidence that NATO expansion to Ukraine was considered or even discussed in the early 1990s (Krawchenko 1993, 83–4, 90–5). Ukraine was understood to represent a vital Russian interest.

Another aspect of the compromise was that Ukraine would have the diplomatic support of Western powers, so long as it relinquished its nuclear weapons (a gamble eased by the recent experience of the Chernobyl disaster). Ukraine agreed to comply under the framework of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which the United States volunteered security "assurances" that fell conspicuously short of a commitment to use force to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Pifer 2017, 49).[14] In the following decade, Ukraine sought to balance Russian and Western geopolitical interests in a pragmatic "multi-vector" foreign policy (D'Anieri 2019b, 73–8).

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[13] Following Sarotte (2014) and Itzkowitz Shifrinson (2016), we are intrigued by the historical counterfactuals. What might have been had Russian elites in 1990 not been so internally divided, so optimistic about Russia's ability to join the West, and so myopic about the temporary leverage that they had? Russia might, for instance, have demanded that the United States sign a simple, clear, unambiguous promise never to expand NATO into former Soviet-dominated territory. Russian diplomats could have bundled these kinds of "concessions" (which at the time might not have seen as concessions at all, but simply formalization of mutually shared understandings at the highest levels) with the resolution of the German question, or traded them for authorization by the UN Security Council to use force in the First Gulf War against Iraq. Our point is not to advocate for these kinds of positions, nor to argue that they would have been enforceable, but simply to note that alternative arrangements for Ukraine from the 2000s–2010s onwards might have been feasible if Russian elites had behaved differently than they did in the early 1990s.

[14] Western governments made economic and geopolitical support for Ukraine contingent on the removal of nuclear weapons (Cohen 2017). In hindsight, Ukrainian nuclear disarmament can be seen as overdetermined by the fact that the state was too poor to pay for its maintenance and would have been barred from legally acquiring necessary components from abroad (Rublee 2015, 145–7). At the time there were grave concerns that economic pressures might tempt Ukraine to follow North Korea's example, and export weapons or technical expertise (Jones et al. 1998, 93–6). Mearsheimer (1993) and Posen (1993, 44–5) warned that unilateral nuclear disarmament would give Russian nationalists more freedom of action, raising conflict risks. Stone (2002, 184) notes that as part of the package deal of abandoning nuclear weapons Ukraine became, for a time, the third-largest recipient of all US foreign aid.

Russian–Western relations declined gradually.[15] The United States opened diplomatic and economic relations with all of the post-Soviet republics, and NATO expanded into Central Europe despite Russia's objections (Charap and Colton 2017, 30–94). NATO fought an air war against Serbia in 1999, which eventually yielded independence for Kosovo in 2008, despite Russian opposition. Russian diplomatic concerns about "encirclement by NATO" were dismissed as rhetorical exaggerations. At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members" (NATO 2008).[16] Russian calls for a geopolitical sphere of influence that would be analogous to the US Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere were rebuffed with the claim that sovereign countries should be able to choose which international agreements they wish to join. Russian military power had started to rebound in the first decade of the twenty-first century as well.[17] The 2014 Winter Olympics, hosted by Russia, were its best foot forward in terms of soft-power production.

Against this background, things came to a head. Late in 2013, Ukrainian President Yanukovych's abrupt decision to forego a free trade deal with the EU signaled intent to explore membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's proposed geoeconomic competitor to the EU. In Ukraine, the proposed Economic Union was more popular in the East than the West. Western-oriented Ukrainians took to the

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[15] Whether the increased antagonism was due to changes in Western values and policy, changes in Russian values or policy, both, or neither, is a fount of academic dispute. For an argument that the choices made by Russia are dependent on its type of regime, see McFaul (2020). For an argument that a different Russian leader or regime might have made similar choices under a similar international environment, see D'Anieri (2019b, 18).

[16] The West saw the statement of intent as a compromise, since no membership path was offered, as had initially been envisaged (D'Anieri 2019b, 163). Russia saw it as a threat and a slap in the face (Freedman 2019, 58), and signaled its displeasure with a small, ugly war in Georgia a few months later. NATO expansion was also accompanied by EU expansion, with eight Central European states joining the EU in 2004 (including the three former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), and two more in 2007.

