



UKRAINE: THE VIOLENT CONTRARIES

By John R. Haines



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Do we ever get what we really want? Do we ever achieve what our powers have ostensibly equipped us for? No: everything works by contraries.

Nikolai Gogol
Diary of a Madman and Other Stories

What does it think it's doing running west
When all the other country brooks flow east
To reach the ocean? It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries.

Robert Frost
West Running Brook

What, indeed, Russia must wonder, must Ukraine think it's doing, running west, not east?

A fortnight ago, someone fired a *Grad* rocket — the name means "hail" — in the direction of a government checkpoint northeast of Volnovakha in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region. The rocket missed the checkpoint, but struck a civilian passenger bus that was traveling north from Zlatoustovka to Donetsk, killing twelve and wounding thirteen. And there, all agreement as to the facts ends.

The Ukrainian government claims pro-Russian separatists in Dokuchayevsk, a town northeast of the checkpoint, fired the rocket. Armed irregulars of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) quickly claimed credit for destroying "an *Ukry* checkpoint" later disputing that a rocket hit the bus. They blamed automatic weapons fire; then later that day, a false flag attack by *Banderontsi* from "rogue" elements of the Ukraine Interior Ministry's Sich Battalion.¹ Two days later, the Donetsk News Agency claimed the bus detonated an anti-personnel mine planted at the checkpoint by Ukrainian troops. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) quickly determined that a *Grad* rocket struck close to the passenger bus, though the OSCE's Russian representative highlighted the team's assessment that the rocket was fired, contrary to Ukrainian claims, from a north or northeastern direction.² On 22 January, a streetcar in the center of Donetsk was hit by mortar fire, killing 13 persons. DPR defense minister Vladimir Kononov announced, "A covert group operating in the area was arrested," elaborated by a DPR security ministry spokesperson as, "The self-defense forces arrested a covert group of

¹ The "Sich Battalion" was formed in June 2014 from *Svoboda* (a Ukrainian nationalist party) volunteers.

² In reality, a Ukrainian Interior Ministry official for the Donetsk region stated within an hour of the rocket attack that it was launched from a town north-northeast of Volnovakha. Dokuchayevsk is located about 31km north-northeast of Volnovakha.

Ukrainian security forces not far from the scene."

What is the purpose of this narrative, one might ask, beyond proving the maxim that truth is the first casualty of war? It is to put the question: what do the parties to this conflict really want? The separatist DPR wanted a pretense to breach the Minsk armistice agreement and go on the offensive. What it got was a provocation gone awry — the *Grad* rocket attack on the Volnovakha checkpoint that instead hit a passenger bus — and a counterfeit "Ukrainian" response — the mortar attack on civilians in Donetsk. The separatist DPR disposed of an inconvenient truth — Ukrainian armed forces in the area were deployed well outside mortar range of Donetsk — by blaming "rogue" Sich Battalion elements. The later *Grad* attack on Mariupol was cynically instrumental, attempting to provoke a civilian exodus to impede the movement of Ukrainian armed forces, potentially trapping several thousand defenders in the city. The separatist endgame is to dictate favorable armistice terms, including the termination of "anti-terrorist operations" in eastern Ukraine and the imposition of a federal structure that grants substantial autonomy to Ukraine's regions, something many analysts believe would bring down President Poroshenko's government.

So, to the question *What do the separatists want?*, here is their imagined map of a post-armistice Ukraine:



It depicts a view of so-called "federal Ukraine" in which the nation is reduced to a near rump state. The pro-Russian "Novorossian Territories" (red) extend west from the separatist strongholds of Donetsk and Lugansk to claim the eastern third of the country. An arc separating the nine-region *Novorossija* extends southwest from Kharkiv through Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa to Ukraine's border with Moldova (and its own pro-Russian separatist province, Transdnistria). In southwestern Ukraine, Zakarpattia with its sizeable ethnic Hungarian and Rus minorities is an "Autonomous Colony" (green) along with a three-region bloc in north central Ukraine covering Cherviv, Surny and Poltava. Galician "Ukraine" (dark blue) and "Malorossia" Ukraine (light blue) comprise the core of the rump state.

The separatists' imagined geopolitical reshaping of Ukraine is encapsulated in their choice of the word Malorossia ("Little Russia") or properly, *Malorossija*. The triune Russian nation— *Velikorossija* ("Great Russia"), Ukrainian *Malorossija*, and Ruthenian *Belorossija* ("White Russia") — was a defining principle of the Russian imperial credo. On the other hand, the ethnonym *Ukraine* denotes a distinctive historical status, not derived from Russia but from its own culture, religion and language. The Ukrainian national identity that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries deconstructed *Velykorossija* of the triune Russian nation and left the unadorned *Rossija* as its remainder.

In Natal'ya Ivanova's elegant phrase, Ukraine today is "a knight at the crossroads: Ukraine or Malorossiya?" For her, the choice of Ukraine reduces to the principle "anything rather than with Russia."³ The principle at the heart of the Malorossiya

³ Natal'ya Ivanova (2012). "A Knight at the Crossroads: Ukraine or Malorossiya?" *InfoRos.ru* [online English edition, 28 August 2012]. <http://inforos.ru/en/?module=news&action=view&id=31585>. Last accessed 29 January 2015.

pathway is the reunion of Eurasia's Slavic core, a center of gravity sufficiently forceful to banish Western (read: American) hegemony from Eurasian geography. It is small wonder that many central and eastern Europeans fear a political solution in Ukraine based on "spheres of influence, a new Yalta,

asymmetric economic responses of its own, like the use of gold as a monetary asset.

Since the onset of conflict in eastern Ukraine, which began as a local war of occupation, none of the parties — none — were willing to accede to the rules that governed the Cold War. The consequence has been to turn the conflict in eastern Ukraine into a disaster, the scale of which is difficult to predict. While suggesting no equivalency in their positions or standing in the conflict, the United States and Russia seem to share one thing in common: each in its own way seems at a loss as to what it wants, and that for the people of eastern Ukraine that may be the most terrible thing.

Ukraine today is a place of contraries and oxymora. Edmund Wilson once wrote that "the more violent the contraries, the greater the works of art." In art or literature, perhaps, but for the people of Ukraine, it is the greater the tragedy.

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