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**Plokhy, Serhii. 2023.** *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History***. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 376.**

‘We must strive not for the expansion of the state,
but for a clarity of what remains of our spirit’.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 1991

The book was, according to the author, written between March 2022 and February 2023, the first year of Russia’s all-out war on Ukraine, and it covers roughly the first ten months of military operations of the Russian invasion. So, a reasonable question for the reader is what is the aim of a historian in writing the book on the ongoing event? What is the aim of a history book about the war that is written in the middle of the war? Even at the time when this review goes to press, it is still the middle of the war, with a comprehensive military stalemate, a few military breakthroughs, here and there, for one side or the other, and there is no clue whatsoever when and how the war will end.

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The author, a Harvard-based Ukrainian historian, with substantial opus focusing on the Soviet Union and Ukraine (Plokhy 2010; Plokhy 2014; Plokhy 2015; Plokhy 2018) complains that after the war started, the media kept reaching out to him for commentary, so 'I felt that I could not refuse, as my words might actually have some impact on the course of events. I realized that as a historian I could offer something that others lacked when it came to understanding the largest military conflict in Europe since World War II. Eventually I convinced myself that, to rephrase Winston Churchill, historians are the worst interpreters of current events except everyone else' (p. xx). The reader grasps that the book aims to have 'some impact on the course of events'. This is quite a legitimate aim of the book, but then this is not a history book, this is not an academic exercise, but rather a mix of advocacy, lobbying, PR, and propaganda. As to the author's self-serving rephrasing of Winston Churchill, it is not convincing to the reader that historians are superior in the interpretation of current events, such as the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. Perhaps, military experts should have a word in explaining military operations, lawyers about breaches of international law, international relations specialists about strategic considerations, and economists about the economic sanctions on Russia and economic havoc created in Ukraine.

Be the rephrase of Winston Churchill's quip as it may, the author at the Preface lays out what should be the plan of the book, organised around three questions: 'What made such a war of aggression possible? What made the Ukrainians resist as they did and are continuing to do? Finally, what will be the most important consequences of the war for Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the world?' (p. xx). Undoubtedly very ambitious questions, each worthy of its own book. The author specifies that he takes a *longue durée* approach to understanding the current war – for him the war began eight years earlier, on 27 February 2014, when Russian armed forces seized the building of the Crimean Parliament, the first step in the annexation of Crimea, whatever the euphemism used for this in Russia. At the beginning of the book, before any evidence is presented, the author spells out, not as a hypothesis, but as an irrefutable insight: '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. On Ukraine's part it is first and foremost a war of independence, a desperate attempt on behalf of a new nation that emerged from the ruins of the Soviet collapse to defend its right to existence' (p. xxi). Too many pompous words and too many asserting statements for the opening of an academic book. Not a promising start, the reader ponders.

Six chapters, effectively the first part of the book, are about the history. Serhii Plokhy gives his version of a crash course on the history of Ukraine, Russia, and the Soviet Union. Chapter 1 ('Imperial Collapse') deals with the end of the Soviet Union. One of the very few insights in this chapter that is indisputable is that the Soviet Union collapsed on 25 December 1991, at 19:12 Moscow Standard Time. But the crucial question is the reason for its demise. 'The Soviet Union fell on account of the Ukrainian referendum, as the Ukrainians were the only ones who put the question of their independence to a vote' (pp. 3–4).[1] Is there any evidence provided that the Ukrainian independence referendum was a necessary condition for the collapse of the Soviet Union? None, whatsoever. On the contrary, it is suggested (Sarotte 2021; Zubok 2021) that a crucial agent of the collapse of the Soviet Union was Russia's president at the time, Boris Yeltsin, as dissolving the country was a safe way for him to get rid of his arch-rival Michael Gorbachev and move Russia in direction of capitalism and market economy. Although the Belovezha meeting (at which the accords to dissolve the Soviet Union were reached between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) was hosted by Belorussia's President Stanislav Shushkevich, the key person at the meeting was Boris Yeltsin and it was his political will that was decisive for the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Without his political stance at the time, the Soviet Union would have been preserved, with or without Ukraine.

More generally, the alternative hypothesis could be that the crucial reason for the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism was a putsch organised by Moscow hardliners on 19 August 1991, orchestrated and led by Vladimir Kyrchkov, the head of the KGB. It was the people of the Soviet Union, predominantly the people of Russia, who did not want to go back to a communist dictatorship and a country run by a KGB officer. It was the people of Russia who supported Boris Yeltsin in these dramatic days, which sent shockwaves through the Soviet Union, demonstrating widespread fear of restoration of communist dictatorship and the return of the KGB thugs. Perhaps that very fear, and not strong national feeling and identity, that was decisive for people in Ukraine to vote for independence in the referendum (incidentally, independence from the Soviet Union, not from Russia).

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[1] It is not true that, as the author claims, 'the Ukrainians were the only ones who put the question of their independence to a vote'. The independence referendum was held in Estonia in March 1991, with 78.4 per cent of the voters supported independence (Gill 2003, 41; Smith 2013, 54). The other two Baltic republics, for political reasons, decided not to organise referendums, but it was their legislatures that proclaimed the 1940 annexation by the Soviet Union null and void. Anyway, the Ukrainians were definitely not the only ones, as is wrongly claimed in the book.

As to the referendum, the author points out that 'In the Crimea, the only region of Ukraine with a majority Russian population, 54 percent supported independence. Sevastopol, the home port of the Black Sea Fleet, did even better, registering 57 percent support for Ukrainian independence' (p. 2). Although 'majority' is a euphemism for 'almost all', this result is paradoxical. It was ethnic Russians who predominantly voted not to be in the same country with other Russians! The only available explanation is that they were running away from the Soviet Union, its communism and KGB overwatch, rather than from Russia. Without even noting that this is a paradox, the author considers the referendum result in Crimea as merely evidence of how widespread the idea of independent Ukraine had been in 1991. Well, that is confirmation bias, the reader comments.

What follows is an extensive and rather tedious saga of the history of the Russo-Ukrainian relations, starting with the 'myth of the Kyivan Rus' and ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The saga is told within the framework of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* – four legs good, two legs bad. The nice, generous, and democratic Ukrainians, and the nasty, greedy, and authoritarian Russians – without any shades of grey.[2] According to the author, Stephan Bandera was a patriot, fighting for the liberation of Ukraine, who never perpetrated horrible crimes against Poles or Jews, and he was a person who fought the Nazis and never collaborated with them. Perhaps this is the reason why he was granted residency in Munich after the war. The reader gets used to it, but then the problem is that the author does not explain the crucial development: by and large peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, dubbed in the book as the 'Soviet empire'. On the one side, it is compared to the Ottoman Empire (with grave inaccuracies about the break-up of the former Yugoslavia), on the other, it is compared to the dissolution of the Portuguese colonial empire, perhaps some other colonial empire – who cares. But for the author, only one thing is certain: 'The role of Ukraine in bringing about the Soviet collapse can hardly be exaggerated. Not only was it a key political actor pushing for the dissolution of the USSR, but it also helped to ensure a peaceful disintegration' (p. 32). Any evidence provided? No! The reader ponders – had Russia's political elite desired the empire to be

[2] Just as an example of this approach: 'The Germans soon replaced the democratic Central Rada with the authoritarian regime of hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky, but the democratic Ukrainian People's Republic was restored when the Germans withdrew from Ukraine late in 1918' (p. 16). A 'democratic republic' in the middle of what Snyder (2010) refers to as 'Blood Lands' in late 1918 is hardly a convincing notion. The reader wonders whether the author believes that.

preserved, it would have taken that path, with or without Ukraine.[3] Whether the empire would have been preserved in the long run is not relevant for this debate. Furthermore, had Russia's political elite wanted to use force to preserve the empire and change the borders as necessary – it would have taken that path.[4] Hence, it seems to the reader that the key player in the game and the key explanation for the 1991 peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union was Russia, not Ukraine.

Chapter 2 of the book ('Democracy and Autocracy') ensures the reader knows who is who: it is the clash between Ukrainian democracy and Russian authoritarianism, even in the 1990s. Hence, the reader learns that 'Ukrainian democracy presented a major threat to the Russian political regime, as it provided an example of a functioning political system with a strong parliament, which encouraged and empowered Russian liberal opposition to the increasingly authoritarian regime in Moscow' and 'the Ukrainian democratic tradition and parliamentary system made it much more difficult for Russia to regain control over Ukraine' (p. 36). Nonetheless, in the same chapter, there is evidence of the operations of the Ukrainian government. 'Most damaging in the recordings were conversations in which [President Leonid] Kuchma gave his interior minister an order to kidnap an oppositional journalist, Heorhii Gongadze. He had disappeared in September of that year, and his headless body was found in a forest near Kyiv in November' (p. 58). What a democracy!