[17] Contextualizing Russia's temporary/local strength with cutting observations of its long-term decline as a society, and a global power (vis-à-vis China and its neighbors), was common in the West after the Cold War. By the time of the events of Chapter 4, the balance of power between Russia and the United States had favored the NATO alliance member states for a generation (Wohlforth 1994, 102–15). The gap is starker if US power is added to that of its allies and Russian power is added to its impoverished dependents (Kotkin 2008, 24).

streets and did not disperse. In the Russian version of this conflict, external enemies choreographed mass protests in Maidan – part of a longer-term pattern. The nonviolent 2004 Orange Revolution was bankrolled by Western NGOs, they argued, and the violent 2014 Maidan militants were trained by Western security services (Wilson 2005, 183–8; Ernst 2015). In the Western version, the Kremlin responded by testing its new *hybrid warfare* techniques in Crimea and Donbas.

What is hybrid warfare? It is an umbrella term for military coercion steeped in plausible deniability. The strategic goal is to send a threatening signal, avoid escalation, and impose costs on another state.[18] Hybrid warfare methods include various kinds of disruption using clandestine agents, disinformation and media manipulation, social media trolling, covert funding for political parties, economic tools (like sanctions and parastatal companies), spycraft, and the use of soldiers without insignias trying to pass as civilians (Reisinger and Golts 2014; Charap 2015; Van Herpen 2015; Conley et al. 2016; Kier 2016; Chivvis 2017). The extent to which any of this was actually new is disputed (Galeotti 2019).[19] Whether Russia or the West is responsible for initiating hybrid hostilities is also open for debate.[20] The important escalation was that Russia sent troops into Ukraine while claiming that it was not, violating a commitment to respect borders made in a 1994 multilateral memorandum (when Ukraine agreed to give up nuclear weapons) and a 1997 bilateral

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[18] Another term of art in US military circles is "gray zone" conflict (Schram 2021).

[19] New frontier technology applied to warfare may be leveling the playing field between weak and strong nonstate and state military actors (Biddle 2021, 8). Cell phones, for example, interact with the "Web 2.0" leading to the production of high-quality content at low cost, and the dissemination of the content quickly, semi-anonymously, and independently (Walter 2017; Pomerantsev 2019, 85–97). Speculative scholarly efforts to document "hybrid war" techniques in Ukraine as a window into the future of war include efforts to evaluate the efficacy of cyberattacks (Kostyuk and Zhukov 2019), the potential to repurpose patterns of social media for military intelligence (Driscoll and Steinert-Threlkeld 2020).

[20] Orenstein (2019, 11–17) astutely notes that this question, asked in this way, really has no answer, since the West and Russia are in a security dilemma. Galeotti (2019, 1) points out that "Moscow considers itself rather a *target* of Western hybrid aggression." Consider a famous 2013 speech by Valery Gerasimov, often referenced as the authoritative description of Russia's "new" strategy, with ample references to "the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian and other non-military measures" and "concealed" fifth-column armed forces. Gerasimov, in context, is reflecting on *American* military practices of war (Freedman 2019, 174–5).

treaty with Ukraine. Few analysts are tempted to call the flagrant violations of those same commitments in 2022 "hybrid warfare" for many reasons, but one of them is that Russia openly announced it was sending its military (while avoiding full mobilization and not calling it a "war").

In the Western policy-shorthand version of this conflict (among most NATO military professionals), the Donbas militants were, and are still, directed by Russia. Pro-Russian rebels took over government buildings in Kharkiv or Donetsk in the spring of 2014 because Russia told them to (Umland 2016). This caused anxiety in the NATO alliance. How would its member states respond if the same sort of thing occurred in Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia? A host of seemingly technical questions, such as how to precisely define aggression in the cyber-realm, gained new salience to war planners. Since Ukraine was not yet a NATO member state, a contained hybrid war served a theatrical purpose. Russians, Americans, and others could observe each other play war games, update public statements, and begin to signal what they would be willing to risk in the event of a more severe clash of interests in Eastern Europe (Shaplak and Johnson 2016).

Zones of fighting ossified into stable front lines in late summer 2014 and winter 2015, after Russia overtly sent regular troops to tip the scales at two critical junctures, the Battles of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve. Until February 24, 2022, territory had barely changed hands since those battles. As the war conventionalized along a frozen and fixed line of contact, the number of deaths dropped considerably.

