

Serhii Plokhy. *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation From 1470 to the Present.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. 432 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-09849-1.

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Serhii Plokhy's *Lost Empire* is a history of the present. It is a historical exploration of the contemporary "Russian question"—a "world problem ... no less serious than the one posed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the German question" (pp. 347, 351). Its core consists in determining "where Russia begins and ends, and who constitutes the Russian people" (p. 347). Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, several answers have been proposed. One was to focus on the citizens of the Russian Federation, an early liberal attempt at civic nationalism. An alternative saw Russia as the principal successor of the Soviet Union. As Boris Yeltsin's former privatization guru, Anatoly Chubais, wrote quite openly in 2003: "Russia's ideology ... should be liberal imperialism, and Russia's mission should be the construction of a liberal empire" (p. 322).

Chubai's empire-building was economic. Russian businesses would acquire enterprises and infrastructure in the successor states of the Soviet Union in repayment for debts resulting from the export of Russian natural gas. This strategy worked well as long as authoritarians who were economically dependent on Russia ruled the "near abroad." Democracies were a different matter, as citizens demanded economic and political liberties at odds with the empire. They might even join the enemy camp, as did the Baltic republics,

now NATO members. Ukraine, too, threatened to drift westward. When attempts at controlling the political process in Ukraine failed twice (first in the Orange Revolution of 2004-5, then in Euro-maidan of 2013-14), the economic strategy was clearly no longer viable.

Hence the new phase we are in today: military empire. Russian unmarked special forces took over Crimea, installed a puppet government, ran a referendum "reminiscent of Soviet-era elections" (p. 337), and annexed the region in brazen disregard for international law. Next came support (and manipulation) of separatists in the Donbas. The region descended into civil war but could only be kept independent from Ukraine by direct, if always denied, military aid from Russia. This war cost around 10,000 lives, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and led to "the worst international crisis in East-West relations since the end of the Cold War" (p. 351).

Why is the Russian question so explosive a quarter-century after the breakdown of the Soviet Union? The short answer is that the Russian state and much of the Russian public have not come to terms with decolonization. Rather than a nation state, Russia is still a "truncated empire, driven into ever new conflicts by the phantom pains of lost territories and past glories" (p. 348).

In Russia, the empire came first, and the nation second, as Plokhy shows in his sweeping historical survey from the tenth century to the present. This entanglement of the polity, the nation, and the empire has profound implications. Historian Geoffrey Hosking has made the useful distinction between "having an empire" (like Britain) and "being one" (like Russia). In the first instance, empire is "a distant and profitable appendage;" in the latter case the empire "was part of the homeland" itself.[1] Decolonization plays out differently in the two types, as historian of China Peter C. Perdue explained in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*: "If you *have* an empire, you can shed your colonies and preserve the metropolitan core.... If you *are* an empire, losing the periphery means total transformation of the state and society." [2] The trouble is, as Plokhy points out, that large sectors of both the Russian elite and the Russian population have not freed themselves from imperial nostalgia.

Such liberation, however, is hard to achieve, as Plokhy's account shows. The imperial Russian nation was from the get-go entangled with Kyivan Rus, a precursor that both modern Ukraine and modern Russia claim for themselves. Russian statehood began in the 1470s, when the ruler of the principality of Moscow challenged the Mongols under whose suzerainty his state had become dominant in the region. Ivan III required an ideological foundation for his conquests of neighboring polities. He found it in the claim that what he was doing was not military expansion, but simply the regathering of the land of the Rus', that is, a resurrection of the Kyivan state which had existed in the Eastern Slavic lands before the Mongols arrived in the thirteenth century.

Plokhy recounts in detail the making and the transformation of the Russian Empire from its earliest beginnings in the fifteenth century to today. This political history, however, is just the background to what really interests him: the ideas which both fueled and made sense of the building

of what would become the largest continuous territorial state in the world. He tells this history in six parts, each broken down into several chapters. Part 1 details the rise of Muscovy to become the Russian Empire by the eighteenth century. In forging the imperial consciousness, the entanglement with Kyiv was again crucial. The most important cultural innovations in the rising empire—such as the new Orthodox rites developed in the seventeenth century, or the idea of a Russian nation including the Kyivan, Muscovite, and White Russian peoples—were invented by intellectuals from Kyiv.

Part 2 continues the story, centering now on the challenge that the incorporation of Polish territories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries posed to this idea. The expansion to the west not only brought Poles and Jews into the Russian Empire but also Eastern Slavs, who would become Ukrainians and Belarusians later. The rise of Ukrainian nationalism in the nineteenth century was accommodated in the official ideology. The imperial nation of all the Rus transformed into a tripartite Russian nation, a process recounted in part 3. The new nation now consisted of three "tribes": Great Russians, Little Russians, and White Russians (or, in modern terms, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians).

During the revolutionary period, which started in 1905 and went all the way through war, revolution, and civil war into the early 1920s, these three tribes became "nations" with claims to their own territories, a process recounted in part 4. When the Bolsheviks regathered, yet again, much of the lands of the Rus by military means, they integrated these nations into a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Now each of the three nations had their own, formally independent republic, which reinforced the idea that they were essentially different from each other.

