

## The lands in between: Russia vs. the West and the new politics of hybrid war

by Mitchell A. Orenstein, New York, USA, Oxford University Press, 2019, 248 pp., £16.95/\$24.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-093614-3

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The lands in between: Russia vs. the West and the new politics of hybrid war**, by Mitchell A. Orenstein, New York, USA, Oxford University Press, 2019, 248 pp., £16.95/\$24.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-093614-3

The author is a professor of Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and a senior fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program. As such, he is well placed to comment on the nature and impact of Russian foreign policy and reactions to it. The present book is a contribution to the emerging literature on the concept of hybrid war that focuses on political relations between contemporary Russia and what the author styles as "the West", by which he means the United States of America and the European Union. The author's aim is "... to explain to a general audience how the politics of hybrid war affects the lands in between, [so that] we in the West could better understand our own problems and perhaps address them more effectively." (2). This is based on what he believes to be "... the sudden and surprising relevance of East European politics to Western societies." (2). This is, he says, seen by many in terms of "a civilizational choice", (reminiscent of Samuel Huntington who came in for much liberal criticism on publication), a product of a polarized political environment in which "... the greatest asset is not ideology but flexibility." (6).

The book has a simple structure and is written in a readable, even conversational style. There are seven chapters (including a short Introduction), together with notes and an index. There is no bibliography, but titles may be identified through the notes. Chapter Two presents the author's view of the nature of the geopolitical conflict "... that is threatening Western politics" (7). It attempts to explain the nature of Russia's hybrid war on the West, why it started, its methods and objectives. The next chapter considers the West's responses, military and economic, with the European Union cast as both trading partner and geopolitical rival of Russia. Chapter Four considers the politics of polarization in the "lands in between – Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan" (7). The next chapter argues that such trends affect not only these countries but also the new member states of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The following chapter focuses on how this, it is said, also concerns what is called "core Europe" and the United States. Finally, the author offers some reflections on what, in his opinion, should be done. The intention is to provide a general introduction, from a distinct perspective "... on a political trend that is shaping the modern world and that everyone needs to know." (7).

This makes some assumptions. First, is Russia indeed engaged in a hybrid war against "the West" and, if so, how is it being conducted? The author asserts this plausibly, identifying Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin with his KGB experience as crucial in developing a workable geopolitical strategy for Russia after the chaos of the Yeltsin years. The "tools of hybrid war" are said to include covert operations, media influence, cyber warfare, and limited military action, both proxy and open. The purpose is to undermine the European Union and NATO, to deny them influence in the "lands in between", and to split Europe from the United States. This is said to be a coordinated assault on Western institutions and foreign policy objectives.

The concept of “hybrid war” is fundamental to this. However, it is considered in less than two pages. The absence of a generally accepted definition makes the concept of doubtful use in political analysis. Perhaps it is no more than a fashionable term that adapts von Clausewitz’s well-known aphorism: “War is the continuation of politics by other means.” There are other examples in political and military history such as Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Britain’s Political Warfare Executive during the Second World War, and the cultural propaganda and proxy conflicts of the 20th century Cold War. In short, the only thing *new* about “hybrid war” is the sophistication and range of the methods available in our digital age.


The book does not place the current situation in its historical context and fails to provide detailed evidence in support of its assertions. An egregious example is the rather crude lumping together under Russian influence of “... extremist, anti-EU political parties, leaders, and movements, such as France’s National Front, Germany’s Alliance for Germany, the Brexit campaign, and, *of course*, the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. The ultimate goal is to break up the Western alliance and its institutions.” (131, *my italics*). Later there is the assertion: “The most important has been Brexit, a major blow to the EU, the campaign for which *may* have been financed primarily by Russia.” (166, *my italics*). Really! The book is full of such conditionals and often begs the question in this way.

The reduction of “the West” to the European Union, which has its elite *nomenklatura* and democratic deficit, and to the United States is unfortunate. It glosses over internal problems as populist concerns, open to exploitation by Putin through his hybrid war strategy. Yet, the successful conduct of a hybrid war, or indeed any other kind, depends on common cultural and political values held by those who, as Oliver Cromwell said, “... know what they fight for and love what they know.” Unfortunately, such unity of purpose is conspicuous by its absence from a United States torn by extreme “culture wars” where pronouns and sexuality are as concerning as crime and poverty; and from a European Union governed by political elites dismissive of national populations and their cultures. This is aggravated by supine political leadership as President Biden’s debacle in Afghanistan shows. A tragic example of how to lose a hybrid war.

Again, the problem in Russia is reduced to that of President Putin and his political base in United Russia. Putin justifies his rule to the Russian people by appealing to patriotism and claiming to restore Russia as a respected country. This has enabled him to paper over Russia’s fundamental problems such as its demographic decline, over-reliance on commodities, and worsening economic and social inequalities (not exceptional to Russia, of course). External efforts to develop a “civil society” and a liberal “market economy” in post-Soviet Russia have foundered and neo-authoritarianism has been established. More optimistically, there is evidence of a civil society emerging from the country’s grassroots, despite state suppression. This prospect is considered only very generally in the book. However, it will be of value post-Putin and could still hasten that end. Yet again, neither the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe nor the Council of Europe (important for human rights) is found in the Index. The author may regard them as moribund, but, if so, it would be helpful to know why.

The result is a lost opportunity in that such complexities both in Russia and in “the West” are glossed over. The book is more of an extended opinion piece than a scholarly investigation of what is after all a fundamental question: the conduct of political relations between an authoritarian and aggressive Russia and parliamentary democracies, wherever they may be found. Its best chapter is that on the actual “Lands in Between” of which the author has specialist knowledge. Ironically, he was advised by his wife not to write a book on Moldova as “no-one will read it.” (1). However, a scholarly

book specifically on the “Lands in Between” would be welcome. In this book, the author intends to provide a general introduction to what he believes are broader issues. The criticisms noted here apart, that is what the reader will find. It is priced reasonably for a short well-produced hardback.

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