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Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*

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Howard Davis¹

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How much history do we need to know to make sense of the war between Russia and Ukraine? Generations who lived through the Cold War, the collapse of Soviet Union and its aftermath, will have resources and explanations to bring to bear. Those whose memories are shorter will know the rise of Putin, the annexation of the Crimea in 2014, and the war in the Donbas region. There are ways to read the origins and course of the current war in the light of events in living memory and the behavior of key protagonists because there is a pattern to them. But conflict and violence have been part of Ukraine's history for a millennium; the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was clearly not an unprecedented event. Serhii Plokhy believes that history can provide insights into the present and he is a historian who succeeds better than most in making it accessible to a broad spectrum of readers. His extensive output includes the general histories *The Gates of Europe* (2015), *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (2014), and *The Origins of the Slavic Nations* (2006) as well as the mesmerizing stories of *The Man with the Poison Gun* (2016) (on the assassination of Stepan Bandera) and *Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe* (2018). His authoritative historiographic voice has a personal inflection. As a Ukrainian American, with family and professional connections in Ukraine, he positions himself as a Ukrainian in the narrative, as well as a Harvard scholar influenced by the transnational and cultural turn in historical studies as much as by political and institutional history. He dedicates *The Russo-Ukrainian War* to a cousin killed in Bakhmut, and the many thousands who have died in defending their country.

Plokhy begins the book with his personal reaction to the Russian invasion, which he observed from Vienna, with the

shock and disbelief that many felt. His historian's instinct takes over and he traces the roots of the present conflict deep into the past relationship between Ukraine and Russia. It is time to learn from this history, he says. His broad position is clear: "In many ways, the current conflict is an old-fashioned imperial war conducted by Russian elites who see themselves as heirs and continuators of the great-power expansionist traditions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union" (p. xxi). For Ukraine, it is first and foremost a war of independence.

Polling at the time of the collapse of the USSR in 1991 showed that a large majority of voters in Soviet Ukraine were in favor of independence, including those in Donbas and the Crimea, where the population of Russians was most numerous. This dealt a fatal blow to the structure of the Union, and it firmly contradicted the powerful Russian origin myth of unity: the idea that Kyiv in the mid-fifteenth century was where Russia's foundations were laid, in the unification of the lands of Ukraine, Belarus, and Muscovy under Ivan the Great and his dynasty. While aspects of both Russian and Ukrainian religion (Orthodoxy), written language, culture, and law can be traced back to Kyivan Rus, it did not follow that it was unified ethnically, linguistically, or culturally, or that Moscow was leader. By being a bridge between Europe and Eurasia, with few geographical features to define its borders, Ukraine has been a place of encounter (and as often as not, a battleground) of empires, from Roman to Ottoman, Hapsburg to Romanov, and Nazi to Soviet. Nationalism played a central part in these conflicts, represented by the Cossack revolt, and nineteenth and twentieth century movements. National feeling and language, ethnicity, and culture were resources in a power game, used by imperial forces as well as their opponents. Russian nationalism developed an all-Russian notion of imperial history, where differences among Slavs were recognized but reduced to the status of "tribes" of Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians), and White Russians (Belarusians). Ukraine's expressions

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of nationalism were more fractured, with the result that, in the interwar period, it was the largest nation in Europe with an unresolved national question.

After World War I and the Bolshevik revolution, when Ukraine became a constituent republic of the Soviet Union, its political and legal status second only to the Russian Federation was clear, but political accommodation went along with close control of Ukrainian language and culture. Signs of independence, kept well below the surface during the period of “national communism”, began to emerge in the late Soviet period, stimulated by the movement of the Baltic states for sovereignty. In geopolitical context, Plokhy compares the demise of the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and Ottoman empires with the end of the USSR. The relatively peaceful disintegration, which received unambiguous support from the Ukrainian people, including Russian speakers, augured well for Ukraine’s future as an independent state.

Ukraine’s enormous economic problems, regional differences, and chaotic political process threatened its newly won democracy. The second chapter is the story of how Russia and Ukraine parted ways in their political development: Russia becoming more authoritarian, Ukraine clinging to functioning plural democracy, despite leaning towards presidentialism. In this period, long before the current war brought unity in the face of the enemy, the key to Ukraine’s survival as a democracy was its diversity and willingness to comprise. The west of the country, literally the farthest from Russia, had always been the focus of Ukrainian language, identity, and culture. The industrial, Russified east was inclined to seek ties with Russia. The center, including Kyiv, held the balance and encouraged political compromise between regions. Theories which prioritize economic crisis as the background source for electoral autocracies (because they give rise to a strongman to bring order and redress for grievances) underestimate this link between diversity and democracy.

