

Serhii Plokhy, professor in Ukrainian history:

“Land doesn’t buy peace in the case of Ukraine”

by Barbara Törnquist-Plewa

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erhii Plokhy, professor in Ukrainian history at Harvard University and director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, in a conversation on the history of Ukraine, knowledge production, decolonization, the role of the Church and the ongoing war, with Professor Barbara Törnquist-Plewa.

BARBARA TÖRNQUIST-PLEWA (BTP): I would like to ask some questions connected to your two books: *The Gates of Europe* and *The Russo-Ukrainian War*. Let us start with *The Gates of Europe*: Is there anything in the book that, in your opinion, lost actuality or relevance in the light of the events since 2022? Are there any parts that you would like to update or rewrite since the war started?

SERHII PLOKHY (SP): The book was published in 2015. And then in 2018, the publisher asked me to do an update. And so the update appeared, as I recall, in 2019 or 2020. But certainly, before the start of the all-out invasion.

When I look at that book now, it certainly needs at least one more chapter dealing with the war. I don’t know when that will happen, but I have no intention of changing anything in my coverage before 2019, which for me is an indication that basically the book performs its function of informing a broader public about Ukraine – the place that suddenly appeared in the news when many people didn’t know of its existence. And it tells the story that helps us to understand current developments in Ukraine and in the region. In my introduction to the original edition, I stated that I am not ashamed to ask very presentist questions in the sense of questions that are of interest for us today. What I am trying to do is not to be presentist in providing the answers and trying to understand the realities on the ground at that time. And I think that this conscious decision to ask questions that are of interest today probably also contributes to the fact that this book has now been through a number of editions with limited revisions.

BTP: Taking Ukrainian history into account, what parts of Ukrainian history do Ukrainians most refer to during this ongoing war? What parts, in your opinion, are used to mobilize resistance against Russian forces?

SP: Certainly, anything related to the relations between Russia and Ukraine became extremely important, almost regardless of the period when they occurred. But one particular period stands out, that is the Second World War.

More specifically, the history of resistance to the Soviet regime, which happened to be nationalist resistance, comes with a very, very heavy historical legacy and baggage, I would say. It was run by a nationalist organization, Ukrainian Nationalists. There were very difficult relations between the Ukrainians and the Poles. Ukrainians interpret that part of history, a controversial part of history, by concentrating on the fact of resistance to the communist and basically Russian regime that lasted for probably between five and ten years altogether. There was a lot of sacrifice on the part of those people who were in the resistance, who were in the underground. When Ukrainian people think about that period, they think about the resistance to the Soviet Union rather than the history of Ukrainian-Pol-



The Gates of Europe (2015).



The Russo-Ukrainian War (2023).



Historian Serhii Plokyh during the presentation of his award-winning book *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* on the Shevchenko Scientific Society (Toronto).

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ish relations in 1943–1944 or the story of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists making a deal with Nazi Germany in 1940 or 1941. So it's the period between 1945 and the mid-1950s when active resistance against the Soviet Union was going on that has really become an inspiration now for many people because that's the closest example in history when Ukrainians were fighting for an independent country, an independent Ukraine, against the Red Army.

BTP: But at the same time, it creates some tensions?

SP: It does. It was controversial and continues to be a controversial topic in Ukraine. It certainly adds to controversy outside of Ukraine. But that is an example of a history in which when looking back into the past, people look at things that are most relevant for them and try to associate themselves not with the entire set of values that the movement represented, but with a particular set of values. To a degree, it's like the monuments to the founding fathers in the United States, or the name of the American capital, Washington. Washington is not celebrated for being a slave owner, Washington is celebrated for a particular set of ideas and bringing independence to the country. In that sense, Ukrainians are not unique.

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BTP: And what about the Cossack myth? I ask, not least because you wrote a book specifically about Cossacks. Don't you think that it's a quite important phenomenon if you look, for example, at war mobilization?

SP: Yes, I would say that the Cossack myth is present there, but the Cossack period is a really remote part of history, more than 300 years ago, closely related to a particular period. The Cossack state ceased to exist in the second half of the 18th century. There is a chapter or section in my book on the Russo-Ukrainian war that is called “The Cossack Raid”, about the Ukrainian counter-offensive in the fall of 2022 in the Kharkiv region, concerning the recapturing of territories that fell to the Russians. The detachments or divisions that took part in that raid were very often given the names of Cossack commanders. So we don't see the names of the people associated with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army from World War II and the post-war period, for example, given to the military units, but Cossack names. And many people, including journalists, observed that the way the Ukrainians mobilized in the first days and weeks at the start of the full-scale war reminded them of Cossack tactics. There were a lot of volunteers. Some of them just got together in groups and went outside of the city to engage in fighting. So, there were parallels with the Cossack way. I'm not sure whether they were really inspired by the Cossack way of waging the war, or whether it was very situational, but that was how they functioned in February 2022. They helped to save the capital, Kyiv. The same tactics also added to the chaos and to incidents of friendly fire. One could say that there are pluses and minuses in following the Cossack example.

