

Review – The Russo-Ukrainian War

Written by Taras Kuzio

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TARAS KUZIO, APR 17 2024

The Russo-Ukrainian War

By Serhii Plokhy

Allen Lane, 2023

Serhii Plokhy's book includes 13 chapters covering Ukrainian and eastern European history, and Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The first six chapters, covering 134 out of 304 pages of the book, draws on Plokhy's earlier books and therefore includes little new material.

Refreshingly, Plokhy uses Ukrainian primary sources throughout the book, whereas most authors writing about the war mainly use sources from Russia. Plokhy's book, however, does not include a literature review of other published works on the war; it is almost as though Plokhy is uncomfortable in critically engaging with other scholars. Many books on the war are Russo-centric in a manner that I have described as academic orientalism; that is, viewing Russia's war against Ukraine through Russian eyes. For instance, Anna Arutunyan barely uses any Ukrainian sources and her hurriedly written last chapter on the Russian invasion does not include a single Ukrainian source!

Plokhy is a leading historian of Ukraine, whose books on Ukrainian history have won acclaim and positive reviews. This book is therefore unusual in that it reads as though it was written in a rushed manner and without drawing on his strengths. Plokhy is a good historian but not a journalist or specialist in international relations. Writing books as chronological accounts of the war should be left to journalists. Plokhy's decision to write his book as a chronological account was a poor decision, as chasing events means the book was already one year out of date when it was published. Completed before the 2023 offensive, the 'Afterword' now reads as overly optimistic, as 2024 will be a crucial make-or-break year for Ukraine in the war.

Plokhy should have drawn on his strengths and written a thematic account of the roots of the invasion and other areas he is an expert in, such as White Russian emigres, Russian nationalism, Russian imperialism (pp.214-215), and Eurasian and other ideologies. Plokhy could also have written about memory politics in Vladimir Putin's Russia, which is another area in which he is an expert; specifically, the cult of the Great Patriotic War and promotion of hero-like status to the Soviet dictator and mass murderer Joseph Stalin. Only a brief mention is made of how the Kremlin views the war as a second Great Patriotic War against "Hitler's accomplices"; that is, Nazi-ruled Ukraine (p.152). Plokhy touches on this briefly when he writes about Putin comparing himself to Peter the Great during his 350th anniversary in June 2022 to argue he was conquering, not 'liberating', Ukraine (p.152).

A very brief mention is made of White Russian émigré writer Ivan Ilyin (p.239). Ilyin, who denied the existence of a Ukrainian people and was xenophobically anti-Western, is Putin's favourite author, and, as Timothy Snyder has written, therefore important as a driving force of Russian military aggression against Ukraine. Ilyin's writings have provided an ideological basis for Putinism. The first of these bases was Ilyin's belief that Western-style democracy was not suited to Russia. The second was Ilyin's denial of the existence of a Ukrainian people and belief in a pan-Russian nation (*obshcherusskij narod*) of great, little, and white Russians (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians respectively). The third was his anti-Western xenophobia and belief that the West was always afraid of, and seeking to destroy, Russia. These key roots of the invasion and war, all areas within his expertise on Russian nationalism, could have been analysed by Plokhy.

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Plokhy discusses the invasion as Putin's attempt to implement the pan-Russian ("big Russian nation") project of returning Little Russians (Ukrainians) to the Russian World (*Russkij mir*) (p.105). Dissident Russian nationalist Alexander Solzhenitsyn and former KGB officer Putin held the same views — that Ukraine should be within a Russian union/Russian World, and that southeastern Ukraine is historically Russian land (p.151). Putin's revival of the Tsarist term 'New Russia' for southeastern Ukraine in 2014 was an "unprecedented appeal to Russian nationalism" (p.119). Russian imperial nationalists, such as Putin, hold a firm conviction that "Russian historical lands" in southeastern Ukraine have rightfully returned to Russia in 2022 and uphold Russian values (p.217). Putin, however, is a poor historian as the Tsarist 'New Russia' did not include the Donbas and Kharkiv regions. In addition, Plokhy and other scholars have pointed out that ethnic Russians were always a minority, and ethnic Ukrainians a majority, in Tsarist 'New Russia' and Soviet southeastern Ukraine (p.123). Plokhy also briefly discusses how Russian nationalists blame the formation of Ukrainians on conspiracies by Austrians, Poles, and the Bolsheviks, because they provided Ukrainians with their own Soviet republic (pp.136-137, 149). (A fourth, more recent Western conspiracy supporting 'artificial' Ukrainians lays the blame on Washington and the CIA).