The great powers began to circle their wagons for a long game of trying to wait out the other. The optimism in the West depended on a theory of soft power, the optimism in Russia rested on a theory of hard power. Many social forces within Ukraine saw NATO, the EU, and the West as Ukraine's future. They argued that Russia has shown it cannot win – or even compete – in what Gramsci (1987) would have called a global *war of position* over interpretation of the war. Most members of the United Nations rejected Russia's interpretation of the Crimea events. The Ukraine conflict exposed Russian soft power as much weaker than had been previously assumed, and "increased American power and European influence in Russia's western borderlands."[21]

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[21] This is the analytic conclusion of Kivelson and Suny (2017, 392), who take a historical view of Russian cultural ("soft") power projection. For historical retrospectives on soft power in the Cold War period, see Selznick (1952,

The Kremlin, for its part, was also comfortable imagining a long game in which geography and demography are destiny. In this view of hard power, a protracted war, fought over a part of the planet that Russia cares about much more than any other great power, is not going to go on forever. When it ends, a war on Russia's border is likely to end on Russia's terms. Due to geography and history, Russia cannot "leave" Ukraine. The Kremlin has military leverage. It will enjoy political influence post-settlement.

Distilling Ukraine's conflict down to a contest between Russian hybrid warfare and Western soft power is appealing for many reasons. It is simple (see Appendix B), teachable, and prescriptive for military planners. It leaves out a great deal, however.

The Policy Implications of Academic Language Choice

This book is a reaction to many descriptions of the Russia–Ukraine conflict between 2016 and 2021. It frustrated us that the dominant frames in Western policy circles so quickly calcified into morality tales of Russian aggression, where Ukraine was abstracted as a helpless victim. Even those inclined to locate all the blame on Kremlin policy had to admit that some changes had taken place in Ukrainian society since March 2014 that Putin probably did not anticipate or engineer.

To put a fine point on it: In Western policymaking circles, the language of hybrid warfare conflated "Eastern Ukrainian" with "Russian" interests and "Western Ukrainian" with "Western" interests. While it was clear that Russian military intervention in Crimea and Donbas was not supported throughout Eastern Ukraine, public opinion in the Russian-speaking East remained divided on assuming responsibility in triggering the conflict.[22] This blurring was common

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48–70) and Barghoorn (1964). In retrospect, the United States had a clear comparative advantage in soft power throughout the Cold War: "American music and films leaked into the Soviet Union with profound effects, but indigenous Soviet products never found an overseas market. There was no socialist Elvis" (Nye 2004, 74). Recent observational (Avgerinos 2009; Gentile 2020) and experimental (Fisher 2020) studies conclude that Russia still competes at a relative disadvantage in the production of credible news.

[22] In a 2019 survey, while 45 percent of the entire population saw the Donbas conflict as "Russian aggression," the proportion fell to 22–24 percent in the Southeast, while 21–22 percent saw it as a "purely internal civil conflict" (Fond demokratychni initsiatyvy 2019).

in Ukrainian policy debates for historical reasons, as well. What made the "hybrid warfare" language such an impediment to creative discussions on the specifics of conflict resolution was its interaction with US domestic politics in the 2016–2020 period, when Democrats blamed Russian policy for the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government – increasingly aligned with the "No to Capitulation Front" that we will discuss in Chapter 8 – staked out policy positions on language, historical memory, and the implementation of the Minsk accords that were more popular in the Ukrainian West than the Ukrainian East.

One effect of this was the sidelining of anyone willing to challenging the narrative that the Donbas war had been, at its roots, a war of Russian aggression. In Ukraine, this had the practical effect of marginalizing the views of an important constituency of Eastern voters. This, in turn, as we shall see in Chapter 8, had implications for the status of contested territory in Donbas, for the status of the Russian language in secondary school curricula throughout Ukraine, for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, and much more. Criticism of state policy over any of these issues became associated with an indefensible pro-Russian position. The Russian army had seized Ukrainian territory, and Russia needed to leave. The hard truth is that in August–September 2014, and again in February 2015, the Ukrainian army could not fight the Russian army. Kyiv was forced to commit internationally to the principle of granting some kind of de jure autonomy to the two Donbas territories that it no longer de facto controlled. These political conditions proved politically impossible to implement. The de facto policy was to interpret the Minsk Protocol to mean that Russia had to withdraw its military completely before political steps could be taken.

We wrote our book in an effort to add nuance to the analysis of the Ukrainian political landscape between 2013 and 2021, before the Russian invasion of 2022. Our strategy for accomplishing this is an analytic narrative. Our aim is to challenge the notion that there was a hegemonic view in Ukraine on how to assess the origins of the war in Donbas and how to devise a political solution. This is not about whether Ukrainians, whatever language they speak at home, believed in the territorial integrity of Ukraine. A majority of Eastern Ukrainians identified with the Ukrainian state in 2014 and rejection of the Russian invasion of 2022 became nearly hegemonic quite early on

(Reiting 2022). Our goal, for historians interested in more nuance, is to analyze how Ukrainian politics actually operated before this invasion. Eastern Ukrainian opinion, parties, and elites could not be easily reduced to a "pro-Russian" position. For instance, an important strand in our narrative shows how even the Party of Regions, portrayed as aligned with Russian interests, was mistrusted by Russian officials and ultimately failed to accomplish what Putin expected.

