

Explaining Ukraine's second Maidan

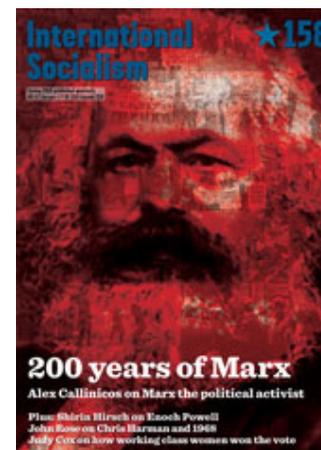
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Maciej Bancarzewski

A review of Chris Kaspar de Ploeg, *Ukraine in the Crossfire* (Clarity Press, 2017), £19.19

Since the unrest of 2014—the Maidan protests, the outbreak of separatist war in Donbass, the annexation of Crimea and the MH17 plane crash—it seems Ukraine is not getting much attention. The Donbass conflict was even coined a “forgotten war”. Additionally, the mainstream discourse explains Ukraine’s misfortune purely as a consequence of the influence of Russian imperialism. The country is seen as a victim of “one-sided” geopolitics; at the same time, the media and politicians alike idealise Ukraine’s pro-Western governments.



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Chris Kaspar de Ploeg's *Ukraine in the Crossfire* helps to overcome this imbalance and provides a much needed, informative analysis of present day Ukraine. In contrast to the mainstream picture, de Ploeg goes beyond the anti-Russian hysteria and depicts the country as a sphere of influence of three imperialisms: Russia, the European Union and the United States.

The book sets an ambitious goal in explaining the Second Maidan's complex politics and brings less popularised facts to light. Firstly, de Ploeg provides an important context. In his detailed introduction he meticulously explains the historical and material roots of divisions between the country's regions (pp12-21). However, as he perceptively observes, the popular "bipolar" view of Ukraine might be too simplistic. Despite the country's apparent divisions and regional "sympathies", the Ukrainian and Russian identities seem to be fluid. Before the First Maidan (in 2004) nearly a quarter of Ukraine's citizens identified as both Ukrainian and Russian.

It is crucial to understand the economic interdependence between Russia and Ukraine in the regional context. Eastern and Southern regions—industrialised during the Soviet era—are now heavily reliant on Russian exports and have much stronger economic (but also cultural) links with Russia than with Western Ukraine. Since 1991, election results have corresponded with this dichotomy with pro-Russian parties and candidates receiving majorities in the East and South. De Ploeg also points out that support for Maidan was relatively low in these regions. By the same token, while Ukrainians are generally sceptical towards Russian-led international organisations, in 2014 Donbass favoured joining the Eurasian Customs Union over the European Union. The polls also indicated that Ukrainians considered NATO a threat, rather than a protection (p178). These facts are missing from the mainstream coverage of the Ukrainian crisis.

Ukraine in the Crossfire gives an extensive analysis of the influence of far-right movements on contemporary Ukrainian politics. De Ploeg traces its origins back to the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Stepan Bandera's Ukrainian Insurgent

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Army (UPA), but mainly focuses on the rise of the ultra-nationalistic parties (such as Svoboda and Right Sector) after the First Maidan. De Ploeg has exposed the symbiotic relationship between ultra-nationalists and “Orange” politicians. He explains how the leader of the Orange Revolution and later president Viktor Yushchenko not only turned a blind eye to the rise of far-right extremism, but also sat on the board of directors of MAUP (a private, openly antisemitic university). This “academic” institution regularly publishes antisemitic pamphlets and gives lecturing platforms to racists, such as the Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. As de Ploeg points out: “[the] Orange president was willing to ignore certain racist connections in service of his vision for a new nationalist identity for his country” (p24). Flirting with fascists continued into the Second Maidan. Despite Svoboda having no popular mandate during the Second Maidan, it managed to hold three portfolios in the cabinet. Moreover, the West’s “beloved” technocratic prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk appointed several leaders of far-right battalions to the military council, including the neo-Nazi soldier Andriy Biletsky (p158). But de Ploeg’s picture of Ukraine’s political scene is not entirely gloomy. He does not forget the active role the AntiFascist Union Ukraine and other left wing movements have taken in building the resistance during the Second Maidan (p33).

Ukraine’s transformation in the 1990s, similar to that of other post-Soviet countries, resulted in deteriorated living standards and economic downturn. Neither did the aftermath of the 2004 Orange Revolution improve the wellbeing of ordinary Ukrainians. Indeed, it was “a change of elites rather than a revolution”, as sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko rightly described it. Nowadays, Ukraine is a war-torn country with a polarised society, increasing levels of poverty and the population pouring out. *Ukraine in the Crossfire* thoroughly investigates the neoliberal policies of the two Yatsenyuk governments (2014-16). De Ploeg demonstrates that austerity does not only concern the struggling Eurozone economies. Ukraine was also “looked after” by the IMF (pp69-86); as a recipient of a Structural Adjustment Programme loan in 2014, Ukraine had to cut its welfare budget severely. Unsurprisingly, this was combined with a huge increase in military spending.

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Since 2015 the minimum wage has decreased by 32 percent and taxes on corporate profits decreased by 37 percent. Additionally, Ukrainians experienced a substantial increase in energy prices. These policies were overseen by foreign “experts”, including neoliberal hardliners such as Natalie Jaresko, Ivan Mikloš and Leszek Balcerowicz. Up to now the implementation of the reforms has brought only higher unemployment, inflation and massive emigration. As might be expected, Ukraine has disappeared from the European radar as it cannot be treated as a “Post-Maidan” successful economic story.