Because Ukrainians saw themselves as beneficiaries of the end of empire, they were more motivated to make politics work notwithstanding dire economic conditions, especially hardship arising from the 1998 financial crisis in Russia. In contrast, Russia was orientated towards its lost empire. After a decade of independence in Ukraine, the question of joining western organizations, NATO and the EU, became urgent. Plokhy’s expertise in nuclear politics, civil and military, supports his discussion of security politics in the 1990s. Ukraine saw the last of the nuclear warheads leave its territory shortly before NATO invited Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary to join the alliance, which they did in 1999. The NATO theme is elaborated throughout the book, reflecting Putin’s reliance on NATO’s eastern expansion as a reason for going to war. Should Ukraine be a buffer or a border in security arrangements between Russia and western countries? The choice facing Ukraine was between (eventual) NATO membership or a subordinate

role in a military alliance with Russia. Putin’s aim was for a buffer, forming part of a bloc of former Soviet countries, the Eurasian Union. The Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) in 2013–2014 decided the question, though not without bloodshed. The new government would sign the EU association agreement and end the idea of a buffer state in the Russian sphere of influence once and for all.

Russia’s response is intelligible in terms of Putin’s ambition to recover the “empire” and reverse what he called “the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century” (p. 100). Symbolically, the Crimea was more important to Russia than any other territory outside the Russian Federation. It was also populated by a majority of Russians and was the location of the Russian Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol. Yet relations between Russians and Ukrainians were not particularly strained. As a visitor to the Crimea in 2002, I observed the regular Victory Day joint parade of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy, happily watched by large crowds. When the opportunity came to take the Crimea back into Russian hands, Putin used his version of history to justify what was a blatant violation of international law. The annexation was complete in March 2014, with no resistance and the thinnest veneer of legitimacy provided by the Russian-controlled Crimean parliament. The first such annexation of territory in Europe since World War II, it was comparable with Hitler’s Anschluss of Austria in 1938. For those interested in exploring the justification for the take-over, Plokhy goes into some detail on Putin’s speech to the Russian houses of parliament on 18 March 2014, where he condemns Khrushchev’s 1954 decision to transfer the Crimea to Ukraine, objects to the actions of NATO in eastern Europe “behind our backs”, sees conspiracy in western-inspired color revolutions, and asserts that Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. Not only Crimea. “We are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other.” Ominous words in the light of subsequent events.

At this time, Putin asserted that the Crimea was a special case, not a threat to the integrity of Ukraine as a state. Yet alongside this lie, he began to exploit the historical idea of “New Russia”, to boost Russian claims to the east and south of Ukraine. Separatists, with strong Russian support, demonstrated and held referendums, voting to form the “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk. Russian forces directly invaded in August 2014. The loss of these territories provoked a Ukrainian counteroffensive, but what began as a hybrid war has dragged on up to the present stage of outright hostilities. The effects of this second phase of conflict in Ukraine were the opposite of what Putin intended in the longer term. Monuments to the Soviet past were toppled, there were more incentives to speak Ukrainian, growing interest in the history and culture of Ukraine, and the

establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, independent of Moscow. EU and NATO membership moved even higher up Ukraine's agenda.

Plokhly finds important clues to Putin's use of history in his extended essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", published in July 2021¹. It repeats the familiar theme of Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" united by their common history, but it also reads that history as a series of attempts by foreign powers (Poland, Austria-Hungary, Germany, now the USA and its allies) to exploit nationalism in Ukraine to their own anti-Russian advantage. The Bolsheviks are cited as guilty for having created the entity that is today's Ukraine. To this extent, Putin follows nineteenth century advocates of Greater Russia as well as Solzhenitsyn's proposals for a "Russian Union" including Ukraine to establish congruence between political and Slavic ethnonational borders. Such arguments are insufficient to justify armed conflict in twenty-first century geopolitics. Putin needed to invoke something more concrete and immediate, still within this wider framework. It was the alleged "genocide" against the Russian population of the Donbas perpetrated by far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis—another unsupported, historically false claim obscured by propaganda. Following the massive build-up of troops along the Russian, Belarusian, and Crimean borders with Ukraine, Putin launched his so-called special military operation on February 24, 2022.