A second problem with the language of "hybrid warfare" is that it functionally loaded the US conversation in favor of particular policy response: demonstrating resolve to Russia. This ignored a serious realist counter, which is that Western policy may have played a role in provoking the 2014 conflict – more than Western government agents can easily admit because of the nature of the security dilemma.[23] In practice, "hybrid warfare" conversations invited scholars to weigh in on an ongoing policy conversation asking, "What else can we do to assure our Ukrainian security partners and deter Russians from engaging in new styles of aggression?" For restrainers in the realist school, a prior question may be what US interests are in Europe and whether the generous support to European allies and partners actually serves those interests or can have unintended consequences.[24]

As social scientists interested in curating the historical record, we feel that ignoring Ukraine-specific details in favor of crude geopolitical plate tectonics misses many important stories. Filtering all incoming information about the 2014–2020 war through a top-down international relations (IR) lens obscured the agency of Ukrainian actors, effectively silencing the voices of millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. This is important because a theoretically informed understanding of how the conflict broke out in 2014–2015 is necessary to imagine an eventual final settlement. Specific policy-relevant questions include: Why did the Kremlin send troops to some places and not others? Why did the conflict zone have the geographical boundaries that it did in 2022, when Putin recognized the DNR/LNR and invaded?

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[23] This is not our book's position, but neither was it a "fringe" position in 2014–2015. See, for example, Mearsheimer (2014), Walt (2014, 2015), Posen (2016), and Charap and Colton (2017).

[24] Posen (2014) ably summarizes the restraint position. His view of European security (including Ukraine) is informed by his study of the pathways to inadvertent nuclear use by Russian and NATO war planners (Posen [1991], especially 21–3, 45–7, 60–7, 146–58).

Why was Ukraine more cohesively "Ukrainian" (distinct from geopolitically "Western") seven years after Crimea? Why was settling the conflict in the Donbas so difficult?

These are not simply rhetorical questions. Our book provides clear answers.

1. The Kremlin sent troops where it did after observing the strategies of Russian-speaking communities within Ukraine.[25] Such communities directly adjoining Russia's border (Kharkiv and Donbas), and Russia's redefined border post-Crimea (such as the Donbas city of Mariupol and the oblasts of Kherson and Odesa – close to Transnistria and the ocean) acted with a higher chance of successful separation compared to the heartland areas of Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, or Mykolaïv. The Kremlin waited for either local allies to obtain the backing of the regional parliament or for local armed allies to secure territory first. Russia was responsive and opportunistic.

2. The conflict had the geography it did because of choices made by Russian-speaking elites. Russian machinations shaped the information environment, but the choice between sedition or loyalty to the post-Maidan Ukrainian political order was made within Russian-speaking communities. A tip toward sedition proved arduous, and despite a great deal of jockeying on the streets, most communities did not tip or come close. As elites worried their neighbors were approaching a tip, one response was violent threats against elites considering *sedition*. The only part of Ukraine with no antisecession vigilantes, Crimea, tipped in days. In the industrial core of Donbas, elites were pushed aside by angry mobs and anti-institutional newcomers in the space of a few dramatic weeks. Outside these towns, no other communities tipped.

3. Since 2014, Ukrainian political identity has come into its own as a "new" ethnic supermajority due to two processes. First, after the de facto border change in Crimea, the demographics and politics of Ukraine changed. This left the government in Kyiv more willing

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[25] The concept of *community* is integral to the theoretical model that we are presenting in Chapter 2. We define community using the Taylor (1982) criteria: Direct face-to-face relations between members, many-sided relations, reciprocity, rough equality of material conditions, and common sets of beliefs and values.

to pay costs in blood in order not to cede territory. Second, the crisis altered perceptions of Russian military intentions. As a result of watching where Russia did – and did not – send its military, beliefs about the probability of Russian military intervention were revised downward. (These beliefs turned out to be false in 2022, but they existed until the very last minute.) Our prediction is fewer cultural concessions to Russian-speaking communities under these circumstances.

