

Flight MH17 and the New Cold War,
Kees Van der Pijl -

Living in Kyiv since 2007, I have witnessed the events that Kees van der Pijl analyzes. This is the most thoroughly researched, comprehensive book I have seen on the conflict with Russia. Having been impressed by the author's most recent book, *States of Emergency*, about the Covid crisis, I was delighted to find that he had written one about my adoptive country.

I write this review in four parts:

- o The objectives of the book, and its slant
- o My own perspective, and how it meshes with the author's
- o A brief summary of the book itself
- o How these themes are reflected in the "Russian invasion" of February 2022

The objectives of the book, and its slant

Van der Pijl is a Dutchman writing for a Western audience. The story that we in the West have been told about the Maidan revolution of 2014, the downing of MH17, and the continued tensions between Russia and Ukraine has been provided by the Western media.

The degree to which the media is in lockstep with the intelligence agencies and the Internet oligarchs has become impossible to ignore in the last two years of the Covid crisis. More and more of us find it impossible to believe what the government says about the dangers of Covid, its transmissibility, the effectiveness of lockdowns, masks, social distancing, and sanitizing and especially the newfangled mRNA jabs.

Only the unimaginable level of today's deception surprises a guy like me who played an unwitting part in the deceptions of the Vietnam War and has since observed the falsehoods associated with weapons of mass destruction, chemical weapons in Syria, supposed poisonings in England, the Benghazi fiasco and so on. It was time to rethink what I thought I knew about 2014.

The author gives himself away by calling the Ukrainian ultranationalists "Fascists." In my mind the last of that breed died in 1945. Probably because progressives in the United States apply that label to me, along with racist, sexist and the other predictable slurs, I tend to discount people who use it.

Many of my Ukrainian neighbors have the view that had it not been for the strong patriotism of the Western Ukrainians in the Right Sector and other militias, much of Ukraine would have been lost to Russia. The Ukrainian Army had been hollowed out, underfunded and populated with pro-Russian sleepers under Yanukovich and his predecessors. It was in no shape to resist the annexation of Crimea and the spontaneous uprisings that resulted in the People's Republics.

There are some questions that can never be answered. I know several people who were in Crimea at the time of the referendum on annexation to Russia. It was hastily conducted, ambiguously worded, and the polls were watched in such a way that the integrity of the process is in doubt. Nonetheless, in my several visits to Crimea I had noticed that they did only speak Russian and appreciated Ukrainians mainly for the money they dropped on vacations.

It was called the Autonomous Republic of Crimea at the time, in deference to its long-standing separate status. Although the refugees from Crimea no doubt suffered discrimination and considerable financial losses when the Russians took over, I think it is equally true that most of the population was comfortable with them. After all, the Russians had been a major presence all along on account of their long-term lease on the port of Sevastopol. The Russian takeover was stealthily and smoothly executed. So far as I know only one Ukrainian died.

Van der Pijl's account of the uprisings that led to the People's Republics seems incomplete. I met the mayor of Slavyansk, a very Russian-speaking city in the Donetsk oblast, who regaled me with stories about how they had resisted the insurgents. Uprisings in Kharkiv, Mariupol, Odessa and many other cities appear to me to have been put down by the local citizenry. It had to be – the central government was weak and ineffective. Also, the playbook seemed to hew very closely to the techniques I had read about for Soviet guided "people's uprisings" to install communism in what became the Eastern European satellites. The process was repeated in the Transnistria region of Moldova.

My conclusion is that today's People's Republics represent the two portions of southeastern Ukraine with the greatest affinity for Russian history and culture. Given that the rest of Ukraine five years ago absorbed the people who did not want to live under the Russians, the best bet at this point would be to implement the Minsk Accords and let everybody live in peace. I suspect that van der Pijl is right to observe that the Ukrainians seem to be the obstacle. No Ukrainian politician can afford to be tagged as the one who "gave away the Donbas."

