Lex Fridman Podcast #415 - Serhii Plokhy: History of Ukraine, Russia, Soviet Union, KGB, Nazis & War

Published - March 4, 2024

Transcribed by - thepodtranscripts.com

Lex Fridman
The following is a conversation with Serhii Plokhy, a historian at Harvard University and the director of the Ukrainian Research Institute, also at Harvard. As a historian, he specializes in the history of Eastern Europe with an emphasis on Ukraine. He wrote a lot of great books on Ukraine and Russia, the Soviet Union, on Slavic peoples in general across centuries, on Chernobyl and nuclear disasters, and on the current war in Ukraine, a book titled "The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History". This is the Lex Fridman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Serhii Plokhy. What are the major explanations for the collapse of the Soviet Union? Maybe ones you agree with and ones you disagree with.

Serhii Plokhy
Very often people confuse three different processes that were taking place in the late '80s and early '90s, and the one was the collapse of communism as ideology. Another was the end of the Cold War. And the third one was the end of the Soviet Union. All of this processes were interrelated, interconnected, but when people provide ideology as the explanation for all of these processes, that's where I disagree, because ideological collapse happened on the territory of the Soviet Union in general. The Soviet Union lost the Cold War, whether we're talking about Moscow, Leningrad, or St. Petersburg now, or Vladivostok. But the fall of the Soviet Union is about a story in which Vladivostok and St. Petersburg ended up in one country, and Kyiv, Minsk and Dushanbe ended in different countries. The theories and explanations about how did that happen, for me, this really very helpful theories for understanding the Soviet collapse. So the mobilization from below the collapse of the center, against the background of economic collapse, against the background of ideological implosion, that's how I look at the fall of the Soviet Union and that's how I look at the theories that explain that collapse.

Lex Fridman
So it's a story of geography, ideology, economics. Which are the most important to understand of what made the collapse of the Soviet Union happen?

Serhii Plokhy
The Soviet collapse was unique, but not more unique than collapse of any other empire. What we really witnessed, or the world witnessed back in 1991, and we continue to witness today with the Russian aggression against Ukraine, is a collapse of one of the largest world empires. We talked about the Soviet Union, and now talk about Russia, as possessing plus-minus 1/6th of the surface of the Earth. You don't get in possession of 1/6th of the earth by being a nation state. You get that sort of size as an empire. And the Soviet collapse is continuation of the disintegration of the Russian Empire that started back in 1917, that was arrested for some period of time by the Bolsheviks, by the Communist ideology, which was internationalist ideology. And then came back in full force in the late '80s and early '90s. So the most important story for me, this is the story of the continuing collapse of the

Russian Empire and the rise of not just local nationalism, but also rise of Russian nationalism that turned out to be as a destructive force for the imperial or multi-ethnic, multinational state, as was Ukrainian nationalism or Georgian or Estonian for that matter.

Lex Fridman
You said a lot of interesting stuff there. In 1917, Bolsheviks, internationalists, how that plays with the idea of Russian Empire and so on. But first, let me ask about US influence on this. One of the ideas is that through the Cold War, that mechanism, US had major interest to weaken the Soviet Union, and therefore the collapse could be attributed to pressure and manipulation from the United States. Is there truth to that?

Serhii Plokhy
The pressure from the United States, this is part of the Cold War. And Cold War, part of that story, but it doesn't explain the Soviet collapse. And the reason is quite simple. The United States of America didn't want the Soviet Union to collapse and disintegrate. They didn't want that at the start of the Cold War in 1948. We now have the strategic documents. They were concerned about that, they didn't want to do that. And certainly they didn't want to do that in the year 1991. As late as August of 1991, the month of the coup in Moscow, President Bush, George H. W. Bush, travels from Moscow to Kyiv and gives famous or infamous speech called Chicken Kiev speech, basically warning Ukrainians against going for independence. The Soviet collapse was a huge headache for the administration in the White House for a number of reasons. They liked to work with Gorbachev. The Soviet Union was emerging as a junior partner of the United States on the international arena. Collapse was destroying all of that. And on the top of that, there was a question of the nuclear weapons, unaccounted nuclear weapons. So the United States was doing everything humanly possible to keep the Soviet Union together in one piece until really late November of 1991, when it became clear that it was a lost cause and they had to say goodbye to Gorbachev and to the project that he introduced. A few months later, or a year later, there was a presidential campaign and Bush was running for the second term and was looking for achievements. And there were many achievements. I basically treat him with great respect, but destruction of the Soviet Union was not one of those achievements. He was on the other side of that divide. But the politics, the political campaign, of course, have their own rules. And they produce, give birth to mythology, which we still, at least in this country, we live until now, until today.

Lex Fridman
Gorbachev is an interesting figure in all of this. Is there a possible history where the Soviet Union did not collapse and some of the ideas that Gorbachev had for the future of the Soviet Union came to life?

Serhii Plokhy
Of course, history, on the one hand, there is a statement, it doesn't allow for what-ifs. On the other hand, in my opinion, history is full of what-if. That's what history is about, and certainly the Russian areas, how the Soviet Union would continue, would continue beyond, let's say, Gorbachev's tenure. And the argument has been made that the reforms that he introduced, that they were mismanaged and they could be managed differently, or there could be no reforms and there could be continuing stagnation. So that is all possible. What I think would happen one way or another is the Soviet collapse in a different form, on somebody else's watch at some later period in time. Because we're dealing with not just processes that we're happening in the Soviet Union, we're dealing with global processes. And the 20th century turned out to be the century of the disintegration of the empires. You look at the globe, at the map of the world in 1914, and you compare it to the map at the end of the 20th century in 1991, 1992, and suddenly you realize that there are many candidates for being the most important event, the most important process in the 20th century. But the biggest global thing that happened was redrawing the map of the world and producing dozens, if not hundreds, of new states. That's the outcome of the different processes of the 20th century. Look, Yugoslavia is falling apart around the same time. Czechoslovakia goes through what can be called a civilized divorce, a very, very rare occurrence in the fall of multinational states. So yeah, the writing was on the wall, whether it would happen under Gorbachev or later, whether it would happen as the result of reforms, or as the result of no reforms. But I think that sooner later that would happen.

Lex Fridman
Yeah, it's very possible hundreds of years from now, the way the 20th century is written about, as the century defined by the collapse of empires. You call the Soviet Union "the last empire." The book is called "The Last Empire". So, is there something fundamental about the way the world is that means it's not conducive to the formation of empires?

Serhii Plokhy
The meaning that I was putting in the term the Soviet Union as the last empire was that the Soviet collapse was the collapse of the last major European empires, traditional empires, that was there in the 18th century, 19th century, and through most of the 20th century. The Austria-Hungary died in the midst of World War I. The Ottoman Empire disintegrated. The Brits were gone and left India. And the successor to the Russian Empire called the Soviet Union was still hanging on there. And then came 1991. And what we see even with today's Russia, is it's a very different sort of policies. The Russia or Russian leadership tried to learn a lesson from 1991, so there is no national republics in the Russian Federation that would have more rights than the Russian administrative units. The structure is different, the nationality policies are different, the level of Russification is much higher. So it is in many ways already a post-imperial formation.

Lex Fridman
And you're right about that moment in 1991, the role that Ukraine played in that, seems to be a very critical role. You can describe just that, what role Ukraine played in the collapse of the Soviet Union?

Serhii Plokhy
History is many things, but it started in a very simple way of making notes on the yearly basis, what happened this year and that. So it's about chronology. Chronology in the history of the collapse of the Soviet Union is very important. You have Ukrainian referendum on December 1st, 1991, and you have dissolution of the Soviet Union by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus one week later. And the question is why. Ukrainian referendum is the answer, but Ukrainians didn't answer their referendum question of whether they want the Soviet Union to be dissolved or not. They answered very limited in terms of - It's been a question whether you support the decision of [foreign language 00:13:06], your parliament, for Ukraine to go independent. And the rest was not on the ballot. So why then, one week later, the Soviet Union is gone? And President Yeltsin explained to President Bush around that time the reason why Ukraine was so important. He said that, "Well, if Ukraine is gone, Russia is not interested in this Soviet project because Russia would be outnumbered and outvoted by the Muslim republics." So there was a cultural element. But there was also another one. Ukraine happened to be the second-largest Soviet republic in then post-Soviet state, in terms of population, in terms of the economy, economic potential, and so on and so forth. And as Yeltsin suggested close culturally, linguistically and otherwise to Russia. So with the second-largest republic gone, Russia didn't think that it was in Russia's interest to continue with the Soviet Union. And around that time Yegor Gaidar, who was the chief economic advisor of Yeltsin, was telling him, "Well, we just don't have money anymore to support other republics. We have to focus on Russia. We have to use oil and gas money within the Russian Federation." So the state was bankrupt. Imperial projects, at least in the context of the late 20th century, they costed money. It wasn't a money-making machine as it was back in the 18th and 19th century. And the combination of all this factors led to the processes in which Ukraine's decision to go independent spelled the end to the Soviet Union. And if today anybody wants to restore, not the Soviet Union, but some form of Russian control over the post-Soviet space, Ukraine is as important today as it was back in December of 1991.

Lex Fridman
Let me ask you about Vladimir Putin's statement that the collapse of the Soviet Union is one of the great tragedies of history. To what degree does he have a point? To what degree is he wrong?

Serhii Plokhy
His formulation was that this is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe or tragedy of the 20th century. And I specifically went and looked at the text and put it in specific time when it was

happening. And it was interesting that the statement was made a few weeks before the May 9 parade and celebrations of the victory, a key part of the mythology of the current Russian state. So why say things about the Soviet collapse being the largest geopolitical strategy, and not in that particular context, the Second World War? My explanation at least is that the World War II, the price was enormous, but the Soviet Union emerged as a great victor and captured half of Europe. 1991, in terms of the lives lost at that point, the price was actually very, very low. But for Putin, what was important that the state was lost, and he in particular was concerned about the division of the Russian people, which he understood back then like he understands now in very, very broad terms. So for him, the biggest tragedy is not the loss of life, the biggest tragedy is the loss of the great power status or the unity of those whom he considered to be Russian nations. So at least this is my reading, this is my understanding of what is there, what is on the paper, and what is between the lines.

Lex Fridman
So both the unity of the, quote, Russian Empire and the status of the superpower?

Serhii Plokhy
That's how I read it.

Lex Fridman
You wrote a book "The Origins of the Slavic Nations". So, let's go back into history. What is the origin of Slavic nations?

Serhii Plokhy
We can look at that from different perspectives, and we are now making major breakthroughs in answering this question with the very interesting, innovative linguistic analysis, the study of DNA. So that's really the new frontier. We are getting into a pre-historical period where there is no historical sources. And from what we can understand today, and that can of course change tomorrow with all these breakthroughs in sciences, is that the Slavs came into existence somewhere in the area of Pripyat Marshes, the northwestern part of Ukraine, southwestern part of Belarus, eastern part of Poland. And that is considered to be historical homeland of Slavs. And then they spread, and they spread all the way to the Adriatic. So we have Kurds, we have Russians spreading all the way to the Pacific. We have Ukrainians, we have Belarusians, Poles. Once we had Czechoslovaks, now we have Czechs and Slovaks. That's the story of starting with the 8th and 9th century, even a little bit early, we can already follow that story with the help of the written sources, mostly from Byzantine, then later from Western Europe. But what I was trying to do, not being a scientist, not being an expert in linguistics, or not being an expert in DNA analysis, I was trying to see what was happening in the minds of those peoples, and their elites in particular. Whom we call today not Slavs, but Eastern Slavs, which means Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. How they imagined themselves, how they imagined their world. And eventually I look at the so-called nation-building projects. So trying to answer the

question of how we arrived to the situation in which we are today, where there are not just three East Slavic nations, but there are also three East Slavic states, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian. This is the focus of my book. And admittedly, in that particular book, I end on the 18th century before the era of nationalism. But then there are other books like Lost Kingdom, where I bring the story all the way up to today.

Lex Fridman
What aspects of the 8th and 9th century the East Slavic states permeates to today that we should understand?

Serhii Plokhy
Well, the most important one is that the existence of the state of Kievan Rus, back during the medieval period, created the foundations for historical mythology, common historical mythology. And there are just wars and battles over who has the right or more right for Kievan Rus. The legal code that was created at that time existed for a long period of time. The acceptance of Christianity from Byzantium, that became a big issue that separated then Eastern Slavs from their Western neighbors, including Czechs and Poles, but united in that way to, let's say, Bulgarians or Serbs. And the beginning of the written literature, beginning in Kyiv. So all of that is considered to be part of heritage, all of that is being contested. And this debates that were academic for a long period of time, what we see now tragically are being continued on the battlefield.

Lex Fridman
What is Kyiv? What is Rus that you mentioned? What's the importance of these? You mentioned them as the defining places and terms, labels, at the beginning of all of this, so what is Kyiv?

