

## **Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes**

### **QI Panel:**

#### **Book Talk: The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Return of History**

December 12, 2023

12:00-1:00 PM EST

#### **Anatol Lieven 0:45**

Hello, everyone, I'm Anatol Lieven director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute for Responsible statecraft. Before I introduce our author for today, just a couple of announcements. We have tomorrow, a panel to mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Kenneth Roth, former director of Human Rights Watch. And on Monday, but at a different time 10am. We have a panel on China's role in the Middle East, and opportunities and challenges of that. So I hope as many of you as possible will be able to attend.

Questions, please put in the q&a, which you see at the bottom of your screens. And I will pass as many of them on as I can. Please forgive me in advance if I can't get around to everybody. So for the first half hour, we will have our conversation and then I will open it two questions from the audience. So today, it's a great honor to introduce Professor Serhii Plokhy, who is director of the Ukrainian Studies Institute, sorry, the Ukraine Research Institute at Harvard University, and generally regarded as the most distinguished contemporary historian of Ukraine. His numerous books, I must confess, not all of which I've read, but I have read most of them include the standard history of Ukraine, the gates of Europe, a history of the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear folly. And this year, Dr. Plokhy produced no less than two books. The front line essays on Ukraine's past and present, and a study of the Russo-Ukrainian war, which of course, tragically, is still continuing. So, Professor, welcome, as I said, it's a great honor to have you with us. I think you may be muted.

#### **Serhii Plokhy 2:59**

Thank you. It's a pleasure and honor to be to be on this platform. And, again, your book on centrality of Ukraine in the security structure in Europe, published back in 1990s, was for me, really an introduction to the East European security studies in general. So it's, it's also has this appearance with you, it has also the sentimental value.

#### **Anatol Lieven 3:27**

Yes, well, of course, you are far more than me. But as you can see, I also feel rather deeply that this war is a is a tragedy, of course, a catastrophe, but also a tragedy for all Ukraine. I'd like to begin as a former historian myself by asking you, How has your understanding of Ukrainian history and your analysis of Ukrainian history developed over the years, because, of course, historian of Ukraine, but also much wider historian of the former Soviet Union in its last stages,

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and of the Cuban missile crisis and the Soviet Union's relations with the West. Perhaps you could tell us something about your evolution as a Ukrainian historian?

### **Serhii Plokhy 4:19**

Well, I started as early modernist back in Ukraine during the 1970s and 80s. It was certainly part of the Soviet Union. And the only really subject that one could study relatively free were early modern period and medieval period and source studies in particular. So as limited a lot of interpretation of the sources but not not much conceptually that could question the Marxist dogma at the time. And I came to Canada in 1991, I actually left the Soviet Union in Moscow on the second day of the coup. And that's where I discovered in your type of history, that history about interpretations about discussions and debates. I never lost my interest and and fetishism to a degree toward the sources, historical sources, but I also discovered, discovered in your new feature of history, and that really was was not available in the Soviet Union, or at least was not available at my university. I also was able to realize my old dream to look at the history of the Cold War, I am a child of Cold War. But of course, studying Cold War in the Soviet Union, especially when it comes to interpretation was all but impossible. So it's it's the academic freedom that really came to me with my move to to North America, first to Canada, and then to Ukraine to made me really try different things. And there is one thing that is at the center of what what I'm doing. It's certainly Ukraine industry in Europe, in terms of geography, but it is pretty much international relations focused on the cold. So if geographically, again, my center of the universe is somewhere between Moscow and Warsaw and Istanbul, and more specifically in Kiev, the center the center of my interest chronologically, and also intellectually around the Cold War.

### **Anatol Lieven 6:48**

Have a question actually, about historical analysis and approaches. With regard to the the present war, I'd be interested to know, if you see this conflict as to some degree, implicit or inevitable in the history of the two countries Ukraine and Russia? Or to what degree has this been a question of agency or contingency? Could different decisions, could different leaders, of course, above all, Putin in Moscow, have prevented the conflict and lead to a well, a less tragic outcome?

