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Dominique Arel & Jesses Driscoll, *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2023 273pp £80 (£26.99 paperback)

Nicolai N. Petro, *The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach US About Conflict Resolution*, Se Gruyter: Berlin 2023 285pp £90

Both these books deal with the prelude to the Russia-Ukraine war. Their authors employ different approaches and styles of political science analysis but reach broadly the same conclusion: the key to understanding the current conflagration is not geopolitics, but the longstanding clash between competing Ukrainian national-political identities – a clash that took a violent turn during the Maidan protests of 2014 and then developed into a civil war situation – a domestic conflict that was intensified by Russian and western interference and then internationalised by Putin's invasion of the country in February 2022.

Both books assert the agency of Ukrainians themselves in precipitating and sustaining the prolonged post-Maidan crisis, whose denouement was the outbreak of full-scale war. Their treatments are refreshingly free of propaganda. Arguments and evidence are presented fairly and carefully assessed. All three authors are North American Ukrainian Studies specialists who have spent a lot of time doing research in Ukraine.

Nicolai Petro's book is more readable and accessible, but Arel and Driscoll's text is also very clear and illuminating and will appeal to those who prefer narratives laced with a good dollop of definitions, models and conceptual schemas.

Petro sees the fundamental division within Ukraine as that between a 'Galician' or western Ukrainian nationalism that rejects all things Russian, and the regional identity of Eastern or 'Maloross' (Little Russia) Ukraine that accepts the country's historical and cultural ties to Russia and rejects the idea of a civilisational choice between an eastern and western orientation.

As Petro tellingly points out, a July 2021 poll found that 40% of Ukrainians agreed with Vladimir Putin's claim in his now notorious essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' that the two groups were essentially one people. The problem was that those who believed in such a close connection mostly lived in eastern and southern Ukraine.

While Maloross regionalists sought greater autonomy for Ukraine within a larger Russian cultural community, Galician nationalists celebrated Ukraine's distinctiveness and, indeed, superiority in relation to what they derisively called 'Muscovy'.

Petro defines tragedy "most simply, as an outcome made inescapable by the fact that the actors do not see how their own actions are leading to the very outcome they are trying to avoid."

In Ukraine's case the primary agent of tragedy has been Galician nationalists' quest for justice at the expense of their Russia-leaning compatriots trying to be loyal to Ukraine in their own way – a quest that has only served to deepen the divisions in a country they are seeking to unite.

In Petro's usage, classical Greek tragedy is a mode of reconciliation as well as a conceptual framing device. When the Greeks staged their plays the aim was to raise awareness of the dangers inherent in conflict situations and to foster civic dialogue that would educate audiences not to seek vengeance but to purge mutual hatred through *catharsis*.

While Petro accepts that Putin's attack has united Maloross and Galician Ukrainians, he is not sure that unity will last, especially if the latter resume their efforts to impose their ethno-linguistic nationalism on the former, many of whom continue to cherish their native Russia language and cultural identity. Another salient impact of the war is that millions of people in Crimea, the Donbass and other parts of Ukraine are now even more determined to remain or become part of Russia. Driving Russia out of Ukraine would perforce be a war of conquest as well as liberation. Of salience, too, is the fact that tens of thousands of Russian-speaking Eastern Ukrainians have fought and died for both sides' causes.

Petro is convinced that “external parties” care little about resolving this internal Ukrainian conflict, “especially if resolving it stands in the way of achieving some grander geopolitical objective.” Whatever the outcome of the war, the best way for Ukraine to strengthen its actual independence and sovereignty, writes Petro is “to develop greater immunity to all foreign influence, both Russian and western.”

For that to happen, Eastern and Western Ukrainians will need to develop a common vision of their joint future, one in which the nationalists would accept cultural diversity in exchange for the regionalists’ political loyalty to the Ukrainian state. “The tragic cycle of Ukraine”, concludes Petro, will only “end when Ukrainians realize that a complete revolution is a revolution of compassion and dignity that views all Ukrainians, regardless of religion, language or cultural heritage, as indispensable to the Ukrainian nation.”

Currently, there is little hope for Petro’s dream of a Ukrainian civic nationalism, but until it materialises Ukraine will remain a country mentally as well as territorially partitioned.

