



The Ukrainian National Movement and its Consequences: Review of Two Recent Books by Serhii Plokyh

Clark Johnson¹

Abstract: There are conflicting explanations for the current war in Ukraine. One is that Russia's sphere of influence was being invaded, and Russia had little choice but to respond; the review cites three advocates of this argument. A second, Professor Plokyh's, is that the war is driven by the latest in a long pattern of national independence movements, that Ukraine's movement is likely to win, and in so doing will hasten an end to Russian imperial politics and culture. Plokyh shows that the national movement in Ukraine has been intertwined with embrace of democracy and constitutionalism, and that Russian intervention has accelerated such developments. Plokyh sees the war - because it is so large -- as having important consequences for world order. Russia is fading as a world power, leaving a US-China bipolarity. Changes in the nature of war mean that smaller countries now have military sustainability. In a parallel development, such countries will play a growing role in establishing international norms and legitimacy.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukrainian National Movement, Russian Imperialism, NATO Expansion, Vladimir Putin, Stephen Walt, Volodymyr Zelensky, Serhii Plokyh, Stephen F. Cohen, John Mearsheimer, Jack Matlock, Foreign Policy Realism, International Legitimacy, Mikhail Gorbachev, Budapest Memorandum, Victor Yanukovych, European Settlement, 1963, Boris Yeltsin.

INTRODUCTION: A CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE

The US-Soviet Cold War provides necessary context. The five-year Berlin Crisis, the central US-Soviet standoff during the Cold War, was settled by the summer of 1963. Essential JFK-Khrushchev understandings were 1) that the US would maintain military forces in Europe, and hence that German forces would remain under US command; and 2) agreement, in part via the limited test ban treaty, signed and ratified in 1963, that West Germany would be blocked from developing its own nuclear weapons. (Trachtenberg, 1999)

Alongside these understandings, the US and Soviet Union agreed that there would be no change in the political status of East Germany or in access to Berlin via *Autobahn* from the West, and by implication, there would be no change in the Soviet dominance of Warsaw Pact countries further east. These understandings regarding Germany survived its reunification in 1990, then the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and then of the Soviet Union, both in 1991. Implicitly understood was that newly independent countries abutting post-Soviet Russia - eg, Ukraine and Georgia -- would not join NATO, which almost by definition is an anti-Russian security alliance.

In part a consequence of this history, an influential view has urged the US as well as other Western governments to keep some political distance from Ukraine's war effort going back to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and to the larger-scale invasion of Ukraine

¹ Author of *Uncommon Arguments on Common Topics: Essays on Political Economy and Diplomacy*. EconSciences (KSP Books); open access - June 2022

in February 2022. The premise of this view has been that Russia should have a sphere of influence (like the US in Latin America, or perhaps China, in various venues), particularly in view of German invasions during the twentieth century. I highlight three prominent advocates of this argument.

Stephen Cohen (1938-2020), of Princeton and New York Universities, was a man of the Left. One of his lifelong projects was to demonstrate that Soviet communism might have escaped the tyranny of Stalinism. His well-regarded biography² on early Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin (1973), who had advocated leaving in place the comparatively market-friendly, Lenin-introduced New Economic Policy of the 1920s, was in this spirit. Stalin instead moved to extreme state socialism, and purged most who argued, or had argued, otherwise; Bukharin was executed following a show-trial in 1937. In the 1980s, Cohen became personally close to Premier Gorbachev who, like Cohen, sought inspiration from early Bolsheviks toward renovating and redirecting Soviet socialism. Cohen was scathingly critical of US-encouraged mass privatizations during the 1990s, and of Russian President Boris Yeltsin's willingness to facilitate them. Cohen later offered a benign view of Vladimir Putin, defending him against charges that he was massively corrupt (arguing instead that Putin inherited a corrupt system from Yeltsin,) and disbelieved evidence that Putin frequently arranged executions of domestic enemies. (Cohen, 2019; 1-9) One commentator opined that Cohen saw Putin's Russia as having the necessary international heft to counter-balance US excesses in the world (Kotsonus, 2020; p xvii.)

John Mearsheimer, an "offensive realist" at the University of Chicago, has described his role as parallel, or successor, to Cohen's in warning against US involvement in Ukraine. Indeed, Mearsheimer (like Cohen) has identified the US and NATO as largely responsible for provoking Russian invasion in 2014 and again in 2022. He argues that as a geopolitical off-shore power, the US should confine its efforts to preventing another power from becoming a regional hegemon. He sees Russia as too weak to threaten hegemony in Europe - hence he wants the US to stay out of on-shore disputes among European countries. As a matter of grand strategy, Mearsheimer has often argued that the US should align with Russia, the better to contain a rising China.

Mearsheimer lost credibility with many when he told the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* in May 2025 that, were he in Putin's position, he would have invaded Ukraine just as Putin did; indeed, he would have done it sooner (Motyl, 2025). More recently, in his frequent online interviews, he continues to argue that Russia is winning the war³ - a view that runs counter to conclusions often taken from available evidence, and even to what Russian leadership appears to believe.