Serhii Plokhy
Kyiv became a capital or the outpost of the Vikings who were trying to establish control over the trade route between what is today's western Russia and Belarus and northern Ukraine, so the forest areas. And the biggest and the richest market in the world that existed at that time, which was in Constantinople, in Byzantium. The idea was to get whatever goods you can get in that part of Eastern Europe, and most of those goods were slaves, local population. Put them on the ships in Kyiv, because Kyiv was on the border with the steppe zones. Steppe zones were controlled by other groups, Scythians, Sarmations, Polovtsians, Pechenegs, and so on, and you name it. And then staying on the river, being protected from attacks of the nomads to come to the Black Sea and sell these products in Constantinople. That was the idea, that was the model. Vikings tried to practice that sort of business model also in other parts of Europe, and like in other parts of Europe, they turned out to be by default creators of new politics, of new states. And that was the story of the first Kievan dynasty, and Kyiv as the capital of that huge empire that was going from the Baltics to today, central Ukraine, and then was trying to get through the southern Ukraine to

the Black Sea, that was a major, major European state kingdom, if you want to call it, of medieval Europe. Creating a lot of tradition in terms of dynasty, in terms of language, in terms of religion, in terms of, again, historical mythology. So Kyiv is central for the nation-building myth of a number of groups in the region.

Lex Fridman
In one perspective and narrative, Kyiv is at the center of this Russian Empire. At which point does Moscow come to prominence as the center of the Russian Empire?

Serhii Plokhy
Well, the Russian Empire is a term and really creation of the 18th century. What we have for the Kievan, we call it Kievan Rus, again, this is a term of the 19th century, they call themselves Rus.

Lex Fridman
Rus.

Serhii Plokhy
And there was metropolitanate of Rus and there was Rus principalities. So very important to keep in mind that Rus is not Russia because that was a self-name for all multiple groups on that territory. And Moscow doesn't exist at the time when Kyiv emerges as the capital. The first reference to Moscow comes from the 12th century when it was founded by one of the Kievan princes. And Moscow comes to prominence really in a very different context and with a very different empire running the show in the region. The story of Moscow and the rise of Moscow, this is the story of the Mongol rule over former Rus lands and former Rus territories. The part of the former Rus eventually overthrows the Mongol control with the help of the small group of people called Lithuanians, which had a young state and young dynasty, and united this lands, which were mostly in today's terms Ukrainian and Belorussian. So they separate early. And what is today's Russia, mostly western Russia, central Russia, stays under the Mongol control up until late 15th century. And that was the story when Moscow rises as the new capital of that realm, replacing the city of Vladimir as that capital. For those who ever went to Russia, they familiar with, of course, Vladimir as the place of the oldest architectural monuments, the so-called the Golden Ring of Russia, and so on and so forth. Vladimir is central, and there were so many architectural monuments there because before there was Moscow, there was Vladimir. Eventually in this struggle over control of the territory, struggle for favors from the Mongols and the Tatar Horde, Moscow emerges as the center of that particular realm under Mongols. After the Mongol rule is removed, Moscow embarks on the project that historians, Russian historians of the 19th century, called the "gathering of the Russian lands." Using Russian now for Rus and trying to bring back the lands of former Kievan Rus, but also the lands of the former Mongol Empire. The Russians get to the Pacific before they get to Kyiv historically, and really the, quote, unquote, "gathering of the," quote, unquote, "Russian lands." As only in

1945, when the Soviet Union bullies the Czechoslovak government into turning what is today's Transcarpathian Ukraine to the Soviet Union. It is included in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. So that's the moment when that destiny, the way how it was imagined by the 19th century Russian historian, was eventually fulfilled. Moscow was in control of all these lands.

Lex Fridman
To what degree are the Slavic people one people, and this is the theme that will continue throughout, I think, versus a collection of multiple peoples? Whether we're talking about the Kievan Rus or we're talking about the 19th century Russian Empire conception.

Serhii Plokhy
Well, a number of ways to look at that. One, the most obvious, the most clear, is language. And there is no question that Poles speak a separate language than the Slavs. And there is no question for anyone going to Ukraine and here in Ukrainian, realizing that this is not Russian. The level of comprehension can be different, you can understand certain words and you don't understand others. And the same would be with Polish, and the same would be with Czech. So there is this linguistic history that is in common, but languages very clearly indicate that you're dealing with different peoples. We know that language is not everything. Americans speak a particular way of English, Australians speak a particular variant of English. But for reasons of geography, history, we pretty much believe that despite linguistic unity, these are different nations and different peoples. And there are some parts of political tradition more in common, others are quite different. So the same when it comes to language, the same when it comes to political tradition, to the loyalty to the political institution, applies to Slavic nations. Again, there is nothing particularly unique about the Slavs in that regard.

Lex Fridman
You wrote the book "The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires". It tells the story of an anonymous manuscript called The History of the Rus. It started being circulated in the 1820s. I would love it if you can tell the story of this. This is supposedly one of the most impactful texts in history, modern history. So what's the importance of this text? What did it contain? How did it define the future of the region?

Serhii Plokhy
In the first decades of the 19th century, after Napoleonic Wars, a mysterious text emerged that was attributed to an Orthodox archbishop that was long dead, which was claiming that the Cossacks of Ukraine were in fact the original Rus people, and that they had the right for particular place, for central place, in the Russian Empire. And it tells the history of the Cossacks. It's the era of romanticism, full of all sorts of drama, there are heroes, there are villains. And the text captivates the attention of some key figures in the Russian intellectual elite in St. Petersburg, people like Kondraty Ryleyev, who was executed for his participation

in 1825 uprising. Writes poetry on the basis of this text. Pushkin pays attention to it as well. And then comes along the key figure in Ukrainian national revival, of the 19th century Ukrainian national project, Taras Shevchenko, and reads it as well, and they all read it very differently. Eventually, by the beginning of the mid 20th century, some of the Russian, mostly nationalist writers, call this text the Quran of Ukrainian nationalism. So what is there? The story, it's very important in a sense that what the authors, and that's what I claim in the book, what the authors of the text were trying to say, they were trying to say that the Cossack elite should have the same rights as the Russian nobility. And brings the long historical records to prove how cold the Cossacks were over the period of time. But at the beginning of the 19th century, they put this claim already, they use new arguments, and these arguments are about nation and nationalism. And they're saying that the Cossacks are a separate nation, and that's a big, big, big claim. The Russian Empire, and this is a very, very good argument in historiography, that Russian Empire grew and acquired this 1/6th of the Earth by using one very specific way of integrating those lands. It integrated the elites. It was making deals with the elites. Whether their elites were Muslim or their elites were Roman Catholic, as the case with the Poles, they would be - were Roman Catholic, as the case with the Poles. The elites would be integrated, and the empire was based on the state loyalty and the state integration. But once you bring in the factor of nation and nationalism and language, then, once in a sudden, the whole model of the integration of the elites, irrespective of their language, religion, and culture, starts falling apart. And the Poles were the first who really produced this sort of a challenge to the Russian Empire, by two uprisings in the 19th century. And Ukrainians then followed in their footsteps. So, the importance of the tax is that it was making claim on the part of a particular estate, the Cossack Officer Class, which was that empire could survive. But it turned it, given the conditions of the time, into the claim for the special role of Cossacks as a nation, creating that this is a separate nation, Russian nation. And that is the challenge of nationalism that no empire really survived, and the Russian Empire was not an exception. So, there's a turning point when the discourse switches from loyalty based on the integration of the elites to the loyalty based on attachment to your nation, to your language, and to your culture, and to your history.

Lex Fridman
So that was like the initial spark, the flame, that led to nationalist movements.

Serhii Plokhy
That was the beginning and the beginning that was building a bridge between the existence of the Cossack state in the 17th and 18th century that was used as a foundation for the Cossack mythology, Ukrainian national mythology, went into the Ukrainian National Anthem, and the new age and the new stage where the Cossacks were not there anymore, whether they were professors, intellectuals, students, members of the national and organizations. And it started, of course, with romantic poetry, it was started with collected folklore, and then, later goes to the political stage, and eventually the stage of mass politics.

Lex Fridman
So to you, even throughout the 20th century under Stalin, there was always a force within Ukraine that wants it to be independent.

Serhii Plokhy
There were five attempts for Ukraine to declare its independence and to maintain it in the 20th century. Only one succeeded in 1991, but there were four different attempts at times before. And you see the Ukrainian national identity manifest in itself in two different ways, in the form of national communism after the Bolshevik victory in the Bolshevik-controlled Ukraine, and in the form of radical nationalism in the parts of Ukraine that were controlled by Poland and Romania, and part of that was also controlled by Czechoslovakia and later Hungary. So, in those parts outside of the Soviet Union, the form of the national mobilization, the key form of national mobilization, became radical nationalism. In Soviet Ukraine, it was national communism that came back in the 1960s and 1970s. And then, in the 1991, the majority of the members of the Ukrainian Parliament, who voted for independence, were members of the Communist Party. So that spirit on certain level never died.

Lex Fridman
So, there's national communism and radical nationalism. Well, let me ask you about the radical nationalism, because that is a topic that comes up in the discussion of the war in Ukraine today. Can you tell me about Stepan Bandera? Who was he - this controversial, far-right Ukrainian revolutionary?

Serhii Plokhy
The are at least two Stepan Banderas. One is the real person and another is mythology that really comes with this name. And the real person was a young student, nationalistically oriented student, in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the part of Ukraine that was controlled by Poland, who belonged to the generation who regretted that they were not born in time for the big struggles of the World War I and Revolution at that time. They believed that their fathers lost opportunity for Ukraine to become independent and that a new ideology was needed, and that ideology was radical nationalism, and new tactics were needed. So, Bandera becomes the leader of the organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in Ukraine at the young age and organizes a number of assassinations of the Polish officials or members of the Ukrainian community who this young people, in their 17, 18, 19, considered to be collaborators. He is arrested, put on trial, and that's where the myth of Bandera starts to emerge, because he uses the trial to make statements about the Ukrainian nationalism, radical nationalism, and its goals, and suddenly, becomes a hero among the Ukrainian youth at that time. He is sentenced for execution for death. So, when he delivers his speech, he knows that he probably would die soon, and then it was, the sentence was commuted to life in prison. Then World War II happens. The Polish state collapses under the pressure coming, of course, from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Bandera walks away and presides over

the act of the split of the organization of Ukrainian Nationalists into two groups. The most radical one used called Revolutionary, they call themselves Revolutionary, is led by Bandera. They worked together with the Nazi Germany at that time, with the hope that Nazi Germany would deliver them independent Ukraine. First days of the German attack, Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, the units formed on the basis of Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists marching to the city of Lviv and declare Ukrainian independence. That was not sanctioned by the German authorities. That was not in German plans. So, they arrest Bandera, members of his family, his brothers, members of the leaders, leaders of the organization. So, his two brothers go to Auschwitz, die there. He was sent to Sachsenhausen for the most duration of the war, until 1944, refusing to revoke declaration of Ukrainian independence, which, again, contributes further to his mythology. After the war, he never comes back to Ukraine. He lives in exile in Munich. So, between 1930 and his death in 1959, he spent in Ukraine maybe up to two years, maybe a little bit more, but most of the time was either in the Polish prison, or in the German concentration camp, or in exile. But the myth of Bandera lived. And all the members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and then the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, that fought against the Soviets all the way into the early 1950s, they were called Banderites. They were called Banderites by the Soviet authorities. They were known also in that way to the local population. So, there was a faraway leader that barely was there on the spot, but whose name was attached to this movement for, really, liberation of Ukraine at that time. Again, the battle that failed.

Lex Fridman
The fact that he collaborated with the Nazis sticks. From one perspective, he's considered by many to be a hero of Ukraine for fighting for the independence of Ukraine. From another perspective, coupled with the fact that there's this radical, revolutionary extremist flavor to the way he sees the world, that label just stays that he's a fascist, he's a Nazi. To what degree is this true? To what degree is it not?

Serhii Plokhy
This label is certainly promoted, first, by the Soviet propaganda, and then by Russian propaganda. It works very nicely. If you focus on the years of collaboration, those were the same years when Joseph Stalin collaborated with Hitler, right? So, we have the same reason to call Stalin Nazi collaborator as we have the reason to call Bandera Nazi collaborator. We look at the situation in the Pacific, in Indonesia, in other places, the leaders who worked together with Japanese, with the idea of promoting independence of their countries after the Japanese collapse, become leaders of the empire. So, the difference with Bandera is that he never becomes the leader, the leader of empire, and immunity that comes with that position certainly doesn't apply to him. But there are other parts of his life which certainly put this whole thing in question. The fate of his family, his own time in the German concentration camp, certainly don't fit the propaganda one-sided image of Bandera. In terms of him being a hero, that's a very, very interesting question, because he is perceived in Ukraine today, not by all, and probably not by the majority, but by

many people in Ukraine, as a symbol of fighting against the Soviet Union and, by extension, against Russia and Russian occupation. So, his popularity grew after February 24, 2022 as a symbol of that resistance. Again, we are talking here about myth and mythology, because Bandera was not leading the fight against the Soviet occupation in Ukraine because, at that time, he was just simply not in Ukraine. He was in Germany. And you can imagine that geography mattered at that time much more than it matters today.

Lex Fridman
There's a million questions to ask here. I think it's an important topic, because it is at the center of the claimed reason that the war continues in Ukraine. So, I would like to explore that from different angles. But just to clarify, was there a moment where Bandera chose Nazi Germany over the Red Army when the war already began? So, in the list of allegiances, is Ukraine's independence more important than fighting Nazi Germany, essentially?

Serhii Plokhy
The Ukrainian independence was their goal, and they were there to work with anybody who would support and, in one way, or at least allow the Ukrainian independence. So, there is no question that they are just classic nationalists. So, the goal is, nationalism is the principle according to which the, or at least one definition is, according to which the cultural boundaries coincide with political boundaries. So, their goal was to create political boundaries that would coincide with the geographic boundaries in the conditions of the World War II, and certainly making deals with whoever would either support, as I said, or tolerate that project of theirs.