### **Serhii Plokhy 7:40**

I look at this more as certainly a postponed war. A war that really can best can to be back best explained, at least in my opinion, in the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and more broader the history of the disintegration of the Russian Empire. Because the Empire really disintegrated in 1980 in 1990, and then it was stitched together by the Bolsheviks, his new ideology, and of course, brutal force. And then this this post Imperial space while through disintegration, once again in 1991. And we all hoped we all hoped that the largest territorial and the largest empire in the world, 1/6 of the Earth was controlled by the Czars, and then a little bit expanded by the Bolsheviks that it would go down without without a major bloodshed. And, of

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course, we're looking at Chechnya, and we're thinking that okay, that's, that's not. That is not really normal. That's not what we should expect. This is some operation. And then Georgia, and now by the wars in Ukraine, started by Russia first in 2014. And then this all out war in 2022, it became clear that we in history of the disintegration of the Soviet Union turns out to be as bloody or maybe even bloodier than the demise of other empires back back in the 20th century. So it doesn't mean that we were really doomed for war of that sort of that kind. The war didn't happen in the 1990s or the beginning of the century for a number of reasons. But one of them was also the the, with the different leadership in Russia, especially in the 1990s and but its Yeltsin who was personally committed to the ideals of democracy. He also happened to be the person who buried Russian democracy and ordering ordering the tanks to fire at the building of the Russian parliament that he defended two years earlier. So the agency matters. And I'm sure that the Russian post imperial history and post imperial history of the post Soviet space could be, could be different. So I see they're both history at work, but also a particular particular type of leader in Russia at work as well, as far as we know, today, his decisions, first to an extreme here and start this more. And then all out war against against Ukraine came as a surprise to a big part of the Russian elite, not just to the Ukrainians, not just to observers, outside. And that's that says that in the political system that emerged in Russia after the Soviet Union, one person has really enormous power of the sort of the power that probably not every authoritarian state can can can produce. And certainly democracies don't have that that is an argument in favor of, again, importance of agency and in particular agency of the leaders that emerge or build the states that are as close to authoritarian form of government as, as it gets.

### **Anatol Lieven 11:33**

It's often struck me that one reason for Putin's power and survival is that the Russian elites themselves, they, they, they distrust themselves, they distrust their ability to maintain any kind of, you know, consensual order, among themselves, without a strong, you know, at the very least one could say, a very strong chairman of the board to to keep them in order. And that, of course, feeds into, you know, the old Russian fears, which were, in my experience very strongly reinforced for many people by what happened in the 1990s, of chaos of anarchy or the The Time of Troubles. And I mean, going back to what you said about the the decision to invade in last year of being very much that of Putin and his narrow, immediate circle, I think, from my own conversations, that's, that's entirely correct. But, and I don't think that a majority of the Russian elites or people wanted this war or would have, would have launched the invasion. However, there seems to be now also a very widespread desire not to lose, I mean, now that they're in the war, they want to, there is a willingness to fight on partly because of fear that if you know, if they suffer defeat, the whole system will will will crumble. I mean, if that is an accurate picture of the of the Russian collective mind today, do you see any realistic possibility of a compromise peace between Russia and Ukraine? Or I have to say, God forbid, is this something which will simply have to be fought out to the finish?

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### **Serhii Plokyh 13:37**

What's, what you see me in Russia is that the decisions were made both in 2014 and 2022, by Vladimir Putin, but then annexation of the Crimea in 2014 was really welcomed by the absolute majority of Russians.

### **Anatol Lieven 13:58**

But of course, that was that was casualty free

### **Serhii Plokyh 14:04**

The fact that the invasion of 2022 was called special military operation, it certainly was certainly not planned for the big war. And let's say, again, the parallel was the start of World War Two. Hitler didn't have plans for starting World War Two, that was supposed to be a special military operation, crushing Poland and dividing it with Joseph Stalin at that time. So I have no doubt that the successful special military operation in Ukraine probably wouldn't be welcomed on the same level as as was Crimea. And what is not welcomed is of course, the long and bloody war and potential defeat as you as you already mentioned, the Russia historically is in a very particular place. It goes through the decades that follow the loss of empire, we talked already about that, and the loss of great power status. And this is an the country that never had any track record of democratic of democratic development, but has an enormous track record of existence of empire. And basically, the regime being legitimized through the Imperial conquest and through the, through the presence in the international arena. And the population, the population really reacts to what what policies government conduct in that sense, in sort of the continuation of the long tradition established not just by the previous decades, but by previous centuries of Russian history. Now, the question of where that leads and where, where that will end, we are already in the middle of the largest war in Europe since 1945. And this is the largest war in the world in terms of industrial war, probably the last 70 years. And that means that we are at the point where the the political solutions don't apply anymore. And the fate of the war, like any war of that sort of that kind will be decided on the battleground. Depending on what happens in battleground, either one sides, when are the sides loose, or there is a stalemate, which it looks like the situation on the ground today with the frontline not moving much in the course of the last year. So that will be the foundation for the for the any political solution decision, which is compromised or it is victory. But again, it's it's we are so deep in the in the most we are the largest and the most horrible war in the world in the last 70 years. That really, really it's the institution on the frontlines that will decide the future.

### **Anatol Lieven 17:30**

Before 2014, which had of course such a naturally such an effect in Ukraine, it was not uncommon to hear particularly more radical Ukrainian ethno-nationalists, one could call them, and also some Ukrainians in the West, including a fellow Canadian Ukrainian who will known to us both, but since it was private conversation, I can't name him. To say that actually, Ukraine

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would be stronger, because more homogeneous would have a much greater opportunity to build itself as a united and Western oriented nation without Crimea and the Donbass. And as I say, this, this came not from, of course, it came from sort of pro-Russian elements, but it also came from very strongly Ukrainian nationalist elements. Is that is that discourse now over? Or is there a possibility that it could return as part of moves towards the peace settlement? That actually, to hell with them, we're, we're better off with what we have.

### **Serhii Plokhy 18:44**

Yes, the voices of that of that nature were heard, both in Ukraine and and in the diaspora as well. Putin's aggression of 2014 made really politically change the political climate and made claims like that really impossible to be to be really proposed anywhere, publicly or openly. On the other hand, what I can see is that the Ukraine after 2014 was slowly learning how to live in the new borders. Now, the largest battle of the of the war that has happened in the last few weeks is the battle for Avdiivka, which is a suburb of Donetsk. And in the course of the war, Russia army wasn't able actually to move further from Donetsk, any any anywhere East. And the reason for that is quite simple that the Ukrainians were fortifying depositions for defying depositions means that they were actually prepared to have a marginal line there, they're prepared to stay They're de facto recognizing the border. If not, politically, it's not If not legally, but then it's something that probably will stay for a while. And now, of course, it's it's the war opened, opens the question of the borders of Ukraine. The open question is of Russia's borders. Russia legally relaxed, legally in a sense illegally, according to the international law, but introduced in the constitution of the Russian Federation, for regions of Ukraine apart from paying in five regions all together, including the territories that it didn't control on the in late September of the last year, and since then kept losing those territories. So Russia today, not only Ukraine, but also Russia doesn't control the territories that are allegedly Russian according to the Russian constitution. So we are we are again, in the situation where it will be, it will be the the fortunes of the world that will probably will be decided that, that issue, the issue of the borders, at least in the short run, I can't imagine, certainly any government in Ukraine surviving, recognizing the Russian annexation, or Ukrainian people at that point agreeing to that, formally.

### **Anatol Lieven 21:24**

Recognizing it, legally recognizing it?

### **Serhii Plokhy 21:28**

Exactly legally, legally, in terms of recognizing the temporary borders as as a fait accompli. Well, we saw that in history more than once from from Germany to Korea, to Vietnam and so on. So, what else till till today, there is no peace treaty between Japan and Russia, because of the territorial disputes. So yeah, this things can take can take a while.

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### **Anatol Lieven 22:05**

I have a question about Ukraine's state national identity, which, obviously, very naturally, as a result of the Russian invasion has swung in a very strongly, ethno nationalist direction, especially, of course, when directed against Russian culture and language and so forth within Ukraine. And I was struck by a couple of quotes from your book, *The gates of Europe*, which, of course, was written before the Russian invasion, if I remember, if I understand correctly. And one of them you asked how much hybridity in terms of, you know, mixture of cultures, how much hybridity can a nation bear in face of hybrid war. And but another quote that you quoted a Russian speaker, partly, I think, Russia within Ukrainians, I, myself when I was traveling in Ukraine in the spring heard similar sentiments from people of mixed Russian origin that she, I think, was a woman if I remember rightly, she identified with Pushkin, but not Putin. I heard that again and again, in Zaporizhia, as you know. Nobody still sympathized with the Russian government, with Putin with the Russian army, not surprisingly, after a year of being bombarded, but there was, of course, still, naturally a deep attachment to Russian culture and Russian literature. And although, you know, I saw no reason to doubt that people, largely as a result of the invasion were fully loyal to Ukraine, there was, you know, considerable measure of unease about some of the language about Russians in general. You know, coming out of Kyiv, you know, the whole Mongoloid Barbarian line, as one woman said, you know, they should remember that they're talking about my mother there. And you see a way I mean, it's ethno nationalism now, an ethno nationalist identity going to be the permanent feature, you think of Ukraine, or is there a way back after the war when whenever that occurs, towards a more hybrid and, and and civic, national identity?