A third opponent of military support for Ukraine has been Jack Matlock, who was the US Ambassador to Russia during 1987-1991, when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union imploded. He explained in a May 2024 interview: "I would say the whole concept of ending the Cold War was based partly upon the idea that the Western alliance would not expand [eastward]." Matlock, who aligns with a realist tradition, has shared with Mearsheimer a high estimation of Russia's military power, and of the futility of fighting against it. In the same interview, he explained:

² Eg, Kolokowski (1978), p. 43.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGL1RBBUrSU&t=3471s>

“More arms simply will enable more destruction, most of it in Ukraine itself. The longer this war goes on, the more territory Russia is going to take and probably insist on keeping. If it goes on much longer Ukraine will turn out to be a state which is hardly viable, particularly if it continues to define itself as anti-Russian, its main neighbor, and a country to which its eastern and southern areas belonged for several centuries.”

Matlock has been similarly dismissive of claims that Ukraine is an aspiring democracy, or that it embraces rule-of-law standards any more than Putin’s Russia does. He offered:

“Today, when we say we’re defending democracy when we support the Ukrainians, that’s absolute nonsense. The current Ukrainian government is the result of a coup d’etat in 2014 that removed an elected president. Areas that had broken away from Ukraine but Ukraine claims, had no vote. The current government is dictatorial and corrupt... What we now say is that we must protect and defend democracy overseas and create it for other people. Isn’t this saying the same thing that Brezhnev was saying about socialism?”

Matlock also embraced a canard that Britain and the US discouraged a Ukraine-Russia peace settlement in the weeks after the February 24, 2022, invasion:

“The current tragedy is that it is bad for everybody. Obviously the people suffering most are the Ukrainians and we also know that a few weeks after the Russian invasion they came very near coming to an agreement but were discouraged by Boris Johnson. They were also, I’m sure, discouraged by the United States.” (Baszak, 2024)

In fact, a few weeks earlier the US offered Ukrainian President Zelensky a plane to leave Ukraine forever - not to stay and fight, as one might infer from Matlock’s account. And according to a *Foreign Affairs* research piece on topic, Zelensky wanted a security guarantee from the US as a condition for settling with Russia; March 2022 negotiations fell apart when no such guarantee was offered (Charap and Rodchenko, 2024).

Cohen was, and Mearsheimer and Matlock are, credible observers. And with neo-isolation rising in the US, and Donald Trump in the White House, their and similar arguments offered a backdrop of reinforcement for any case against military support for Ukraine.

Some of the most prominent historians of Russia and the Ukraine reject these views, across the board. Stephen Kotkin, Russian historian and Stalin’s exhaustive biographer, has said the Ukrainian side represents enlightened aspirations, and is fighting “for the rest of us” on behalf of democracy and liberal values. Timothy Snyder, historian of fascism and of Eastern Europe, has emphatically embraced Ukraine’s cause. He has emphasized that Ukraine is self-standing and autonomous, that Ukrainians are not a subspecies of Russians and should not be understood always in the context of Russian history or politics. Serhii Plokhy, Harvard University’s prominent historian of Ukraine, has added two recent books to our understanding of the ongoing war and its background.

MISSING LINKS IN THE NARRATIVE

Plokhy is at essence an historian, not a political scientist or military expert. I mean that historians begin with less conceptual framework, less inclination to graft new information

onto a latticework already in place, and are more likely to emphasize what we might call unfiltered evidence. Plotky's *m.o.* is to stick to his narrative, and to discipline himself not to highlight views of others in the Ukraine policy debate, or in most cases even to mention others by name. One inference from his approach is that the Russo-Ukrainian War has not simply played out ethnic or political forces that were already in motion. It has reshuffled the deck; it has reinforced both the Ukrainian national movement and its Western aspirations - and Russian regression.

A core tenet of the initial case against military support for Ukraine was that NATO expansion eastward was a provocation against post-Soviet Russia. There is merit in this view, although the details belie any one-way arguments. The Budapest Memorandum of December 1994, by which Ukraine returned nuclear weapons to Moscow, was accompanied by the US-Russia-Ukraine Treaty (January 1994) and the Treaty on Cooperation, Friendship and Partnership (May 1997), according to which Russia accepted Ukraine's borders, including of Crimea. Ukraine gave up the missiles (as did Belarus and Kazakhstan in parallel agreements) in order to gain "assurances" - short of guarantees -- from the US, UK, and Russia regarding sovereignty, borders, and so on. Plokyh favorably cites the view that Ukraine's price for denuclearization should have been higher - perhaps NATO membership. (Plokyh, 2026; pp 42-43) Certainly NATO membership has been a goal of Ukraine's leadership since those negotiations. (Plokyh, 2023; p. 74)