My own perspective, and how it meshes with the author's

Van der Pijl calls Ukraine a "failed state." One of the better parts of the book is his analysis of who the players are – the oligarchs who own 90% of the economy. They fight interminably over the spoils. This constant infighting and name-calling are certainly an impediment to presenting a united face to Russia and seeking a settlement. While I'm on the topic, let me remark on the benefits of a "failed state." They have not come together to enforce Covid vaccinations, masks, or even childhood vaccinations. They do not push politically correct agendas with regard to sex, gender, race or whatever. We in Ukraine enjoy the same accidental but nonetheless refreshing freedom as citizens of Argentina, Nicaragua and wartime Vietnam. The government has better things to do than pester the citizenry.

Ukraine does not have the sense of despondency and purposelessness that one thinks of in connection with a failed state. The sense of personal pride shows itself in the way people dress, take care of their cars and possessions, and treat each other with respect. It is a more pleasant place to live than Washington DC. Children are happier and more normal. Among other things, they haven't been wearing masks. They are learning arithmetic rather than rainforest math. This may represent the paradox of a healthy society within a failed state.

A person's sense of well-being is a relative thing. The economy has been growing comfortably over the past few years. Agricultural exports to Europe and China are booming. Outsourcing of services delivered by the Internet, chief among which is computer programming, have been growing by leaps and bounds. The sense of optimism in Kyiv is palpable. My understanding is that this is true as well in regional cities. There are IT technology hubs all over the country.

Van der Pijl has a negative take on the big agricultural firms. Mostly publicly traded, these large companies consolidate thousands of square kilometers on which they can conduct large-scale farming operations using Dutch and American farm equipment, seed, fertilizer, irrigation systems and the like. It makes them vastly more efficient.

So far, these big combines are not allowed to own land outright. They typically lease family-owned smallholds, for which they pay fairly modest leases. Van der Pijl contends that the leaseholders overuse the land, destroying its fertility. I had heard that before. He contends that they use GMO crops. This I had not heard. GMOs are generally against the law here, although glyphosate – Roundup, used with GMO corn among other things – is still tolerated as a farm chemical. While I share his concern for the future the land, I cannot envision a scenario in which smallholdings will be profitable for owners to farm any time in the future. Not here, or any place in the developed world, unfortunately. I am glad that Ukrainians at least retain ownership. There are a

number of techniques for restoring degraded farmland, depending on what's wrong with it, though they take both time and money.

Van der Pijl observes, as do many others, that Yanukovych was a lawfully elected President. This is true, he was elected by a narrow plurality, significantly less than a majority. There are many historical precedents: Lenin, Adolf Hitler, Salvador Allende, and in our day Justin Trudeau. And all four men, once elected, far exceeded their mandates in an attempt to perpetuate their power.

Yanukovych's predecessor, Western Ukrainian Victor Yushenko, had appeal to his base by sticking it to the Russian speakers. He renamed streets after detested anti-Soviet resistance leaders such as Simon Petrulya and Stepan Bandura. Van der Pijl calls them fascists. He also curbed the language rights of the Russian speaking minority by limiting broadcasts, movies and the like in the Russian language.

Yanukovych's pushback was predictable. He more than restored language rights. His minister of education Tabachnik eviscerated Ukrainian language institutions such as the oldest university in the country, Kyiv Mogilia Academy, and the Ukrainian Catholic University. He made significant changes to public school education, reducing the national pride factor significantly. This did not make him popular.

Yanukovych was also a world-class thief. At the time I said of him that he "broke more than he stole, and stole all he could." All of the merchants I dealt with in Kyiv lived in terror of his tax police, who unfairly shook down small businesses such as my barber. On a larger scale, he prevented the export of Ukraine's 2013 bumper crop of grain in on the spurious ground that it was somehow contaminated and required meticulous inspection. One could only export through companies Yanukovych controlled. This was a vast hit to Western grain dealers such as Cargill. They ran up huge charges for demurrage of railcars and ships as their cargoes could not move. Quite a bit spoiled.

When Maidan came around, the people of Kyiv rallied enthusiastically against this much hated president. Though I have no use for the CIA – see my reviews of *Legacy of Ashes* and *Deadly Deceits* – my impression, and my Russian and Ukrainian language searches on the Internet convince me that the CIA was not heavily involved in Maidan. I credit it to ineptitude rather than a lack of malicious intent.