4. Settling was difficult for two reasons. First, the collapse of political institutions in 2014 made it impossible a return to the old social contract due to commitment problems. The relevant actors feared that the other side would renege on what they committed to if they moved first. Second, a narrative of the conflict has taken root within Eastern Donbas that sedition was legitimate. Social policies chosen in Kyiv reinforced the view that the Donbas population would be treated as second-class citizens if Ukraine ever reclaimed the territory.

Where Is this Book Going?

Employing the language of *civil war* violated a taboo in Western foreign policy circles throughout 2014–2021. Since Russia called the war in Ukraine a *civil war*, Western officials had to call it something else. Since both sides were sending costly signals of their intent to wait the other out, adopting the language of the enemy felt like a tactical concession.[26] With Putin's decision to escalate the conflict over Ukraine with a full-scale invasion, as well as repeated nuclear threats, this taboo has outlived its utility. If Western policymakers revisit this period critically, and describe this as an *intra-Russkii Mir* civil war, the shoe is suddenly on the other foot. The civil war that we describe in this book is not the civil war Putin imagines it to be. There is no war pitting "real" Ukrainians (the belief that Ukrainians are a subset of Russians) against "nationalist" Ukrainians (the belief that the Ukrainian nation is an artificial creation of foreigners and a threat

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[26] For readers unfamiliar with the reference to "costly signaling," a common vein of argument is that professional diplomats engage in regular "cheap talk" performances (colloquially: diplomats lie). To show they mean business, sometimes states have to incur costs, like putting soldiers' lives at risk and running risks of escalation/war, in order to communicate with each other.

to Russia). This is rather a war that always divided a narrow sub-set of Eastern Ukrainians, mostly concentrated in Donbas, against the majority of Eastern Ukrainians, Donbas included (who were ambivalent on Maidan and on the sources of the conflict, but opposed Russian military intervention). In our historical and analytic narrative, we believe that reclaiming the language of civil war has the potential to do three things.

First, the grains of truth in the Russian version of events can be plucked from state propaganda (Radnitz 2021: 44–9, 119–28). What emerges is a bottom-up story, emphasizing that the genesis of the war in Ukraine came from choices made on Ukrainian territory. In the language of our model, critical first- and second-movers thought of themselves as political Russians defending their homes.

Second, employing the language of civil war to approach the 2014 origins of the Donbas war clarifies how different this part of Donbas was, and arguably remains, from the rest of Eastern Ukraine. Putin identifies *Russkii mir* with Russian-speakers and expected Ukraine to collapse over all of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The problem is that *Russkii mir* failed everywhere, except parts of the industrial core of Eastern Donbas, where Kyiv lost control of security institutions well before Russia sent troops. The 2014 war mostly opposed pro-Ukraine Ukraine-born combatants to anti-Kyiv Ukraine-born combatants.[27]

Third, reclaiming the language of civil war highlights the argument for more serious conversations within foreign policy circles, especially in NATO capitals, about what it is reasonable to expect from a post-war Ukrainian polity. Policymakers hoping to educate themselves on the war that preceded the Russian invasion of 2022 will find answers to many of their factual questions in the pages of this book.

In Chapter 2 we present our theory in normal language and describe the analytic narrative approach we will use in data presentation for the remaining chapters.

In Chapter 3 we present a gloss on Ukrainian political history in order to introduce key insights on Ukrainian identity, regional and memory politics, and demonstrate the plausibility of model assumptions.

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[27] To clarify: We are not claiming that Russian-speaking Ukrainians see themselves as part of *Russkii mir*, but rather that a critical mass demonstrated in 2014 that it does *not*. It is only from the perspective of the talking points of the Russian state that the *Russkii mir* is at war with itself.

In Chapter 4 we describe the critical juncture of the Maidan protests (November 2013–February 2014) with a focus on the logic and consequences of political violence.

In Chapter 5 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in Crimea. This chapter explains why the secession of Crimea did not result in very much violence.

In Chapter 6 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in Eastern and Southern Ukraine (outside Crimea and the Eastern Donbas). An Eastern Ukrainian political rebellion, expected by Russia, did not happen and the street turned pro-Ukrainian.

In Chapter 7 we describe the political aftermath of the Maidan events in the Eastern Donbas region. This chapter explains the outbreak of Ukraine's war.

In Chapter 8 we describe the international diplomatic stalemate on settling Ukraine's unnamed war, the effects of the war on Ukrainian society, and briefly comment on Russia's decision to engage in a full-scale war of aggression reminiscent of World War II.