Conroy on Kostenko, 'Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament: A History'

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Reviewed by Shawn Conroy (The Ohio State University) Published on H-War (March, 2022) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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In 1991, Ukraine became an independent country and the world’s third largest nuclear power, having inherited the nuclear stockpile of the Soviet Union located on the territory of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR). The Soviet Union’s collapse also created a power vacuum in which the independent Russian Federation sought dominance and the United States sought predictability; independent Ukraine’s nuclear status complicated the efforts of both countries to complete their objectives. As a result, the Russian Federation and the US joined forces to pressure Ukraine to surrender its entire nuclear arsenal. Diplomatic means represented the core of this joint pressure campaign. In particular, American and Russian diplomats wanted Ukraine to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and START I as a package deal, which would bind Ukraine to reduce its nuclear stockpile to zero. Yuri Kostenko, at the time a member of Parliament sitting on the Verkhovna Rada’s working group on Ukraine’s denuclearization, provides a play-by-play, firsthand account of the deliberations that led to Ukraine’s complete denuclearization in Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament: A History, published with an introduction by political scientist Paul D’Anieri.

Kostenko argues that Ukraine’s denuclearization turned out poorly because it had acquiesced to the goals, line of reasoning, and terms of the Americans and Russians, which identified Ukrainian denuclearization as essential to the security of the former Soviet space and Ukraine as solely responsible for dismantling the weapons in its possession. The United States wanted to avoid an increase in the total number of nuclear weapons states. American diplomats reasoned that stability in the former Soviet space necessitated that the most powerful state in the region, the Russian Federation, inherit the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal. US diplomats argued that Russia should guarantee Ukraine’s security after Ukraine’s denuclearization because “Russia had become democratic and rejected any imperial ambitions” (p. 38). With this objective and explanation, the Americans expected that Ukraine would surrender its nuclear weapons stockpile to Russia in order to signal Ukraine’s adherence to nonproliferation and, therefore, its eagerness to join the world community of nations. By globalizing Ukraine’s denuclearization through appeals to “universal” values of peace, American diplomats practically ensured that they would interpret later Ukrainian efforts to revise the terms of its denuclearization as militaristic and hostile to the new international order. Russia, in turn, aimed to maintain its influence in Ukraine. Russian diplomats presented the
Russian Federation as competent, reliable, and predictable and, therefore, the best candidate to secure stability in the former Soviet space on behalf of the United States. To bolster its position, Russia sought to portray Ukraine as backward, untrustworthy, and, therefore, undeserving of retaining the nuclear weapons. Ukraine's denuclearization ultimately took the form that it did—in other words, the transfer of all Ukraine's nuclear weapons to Russia for dismantling—because the United States and Russia shared the same expected outcome, while Ukraine lacked a clearly articulated alternative proposal of its own. Here, Kostenko offers a counterfactual: what kind of proposal could Ukraine have promoted that would have resulted in a better deal for Ukraine? In posing this hypothetical, Kostenko rejects the deterministic argument among politicians and scholars—especially among proponents of the so-called realist school—that Ukraine had no other options in the diplomatic negotiations on denuclearization.

Ukraine’s ideal denuclearization program, according to Kostenko, would have asserted clearly Ukraine’s intention to become a non-nuclear power, over an extended period of time, on condition of substantial security and economic guarantees, which would have ensured the stability of the independent Ukrainian state. At the start of the negotiation process, Ukraine would have stated that it was de jure and de facto a nuclear power: de jure, Ukraine had legal jurisdiction over the property, resources, and inhabitants within the territorial bounds of the former UkrSSR; de facto, Ukraine had nuclear weapons in its physical possession. Drawing attention to this reality would have bolstered Ukraine’s claim to a greater share of the profits and fuel rods as a result of recycling the materials from the dismantled warheads; in other words, Ukraine would have owned the nuclear weapons on its territory and, therefore, the profits garnered from the sale of its components. Having established its ownership of the nuclear weapons, Ukraine would have declared its intention to become a non-nuclear power through a gradual reduction of its arsenal, thereby fulfilling its obligation to the START I treaty, which stipulated that nuclear powers commit to the reduction of their stockpiles. To dismantle its weapons safely while maintaining economic stability, Ukraine would have requested financial and expert assistance from the West, which would have also offered Ukraine an opportunity to strengthen multilateral ties with Western countries through cooperation. Lastly, on condition of security guarantees à la Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (if not, actually joining NATO), Ukraine would have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear state. However, this was not to be. In the real story, Ukraine shouldered the costs of transporting the nuclear weapons to Russia, depended on Russia to receive a fair portion of the profits from dismantling the weapons, and acquiesced to weak security assurances in the guise of the Budapest Memorandum.[1]