Ukraine’s internal conflict is far more complex than a split between pro-Russia and anti-Russia Ukrainians. As Arel and Driscoll highlight, the post-Maidan civil war in Southern and Eastern Ukraine was primarily an *intra-Russkii mir* (Russian World) struggle between the majority of ethnic Russians who stayed loyal to the Ukrainian state and the Donbass-concentrated minority who sought secession. Only in Crimea was there overwhelming support for re-uniting with Russia; elsewhere secession was resisted both by ‘antisecession vigilante’ mobs and by local pro-Russia elites for whom it was a step too far.

Especially interesting is Arel and Driscoll’s detailed analysis of Russia’s response to the outbreak of Ukraine’s civil war.

Only in relation to Crimea did Putin move quickly and decisively to support secession. The strategic importance of the Sebastopol naval base was certainly a key factor but as important was the high level of popular and elite support for secession in Crimea. Unlike elsewhere in Ukraine there was no pro-Maidan insurgency, which meant the breakaway

could be achieved relatively peacefully and with a fig-leaf of constitutionality in the form of a locally organised referendum that confirmed most Crimeans no longer want to be citizens of Ukraine.

The Donbass separatists hoped to replicate the Crimean model but they controlled neither the streets nor key institutions in the region's towns and cities whose names are now so familiar to us as the site of fierce battles. Crucially, the separatists miscalculated Russia's reaction to their movement.

Arel and Driscoll suggest that Moscow expected widespread anti-Maidan protests throughout Ukraine's Russian-speaking areas to result in Ukraine's forced federalisation, and were surprised by the outright rebellion in Eastern Donbass.

When the Donbass secession descended into a violent struggle between Kiev's forces and the pro-Russia insurgents, Moscow was reluctant to intervene military because it didn't want to send troops into a situation where they would be treated as an invading army, or so these two authors argue. Only in August 2014 did the Russian military intervene directly to save the Donbass secessionists from possible defeat by Kiev's 'anti-terrorist' forces.

Russia's successful military intervention in the Donbass civil war led to the Minsk agreements of 2014-2015, to a ceasefire of sorts and to a stable demarcation line that for nearly eight years was frequently violated but never breached. During this period thousands of people were killed and wounded by both sides' intermittent shelling but most of the casualties were military. As Arel and Driscoll point out, the Donbass civil war transitioned quite quickly into conventional warfare that gave civilians a chance to keep out of the way of the warring sides. A more normal civil war would have resulted in a much higher civilian body count. This is also a feature of the current war: tens of thousands of civilians have been killed or wounded but the number is comparatively low given the scale and intensity of the military action – which has resulted in hundreds of thousands of combatant casualties.

Donbass's conflict was supposed to be resolved by the Minsk Agreements. Under these agreements the rebel territories of Donetsk and Lugansk would return to Ukrainian sovereignty on the basis of constitutional guarantees of their regional autonomy.

According to Petro, negotiations about the implementation of the Minsk Agreements failed because Ukrainian nationalists did not want the pluricultural Ukraine that they entailed. As Petro reports, Donbass residents duly took note. In 2019, a majority of them still wanted to re-join Ukraine. By 2021 that number had shrunk to 12% while more than half now wanted to join Russia. Putin's announcement in February 2022 that Russia recognised the independence of Donets and Lugansk was widely welcomed in the Donbass, even though everyone knew it meant war.

Arel and Driscoll focus on the fact that the Minsk Agreement were signed by the Kiev government under duress, when it was facing military defeat and the loss of even more territory to the secessionists. From the outset, the Donbass civil war was framed by Kiev as a war with Russia, which meant that anyone advocating regional autonomy was depicted as a fifth columnist seeking to secure for Putin a veto over Ukraine's future.

Minsk was so toxic in Ukraine's domestic politics that when in 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky was overwhelmingly elected President on a pro-peace platform, he was unable (or unwilling) to face down the nationalist backlash against reactivating the agreements as the basis for a permanent ceasefire in the Donbass. Thereafter, Zelensky refused to budge on Minsk, even in the face of imminent Russian invasion.

The failure to implement the Minsk Agreements was an egregious missed opportunity to resolve the Donbass crisis and avert the Russia-Ukraine war. Such claim would be fiercely contested, but both these books provide abundant evidence that Ukraine's tragedy has been the result of human choices not historical inevitability.