Review – The Frontline

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The Frontline: Essays on Ukraine's Past and Present
By Serhii Plokhy
Harvard University Press, 2023

This book is a collection of writings by Harvard University Professor Serhii Plokhy, Chair of Ukrainian history at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI), on different aspects of Ukrainian history. The book has been published during a period when interest in Ukrainian history has been growing, ever since Russian military aggression in 2014 and 2022.

The book is divided into twenty-one chapters, including five on Cossack Ukraine; six on the twentieth century; and another six on the disintegration of the USSR and independent Ukraine. The last four, entitled 'European Horizons', are broader think pieces dealing with Ukraine's relations with Russia, Europe, and its central-eastern European neighbours. Plokhy is a prolific historian writing in a high-brow essay style without the use of footnotes. This style has the advantage of reaching a bigger audience. Plokhy's writings, including his 2015 history *The Gates of Ukraine*, have been influential within the non-expert community.

Plokhy's approach to Ukrainian history is territorial, as is typically found among Western historians. Ukraine's history is that of all the events which have taken place on the territory of the Ukrainian nation-state that came into existence in 1991. This territorial approach is similar to well-known University of Toronto Chair of Ukrainian Studies Professor Paul R. Magocsi, whose large history of Ukraine has been published in two editions in 1996 and 2010, and in 2020 in Poland. This kind of collected work is inevitably lopsided as it brings together what has already been written, or the contents reflect the editor's subjective choices. Presumably, the Russian-Ukrainian war led to a decision to devote most of the book to the contemporary period.

Plokhy writes that the name 'Ukraine' can be traced to the twelfth century, and then again in the Cossack era in the seventeenth century. Russian President Vladimir Putin denies Ukraine existed before it became a Soviet republic in the USSR. In fact, the name 'Ukraine' is older than 'Russia', a name which came into existence only in 1721 when the Muscovite kingdom was renamed the Russian Empire. It is therefore a mistake for Western historians of Russia to use 'Kievan Russia' to describe medieval Kyiv Rus.

Plokhy's book includes discussions of the 1654 're-unification' of Cossack Ukraine and Muscovy in the Treaty of Peryaslav, and the 1709 Battle of Poltava where Ukrainian forces were led by Hetman Mazepa. Plokhy traces how the myth of the 1654 're-unification' became the foundation for Tsarist and Soviet mythology of a pan-Russian people where Russians and Ukrainians are forever united. The USSR celebrated the 're-union' of Ukraine and Russia in 1954 and 1979, and this mythology underpinned Putin's July 2021 long essay on Russian-Ukrainian unity that became the ideological treatise behind the invasion of Ukraine. Mazepa, like other Ukrainian leaders who have sought a Ukrainian future outside Russia, is classed by Russia as a 'traitor' working for foreign powers against Russia. Mazepa's fight for Ukrainian independence, which was popularised by Lord Byron in a 1819 poem, and the 1711 Pylyp Orlyk constitution, are central to Ukrainians viewing their political culture as more democratic to that of authoritarian Russians.

Plokhy criticises the term 'Russian Revolution', as this was a 'revolution of nations' with Russia as only one of many (pp.88-89). The revolution was a defeat of the imperial nationalist pan-Russian people, allegedly composed of great, little, and white Russians (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians). Russian democratic and monarchist forces in the White movement opposed Ukrainian autonomy and independence.

Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin had different approaches to the creation of the USSR. Lenin wanted a union of republics whereas Stalin supported a federal Russia with the non-Russians only given autonomy (p.293). Putin blames Lenin for creating an artificial Ukrainian people by giving it a republic. In a recent speech, Putin blamed 1917 and 1991 for destroying the unity of the pan-Russian people.

Plokhy discusses the 1933 *Holodomor* which killed four million Ukrainians. The timing of the *Holodomor* alongside the ending of indigenisation (i.e. Ukrainianisation) and repression of Ukrainian national communists and literati points to this being a concerted attack against Ukrainian identity. Most Ukrainians view the *Holodomor* as an act of genocide. Russia has always condemned this view and has revived Soviet denials of a famine while linking historians of the famine, such as Robert Conquest, to Western intelligence agencies. This is not surprising, as Putin's Russia has fanned a cult of Stalin and downplayed and denied his crimes against humanity. Most Russians hold a positive view of the dictator, while most Ukrainians view him as a tyrant.