At the nexus of American, Russian, and Ukrainian politics, Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament highlights how, in 1992, the US and Russia successfully internationalized Ukraine’s denuclearization—ostensibly a domestic policy issue for Ukraine—which facilitated the formation of a US-Russia alliance that determined the framework and key issues for the diplomatic talks until their resolution in 1994. From the start, the United States and Russia violated Ukrainian sovereignty in imposing their own foreign policy goals and domestic political concerns on Ukraine’s denuclearization. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the rise of a multitude of independent states coincided with George H. W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 1992. Bush highlighted Ukraine’s complete denuclearization as the main roadblock to rapprochement with Russia, whom he regarded as the integral US partner in maintaining stability in the former Soviet space.[2] In designating Ukraine’s denuclearization as a prerequisite to renewed diplomatic relations
with Russia and creating a time crunch to resolve the issue before the election, Bush denied all Ukrainian attempts to challenge components of the denuclearization talks and, in the same motion, leaned more on Russia to break Ukrainian resistance.[3] Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, supported the Americans’ efforts because the original terms of Ukraine’s denuclearization also fit his own domestic political incentives to maintain Russian influence over the former Soviet space. After all, the original denuclearization deal, once implemented, would leave Ukraine weaker in the sectors of defense, energy, and the economy as well as (in theory) more incentivized to join Russia-dominated structures, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States. Therefore, Russia joined the US in the internationalization of Ukraine’s denuclearization. Meanwhile, Ukraine lacked the same united political front to articulate its own position and cultivate allies. While the United States and Russia succeeded in internationalizing Ukraine’s denuclearization, Ukraine, in turn, failed to nationalize the issue properly for its own benefit.

In juxtaposing the international nexus with a domestic Ukrainian perspective, Kostenko highlights the degree to which Ukraine’s internal disunity further solidified the Russo-American alliance’s position on Ukraine's denuclearization and victory of the alliance's plan for Ukraine’s denuclearization. Kostenko draws the domestic front battle lines between the executive branch—represented by President Leonid Kravchuk—and the legislative branch, represented by the Verkhovna Rada. The executive branch wavered constantly in its policy position but generally remained within the view that Ukraine should surrender its nuclear stockpile, immediately and unconditionally, in order to establish productive relations with Russia and the West, which would serve as a more effective security guarantee for Ukraine than holding onto the weapons and risk becoming a pariah state. In turn, the Verkhovna Rada favored a longer-term strategy of disarmament that would draw on Western expertise and funding, with the aim of laying the groundwork for greater integration with Western international structures. Without any compromise, Ukraine failed to present a coherent alternative proposal with which to pull the US away from its alliance with Russia in the summer of 1993, when US-Russia relations were at a low point and American diplomats were open to Ukraine’s perspective on denuclearization. Unfortunately, the mixed signals from Ukraine meant that Bill Clinton’s administration soon thereafter reverted to the original denuclearization plan as stipulated by Bush and Yeltsin. According to Kostenko, Kravchuk wasted this precious chance for a better deal, which could have provided Ukraine with the resources to reinforce its independence early on. However, I consider Kostenko’s condemnation unjustified here. To tease out the issues with Kostenko’s analysis, I think it pertinent to bring Ukraine’s Denuclearization into conversation with other related texts.

Kostenko’s overarching weakness in Ukraine’s Denuclearization is the extent to which he ascribes unrestricted agency to the executive branch decision-makers in Ukraine while depriving those actors’ actions of explanatory context. Kostenko leaves readers with the impression that individual actors in the executive branch—acting in a vacuum independent of historical legacies—had the most (negative) impact on developments in Ukraine’s denuclearization talks. Through the exploration of narrative scope, Soviet political elite culture, and cadres, I argue that Kravchuk and company acted within a political environment that heavily circumscribed their agency; and, therefore, they do not deserve the high degree of condemnation that Kostenko directs at them.

A comparison of the periodization of the Russo-Ukrainian War in Ukraine’s Denuclearization and Paul D’Anieri’s Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War (2019) shows that Kostenko’s
narrow framework leads him to attach too much weight—bordering on historical determinism—to Kravchuk’s individual decision-making. [4] Whereas Kostenko focuses on the single process of Ukraine’s denuclearization (1992-94) as the turning point toward future war with Russia, D’Anieri covers multiple processes over a longer period (1989-present). Kostenko’s choice to position Ukraine’s denuclearization as a direct prelude to the Russo-Ukrainian War not only imbues the historical process of denuclearization itself with immense contemporary significance but also transforms Kravchuk’s missteps into grave errors bordering on treason. Kostenko relates a few cases where Kravchuk signed documents that he was seeing for the first time, unaware that he had the right to defer a decision until careful review of the documents’ contents. In contrast, D’Anieri’s *longue durée* allows him to track the development of different political processes over time. D’Anieri identifies the Orange Revolution of 2004-5, a political event—rather than a singular individual (Kravchuk) and his actions (diplomatic blunder in denuclearization)—as the key turning point toward future war with Russia.