Whereas Van der Pijl would put most of the blame on the United States and Western machinations, my view is that the blame can be rather equally shared. This was a historical confrontation with deep historical roots, in which there are no white hats.

As mentioned above, I have seen what the CIA and American diplomacy did in many other countries. It is disreputable, reprehensible. My observation is that in this case events got ahead of them. The American Embassy, whatever their intentions, did not initially stage manage the Maidan uprising. They were playing catch-up. I was there a few times; some acquaintances quite often. Their protest was sincere. These friends did not belong to right wing groups, or any groups at all for that matter.

A brief summary of the book itself

This is a good time to repeat that although I do not totally agree with Van der Pijl's take on the situation, it is the best, most thoroughly documented one I have seen. The chapter outline is a good introduction.

- 1 The global gamble of a new Cold War
2. Divided Ukraine
3. From the Maidan revolts to regime change
4. The Civil War and the MA17 disaster
5. Aftermath: the failed state on NATO's front line

The global gamble of a new Cold War

The US sees itself as the leading world power. As such it habitually meddles in other countries business for a number of reasons. It promotes its own commercial interests. It works to suppress potential rivals to its global hegemony.

It does this by soft means – supposedly "promoting democracy" and exporting American culture and values. In the last decades this has included rampant secularism, feminism, gay and transsexual rights, notions of racial equality in countries that historically had insignificant problems with minorities, and so on.

The United States has extended its hegemony commercially through banks, pharmaceuticals, the Internet, entertainment and other domains.

The United States has used covert operations to support governments amenable to American hegemony and to upset those that might oppose it. Van der Pijl points to the color revolutions that have taken place throughout the world. The now defunct U.S. Army run School of the Americas educated a generation of Latin American caudillos.

Van der Pijl provides as good an overview as one can find of how this operated in Ukraine. This alone is worth the price of the book.

Divided Ukraine

Van der Pijl provides a pretty good history of Ukraine. It has not been a strong and united country since its glory days of the 11th century. Its fate is governed as much as anything by geography, which Van der Pijl could afford to describe at greater length. The Carpathian Mountains to the west, peaking at 6000 feet, are the best natural barrier the country enjoys – but they aren't much. From the northwest wrapping clear around to the Black Sea there is nothing but flat land. Ukraine has been controlled by invaders from every quadrant.

The two dominant languages, Ukrainian and Russian, are distributed along three clines: west to east, rural to urban, and poor to rich. Though a majority may have spoken Ukrainian, Russian has simply been a superior language for science, commerce, and even literature. This has resulted in constant tension.

Ukrainian speakers in the West bridle at the memory of centuries of domination by Lithuania, Poland and Hungary, followed by a brutal Russian communist regime. There is a lingering resentment of all things Russian, including today's political class which mostly grew up speaking the language. While people in the West have always been polite to me, they make it clear that they would prefer to speak Ukrainian. People in the East never attempted to address this foreigner in Ukrainian and were pleased by my less-than-perfect Russian.

Though he may overdramatize the tensions between East and West, Van der Pijl is certainly describing a real phenomenon. Ukraine has not been a united polity in anybody's memory. It was not prepared to immediately become one upon achieving its independence in 1991. The United States' delusion that a full-blown democracy might spring up automatically was as unrealistic in Ukraine as in sub-Saharan Africa. These things take time. It is clear in any case that, rhetoric aside, the United States wanted a catspaw to irritate Russia more than a functioning democracy.

The United States supported ardent Ukrainian nationalists, the so-called fascists, because it was in the US national interest to pry Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and to keep it divided.

From the Maidan revolts to regime change

Van der Pijl's account of the events of Maidan are very much worth reading because they go against the mainstream narrative. There is undoubtedly truth on both sides.