One of Plokhy's strengths as a historian of Russian nationalism could have been in explaining the question of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. There is no evidence the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine (officially registered as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC]) 'rebelled' in 2022 against the Moscow Patriarchate as a "step towards independence" (pp.196-197). UOC Metropolitan Onufry's call for an end to the "fratricidal war" (p.197) should not be construed as a condemnation of the invasion, since this term is drawn from Kremlin disinformation depicting what has taken place in Ukraine since 2014 as a 'civil war' between two branches of the pan-Russian nation (great and little Russians, or Russians and Ukrainians respectively). Fratricide is the act of killing one's own brother; that is 'civil war'. Clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine have been investigated for their collaboration with Russian occupiers and for supporting the invasion, with the Ukrainian parliament deliberating whether to ban the Church.

Unlike Yaroslav Trofimov's journalist account, Plokhy feels uncomfortable in critically analysing the many flaws in Western policy towards Russia over the last two decades. Western policymakers believed, like their Russian counterparts, that Ukraine would be quickly defeated. Why did Western policymakers and Russia experts believe in the Russian military reforms, exaggerate Russian military strength, dwell too much on Ukrainian regional divisions, and under-estimate Ukrainian resilience?

The drip-drip flow of US military assistance to Ukraine was because of the Joe Biden administration's exaggerated fear of 'escalation'; that is, Russia threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Hiding behind the US has been German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The slow Western supply of military aid to Ukraine doomed its 2023 offensive because Russia was given eight to nine months after the September 2022 rout of its forces in Kharkiv to build three lines of fortifications, lay tens of thousands of mines, and mobilise 300,000 troops. Russia has been allowed to consolidate its occupation grip over southeastern Ukraine which, as seen with the failed 2023 offensive, will be difficult to dislodge.

Plokhy spells out the many mistakes made by Putin and the Kremlin. Russia's invasion was based on stereotypes and myths such as the belief that Ukraine does not exist, that most Ukrainians want to live in the Russian World, and that the invasion would meet little to no resistance (as had been the case in 2014 in Crimea). Russian troops were provided with only two to three days' rations (believing Ukraine would fall quickly), they were issued parade uniforms for a victory parade in Kyiv, and the lightly armed Russian National Guard were included in the invasion force because they were to police the occupation.

Russia is implementing a major programme of de-Ukrainianisation and Russification of southeastern Ukrainian children and youth. Plokhy writes that Putin's "distorted view of history" led him to have a "lack of understanding of Ukrainian society" (p.163) and Putin's revival of the nineteenth century pan-Russian nation model is "anachronistic" (p.298). Nevertheless, the Kremlin has been implementing this "anachronistic" model in occupied Ukraine since 2014 and 2022.

There is little discussion in Plokhy's book of why Russia's invasion failed in the face of Ukrainian resilience. Russian

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speaking Ukrainians supported Ukrainian over pan-Russian identity in 2014 and 2022. Ukrainian resilience was evident in three colour revolutions (1990, 2004, 2013-2014), and in a large civil society and volunteer movement. The war is fought between a horizontally organised society where Ukrainians have agency, and a vertically organised society where Russians have no agency and live in a dictatorship.