[3] The author quotes a quip from Zbigniew Brzezinski that 'Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire' (p. 4). Needless to say – no evidence is provided. Nonetheless, much more important is an analysis by Lieven (2015) and his estimate that this insight was true in 1918, at the time of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, but following the structural changes in the Soviet economy and relocation of many manufacturing capacities to Siberia, as well as new developments east of the Ural Mountains, a Russian empire without Ukraine would have been quite feasible in 1991.

[4] The issue of the borders between the republics of the Soviet Union, i.e. the internal administrative borders that become international borders according to the Belovezha Accords, is hardly mentioned in the book. The author of this review, by coincidence, learned more about this issue from former Belarus President Stanislav Shushkevich during a ten-minute private conversation over a cup of tea during the break at a conference held in May 2011 in Moscow. The bottom line is that it was the context that was important. The Belovezha conference took place at the time of the peak in ferocity during the first stage of the civil war(s) in Yugoslavia, which was effectively about changing borders. Hence the sinister notion of 'Yugoslavia with nukes' was unavoidable in Belovezha. The participants quite rationally swept these issues under the carpet, enabling the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Empire. The only problem is that the issues came back – with vengeance (Lieven 2022).

A much more interesting insight is that '[w]ith no recent tradition of national statehood, the country was unlikely to coalesce quickly around a political center of its own: instead, there was a strong regionalism that fragmented Ukrainian political space and made politics much more competitive than they had ever been in Russia' (p. 42). The comparison with Russia notwithstanding, this is a convincing portrait of the Ukrainian political scene, but there should be an important caveat: competitiveness in politics does not necessarily mean democracy; it is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. Democratic institutions – those that specify the rules of political competition and ensure its sustainability – are not inevitably short-term consequences of competitiveness. It is Way (2016), quoted by the author, who points out that Ukraine's surprising pluralism was rooted in underdeveloped ruling parties, a weak authoritarian state, and national divisions between eastern and western Ukraine, and refers to it as 'pluralism by default'. Such pluralism is better grounds for building democracy than monolithism (regardless of its source), but it is a far cry from democracy. Accordingly, the insight that 'Ultimately it was Ukrainian regionalism, rooted in political and cultural differences, that came to the rescue of Ukrainian democracy' (p. 61) is simply not convincing, because the reader is not quite certain that there was anything substantial to be rescued – pluralism has been mistaken for democracy.

Chapter 3 ('Nuclear Implosion') addresses serious issues – unfortunately, not with an equally serious approach. The author's statement that 'Russia wanted the Ukrainian nuclear weapons to be transferred to its territory as soon as possible, which would greatly strengthen its claim to an exclusive sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space' (p. 63) is misleading. This was the idea of the United States administration, for national security reasons, so that it would deal with only one nuclear power, Russia, instead of the four powers on whose territories the Soviet nuclear weapons were located (Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, in addition to Russia). This is not to say that the Russian political elite was reluctant to embrace the status of nuclear power, but the attitude of Yeltsin *et al*. was something completely different from what is presented in the book. Also, the title of the chapter is misleading: it does not only discuss the nuclear issue but also Ukraine establishing its independence and building the nation, as well as many foreign policy and other challenges. The nation building process was, undoubtedly, a difficult, complicated, and painful one for various reasons, many of them had nothing to with Russia, with many obstacles and choices between two evils, in which the principle of lesser evil had to be applied. In some cases, Russia's position was not helpful, but the point is that at the time it was immersed in a nation-building process on its own, following the break-up of the Soviet Union, with its political elite having different views on certain issues it had

in common with the Ukrainian political elite, such as NATO enlargement. Nonetheless, pointing out that 'Models and rulers changed, but the basic principle remained the same: Russia's recognition of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the post-Soviet states would be conditional on alliance with Moscow' (p. 65) means, in short, that everything is Russia's fault. It is an oversimplification at best.[5]

Chapter 4 ('The New Eastern Europe') starts in 2000/2001 with two big changes: a new (and currently still incumbent person) in the Kremlin, and the Al-Qaeda attack on 11 September 2001. Suddenly, the Russian and American political elites found the ground for collaboration, but soon the problems in relations between the two emerged. Ukraine is one of the situations, especially its NATO aspiration. The author describes the process of deterioration of relations between Russia and the West referring to Putin's February 2007 speech in Munich, which was followed by the 2008 Bucharest summit and the decision of NATO to invite Ukraine (and Georgia) to join NATO. This controversial decision was made by the US President for reasons that had nothing to do with Ukraine and Eastern Europe; due to his failure in the war on terror, he wanted to score some points on foreign policy grounds (Sarotte 2021; Kaplan 2022), although this is not mentioned in the book. The author is right in claiming that this decision was problematic because it was not followed by a MAP (Membership Action Plan), making Ukraine more vulnerable. Nonetheless, he does not attempt to analyse the reason for such a decision, on any of the sides: NATO countries, Russia, and Ukraine itself.

Nonetheless, the author jumps to the conclusion that 'a few months after the Bucharest summit, Russia launched a war on Georgia, ostensibly in defense of the Georgian enclave of South Ossetia, which had seceded from Georgia in the early 1990s. The Russian attack allegedly came as a response to the actions of the Georgian army, which had been ordered into South Ossetia, but there was no doubt that the war was directly linked to the outcome of the Bucharest summit' (p. 88). A few comments about this claim.

[5] The author of the review has no second thoughts about the political and legal responsibility of the Russian political elite, i.e. Putin, for starting and waging Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, an aggression against a foreign, internationally recognised country, a blatant violation of international law, and a breach of international treaties that Russia has concluded. Nonetheless, it seems that the issue of historical responsibility, i.e. the process in which conditions for the Putin's decision are made, should be considered in a more balanced manner, as it appears that historical responsibility does not solely lie with Russia. This was clearly demonstrated in thorough considerations of various strategic options and decisions regarding these options by the West, predominantly the US administration (Sarotte 2021). Begović (2022), reviewing Sarotte's book, further develops some of these considerations.

First, this is an example of a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Second, this insight is not based on facts. It was the Georgian military that started a full-scale military operation against the breakaway region of South Ossetia, with artillery shots fired in anger at various sites in the region. It was the Russian military that responded to this attack. Third, the Georgian military action was deliberate and planned in advance, so it was Georga that 'launched the war', rather than Russia, as the Russian military move was only a reaction to the premeditated Georgian military action.[6]

Chapter 5 ('The Crimean Gambit') starts by explaining the idea of Eurasianism, which, according to the author, aims to re-create the former Russian imperial and now post-Soviet space based on Russia's imperial heritage, Russian culture, and Orthodox Christianity, possibly integrating the non-Russian parts of the former empire into the present-day Russian Federation, and linking these ideas to different people, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Alexander Dugin.[7] Regardless of whether the ideas are convincing or not, or the extent to which Solzhenitsyn subscribed to them, they cannot explain the action of the Russian political elite regarding the annexation of Crimea and especially its timing. The author points out that 'Now Putin, faced with the loss of his protégé in Kyiv [Yanukovich – remark BB], Ukraine's almost certain signing of an association agreement with the EU, and thus the fiasco of his plans to involve Ukraine in the Russia-

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[6] By some strange coincidence, the author of this review visited Georgia just prior to the Russian military intervention and spent two weeks in the country (in July 2008), leaving the country one week (on 1 August) before military operations started. In private conversations with senior Georgian decision-makers (including government ministers and advisors to the President Saakashvili), he witnessed, first-hand, that a wide rift had opened in the government, with fighting between doves (mainly older officials) and hawks (predominantly younger officials), who were in favour of triggering fully-fledged military operations in South Ossetia for 'its liberation and integration into Georgia'. Travelling throughout Georgia at the time, he also witnessed poorly concealed movements of Georgian troops. It is reasonable to assume that the Russian government obtained proper intelligence about all these matters. Hence Russian troops on the border were 'locked and loaded'. This is not to say that the Russian military intervention in 2008 was not an invasion of a sovereign country, as well as a violation of international law, but rather to clarify that it was not unprovoked. Furthermore, the military engagement on both sides looked like a 'special military operation', with somewhat limited casualties, rather than a fully-fledged war, like to one that is still going on in Ukraine – it was in its 737$^{th}$ day at the time this review went to press.

[7] Alas, the reader is provided much more information about the concept of Eurasianism, its origin, features and profound political consequences, particularly in terms of the influence, especially of Alexander Dugin's contributions, on 'Russian military, police and statist foreign policy elites' in a short books review (Morson 2024), than from a book about the Russian aggression on Ukraine.

led Customs Union and Eurasian Union, decided to take the peninsula by force' (p. 106). This is more of a description than an explanation because it is not specified why exactly Putin decided on this particular move. It is evident that the political developments in Ukraine caught Putin on the back foot, yet why he adopted such an aggressive, high-risk strategy, burning all the bridges behind himself, remains a mystery to the reader, as the author does not provide any consideration of the Russian domestic policy, including political economy, for Putin's behaviour in this and other situations, despite the existence of contributions focused precisely on this (Stoner 2021) and on his mechanisms of promoting and securing power as a 'spin dictator' (Guriev, Treisman 2022). It is disappointing for an academic history book to only focus on the events, without even considering their background or the context in which they unfolded. This failure is even more important because the author himself believes that the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war started in 2014, with the Russian occupation (and subsequent annexation) of Crimea.

