Ukraine’s war-torn history

Keeping hope

alive

The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine.

R

OWSoverinheritancesarebitter—with-

in families and between countries. At

the heart of the conflict between Russia

and Ukraine is the contested legacy of a

long-forgotten superpower: Kievan Rus.

Both Vladimir Putin’s Russia and post-

Soviet Ukraine lay claim to the mantle of

Vladimir the Great, a prince who just over

1,000 years ago accepted Christian bap-

tism for his unruly tribes of Slavs and Vi-

kings. To patriotic Russians, that was the

foundingactionoftheirstatehood.For Uk-

rainians, the story is the other way round:

their country, so often wiped off the map

byitsneighbours,isthetruedescendant.

That dispute underlies today’s smoul-

dering war. Many Russians find it hard to

accept that Ukraine is really a state; more-

over, Ukrainians (especially if they speak

Russian as a first language) are essentially

Russians. The territory they inhabit is

thereforepartofMoscow’spatrimony.

Ukraine’sidentityanditsenemiesover

the past ten centuries are the central

threads of Serhii Plokhy’s admirable new

history. He eschews polemic—almost to a

fault, given the horrors he describes. The

subject material could seem dauntingly

dense: few readers will be familiar with

the twists and turns of the history, and

unfamiliar names and places abound. But

Mr Plokhy—a Harvard historian whose

previous book, “The Last Empire”, was a

notable account of the Soviet Union’s

downfall—treadsacarefulpath.

The story is not just of high politics,

gruesome and enthralling though that is.

EvenwhenUkrainedidnotexistasa state,

he writes, “language, folklore, literature

and, last but not least, history became

buildingblocksofa modern national iden-

tity”. He pays particular attention to the

linguistic complexities. Ukrainians may

speakRussian yetalso identifyprofoundly

with the Ukrainian state. The real linguistic

divide iswith Polish: western Ukraine was

formanydecadesunderPolish rule. Mem-

ories of massacres and oppression are re-

cent and vivid, making the reconciliation

between those two countries all the more

remarkable.

The epilogue to “The Gates of Europe”

rightly describes the Ukraine crisis as cen-

tral to Russia and Europe as a whole. It is

widelyknown thatthe Ukrainian national

anthem begins: “Ukraine has not yet per-

ished”. Mr Plokhy points out that the

Polish one begins in similarly mordant

style. The question forUkrainians—and for

Europe—is whether the country can sum-

mon up the determination thatPoland has

shown to tread the hard road which his-

toryhassetbefore it.

The stakes are high: a successful, stable

Ukraine would be a strong candidate to

join and strengthen the European Union. It

would also be a devastating refutation of

the Putin regime’s contention that belli-

cose autocracyisthe bestwayofrunning a

large ex-SovietSlaviccountry.

But the odds are uncomfortably long.

Ukraine returned to statehood in 1991

shorn ofitselites, thanksto famine, repres-

sion and Russification. The creepsand cro-

nies who have so signally misruled the

country since then have acquired great

riches, and put down deep roots. Two

democraticupheavals—the Orange revolu-

tion that began in late 2004 and the Mai-

dan protests of 2013—have failed to dis-

lodge thisparasiticrulingclass.

Yet belief in Ukraine’s history of toler-

ance and legality, rooted in European

Christian civilisation, keeps hope alive. In

his elegant and careful exposition of Uk-

raine’s past, Mr Plokhy has also provided

some signpoststo the future.