BTP: In light of the ongoing war, many Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian intellectuals refer to the history of colonization of Ukrainian lands and actually see the current war as an anti-colonial war, claiming that it is necessary to decolonize Ukraine. What is your standpoint in this discussion and your view on the application of post-colonial theory to Ukrainian history?

SP: I think that what is new in the last 30 years’ study of world history can very much be attributed to the decolonization trend, which makes it possible to highlight the history of those parts of the world that were previously subsumed under the rubric of British or French history. This is a long-overdue phenomenon: Somehow the Russian Empire, territorially the largest empire in history, or at least in recent history, was not treated the same way as the British or French Empires were treated. Now is a good time to look beyond Moscow and to look at what was happening in Kazakhstan, what was happening in Ukraine, what was happening in Belarus during the Russian Empire period, and give some agency to the people, because they had that agency. So this is a positive development in which the study of the Russian-Soviet space, East European-Eurasian space, finally catches up with the study of the rest of the world, from the Americas to Asia and Africa. I look at that positively. Again, it all depends on what do you do and how you do it, because it's only too easy to abuse any method of research or pretend that other methods didn't actually produce anything of value. That also happens and, unfortunately, it happens too often.

BTP: Can I add one thing to this? How do you deal with the history of the Russian Empire vis-à-vis the Soviet Empire and especially the question of agency, because in the Soviet era it was much more mixed and less ethnically clear. How do you deal with that distinction between Russian and Soviet empires and even Ukrainians being on all sides, on the side of the empire and on the side of the colonized people?

SP: Depending on the period, we can look at imperial and Soviet history more or less through the same lens, because we have a relatively long period of history when an autonomous Cossack entity existed within the borders of



The Cossack Myth (2012).



The Last Empire (2014).

the Russian state, separate, but also part of the empire, and when the first “Russian” – actually East Slavic – president of the Russian Academy of Sciences also held the position of hetman or leader of the Cossack state. The irony is that the first so-called Russian president of the Academy of Sciences was a Ukrainian hetman. And you can look through the same prism at the story of either Khrushchev or Brezhnev during the Soviet times: They are very much the products of the Ukrainian Communist party machine who go to the capital and influence decisions at the very top. In the Cossack era, a similar parallel would be Prince Bezborodko: again, another irony, a Cossack who becomes a prince of the Russian Empire. So there are similarities, but I wouldn’t push that too far because there are, of course, differences as well. During most of their existence within the Russian Empire, Ukrainian territories were not united in one administrative unit, and really didn’t have much influence over their own fate. And that’s when we also turn to the history not just of state institutions or institutions as such, but to the history of popular revolts and uprisings, the history of violence in the region – which was an important part of the story. Now more attention is being paid to this issue of violence, to put it mildly, and the very unpleasant parts of history of all countries in the world. Those are terrible and horrible pages, but you can’t say that the people involved had no agency.

So it really depends on the period. But most of the time people who we think don’t have agency in reality have it. And that’s very much part of the story of Ukrainian Cossacks and settlement of the huge southern areas of Ukraine, because those people who ended in the steppes voted, so to speak, with their feet, right? You look at the places from which they came: There, they’re invisible to us, they have no agency. But they had agency; they exercised it by leaving the place where they actually didn’t have it, and moving to the place where they acquired it.

BTP: Let’s move now to contemporary history, I would like to ask you some questions connected to what is happening now. Let’s start with the legal situation in Ukraine today. In particular, I want to ask about the law that was passed in 2024 after the second reading, a law called “On the defense of constitutional order in the sphere of the activity of religious organizations”. This law is sometimes called the “law to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate” and many international Western observers see this law as a violation of freedom of religion. What is your opinion about this?

SP: The biggest development is, of course, the all-out war waged against Ukraine by Russia, the daily bombings of cities and infrastructure, the daily loss of life. The majority of Ukrainians know that this is not just a god-sent punishment, that this is done by the Russian Federation. It is also not a secret that the war is being blessed and supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, with its leader, Patriarch Kirill, certainly being very vocal in that regard. And it is also very well known that a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church does exist in Ukraine and that, as you can imagine, produces all sorts of questions on the level of the government, on the level of people, on the level of members of the parishes, churchgoers. And the response overall is negative. It shows in different ways, in different forms. One of those forms is the parishes leaving Russian Orthodox Church jurisdiction and joining the jurisdiction of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The process started in 2018 when Ukraine’s independent Orthodox church acquired religious legitimacy and then later autocephaly. So that’s one level. Another level is the Ukrainian government that is basically trying to cut the ties between the Moscow Patriarchate that supports the genocidal war and the institutions that are functioning as part of that church. It is a controversial issue in Ukraine, as it is certainly a controversial issue outside of Ukraine. There are proponents of those measures undertaken by the government. There are also opponents. One thing that we should keep in mind is the context in which this is happening. My personal belief is that the solution to the problem is up to the people who go to the church. They should not go to those churches whose jurisdiction they do not accept. It’s also up to the bishops and leadership of the Ukrainian church under Moscow. I think that the whole issue of separating themselves legally from the Moscow Patriarchate is long overdue. If they were really responsible leaders of the Church, they would take that decision. When it comes to the government, my position and my advice is basically that most people understand where the state is coming from; but the biggest issue is how you do that without violating the rights of the believers. So that’s my view on these three constituencies that I see involved: the parishioners themselves, the leadership of the church, and the government.

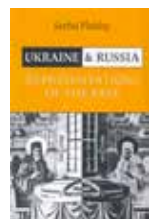
BTP: From time to time discussions suggest that Ukraine could maybe give up Donbas and Crimea because they are late additions to the Ukrainian heartland and populated mostly by Russians. It is also argued that if Ukraine did manage to reconquer these territories, it would be very difficult for them to accommodate and integrate the Russian population after all that has happened. What is your view? How could you envision this?

SP: Well, part of that argument reminds me about the argument in Europe about the legitimacy of the Anschluss of Austria in 1938. The attitude of European governments was similar: of course, the Anschluss is illegal, but wouldn’t

“The irony is that the first so-called Russian president of the Academy of Sciences was a Ukrainian hetman.”



Lost Kingdom (2017).



Ukraine & Russia (2008).

it be better if the German-speaking Austrians lived together with the German-speaking Germans? What that argument completely ignores, whether we are talking about 1938 or about 2024, is the importance of international law, of sovereignty, of the rights of the people to decide what they want, not replacing that with fake referenda. It was not okay in 1938. We know that. It is not okay in 2024, at least for the majority of the Ukrainians, and should not be okay for the rest of the world. Now, that's regarding the argument that justifies the annexation. With regard to the reality on the ground, the war that has been going on now for three years: No one is more exhausted than Ukrainians, Ukrainian society, the soldiers on the front lines. And it is also very clear that without Western support, Ukraine would not be able to continue. So theoretically, the war could be stopped today, and there could be sort of an armistice, to which Ukraine would agree because of exhaustion or the lack of willingness of either the United States or European governments to support Ukraine in the struggle, which most of the populations and politicians believe is very just.

But what about the cost of such an agreement? The principle of justice can be sacrificed and was sacrificed in the past more than once. However, one thing to keep in mind if this really happens is that land doesn't buy peace in the case of Ukraine. The war was unleashed against Ukraine with the idea of controlling the entire Ukraine, with the idea of crushing Ukrainian democracy so that it would not produce an example for Russian society to go democratic as well.

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The war was launched with the idea of making Russia great again and making it a big, powerful, dominant country in Europe. I can expand on that topic endlessly. I just listed three different reasons why the war started. Can you satisfy any of these reasons by giving 200 square kilometers of territory, more or less, to the country that is already the largest country in the world (just check the map). Does this country need extra territory to settle for economic reasons, for any other reasons? The answer is no. The war is not about the land. You can't buy peace with Russia with land. And if the armistice comes, that means that no matter how much land Ukraine has to give up it will not, cannot stop the fighting. It will not end the war in the long term so it's very im-

portant to stop talking about peace. There can be an armistice, there can be an unjust armistice but it's not peace, it's not a just peace and it's not a lasting peace.

BTP: Can I just follow up on that 1938 reference, because Russian historian Andrei Zubov compares Putin's policy vis-a-vis Crimea and eastern Ukraine to Hitler's annexation of Austria and his Sudeten German policy in 1938, 1939. Austria included German-speaking Germans and Austrians; Czechoslovakia: Germans and Czechs; it was ethnically mixed. This was a different quality.

But nevertheless, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia and in a way all Germans from Central Europe was a tragedy for the expelled and the consequences are still influencing the region. So my question is, with that knowledge and with all your knowledge about the situation in Ukraine, do you see chances for any kind of future reconciliation between the Russian population and the Ukrainian people, which also needs to be considered in some way in the future because Russia will not move farther away. It will be still Ukraine's neighbor, no matter what. What is your opinion about this?

SP: We are, in a sense, fortunate that we have examples of reconciliation in the past. This war waged by Russia against Ukraine is quite often compared to the way Germany attacked France in World War II, in the way Russia attacked Ukraine through Belarus, in terms of the number of the troops, the arms that are being used, the sort of atrocities committed by the aggressor. The Russo-Ukrainian war is the largest war in Europe since World War II, potentially the largest in the world, so it makes a lot of sense to look at WWII to compare not only what is happening on the battlefield but also in terms of thinking for the future. Here, the German attempts at reconciliation with its neighbors from Poland to Czechoslovakia and other east-Central European countries is probably at least one example of how it can be done, maybe with some changes or some additions. So that is the basis for reconciliation in which there is a very clear realization of who is the aggressor, who is the victim, what is the price that comes with aggression. Of course, I'm not advocating the expulsion of Russians the way it was done with the Germans. It doesn't look like that is on the agenda. But there must be a price for aggression. If that price is not paid and is not considered to be fair by people around you, reconciliation is a pipe dream. It's not a reality. So that's at least one way to look at the issue, looking at the scope of the events that we are going through now and at the examples that we have in European history.

BTP: You said that the war is not about territory, which I definitely agree with, but I would like to ask you about Ukrainian statehood, because in relation to statehood, Putin mentioned it differently before the war, very differently; he was quite flexible about that, depending on who he was talking to, whether it was

a pro-Russian or anti-Russian president of Ukraine. For example, in 2001, when he came for the first time to Kyiv as president to commemorate and celebrate 10 years of Ukraine's independence, his speech referred to two nations and two people and two states, for example. And now he denies even Ukrainian nationality and the Ukrainian state as well. From this point of view, how do you understand these changing positions? And do you think that these positions play any role in interpretations of Putin's reasons for the war, from the Ukrainian perspective?

SP: First of all, Putin can't be trusted. We know that from multiple examples, but the most obvious is him denying any plans for attacking Ukraine in the months leading to this war. Any idea of basing anything on Putin's words is already problematic. It's a very, very shaky ground.

But to the degree that one can talk about his position and how it changed, we can look at Ukraine today being at war with Russia, being attacked by Russia, and we can look at Belarus today where there is no war, but the country is fully controlled by Russia politically, economically, and militarily to a degree that its territory was used in this war. The Lukashenko type of state in Ukraine is something that is certainly acceptable for Putin. The country's independence is unacceptable. And we see that by comparing Belarus and Ukraine. Putin would probably accept the Belarusization of Ukraine, and would live with its sovereign borders which would not be sovereign anymore. Ukraine as a sovereign country: that's completely unacceptable, as Belarus as a sovereign country is completely unacceptable for Putin. And that is also a potential explanation of the different positions, not different beliefs, not different goals, but different rhetorical positions that he takes vis-a-vis one Ukrainian president or another.

BTP: I agree and in 2004 he referred to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the biggest geopolitical catastrophe, because in my reading he fears a continuity between the dissolution and collapse of the Soviet Union and an internal collapse of the Russian state, the Russian Federation, as well. He is not so much concerned about the outside world. I think it's also a fear, a kind of defensive position of his own power, which means he doesn't care that much about Ukraine or other countries of the former Soviet Union as much as about his own power, and that maybe dominates his thinking from this point. Do you have a comment on that specific moment, on that speech?

SP: There are maybe conflicting impulses at the first glance, but in a sense they complement each other. On the one hand, there is a concern about possible disintegration of the Russian Federation. That is one of the reasons why Russia moved away from the Soviet model where the ethnically based Union republics, like Ukraine, had status equal to the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation is now the kind of entity that Stalin wanted to make out of the Soviet Union, with autonomy and autonomous regions, with the ethnic-based ones having actually no more rights than any administrative unit in the Russian Federation. There is a concern, and one of the ways they deal with that is addressed in the Russian constitution which no longer allows secession from the country as was the case with the Soviet constitution. On the other hand, there is an urge to reclaim the territories that once belonged to the Russian Empire and the USSR.

That's where I think Putin's statement about the collapse of the Soviet Union to be the biggest geopolitical calamity or tragedy of the 20th century comes from. The phrase was used in the speech that he gave relatively close to the May 9th, the celebration of the victory over Germany. So it was given in the context of the history of World War II. And in that context, to say that the collapse of the Soviet Union is the greatest calamity in the 20th century means that it's a bigger tragedy than World War II. What is really meant there is that despite the fact that World War II or the Great Patriotic War, as it is called in the Russian Federation, came with enormous casualties, it ended up with the victory of the Russian people and extension of the empire. In that sense it's not the greatest tragedy, in the eyes of Putin. It is the collapse of the empire, and what Putin called the division of the Russian people, which was the biggest tragedy.

That's what he is now trying to undo, by trying to take over Ukraine. It is the prelude to rolling back what he calls the division of the Russian people, and he considers Ukrainians to be Russians. So that, again, correlates more with his forward-looking perspective on expansion rather than preservation of what he has got. But preservation of what he has got is the other side of the same coin.

BTP: But do you think Russia can be governed democratically and at the same time remain a country in the same form as it is now?

SP: They tried a couple of times. They clearly failed. Failed to a degree that Russia never experienced any sustainable democratic development in the course of the last 100 years. Even Boris Yeltsin, who is considered to be a big

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democratic leader, never ruled Russia by anything but presidential decree. First, parliament gave him permission to do that for one year. Once parliament decided to take this permission away, he asked the tank units to move to the parliament and open fire on the building. So that was the end of the Russian democracy that actually never started. Historical experience says that Russia and democracy is not completely impossible, but the probability of that happening anytime is very low.

Where I see the future for Russian democracy again, if not today or tomorrow, but at least in the historical perspective, I see it in Russian Federation becoming a real federation in which the regions, whether ethnically based or regionally based or otherwise, would acquire some power. They started doing that in the 1990s with Yeltsin saying to the regional elites, okay, take as much autonomy or sovereignty as you can stomach. But that was taken away under Putin. So that's where I see a possibility of democratic future. It is there. Most people who you and I, and all of us here, know, come from major cities, university centers. They are very pro-democratic. They are very liberal. The problem is that they represent a minority when it comes to the voters, the people who have a say in what is happening in Russia. And they can spearhead movement into something that is called democracy. But the success of that undertaking would depend not on support from the United States, Sweden, or the determination of those people whom we know, but on support from below. And there, where I see it's basically about the self-governance of the regions, that's what could produce different results. But wishful thinking on our part or real determination on the part of our friends are not enough to make Russia democratic, even in the historical perspective. I say nothing about today or tomorrow.

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BTP: May I ask one last question, one which I sometimes hear, especially from our leftist students? They say that every war is about resources and money, so this war is about wanting resources from Ukrainians, certain minerals for example. It's about lithium and titanium for modern technologies. So it's actually United States or one empire who wants to have access to them, and then there is Russia who wants them. And so in principle it's a war between them over this. What would be your answer to them?

SP: Well, I agree with one part of the argument, but disagree with its other part. The part I agree with is that it's about the resources. And it is the geographic position, the geostrategic position of the country. It is also about the natural resources and industrial potential. It is equally about human resources.

Russia comes, occupies territory, and immediately enrolls the male population into the army, and they're being slaughtered. So it's not just about coal, oil, or gas. The other part, that this is basically a battle between the two superpowers, that's where I disagree.

What we have here is a very classic example of a continuation of the collapse of empire. We saw that worldwide: everywhere the empire wants to control resources, including human resources.

Think about how many British troops in World War I were actually not British, but Indian, African, and so on. In that sense Russia is not particularly unique. And when empires declined or collapsed, their competitors actually tried to support the imperial subjects' independence movements. The independence of the United States was backed by France, the independence of Greece by Britain, etc. For anyone who knows at least something about international history and the history of empires, the parallels are very clear. This is a classic example of an empire fighting for resources and against the population that doesn't want the empire and wants to end this colonial or semi-colonial relationship, that wants real independence, not just independence on paper. That was the story of Latin America. Those countries had pro forma independence. In reality, the United States dominated them for a long period of time. And there was the Soviet Union who was trying to move missiles into Cuba. Does this somehow delegitimize the anti-imperial, anti-colonial struggle? I really would like those people who make this argument to think about that again because what they're doing goes against a long-established tradition of thinking about the anti-imperial struggle as being something positive, that is changing the world for the better. ❌

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