As to the annexation of Crimea, the author points out that 'the Ukrainian parliament gave Putin a political gift with its maladroit adoption of a new law supporting the use of the Ukrainian language, which pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine characterized as an attack on Russian minority rights' (p. 106). Finally, some political responsibility, though in very soft terms, is allocated to the Ukrainian side, the reader ponders. However, whether the adoption of this law was 'maladroit' or was a part of strengthening Ukrainian national identity at the time of trouble, remains to be seen in some serious historiography that will be written with substantial historical distance, long after the war has ended.

There is no doubt that the Russian annexation of Crimea was a turning point. The author claims that '[h]aving failed to keep all of Ukraine in his orbit, Putin opted for the annexation of part of its territory to develop his Greater Russia project, meant to integrate territories with ethnic Russian majorities into the Russian Federation. The hope was that the construction of Greater Russia would save Putin's Pan-Russian and Eurasian integration projects' (p. 111). There is a problem with this view. The point is that by carving out parts of Ukraine's territory, whatever the pretext may be, Putin would alienate Ukrainians, boosting their national feelings/identity, and making both his Pan-Russian and Eurasian integration projects, of which Ukraine is a cornerstone, much harder to achieve. In short, Greater Russia and the Pan-Russian and Eurasian integration projects are substitutes.[8]

[8] This is effectively confirmed by the author, who contradicts himself in the book just a few pages later. 'The annexation suggested that Putin had given the Greater Russia project – annexation of the territories either settled by ethnic Russians

Chapter 6 ('The Rise and Fall of the New Russia') starts with the author referring to the substantial change in Putin's attitude towards the basic political issue of distinction between citizens and members of ethnic communities, which occurred in Putin's 2014 address to the Parliament. 'This was a marked departure from his earlier statements and pronouncements, in which his main addressee and point of reference was the multiethnic Russian political nation embodied by the citizens of the Russian Federation, referred to as *rossiiane* rather than ethnic *russkie*. Now he claimed that Russia and the Russians were the greatest divided nation in the world' (p. 119). Without disputing this change, the reader has second thoughts as to the extent to which the change was genuine. Perhaps it was a pragmatic change of a spin dictator obsessed with popularity and without any of the aces that he had in his sleeve in the 2000s (Guriev, Tiersman 2022).

According to the author, the annexation of the Crimea made the New Russia. 'The annexation of the Crimea made imperialism and nationalism key elements and driving forces of Russian foreign policy' (p. 120). Well, this is a change in Russian foreign policy, but it is hardly sufficient to proclaim the emergence of the New Russia. What are the changes in Russian society, Russian domestic policies, and domestic political institutions? The author is silent about them. Now, there is a question for the reader of this review: is there any good history book on the Second World War, especially its origin, that does not consider changes in society, domestic policies, and domestic political institutions of Nazi Germany?

Surprisingly enough, within the chapter titled 'The New Russia', there is a section titled 'The New Ukraine'. Trying to explain the terms that the author emphasises: 'A country divided by issues of history, culture, and identity when the Crimea was annexed was now united by the desire to defend its sovereignty, democratic order, and way of life at almost any price' (p. 132). It is irrelevant whether this is an accurate description of the change that occurred in Ukraine in 2014 – the reader feels that this decisive change, after all, happened in February 2022 – but this is the author's admission that, contrary to insights in many paragraphs in his book, Ukraine was not a homogenous country, with many issues related to its history, with heterogeneous cultures and languages, and with weak national identity.[9]

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or considered to be Russian on historical or cultural grounds – priority over the projects of Russo-Ukrainian unity and Eurasian integration' (p. 120).

[9] In the other chapter of the book the author claims that with the election of Zelensky in 2019 'Ukrainian society had rallied around the government to embrace its new linguistic and cultural identity' (p. 139), again contradicting himself and adding to the reader's confusion whether Ukrainian identity had existed for centuries or was created in 2014 or 2019.