The most significant claim he makes is that the "heavenly hundred" of martyrs shot on European Square, to spark the ultimate removal of Yanukovich, were shot by Western Ukrainian forces to engender outrage against Yanukovich. This claim has been made many times before and the forensic evidence supporting it is quite well presented. If this was the case, it was certainly effective in getting rid of Yanukovich,

The Civil War and the MA17 disaster

Van der Pijl characterizes the Donbas uprisings as a civil war. I am less charitable. I believe that these "popular uprisings" were sparked and supported by Russia. The modus operandi is familiar – enlist local thugs, of whom the local people are appropriately in fear, to take over and rush to support them once they get a foothold.

As noted above, the uprisings took place simultaneously in a great many cities in Southern and Eastern Ukraine. It's quite obvious they were coordinated. Putin did, however, ensure deniability. He kept an arm's-length relation with the insurrectionists and did not support them when they failed in all but Donetsk and Lugansk. These uprisings galvanized the Western Ukrainian patriots who rushed in to fight their long-time enemy, Russia, and what they took to be Russian proxies. The American Embassy and CIA were no doubt overjoyed at this development.

Van der Pijl's treatment of the MA17 catastrophe is extremely detailed and compelling. Although he stops short of claiming that the Kyiv government did it as a false flag, one can read his opinion between the lines. It is worth reading all of the contradictory accounts of the affair, which he chronicles in detail, providing a wealth of footnotes for his sources.

He observes that the affair played into the hands of the United States. It killed the North Stream and the South Stream gas pipeline projects which would have strengthened the economic ties between Russia and Europe, weakening American interests. It allowed NATO to push closer to Russia, being even more threatening.

Whatever one chooses to believe about the MH17 affair, one should not ignore such a thoroughly researched position as is presented here.

Aftermath: the failed state on NATO's front line

Ukraine remains governed by a motley collection of oligarchs. Van der Pijl finds this to be a lamentable situation. In my opinion it is not too different from the present situations in the United States and Western Europe. We need only look at the past couple of years under Covid. The tyranny has been worse almost everywhere in the world outside Ukraine.

The failed state is serving the residents fairly well in not attracting immigrants. My bet is that the meager quota – about 7000 this year – will not be exceeded simply because immigrants don't find it attractive. That is wonderful – we are not importing the headaches of multiculturalism and diversity. Wages and salaries are artificially depressed, which means that talented young people are able to find jobs in high tech at home and working in Western Europe, where their work ethic is appreciated.

How these themes are reflected in the "Russian invasion" of February 2022

As I write, the United States is stubbornly persisting in its efforts to spark a war with Russia. Just this morning there is an unexplained explosion on a pipeline in the People's Republics. I have dark suspicions that it was not Russia who lit the match.

A person seeking to tie the threads together, to look for historical antecedents to present day events, must approach this book as required reading.

As a bottom line, though I do not agree with all of Van der Pijl's points, I have not seen a better presentation of the facts in Ukraine for this period of history. It is a five-star effort.

Good evening dear Graham,

Let me first apologise that there must be 10+ letters/ articles you sent me that I have not yet read. I migrated out of Kos Island, Greece 3.5 weeks ago. My mission there ended. I am now in the "capital of Europe" better said European Union, Brussels, need to get up at 4 am to get a train just after 5 am to go and work at the international airport. It is going to take quite some getting used to. The real problems I (and hundreds of colleagues in other EU countries) now have are with the mess our sending organisation is making of travel/ accommodation and many other rules. They and I (only one for the organisation working at the airport) are swamped with contradictory rules and see our hopes vanish that we can get reimbursed for costs we are being forced to work to reach our places of deployment. This will hopefully be temporary as I like the people here and have always loved the history, architecture and joi de vivre in Brussels. Better than the Netherlands. In all, my life now is too busy, my mind is too occupied to be involved in Toastmasters clubs. I do only the bare necessities for the Perissos Horizon TMC and Toastmot de passe in Ghana. I cannot even begin looking for TMCs in Brussels, let alone find how to combine visits to them with my work schedule. OK, may it will come in a month or so.

I did not get to read your other letters yet, but now you mentioned/ reviewed not only about Ukraine but mentioned MH17 as well, I simply had to pick up this letter and read it. Thank you for as always so nicely worded thorough and most interesting review you wrote. I agree with most views you bring forward and am pleased to read you illustrate them by explaining what you personally saw and heard.