Lex Fridman
So, I would love to find the line between nationalism, even extreme nationalism, and fascism and Nazism. So, for Bandera, the myth, the Bandera the person, let's look at some of the ideology of Nazism. To which degree did he hate Jews? Was he anti-Semitic?

Serhii Plokhy
We know that, basically, in his circle, there were people who were anti-Semites in a sense that, okay, we have the texts, right? We know that. We don't have that information about, or that sort of text, or that sort of evidence with regard to Bandera himself. In terms of fascism, there is very clear and there is research done that, in particularly, Italian fascism had influence on the thinking of people in that organization, including people at the top. But it is also very important to keep in mind that they call themselves nationalist and revolutionaries. And despite the fact that in 1939 and 1940 and 1941, it was very beneficial for them to declare themselves to be Ukrainian fascists and establish this bond, not just with Italy, but with Nazi Germany. They refused to do that. And then, they used to recall their independence. So, influences, yes, but clearly, it's a different type of political project.

Lex Fridman
So, let me fast-forward into the future and see to which degree the myth permeates. Does Ukraine have a neo-Nazi problem?

Serhii Plokhy
My understanding is there are Nazis in Ukraine and there are supporters of white supremacy theories, but also my understanding is that they are extremely marginal and they are more marginal than the same sort of groups are in Central Europe, maybe in the U. S. as well. And for me, the question is not whether the Ukraine has it, but why even in the conditions of the war, the radical nationalism and extremism and white supremacist is such a marginal force, when in the countries that are not at the war, you look at France, you look at, again, it's not exactly Nazis, but really right radical right is becoming so important. Why Ukraine in the conditions of the war is the country that manages relations between different ethnic groups and languages in the way that strengthens political nation? So, for me, as a scholar and a researcher, what I see is that, in Ukraine, the influence of the far right in different variations is much lower than it is among some of Ukraine's neighbors and in Europe in general. And the question is why. I don't know. I have guesses. I don't know answer. But that's the question that I think is interesting to answer, how Ukraine ended up to be the only country in the world, outside of Israel, who has a Jewish president who is, my at least understanding, is the most popular president in history, in terms of how his popularity goes after the election. So, this really, from my point of view, interesting questions, and again, we can certainly debate that.

Lex Fridman
So, just for context, the most popular far right party, 1-0.15% of the vote in 2019. This is before the war. So that's where things stood. It's unclear where they stand now. It'd be an interesting question whether it escalated and how much. What you're saying is that war in general can serve as a catalyst for expansion of extremist groups, of extremist nationalistic groups especially, like the far right. And it's interesting to see to what degree they have or have not risen to power in the shadows.

Serhii Plokhy
So, no nationalist or nationalistic party actually crossed the barrier to get into the Parliament.

Lex Fridman
Yeah.

Serhii Plokhy
So, Ukraine is the country where there is no right or far right in the Parliament. We can't say that about Germany, we can't say that about France, so that's just one more way to stress this unique place of Ukraine in that sense. And the year 2019 is the year already of the war.

The war started in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimean. The front line was near Donbas. All these groups were fighting there. So, Ukraine, maybe not to a degree that it is now, was already on the war footing, and yet the right party couldn't get more than 2%. So, that's the question that I have in mind. And yes, the war, historically, of course, puts forward and makes, from the more nationalist views and forces, turned them from marginal forces into more central ones. We talked about Bandera and we talked about Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. They were the most marginal group in the political spectrum in Ukraine in the 1930s that one can only imagine. But World War II comes, and they become the most central group, because they also were, from the start go, they had the organization, the violence was basically one of their means, they knew how to fight. So, historically, wars indeed produced those results, so we are looking at Ukraine. We're trying to see what is happening there.

Lex Fridman
So, Vladimir Putin in his interview with Tucker Carlson, but many times before, said that the current goal for the war in Ukraine is denazification, that the purpose of the war is denazification. Can you explain this concept of denazification as Putin sees it?

Serhii Plokhy
Denazification is the trop that is accepted quite well by the former Soviet population and Russian population in particular. The most powerful Soviet mythology that then was basically passed as part of heritage to the Russian Federation was World War II, was fighting against fascism. So, once you use terms "fascism," and "Nazi," and "denazification," suddenly people, not just start listening, they just stop analyzing. And as a propaganda tool, this is, of course, very powerful tool. In terms of to what degree this is the real goal or not, we discussed the importance of the far right in Europe and in Ukraine. So, if that's the real goal of the war probably, the war would have to start not against Ukraine, but probably against France or some other country, if you take this at face value.

Lex Fridman
Well, there is something really interesting here, as you mentioned, because I've spoken to a lot of people in Russia, and you said analysis stops. In the West, people look at the word "denazification" and look at the things we've just discussed and almost think this is absurd. But when you talk to people in Russia, maybe it's deep in there somewhere, the history of World War II still reverberates through maybe the fears, maybe the pride, whatever the deep emotional history is there, it seems that the goal of denazification appears to be reasonable for people in Russia. They don't seem to see the absurdity or the complexity or even the need for analysis, I guess, in this kind of word of denazification.

Serhii Plokhy
I would say this is broader. This is broader. The war that started under the banner that Russians and Ukrainians were one and the same people and produces that sort of casualty,

really goes against also any sort of logical thinking. But Russia is a place where the free press doesn't exist already for a long period of time. Russia is the place where there is an echo chamber, to a degree. And as war started first in 2014, and then all out war in 2022, I came across a lot of people on the personal level, but also in the media reporting, that they really can't find common language with their close relatives in Russia, people who visited Ukraine who know that it's not taken over by nationalists and is not taken over by Nazis, but the media around them, the neighbors around them, the people at their work, basically, say one and the same thing. And we, as humans, in general, whatever our background, we are very, very, our mind is really, it's relatively easy to manipulate it, and to a degree that even family connections and even family ties don't sometimes help to maintain that ability to think and to analyze on your own to look at the facts.

Lex Fridman
So, Putin has alluded to the Yaroslav Hunka incident in the Canadian Parliament September 2023. This man is a veteran of World War II on the Ukrainian side, and he got two standing ovations in the Canadian Parliament, but they later found out that he was part of the SS. So, can you explain on this, what are your thoughts on this? This had a very big effect on the narrative, I guess, propagated throughout the region.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes. What happened during World War II was that once the Germans started to run out of manpower, they created foreign legion groups. But because those people were not Aryans, they were created for fighting on the battleground. Because they were not Aryans, they couldn't be trusted. So, they were put under the command of Henry Himmler, under command of SS, and became known as SS Waffen units. And one of such units was created in Ukraine, with great difficulties, because Nazis didn't consider Slavs to be generally worthy of even that sort of foreign legion formations. But they made an exception, because those people were coming from Galicia, which was part of Austria-Hungary, which means part of Austria, which means somehow were open to the benevolent influence of the Germanic race, and called the Division Galizien, or Galicia. Part of Ukrainian youth joined the division. One of the explanations was that they were looking at the experience of World War I, and seeing that the units, the Ukrainian units, in the Austrian army then played a very important role in the fight for independence. So that is one of the explanations. You can't just use one explanation to describe motivations of everyone and every single person who was joined in there. So, they were sent to the front. They were defeated within a few short days by the Red Army, and then were retreating through Slovakia, where they were used to fight with the partisan movement there, and eventually surrendered to the British. So, that's the story. You can personally maybe understand what the good motivations were of this person or that person, but that is one of the best, one of the very tragic and unfortunate pages in Ukrainian history. You can't justify that as a phenomenon. So, from that point of view, the celebration of that experience, as opposed to looking at that, okay, that happened, and we wish that those young men who were idealistic or joined the Division for

idealistic purposes had better understanding of things or made other choices, but you can't certainly celebrate that. And once that happened, that, of course, became a big propaganda, a propaganda item, in the current war. We're talking about 10,000-20,000 people in the Division, and we're talking about 2-3 million Ukrainians fighting in the Red Army. And again, it's not like Red Army is completely blameless in the way how it behaved in Prussia, in Germany, and so on and so forth. But it's basically, it's, again, we're going back to the story of Bandera. So, there is a period of collaboration, and that's what propaganda tries to define him by, or there is a Division Galizien by 20,000 people, and somehow it makes irrelevant the experience of 2-3 million people.

Lex Fridman
I mean, just to clarify, I think there is just a blunder on the Canadian Parliament side, the Canadian side, of not doing research of, maybe correct me if I'm wrong, but from my understanding, they were just doing stupid shallow political stuff. Let's applaud, when Zelenskyy shows up, let's have a Ukrainian veteran, let's applaud a veteran of World War II, and then all of a sudden, you realize, well, there's actually complexities to wars. We can talk about, for example, a lot of dark aspects on all sides of World War II, the mass rape at the end of World War II by the Red Army, when they march towards Germany. There's a lot of really dark complexity in it on all sides. So, that could be an opportunity to explore the dark complexity that some of the Ukrainians were in the SS, or Bandera, the complexities there, but I think they were doing not a complex thing. They were doing a very shallow applaud. And we should applaud veterans, of course, but in that case, they were doing it for show, for Zelenskyy and so on. So, we should clarify that the applause wasn't knowing, it wasn't for the SS. It was for Ukrainian, it was for World War II veterans, but the propaganda, or at least an interpretation from the Russian side, from whatever side, is that they were applauding the full person standing before them, which wasn't just a Ukrainian veteran, but Ukrainian veteran that fought for the SS.

Serhii Plokhy
I don't have any particular insights, but I would be very much surprised if even one person in the Parliament, I mean, the members of the Parliament actually knew the whole story. I would be very surprised.

Lex Fridman
Yeah. The whole story of this person, and frankly, the whole story of Ukraine and Russia in World War II, period.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes, yes.

Lex Fridman
Nevertheless, it had a lot of power and really reverberated in support of the narrative that there is a neo-Nazi, a Nazi problem in Ukraine.

Serhii Plokhy
This is the narrative that is out there, and it's especially powerful in Russia. It's especially powerful in Russia given that there are, really, that the atmosphere that is created, really, is not conducive to any independent analysis.

Lex Fridman
Well, I wonder what is the most effective way to respond to that particular claim, because there could be a discussion about nationalism, and extreme nationalism, and the fight for independence, and whether it isn't, like Putin wrote, "one people," but the question of, are there Nazis in Ukraine, seems to be a question that could be analyzed rigorously with data.

Serhii Plokhy
That is being done on the academic level. But in terms of the public response and public discourse, the only response that I see is not to focus on the questions raised and put by the propaganda, because you've already become victim of that propaganda by definition, but talk about that much broadly and talk about different aspects of, if it is World War II, about different aspects of World War II, if it's about issue of the far right in Ukraine, let's talk about U. S., let's talk about Russia, let's talk about France, let's compare. That's the only way how you deal with propaganda, because propaganda is not necessarily something that is an outright lie. It can be just one factor that's taken out of the context and is blown out of proportion. And that is good enough.

Lex Fridman
And the way to defend against that is to bring in the context. Let us move gracefully throughout, back and forth through history, back to Bandera. You wrote a book on the KGB spy Bohdan Stashynsky. Can you tell his story?

Serhii Plokhy
This is a story of the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, and Bandera as well, already after the end of the Second World War.

Lex Fridman
Mm-hmm.

Serhii Plokhy
Because what you got after the Second World War, so imagine May of 1945, the Red Banner is all over Riksdag, the Red Army is in control of half of Europe, but the units of the Red Army are still fighting the war, and not just behind the Soviet lines, but within the borders of

the Soviet Union - behind the Soviet lines, but within the borders of the Soviet Union. And this war continues all the way into the early 1950s, almost up to Stalin's death. The war is conducted by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which have a Ukrainian insurgent army, and the government tries to crush that resistance. So, what it does is basically recruits local people to spy on the partisans on the underground, and Bohdan Stashynsky is one of those people. His family is supporting the resistance. They provide food. His sister is engaged with one of the local commanders of this underground unit, and they know everything about Stashynsky's family and they know everything about him because he is also collecting funds for the underground. They have a conversation with him saying that, "Okay, that's what we got, and you and your family can go to prison, or you help us a little bit. We're interested in the fiance of your sister, and we want to get him." Stashynsky says yes. Once they round up the fiance, he basically betrayed a member or almost member of his family, he is done. He can't go back to his village. He can't go back to his study. He was studying in [inaudible 01:09:39] at that time. As I write in my book, the secret police becomes his family. And he is sent to Kyiv. He is trained for two years, sent to East Germany, into Berlin and becomes an assassin. So, they sent him across the border to Western Germany, to Munich. It was the headquarter of different organizations, anti-Soviet organizations, Ukrainian and Russian and Georgian and so on and so forth. And he kills two leaders of the organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, one editor of the newspaper, and eventually he kills Bandera. He does that with the new weapon, a spray pistol, that eventually makes it into the bond novel, The Man with the Golden Gun. And that whole episode is a little bit reshaped, but it's not in the film, but it is in the novel itself. And then later has a change of mind under the influence of his German fiance and then wife. They decide to escape to the West. And while they're doing that, they discover that their apartment was bugged and probably the KGB knows all of that. A long story short, his son dies in Berlin. KGB doesn't allow him to go there, but his wife has a nervous breakdown so they allow him to go there to just calm her so that there would be no scandal. And two of them, one day before their son's burial, because after that they would be sent to Moscow. They jumped the ship and go to West Berlin, two hours before the Berlin Wall was being built. So, if they would stay for the funeral, probably the KGB would not let them go. But also if they would stay, the border would be there. And he goes to the American intelligence and says, "Okay, that's who I am and that's what I did." And they look at him and they say, "We don't trust you. We don't know who you are. You have documents in five names. You say you killed Bandera. Well, we have a different information. He was poisoned and probably by someone in his close circle. A spray pistol, did you read too much Ian Fleming? Where does this come from?"He insists, they said, "Okay, you insist. If you committed all those crimes, they giving you to the German police, and German police will be investigating you." And then the trial comes, and if he says, if he takes back his testimony, the whole case against him collapses. He can go free. He knows that if he goes free, he is a target of his colleagues from the same department. So, his task at the trial is to prove that he's guilty, that he did that. And then he disappears and nobody knows where he goes. And there are all sorts of

cover stories. And I was lucky to interview a commander, former chief of the South African Police, who confirmed to me that Stashynsky was in South Africa.