This is the crucial point. It was Vladimir Putin, courtesy of his decision to launch grand scale aggression in February 2022, who enabled the great Ukrainian unification. Vlad, the Unifier; Vlad – the Nation Builder![10]

In Chapter 7 ('Putin's War'), we come to the war, actually, the preparations for the war and the beginning of Russia's aggression. This is nothing but a chronology of who said what, devoid of analysis of the context, motives, or explanations of messages between the lines. This is predominantly a media text, more precisely, a compilation of media reports – virtually a press clipping. Nonetheless, it does not provide an answer to the crucial question: why did Putin decide to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and what was his aim? The point is that Putin has been a politician (although his fervent supporters would rather say a statesman), so there must a political motive for such a move – there must be some political aim for it. Simply quoting Putin's publicly disclosed accounts on everything and anything does not answer these questions. The author points out that Putin produced and distributed by media on July 2021 the essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. So what? Even if the assertion that 'Putin was clearly upset with the Ukrainian democracy that kept generating political leaders dedicated to the idea of the independence of Ukraine' (p. 138) is accepted, that is not a reason to go to full-scale war. Even the official goal of Russia's 'special military operation' – declared to be to 'demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation' – is a propaganda proclamation rather than a clear program. Accordingly, what is missing from the book is the answer to the question why Putin decided to start a fully-fledged war against Ukraine.

This question is especially relevant because it is now evident, as it was at the time the book manuscript went to press, that Putin's decision was a grave miscalculation and a horrible mistake from the point of view of his interest – 'It is worse than a crime, it is a mistake'.[11] It was a blunder! Putin made a fool of himself. Although this was evident at the time the manuscript of the book went to press, it is even more evident at the time this review goes to press. Putin humiliated himself by this decision and the ultimate failure

[10] It is indisputable that some steps of this nation building and cultural unification were accomplished between 2014 (annexation of Crimea) and February 2022 (launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine), but it seems to the reader that it was the fully-fledged military aggression in 2022 and its unexpected ferocity that was decisive for the outcome.

[11] This sentence is attributed to the Prince of Talleyrand (*Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord*), a French clergyman and prominent diplomat at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, renowned for his cynical remarks.

to win a blitzkrieg and to install a puppet government in Kyiv (regardless of its sustainability), and all the signals were there that this option was not feasible. He demonstrated that he was an impotent dictator, save for a stockpile of nuclear weapons that he had inherited. On top of it came the Prigozhin affair, in which, from the outset, Putin acted like a mafia boss rather than a serious dictator. The feeling is that Stalin, doubtless a proper dictator, with an impressive track record, was turning in his grave when Prigozhin's troops were unopposed during their march on Moscow. Can anyone imagine rebellious Red Army units with political demands marching on Moscow with Stalin in the Kremlin? Nonetheless, there is nothing about that crucial Putin's blunder in the book on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Quite a shame.

The following four chapters (Chapters 8–11) deal with the war itself. They are nothing but a chronology of the events based on media reports and, sometimes, on the Facebook page (*sic*) posts by individuals. In short, these chapters are a summary of the media reporting on the first year of the war; naturally, with such an approach, they lack academic rigour. However, perhaps more importantly, the frontline reporting is done by the author who was thousands of miles away. So, there is no smell of battle in these lines, no blood, sweat and tears. It is a far cry from Ernest Hemingway's juicy reporting from the Spanish Civil War, *Mourir à Madrid*-style. It is also well below of reporting by Tim Judah from war-torn Ukraine in his contributions for *The New York Review of Books*. In short, these chapters are ideal for people who are too lazy to systematically follow media coverage, who are satisfied with a shallow notion of goodies and baddies, and who are complacent enough to consider things without embracing the difficult questions. They will greatly enjoy these highly readable chapters. Good for them!

The final two chapters are about international players, their position, and changes in that position since the beginning of the war. Again, this is a chronicle of media reports without any profound analysis of the developments. In short, Putin accomplished a united West, an enlarged NATO, adding 1,340 kilometres of Russian border with NATO countries (this time Finland), making the German public move from its pacific stance towards the warpath. Some players in the East do not subscribe to the Western condemnation of Russia, but the key player, China, has been reluctant to fully support the Russian war effort. Unfortunately, there is nothing new for the reader who has paid average attention to the new coverage of these developments. Again, there is no deep or rather any analysis of these developments, the motives of the players, their dilemmas and possible alternative strategies,

the consequences of these developments – not only to the war but to global international relations. In short, this is again a kind of summary of media reporting – a press clipping.

There is nothing intellectually exciting in the Afterword of the book (which has the utterly pretentious title 'New World Order'), but some assertations deserve attention. The author claims, that 'By paying an enormous price in wealth and the blood of its citizens, Ukraine is terminating the era of Russian dominance in a good part of eastern Europe and challenging Moscow's claim to primacy in the rest of post-Soviet space' (p. 294). With all the respect, regret and sympathy for the massive casualties and wealth losses of the Ukrainians, especially those casualties that are the consequences of Russian military actions without any military rationale, i.e. terror actions, the reader comments that the Russian era of dominance in Eastern Europe ended in 1991, and Moscow's claim to primacy in the rest of the post-Soviet was challenged a long time ago. A reality check helps.