Matlock is surely correct that NATO expansion during the 1990s created unnecessary tensions with post-Soviet Russia. On a related matter, Henry Kissinger indicated in 1999 that he believed NATO's then-recent expansion, combined with its intervention in Kosovo without UN Security Council approval, would drive Russian politics in a nationalist, and authoritarian, direction. (Kosovo On-Line, 2023) Matlock believes more cooperative arrangements with the Russian Federation might have brought an end to war in the Balkans, and thus accelerated the disarmament that had begun under Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. (Matlock, 2010; p xi)

But his comment above, in 2024, essentially that the Cold War would have continued without US-Soviet agreement to avoid eastward expansion of NATO - is ahistorical. Matlock cites discussions at the Malta conference in December 1989, attended by Gorbachev and the first President Bush. Yet by many accounts, the Cold War had already ended a year earlier, with Gorbachev's December 7, 1988, speech to the United Nations as the reference point. Gorbachev called for sharp cutbacks in military forces and materiel in Eastern Europe, and said the Soviet Union must join the world's information age. He never mentioned Karl Marx, scarcely noted the 1917 Revolution, and called for tolerance of different political systems. US Secretary of State Shultz said Gorbachev "almost adopted a Western point of view on human rights." Gorbachev added that "mutual understanding has started to build up, elements of trust have arisen, without which it is very difficult to move forward in politics." (Shultz, 1993; pp 1107-1108)

This is the sort of shared legitimacy on which structures of peace can be built. As Shultz recounts the end of US-Soviet Cold War tensions, discussion of NATO expansion was absent one way or the other. The Cold War instead ended with arms agreements and understandings on legitimate domestic and international conduct.

Matlock has justified obvious violations of Ukraine's borders since 2014 with the explanation that NATO should not have expanded eastward, or brought NATO into the Serbian War in 1999. He wrote this after the 2022 invasion:

What the U.S. demand ignores is that, under traditional international law, agreements remain valid rebus sic stantibus (things remaining the same). When the Budapest memorandum was signed in 1994 there was no plan to expand NATO to the east and Gorbachev had been assured in 1990 that the alliance would not expand. When in fact it did expand right up to Russia's borders, Russia was confronted with a radically different strategic situation. (Matlock, 2022)

Matlock's administrative boss during the Reagan years, Secretary Shultz, emphatically disagreed. Here is what former Defense Secretary Perry and he coauthored already in 2014, following Russian annexation of Crimea:

Russia has completely ignored the Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances of 1994 in which, as a signatory, it agreed not to violate any Ukrainian territory. Russia has taken Crimea and is actively stirring trouble in the eastern part of that country, a blatant violation of solemn vows. One of us, Mr. Perry, participated in the negotiations leading to the Budapest Memorandum, and can testify to the seriousness of that broken promise. He can also testify that both the Russian and American negotiators understood that this Memorandum was critical to Ukraine's decision to give up its almost 2,000 nuclear weapons. (Perry and Shultz, 2016)

We can best leave legal conclusions to international lawyers, and perhaps to diplomats. Plokhly's books take us away from such matters to what he argues the war is really about - which is certainly not a treaty violation. On the Russian side, it was about recovery from the collapse of the Soviet Union and re-establishing Empire - a project almost destined to fail in the 21st century. For Ukraine, it was about an expanding national movement, a movement based on growing political (not ethnic) solidarity. (Plokhly, 2026: p. 229) For Ukrainians, Russian invasions accelerated the process.

Cohen was and Matlock has been inclined to treat the status of democracy and the rule of law in the Ukraine with disdain, so a few highlights are in order. In 1993, following a movement of tanks against the Russian Duma, Yeltsin introduced a new Constitution that enhanced the powers of the executive. Russia's two-year experiment with parliamentary democracy was over. Russia then seemed to become a bit more authoritarian each year, until Yeltsin - taking advantage of loopholes in the new Constitution - facilitated takeover by Putin. (Plokhly, 2023; pp 34-36) Two Chechnyan wars, one each under Yeltsin and Putin, brutalized Russian culture and society, and strengthened Russia's imperial model as trans-ethnic and trans-cultural. (Plokhly, 2023; p 101)

But democracy lived on in already-independent Ukraine. Ukraine's 2004 Constitution reduced presidential powers. While Russia's defenders point to US or other Western support for the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Maidan Revolution of 2014, there is evidence that much Ukrainian opinion was actively behind both. Outside interference came from both directions: Putin demanded that Ukraine's President Yanukovich use force to put down demonstrations in 2014. Yanukovich worked with allies in parliament to weaken the 2004

Constitution and increase the president's power. In response, the Ukraine parliament then voted to remove Yanukovich, returned to the Constitution, and passed a resolution, soon implemented, prohibiting the use of police against protestors. Putin responded by invading Crimea and the Donbas later that year. (Plokyh, 2023; pp 93, 96-99) Volodymyr Zelensky was elected President in 2019 on an anti-corruption platform, defeating incumbent Petro Poroshenko, who had used office to become very rich. Poroshenko unsuccessfully attempted to portray candidate Zelensky as pro-Russian, as a political successor to Yanukovich. Ukraine was at once becoming more nationalist and more democratic. (Plokyh, 2023; pp 138-139) Indeed, opposition to such a democratic example immediately on Russia's border was part of Putin's calculus to interfere, and then to invade.

NATO expansion played a large role in public discourse as events moved toward February 24, 2022. Promises to Ukraine of eventual NATO membership in the Bucharest Declaration of 2008 were reprised in the US-Ukraine Strategic Partnership of November 2021. Biden Administration leaders announced that potential member countries should be able to join any military alliance they chose. Putin had threatened over the years that Russia would destroy Ukraine as a sovereign state, were it to join NATO.

Cognizant of the collision course between Western promises and Russian threats, Harvard's Stephen Walt (among others) argued a month before the February invasion that Ukraine should embrace permanent neutrality. He added, as he had emphasized for some time, that Ukraine should renounce NATO membership, even if membership were offered to them. (Walt, 2022) In what was very unexpected evidence to this reader, Plokyh summarizes that Ukrainian officials offered Russian negotiators something quite similar to what Walt proposed they should offer, only to have it rejected (Plokyh, 2023; pp 147, 156). Plokyh reinforced his argument in personal communication with me earlier in 2026:

... The reference is to the January and February 2022 negotiations between Yermak and Kozak that I refer to on p. 147. According to Reuters reporting from September 2022, Kozak succeeded in getting a promise from Ukraine not to join NATO in exchange for not starting the war. My conversations with some of the key officials in the Ukrainian administration and my reading of Zelensky's signaling to his elites on the eve of invasion suggest that he believed that negotiations with Kozak would preclude the war.⁴

Plokyh then takes us closer to what Putin's real *casus belli* was. He wants to rebuild the Russian Empire of his imagination, beginning with telling us that Russians and Ukrainians are historically the same people. Putin's vision harkens back to Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and Alexander II, and is nurtured by more recent thinkers including Soviet arch-critic Alexander Solzhenitsyn and fascist ideologue Alexander Dugin. There is little historical accuracy in Putin's accounts, yet he is voicing a self-assertion of many Russians. Plokyh stresses the role of Putin not only as a mirror of Russian political culture, but as policy maker. It is worth reciting what Plokyh told an interviewer in 2024:

[A] so-called chauvinistic imperial streak is what helps Russians hold on, it is part of their identity. It doesn't change overnight, it doesn't happen with Boris Yeltsin climbing on a tank... How is it corrected? It takes place through defeat. That is the only cure for imperialism. And Russia is getting those

⁴ From Professor Plokyh's email to me, April 5, 2026.

pains nowadays. Unfortunately, thanks to us [Ukrainians]. (Plokhy, 2026; p. 226) Italics added.

Zelensky was elected President of Ukraine in April 2019. Two Minsk Agreements from 2014 and 2015 had attempted to resolve issues regarding the ongoing low-intensity war with Russia that had begun with Russian annexations in 2014. Zelensky met in Paris in December 2019 with Putin, host French President Macron, and German Chancellor Merkel. The fundamental issue of the Minsk agreements was on the table: whether Donbas elections would take place before or after Russian withdrawal. His hand forced by growing national sentiment, Zelensky would not accept Putin's demand that elections take place prior to Russian departure. Indeed, accepting that demand would have turned Donbas into a Russian-controlled enclave. By several accounts, this is when Putin began to think of a new war with Ukraine. (Putin actually withdrew from the Minsk Agreements two days before the 2022 invasion.)

Just as in 1994, after giving up what had been the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons, Ukraine looked to potential NATO membership after the 2019 meeting in Paris. Putin took it as more provocation; but from Zelensky's perspective, it was defensive. (Plokhy, 2023; p 140)

When Russian soldiers got the order to invade and to take Kiev, they were provided with only light rations and told their purpose was to prevent the installation of NATO bases in Ukraine. Putin's war declaration rhetoric pointed to the struggle against the West and "denazification," which was code for replacing the Zelensky-led government. This was roughly within the bounds of what a limited war of purported liberation might assert. (Plokhy, 2023; pp 152-154) The light rations quickly ran out, and Russian effort to take Kiev failed, as its army turned out to be much weaker than expected. But Putin, rather than look for a way to abort a failed effort, seems to have raised his personal commitment, and the ideological stakes.

On June 9, 2022, Putin addressed an exhibition in Moscow on Peter the Great. As he spoke to students and entrepreneurs, Putin praised Czar Peter's 21-year Great Northern War. He offered the theme to the group that Peter "was not taking anything away, he was returning," which (although rather cryptic) provides a teleological framework for conquest. British military historian Lawrence Freedman wrote a few days later that the Ukraine War had become a "different war" to the one Putin had begun in February. It had passed from being a war of purported liberation to a war of conquest. and it would draw upon most of the Russian state's resources. (Plokhy, 2023; p 216) Unexpectedly for Russian invaders, they would run up against another potent force, that of a Ukrainian national movement.

