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***The War Came to Us: Life and Death in Ukraine.* By Christopher Miller. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023. ISBN 978-1-3994-0685-7. Maps. Photographs. Glossary. Notes. Sources Cited. Index. Pp. vii, 374. \$15.69.**

Reviewed by Amos C. Fox, Ph.D.

Introduction

In the same vein that Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghost's* and Sebastian Junger's *War* vividly chronicle their adventures in the Balkans and the US-led war in Afghanistan, respectively, Christopher Miller's *The War Came to Us: Life and Death in Ukraine* is an enthralling account of his time living and working for the Peace Corps in Ukraine from the pre-Maidan period in 2013 to February 2023. The Euromaiden Uprising was a domestic response in the form of demonstrations and civil unrest in November 2013 to then President Viktor Yanukovich's unwillingness to move the country towards the European Union, and instead strength Ukraine's ties with Russia. During that period, Miller lived and worked amongst the Donbas region's ethnically and culturally diverse population in eastern Ukrainian. Building on that experience, Miller eloquently paints the picture of a poor eastern Ukraine, which has not economically recovered from Ukrainian's independence from the Soviet Union, and where the local population often must resort to illegal work to make ends meet. These hardships, coupled with a culturally and ethnically sympathetic population, made the situation in the Donbas ripe for revolution. Russia, keen on keeping Western influence in Ukraine at bay, while increasing its own power and sway over the region, relied heavily on the situation in the Donbas to interfere with Ukraine's political process.

Miller – living and working in country at the time, details the strife, sacrifice, and national unity that emerged during the 2013 Maidan Uprising in which Ukrainians protested the outcome of elections that clearly highlighted Moscow's interference in Ukraine's political process. Miller writes about the Maidan experience from a first-person view, as he walked the bloody streets with his friends, colleagues, and professional

contacts. Following the Maidan, Miller recounts Russia's infiltration of Crimea, using special operations forces and intelligence elements to quickly and quietly take control of the peninsula. Fast-forwarding to 2022, Miller's experience in the conflict spans Russia's re-invasion in February through the end of the year. He recounts the horrific experiences of the battle for Kyiv, Irpin, Avdiivka, and the sieges of Mariupol and Bakhmut. More importantly, however, Miller's *The War Came to Us* vividly illustrates the determinism, optimism, and work ethic of the Ukrainian people to overcome the terror that Vladimir Putin and his armed forces brought to their country.

Summary

Christopher Miller provides a mesmerizing glimpse into the war in Ukraine by providing a first-person account of much of the conflict, from its origination in the spring of 2013 with the Euromaidan Uprising to February 2023, when he reflects on the conflict to that point in time. Miller's first-person account of the conflict provides a rich meshing of conversation with colleagues, students, social and political leaders, and military personnel. Miller illustrates the illegal nature of Russia's invasion, while illuminating the stab-in-the-back many Ukrainians felt by the Kremlin's unsanctioned action. In doing so, *The War Came to Us* is unique. It tells the story of the Russo-Ukrainian War through the vantage point of those who were there – living, fighting, working, and in some cases, dying – in the name of both liberty and retaining national sovereignty.

Christopher Miller provides a gripping account of many of the early, and little known, battles of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Starting in 2014, Miller discusses the battle of Ilovaisk, one of the first major Russia troop deployments in the conflict. At Ilovaisk in August 2014, Russian proxy forces – the Donetsk People's Army, or DPA – has surrounded Ukrainian forces attempting to retake the town. The DPA, a ragtag band of fighters hastily thrown together by Russian intelligence officers, had taken control of the city in their early thrust to seize control of Donetsk oblast. As the fighting in August wore on, the DPA found themselves on their back foot, and Ukrainian forces on the verge of victory at Ilovaisk. Late in the month, Russia dispatched a number of battalion tactical groups (BTGs) from within Russia to augment the DPA and provide additional firepower to

help their proxy hold the line. Russia's force deployment tipped the balance to the Russia-DPA forces. The groups negotiated a withdraw of Ukraine's forces from Ilovaisk along to safety corridors leading out of the city. Yet as the time for withdraw came, Russia and DPA forces pummeled the Ukrainians as they attempted to depart Ilovaisk. This resulted in a slaughter. As Miller notes, Kyiv called what occurred at Ilovaisk, a massacre. The Minsk Protocol, the conflict's first nominal ceasefire, resulted from the slaughter at Ilovaisk.