Part 5 contains the most original parts of the overall interpretation. Building on the works of Richard Pipes, Terry Martin, David Brandenburg-

er, Serhy Yekelchuk, and others, Plokhy carefully reconstructs the ups and downs of Russian and Ukrainian national consciousness. After the Revolution had clearly separated Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as separate nations, the 1930s elevated the Russians to the status of leading Soviet nation, a turn to nationalism informed by the German example. The fear of war and the example of National Socialism convinced Josef Stalin to wager on Russian patriotism. Ironically, once war actually came in 1939, a partial retreat from this Russification was necessary. The expansion into Poland in 1939—legitimized as it was by concern with saving Ukrainians and Belarusians—elevated the status of these "lesser" nations. "From then on," writes Plokhy, "Stalin would have to balance the interests of the newly empowered Russian nation with the demands and expectations of the minorities" (p. 261). The war effort against Germany, too, relied on the loyalty of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, and Central Asians. Hence, wartime patriotism was more multifaceted than is sometimes remembered.

After a return to Great Russian chauvinism in the final years of Stalin's life another subtle change took place. Instead of promoting the Russians as the first among the Soviet nations, the regime began to push the idea of an all-Soviet nation. This Soviet nation, however, spoke Russian, read the Russian classics, and was steeped in Russian history. In the final years of the Soviet Union, Soviet national consciousness was indeed on the rise among Eastern Slavs, argues Plokhy. Fewer Belarusians and Ukrainians spoke their native tongues, and more made careers in a Russian-speaking empire. "The only thing ... needed" to complete this process of forging one Soviet nation "was time" (p. 296).

And then, just when the new imperial nation of Russian-speaking Soviets finally took shape, the empire collapsed in 1991. This process, its aftermath, and its continuing consequences are described in the final, sixth part of the book. It re-

counts how Russian elites tried to come to grips with the truncated empire they suddenly lived in. As already sketched, solutions included the building of a post-imperial, civic nation, based on the Russian Federation, its institutions, and its laws; a "liberal empire" which would reintegrate the Soviet space by peaceful means of economic compulsion; and finally the military imperialism which thus far has seen its high point in the Crimean annexation and the fueling of the war in the Donbas. Each of these tentative solutions failed amidst the complexities of the post-imperial landscape.

Paradoxically, the transformation of economic into military imperialism might yet contribute to the evolution of the truncated empire into a nation-state. Putin's tactics have indeed backfired spectacularly. Domestically, the attempts to legitimize the land grab by conjuring the ghost of "Ukrainian fascism" has led to a decline of the sense that Russians and Ukrainians are one and the same people. If in 2005, the share of Russians who believed in this national unity stood at 81 percent of those surveyed, in 2015 it had dropped to 52 percent (p. 345). If the Ukrainians are "fascists," why try to unite them with the Russian heartland? Let them join the equally "fascist" Europeans. Reconstructing the Soviet empire, in this case, is off the table. But even saving other Russians from "fascism" finds fewer and fewer supporters. The financial and human costs of the Crimean annexation and the Donbas war have undermined popular support for further military adventures. If in early 2014 a staggering 58 percent of Russians were in favor of using their state's military might to protect their national brethren abroad, by 2015 only 34 percent did, and only 18 percent supported attempts to revise the borders of the Russian Federation (pp. 345-46). Given that Putin's government always has at least one eye on the polls, this popular disenchantment with imperialism should have some constraining effects.

Internationally, too, the Ukrainian adventures had unintended consequences, throwing Russia back upon itself. While the impact of the sanctions are debatable—oil and gas prices are probably more important for the Russian economic crisis—Russia has suddenly faced increasingly concerted international pressure to respect the borders in the region. If determining the aggressor in the war with Georgia in 2008 was still rather convoluted, and the forces of democracy had lulled themselves into the sense that history had been won for liberalism, the 2014 situation was fundamentally different. By then, liberal self-delusions had begun to evaporate and the question of who had breached international law was so clear cut that only the most dedicated *Putin-Versteher* could still raise doubts. Hawks in NATO countries bemoaned the fact that the sanctions were so limited and demanded that Ukraine be armed to defend itself. But weak as the response seemed to critics, a clear line had been drawn. As the response to the Skripal poisoning would show, the democratic countries were far less divided and much less susceptible to disinformation as it had seemed for a while.

Even more decisive than the reactions from outside the region are the effects of Russia's military aggression on Ukraine. The illegal annexation and the war in the Donbas have decidedly pushed the country away from Russia. They have weakened rather than strengthened pro-Russian forces within Ukraine. Even more dramatically, they have alienated old allies in the region. Even traditionally pro-Russian Belarus was unhappy with the transformation of Russia into a revisionist power. Its staunchly authoritarian president, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, normally a good friend of Putin, left no ambiguities. He declared in 2015 that if there was no independent Belarus before 1991, now there certainly was one. And it would be defended, he added: "We will not give our land away to anyone" (p. 345).

Time will tell if Moscow will accept the political shifts its military adventures have caused both domestically and internationally. Will the Russian elites manage to overcome their post-imperial anxieties? Will they stop plundering their own country and lust after the wealth of others? Will they shift their focus to looking after the well-being of the citizens of the Russian Federation as it emerged in 1991? *Lost Kingdom* is both an argument for this reorientation and a guide to the complex history of Russian nationalism that has brought us to the current impasse.

Notes

[1]. "The Freudian Frontier," review of Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: The Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 10, 1995, 27.

[2]. *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 14, nos. 1-2 (2009): 102.

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