Lex Fridman
He fled.

Serhii Plokhy
The West German intelligence thought that it was too dangerous for him to stay in Germany. They sent him under a different name to South Africa. So, that's the story of Stashynsky himself. But going back to Bandera, of course, the fact that he confessed and it became known that KGB assassinated Bandera, that added to the image and to general mythology about Bandera.

Lex Fridman
What a fascinating story of a village boy becoming an assassin who killed one of the most influential revolutionaries of the region in the 20th century. Just zooming out broadly on the KGB, how powerful was the KGB? What role did it play in this whole story of the Soviet Union?

Serhii Plokhy
It depends on the period. At the time that we just described, late '50s and early '60s, they were not powerful at all. And the reasons for that was that people like Khrushchev were really concerned about the secret police becoming too powerful. It became too powerful in their mind under Stalin, under Beria. And it was concern about Beria's power as a secret police chief that led to the coup against Beria, and Khrushchev come into power, and Beria was arrested and executed. And what Khrushchev was trying to do after that was trying to put - since '54, the name was already KGB, KGB under his control. So, he was appointing the former [inaudible 01:15:33] leaders as the heads of the KGB, so the people who really owned everything to him, that sort of position. And the heads of the KGB were not members of Politburo. It changed in the '70s with Andropov where KGB started to play, again, very important role in the Soviet history. And let's say decisions on Afghanistan and the Soviet troops marching into Afghanistan were made by the, apart from Brezhnev, by the trio of the people who would be called today [foreign language 01:16:15] maybe or not all of them were [foreign language 01:16:17] but one of course was Andropov, the head of the KGB. Another was the Minister of Defense, and then there was secretary in charge of the military industrial complex, Ministry of Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the head of the KGB became really not just the member of Politbruo, but the member of that inner circle. And then the fact that on Andropov succeeds Brezhnev is also a manifestation of the power that KGB acquired really after Khrushchev in the 1970s, and then going into the 1980s.

Lex Fridman
Who was more powerful, the KGB or the CIA during the Soviet Union?

Serhii Plokhy
The CIA, it's the organization that is charged with the information gathering and all sorts of operations, including assassinations in the '50s and '60s abroad. The KGB was the organization that really had both the surveillance over the population within the Soviet Union and also the operations abroad. And its members, its leaders were members of the inner circle for making decisions. Again, from what I understand about the way how politics and decision work and decisions are made in the United States, the CIA, the chief of the CIA is not one of the decision-making group that providing information. Yeah, so I would say it's not day and night, but their power, political influence, political significance, very different.

Lex Fridman
Is it understood how big the KGB was? How widespread it was, given its secretive and distributed nature.

Serhii Plokhy
Certain things we know, others we don't, because the Stasi archives are open and most of the KGB, especially in Moscow, they're not. But we know that the KGB combined not only the internal sort of secret police functions at home and counter intelligence branch and intelligence branch abroad, but also the border troops for example. So, really institutionally it was a huge, huge mammoth. And another thing that we know we can sort of extrapolate from what we know from the Stasi archives, that the surveillance at home, the surveillance was really massive. The guess is the Soviets were not as effective and as meticulous and as scrupulous and as methodical as probably as Germans were. But that gives you a basic idea of how penetrated the entire society was.

Lex Fridman
What do you think is important to understand about the KGB, if we want to also understand Vladimir Putin? Since he was a KGB foreign intelligence officer for 16 years.

Serhii Plokhy
From my research, including on Stashynsky, what I understand is that in KGB, and it was a powerful organization, again, less powerful in '50s and '60s, but still very powerful organization. There was on the one hand the understanding of the situation in the country and abroad that probably other organizations didn't have. They had also first pick in terms of the select and cadres. The work in the KGB was well paid and considered to be very prestigious. So, that was part to a degree of the Soviet elite in terms of whom they recruited. And they had a resentment over the party leadership that didn't allow them to do James Bond kind of things that they would want to do because there were political risks. After this scandal with Stashynsky, at least on many levels, the KGB stopped the practice of the assassinations, political assassinations abroad because it was considered politically to be extremely, extremely dangerous. The person who was in charge of the KGB at the time of Bandera assassination, Shelepin, was one of the candidates to replace Khrushchev and

Brezhnev used against him that scandal abroad eventually to remove him from Politburo. So, the KGB was really looking at the party leadership as to a degree, an effective corrupt and who was on their way. And from what I understand, that's exactly the attitudes that people like Putin and people of his circle brought to power in Kremlin. So, the methods that KGB use they can use now, and there is no party or no other institution actually stopping them from doing that. And they think about, my understanding, the operations abroad about foreign policy in general in terms of the KGB mindset of planning operations and executing particular operations and so on and so forth. I think a lot of culture that came into existence in the Soviet KGB now became part of the culture of the Russian establishment.

Lex Fridman
You wrote the book, the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Return of History, that gives the full context leading up to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February, 2022. Can you take me through the key moments in history that led up to this war? So, we'll mention the collapse of the Soviet Union. We could probably go much farther back, but the collapse of the Soviet Union mentioned 2014. Maybe you can highlight key moments that led up to 2022.

Serhii Plokhy
The key moments would be first, the year 2004, known for Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and then the year 2013, known as the Revolution of Dignity. Both were the revolts against the something that by significant part of Ukrainian population was considered to be completely, completely unacceptable actions on the part of the government and people in the government at that time. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was a protest against falsified presidential elections and rejection of a candidate that was supported by Russia, publicly supported by Russia. I remember being in Moscow at that time and couldn't believe my eyes went, in the center of Russia, I saw a billboard with Yanukovych. The trick was that there were a lot of Ukrainians in Russia and in Moscow in particular, and they had the right to vote. And it led to the election as Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, who put on the agenda the issue of Ukraine's membership in NATO. So, it was very clear pro-Western orientation. And the second case was the Revolution of Dignity 2013, with some of the same characters including Yanukovych, who at that time was already president of Ukraine. And there the question was of the government promising the people for one year at least to sign an association agreement with European Union, and then turning over almost overnight and saying that they were not going to do that. And that's how things started. But then when they became really massive and why something that was called Euro Revolution became Revolution of Dignity was when the government police beat up students in downtown Kyiv, who judging by the reports were basically already almost ready to disperse, almost ready to go home. And that's when roughly half of Kyiv showed up on the streets. That sort of the police behavior, that sort of was absolutely unacceptable in Ukraine. The stealing elections and falsification of elections wasn't unacceptable. That's where around that time and around 2004, the president of Ukraine at that time, Leonid Kuchma, writes a book called "Ukraine is Not Russia". And apparently the term comes from his discussion with Putin,

when Putin was suggesting to him quite strongly to use force against people on the Maidan - on the square in Kyiv. And Kuchma allegedly said to him, "You don't understand. Ukraine is not Russia. You can't do things like that. You get pushed back." And that's, this two events, 2004 and then 2013 became really crucial point in terms of the Ukraine direction, the survival of Ukrainian democracy, which is one of very few countries in the post Soviet space where democracy survived the original flirt between the government leaders and democracy of the 1990s. It was the old Soviet story in Russia. Everywhere else there was high democratic expectations, but they came pretty much to an end by the end of the decade. Ukraine preserved the democracy and the orientation of Ukraine toward integration in some form into Western and European structures, that Ukrainian democracy plus Western orientation was something. And in Russia, we see the strengthening of the autocratic regime under Putin, that if you look deeper, this are the processes that put the two countries on the collision course.

Lex Fridman
So, there's a division, a push and pull inside Ukraine on identity, on whether they're part of Russia or part of Europe. And you highlighted two moments in Ukrainian history that there's a big flare up where the statement was first Ukraine is not Russia, and essentially Ukraine is part of Europe, but there's other moments. What were the defining moments that began an actual war in the Donbas?

Serhii Plokhy
The war started in February of 2014, was the Russian takeover of Crimea by military force. The so-called Green Man. And the big question is why, and it's very important to go back to the year 2013 and the start of the protests and the story of the Ukraine signing association agreement with European Union. So, from what we understand today, the Ukrainian government under President Yanukovych, did this suicidal sharp turn after one year of promising association agreement saying that, "Okay, we changed our mind under pressure from Moscow." And Moscow applied that pressure for one reason, at least in my opinion. The Ukraine signing association agreement with European Union would mean that Ukraine would not be able to sign association agreement with any Eurasian union in any shape or form, that was at that time in the process of making. And for Vladimir Putin, that was the beginning of his, or part of his third term, one of his agenda items for the third term was really consolidation of the post-Soviet space and Eurasian space and not membership in NATO, not membership in European Union. But association agreement with European Union meant that that post-Soviet space would have to exist under Moscow's control, but without Ukraine, the second-largest post-Soviet republic. The republic on whose vote depended the continuing existence of the Soviet Union and whose vote ended in many ways the existence of the Soviet Union. So, that is broadly background, but also there are of course personalities. There are also their beliefs, their readings of history, and all of that became part of the story. But if you look at that geopolitically, the association agreement is put in Ukraine outside of the Russian sphere of influence. And the response was an attempt to

topple the government in Kyiv that clearly was going to sign that agreement, to take over Crimea and to help to deal with a lot of issues within Russia itself and boost the popularity of the president. And it certainly, certainly worked in that way as well. Once Ukraine, still after Crimea, continued on its path, then the next step started the so-called hybrid warfare in Donbas. But again, unlike Crimea, from what I understand, Russia was not really looking forward to taking possession of Donbas. Donbas was viewed as the way how to influence Ukraine to stop it from a drift toward the West.

Lex Fridman
Maybe you can tell me about the region of Donbas.

Serhii Plokhy
I mentioned that nationalism and principle of nationalism is the principle of making the political borders to coincide with ethnic and cultural borders. And that's how the maps of many East European countries had been drawn in the 19th and 20th century. On that principle, Donbas, where the majority constituted by the beginning of the 20th century were Ukrainians, was considered to be Ukrainian and was claimed in the middle of this revolution and revolutionary wars and civil wars by Ukrainian government. But Donbas became a site, one of the key sites in the Russian Empire of early industrialization, with its mining industry, with mythological industry. So, what that meant was that people from other parts of, not Ukraine, but other parts of the Russian Empire, congregated there. That's where jobs were. That's how Khrushchev and his family came to Donbas. The family of Brezhnev overshoot a little bit. They got to the industrial enterprises in the city of Kamensk - the place - the city that was called [inaudible 01:33:16]. So, those were Russian peasants moving into the area in looking for their job. The population became quite mixed. Ukrainians still constituted the majority of the population, but not necessarily in the towns and in the cities. And culturally, the place was becoming more and more Russian as the result of that moment. Apart from the Crimea, Donbas was the part of Ukraine where the ethnic Russians were the biggest group. They were not the majority, but they were very, very big and significant group. For example, in the city of Mariupol, that was all but destroyed in the course of the last two years, the ethnic Russians constituted over 40% of the population, right? So, that's not exactly part of Donbas, but that gives you general idea. Now, the story of Donbas and what happened now is multidimensional, and this ethnic composition is just one part of the story. Another very important part of the story is economy, and Donbas is a classical rust belt. And we know what happens with the cities that were part of the first or second wave of industrialization in the United States and globally, we know about social problems that exist in those places. So, Donbas is probably the most dramatic and tragic case of implosion of the rust belt. With the mines not anymore producing the sort of the - and at the acceptable price. The coal that they used to produce, is people losing jobs with the politicians looking for subsidies as opposed to trying very unpopular, unpopular measures of doing something and bring your money and your investment into the region. All of that become part of the story that made it easy for Russia, for the Russian Federation, to

destabilize the situation. We have interviews with Mr. Girkin who is saying that he was the first who pulled the trigger and fired the shot in that war. He became the Minister of Defense in the Donetsk people's republic. You look at the Prime Minister, he is another person with Moscow residency permit. So, you see key figures in those positions at the start and the beginning, not being Russians from Ukraine, but being Russians from Russia and Russians from Moscow closely connected to the government structure and intelligence structure and so on. So, that is the start in the beginning, but the way how it exploded, the way it did was also a combination of the economic and ethno-cultural and linguistic factors.

Lex Fridman
For Putin, the war on Donbas and even in 2022 is a defensive war against what the Ukrainian government is doing against ethnically Russian people in Donbas. Is that fair to say how he describes it?

Serhii Plokhy
What we see, this is certainly the argument. This is certainly the argument and pretext because what we see there is that there would be no, and there was no independent mobilization in Crimea either, in Crimea or in Donbas, without Russian presence. Without Russian occupation de facto of the Crimea, there would be no - and there was no before, at least in the previous five to six years, any mass mobilizations of Russians. There was none of such mobilizations in Donbas before Girkin and other people with parts of military units showed up there. So, it is an excuse. You've been to Ukraine.

