



Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation, from 1470 to the Present by Serhii Plokhy.

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In this book, Serhii Plokhy,¹ the Mykhailo Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian history at Harvard University, traces the changing political ideas and historical events that have shaped Russian national identity since the fifteenth century. It consists of an introduction, twenty chapters distributed in six parts,² and an epilogue. Though the book proceeds chronologically, much greater attention is paid to the period up to the Russian Revolution and Civil War. The logic for the book is well put on its dust cover:

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and launched hybrid warfare in eastern Ukraine. The conflict produced the worst crisis in East-West relations since the end of the Cold War and led to election-meddling scandals in the United States and in France. The Western world was shocked and outraged, but these blatant violations of national sovereignty were only the latest iterations of a centuries-long effort to expand Russian boundaries, create a pan-Russian nation, and assert Russian power in Eastern Europe and beyond.

The book's content falls into two unequal parts. The most space is given to an engaging, detailed study of five centuries of Russian history. The rest of the book, concerning present-day developments, is more speculative and politically biased.

Plokhy paints a rich and colorful picture of the historical events that influenced debates about Russia's conception of its geopolitical position. In the fifteenth century, it was a weak state in a highly contested neighborhood; as it strove to remove the last vestiges of Mongol ascendancy, the leading regional power of the time—Poland—was able to involve itself in the internal affairs of Russia at will. As the author shows, Russians cast Poland as “the Other,” setting the tone of a geopolitical struggle that lasted for hundreds of years.

Plokhy also ably describes the convergence of religion and politics evident in the concept of Moscow as a “Third Rome.” Russia was seeking legitimacy among both its own people and other states through a national myth that drew its potency from an iconic symbol of supremacy and legitimacy.

A great strength of the book is its clarification of the Russian desire to co-opt the history and the peoples of Ukraine as an added source of legitimacy, especially given the role of Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv in bringing Orthodoxy to the region. This process was influenced by events inside Ukraine, but especially by the ebb and flow of Russia's hard-power capacity rather than its soft-power appeal, real or imagined.

1. His earlier work includes *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (NY: Basic Books, 2014) and *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (id., 2015).

2. Respectively, “Inventing Russia,” “The Reunification of Russia,” “The Tripartite Nation,” “The Revolution of Nations,” “The Unbreakable Union,” and “The New Russia.”

Plokhy has meticulously researched some relevant but lesser known aspects of history. For example, he argues persuasively that emerging Belarusian nationhood was a product not of its people's self-awareness, but of the occupying imperial German Army's efforts to counter the apparent monolith of imperial Russia (202–4). Again, he presents the Russian Revolution and Civil War as complicated by the multitude of actors, domestic and foreign, seeking their own independence (Poland, Finland, the Baltic States et al.) or fighting the “Reds” in the Baltic states and Russia (United Kingdom, France, United States, and Japan).

Though the Bolshevik victory spawned efforts to build a new distinctly *Soviet* society, Plokhy shows that recurrent historical ideas still underlay the imperial Russian identity. Old dilemmas periodically surfaced: for instance, whether to preserve diverse ethnic identities within the USSR or erase them in favor of a universal “Soviet citizen.” The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 has proven to be a watershed moment for both Ukrainians' and Russians' perceptions of their place in the world after centuries of Russian empire building.

The author's treatment of more contemporary developments lacks the academic objectivity evident elsewhere in his book. It is hard to remain disinterested in the current sharply partisan climate of ideas and arguments. An early hint of this problem is seen in Plokhy's characterization of the new fifty-six-foot statue of Prince Volodymyr in the Kremlin as an attempt to “glorify none other than St. Volodymyr's namesake, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin” (vii). Another such politicized “finding” concerns the supposed Russian first-strike invasion of Georgia in 2008 (325), something the EU report on the conflict refutes; *Times* reporters C.J. Chivers and Thom Shanker cautioned that “Georgia's decision to attack Russian and South Ossetian forces raises questions about the wisdom of further United States investment in the Georgian military, which in any case would further alienate Russia. Not doing so could lead to charges of abandoning Georgia in the face of Russian threats.”³

Plokhy refers to Boris Yeltsin as both “a former Moscow party boss” (309) and Western-style democrat, which is problematic given the disconnect between Yeltsin's rhetoric and his actions. He was certainly a shrewd politician, but ordering a military attack on the Russian Parliament (!) can hardly be seen as a democratic act. The former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, was not “Putin's protégé” (335); he worked not for Russia's interests, but only his own. To claim otherwise would be like considering Yulia Tymoshenko to have been a Russian candidate based on the gas deals she negotiated. Finally, to assert that the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and subsequent Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine were solely the result of Russian machinations ignores the motives of many other parties (domestic and foreign) to the conflict.

In summary, *Lost Kingdom* contains many valuable insights into the enduring force of political concepts from earlier periods in the formation of Russia's cultural and political identity up through the Cold War. But these do not tell the whole story of Russia's motives in Ukraine. Serhii Plokhy concludes that we are living in a post-imperial world (351), but, judging from current global events, it seems rather that imperialism has simply evolved away from traditional notions of how it functions.

3. “Georgia Eager to Rebuild Its Defeated Armed Forces,” *NY Times* (2 Sept. 2008).