

Book Review

The Russo-Ukrainian War, The Return of History



Author: Serhii Plokhy

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Reviewed by Wing Commander Nigel Jones

Introduction

Serhii Plokhy is a noted historian and award-winning author who specialises in the history of Ukraine, Eastern Europe and Cold War studies. He was born in Russia and spent his childhood in the Ukraine, both then being part of the former Soviet Union. He studied in universities in Dnipropetrovsk, Moscow and Kyiv, going on to teach in and gain a professorship in the University of Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro which is very close to the frontline in south-eastern Ukraine). Following the fall of the Soviet Union Plokhy went on to take up posts in North America where he is currently professor of Ukrainian history at Harvard University and is also the director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

It might appear premature to be reading a history of a conflict before its resolution is known, indeed as I am writing these words the Wagner Group is marching on Moscow (23-24 June – spoiler alert came to naught!), but Plokhy has written a highly readable book which provides an historic and strategic examination of the tensions between Ukraine and Russia. His account of the conflict thus far provides a compelling analysis of the successes, setbacks and failures of the combatants and the influence of, and effect on, their respective allies and the wider world.

Through the first half of the book, Plokhy takes us through the origins of the current conflict. Not just the immediate and obvious frictions between a democratic and western looking Ukraine versus an insular and kleptocratic Russia, but also examines the roots of this enmity by looking at how the relationships between the two regions (now nations) have developed historically. This section draws in a vast sweep of history focussing on key developments and showing how they have led to tensions today. This focus gets sharper as we get to the present and he identifies key events from the past three decades which resulted in steadily increasing tension between Russia on one side and Ukraine and its developing alliance with the West on the other, indicating how the brief reproachment following the end of the Cold War might have been a missed opportunity. This section also demonstrates why the 'end of history' thesis, following the collapse of Soviet communism, was an overoptimistic assessment of those events and should remind us that similar tensions can be found elsewhere around the world, waiting for the right (wrong) circumstances to reignite conflict.

The second half of the book takes in the events since 24 February 2022. Plokhy reminds us of the sense of shock and surprise there was at the Russian invasion, both in Ukraine itself and worldwide. His description of how Ukraine rapidly responded both politically and militarily across the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war provides a case history of why unity of purpose is so important. This coupled with the support of the international community toward Ukraine and their moves to economically isolate Russia. This combined resolve served to hinder Russian war aims, characterised by Plokhy as a bid by Putin to return an imperial Russia to the world stage. However, whereas the Ukrainian performance has been notable by its many successes, the opposite is true of Russia. The performance of Russian forces themselves has so far proved to be underwhelming, characterised by incompetent leadership, poor morale amongst the front-line troops, inadequate equipment and poor logistical support. All combining to undermine any reputation for military might that Russian conventional forces had. In addition, Putin's aim to limit NATO expansion backfired spectacularly as the invasion accelerated moves by both Finland and Sweden to accede to the alliance and neighbours on its Western border have strengthened their own forces through extensive rearmament.

The book itself is well laid out. It begins with a series of clear maps detailing: the growth of the Russian Empire since 1500; the security alignment of countries in Europe in 2022; the conflict in Ukraine itself; and a World map detailing levels of support to the respective belligerents. This is a useful device as it helps to put the conflict in its strategic context. It concludes with a comprehensive notes and bibliography section and an extensive index which will prove useful for students and researchers who will undoubtedly refer to this book which is likely to become a seminal text about the origins and early stages of this campaign.

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