Lex Fridman
Mm-hmm.

Serhii Plokhy
You know that Russian language is not persecuted in Ukraine. And if you've not been to Donbas or to the Crimea, it would be difficult to find one single Ukrainian school. Not that they didn't exist at all, but it would take quite an effort for you to find it, or sometimes even to hear Ukrainian language outside of the institutions or the farmer's market. That's the reality. That's the reality that is clear, that is visible. So, imagine under those conditions and context that someone is persecuting ethnic Russians or Russian speakers. One, to believe in something like that, one important precondition is never to step your foot in Ukraine.

Lex Fridman
I should mention, maybe this is a good moment to mention, when I traveled to Ukraine, this is after the start of the war, you mentioned farmer's market, which is funny. Basically every single person I talked to, including the leadership, we spoke in Russian. For many of them, Russian is the more comfortable language even. And the people who spoke Ukrainian are more on the western side of Ukraine and young people that are kind of wanting to show that in an activist way that they want to fight for the independence of their country. So, I take

your point. I wonder if you want to comment about language and maybe about the future of language in Ukraine. Is the future of language going to stabilize on Ukrainian or is it going to return to its traditional base of Russian language?

Serhii Plokhy

Very roughly, before the start of the war in 2014, we can talk about parity between Russian and Ukrainian and also with, as you said, clearly Ukraine being a dominant language in the West and Russian being a dominant language on the streets, certainly in the East of the country. And then in between of that to pause a number of these transitional areas. And Ukraine, in my experience, and I visited a lot of countries, not all of them, and probably maybe I will be still surprised, but in my experience, this is the only truly bilingual country that I ever visited. I lived in Canada for a long period of time. There is Quebec and the rest. And in Ukraine, you can talk in either Russian or Ukrainian in any part of the country and you would be understood and you would be responded in a different language with the expectation that you would understand. And if you don't understand, that means you don't come from Ukraine. That's the reality. The war and loss of the Crimea and partial loss of Donbas, its major industrial areas, really shifted the balance toward mostly Ukrainian-speaking regions. And also what you see, and you clearly pointed to that, starting with 2014, even a little bit earlier, the younger generation chooses Ukrainian as a marker of its identity. And that started in 2014, but we have a dramatic, dramatic shift after 2022. And on the - 2022. And on the anecdotal level I can tell you that I speak to people who be in Chernihiv at the time, this is east of Crimea, at the time of the Russian aggression, and bombardment and so on and so forth, who had passive knowledge of Ukrainian but spoke all their life Russian. And they would speak Ukrainian to me, and when I say, "Okay, why you doing that? We know each other for decades and you used Russian." And he said, "Well, I don't want to have anything in common with people who did that to us." So there is a big, big push of course with this current war. Now the question is whether this change is something that will stay or not. What is the future? Linguistic practices are very, very conservative ones. And we at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute have a project called MAPA Digital Atlas of Ukraine. And we were documenting and mapping different data in time. And what we noticed a spike in the people's self-reporting of use of Ukrainian in 2014 and 2015 at the time of the start of the war when the threat was the most clear one. This is self-reporting, that doesn't mean that people exactly do what they believe that that's what they're supposed to do, and then return back to where it was by the year 2016 and 2017. So this dynamic can repeat itself, but given how long the war is going on, how big the impact, how big the stress is, and that the wave of the future is probably associated with younger people who are switching to Ukrainian. So my bet would be on Ukrainian language rising in prominence.

Lex Fridman
So as we get closer to February of 2022, there's a few other key moments. Maybe let's talk about in July 2021, Putin publishing an essay titled On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. Can you describe the ideas expressed in this essay?

Serhii Plokhy
The idea is very conveniently presented already in the first paragraph, in the first sentences really of the article, where Putin says that, "For a long time I was saying that Russians and Ukrainians were one and the same people, and here is the proof." He develops his historical argumentation apparently with the help of a lot of people around him. And he started to talk about Russians and Ukrainians being one and the same people, one year before the start of the war in 2014. So in 2013, he was together with Patriarch Kirill on visit to Kiev. And there was a conference specifically organized for him in the Kievan Caves Monastery, and that's where he stated that. The fact that he was with Patriarch Kirill is very important factor for understanding where the idea is coming from. This is the idea that was dominant in the Russian Empire of the 19s and the beginning of the 20th century, that Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians are really, great Russians, little Russians, and white Russians, and that they constitute one people. Yes, there are some dialectical differences. Yes, Ukrainians sing well, yes, they dance funny, but overall that doesn't matter. And that idea actually was really destroyed, mostly destroyed by the revolution of 1917. Because it wasn't just social revolution that's how it's understood in the US and good part of the world, it was also national revolution, it was an empire, it was a revolution in the Russian Empire. And to bring this pieces of empire back within the Soviet Union, the Bolsheviks had to make concessions. And one of those concessions was recognition of the existence of Ukrainians as a separate nation, Belorussians as a separate nations, Russians as a separate nations. Endowing them with their own territorial with borders, with institutions and so on and so forth. But there was one institution that was not reformed, that institution was called the Russian Orthodox Church. Because one of the ways that Bolsheviks dealt with it, they couldn't eradicate religion completely. But they arrested the development of the religion, and thinking, and theology on the level as it existed before the revolution of 1917. So the Russian Orthodox Church of 1917 continued to be the Russian Orthodox Church in 1991 and in 2013. Continuing the same imperial mantra of the existence of one big Russian nation, one unified people. And when you see the formation of the ideas about nations, about foreign policy in the Russian Empire after 1991, they're going back to the pre-Bolshevik times. Ukrainians do that as well. Estonians do that as well. The difference is that when Ukrainians go back, they go back to the pre-1917, they had their intellectual fathers and writings of basically liberal nationalism. Or sometimes they go to the radical nationalism of Bandera, which would be not pre-1917, but pre-1945. When the Russians go to pre-Bolshevik past, looking for the ideas, looking for inspiration, looking for the narratives, what they find there is empire, what they find there are imperial projects. And that's certainly the story of Putin's claim, that's the story of the argument. And to conclude the argument that he lays out there, historical argument, comes also almost directly from the narratives of the late 19s and the

beginning of the 20th century. So it's not only the argument is coming from that era, but also the argumentation is coming from that era as well.

Lex Fridman
But those arguments are all in the flavor of empire.

Serhii Plokhy
It's empire on the one hand, but also there is imperial understanding of what Russian nation is, that doesn't allow for independence of its little Russian and white Russian branches, alleged branches. So what you see is the concept of the big Russian nation that's late 19s beginning 20th century. Empire sees the writing on the wall that nationalism is on the rise, and it tries to survive by mobilizing the nationalism of the largest group in the empire, she happens to be Russian. Stalin is a big promoter of some form of Russian nationalism, especially during the war and after war. And he started his career as a very promising Georgian writer, writing in Georgian. So he's not doing that for some personal affinity or cultural intellectual roots within Russian nation or Russian people. He is doing that for the sake of the success of his Soviet and communist project. And he has to get the largest ethnic group on board, which are Russians. But Stalin and Putin have different understanding who Russians are. Stalin already accepted Ukrainians and Belarusians, their existence Putin goes back to pre-Stalin and pre-Lenin times.

Lex Fridman
So if we step back from the historical context of this and maybe the geopolitical purpose of writing such an essay, and forget about the essay altogether. I have family in Ukraine and Russia. I know a lot of people in Ukraine and Russia. Forget the war, forget all of this, they all sound the same. If I go to France, they sound different than in Ukraine and Russia. If you lay out the cultural map of the world, there's just a different beat, and music, and flavor to a people. What I'm trying to say is there seems to be a closeness between the cultures of Ukraine and Russia. How do we describe that? Do we acknowledge that and how does that add tension with the national independence?

Serhii Plokhy
First of all, especially when it comes to Eastern Ukraine or to big cities, many people in Ukraine spoke Russian. Generally, it's the same language. On the top of that we started our discussion with talking about the Slavs, so both Ukrainian and Russian language are Slavic languages, so there is proximity there as well. On the top of that, there is a history of existence in the Soviet Union, and before that in one empire for a long period of time. So you see a lot of before the war, a lot of Ukrainian singers and entertainers performing in Russia and vice versa. And biography of President Zelensky certainly fits that particular model as well, that all talks about similarities. But this similarities also very often obscure things that became so important in the course of this war. And I already mentioned the book titled by President Kuchma of Ukraine, "Ukraine is Not Russia". So, that's the argument, despite the

fact that you think that we are the same, we behave differently. And it turned out that they behave differently. You have Bolotnaya in Moscow and police violence, and that's the end of it. You have the Maidan in Ukraine and you have police violence, and that's the beginning, that's not the end. History really matters in the way why sometimes people speaking the same language with different accents behave very differently. Russia and Russian identity was formed around the state, and has difficulty imagining itself outside of the state, and that state happened to be imperial for most of Russian history. Ukrainian project came into existence in revolt against the state. Ukraine came into existence out of the parts of different empires, which means they left different cultural impact on them. And for Ukrainians to stay together, autocratic regime so far didn't work. It's like the colonies of the United States. You have to find common language, you have to talk to each other. And that became part of the Ukrainian political DNA. And that became a huge factor in the war. And very few people in Ukraine believed what Vladimir Putin was saying that Russians and Ukrainians were one and the same people, but the majority believed that they're certainly close culturally and historically nations. And from that point of view the bombardment of the Ukrainian cities became such a shock to the Ukrainians. Because deep down they maybe looked at Syria, they looked at Chechnya, and were explaining that through the fact that there was basically such a big cultural gap and difference between Russians and those countries and those nations. But my understanding at least, most of them had difficulty imagining the war of that proportion and that ferocity, and bring that war crimes and on that level.

Lex Fridman
It's interesting you say that in the DNA of Ukraine versus Russia. So maybe Russia is more conducive to authoritarian regimes, and Ukraine is more conducive to defining itself by rebelling against authoritarian regimes.

Serhii Plokhy
By rebellion, absolutely, and that was the story pretty much before 1991. So what you see since 1991 and what you see today is I would say new factor, certainly in Ukrainian modern history. Because Ukrainians traditionally were very successful rebels. The largest peasant army in the Civil War in the Russian Empire was the Makhno army in Southern Ukraine. And one revolt, Cossack revolts and other revolts, one after another. But Ukrainians had historically difficulty actually maintaining the freedom that they acquired, had difficulty associating themselves with the state. And what we see, especially in the last two years, it's a quite phenomenal development in Ukraine when Ukrainians associate themselves with the state. Where Ukrainians see a state not just as a foreigner, as historically it was in Ukrainian history. Not just someone who came to take, but the state that is continuation of them, that helps to provide security for them. That the Ukrainian armed forces even before the start of this war had the highest support and popularity in Ukraine. The state today functions unbelievably effectively under attacks and missile attacks, and against city government and local government. And we are witnessing when it comes to Ukraine, we're

witnessing a very important historical development where Ukrainians found their state for the first time through most of their history, and try to make a transition from successful rebels to successful managers and state builders.

Lex Fridman
I talked to John Mearsheimer recently, there's a lot of people that believe NATO had a big contribution to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. So what role did NATO play in this full history from Bucharest in 2008 to today?

Serhii Plokhy
NATO was a big part certainly of the Russian justification for the war, that was the theme that was up there in the months leading to the aggression. The truth is that, and Vladimir Putin went on records saying that, that the Western leaders were telling him again and again that there is no chance for Ukraine to become member of NATO anytime soon. Russia was very effective back in the year two '08 in stopping Ukraine and Georgia on the path of joining NATO. There was a Bucharest Summit at which the US president at that time, George W. Bush was pushing for the membership. And Putin convinced leaders of France and Germany to block that membership. And after that membership for Ukraine and for Georgia was really removed from the realistic agenda for NATO. And that's what the leaders of the western world in the month leading into the February 2022 aggression were trying to convey to Vladimir Putin. What he wanted there was an ultimatum that really was there not to start negotiations, but really to stop negotiations. He demanded the withdrawal of NATO to the borders of the 1997, if I'm not mistaken. So completely something that neither leaders would accept, nor the country's members of NATO would accept. But for me, it's very clear that that was an excuse, that that was a justification. And what happened later in the year 2022 and 2023 certainly confirms me in that belief. Finland joined NATO and Sweden is on the way to joining NATO. So Finland joining NATO, increased border between Russia and NATO, twofold, and probably more than that. So if NATO is the real concern, it would be probably not completely unreasonable to expect that if not every single soldier, but at least half of the Russian army fighting in Ukraine would be moved to protect the new border with NATO in Finland. So I have no doubt that no one in Kremlin either in the past or today looks favorably or is excited about NATO moving, or the countries of Eastern Europe journey NATO. But I have very difficult time imagining that that was the primary cause of the war. And what we see also we talked about Tucker's interview, he was surprised, but he believed that Putin was completely honest when the first 25 minutes of interview he was talking about relations between Russia and Ukraine, was talking about history. And that was also the main focus of his essay. Essay was not on NATO and Russia, his essay was on Russia and Ukraine. So that is where the real causes are. The broader context is the fall of empire and process of disintegration of empire, not the story of NATO.

Lex Fridman
What was to clarify the reason Putin, Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022?