An early phase of separate nationhood started with the collapse of the Russian front during WWI, and the breakup of the Romanov-led Russian Empire. In the same time-compressed rush of events, the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires also broke up -- and into maps-full of separate states. What prevented new states from arising in the Russian domain was the rise of the Soviet Union. The root issue for Marxists is class, not ethnicity. The Soviet Union suppressed the nationalities issue for 70 years, often violently.

The new Red Army lost some early battles against Ukrainian forces; Soviet founder Lenin brought Ukraine into the new Union in 1922 via a concession - that is, granting a degree of autonomy. (This is why Putin accuses Lenin of creating Ukraine. But as Plokhy

summarizes, Lenin was building the Soviet Union, not Ukraine. For his imperial themes, Putin looks to pre-Soviet times for inspiration.) (Plokhy, 2026; pp 20, 103-106) A few years later, Stalin wiped out any autonomy Ukrainians might have felt.

That the collapse of the Soviet Union during and immediately after 1991 was peaceful astonished many. Plokhy gives us a brief tour of the collapse of other empires during the 20th century, and concludes that, unlike many of them, the Russians allowed nominally-sovereign entities to secede. The most important secession, the one that set the pattern for elsewhere, was Ukraine. (Plokhy, 2023; pp 29-33) The Ukraine parliament declared independence, then 92 percent of voters ratified it on December 1, 1991. Gorbachev declared the end of the Soviet Union later that month. That pre-dated by a few years arguments on NATO expansion and Ukraine's nuclear weapons. It also predated outbreaks of war among former Soviet Republics, as the nationalities issue re-emerged. Military moves against Ukraine beginning in 2014 have attempted to roll the clock backward to before 1991, and perhaps to much earlier.

Russia embarked on this war to enhance its power, but to do so required punching above its weight, which it was hence unable to sustain. The post-Cold War model for Russian strategy was multi-polarity - for Russia to challenge the US and to counter-balance a rising China. Ukraine was a traditional nexus of Russian, and then Soviet, power - agricultural, scientific, industrial. However, Russian weakness in 2022 soon became evident, and endless war drains resources. Rather than balancing as a third pole against China, Russia turned to China for support. In order to maintain economic relations with European powers, China has limited its direct military help to Russia. And members of Russia's own military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, all former Soviet Republics, want little to do with the Ukraine War.

Mobilization has been resisted in Chechnya, Dagestan, and in parts of Siberia. Chechnya, which is part of the Russian Federation, has the status of hostile autonomy within it. (Plokhy, 2023; p. 224) For the first time in decades, Russia, drained by the war in Ukraine, was unable to support its Assad family allies in Syria, who then lost power. Turkey, which had long been deferential to its larger neighbor, within days of the February invasion asserted its power under the 1936 Montreux Convention to deny passage of Russian warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea.

A NEW BALANCE OF POWER

The balance of power implicit in the 1963 European settlement has been challenged by Ukraine's wartime performance, and may be decisively overturned. Anticipating a settlement, the US was perceived as having taken the upper hand the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. It was true that the US secretly removed missiles from Turkey as part of the negotiation - but the fact that the Soviets agreed not to publicly link the events reflected their relative weakness. Conflicts are settled when antagonistic states accept the new power balance between them.⁵ The Soviet power profile in Europe was taken down a notch, but Soviet dominance in eastern Europe would continue. Those premises remained in place after the end of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of its successor

⁵ The formulation is Robert Pape's, via a group email in early July 2026. I doubt it was original with Pape.

Russian Federation. Within such a power framework, it would make no sense to challenge Russia over Ukraine prerogatives, or Ukraine independence.

But those premises *were* challenged. Commitments reached in the early 1990s were less than reliable. The Russian Federation fell into depression, corruption, and long-suppressed ethnic and geographic fracturing. While there is a case that NATO's eastern expansion violated what Russians had reason to expect, there is counter-evidence that Russia itself violated rules of the European security structure. Within days of the February invasion, German Chancellor Scholz drew attention to the Russian violation of the Final Act Helsinki Accords of 1975, according to which an attack on the territorial integrity of Ukraine was an attack on the integrity and security of *all* European states, including of the reunified Federal Republic of Germany (Ploky, 2023; p. 259).

The US is an off-shore power, reprising the earlier role of Britain vis-à-vis Europe. According to a "realist" concept, off-shore powers should stay out of on-shore conflicts unless important regional power balances are threatened; we can find approximately this formulation in Hans Morgenthau (1973; pp 193-194), Mearsheimer (2014), and Kissinger (Ferguson, 2015; Ch.10). Application of this concept would have kept the US largely out of wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and, in 2026, out of Iran. On the face of it, the concept suggests the US should stay away from a conflict in Ukraine that does not threaten regional hegemony in Europe as a whole, Asia, or the Middle East. But the Ukraine War is having unanticipated geopolitical consequences.