In addition to not criticising US and European policies, Plokhy does not critically engage with President Zelenskyy, who naively believed in 2019, his first year in power, that he could sit down with Putin and negotiate an end to the war. In late 2019, Zelenskyy agreed to implement the Steinmeier Formula, named after German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (p.260-261), which would have implemented Russia's understanding of the 2014 Minsk agreements and transformed Ukraine into a Russian puppet state. Zelenskyy also ignored very specific US intelligence detailing when and where the invasion would take place. Zelenskyy did not install fortifications or base large concentration of troops on the Kherson-Crimean border or the Belarusian-Ukrainian border north of Kyiv, two of Russia's invasion routes. Strategic bridges were not blown up. There was treason in the SBU (Security Service of Ukraine) (pp.207-208) but there was also Zelenskyy's nepotistic personnel policy of installing a childhood friend with no experience in security affairs, Ivan Bakanov, as chairman of the SBU.

A few mistakes could be corrected in future editions of Plokhy's book. Kharkiv was not on the verge of falling to separatists in 2014 (p.178), as young nationalists who formed the Azov battalion and Kyiv's intervention with Ministry of Interior special forces defeated pro-Russian proxies in March of that year. Plokhy writes that Russian officers and soldiers were ordered to not show hostility to locals (p.154), which is contradicted by other sections of the book. Plokhy writes that the Russian army came with lists of Ukrainian leaders who were to be murdered or imprisoned (p.152), but we now know that Ukrainian prosecutors are investigating over 120,000 Russian war crimes. Plokhy writes that Russian missiles mistakenly hit civilian targets because they failed to hit military targets (p.177); in reality, the Kremlin's primary purpose has always been to terrorise Ukrainian civilians and break their will to resist, such as by attacking utilities. Just one attack on a Ukrainian coal power plant in April 2024 cost Russia \$100 million in ballistic missiles. Plokhy himself writes about the Russians using artillery to destroy cities and towns (p.177). Russia made no distinction between the Ukrainian military and civilians in the port city of Mariupol, which was completely flattened, and elsewhere in southeastern Ukraine. Russia continues to launch daily attacks on Kharkiv, Ukraine's second biggest city, with missiles and drones to make it unliveable.

Plokhy also writes that Russia has few allies. This is mistaken, as most of the world has refused to impose sanctions against Russia, including democratic India, and many countries help Russia evade sanctions. China is not imposing sanctions against Russia, has massively increased its trade with Russia, and imports a large volume of Russian energy. The Global South is sympathetic to Russia. Following the Hamas terrorist attack against Israel in October 2023, Russia has cemented an anti-Western axis with Iran and North Korea, who are supplying large volumes of military aid for Russia to use in its war against Ukraine — at a time when the Europeans are racing to fill the gap left by the US no longer supplying Ukraine with military aid.

Plokhy writes that the invasion and war have destroyed the last vestiges of belief in Russians and Ukrainians as fraternal peoples and the concept of one pan-Russian people with their roots in a common history and Russian Orthodox Church. Monuments to Russian-Ukrainian friendship and Tsarist Russian leaders have been pulled down throughout Ukraine.

Plokhy writes that this is a nineteenth century war fought using twentieth century tactics and twenty first century weapons (p.298): its ideology is drawn from the Tsarist Empire; its military strategy is from the Great Patriotic War; and moreover, this is the world's first drone war. With the US wavering in its military support, Europe racing to deliver military aid to Ukraine, and Ukrainian forces facing tough Russian resistance in the occupied southeast, the Russian-Ukrainian war will be long, drawn out and fraught with danger for Europe.

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Taras Kuzio is professor of political science at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy and co-author of the forthcoming *The Four Roots of the Russian-Ukrainian War*. He is the author and editor of 23 books, including *Fascism and Genocide: Russia's War Against Ukrainians* (2023); *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War: Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality* (2022); *Crisis in Russian Studies: Nationalism (Imperialism), Racism and War* (2020); *Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (2017, 2019); and *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (2015). He has also published six think tank monographs, and 165 book chapters and scholarly articles.