### **Serhii Plokhy 24:41**

Well, Ukraine is changing. And one of the biggest mistakes as far as I understand of planning of this of this war on part of Russia was the expectation that in 2022, they were invading Ukraine of 2014. And what they got were basically the population of the mostly Russian speaking cities and settlements in southern and eastern Ukraine, like Kherson, like Donetsk, were marching on the Russian tanks with the Ukrainian flags. And when you look at the cities like Mariupol where the absolute majority were not just Russian speakers, but but what if, what if, what if 5% were ethnic Russian, and the city was destroyed? You look at the city of Kharkiv that was under bombardment for so long period of time, what comes to mind is a quote from the mayor of Kharkiv, who said that we actually hate Russia today, much more than Western Ukrainians ever hated. And that that certainly translates also to the elements of the Russian propaganda that uses culture and Putin in particular and Russian imperial history, to integrate the territory or claim the territories that were taken militarily from, from Ukraine, the streets of Kherson, there would be certain references to Pushkin and clothes from Pushkin, and from Suvarov and so on and so forth. So the areas that are taken over the Ukrainian books are collected and being destroyed. So it's a very different policy from that point of view, there was the Soviet policy which celebrated Chernenko and allowed Ukrainian classes, and so on and so forth. Modern Russia comes actually with the claim that Ukrainians don't exist as a nation. The response that that induces on the other side is certainly the embrace of the including cultural

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elements of Ukrainian identity. Ukrainian political identity is very different from Russian, it is really based on the understanding of democracy and dedication to the democracy, the people whom I told you were marching against the Russian tanks, they were marching in defense of their mayors, the people whom they elected to represent them. And they will do that because they knew what happened in Crimea and Donbass, their right to elect their right to be in charge of their of their own localities was taken away from them. So what is added to that now to this political culture, which is very different from Russian, as it turned out, in other elements of Ukrainian culture, as as a rule, this is happening among the younger generation, that process already started in 2014. And also happening happening among all digitalization, I visited Kyiv in in August and September of this year, the switch to Ukrainian is remarkable. And no government in world is powerful enough to order people speak on the streets, one language or another. So this is this is the reaction to the war. And this is the embrace of the not just political elements, which are democratic elements of Ukrainian identity, but also cultural ones. The monument to the roots of Ukrainian friendship in downtown Kyiv. And you probably remember it, too. It's also on the cover of my UK book now, the head survives 2014, but it couldn't survive the Russian bombing of Kiev. The same is happening with this fact if so, the irony the sad irony, or maybe not so sad, tragic, whatever irony of the situation is that the war that started under the banner of the Russians and Ukrainians being one of the same people and save in Russian speakers and ethnic Russians, produced, in my opinion, the highest casualties among Russian speaking and ethnic Russians in East and in the south of the country, the main battlefield of the war, but also certainly strengthen strengthen the Ukrainian identity, both political and cultural. I expect we don't have this data, and that takes time, I expect that process of the strengthening of Russian identity separate from Ukraine will be happening in Russia as well as the result of that.

### **Anatol Lieven 30:12**

Yes, which makes, of course ethnic minorities in Russia very nervous indeed. Because it remains a multi ethnic state.

### **Serhii Plokhy 30:22**

And already in this war, we know that there were tensions and protests in Russian regions, among ethnic Russian regions, partially, as the result of the war as this, this groups have been overtaxed in terms of the, of the mobilization into the, into the Russian army, in comparison to ethnic Russian regions, and in particular capitals, like like Moscow, St. Petersburg.

### **Anatol Lieven 30:57**

Um, so to begin with questions from from the audience, two interlinked questions. I mean, it's absolutely clear that the Russian security elite and foreign security establishment still think of themselves as an imperial power and people or at least have a great power. How far do you think that extends into the Russian population? And a second question. Why do you think I mean, it's, it's very understandable, of course, why Ukraine has well, it's had no choice but to accept massive casualties in this war of defense. Why do you think that the Russian population I

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mean, other than simply through, of course, authoritarianism has been willing to accept with so relatively little protest such heavy levels of, of casualties in this war?