Furthermore, the author asserts the Russo-Ukrainian war in the way that '[i]t was the first "good war" since the global conflict of 1939–45, in which it was very clear from the start who was the aggressor and who the victim, who was the villain and who the hero, and whose side one wanted to be on' (p. 294). *Animal Farm* language notwithstanding, a cynical reader could ask the question: is it really so? How about the many US military interventions, in some cases fully-fledged wars around the globe since the end of the Cold War? How about the First Gulf War? How about the Kosovo War and the bombing in Serbia? Did that not stop, according to advocates and decision-makers such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, the genocide of bloodthirsty Serbian aggressors (though on the territory of their own country) against the peaceful Kosovo Albanians? Plokhy should be more careful not to offend advocates of the R2P ('Responsibility to Protect') and their icon Samatha Power, because there will be more 'good wars' to follow in which someone will be protected by the US military might, and someone, preferably the one without nuclear armament, will be eliminated.

Curiously, the author claims that '[t]he Russo–Ukrainian war, like nothing else, undermined the foundations of the post-Cold War order, triggering processes that would lead to the formation of the new international order' (p. 295). 'It's China, stupid!' Exactly, it is, first and foremost, the rise of China's economic might, followed by its foreign policy turning more belligerent, quite expectedly, that undermined the foundations of the post-Cold War order. It is the economic rise of many emerging makers that made these countries and their governments more powerful in international relations. In the post-1990 period both Russia and Ukraine failed miserably: from an economically equal partner, China has grown its GDP to now being

more than ten times greater than Russia's. However, despite the Russo-Ukrainian war being horrible, it is not a crucial global international relations event. The recent attack on Israel by Hamas, supported by Iran, the recent Yemen's Houthi attacks on international shipping, also supported by Iran, have proved to have more impact on international commerce than the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is indisputable that these developments came after the book was published, but they just provide further evidence about the author's exaggeration of the impact of the war on the international relations, which his book focuses on.

Furthermore, wishful thinking does not do a great job of providing insight into both history and the present. For example, the author states that '[i] ronically, the view that the Yalta Conference had established spheres of influence was mistaken: at the conference, President Franklin Roosevelt rejected not only the principle of spheres of influence, but also Stalin's claim to exclusive control of Eastern Europe' (p. 296). The only problem regarding this insight is that it is not based on facts. Whatever President Franklin Roosevelt thought and felt about Stalin's posture, he rejected nothing of the kind in the document that the three sides agreed upon in the Protocol of Proceedings of Crimea Conference.[12] President Roosevelt was more cooperative with Stalin, and more lenient to his claims than his British counterpart, Prime Minster Churchill (Hamilton 2019; Preston 2020). There was an obvious reason for that. As a political realist, Roosevelt knew that it was not feasible to remove the Red Army from the ground in Eastern Europe, and more importantly, that the American main focus was not Europe, where the war had already been won, but Japan, and that the Soviet Union, specifically it's military might, was a valuable asset at a time when it was still uncertain whether the atomic bomb would work.[13]

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[12] The only exception was perhaps the case of Poland, dealt with in Section VII of the Protocol, although this section stipulates only moderation of the power structure already established by the Soviet Union and expansion of its western borders to the Curzon Line, which is today the border between Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. This provided grounds for the legalisation of the Soviet annexation of eastern Polish provinces (labelled by Stalin as Western Ukraine and Western Belarus), which was accomplished in 1939, under the auspices of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). The text of the Protocol of the proceedings of the Crimea conference is available at: *https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp* (Last visited 31 January 2024).

[13] That idea worked, as the Agreement regarding Japan, signed by the heads of the states in Yalta separately from the Protocol (which was signed by the foreign ministers), stipulates in the first paragraph that 'The leaders of the three great powers – the Soviet Union, the United States of America and Great Britain – have agreed that in two or three months after Germany has surrendered and the war in Europe is terminated, the Soviet Union shall enter into war against Japan on

Apart from wishful interpretation of the facts, there is a substantial number of factual errors in the book. For example, the author claims that 'In 1967, when the Soviet government celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the USSR' (p. 22). No, that is not correct. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution; the USSR was established in 1922 (on 28 December). Someone who is a historian of the Soviet empire should know these details better and demonstrate that knowledge in his books. As to the other parts of the world 'Yugoslavia, a federative south Slavic state formed on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1918' (p. 30). No, not only were the western border of ruins of the Ottoman Empire rather far away at the time of the formation of Yugoslavia, but substantial regions of Yugoslavia had never been part of the Ottoman Empire, but rather the Habsburg Empire.

