

Serhii Plokhy Chronicles the Russo-Ukrainian War

By [Emily Couch](#)

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Author Serhii Plokhy **Simon Simard**

Over a year into Russia's grotesque full-scale invasion of Ukraine, disinformation and misconceptions of the conflict — fuelled both by the Kremlin and by political actors abroad — continue to permeate public debate. "The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History" by Serhii Plokhy takes aim at many of these myths, demonstrating how Russia's centuries-long imperial obsession with Ukraine created the conditions for Europe's largest land war since 1945.

In Chapter One, Plokhy lays out his central contention: that the "myth of Russia's Kyivan origins had already embedded itself in the consciousness of the Russian elites by the late fifteenth century." The centrality of Ukraine to Russia's idea of itself, he writes, contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union: "The role of Ukraine in bringing about the Soviet collapse can hardly be exaggerated. Not only was it a key political actor pushing for Imperial Collapse the dissolution of the USSR, but it also helped to ensure a peaceful disintegration."

Chapters Two and Three cover the political divergence of Russia and Ukraine — with the former opting for autocracy and the latter for democracy — and the resolution of the first “Crimean crisis” in 1994. “Ukrainian democracy presented a major threat to the Russian political regime,” Plokhy writes, because it emboldened the Russian liberal opposition. In Chapters Four and Six Plokhy takes us through the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013/14 Revolution of Dignity, again illustrating how these events threatened Russia’s autocratic regime, and how these events set the stage for the annexation of Crimea and eight years of hybrid war in Donbas. Chapters Six and Seven address how the annexation of Crimea “made imperialism and nationalism key elements and driving forces of Russia policy.” Plokhy argues that the full-scale invasion “was modeled on the Russian takeover” of the peninsula. In Chapters Nine through 11, he covers the military developments since February 24, 2022, writing that Russia’s strategy has been one of “terror” aimed “break[ing] Ukrainians’ will to resist.” In Chapters 12 and 13, Plokhy zooms out to consider the international implications of the war, such as the renewed strength of ‘the West’ as a geopolitical bloc, and the rise of China as Russia makes its “pivot to Asia.”

For a book of only 299 pages, "The Russo-Ukrainian War" covers a staggering amount of history. In the first 33 pages alone, Plokhy takes us through the war of Ivan the Great with Novgorod in 1471, the rise and fall of the Cossack Hetmanate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the emergence of the modern Ukrainian national project in the 1840s, the short lived Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1917–18, the entire Soviet period, and a good portion of the 1990s. Plokhy has, throughout his prolific career, devoted whole books to topics that receive only a paragraph of attention in "The Russo-Ukrainian War." Testament to his skill as a historian is his ability to condense and explain these complex historical moments in a way that is accessible for a general reader, while maintaining the clear narrative thread about the centrality of Ukraine to Russia’s imperial imagination.

Amid the macro-level analysis, "The Russo-Ukrainian War" also reminds us of the conflict’s devastating human toll. Interviewing Ukrainian refugees, Plokhy writes of how they “fled the Russian invasion, abandoning all their possessions and trying to save their lives. They were driven out by the fear of death, not by the hardships of war, and often risked their lives in the process.” While many readers may generally be tempted to skip a book’s Afterword, Plokhy’s merits attention because it underscores the human tragedy through his painful account of the deaths, first of one of his readers, Lieutenant Yevhen Olerenko, and then of his cousin, Andriy Khlopov. Recounting how he struggled to find the right words to respond to their tragic deaths, he writes poignantly: “I did not find any, there were none.”

With Plokhy championing the strength of Ukraine’s democratic culture, the vibrance of its past national independence movements, and the strength of its national unity since 2014, "The Russo-Ukrainian War" is unapologetically pro-Ukrainian in its narrative, avoiding any disingenuous attempts to “both sides” the conflict. Much like Plokhy’s previous books, it promises to become a staple for students of Ukrainian history and politics. Its emphasis on the role that a country’s history — real and imagined — has on its relations with other states, as well as its reflections on how Russia’s invasion has created a “new international order” also provides fertile ground for debate for the field of international relations. Underpinned by Plokhy’s preeminent knowledge of Ukrainian history, "The Russo-Ukrainian War" paints a masterful portrait of a conflict whose dire consequences have rippled across the world.

“The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History” was written by Serhii Plokhy and published by Allen Lane. For more information about the author and this book, see the publisher’s site [here](#).

This text has been updated to comply with publishing requirements.

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