Is it useful for you when I try to see if I can be critical? Even then there are only a few critical remarks that I can make.

Here they are:

The degree to which the media is in lockstep with the intelligence agencies and, the Internet oligarchs has become impossible to ignore in the last two years of the Covid crisis. IN RUSSIA THAT IS THE SAME OR EVEN STRICTER.

The author gives himself away by calling the Ukrainian ultranationalists "Fascists." In my mind the last of them died in 1945. NOT REALLY AS I SEEM TO REMEMBER THAN MANY NATIONALISTS FOUGHT ON AGAINST (STALIN AND) THE SOVIET UNION FOR YEARS AFTER 1945.

The Ukrainian Army had been hollowed out, underfunded and populated with pro-Russian sleepers under Yanukovich and his predecessors. I DOUBT WHETHER YUSHENKO WAS PRO-RUSSIAN. And you yourself explain so later on in your review.

Given that the rest of Ukraine five years ago absorbed the people who did not want to live under the Russians, the best bet at this point would be to implement the Minsk Accords and let everybody live in peace. I suspect that van der Pijl is right to observe that the Ukrainians seem to be the obstacle. No Ukrainian politician can afford to be tagged as the one who "gave away the Donbas." YOU MAY BE RIGHT IN THAT GRAHAM. BUT WHEN WE LOOK A BIT FURTHER, NO COUNTRY (I MEAN NOT ONLY THE CHOSEN POLITICIANS BUT ALSO THE PEOPLES THEY GOVERN) GIVES UP TERRITORY, SEE THE UK – THE FALKLANDS, SCOTLAND THE ISLAND NEAR MAURITIUS, SEE FRANCE – POLYNESIAN ISLANDS ETC. MAYBE EXCEPTION ARE THE NETHERLANDS WHO KEPT TRYING TO GET RID OF THEIR WEST INDIAN ISLANDS, BUT THE POPULATIONS ON THESE ISLANDS DO NOT WANT TO BE INDEPENDENT, MISS THE FLOW OF DUTCH TAX MONEY.

But let me add. I mostly agree on the stands you take in your review.

Again, thank you for active stands on things and sharing them with me. I hope to find some time to read more of the letters that are still in my inbox.

Best regards, also to your happy family.

Ivo.

Dear Graham:

I'd like to make a couple of points about your introduction to the review of the book. First, like you, I oppose the use of ultranationalists or fascists in regard to the volunteer units who opposed the Russians after the invasion of Donbas and Crimea. There are probably some, but Pravi Sector was neither extreme or far right, and I knew some people in Ukraine who knew them and they were not as they were reported.

Crimea was the most pro-Russian area of Ukraine before the invasion. But there were several referendums held to determine the affiliation of Crimea before the Soviet Union fell and afterwards. When all this first started, I looked on line and found referendums and the results of those referendums. I don't think we can determine how free they were, but all of them favored staying with Ukraine. Before the Soviet Union broke up, there was a referendum in Crimea about staying in the Soviet Union. The Crimeans voted to leave. They also voted in the same referendum to stay with Ukraine, rather than be connected to Russia. There were several other referendums over the years in which Crimeans were given the opportunity to remain in Ukraine or connect with Russia. In every referendum, they chose to remain in Ukraine. You can't find that information any more. I assume it has been scrubbed. like a lot of inconvenient information.

About the Minsk accords, you and I have always disagreed. The Minsk accords favor Russia and you are correct that politically no Ukrainian politician could ever agree to those accords. Your author blames Ukraine for violating the accords, but most other sources say that Russia violates them more than the Ukrainians. Who is telling the truth? We don't know.

