

Writing the Ukraine War History, As It Happens

Three new books dissent from the orthodoxy, helping to illuminate key aspects of the conflict and the crisis between Russia and the West.

By [James Carden](#)

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Heading into its tenth month, the war in Ukraine, and the resulting political, social and economic upheavals brought about by Russia's illegal invasion, have given rise to a narrative in Washington notable both for its ferocity and unanimity.

A coterie of [neoconservative](#) and [liberal interventionist](#) 'thought-leaders' with a [direct line](#) to the Biden National Security Council have [ruled](#) as [out-of-bounds](#) views which take into account the role the United States and NATO, or even Ukraine itself, may have played in bringing about the current crisis. Such views have been deemed largely irrelevant to what is seen as a global battle, in which Ukraine is currently the most important front, between an alliance of global authoritarians on the one hand (Russia, China, Iran) and the forces of freedom and democracy (Ukraine, the U.S., NATO) on the other.

The trouble with much of what passes for informed analysis on the current state of affairs in Ukraine is that it is clouded by what the Biden administration and its eager servants in the media *wish* to be true, rather than by what is *actually* true. That, as a recent Quincy Institute [panel](#) on the Global South demonstrated, enormous swathes of the world outside of Europe and the Anglophone North Atlantic do not share the NATO-centric view of Russian aggression seems rarely, if ever, taken into account by Washington's foreign policy "Blob." Yet, as the journalist and grand strategist Walter Lippmann once observed, "Where all think alike, no one thinks very much."

Venturing into this contentious territory are three authors who, as Lippmann once did, dissent from the new Cold War orthodoxy. Each of the three books under review helps to illuminate different aspects of the current war and the concomitant crisis in relations between Russia and the West.

A too often overlooked (or ignored) cause of the cycle of endless tragedy which

characterizes Ukraine's post-Cold War trajectory is Ukrainian nationalism. It didn't have to be this way. At the end of the first Cold War, President George H.W. Bush traveled to Kiev in 1991 and warned that the U.S. would:

...not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred."

But Bush, who lost his bid for reelection the following year, ended up being ignored. And in the intervening three decades, Ukraine's domestic politics have been trapped in a seemingly endless and tragic cycle of revolution and recrimination.

In *The Tragedy of Ukraine, What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About Conflict Resolution* (De Gruyter, 2023), scholar Nicolai N. Petro posits that the cycle owes itself to the "lack of meaningful dialogue between Galicia and Donbass, the cultural heartlands of Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking Ukraine" which "runs through Ukrainian history like a red skein."

As Petro sees it,

"Such a dialog will be possible only if Russophone Ukrainians are embraced as true Ukrainians and not treated as potential traitors within their own country. Ukraine's ability to break the cycle of tragedy will ultimately depend on this."

The solution offered by Petro, to apply to the Ukraine crisis the lessons handed down to us by the ancient Greek tragedians, is timely, original, and most of all, wise. As Petro puts it, "In the centuries since the fall of Athens, Greek tragedy has continued to be a source of inspiration for...all the humanities, but its most important function - that of sparking dialogue among citizens on civic values and behavior - has been all but forgotten." Petro believes that efforts, such as the Minsk protocols and the National Platform for Reconciliation and Unity, failed to bring about peace to Ukraine because they "did not include any mechanisms for fostering social healing among Ukrainians themselves. That is why a greater awareness of classical Greek tragedy, which saw social healing as one of its core therapeutic functions, can be so valuable for Ukraine."

And so, if Petro provides us with a lens from antiquity with which to view the Ukraine crisis, Hall Gardner's *Toward an Alternative Transatlantic Strategy* (Foundation Perspective and Innovation, 2022), provides us with a valuable critique from present-day Europe. Gardner, a professor of international relations at the American University of Paris, believes that the Biden administration's policy of trying to simultaneously "cooperate" and "constrain" peer rivals, notably Russia and China (a policy that Gardner calls "constraint"), is misguided. As he points out, "the effort to find common interests with rival states is taking place in a context in which those 'intersecting interests' are essentially American-defined priorities and not necessarily major priority for Russia, China or for other rivals and allies."

The way Gardner sees it, the best way forward for the West is through an equitable partnership between Europe and the United States which must replace Washington's rule by diktat. Whether the war in Ukraine will hasten or delay such a development is anyone's guess. But Gardner's offering is timely given [the rift](#) that has opened up between the Biden Administration and its European allies in recent weeks. "The fact is," an anonymous senior European official [told](#) Politico last week, "if you look at it soberly, the country that is most

profiting from this war is the U.S. because they are selling more gas and at higher prices, and because they are selling more weapons.”

Yet given the chaos and, yes, tragedy now engulfing Ukraine, policymakers across the West might do well to reflect on how we got to this point in the first place. In *How The West Brought War To Ukraine* (Siland Press, 2022), Dr. Benjamin Abelow, a nuclear arms activist and graduate of Yale Medical School, gives a concise, thorough chronology of U.S. policy toward Russia over the past 30 years.

According to Abelow, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, if seen through the prism of our own demands for a hemispheric sphere of influence via the Monroe Doctrine, is not necessarily the expression of “unbridled expansionism” on the part of “a malevolent Russian leader.” It is instead “a violent and destructive reaction to misguided Western policies.” Abelow succeeds in prompting the reader to question the regnant Western narrative of the conflict and, in so doing, helps point the way towards what a negotiated settlement might look like.

In the end, Western policymakers would do well to take seriously the advice offered by the aforementioned authors. Whether or not they will do so remains, alas, an open question.

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