We knew almost with the invasion on February 24, 2022, that a setback to the international rule of law had occurred, that Ukrainian sovereignty was violated, and that the Russian military had committed large-scale war crimes. And we saw within days that Ukrainian resistance would be motivated and determined. But the geopolitical import of the invasion, and of the defense against it, were not immediately evident. The Russian invasion seemed to be in line with long-standing Russian demands for a *cordon sanitaire* against the lures of Western progress and democracy, and an assertion of a Russian sphere of influence. Leaders of "Old Europe" at the time - Macron, Scholz and Italian PM Mario Draghi - were eager to avoid confrontation with Russia; some in their countries even saw Russia as a useful counter-balance to US influence on their Continent. In May 2022, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi DiMaio presented a plan to the UN Secretary General and to the G-7 re-asserting neutralization of Ukraine (meaning no NATO membership), and proposing withdrawal of Russian troops, lifting of sanctions, negotiations on Crimea and the Donbas, and some multi-lateral moves toward peace and security in Europe.

They soon discovered -- as Ukrainians had learned in February -- that Putin was not interested. (Ploky, 2023, pp 263-264) That probably marked the end of the hope among them that the war was essentially about NATO expansion and neutrality. A few weeks later, the three Old Europe leaders met in Poland, and then (at some personal risk) took a train into Ukraine. Rather than press a peace proposal on Zelenskyy and the Ukrainians, this time they promised to support whatever the latter chose to do. (Ploky, 2023; pp 265-268)

Ploky, writing in late 2023, commented on the stakes:

The war between Russia and Ukraine can continue indefinitely unless the West realizes that what is at stake isn't just the fate of Ukraine, but the future of the West itself...

At stake is the stability of the international order and the future of democracy as a global force. The outcome of wars of such magnitude shape the future for generations to come. (Ploky, 2026; p. 171, 174).

In the books under review, Ploky does not self-identify as a foreign policy realist. His concept of the “future of the West” goes beyond balance of power theory, although they are related. Beyond military balances, Ploky calls attention to the dynamics of de-colonization as well as to matters of rule of law, human rights, and war crimes.

Realists during the US-Soviet Cold War usually emphasized the US-Soviet axis, in which post WW2 decolonization was not center stage. Cohen and Mearsheimer in recent years focused on Russia as a great power. Cohen seemed to pine for the days of détente and the parity principle in the 1970s, when the US and Soviets responded predictably and proportionately to each other’s actions. (Cohen, 2020; pp 27-29) Cohen identified forces in Ukraine as linked to how much Russian is spoken by region, and he was generally sympathetic to Moscow’s claims that nationalist “Nazi” forces were prominent in Ukraine; he never quite acknowledged that Ukraine could be an independent actor. Mearsheimer always identifies Russia as the world’s third great power (alongside the US and China), hence deserving of deference on strategic power matters. Reflecting such premises, the prewar consensus in both Moscow and Washington was that Ukraine would be crushed in a few days of war. (Ploky, 2026; p 98)

As a corrective, Ploky points out in a 2024 interview that “there have only been exceptional instances of great powers winning wars against mobilized national movements. (Ploky, 2026; p 223)” Somehow all of the forecasts of an easy Russian victory, or even of a hard-fought Russian victory, have posited that such a evidence did not apply to Ukraine. Once we replace the view of Ukraine as part of a Russian sphere with a view that Ukraine is following in the tracks of dozens of other newly independent countries, the logic of outside support is turned on its head. In Vietnam, the US initially supported the colonial French, and essentially fought against a national movement for two decades. In Ukraine now, in a reversal, outside Western powers are supporting de-colonization. In the case of the Soviet Union and Russia, the “nationalities” question has mainly been understood from the perspective of the center (ie, Russia). It is time to join the historiography of other imperial and post-imperial places and give much more weight to evidence from post-Soviet lands themselves, especially Ukraine.

Decolonization of histories of the Empire’s nationalities will restore perspective, and it will help with long-range understanding. (Ploky, 2026; pp 199, 215ff) Ploky (2026; p 98) argues that “the key reason for the success of the resistance is the rise in Ukraine of a strong national identity and loyalty to the democratic state.” Ploky is upbeat about Ukraine’s shorter-term military prospects. But we can reasonably separate the shorter-term forecasts from his greater confidence in longer-range national success.