The stories of the all-out invasion and assault on Kyiv, Zelensky's stand, and the fight back by the Ukrainian army and volunteers are told by Plokhly with exceptional expertise and flair. Putin's hopes for a repeat of the Crimea annexation were quickly dashed. History takes a back seat in this part of the book, but the narrative conveys a sense of global realignment taking place even as the battles rage. The "west" unites, the EU is no longer a barrier but a welcome refuge, Russian speakers in Ukraine turn against Putin, and NATO finds a consistent voice. The failure to bring about a military coup in Kyiv can be put down to Russia's ill-considered strategy, lack of preparation, logistics, and low morale, but, according to Plokhly, this is because Putin fell victim to his "distorted view of history and complete lack of understanding of Ukrainian society and its democratic foundations" (p. 163). As the war played out on the eastern front, in the Black Sea, Mariupol, and cities across the country, it became clear that it would be long, costly, and bloody for both sides. Plokhly moves adeptly between the military conduct of the fighting, diplomatic maneuvers, and the human dimensions to create an intricate and gripping account of this modern yet old-fashioned war. The relative success of the Ukrainian

counteroffensive in recapturing territory in the summer of 2022, including Kharkiv and Kherson, is an important part of the story so far, because it "helped to destroy a number of Russian imperial and Soviet myths" (p. 198), opening the way to new narratives of independence and identity for Ukraine.

The later chapters of the book focus on the role of the West in supporting Ukraine, and in Russia's case, relations with China in the new geopolitical alignments that the war has helped to accelerate. They show that the unity of the West has strengthened to an unprecedented degree. In June 2022, Ukraine was offered EU membership candidate status. In the same month, Finland and Sweden were invited to join NATO. Nothing symbolized Putin's strategic failure more than these two events. There are important differences between and within countries in the transatlantic alliance which continue to affect the amount and speed of help they have delivered, but none has doubted Ukraine's right to independence and territorial integrity. Economic and diplomatic sanctions against Russia, and Europe's turn away from Russian oil and gas, pushed Putin towards China. The opposite pole of the new world order is represented by the rapprochement in Sino-Russian relations. It harks back to the Cold War in the 1950s, but with the roles reversed. China is the dominant partner and a potential beneficiary of the widening gulf between Russia and the West. It has used its position of strength to curb Putin's threats of escalating the conflict.

Plokhly records that he finished writing the book in February 2023, one year after the Russian invasion. It is reasonable to ask whether anything has changed fundamentally since then. Arguably, the main contours of the conflict were well established after twelve months of fighting. The key protagonists remain in place, and the alliances which applied then still hold. The core historical arguments which underpin his account of the origins and conduct of the war are still convincing, yet the second year has thrown up some partly new questions about military capabilities on both sides, and deferred the question of how the war will come to an end. While Ukraine's second summer counteroffensive has met with some success, it has not been the big breakthrough that was hoped for. There is no immediate end in sight to the relatively static confrontation, nor to the enormous losses on both sides. However, in his conclusion, Plokhly expresses the strong expectation that Ukraine will fit into the same pattern as other wars of national liberation that accompanied the decline and fall of world empires. Ukraine's independence is already secure. The consequences for Russia are harder to fathom but history shows that empires are replaced by post-imperial nation-states. This book offers important clues, if not definitive answers, to a series of important questions. Will Putin survive the war?; will the war survive Putin? What is Russia's future? What is the trajectory of geopolitical change? Is the nuclear threat growing or receding? And how will the war be brought to a conclusion?