### **Serhii Plokhly 32:02**

Oh, I belong to the generation that lived through the collapse of the Soviet Union, and then the rise, the rise of independent republics. And certainly I remember and ensured they not just hopes, but almost conviction that Russia emerge, was emerging as a beacon of democracy in the post Soviet space, was enough to look at Mr. Yeltsin on the tank in front of the Russian parliament, the coup was stopped in Moscow, and so on and so forth. And that didn't happen. And now as a historian looking back in 1991, and the hopes of that time, I just realized that that history matters, and that the particular political culture that exists in the society it, it changes over time, but it can change overnight. And what you see what you see with the Russian population, and with the Russian elites, and I talked already about that, before, you see centuries of the existence as as empire as a regional power, and eventually during the Soviet time says, as well, superpower. And in that sense, there is there is this almost automatic element of thinking about about Russia, and making Russia great again, and this is this is something that brings together Russian elites and Russian population. And I don't think that that can change without, without Russia suffering a major difference. As simple as that. Because the message that this is, this is not something that is acceptable for the world, beneficial for neighbors, but also disastrous for Russia. It can't be delivered in any other way. It's the idea of creating, like, the US was doing that in the 1990s centers of excellence and universities with the liberal education, and so on and so forth. That that doesn't work unless there is a very clear message coming from outside world that that that behavior is is unacceptable in terms of why Russians are prepared to sacrifice so much. Certainly, it's an authoritarian, authoritarian tradition is one of those reasons. I was also shocked to see how little has changed rarely since since Soviet times since World War Two in particularly, the Russian army still fights the wars and the battles in the same way how, how the Soviet Army fought. And I don't mean, tactics, tactics are sometimes the same as well. But I mean, the value of human life, I mean, the the, this special units formed from the, from the prisoners, or from people who are accused of all sorts of crimes, and the execution of people who refuse to go to go into suicidal attacks. I, as a historian suddenly started to understand much more not just about Russia and the Soviet Union, but also about World War Two. And how it was won by looking at what was happening by looking at recursion, or by looking at the way how, how the Russian population at large, the majority doesn't want to go to the war, but doesn't doesn't really challenge the government, but that wages the small. So, again, I, I see a lot of a lot of continuation in that in that story, and not not much discontinuing discontinuity in terms of the this historical tradition and discontinuity and introduction of, of new elements. That's That's what I think we all need. Whether we are in Russia, outside of Russia, in the West or in Ukraine.



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### **Anatol Lieven 36:57**

On the subject of Russian defeat, I mean, I have often made the argument that although Russian state propaganda has, of course, managed to completely mask this as far as the Russian population is concerned. I mean, in objective and long historical terms, Russia has already suffered a colossal defeat in Ukraine, suffered it last year. And as you said earlier, I mean, this was a, this was a defeat, which was obviously both military, but it was also, I mean, a tremendous historical political defeat in that it absolutely demonstrated the strength of Ukrainian nationalism. And as you said, the loyalty to Ukraine of people who Moscow had expected it seems genuinely would side with or accept Russian rule. What would you agree with, and it's, I mean, very difficult for me. I mean, as you say, I suppose in the end, everything will depend on what happens on the battlefield. And it's very difficult for me now to imagine how Ukraine as a whole could ever again, be permanently or semi permanently, or for any significant length of time subjugated to Russia. Is that too optimistic in your view? Or do you think that was actually proved by last year?

### **Serhii Plokhyy 38:34**

I think it was, I made what I thought was a mistake. And now now, it doesn't look that way. Really, in the first days after the war, maybe after the first week, I stated publicly in an interview that in historical terms, Ukraine had already won. And what I meant was that Ukraine didn't, didn't collapse. And Ukraine mobilized to resist. And in historical terms, that's that's extremely, extremely important development because we had in the history of 20th century, only one case when someone resisted Russia/Soviet Union, and that was Finland. And not to oversimplify things too much, but at the end, Finland was left without without the communist controller and economists. Certainly Poland could not could not defend itself on the condition of attack from both sides. The uprising in Budapest was crushed within a few days, Czechoslovakia didn't didn't refuse. So sorry, didn't resist in 1968 I mean, even militarily, and even now know that the Polish plans and in case of the Russian attack plans of 2011 was actually to retreat beyond Vistula and wait for the NATO troops to arrive. Right. So it was suicidal idea to resist. But what experience shows that those who resist eventually when in if not immediately, then then in historical in historical terms, the current Russian plans for Ukraine, basically included eastern Ukraine, central Ukraine, but never included Western Ukrainian commission particularly. So Galicia and control over the Sigal was the plan of the Russian army back in 1914. It was taken by the by Stalin in 1939, and then in 1945. But what Stalingrad was the resistance of Ukrainian nationalists and Ukrainian insurgent army, change in plans in the long term for the Russian takeover of Ukraine that Russians decided that it was too, too, too troublesome to try to keep Western Ukraine. And I think that long term that will be also the impact of the Ukrainian resistance in the center and in the east. So in historical terms, Ukraine, Ukraine won, I still believe that this is the case, but what what I'm concerned about is not so much long term perspective, what I'm concerned about lives, lives being lost today.