The other set of issues that Ploky narrates in detail concerns democratic norms and, related, records on war crimes and respect for human rights. If power were only military, perhaps these would not matter. In fact, stability rests on legitimacy as well as on hard power. This also gives the outside world a stake in the outcome of the Ukraine War. Snyder has identified the war as a crucible for an international confrontation between democratic and authoritarian forces. (Snyder, 2024) Kissinger sometimes offered a nuanced, less mechanical understanding of foreign policy realism - according to which establishing peace

requires building legitimacy and consent. He argued, for example, that the structural weakness of the post-WWI Versailles settlement was that it rested on no agreed concept of legitimacy. It soon broke down. The more successful post-Napoleonic settlement at Vienna in 1815 was expressed in the Holy Alliance and the Quadruple Alliance, which combined shared legitimacy with military readiness. (Kissinger, 1994; pp 82-83)⁶

Governments in the 2020's have trended toward less constitutional restraint in Russia, Israel, the US, and elsewhere. There are large hard right electoral movements in European countries, including in France and Germany. This is surely a moment to view confrontation in Ukraine under the light of the shared legitimacy that was emerging at the end of the Cold War in 1988 and 1989 -- and which has since withered. Mearsheimer and Matlock's self-described realist views of the Ukraine War, miss the import of this. Mearsheimer (2018; 171-179) treats the pressure to bring Ukraine into the EU and NATO as driven by Western powers, in what he calls "liberal delusion." Matlock dismissed Ukraine as a "corrupt dictatorship," by implication similar to Putin's Russia. (Baszak, 2024) In fact, the Ukraine national movement, the Westernizing imperative, and strengthening of legal infrastructure, were intertwined, and significantly home-embraced.

In a revealing detour, consider some publicly expressed views on legal charges of wartime genocide. Both Mearsheimer and Matlock freely cite charges of genocide against Israel during the Gaza War (Mearsheimer, 2024; Matlock, 2023). The Gaza charges are now in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). At the same time, Russia also has been credibly accused of genocide -- for actions during the Ukraine War, and again with charges before the ICJ. In contrast to their denunciations of Israel, neither Mearsheimer nor Matlock have publicly mentioned such charges against Russia.⁷ This is corroborating evidence that both have de-emphasized, even dismissed, legal or governing legitimacy as an important factor in understanding the geopolitics of the Ukraine War. It is a telling omission.

US leadership grasped early what was at stake. On August 26, 2022, following a visit to Ukraine with Secretary of State Blinken, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, presumably speaking for the Biden Administration, announced that, "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kind of things that it has done in invading Ukraine (Plokhy, 2023; p 251)" It is hard to interpret this as other than a policy objective of changing the balance of power between Russia and the region heretofore considered Russia's "sphere of influence." Given Putin's imperial ambitions, Austin's publicly stated objective acknowledged the stakes.

When Austin said that, it is likely that the question of legitimacy, and of the justice of supporting the fledgling state of Ukraine, was large in his mind. Indeed, the face-off between democracy and authoritarianism was a constant theme for the Biden Administration. It is also likely that Austin had intelligence on the debilitated state of the Russian army, included its weakened spirit. We can say now that Mearsheimer and Matlock were quite wrong in their forecasts of a decisive Russian victory, and of ongoing gains in territory. If we think of the war as one of re-assertion of Empire - Putin's policy - against growing force of de-colonization, confrontation seems almost inevitable. Plokhy's account suggests that we would need carefully hedged premises to believe that war could have been

⁶ Also, see Morgenthau (1973; pp 215-217) for a similar view on the Holy Alliance.)

⁷ A Google Deep Mind search will quickly corroborate this

averted other than through Ukraine's capitulation, going necessarily beyond anything like offering neutrality.

With the revised realist framework suggested here, Trump's re-election in the US in November 2024 has apparently delayed a settlement in Ukraine in two ways. First, direct US military support to Ukraine was sharply reduced, although the US continued to provide some intelligence and signals support. Appropriately, nearby European powers have picked up much of the slack, often through purchases of US equipment and materiel. At the NATO meeting in Turkey in July 2026, Trump announced that the US would provide licenses to allow Ukraine to produce Patriot interceptor missiles - an important concession, if it is not withdrawn. Surely more focused US support for Ukraine would have raised costs for Russia, hence pushed them toward accepting sooner that the Ukraine national movement is here to stay.

Direct military matters aside, Trump's 2024 victory was an energizer for authoritarians everywhere, sending a message to the world that the US was no longer reliably on the side of democracy, the rule of law, or transparent government. To some extent, perhaps, European countries and Canada have moved to fill the gap. But Trump's intervention also played a role in blocking deployment on Ukraine's behalf of heretofore frozen Russian exchange reserves.⁸ If Ukraine's fight benefits the world, and boosts a new structure of legitimacy, it will be despite indifferent US leadership.