Perhaps the most embarrassing factual error regarding Ukraine is the claim that '[i]n February 2022, a few weeks after his inauguration, Yushchenko attended a meeting of heads of state of NATO member nations in Brussels, where he publicly declared that he wanted his colleagues to regard Ukraine as a future member of the alliance' (p. 84). Yushchenko's inauguration took place in January 2005 and this visit occurred in February of that year, not in 2022. It is stunning that none in the publishes' team, including the author, spotted such a technical mistake in the manuscript. Perhaps this is the price for the hasty production of the book – the sooner it reaches the customers the better, never mind the loose nuts and bolts.

The reader is hardly any wiser after reading this book. What is the reason for this? Is it, perhaps that the book is about an ongoing historical event, was written in the middle of it (not literarily, the knowledge of where the middle was will come ex-post) and, in short, the author attempts to tell an unfinished story? There is no doubt that such an approach creates substantial limitations in historiography: there is no historical distance, archive materials are not available, and no secondary sources, save media reports.[14] Nonetheless, what such a contribution can do is to create a framework for asking relevant questions regarding the ongoing event, especially considering the stalemate on the battlefield that was reached, for example: what will be the outcome of the war, who will win, and what will victory will consist of, or, alternatively, what kind of truce will be concluded? This is exactly what Tooze (2024) did

the side of the Allies'. What follows are the territorial concessions to the Soviet Union, mirroring Japan's territorial losses. The text of the Agreement is available at: *https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp* (Last visited 31 January 2024).

[14] As Economist (2024) points out in a sarcastic tone '[t]o go quickly from missile launch to book launch is an impressive feat of publishing. Whether such speed makes for equally impressive histories is less clear'.

in his comparison of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Great War, specifying that the outcome of both wars is/was uncertain, noting that in the case of the First World War, the outcome was uncertain as late as perhaps two months before the Armistice. Furthermore, taking into account that a total victory by either side is improbable, he also stipulates the political risk that both sides, especially Zelensky or whoever will be Ukrainian president, would face in the process of reaching a compromise peace. Unfortunately, there is nothing of the sort in Plokhy's book.

In short, this book is not well thought out, and the research is even worse, it lacks academic content, it is poorly written, thought readable, and edited even more poorly. It was produced hastily. The findings are not balanced. There are only good guys and bad guys in this book, snow-white angels and nasty villains – glorified Ukrainians and villainised Russians.[15] Perhaps all these things are understandable given that the author himself discloses in the Foreword that the aim of the book is to 'have some impact on the course of events'. The author of the review is not competent to evaluate the advocacy, PR and propaganda effects of any endeavour in this field, and so he remains ignorant of whether the book actually made an impact in these areas.

As to the academic point of view, the value of the book should be tested by the three questions that the author spells out in the Preface as being the cornerstones of the book. The first question, '[w]hat made such a war of aggression possible?', was answered only partially, indirectly, and unconvincingly, without considering the crucial factor of this war – Putin's blunder in starting it. The second question, '[w]hat made the Ukrainians resist as they did and are continuing to do?', is not answered at all. Instead, there is only a package of press clippings in the book, providing evidence that Ukrainians have resisted, which is not a great revelation, although a surprise to many, but there is no explanation as to why that extraordinary achievement has occurred. Finally, '[w]hat will be the most important consequences of the war for Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the world?' No answer whatsoever, save a trivial insight that China will emerge as a key beneficiary of the current war. So much for the answers to the questions

[15] These findings of this review of Plokhy's book fully contradict the evaluation of the book in some other reviews, such as some published in the UK. For example, 'The great chronicler of Ukraine breaks new ground in his rigorous and elegant analysis of Europe's biggest conflict since 1945' (Harding 2023), or that the book is 'comprehensive yet concise, eminently readable, and carefully sourced' (Wilson 2023). It is as if we did not read the same book.

that the author himself formulated. In short, according to academic criteria, this book is a failure, and its academic impact is negligible. Perhaps it can be used as an example of how *not* to write a history book.

Is it politically correct at the present to claim that a book on Ukraine's war effort in the Russo-Ukrainian war is a poorly written academic book? The answer will come from the readers of this review.

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