¹ Vladimir Putin (2021) "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" President of Russia <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> July 12

In contrast to some who allege that Putin is a fanatic, mad, sick, or megalomaniac, Plokhly sees Putin as an increasingly isolated authoritarian figure whose vision and actions are governed by a mixture of principle and pragmatism. His principles derive from a primordial and completely distorted view of Russian and Ukrainian history from Kyivan Rus onwards, expressed in his many writings and speeches. For him, the war is not an imperial adventure, but a crusade to regain and consolidate “lost” territory. Within these parameters, his actions, including the decision to invade Ukraine, are rational and intelligible. His pragmatism is expressed in his suspicion of historic enemies, his exploitation of their weaknesses, and in his ability to seize the initiative at short notice. He is unlikely to concede that he has made a colossal mistake, or that he should cut his losses and compromise, so the conflict is set to continue unless domestic considerations in Russia mean that the war is taken out of his hands. As he is expected to seek another term as Russian president, and virtually all internal opposition has been repressed (a process intensified by the war), the prospect is that both Putin and the war will survive for quite some time to come. The role of the current population in Russia is not explored in the book except in occasional references to polls and to general support for the president. Nor is there significant historical discussion of how internal circumstances might help to bring about the end of empires. History may be instructive about the consequences for imperial regimes that have failed to ensure economic improvement, are bogged down in corruption, have allowed inequalities to rise, and become reliant on anachronistic ideologies that conflict with more genuine human values. Access to knowledge of disaffection and opposition is difficult in today’s circumstances, but we need to see the war through Russia’s eyes as well as Putin’s and his elites’.

It is a commonplace that war brings uncertainty; it is “the province of chance” (Clausewitz). The new Cold War context and Putin’s rhetoric have increased the menace of using civil and military nuclear technology in pursuit of war aims. This is a prime concern in the book. The Chernobyl exclusion zone was on the route to Kyiv and the damaged reactor site was taken over by Russian troops in the first days of the war, with the Ukrainian operators taken hostage. The risks of accident or sabotage are far greater at the huge Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, on the front line for many months. Russian forces have placed vehicles and equipment in the plant and established fighting positions on the roofs of several reactor buildings. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) demanded that Russia demilitarize the zone around the plant and withdraw its forces, but to no avail. The Director General of the IAEA said on 30 May 2023 “We are rolling a dice and, if this continues, then one day our luck will run out”².

² IAEA Director General Statement to United Nations Security Council 20 May 2023 <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/iaea-director-general-statement-to-united-nations-security-council>

The pattern of behavior of using nuclear capabilities to push the boundaries in a power play continues with Putin’s not so veiled threats to consider nuclear retaliation if his regime is endangered, the stationing of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, and plans to resume nuclear weapons testing. The risks from miscalculation, accident, or deliberate intention are so great, and the system of treaties and global regulation is so weak that Plokhly sees historical parallels with the period leading up to the Cuban missile crisis (a theme he elaborates in his *Nuclear Folly: A New History of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2021)).

The changing shape of geopolitics is another of Plokhly’s central themes. With a broad brush, he paints a picture of the bipolar world of the Cold War transforming after 1991 into a less predictable but more unipolar world dominated by the USA that began to take on more multipolar characteristics in the twenty-first century. Now, the USA and the “west”, in a relationship strengthened by the Russo-Ukrainian war, face China and its less powerful ally Russia, in another bipolar formation that is reminiscent of the Cold War. He says “Ukraine emerges on that map as a new Cold War Germany, its territories divided not just between two countries, but two global spheres and economic blocs” (p. 299). He leaves the nature of the division to the reader’s imagination.

Returning to the opening question, this book comes down clearly on the side of *longue durée* narratives of cultures, ethnicities, and political systems as a source of understanding. They allow us to appreciate the temporal transitions that have made the Ukrainian nation, the origins and antecedents of the present war, and its historical parallels. Mediaeval history is offered as a key to what makes Russia and Ukraine different but related in culture, language, and religion. Nineteenth century history is needed to comprehend the growth of Ukrainian national identity in the context of imperial power struggles. In the twentieth century, the development of Soviet Ukraine is essential to grasp how integral it became to the USSR, and how rapidly it could diverge from the post-Soviet trajectory of the Russian Federation. As for “lessons” from history, Plokhly draws parallels with the past in the events leading up to the Russo-Ukrainian war including the 1930s in Europe, the failure of appeasement by the “older” powers, Hitler’s cynical and opportunistic annexation of territory, and the success of propaganda in allowing these things to happen. We also need to understand history to see where it is being mis-used in the pursuit of political power. Putin’s misreading of Russian and Ukrainian history has life and death consequences in the current war. Plokhly bridges the gap between academic and popular history and shines a clear, dispassionate light on the war for a wide readership.

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