In singling out Kravchuk for condemnation, Kostenko ignores his own evidence on how Soviet political elite culture continued to shape Ukrainian political figures’ understanding of their professional capacities (e.g., in setting the mental framework for where initiative came from, what paths of actions were conceivable, and what activity was permissible to carry out said action). Kostenko cites multiple examples throughout the book—especially regarding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and presidential office—in which Ukrainian officials looked to Moscow to draft the terms and oversee the implementation of Ukraine’s denuclearization. One of the most blatant examples was the activity of Derzhkomatom, Ukraine’s atomic energy agency, “whose cadre remained virtually unchanged from the time of the USSR’s collapse, oriented itself towards Russia as a power center, and awaited instructions from Moscow on what to do. The fact was that Ukraine’s strategy on the development of the nuclear power industry simply did not exist, and to make matters worse, there was no one to even formulate it” (p. 105). Kyiv’s deferral to Moscow echoed the centralized administrative structure of the Soviet Union, in which the government at the all-union level (in Moscow) formulated and disseminated policy that the republic-level governments (in this case, Kyiv as the capital of the UkrSSR) then implemented. Ukrainian executive political leaders also routinely made seemingly arbitrary decisions over the heads of legislative organs, merely expecting the latter to confirm the executive’s action. This type of action was reminiscent of “dual-power” in Soviet administration, whereby party organs made decisions that state organs, such as the radas (soviets, in Russian), then rubber stamped. [5]

In addition to political elite culture, the Soviet Union also bestowed on independent Ukraine a particularly acute cadre problem, a point that Kostenko covers thoroughly but leaves out in his condemnation of Kravchuk. Newspaper dailies, think-tank journals, and foreign policy magazines that Kostenko cites in his analysis underscore the fact that Ukraine lacked the personnel and institutions to formulate specifically Ukrainian perspectives and articulate them in a multilateral framework; therefore, with independence, “Ukraine had to create governmental structures and formulate policy instantaneously” (p. 51). As Kostenko explains, the United States clearly possessed the largest number of think tanks and foreign policy magazines relative to Russia and Ukraine, which put the US in a strong position to dominate the intellectual discussion. The Russia focus of these American institutions—a legacy of the Cold War and, in particular, the common American misunderstanding that Russia was the Soviet Union—meant that scholars often drew their own source material from, and tailored their analyses to, Russia. For example, Alexander Motyl in *Dilemmas of Independence*:
Ukraine after Totalitarianism (1993) argues that American scholarship on Soviet history at the time tended to dismiss the study of non-Russian republics as an “exotic pursuit ... irrelevant to ‘real’ politics in the USSR ... emotionally charged” and, therefore, unscholarly (p. 5). American scholar-advisors’ dependence on Russian source material resulted in commentary that tended to reflect the opinions and suggestions of Russian media figures and politicians, to the detriment of Ukraine. Russian opinions also enjoyed wider dissemination because of the Kremlin’s inheritance of the Soviet-era TASS media infrastructure, which made Russia the “only post-Soviet country to have a global news network at its disposal” (p. 177). Ukrainian media also referenced and reiterated Russian perspectives on the domestic Ukrainian front; this was a consequence of not only the persistent Soviet political culture of deference to Moscow for direction but also the fact that Ukrainian journalists had few, if any, homegrown foreign policy-oriented institutions to cite. So, without alternative avenues for pursuit and faced with a Ukrainian media that continually reinforced the impression that the Russo-American plan was the only viable available plan, Kravchuk and officials in Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs would have had to take great risks to chart a different path. Alas, Kostenko does not give Kravchuk much of a fair trial on this count, either.

Nevertheless, Kostenko’s Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament presents a new insider’s perspective on Ukraine’s denuclearization that, though partisan in its judgments, contributes greatly to the picture of post-Soviet Ukraine. Because of the book’s heavy emphasis on diplomacy, treaty stipulations, and institutional struggles for power, I believe this book is best suited for scholars and graduate students. Historians will enjoy Kostenko’s personal archive, point of view, and recollections of the deliberations. In turn, political scientists and international relations experts will find interesting how the key players at the national and international levels interpreted the various nonproliferation treaties. Lastly, the book’s ninety-six-dollar hardcover price tag, while not a problem for library purchasers, may turn some away. I think that a more affordable softcover version in the future might incentivize more scholars to add the book to their personal collections.

Notes

[1]. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and proxy war in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in 2014 unmasked the Budapest Memorandum as a paper tiger.

[2]. Bush became (in)famous in some Ukrainian circles for his Chicken Kyiv speech to the Verkhovna Rada in August 1991, in which he urged Ukraine to stay in Mikhail Gorbachev’s reformed Soviet Union and not to succumb to “suicidal nationalism.”

[3]. This pressure is reminiscent of the Franco-German pressure placed on Ukraine today to implement the Steinmeier Formula in the Donbas.

[4]. Both books are recent publications that explore post-Soviet developments in independent Ukraine, combine international and domestic lenses, and relate historical outcomes to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014.


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