As we have discussed before, I have never seen any CIA presence in the Maidan Revaluation. I saw a spontaneous response to a bad political situation, and an absolute rejection of Yanukovich and his thugs. Of course, Americans were supportive, people like John McCain and others. We know that, and I know that the US was "educating" Ukrainians on "Democracy" and other favorable aspects of the "American Way of Life." They were training a rebellion, like students in US colleges are trained to see "sexual harassment," "racial injustice," and other BS. Lots of Ukrainian students were going to the US on the Flex program, and many went to the model UN conferences around the world. These were all sponsored by the US or their proxies. But you and I both know that everybody was fed up with Yanukovich. His education secretary which you mention in your review wanted to convert the entire University system in Ukraine to the Russian model, to close all regional Universities and to sell their land which is incredibly valuable. He also wanted to close all small Universities like ICU. I heard this directly from Dr. Oleksiuk who met with the guy several times about the existence of ICU. Everybody forgets that the Orange Revolution was an earlier rejection of Yanukovich in 2005. I was in Kyiv in the summer of 2004, and my friends then told me that Yanukovich would be elected in a rigged election. When I came back in the summer of 2005, it was clear that it was a spontaneous revolution by the Ukrainian people. Everybody told me that they had been there protesting in the snow to get rid of Yanukovich.

I don't see how it is possible for the Ultranationalist Ukrainian types to have shot down the heavenly hundred. It seems much more plausible that the snipers were Russian forces brought in by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's right hand man. This seems to me to be the most plausible explanation. If you're going to write a book about this time, you have to consider all the options. I don't mind that this guy includes the idea that it might have been far-right Ukrainians, but I think more realistically it's likely to be Putin directed.

The uprisings in the east which began with Slovyansk were directed by Strelkov by his own admission. He was positioned to the east of the Ukrainian border and went in on his own to start the uprisings, but with his people leading the way, former Russian Spetnatz. I read a long interview with him in which he explained exactly how they did it. They got some local drunks to participate, but the Donbas thing was run from Moscow by hand-picked Kremlin thugs. And all those guys are dead now, except Strelkov.

You don't discuss the MH-17 shutdown at all. I am curious what he might have to say that I don't know. Could you elaborate? I am not much interested in reading this book because most of it seems to be rehashed Kremlin talking points. Putin himself couldn't have written a more biased account. I have read extensively from two sources on the MH-17 shutdown. Bellingcat and another Dutch friend who was heavily involved in the investigation. Some of his work was included in the final report, and much of Bellingcat's research added to the report. I want to know what is different from their report. Bellingcat has gone as far as to name the unit and the officers in charge of the missile launcher.

By the way, contradictory accounts are classic KGB coverup. The way to confuse an investigation and the public trying to understand an event is to clutter up the news cycle with dozens of different accounts, such as how they have covered up the JFK assassination. Cubans, Russians, rogue CIA types, exploding cigars and Lee Harvey Oswald. The purpose of all the stories is to distract the minds of the public and confuse. That way people can't see the signal and are distracted by the noise.

You know, I wrote a lot of academic papers and I know how to write a footnote. If you want to impress, you load up your sources on the page so it impresses, even if you don't actually quote any real information. What sources does this guy have that others do not have? What things has he found that others did not find? I can fake a bibliography as well as anyone.

Ukraine is hardly a failed state. It's no model of how to run a country, but it is functional and has a functional currency and it is improving year by year. This comment reflect a bias that I don't much like. In spite of being ruled over by half a dozen other countries over the past few centuries, Ukrainians have an identity that goes back to Trypillia 7000 years ago.

Years ago, when gas prices fell, Russia had a contract with Turkmenistan which required Gazprom to buy a certain amount of gas at a price that was much higher than the going rate. What happened? There was a mysterious explosion caused by "terrorists" which cut the line and it took Russia a very long time to do the repairs, and fortunately they were completed when the gas price rose again so that it was profitable to import Turkmen gas. Never trust anything that has Putin's fingerprints on it.

I think you have been bamboozled by this book. There is nothing in your summary that makes it any different from Putin's talking points about the west. So, what? I am certainly not going to read this book. You have a propensity to read anti-west pro-Russian perspectives without a critical eyes. I didn't see anything in your review that makes this book unique, aside from the excessive footnotes. I wrote a paper for my MA in London with 150 footnotes, all of which were legitimate, but also unnecessary. It was a statement to the professor.

Mark