LOOKING AHEAD

Here is a snapshot into the world's coming power distribution. The Russian Federation is fading, smoking itself with a blast of imperialism from the nineteenth century, or perhaps earlier. Ukraine's reinforced sovereignty weakens any premise of a Russian sphere of influence. The US-Soviet bipolarity is replaced already with a US-China version. A lesson from asymmetric warfare in the 20th century is being reinforced: small-to-medium powers in the 21st century - Ukraine, Iran - can fight greater powers well enough to protect, even to advance, their strategic interests. The essential lack of interest in building a structure of international legitimacy by either China or the current US administration, alongside what we might call the democratization of military means, opens the field to smaller powers. The US played a dominant role in shaping international norms and legitimacy after WWII and, indeed, in projecting legitimacy forward at the end of the last Cold War. This time, it appears that leadership will have to come from elsewhere. War in eastern Europe offers leadership to Germany and France, and important roles to Britain, Poland, Sweden and perhaps others. Canada's PM Carney has taken a lead in framing international legitimacy. The two great powers may recover; but a more prominent role for some middle powers is likely to gather strength.

The Israelis should pay attention. They will not be able forever to suppress a Palestinian national movement; a continued effort to suppress it is likely to weaken Israel, parallel to what is happening in Russia. In East Asia, China's expanse includes several provinces where Han Chinese are a minority, and where China may one day confront national movements. Taiwan is 95 percent of more Han Chinese; but what we have learned from the

⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20251217-us-pressuring-eu-not-to-use-frozen-russian-assets-for-kyiv-ukraine-official-says>

Russo-Ukraine War is that national movements may not take shape along ethnic lines. A collapse of the Russian sphere of influence in their near abroad will likely influence international norms. It will undermine Chinese claims of legitimacy, should they attempt to absorb Taiwan into domestic administration. The safest course for both sides may be to leave Taiwan inside China with nearly full autonomy, while never announcing sovereignty or independence. The outcome of the Ukraine War is likely to make imperial-style domination less legitimate anywhere.

REFERENCES

- Baszak, G. (2024). "‘Ukraine Today Is Not a Democracy’: An Interview with Former Ambassador Jack Matlock." *Antiwar.com*. May 1. https://original.antiwar.com/Gregor_Baszak/2024/04/30/ukraine-today-is-not-a-democracy-an-interview-with-former-ambassador-jack-matlock/
- Charap, S. and S. Radchenko, (2024). "The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine. A Hidden History of Diplomacy That Came Up Short—but Holds Lessons for Future Negotiations." *Foreign Affairs*. April 1.
- Cohen, S. (2020), *War With Russia? From Putin and Ukraine to Trump and Russiagate*. Skyhorse Publishing; New York.
- Ferguson, N. (2015). *Kissinger 1923-1968: The Idealist*. Penguin : New York.
- Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster : New York.
- Kolakowski, L. (1978). *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. Vol. 3, *The Breakdown*. Oxford University : Oxford.
- Kosovo On-line (2023). "Henry Kissinger and Kosovo." March 26. <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/personal-opinion/henry-kissinger-and-kosovo-26-5-2023>
- Kotkin, S. (2022). "Don't Blame the West for Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *The New Yorker*. March 14.
- Kotsonus, Y. (2020). "National Figure." Included in Cohen (2022); pp xiv-xvii.
- Matlock, J (2023). "Self-defense does not license genocide," November 6. <https://jackmatlock.com/2023/11/self-defense-does-not-license-genocide/>
- Matlock, J (2022). "Ukraine: Tragedy of a Nation Divided." November 5. <https://jackmatlock.com/2022/11/there-must-be-a-negotiated-settlement-with-russia/>
- Matlock, J. (2010). *Superpower Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray - and How to Return to Reality*. Yale : New Haven.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014, Updated). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Norton : New York.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2024). "Genocide in Gaza." *John's Substack*. January 4. <https://mearsheimer.substack.com/p/genocide-in-gaza>
- Mearsheimer, J. (2018). *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale : New Haven.
- Morgenthau, H. (1973, 5th Ed.). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Knopf : New York.
- Motyl, A. (2025), "John Mearsheimer, the Not-so-realistic 'Realist,' Embarrasses Himself Again on Russia," May 15. *The Hill*.
- Pazzanese, C. (2022). "Upending Putin's Russia-Ukraine Myth," *The Harvard Gazette*. February 22.

Perry, W. and G. Shultz (2014). "Helping Ukraine is a U.S. Imperative." Wall Street Journal. August 26 <https://usukraine.org/blog/russia-is-not-that-important>

Plokhy, S. (2023). The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History. Norton : New York.

Plokhy, S. (2026). David and Goliath: Commentaries on the Russo-Ukrainian War. Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies, Number 83. Harvard : Cambridge, Mass.

Shultz, G. (1993). Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State. Scribners : New York.

Snyder, T. (2024). Experts Explain: Why Ukraine has to win the war for democracy. World Economic Forum, October 21. <https://www.weforum.org/videos/expert-explains-timothy-snyder/>

Trachtenberg, M. (1999). A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963. Princeton : Princeton, NJ.

Walt, S. (2022). "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis." Foreign Policy. January 19.