Serhii Plokhy
The immediate goal in 2014 when the war started was to stop the drift of Ukraine toward the west and outside of the Russian sphere of influence. The invasion of 2022 perceived the same goals, keeping Ukraine in the Russian sphere of influence. Once we have the resistance, quite effective resistance on the part of Ukraine, the Rammstein and coalition, international coalition in support of Ukraine. Then we see the realization of plan B, where parts of Ukrainian territory are being annexed and included in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. So the two scenarios don't exclude each other, but if scenario number one doesn't work, then scenario number two goes into play.

Lex Fridman
In the Gates of Kiev chapter, you write about Volodymyr Zelensky in the early days of the war. What are most important moments to you about this time? The first hours and days of the invasion.

Serhii Plokhy
The first hours and the first days were the most difficult, psychologically. The rest of the world really didn't expect Kiev to last for more than few days. Didn't expect Ukraine to last for more than few weeks. And all the data suggested that that's what would happen. Ukraine would collapse, would be taken over. Putin called his war a special military operation, which suggests your also expectations about the scope, expectations about the time. So semi-military, semi police operation. So every reasonable person in the world believed that that would happen. And it's the heroism of "unreasonable" people like Zelensky, like the commander of Ukrainian Armed forces, Zoluzhny, like mayors of the cities, Klitschko and others. I'm just naming names that are familiar to almost all of us now. But there are thousands of those people, unreasonable people who decided that it was unreasonable to attack their country. And that was the most difficult times and days. And speaking about Zelensky, every I understand reasonable leader in the West was trying to convince him to leave Ukraine and to set a government in exile in Poland or in London. And it was reasonable to accept one of his predecessors Mr. Yanukovych fled Kiev. A few months before that in Afghanistan, the president of Afghanistan fled Afghanistan. That was a reasonable thing to expect, and he turned out to be very, very unreasonable in that sense. That comes with the guts, his guts and guts people around him and Ukrainians in general.

Lex Fridman
Why do you think he stayed in Kiev, this former comedian who played a president on TV, when Kiev is being invaded by the second most powerful military in the world?

Serhii Plokhy
Because I think he believes in things. One of those things was that if he a president and he is in the presidential office, he is there to play his role to the end. And another thing, my personal, again, I never met Volodymyr Zelensky. My personal understanding of him is that

he has talent that helped him in his career before the presidency and then helps now. He feels the audience, and then channels the attitude of the audience and amplifies it. And I think that another reason why he didn't leave Kiev was that he felt the audience, the audience in that particular context for the Ukrainians.

Lex Fridman
So he had a sense that the Ukrainians would unify. Because he was quite if you look at the polls before the war, quite unpopular. And there was still divisions and factions, and the government is divided, there's the East and the West and all this stuff. You think he had a sense that this could unite people.

Serhii Plokhy
The East and the West was not already such an issue after Crimea and part of Donbas being gone. So Ukraine was much more united than it was before. He brought to power his before that really non-existent party of regions on his personal popularity. But the important thing is that he created a majority in the parliament, which really reflected the unity that existed among Ukrainians that was not there before. He won with 73% of the population of those who took part in the elections, his predecessor Petro Poroshenko also carried 90% of the precincts. And the same happened with Zelensky. So the country unified after 2014, to a degree it was impossible to imagine before. And Zelensky felt that Zelensky knew that, and that's where the talent of politician really matters. That's something that you can see beyond just data, and you can feel that apparently Yeltsin had that ability.

Lex Fridman
Why did the peace talks fail? There was a lot of peace talks.

Serhii Plokhy
The main reason is that the conditions that Russia was trying to impose on Ukraine were basically unacceptable for Ukraine. Because one of the conditions apart from this strange thing called Denazification, was of course de facto loss of the territory. And for the future, really staying outside either of NATO or any Western support, which was very clear. You can buy a couple of weeks, you can buy a couple of months, but in the conditions like that Russia will come back tomorrow and will take over everything. And once Ukrainians realize that they can win on the battlefield, once the Russians were defeated and withdrew from Kiev, the opportunity emerged to get out of the negotiations, which was very clear were leading, if not today then tomorrow to the complete destruction of Ukraine. And then of course, once the territory started to be liberated, things like butcher and massacres of the civilian population came to the fore, which made also very difficult, if not impossible to conduct negotiations from this moral and emotional point of view.

Lex Fridman
What about the claims that Boris Johnson, the West compromised the ability of these peace talks to be successful, basically manipulated the talks?

Serhii Plokhy
I asked people who accompanied Boris Johnson to Kiev that question, the answer was no. And I believe this answer, and I'll tell you why. Because it is very difficult for me to imagine President Zelensky to take orders from anybody in the world. Either whether it is Johnson or Joe Biden or anybody else, and basically doing things that Zelensky believes are not in his interest or in the interest of his country. I just can't imagine that anybody in the world telling Zelensky what to do, and Zelensky actually following it against his own wishes and desires. At least if that is possible, what is in the public's sphere doesn't allow us to suggest that it is.

Lex Fridman
That said, Zelensky is a smart man and he knows that the war can only continue with the West's support.

Serhii Plokhy
That is a different supposition to know that it can continue with the West's support. But if talking about withdrawing from the negotiations, that's not about the continuation of the war, that you don't need Western support.

Lex Fridman
Well, what I mean is if he started to sense that the West will support no matter what, then maybe the space of decisions you're making is different.

Serhii Plokhy
We can interpret that that way. But Boris Johnson represented at that point Britain, not the United States. And really what the war showed, and it was clear already at that time that what was needed was massive support from the West as a whole. And the promise of that support came only after the West realized that Ukraine can win, and came only in late April is the Rammstein, so at least a few weeks later. So I don't know how much Boris Johnson could promise, he probably could promise to try to help and try to convince and try to work on that. If Zelensky acted on that promise he certainly was taking a risk. But the key issue, again, I'm going back where I started, it's principle unacceptance for Ukraine the conditions that were offered. And Ukraine was the moment they saw the possibility that they could fight back with Johnson's support, without Johnson's support they took the chance.

Lex Fridman
So what are the ways this war can end, do you think? What are the different possible trajectories, whether it's peace talks? What does winning look like for you this side? What is the role of US? What trajectories do you see that are possible?

Serhii Plokhy
It's a question on the one level very easy to answer, on the other very difficult. The level on which it is very easy, it's a broad historical perspective. If you really believe, and I believe in that, that this is the war of the Soviet succession, that this is the war of the disintegration of empire. We know how the story ends, and they end with disintegration of empire. They end with the rise of the new states and appearance of the new colored spots on the map. That's the story that started with the American Revolution, so that's long-term perspective. The difficult part is of course what will happen tomorrow. The difficult part is what they will be in two days or even in two years. In very broad terms, the war can end in one of three scenarios. The victory of one side, the victory of another side, and a sort of stalemate and compromise, especially when it comes to the territories. This war is already approaching the end of the second year. I follow the news and look analysis. I don't remember one single piece suggesting that the next year will bring peace or will bring-Suggesting that the next year will bring peace for sure, and we are in a situation where both sides still believe that they can achieve something or improve their position on the battlefield. Certainly that was the expectations of Ukrainian side back in the summer and early fall of 2023, and from what I understand now, this is certainly the expectations of the Russian side today. This is the largest war in Europe since World War II, the largest war in the world since Korean War. And we know that the Korean war ended in this division of Korea, but the negotiations were going on for more than two years. While those negotiations were going on, both sides were trying to improve their position there. And until there was a political change, death of Stalin, rival of Eisenhower in the United States, and the realization that the chances of succeeding on the battlefield are huge, the peace talks didn't come. So at this point, all three scenarios are possible. I don't really discount any of them. It's early to say what will happen.

Lex Fridman
So without any political change, let's try to imagine what are the possibilities that the war ends this year? Is it possible that it can end with compromise basically at the place it started?

Serhii Plokhy
Meaning back to the borders of 2022.

Lex Fridman
Yeah. Back to the borders of '22, with some security guarantees that aren't really guarantees, but are hopeful guarantees.

Serhii Plokhy
No, it's not just virtual impossibility, it is impossible without political change in Moscow. The reason is that back in the fall of 2022, Vladimir Putin included five of Ukrainian regions, oblasts, even those that he didn't control or didn't control fully into the Russian constitution, which basically in simple language is that the hands are tied up not only for Putin himself, but also for his possible successors. So that means that no return to the borders of 2022 without political change in Moscow are possible. A few days after that decision in Moscow, Zelensky issued a decree saying that no negotiations with Russia. What that really meant in plain language is that basically, we're not prepared to negotiate a stable agreement with five oblasts, not just the next, but also included into the Russian constitution. So that's where we are, so that scenario, again, everything is possible of course, but it's highly, highly unlikely.

Lex Fridman
So the Russian constitution is a thing that makes this all very difficult.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes, and not only as a negotiation tactic for Putin or whoever would negotiate on the Russian side, but also as a legal issue.

Lex Fridman
So the practical aspect of it even is difficult.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes. You really have to change the Constitution before the peace agreement takes hold or immediately after that. And with the Minsk agreements, that was one of things that Russia wanted from Ukraine, change of the Constitution, and it turned out to be rarely impossible. So that's one of the backstories of the Minsk and collapse of the Minsk agreements.

Lex Fridman
Is there something like Minsk agreements that are possible now, maybe this is a legal question, but to override the Constitution to sort of shake everything up? So see the constitutional amendment as just a negotiation tactic to come to the table to something like Minsk agreement?

Serhii Plokhy
Given how fast those amendments to the Constitution were adopted, that suggests that really, executive power in Russia has enormous power over the legislative branch. So it's again difficult to imagine, but technically this is possible, again, but possible if there is a political change in Moscow.

Lex Fridman
I don't understand why assuming political change in Moscow is not possible this year, so I'm trying to see if there's a way to end this war this year. Right?

Serhii Plokhy
There is a possibility of armistice, right? But armistice more like any armistice, along the lines of the current front lines. But withdrawal of the Russian troops to the borders of 2022 at this point, whether it's reasonable or unreasonable, can be achieved all only as the result of the defeat of the Russian army like it happened near Kiev. Is it possible? Possible. Is it likely, especially given what is happening with the Western support, military support for Ukraine? Probably not.

Lex Fridman
But if Putin, the executive branch has a lot of power, why can't the United States president, the Russian president, the Ukrainian president come to the table and drop something like Minsk agreements, and then rapid constitutional changes made and you go back to the borders of before 2022? Through agreements, through compromise, impossible for you?

Serhii Plokhy
Certainly not this year. I look at this year as the time when at least one side, Russian side, will try to get as much as it can through military means.

Lex Fridman
But that's been happening last year too. There's been a counteroffensive, there's attempts.

Serhii Plokhy
It doesn't mean that new year somehow is supposed to bring new tactics. The last year was pretty much a lot of fighting, a lot of suffering, very little movement of the front line. The biggest change of the last year was Ukraine victory on the Black Sea, where they pushed the Russian Navy into the western part of the pond and restored the grain corridor and export from Odessa, apparently up to 75% of what it used to be before the war. So that's the only major change but again, the price is enormous in terms of wealth, especially in terms of lives.

Lex Fridman
So thinking about what 2024 brings, Zelensky just fired Ukraine's head of the army, a man you've mentioned, General Valery Zaluzhny. What do you make of this development?

Serhii Plokhy
This is a very, very dangerous moment in the war. The reason for that is that Zaluzhny is someone who is very popular with the army and we people in general. So if you look at that through American prism, that would be something analogous to President Truman firing

General MacArthur, given that stakes for U. S at that time were very high, but probably not as high as they're for Ukraine today. In both cases, what is at stake is certainly the idea that the political leadership and military leadership have to be on the same page. And the question is whether on the part of Zelensky, this is just the change of the leadership or this is also the change of his approach to the war, and that can mean many things. One, can mean him taking more active part in planning operations. It can mean also possible change of the tactic in the war, given that counteroffensive didn't work out. We don't know yet. I don't know whether President Zelensky at this point knows exactly what will come next, but this is the time when the change of the leadership in the country and in the army that is at war, it's one of the most trying, most dangerous moments.

Lex Fridman
So the thing that President Zelensky expressed is that this is going to be a change of tactics, making the approach more technologically advanced, those kind of things. But as you said, I believe he is less popular than the chief of the army, Zaluzhny, 80% to 60% depending on the polls. Do you think it's possible that Zelensky's days are numbered as the president and that somebody like Zaluzhny comes to power?

Serhii Plokhy
What we know is that in this war, Ukrainian people really united around their president and the armed forces were always, even before the start of the war, more popular than was the presidential office., so the change that happened in that realm was not so dramatic. And from what I can see from social media in Ukraine, there is a lot of unhappiness, a lot of questions, but there is also realization, and very strong realization, that the country has to stay united. And certainly the behavior of Zaluzhny himself is there basically not suggesting any sort of a Prigozhin type of scenario. That gives me some hope, actually a lot of hope. And in terms of whether Zelensky's days are numbered or not, I don't think they're numbered, but if Ukraine stays a democracy, and I believe it'll stay, what comes to my mind is the story of Churchill, the story of de Gaulle. In Poland, the story of Pilsudski. So once the war is over, really the electorate in the Democratic elections, they want to change the political leadership, they want to move forward. But Pilsudski came back to power, and de Gaulle came back to power, and Churchill came back to power. So no, whatever happens in the short run or medium term run, I think that Zelensky's days in politics are not numbered.

Lex Fridman
So what to you is interesting? For example, if I get a chance to interview Zelensky, what to you is interesting about the person that would be good to ask about, to explore about, the state of his mind, his thinking, his view of the world as it stands today?