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### **Anatol Lieven 41:49**

Yeah, no, I entirely agree. And we have several questions. Inevitably, given that, you know, President Zelensky is here in Washington today, basically, to appeal for continued US aid, which looks questionable, as does that of Europe now, or at least on a sufficient scale. If Western aid does, in fact, if not dry up completely, then seriously falter, what do you think that the outcome will be on the ground?

### **Serhii Plokhly 42:28**

Well, Ukraine, rarely surprised the world, the resistance in winter of 2022 achieved a major success of defeating Russian, the Russian offensive on Kiev, Rrght, in March. But since summer of the last year, Ukraine really Ukrainian stability to resist really depends on the western military supply. And there is no question that if that assistance and that help, doesn't arrive, Ukraine will be left one on one with Russia. And the outcome, and I just don't see any other scenario but Ukraine losing this ear.

### **Anatol Lieven 43:21**

And what what in your view does losing mean in this context? Because of course, there are big there are a whole series of gradations there.

### **Serhii Plokhly 43:38**

I don't see any signs that we're not pushing really changed his overall objective toward Ukraine, that he is prepared to, quote unquote, limit himself at this point or the annexation of the south and eastern Ukraine. But his overall goal is Ukraine, Ukraine as a whole, at least Eastern and Central Ukraine. And the policies that were declared were the policies of Denazification. Well, it's sounds, of course, quite bizarre. Again, you mentioned to them President Zelensky, the only president of Jewish background anywhere in the world outside of Israel. And he very much embodies the Ukrainian political nation today. So then Denazification means really the Ukraine as a nation so with the policies that are being conducted in the Crimea, in southern Ukraine, in Eastern Ukraine under Russian control, this is imposition of the Russian rule. So look, look at that parts of Kherson region. Look at Donbas, that's that's clearly the the template that what one should expect from the from the rest, rest of Ukraine. And then, of course, the war on Ukraine is waged today, not just with the help of the Russians or Chechnyans, it's coming from the Russian Federation, but also is the help of the soldiers from Donbass region of Ukraine. So you can imagine them drafting forcefully in the army, Ukrainian population and increasing the Russian ability to fight to fight wars, anywhere from the Middle East to Eastern Europe. This is, as I already mentioned, the largest war in in the world in the last 70 years, and the wars of that proportion, they have tremendous impact on the future of the world, on the future of international relations. So that stake in this war, it's not just just Ukraine, losing, at stake is also the West losing. You know, you look at the the Russian at the Russian polling data on who they consider

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to be the enemy. Surprisingly, Ukrainians. far behind Americans and, and West Europeans. So in the mind of the Russian population, they waged a war on the west.

### **Anatol Lieven 46:30**

I think that that also reflects the fact that I mean, you have some absolutely loathsome really racist characters on on Russian television. But of course, in the Russian population at large, well, there are so many Ukrainians, you know, people of Ukrainian origin that that I think dampens down hostility to, or at least, they want to believe that they're not hostile to Ukrainians as a people. Whereas it's much psychologically easier, of course, to hate the West and the Americans.

### **Serhii Plokhy 47:05**

Well, the war started with the latest stage. It started with Vladimir Putin's articles on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians, which it's a long it's a long essay. But the the argument is right there in the first paragraph, in the first two sentences and Putin says that I said more than once that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people. So here, here is the proof in this develop this argument here. So what does it mean, that Ukrainians are in Russian, so one of the same people, that doesn't mean that Russians don't exist, and Russians are really Ukrainians. That means that Ukrainians really don't exist. And that is, that is the the the particularity of this war, that in many ways genocidal war technically is, or at least if one believes state rhetoric is waged on the part of the Russian people.