Furthermore, Miller recounts the siege of Debal'tseve in January 2015. Debal'tseve was a strategic transportation hub – it was the nexus of highways and railroads – and it served as the keystone that linked both Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. In January 2015, Russian and DPA fighters encircled the city and began to lay siege to the city and its habitants, to include roughly 8,000 defending Ukrainian forces. Miller highlights visiting the Artemivsk, a town close to Debal'tseve, to get a sense of the battle. He spoke to the director of the morgue in Artemivsk, and the director stated that bodies were flowing into his morgue like they were on a conveyor belt. Russian and DPA forces pulverized the city and soundly defeated the Ukrainian forces at Debal'tseve. The battle causing hundreds of killed and wounded Ukrainian fighters and gutting the city. Like the battle of Ilovaisk, the siege of Debal'tseve accelerated political decisions. In the battle's wake, the Minsk II ceasefire was signed, supposedly signaling a cessation to the fighting.

Moving forward to 2022, Miller was in Kyiv for Russia's initial attack in Ukraine. He describes the fear that took hold as power, internet, and other systems went down across the country, and as families moved into the safety of subway states and other hardened structures. Further, he describes the hasty deployment of forces from across the region to defend the city and its outreaches, to include Hostomel Airport. In describing the deployment and fighting, one gets the feeling that the Ukrainian forces arrival in Kyiv and at Hostomel Airport was just in the nick of time, and that any later arrival or any fewer forces and Ukrainian victory at each of those locations might have turned in favor of the Russian armed forces, despite the latter's inept deployment.

Further, Miller's description of the siege of Mariupol (24 February 2022 – 20 May 2022) is fascinating. He describes how Ukrainian units were

hellbent on retaining the city of Mariupol, despite being outnumbered and outgunned by the Russian armed forces. Some reports suggest that 14,000 Russian soldiers took on approximately 3,500 Ukrainian soldiers during the siege. As a result, when portions of control of the city began to slip away, the remaining Ukrainian forces decided to strongpoint to Azovstal steel plant. As Ukrainian casualties stacked up, Miller notes a little-known relief effort initiated by Ukrainian forces. A small helicopter raid into the steel plant was launched; the mission being to bring in medical supplies and evacuate as many wounded as possible. The numbers of soldiers this raid helped are unknown, but it likely saved very many lives. Subsequently, the Ukrainians conducted a few breakouts attempts in April 2022, but as Miller notes, those efforts proved fruitless. In the end, Mariupol fell to the Russian forces in May 2022.

While this summary is not an exhaustive list of the combat that Christopher Miller was witness too, nor the full range of details associated with his experiences in and around the battles in Ukraine, this is a good starting point. Miller's accounts are rich – full of the human drama associated with being in and around the largest land war in Europe since the end of World War II.

Recommendation

Christopher Miller's *The War Came to Us* is a modern classic for both its storytelling and for its documentation of the Russian-provoked conflict in Ukraine. Miller and the book must be applauded for a readable, yet impeccable handling of political and military affairs, which can easily lose the average reader. As a result, *The War Came to Us* is a useful text for policymakers attempting to understand how foreign policy decisions impact local populations, military strategists working to identify causal effects between the actions of competing militaries, historians looking for excellent primary source information from which to craft an official history of the Russo-Ukrainian War, or your average reader who is just interested in learning more about the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

This book is outstanding on multiple levels. First, it is just good storytelling. Second, this book does an excellent job illustrating how foreign and domestic policy impacts regular people living ordinary lives,

and how that can often result in extraordinary life experience. Third, Miller provides great insight from on-the-ground insight regarding the war's battles based on his own personal experience and his personal relationships in Ukraine. This is a welcome, but uncommon experience from this conflict. Most commentators are observing and writing from safe positions far from Ukraine. Considering these three features, I believe that Christopher Miller's *The War Came to Us* should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in foreign policy, international relations, domestic politics, war journalism, or defense and security studies. Superb book.