Serhii Plokhy
Next month we're supposed to take place Ukrainian elections. They're not taking place because the majority of Ukrainians don't think this is the right thing to do, to change the

president, to have the elections, to have a political struggle in the middle of the war. So Zelensky refused to call those elections, despite the fact that he is and continues to be the most popular politician in Ukraine. So it would be to his benefit, but that's clearly not what the Ukrainians want. But the question of continuing as the president beyond five years also one way or another would raise questions about the legitimacy, and certainly Russia will be playing this card like there is no tomorrow. What I would be interested in asking Zelensky about, whether he sees that his second term, which comes on those conditions, would suggest a different attitude toward the opposition. Maybe some form of the coalition government, like it was the case in Britain with Churchill, under different circumstances of course, or this is basically, in his opinion, something that would be destructive and something that would really be an impediment for the issue, for the question of unity and war effort. And I would ask this question not to basically suggest that that's the way to go, but I would be very much interested to hear what is his thinking about that is.

Lex Fridman
Do you think there's a degree during wartime that the power that comes with being a war president can corrupt the person, sort of push you away from the democratic mindset towards an authoritarian one?

Serhii Plokhy
I think that there is a possibility of that, right? In the conditions of any emergency, a war, in the case of the Soviet Union, there was a Chernobyl disaster and so on and so forth, you make decisions much faster. You create this vertical and then it's very easy to get really used to that way dealing with the conditions of emergency. And in continuing emergency or with no emergency, they're continuing the emergency mode. I think again, that would be a very, very natural thing for any human being to do to make it easier. Should I do that easier and in more effective way, or should I do the right way? That's the challenge. Sometimes it's difficult to answer this question.

Lex Fridman
Let me stay in power for just a little longer to do it the efficient way, and then time flies away and all of a sudden you're going for the third term and the fourth term.

Serhii Plokhy
And suddenly it's easy to realize that actually, you can't control in any other way. Whatever skills you had or people around that can help, is that already gone?

Lex Fridman
Exactly. The people that surround you are not providing the kind of critical feedback necessary for democratic system. One of the things that Tucker said after his interview with Putin, he was just in his hotel just chatting on video, and he said that he felt like Putin was not very good at explaining himself, like a coherent, whole narrative of why the invasion

happened or just this big picture. And he said that's not because he doesn't have one, but it's been a long time since he's had somebody around him where he has to explain himself to so he's out of practice, which is very interesting. It's a very interesting point. And that's what war and being in power for a prolonged period of time can do. So on that topic, if you had a chance to talk to Putin, what kind of questions would you ask him? What would you like to find out about the man as he stands today?

Serhii Plokhy
As a historian, I have a lot of questions, and I have questions about when the decision was made to attack Ukraine and what went into this decision because we're thinking about that, we're trying to solve. As a historian, I have this big question. I have question about the Crimea when those decisions were made. So that sort of questions that interest me, but the rest either I think that I understand what is going on with him or I don't expect the answer that can help. For example, a good question, whether you regret or not the start of the war in '22, given the enormous, enormous casualties on both sides. But you can't expect from a politician an honest answer to this question. Right? So there are questions to which I know he can't answer honestly, and then there are other questions to which I think already provided all answers that he could. So what for me is of interest are basically questions for a historian about the timing and the logic of particular decisions.

Lex Fridman
Well, I do wonder how different what he says publicly is from what he thinks privately, so a question about when the decision to invade Ukraine happens is a very good question to give insight to the difference between how he thinks about the world privately versus what he says publicly. And same about empire is if you ask Putin, he will say he has no interest in empire and he finds the notion silly, but at the same time, perhaps privately there's a sense in which he does seek the reunification of the Russian Empire.

Serhii Plokhy
Not in the form of the Russian Empire, not in the form of the Soviet Union, but certainly in some form of the Russian control. For me at least, it's quite clear, otherwise there would be no busts to the Russian emperors and Catherine and Peter and others.

Lex Fridman
You wrote in your book titled "The Frontline: Essays on Ukraine's Past and Present" about the Russian question, I guess articulated by Solzhenitsyn first in 1994. Solzhenitsyn of course is the year of The Gulag Archipelago, he's half Ukrainian. What is the Russian question?

Serhii Plokhy
Solzhenitsyn clearly identifies himself as a Russian, and his opposition to the communist regime was a position of a Russianist. So his argument was that communism was bad for

Russia, and for him Russian question is about the ethnic Russians, but also he was thinking about Russians in Putin's terms, how Putin thinks. In Solzhenitsyn's terms about Ukrainians and Belorussians constituting part of that. So the Russian question is the biggest tragedy of the 20th century, the the loss of the statehood and division of the Russians between different states. This is the Solzhenitsyn Russian question, and his original idea and plan was presented in the essay that he published in 1990, which was called How We Should Restructure Russia. And restructure Russia meant getting rid of the Baltics, Central Asia Caucasus and have Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, including those who live in northern Kazakhstan to create one nation state. So he was a Russian nationalist, but he was thinking about Russian nation state as the state of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians. And once the Soviet Union collapsed and his idea was not implemented in the 1990s, he formulated plan B, taking over by Russia of Donbas, Crimea, and southern Ukraine, the areas that now are included in the Russian constitution. So in historical terms and intellectual terms, what is happening today in the war between Russia and Ukraine is the vision on one level or another level that was formulated by the noble laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, half Russian, half Ukrainian.

Lex Fridman
If there is such a thing, what would you say is the Ukrainian question as we stand today?

Serhii Plokhy
The Ukrainian question is very simple. Now it's not anymore acquisition of the nation state, but actually a sovereign state. But it's maintenance, so the Ukrainian question is like dozens of other questions in the 20th and 21st century, the rise of the new state. And that's what is the Ukrainian question, whether Ukraine will continue to its existence as a nation, as an independent state, because that existence has been questioned by stating that Russians and Ukrainians so on are the same people, which de facto is saying your guy is Russian and also trying to destroy the state.

Lex Fridman
Is it possible that if the war in Ukraine continues for many more years, that the next leader that follows Zelensky would take Ukraine away from a democratic western style nation towards a more authoritarian one, maybe even with a far right influence, this kind of direction because of the influence of war?

Serhii Plokhy
Everything is possible and the longer the war continues, the more likely a scenario like that becomes. But realization of that scenario would go against the grain of largest part of Ukrainian history. Where Ukraine really emerged as a pluralistic state on which the elements of democracy were built in the last 30 years would go against the grain of the Ukrainian society where, as one author formulated in the 1990s, he wrote a book, "Ukrainian Nationalism: A Minority Faith", where the nationalist was a minority faith. And radical

nationalism continues to be or at least continued to be in 2019 a minority faith during the last elections. So possible, but unlikely given the historical realities of the last 30+ years.

Lex Fridman
I could talk to you for many more hours on Chernobyl alone, since you've written a book on Chernobyl and nuclear disaster. There's just a million possible conversations here, but let me just jump around history a little bit. Back before World War II, my grandmother lived through Holodomor and World War II, Nazi-occupied Ukraine. Holodomor, what do you learn let's say about human nature and about governments and nations from the fact that Holodomor happened? And maybe you could say what it is and why it happened?

Serhii Plokhy
Holodomor is a massive famine in Ukraine between the years 1932 and 1934, and it happened as the result of forceful collectivization of the agriculture, and a tamp on the part of Stalin also really roll Ukraine into the Soviet Union with basically no potential opposition from Ukraine, now national communists. So two things came together in December of 1932 when in the same decree, Stalin and Molotov signed a decree on the acquisition of the grain, which led eventually to the mass starvation, and on the banning of Ukrainian language publications and education in other Soviet republics outside of Ukraine, and introducing limitations on the so-called Ukrainianization policies, so the use of Ukrainian language in Ukraine itself. And the numbers are debated. The numbers that most of the scholars work today are 4 million, but again, there are larger numbers as well that circulate. The famine of '32–'33 was not exclusive Ukrainian phenomenon, but most of Ukraine in the Soviet Union died in Ukraine. And Ukraine was the only place where the policy on collecting grain were coming together with the policy of the cleansing of the political leadership, sending people from Moscow to recover the leadership and attack on Ukrainian culture. So in terms of what I learn about human nature, it's more me learning about the ideologies of the 20th century because it's not the only famine in the communist lands. The famine in China, which was in terms of the numbers, much more devastating than that. It's in a different category and for a good reason, but you have Holocaust. What unites these things is the time. This is 20th century. What unites them are the dominance in the societies that are doing that, really ideologies that not just devalued human life, but considered that actually the way forward is by destroying large group of populations defined ethnically, religiously, socially, or otherwise, which tells about the time, but tells also about humanity because for centuries before that human life was valued. There were enemies, but the idea was that human life can put and at the end of the day, they can be slaves. You can use them for productive force. Countries in the 18th century with southern Ukraine, they were looking for settlers, for people to bring and live on land. You move into the 20th century and there is mass destruction of the population in the name of ideologies, which basically are by definition destroy human lives. And that's what's really so shocking and striking because that break with not just with issues of morale, not just with issues of humanity, with any common sense, what is happening. And I'm absolutely convinced that we didn't learn the lesson. I'm

absolutely convinced that we didn't learn the lesson. With turning our page on fascism communism, we somehow decided that we are free of that. That at least in those terms, history came to and end. That what is ahead is the future and nothing of that sort. What happened would take place to a degree that people would get in trouble for comparing any statements or events that happening today with the communism or fascism. And so I feel responsibility of myself and as a historian in particular for not doing a better job about telling people that, "Well, we are who we are and we have as humans our dark side and we have to be very careful."

Lex Fridman
So there is a human capacity to be captured by an idea, an ideology that claims to bring up a better world as the Nazis did, as Soviet Union did. And on the path of doing that, devaluing human life, that we will bring a better world. And if millions of people have to be tortured on the way to that, all right, but at least we have a better world and human beings are able to if not accept it, look the other way.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes. And in the name of a particular nation or race, like it was the Third Reich or in the name of the humanity of the future. So not just devalue human life, destroy human life.

Lex Fridman
Is there something fundamental about communism and centralized planning that's part of the problem here? Maybe this also connects to the story of Chernobyl, where the Chernobyl disaster is not just a story of failure of a nuclear power plant, but it's an entire institution of the scientific and nuclear institution, but the entirety of the government.

Serhii Plokhy
There is, and there is a number of factors of political and social character that produced Chernobyl. One of them is generally the atmosphere of secrecy in the Soviet Union in the conditions of the Cold War. Chernobyl reactor was a dual purpose reactor. It could boil water today and produce enriched uranium tomorrow, so it was top secret and if there were problems with that reactor, those problems were kept secret even at people who operated the reactor. That's what happened in Chernobyl. Another big, big part of the story, which is specifically Soviet, that's the nature of the managerial culture and administrative culture in which people had no right to make their own decisions in their place, in their position. A few years before that, Three Mile Island happened, which was a big, big nuclear disaster, but in terms of consequences, nothing like Chernobyl. And there in the context of the American legal culture and managerial culture, people who were operators, who were in managerial positions, that was their responsibility to take decisions. President Carter came there, but he was not calling shots on none of those issues. What you see with Chernobyl, and people who saw HBO series know that very well, the moment the high official arrives, everyone actually falls in line, it's the official who calls the shot. And to move population from the city

of Pripyat, you needed the okay coming from Moscow from the very top. So that is Soviet story, and then there is a global story of cutting corners to meet either deadlines like it was with that test that they were running at that time, or to meet production quotas. This is not just socialist thing, you can - quotas, this is not just socialist thing. You can replace production quotas with profit and you get the same story. So some parts in that story are generally reflective of today's world in general. Others are very specific, very specific for Soviet Union, for Soviet experience. And then the biggest, probably, Soviet part of that story is that on the one hand, the government in Moscow and Kiev, they mobilize all resources to deal with that, but they keep information about what is happening and the radiation clouds secret from the rest of the population, something that completely would be impossible and was impossible in the US, in UK where other accidents happened. And then guess what? A few years later, the Soviet Union collapses very much also thanks to the mobilization of people over the issue of Chernobyl and nuclear energy. People writing about that subject call it eco-nationalism, ecological nationalism, which comes at least in part from withholding information from people. And in Ukraine, mobilization didn't start over the issues that led to independence, didn't start over the issue of language or didn't start over the issue of national autonomy. It started under the slogans, "Tell us the truth about Chernobyl. We want to know whether we live in contaminated areas or not."And that was a very, very strong factor that crossed, not just ethnic religious linguistic lines, lines between members of the party and not members of the party of the top§ leadership and not in military and civilian because it turned out that the party card didn't protect you from being affected by radiation. So the all national mobilization happens. The first mass manifestations are about Chernobyl, not about anything else.

Lex Fridman
That's fascinating. For people who might not know, Chernobyl is located in Ukraine. It's a fascinating view that Chernobyl might be one of the critical threshold catalysts for the collapse of the Soviet Union. That's very interesting. Just as a small aside, I guess this is a good moment to give some love to the HBO series. Even though it's British accents and so on, it made me realize that some of these stories in Eastern Europe could be told very effectively through film, through series. It's so incredibly well done. And maybe I can ask you. Historically speaking, were you impressed?