### **Anatol Lieven 48:19**

I must say, I, I'm quite skeptical of this overuse of the word genocide. It's used so often by now, you know, by now. And yet, you know, as we know, the cases historically are actually pretty clear cut. And, you know, limited because Hitler didn't say that, that the Germans or the Jews were one people and the Hutu extremists didn't say that, that Hutus and the Tutsis are one people. I

### **Serhii Plokhy 48:51**

But the what what we see normally with cases of genocides which are not clear cut, and even with the clear cut ones, is the question that you really can't prove intentionality. What you have here when basically the right of a particular nation to exist is being denied. That that's that's basically the the intentionality being produced and spelled out. So I leave that to the to the lawyers to debate that. But as a historian, I see the case of intentionality in this particular case, and the case of this war presented presented as clear as one can imagine. So the Stalin, Stalin didn't say that people should die, he was saying that Kulaks should be liquidated as a class, which meant some Ukrainians now have to be liquidated as a nation. If and that's, that's, that's again for me, for me, that's really, really clear indication of genocidal intentions. And then you look at the, the level of destruction, you see it there.

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### **Anatol Lieven 50:17**

There'll be a number of questions you referred, of course, to the case of Finland. And well, obviously, I mean, the price of Finnish independence, qualified, and democracy and non occupation by the Soviet Union and non-annexation during the Cold War was finished neutrality. Do you think that, a.) just how important do you think the expansion of NATO was to the Russian Putin's decision to go to war? And secondly, at the start of the war, of course, the president Zelensky offered neutrality as a way to peace. Is that still a way to peace? And may it also be the inescapable outcome if if more pessimistic assessments of the of the military situation are correct?

### **Serhii Plokhyy 51:28**

Well, the neutrality can be certainly forced on Ukraine, like the removal of the nuclear deterrent from the Ukrainian territory was forced to Ukraine by the United States and Russia. So, yes, things like that, things like that are quite possible. The question is that with the Russian policy continuing as they are, I see Ukraine without really meaningful security guarantees on NATO membership, becoming under, ending up under the Russian control within the next years. Right. So because the the right of Fins to exist was not questioned by the Soviet Union, the right of Austrians to exist was not questioned by the Soviet Union, but was basically postulated by the Soviet Union that Austria should should be not German. But this is not the case with Ukraine. The case with Ukraine is that that nation is not supposed to, to exist. Neutral status is basically if the both sides were not neutral, recognize it, and, and and respect it. I don't see anything in Russian policy indicating that that readiness to accept Ukrainian independence and Ukrainian neutrality. Now a lot has been made out of NATO expansion. And I have no doubt that in Kremlin, they didn't like they didn't like the expansion, which made although the extension of it. But one thing that has happened already was the start of the war and this is Finland joining joining NATO. If NATO would be a threat, and if in Moscow would really believe that NATO was there to attack Russian, if not every single Russian soldier, but at least half of those soldiers would be immediately removed from Ukraine and moved to protect the border with NATO that was doubled in terms of its land. But nothing of that sort happened. Because in Russia, they understand that NATO is not there to attack them and doesn't present a threat. But they continue to fight, to fight in Ukraine. Under the under the under the slogan that we are against NATO moving to the to the Russian borders. But NATO has been on the Russian border before and now that the it's actually moved further. The story of the NATO expansion is not so much the story of NATO moving east, it's the Story of Eastern Europe running west for the protection of the NATO umbrella. And certainly the case of Finland demonstrates that and that was significant certain of Poland, and Hungary and others. So Ukraine is just behaving like like any other country on the border with Russia, being being concerned not only now about the history of the on the Russian imperialism, but also of the reality on the ground.

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### **Anatol Lieven 55:06**

But of course Poland and Hungary and Finland and even the Baltic states, we're not going to carry Sevastopol with them into NATO.