De Ploeg stresses that the “crippling conditions of the IMF reforms” brought the return of socio-economic demands to the protests of 2015, while in 2014 these were predominately ideological in nature (p185). But, politically the picture has not improved at all. Under the presidency of Petro Poroshenko—the “chocolate king”—the oligarchic system remains unshaken and repression has intensified. In early 2017 a decree establishing censorship and surveillance of mass media was issued (p178). Under the pretence of fighting “communism”, pro-Russian politicians and journalists are targeted on a regular basis.

Ukraine in the Crossfire is a very up to date study (the last chapter deals with “Cold War Politics in the Age of Trump”), thoroughly researched and based on numerous sources, including wikileaks. Sporadically the discussion diverts too much from Ukraine, for instance when the author dwells too generally on IMF policies or US military interventions. But despite this occasional lack of focus, *Ukraine in the Crossfire* is a critical left wing antidote to the media bias and blackout on Ukrainian current affairs.

Maciej Bancarzewski teaches at the University of Hertfordshire and is a member of the Socialist Workers Party and its Polish sister organisation Pracownicza Demokracja.

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Now online: John Molyneux's article "In Defence of Party Building" translated into German – thanks to Rosemarie Nünning (<http://isj.org.uk/zur-verteidigung-des-parteiaufbaus/>)

Now online: Sheila McGregor's article on social reproduction theory has now been translated into German – thanks to Rosemarie Nünning (<http://isj.org.uk/theorie-der-sozialen-reproduktion/>)

Now online: Brazil: how big a defeat? Interview with Valério Arcary (<http://isj.org.uk/brazil-how-big-a-defeat/>)

Now online: Rosemarie Nünning on the history of abortion law in Germany – Between "birth strike" and "race treason": The history of Paragraph 219a of the German Criminal Code (<http://isj.org.uk/birth-strike/>)

New to our translations page: Lise Vogel und die Politik der Frauenbefreiung (Nicola Ginsburgh on Lise Vogel and the politics of

women's liberation in German)
(<http://isj.org.uk/lise-vogel-und-die-politik-der-frauenbefreiung/>)

Now online: Syrian revolutionary socialist Ghayath Naisse interviewed on the brutalisation of Syria, the goals of those intervening and the prospects for socialists in the region.
(<http://isj.org.uk/interview-lessons-of-the-syrian-revolution/>)

Online only “How to stop the tanks” by Ron Margulies on the attempted coup in Turkey
(<http://isj.org.uk/how-to-stop-the-tanks/>)

Egyptian Revolution timeline
International Socialism has covered events in Egypt from the strike waves that led up to the revolution, the events of 2011 themselves and the situation since: here is a timeline of key articles (<http://isj.org.uk/egypt-2005-2014/>)

Now online, Ellen Meiksins Wood (1942-2016) writing in *International Socialism* in 1987
(<http://isj.org.uk/looking-for-alternatives-reply>)

Black history, police racism, Islamophobia and contemporary debates on oppression- Articles and book reviews for black history month
(<http://isj.org.uk/black-history-month/>)

Videos of the *International Socialism* conference on Marxism and nature featuring Ted Benton and Ian Angus (<http://isj.org.uk/marxism-and-nature/>)

Videos and transcript of the *International Socialism* debate on Syriza and Socialist Strategy with Stathis Kouvelakis and Alex Callinicos (<http://isj.org.uk/syriza-and-socialist-strategy/>)

Online only: Vincent Sung analyses the roots of Hong Kong's umbrella movement protests here (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=1024&issue=144>)

Online only: Bob Light remembers the 1974-5 Portuguese revolution (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=979&issue=142>)

Videos from the *International Socialism* event on 'Work, Class and Resistance' with Jane Hardy, Kevin Doogan, Lucia Pradella and Jim Wolfreys (<http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=958>)

Videos from the *International Socialism* event on 'Marxism and Revolution Today' with Alex Callinicos, Claire Ceruti, Neil Davidson and others (<http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=842>)

Video: *International Socialism* seminar on "Egypt, Tunisia and revolution in the 21st century" with Gilbert Achcar and Anne Alexander (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=716>)

"The sex work debate: a response to Jess Edwards" by Thierry Schaffauser (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=696>)

Audio: Alex Callinicos on the International Socialist tradition in political economy (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=resources#alexseminar>)

Audio: full recordings from the recent *International Socialism* conference Marxism and Political Economy (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=resources#poleconconf>)

Audio: Harman, Brenner and Itoh discuss the world economy today at Historical Materialism's annual conference (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=resources#HMconf>)

From Our Archives

The roots of gay oppression (Norah Carlin 1989) (<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=310>)

The 'workers' government (Chris Harman 1977) (<http://isj.org.uk/the-workers-government>)

A critique of Nicos Poulantzas (Colin Barker 1979) (<http://isj.org.uk/a-critique-of-nicos-poulantzas/>)

Theories of Patriarchy (Lindsey German 1981) (<http://isj.org.uk/theories-of-patriarchy/>)

Mike Kidron on Marxist political economy (1974) (<http://isj.org.uk/marxist-political-economy-and-the-crisis/>)

The State and Capital (Chris Harman 1991) (<http://isj.org.uk/the-state-and-capitalism-today/>)

Gramsci versus Eurocommunism (Chris Harman 1977) (<http://isj.org.uk/gramsci-versus-eurocommunism/>)