Serhii Plokhy
I was. I was and I think that the mini-series are very truthful on a number of levels and very untruthful on some others. And they got very well the macro and micro levels. So the macro level is the issue of the big truth and the story there is very much built around the theme that I just discussed now. It's about the cost of lies and the Soviet Union lying to the people. And that's what the film explores. So that, I call it a big truth about Chernobyl. And they got a lot of minor things really, really very well. Like the curtains on the windows, like how the houses looked from inside and outside. I didn't see any post-Soviet film or any western film that would be so good at capturing those everyday details. But then there is a huge gray

area in between big truth and small truths of recreating the environment. And that's how you get from one to another. And then you see the KGB officers coming and taking someone out of the meeting and arresting, which was not necessary. You see the Soviet boss threatening someone to throw the person from the helicopter. So you get these Hollywood sort of things despite the fact that it's HBO series. And they're the best really as a film in the fourth episode where they completely decided just to hell with the reality and let's make a film. So they bring Legasov, one of the key characters, to the court meetings. They bring Soviet party boss, Shcherbina, he wasn't there. They created drama there. So they got the main thing, the big truth right, and that's why I like this production.

Lex Fridman
Sometimes to show what something felt like you have to go bigger than it actually was. If you - I don't know. If you experience heartbreak and you see a film about it, you want there to be explosions.

Serhii Plokhy
You want to see this in images. Visible, right? But the question again, I just mentioned KGB marching in and some party leader giving a speech, they were not giving that speech, but the sense was there and it was in the air and I, as people of my generation who were there, knew that and recognized that. But for new generation, whether they are in Ukraine and Russia, in US, in Britain, in Zimbabwe, anywhere, you have do these little untruths and introduce them. And I had a very interesting on-air conversation with the author of the script, Mazin, and I asked him the question of the film declared really the importance of the truth, but how do you square that with the need in the film, to really put it mildly, to go beyond the measures of truth, whatever understanding of that term is?

Lex Fridman
Well, I suppose it is a bit terrifying that some of the most dramatic moments in history are probably quite mundane. The decisions to begin wars, invasions, they're probably something like a Zoom meeting on a random Tuesday in today's workplace. So it's not like there's dramatic music playing. These are just human decisions and they command armies and they command destruction. I personally, because of that, believe in the power of individuals to be able to stop wars, not just start wars, individual leaders. So let me just ask about nuclear safety because there's an interesting point you make. You wrote in the book in "Atoms and Ashes: A Global History of Nuclear Disasters", so technically nuclear energy is extremely safe. If there's a number of people died per energy generated, it's much safer than coal oil, for example, as far as I understand. But the case you also make is you write, quote, "Many of the political, economic, social and cultural factors that led to the accidents of the past are still with us today, making the nuclear industry vulnerable to repeating old mistakes in new and unexpected ways and any new accidents are certain to create new anti-nuclear mobilization."And then you continue with, "This makes the nuclear industry not only risky to operate, but also impossible to count on as a long-term solution to an

overwhelming problem." Can you explain that perspective? It's an interesting one, speaking to the psychology when an accident does happen, it has a dramatic effect. And also speaking to the fact that accidents can happen, not because of the safety of the nuclear power plant, but of the underlying structure of government that oversees it.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes, I wrote a book on Chernobyl and then I tried to understand Chernobyl better by placing it in the context of other disasters. As a historian I was looking at the political factors and social factors and cultural factors, not the physics or engineering part of the story. And the factors that are still with us are, like it was the case in Chernobyl, the authoritarian regimes and high centralization of the decision-making and desire to cut corners and also the issues associated with secrecy. So that is with us, if you look at where the future of the nuclear industry is now at this point, it's the regimes and powers in the Middle East, that's a big new frontier. The countries that are not particularly known for the history of democratic existence. Where we also have the situation that we had at Three Mile Island that we had at Chernobyl, this is the first generation nuclear engineers. So people who are, where the country doesn't have a lot of experience and generations after generations working in that particular industry where it's all new. That is certainly additional risk. And what we got now with this current war is something that - not that people completely didn't expect, but didn't happen in the past. You see the war come into the nuclear sites, Chernobyl was taken over by the Russian army or National Guard rather, on the first day of the invasion. Then there was Zaporizhzhia, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe where the battle was waged on the territory of the nuclear power plant. The missiles being fired, buildings catching fire, and the situation that brought the Fukushima disaster was there at Zaporizhzhia more than once, and Fukushima came because the reactors were shut down as they are at Zaporizhzhia, but they still needed electricity to bring water and to them down. And in Fukushima case, it was the tsunami that cut off the supply of electricity. In the case of Zaporizhzhia, there was the warfare that was happening in the area around Zaporizhzhia that did the same effect. So we have 440 reactors in the world today, plus minus. None of them was designed to withstand the direct missile attack or to function in the conditions of the warfare. Operators they're human, then they make mistakes like they did it Three Mile Island or Chernobyl. But think also if the war is happening around them, if they're not sure what is happening with their families, if they don't know whether next missile, whether will hit the control room or not, that multiplies also. So we are in a situation where we are not done yet with the nuclear accidents. It's not like we don't pay attention or we don't learn. Smart people work on that and after every accident, try to figure the way how not to step into the same trap. But next accident would actually expose new vulnerability. You deal with Chernobyl and then tsunami comes. You deal with tsunami and then war comes. And we really in that sense, we have sometimes wild imagination, but sometimes it's difficult to imagine what can happen next. So we are not done. There will be nuclear accidents unfortunately in the future. And that makes nuclear energy so problematic when you count on it to fight climate change. I'll explain why. You gave the figures how many people die from

burning coal, from how many people die from radiation. And it's a good argument. Some people would question them because it's also the issue of not just dying, but impact of radiation on cancer, on our health, which is not completely understood yet. So still there is a lot of question marks, but let's assume what you're saying, that's the figures. That's how it is. But we as people, for whatever reason are not afraid of coal, but we're very much afraid of radiation. It's invisible, it's everywhere and you can't see it. And then you start having issues and then you have problems during the COVID, the governments closed the borders, maybe a good idea, maybe not so good ideas, isolation. So that was the way governments started to fight for access, to fight, to Moderna, to Sputnik, to whatever it's, to vaccine. So now back to the radiation. What is happening once Chernobyl happens? That's the highest point in the development of nuclear industry so far in terms of how many new reactors were commissioned or the licenses were issued. The next reactor after Three Mile Island in the US go ahead was given, it seems to me 10 years ago or something like that, the Fukushima happens, the reaction is in China to that as well. They're very much concerned. So there is a saying in the field, "Anywhere is Chernobyl everywhere." After Fukushima, Germany decides to go nuclear-free and gets there at the expense of burning coal. So that's how we react. And each major accident, that means global freeze on the nuclear reactor production for at least another 10 years. So that's what I mean that nuclear industry is politic, not just in terms of technology and not just in terms of radiation, impact on health, but also politically a very, very unreliable option.

Lex Fridman
And to you, you suspect that's an irreparable aspect of human nature in the human mind that there are certain things that just create a kind of panic, invisible threats of this kind. Whether it's a virus or radiation. There's something about the mind, if I get a stomach ache in the United States after Fukushima, I kind of think it's probably radiation, this kind of irrational type of thinking. And that's not possible to repair?

Serhii Plokhy
I think we can be trained. We can be trained.

Lex Fridman
Pretty smart, aren't we? Education.

Serhii Plokhy
But generally, we are afraid of things that we see, but even more, we're afraid of things that we don't see and radiation is one of those.

Lex Fridman
Let's zoom out on the world. We talked about the war in Ukraine. How does the war in Ukraine change the world order? Let me just look at everything that's going on. Zoom out a

bit. China, the Israel-Gaza war, the Middle East, India. What is interesting to you, important to think about, in the coming years and decades?

Serhii Plokhy
As a historian, and I'm trained that way, I have a feeling of deja vu. I see the Cold War is coming back in many of its features. And the war started, and we discussed that, in 2014, at least in my interpretation, with Russia trying to really reestablish its control over the post-Soviet space and Ukraine was crucial for that project. The more global Russian vision since 1990s was that they didn't like the American monopolar world. They knew and realized that they couldn't go back to the bipolar world of the Cold War era. So the vision was multipolar world. Again, it wasn't just academic exercise, it was a political exercise in which Russia would be one of the poles on par with China, on par with European Union, on par with the United States. That's very broadly speaking the context in which the war starts in 2014. Where we are now? Well, we are now in Russia certainly trying to regain its military strength, but no one actually believes that Russia is the superpower it was imagined before 2022. We see certainly Russia finding the way to deal with the sanctions, but we don't see certainly Russia as an economic power with any sort of a future. So it is not an implosion of the Russian military economic and political power, but it's significantly - actually it's diminished. So today, very difficult to imagine Russia emerging as another pole of the multipolar world. Not impossible, but the war certainly made that very problematic and much more difficult. On the other hand, what the war did, it basically awakened the old West. United States and Western Europe transatlantic alliance. On the top of that, there are East European countries that are even much, even much stronger proponents of assistance for Ukraine than is Germany or the United States of America. So it is the replay of the Cold War story, the Return of the West, one of the chapters in my book, the Russo-Ukrainian War is called that way. We also can see the elements of the rebuilding of the Beijing-Moscow alliance of the 1950s, which was a very important part of the Cold War. It was extremely important part of the Korean War that in many ways launched also the Cold War globally. So I see a lot of parallels of going back to the time of the Cold War and the bipolar world that emerges, it's not anymore the world focused on Washington and Moscow. It's more like world focused on Washington and Beijing. And then there are countries in between. There are countries in between that join one bloc or another bloc that is emerging that is not fully formed. This, in my opinion, makes the task of us historians to really go back to the Cold War and look through new perspective on the history of that conflict because there is a lot of things that we can learn.

Lex Fridman
So in some ways, history does repeat itself here. So now it's a cold war with China and the United States. What's a hopeful trajectory for the 21st century for the rest of it?

Serhii Plokhy
The hopeful trajectory is really trying to be as wise and as lucky as our predecessors during the Cold War War were. Because the dominant discourse so far about the Cold War was what a horrible thing that Cold War was. What did we do wrong? How did we end up in the Cold War? And I think especially today, this is a wrong question to ask. The right question to ask is how did it happen? What did we do so right that for now more than 70 years, we don't have a world war? How come that after World War I, World War II came within 20 years? What helped us to keep the world on the brink, but still away from the global war for such a long period of time? How to keep the Cold War cold. That's the biggest lesson that the history of the Cold War can give us. And I don't think we ask the question quite often enough, ask the question that way. And if you don't ask right questions, we don't get right answers.

Lex Fridman
Yeah, you've written a book, a great book on the Cuban Missile crisis. We came very close, not to just another world war, but to a nuclear war and the destruction of human civilization as we know it. So I guess it's a good question to ask, what did we do so right? And maybe one of the answers could be that we just got lucky. And the question is how do we keep getting lucky?

Serhii Plokhy
Luck is clearly, clearly one of the factors in Cuban Missile crisis because what happened there, and there is one of the lessons, is that eventually, the commanders at the top, they believe that they have all the cards, they negotiate with each other. They try to see who blinks first in the game of nuclear brinkmanship. The trick is that they don't control fully people on the ground. The most dangerous moment, or one of the most dangerous moment of the Cuban Missile crisis was the Soviet missile shooting down the American airplane, killing the pilot, an act of war. So technically we're already in the war. And the order to shoot the missile was given with Moscow having no clue what was going on the ground. Moscow never gave approval for that. And again, I described that in book many times about Kennedy bringing back his wisdom from World War II years. There always will be SOB who didn't get the order or missed things that was happening on the American side as well. So people who believe that they're in control really are not in control, and that can escalate whether they very often against their wishes. So that is one lesson, but going back to what we're still here and why the world didn't end up in 1962 is that the leadership, and I come to the issue that you strongly believe in that people, personalities matter, leaders matter. They were very different. Age, education, political careers, understanding what politics are and so on and so forth.

Lex Fridman
You mean Khrushchev?

Serhii Plokhy
Khrushchev and Kennedy. Yes, but they had one thing in common, that in one way they belong to the same generation. That was generation of the Bikini Atoll, that was the generation of the hydrogen bomb. The bomb that unlike the atomic bomb, they knew could destroy the world. And they were scared. They were scared of the nuclear weapons and they tried to do whatever they could pushing against their advisors or trying to deal with their anxieties. The first is true for Kennedy, later maybe for Khrushchev to make sure that the war between the United States and the Soviet Union doesn't start because they knew that that war would be a nuclear war. So we have a very, very paradoxical sort of situation. The crisis occurred because of the nuclear weapons, because Khrushchev put them on Cuba, but the crisis was resolved and we didn't end in the third World War because of the nuclear weapons, because people, leaders were afraid of them. And that's where I want to put emphasis. It's not that the nuclear weapons created crisis or solved the crisis, it's basically our perception of them. And we are now in the age after the Cold War era, with the new generation of voters, with the new generation of politicians. We don't belong to the generation of bikini atoll. You maybe know what bikini is, but we think that this is something-

Lex Fridman
It's a different thing. Yeah.

Serhii Plokhy
- that this is something else. And it's very important.

Lex Fridman
It's so fascinating how that fades into memory, that the power and the respect and fear of the power of nuclear weapons just fades into memory. And then we may very well make the same mistakes again.

Serhii Plokhy
Yes, we can.

Lex Fridman
Another leader said that, I believe, but about a totally different topic. Well, like you said, I'm also glad that we're here as a civilization, that we're still seem to be going on. There's several billion of us. And I'm also glad that the two of us are here. I've read a lot of your books. I've been recommending it. Please keep writing. Thank you for talking today. This was an honor.

Serhii Plokhy
Thank you very much, Lex. It was a pleasure.