Review: Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow’s Struggle for Ukraine

Sarah Lohmann

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Recommended Citation
Anna Arutunyan challenges what she believes to be the Western narrative around the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War in her historical account of the conflict. In her view, the West’s perception of the current Ukrainian conflict runs along the following simple, black-and-white lines: President Vladimir Putin is an evil dictator with an insatiable desire for more land and power—get rid of him, and you get rid of the problem. Arutunyan turns this narrative on its head by making two convincing arguments. First, she depicts Putin as weak, paranoid, undecided, and unwilling to take risks that would damage his reputation. Second, she gives voice to the disillusioned inhabitants of eastern Ukraine, the nationalist rebels, and the oligarchs wishing for the glory of the Soviet days who are far more willing to take chances and who she believes were much more responsible for paving the way for the 2022 invasion.

The book is a must-read for senior members of the US defense community seeking to understand the diversity of motivations and formative influences impacting the people working to bring Ukraine under Russia’s rule. It is also helpful in its explanation of the methods and stages of warfare—“hybrid (2014), proxy (2015–21) and full-scale military (2021–22)”—used by the Russian and Russian-Ukrainian players in the conflict (12). At once descriptive and provocative, Arutunyan addresses what she calls “misunderstandings” about the hybrid war, which she argues are “more of a product of American military thought to which Russian military strategists felt they needed to respond” (13).

While current Western research on the Russia-Ukraine War focuses on political and historical figures associated with the Kremlin (a topic with ample resources already available), this book relies on Russian sources from media and academia, as well as hundreds of interviews Arutunyan conducted in eastern Ukraine and Russia. Her interviewees include soldiers, disenfranchised...
citizens, local security forces, and local government figures, whom she interviewed first as a journalist for *Moscow News*, and later as a researcher for Mayak Intelligence, the Wilson Center, and the Kennan Institute. Her work contributes the voices of the members of Russian and Russian-Ukrainian civil society and rebel and military fighters from the Russian front to the current body of research, lending perspectives that have not yet been heard in the West.

Arutunyan brings to life figures like Alexander Zaldostanov, the rebel-turned-nationalist Harley-Davidson biker and leader of the Night Wolves Club; Dima, a Ukrainian volunteer fighter disillusioned with Kyiv; Anatoly Kuznetsov, a deeply Orthodox family man; and Franz Klintsevich and his volunteer fighters from the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. Together with the Moscow-picked leaders of Donetsk and Luhansk, they form the complex group of actors working to change Russia's borders and sphere of influence. In Arutunyan's words:

> But that still left tens of thousands of fighters—idealists, enthusiasts, mercenaries, drifters, men, and women with criminal pasts—who were not acting under orders from Moscow but were used because their choices and desires aligned, briefly, with a half-baked Kremlin plot. … The Kremlin was never really on the side of these self-proclaimed underdogs. It used them as fuel and fodder. (21)

In the end, Arutunyan leaves no simple answers for the resolution of the conflict, instead hoping the “dying empire” of Russia will be reborn and that Ukraine will soon be able to rebuild (254). She criticizes not only the Kremlin’s indecision and chaos during the invasion, but also NATO and the United States for being slow to defend Ukraine even though Russia had been signaling its potential invasion before 2014. In her telling, this conflict is the people’s war. It equally impacts Putin and people like Dima, the Ukrainian volunteer fighter who had “the barely repressed rage of someone who couldn’t make it and, deep down, feared it was all his fault” (253). That aggrieved rage lit the match for the current conflict and is fueling it still. Arutunyan brings US strategists and military planners face-to-face with Russia from the perspective of its citizens and encourages strategists to think beyond segmented operations to ensure Russia’s broad defeat.

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**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, NATO, *Moscow News*, Mayak Intelligence

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