### **Serhii Plokhy 55:18**

Sevastopol and Crimea, historically speaking, are relatively recent Russian acquisition, Russian Imperial acquisition, which was turned into the holy place of the Russian Empire and then was inherited by the but by the Soviet Union. So at the time of the start of the war 2013, that's where the war started, there was no discussion of Ukraine's membership in NATO. There was no discussion of Ukraine's membership in the European Union. The war started over the issue of the Ukraine's desire to sign association agreements with European Union. So no NATO, no European Union, it was Association Agreement with the European Union. And why it was so important because any country that signs Association Agreement with European Union can sign Association and become a member of another union. So that was about Russia keeping its sphere of influence. That's, that's the beginning annexation of the Crimea. And then you have all sorts of, of course of rhetoric around around NATO. But 2013, Ukraine and NATO were on different planets, Putin himself admitted that before the start of all the aggression, the Western leaders will go to him and tell, Ukraine will not be member of NATO. After the Bucharest Summit, Ukraine was not given a map Membership Action Plan for NATO, in response to Russian concerns. So what happens, Russia attacks Georgia and Russia attacks, attacks, Ukraine, after NATO accommodated Russia and didn't give those countries a plan for joining NATO. So NATO is is part of the story, but it's not as central as important as, again, it has been claimed on on the part of Russia and again, this war didn't start in 2022. It started in 2016.

### **Anatol Lieven 57:43**

Though, I have to say that. I mean, of course, the whole background is extremely complicated. But it was in fact, Georgia that attacked South Ossetia into in August 2008, and that's pretty clear.

### **Serhii Plokhy 58:00**

Well, we are talking about the wars in the post Soviet space, in which the territorial integrity of country's new Republics has been has been challenged. And there is only one Republic, which is Russia, that tries to solve these issues for Moldova and Georgia and others. So it's very clear no one intervened into Russia, despite the horrible war that was raised in Chechnya. So that's, that's the context of the Georgian War.

### **Anatol Lieven 58:42**

Deeper, as I say, the deeper, complicated context. One final question, but with quite broad implications. Poland, of course, has presented itself as Ukraine's strongest supporter in the

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West, along with the Baltic states, and yet, of course, you have also seen Polish pressure on Ukraine and blockade first over grain and now this is a social, not a state movement by by Polish trackers. Is this something specific to Polish Ukrainian history? You know, going back into the past of tensions that we all know about? And does this represent a threat to Ukraine's hopes of joining the European Union? If when it comes to these concrete economic issues, even Ukraine's supposedly strongest partner cannot in fact be relied on?

### **Serhii Plokyh 59:52**

Yeah, there is a lot in Ukrainian Polish relations in the history that is super problematic. and is being discussed and debated, and the debates are very heated. So I probably could dedicate another two hours discussing it, longer than that, but the two factors that I want to point to now and they're not necessarily related to history, or directly. One is, of course, the Polish concern about Poland and Eastern Europe being next, in terms of being being the victim of aggression. So the security considerations are absolutely crucial in terms of support for Ukraine. The cultural proximity between Ukraine and Poland and long history of coexistence in different states certainly contributed to the fact that the Poles like no other group actually accepted Ukrainian refugees, allowed, basically, they welcome that to their houses, to their apartments, and so on and so forth. But there is there is an issue that always wasn't always will be in any union, like European Union, which is based first and foremost on the economic on the economic foundations. And Ukraine is grain expert, or, or in case of this blockades. This is about the Ukrainian trucking companies and logistic companies in logistics. They are, of course, competitors, on the east, on the European on the European market. And what you see now, who is basically behind behind the blockade of the border, are basically the Polish truckers who lost a lot of business because they can't go and deliver goods to Ukraine anymore. It's too dangerous, there is war, that part of business went to the to the Ukrainian truckers are now also going through Poland, to the rest to the rest of the European Union, on the top of the Polish truckers lost part of his business because they can't go to Russia anymore, because of the war and sanctions. So what you see is basically an issue and an economic issue and issue of the economic competition that plays itself in the in this general context of sympathy toward Ukraine support for Ukraine, based on good parts of Ukrainian Polish history, and based on the real consideration about security on the part of Poland and other Eastern European countries. So I hope this and the government that is leaving the office doesn't want to take any any responsibility for what is happening, leaving the trouble for the incoming government in Poland. So there is politics there as well. So that sort of economic issues, they, they will continue, and again, the most important factor, of course, today is security. But economy economy continues to be to play its role in relations between Ukraine and Poland, or Poland, or any other country where you ask.

### **Anatol Lieven 1:03:41**

Well, thank you so much. This is I'm afraid all we have time for but this was really a most fascinating discussion. And I'm most grateful to you for taking part in this. And congratulations on all your on all your work and your amazing productivity.

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**Serhii Plokyh 1:03:56**

Thank you. Thank you. And I really I really enjoyed that discussion. So thank you very much for your questions