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 ready 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, she 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 on 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 the *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 Ukraine will soon be able to rebuild (254). She criticizes 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 them to think beyond segmented operations to ensure Russia’s broad defeat.
The aftermath of the long war against al-Qaeda has spawned numerous memoirs, though the most important of that war’s commanders, General David Petraeus, has not yet added his own to that collection. The closest thing to a memoir that readers are likely to get from Petraeus is his new book, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*, written in partnership with Andrew Roberts, a noted British military historian.

Petraeus clearly took the lead in writing the chapters on the American wars in Vietnam (the subject of his doctoral dissertation), Iraq, and Afghanistan. Indeed, the latter two chapters are written in first person—the Iraq chapter concluding with four appendices, one providing Petraeus’s “Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance” and the other three containing PowerPoint slides from his tenure as commander of Multi-National Force—Iraq and US Central Command. It would be safe to assume Petraeus also took the lead in writing the concluding chapters on the Russia-Ukraine War and the future of warfare. While there is nothing wrong with the chapters examining the post–World War II era for lessons for future conflicts, potential readers will not buy this book for those chapters. *Conflict* achieved *New York Times* bestseller status because of the success and notoriety of Petraeus, who concluded his public service as director of the CIA for President Barack Obama.

Future commanders and staff officers will find value in the book’s introduction, which forms the skeleton for the analysis of each of the dissected campaigns. Petraeus argues that there are four major tasks leaders (whether politicians or generals) in any war must master: get the big ideas right, communicate those big ideas, execute those big ideas, and “determine how the big ideas need to be refined, adapted, and augmented, so that they can perform the first three tasks again and again and again” (4). If these tasks sound simple, read the book to see how many politicians and generals have failed at them—particularly at getting the big ideas right, which is far harder than it sounds.
For instance, history might have been much different if President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), as he chose between Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams for command of the American war in Vietnam in 1965, had asked each candidate what his big idea was for that war and how he planned to implement it. Westmoreland, of course, would have gotten that question wrong. When asked what the answer to insurgency was at a press conference, he answered, “Firepower. Next question?” Whether LBJ would have understood that it was the wrong answer is a different question entirely. Petraeus, from his study of the Vietnam War and his experience in two counterinsurgency campaigns, clearly knows better, and the conclusion of his Iraq chapter, the heart of the book, is worth quoting at length:

Keeping counter-insurgency doctrine current and educating mid-grade and senior leaders about it (while understandably focusing more on major combat operations given the developments of the past decade) will be a small price to pay to ensure that when the United States is again confronted with a messy, irregular conflict the leaders of its armed forces are intellectually prepared to cope with it (340).

Petraeus notes that “the U.S. Army required more than three years in Iraq to regain the competencies so unwisely jettisoned after the end of the Vietnam War” without noting how influential he was, as the commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, in helping it regain those competencies (340). Written in Petraeus’s 71st year, this book is likely to be the best first-person account in history of his efforts and results in Iraq and Afghanistan that made him the most important Army officer of his generation. All Army officers and national security officials who bear the responsibility to ensure America does not lose a war again as catastrophically as it did in Afghanistan—or come within a hair’s breadth of doing so, as it would have in Iraq without Petraeus’s big ideas and extraordinary focus on implementing them—must read this book.

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