The most informative sections of the book are on the geopolitics of memory (pp.264-279) and the Russian question (pp.283-298), where Plokhy strays into the dangerous field of political science. Plokhy, for example, describes politicians supporting a European future for Ukraine as 'pro-nationalist' (pp.XII-XIII). After 2014, Plokhy writes that Ukraine had a 'new majority' of pro-Western 'nationalists and liberals' (p.279). However, using the term 'nationalist' is theoretically wrong, as it conflates the centre and far-right of Ukraine's political spectrum and is never used for other countries. The term 'nationalist' is also weaponised by Russian disinformation, which claims Ukraine is ruled by nationalists and neo-Nazis since the Euromaidan Revolution.

Plokhy writes that by the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, central and western Ukraine constituted a 'common memory space' (p.268). In fact, this had already taken place a decade earlier during the Orange Revolution, when western and central Ukraine voted for Viktor Yushchenko. It is not true that western-central Ukraine and the southeast were 'marching to different drums' as the author suggests, seeing as anti-Russian feelings spread from the former to the latter after 2014 (p.269).

Plokhy does not mention the marginalisation of pro-Russian political parties after 2014, but discusses the impact of the loss of pro-Russian voters in Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas (p.272). Plokhy also wrongly argues that Ukraine's southeast was reluctant to accept the rehabilitation of nationalist groups from the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, after 2014, for the first time, most Ukrainians held positive views about these nationalist groups, and after the 2022 invasion, the number holding a positive view massively grew to 90%, with only 6% who did not agree (Democratic Initiatives, 2023). Dnipropetrovsk underwent a radical de-communisation during this period, supported by the influential local Jewish community which included the renaming of streets with the names of Ukrainian nationalist leaders. Ukraine's de-communisation led to a shift from supporting the state anniversary of the 1941-1945 great patriotic war, which had become a quasi-religious cult in Putin's Russia, to the 1939-1945 World War II.

Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions are 'rooted in a particular version of the history of Russia and its relations to Ukraine' (p.X). Plokhy writes that 'history is central to Ukraine's current war with Russia and its relations with the West' (p.XII). He provides five reasons for Russian military aggression: Russia was 'robbed' of its historic territories in Crimea and 'New Russia' (Ukraine's southeast); annexing Crimea showed Russia had returned as a great power; these actions undid the injustice of the disintegration of the USSR in 1991; Ukraine is key to Russia's dominance over a Eurasian sphere of influence; and Ukraine's pro-Western foreign policy constituted a threat to Putin's regime. The conflict in Ukraine in 2014-2021 was not a 'civil war' (Kuzio, 2020, pp.106-132), as Russian disinformation and some Western scholars have claimed (for example, Arel and Driscoll, 2023). Plokhy writes that the conflict was a 'Russian-inspired and funded insurgency' (p. 235).

Since 1991, Russians have not reconciled their mental maps of what they understand to be Russia's borders to the

Russian Federation (see Kuzio, 2022). Instead, there has been the rehabilitation of pre-Soviet imperial nationalist claims of a pan-Russian nation which is not viable for a modern nation-state, because it reflects 'outdated ways of thinking about nations and their relationship to language and culture' (pp.284-285, 296).

Plokhy does not discuss how Putin overcomes this incongruence with the modern world by referring to Russia as a 'state-civilisation' with a thousand-year history beginning in Kyiv Rus. A monument to Kyiv Rus ruler Volodymyr the Great was unveiled next to the Kremlin in 2016 — Plokhy wrongly writes 2018 (p.286) — in Moscow, a city which was founded in 1147 long after his rule ended. Plokhy's description of the Russian Orthodox Church as a pan-Russian religious confession of the eastern Slavs explains Patriarch Kirill's support for the war against Ukraine.

Russia's invasion was driven by eighteenth and nineteenth century imperial nationalist myths of Little Russians becoming confused by Western deceit into believing they are a separate Ukrainian people (see Kuzio, 2022). The Kremlin believes the Russian army will re-educate them by destroying 'Anti-Russia' Ukraine. In 1991, a pan-Russian nation was closer to achievement as the new *Homo Sovieticus* than in 1917 because of decades of Russification and de-nationalisation of Ukrainians. To reverse three decades of nation-building since 1991 would have been difficult for Putin to achieve. Russian military aggression in 2014 and 2022 has brought closer the Ukrainian nationalist and democratic dream of Ukraine joining Europe, with most Ukrainians agreeing with their literati and historic leaders that Russia is non-European (pp.305-306).

Plokhy's book is therefore a useful, albeit lopsided, combination of texts that are important to understanding the background of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in the twenty-first century, using outdated eighteenth and nineteenth century myths.

References

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