Serhii Plokhy, an eminent historian of Early and Modern Ukraine, starts *Lost Kingdom* with an anecdote about the opening of one of Moscow’s largest statues, that of Vladimir the Great, unveiled in November 2016 by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Vladimir the Great, the man who brought Christianity to Kievan Rus, and ruled Kyiv, not Muscovy, now stands proudly overlooking the Kremlin gates two years after the conflict in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine began.

The citizen-led uprising in Ukraine in 2013-2014 and subsequent events compelled Plokhy to write this book. His earlier works have touched upon themes of the development of East Slavic identities, but the present work focuses almost entirely on Russian imperialism, nationalism, and its relationship to Ukraine. *Lost Kingdom* is an intricate exploration of tensions between two spheres: the Russian imperial sphere and the Ukrainian national sphere, and the constant struggle of one to dominate and usurp another.

This loss of Russian nationhood and identity is a favorite theme of historians, anthropologists, and political scientists writing about Russia since the 1990s, and since 2014 there have been a number of works exploring Russia’s nationalism throughout the ages. Many recent works seek to understand Russia’s national quest, from *The Invention of Russia* by journalist Arkady Ostrovsky, which covers Russia’s unsuccessful search for identity since the 1990s, to *Black Wind, White Snow* by journalist Charles Clover, which explores the ideas of Pan-Slavism and Putin adviser Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism in modern Russian political ideology. Plokhy’s work goes much further back and begins with Ivan III and Muscovy’s vision of itself as a Third Rome, when Russia created an imperial understanding of itself for the next few centuries.

Plokhy’s quest for the roots of imperialism is hardly an original one, but his approach is slightly different. In the introduction, Plokhy writes that his book looks at the quest of Russian elites to return territorial wholeness of the “lost kingdom” of the ancient state that gave Russia and later the Soviet Union its historical memory and meaning. Most importantly, Plokhy notes that unlike other great powers and empires of old, Russia never gave up its quest for returning a mythical “lost kingdom.” “It is in pursuit of that vision that Russia
has lost its way to modern nationhood, and in that sense has become a ‘lost kingdom’ in its own right,” he writes. The sheer breadth of Plokhy’s historical analysis allows him to give Russia a diagnosis that a more limited study would be unable to achieve.

From Plokhy’s narrative, it becomes clear that Russia’s desire to control and influence Ukraine comes from the fact that it sees Ukraine as a vital part of its imperial identity. Though the most recent intervention in Ukraine’s politics took place in 2014, Russia’s quest for imperial identity has been at large since the Middle Ages, when concrete ideas of Russia as an imperial nation were conceived. He writes on the evolving tension between Russia’s search for imperial nationhood and the challenges presented first by Polish nationalism in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and later by growing Ukrainian separateness within its own borders. The growth of Ukrainian nationalism in the late 19th century, especially in intellectual circles, presented challenges to Russian imperial understanding of itself, making it unclear if what was Ukrainian was also partly its own. With this tension still unresolved, Plokhy traces Russia’s imperial legacy to the Russian Revolution and illuminates the ways in which the new Soviet state first harnessed Ukrainian (and other national) cultural, linguistic, and national ideals and later subjugated them for its imperial gains.

As a historian, Plokhy has an extensive breadth of geography and history to share with the reader. What makes his work stand out from among similar analyses in recent years is that he starts in 1470 and shows the development of the Russian Nation from the beginning of Muscovy and its tension with the southern territories of the formerly prosperous Kievan Rus. His exposition of obscure historical figures is impressive, as is his almost ethno-graphic study of Ukraine in 1930 until the 1970s. Plokhy finishes with the modern era, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independence of Russia and Ukraine, and finally the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. The author masterfully weaves the stories of the development of distinct, but sometimes intertwining Russian and Ukrainian identities. Never far from the center of the narrative is the Russian need to constantly dominate or otherwise influence or co-opt anything distinctively Ukrainian. In the last chapters of the book, he visits well-covered themes of Russia’s lost identity since the 1990s, and the inability of the Russian elites to see and understand themselves without an imperial idea, and without Ukraine as a

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foundational mythical birthplace. This work as a whole makes for a fascinating, but at times disjointed narrative.

Though impressive, the breadth and the ambition of *Lost Kingdom* raises questions about the book’s intended audiences. The work is published by a non-academic publisher, and the parts dealing with early modern history are glossed over rather quickly. At the same time, the historic moments, and specific figures are unlikely to have deep significance to a lay audience. This choice of key moments also gives the book an unbalanced feel. A less forceful and more nuanced approach would have at times worked better, as Plokhy skips centuries between events making readers wonder what important occurrences were missed in the interim.

The most captivating part of Plokhy’s work is the exploration of Russia’s national idea itself, its mythological and ethereal quality, and its evolvement throughout the centuries. But a more effective approach would have involved writing a comprehensive intellectual history of Russian nationalist ideas, something along the lines of the work of Polish historian Andrzej Walicki, author of *History of Russian Thought, from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, and other works of intellectual history. However, in his quest to balance accessibility with broad, far reaching historical themes, Plokhy has lost a measure of depth.

Despite this shortcoming, the fact that the work leaves the reader wanting more is a tribute to Plokhy’s engaging style. This work could be seen as a gateway to his earlier books and monographs. *Lost Kingdom* is captivating and informative, especially on the subject of Russo-Ukrainian relations in the 18th through the 20th centuries. Among numerous analyses attempting to explain Russia’s foreign policy in the 21st century, especially towards Ukraine, *Lost Kingdom* successfully gives both a comprehensive explanation and a new understanding of the 2014 conflict. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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A Rohingya refugee mother looks at her newborn baby in the Balukhali refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar.

A Rohingya baby cries outside her makeshift tent in Balukhali refugee camp. This baby had suffered eye injuries due to tear-gas shells when her village was burnt down in Rakhine state.
Maryam Zeyna, a Rohingya mother, breastfeeds her baby outside a makeshift camp at Kutupalong refugee camp.

Rohingya refugee women hold their babies in the Palongkali refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar.