***

Volodymyr Kravchenko and Marko Robert Stech (eds), *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian, and East European Studies*. Edmonton & Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2024. xii + 462 pages.

The genesis of this remarkable, necessary and often startling collection of thirty essays by historians of Ukraine, and the wider region of which Ukraine is part, lay in a symposium at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies two and a half months after the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire on matters including the imperatives that the war imposes on their scholarly disciplines, the appropriateness of the theoretical paradigms available for the study of Ukrainian-Russian relations, topics requiring intensified research and/or reinterpretation, and historians' ethical and practical obligations in the context of the present war. The resulting texts differ in length and form (the majority are scholarly articles; a few remain less formal responses to the questionnaire), but agree that history, its interpretation and distortion are among the central causes of Russia's invasion, and that, generally speaking, historians in the West have been remiss and even unjust in their adoption of what are now transparent as Russocentric perspectives on Ukraine.

The editors, historian Voldymyr Kravchenko and writer and translator Marko Robert Stech, introduce the volume with wide-ranging essays. Kravchenko surveys

the evolution of Western scholarship concerning the Soviet Union and its successor countries from the Second World War onward and the failure of this scholarship, notwithstanding its 'imperial turn' in the 1990s, to attend adequately to the 'peripheries' of this 'space'. Stech's contribution, titled 'Academic Theories Disproven in Practice', enumerates misperceptions in the scholarly and international relations spheres that undermined Western understanding of the contemporary Russian state and caused the invasion and its attendant brutality to come as a surprise to many observers. Among these errors Stech, like many other contributors, identifies the attribution of 'rational actor' qualities to the Russian Federation; tacit acceptance of Russia's claim to special prerogatives in dealings with its neighbours; and readiness to accept the Russian narratives of Ukraine as an artificial, unstable quasi-state and as an implement of NATO schemes to threaten Russia.

The other essays are arranged in alphabetical order by author, although they could also be grouped thematically. On matters of theoretical framing and approach, there is no single voice. Yaroslav Hrytsak defends a history of the *longue durée*, arguing that observation across long stretches of time of regularities in the behaviour of states (Russia being the case in point) enables prediction or at least diminishes the likelihood of surprise, while Andriy Zayarnyuk remains sceptical of such generalising models as aids to grasping the reality of the past; the colonial paradigm, for example, nowadays applied by many in conceptualising the nature of Russia's exercise of oppressive power over Ukraine, implies unsustainable parallels with other colonial predicaments. Myroslav Shkandrij, by contrast, recommends examining Russian culture anew through a postcolonial lens. Olena Palko endorses transnational and entangled history approaches to the study of empire, while Serhy Yekelchyk cautions against their potential to deflect attention from the oppression and violence that attend the exercise of imperial authority. Darius Saliūnas, likewise, warns that studies in the spirit

of the 'imperial turn', focussed on the investment of both centre and peripheries in the making of empire, run the risk of underrepresenting its essential repressiveness.

Some contributors invoke regional analogies as resources for understanding the present situation of Ukraine. Tomasz Stryjek meditates on the past dominion of Poland over a major part of Ukraine and the relatively successful process of managing the memory of Polish-Ukrainian enmity, while John Connelly compares the impact on Ukraine of German and Russian imperialisms. Russian claims to exceptionalism and their consequences for historical scholarship and international relations are examined by Heather Coleman and Igor Torbakov. Histories of the discipline of history itself include Frank Sysyn's reflections on the post-war mainstream (non-)study of Ukrainian history and endeavours by the Ukrainian diaspora to address this lack, Andrii Portnov's and Tetiana Portnova's study of colonialism as part of Ukrainian historiographical discourse from 1900 to the 1930s, and Sergei I. Zhuk's diagnosis of a 'historiographic Soviet nostalgia' (p. 425) as a troubling disciplinary legacy that makes Putinist narratives strangely beguiling to some Western scholars. Looking to the future of Western historical study of Ukraine and its region, Olga Andrijewsky advocates for intensification of the study of minority and Indigenous populations, while Serhii Plokhy urges upon Ukrainian scholars the writing of the history of Russia (and the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Poland and Central Europe) as an empire from the perspective of its peripheries.

The most disturbing essays in the book deal with Russian state-sponsored historical disinformation. Hiroaki Kuromiya shows how even in the 1990s Western scholars' access to Russian archives was managed so as to result in publications supportive of Russia's favoured narratives. Andrew Wilson reports on the creation by Putin-era 'political technologists' of institutions and communication networks for disseminating the thesis that Russia is a unique civilisation facing the West's implacable

hatred, and that Ukraine, an artificial construct, is the West's anti-Russian Trojan horse. Tatiana Tairova describes the creation of journals for the propagation of such messages and the strategies employed to boost their standing in Western journal ranking systems.

The Unpredictable Past? is essential reading for all within academe who wish to write about anything between Berlin and the Bering Strait. It is a book that formulates, sometimes quite sharply, the consequences of the insufficiently critical treatment by scholars of enduring assumptions and value judgments about Russia and Ukraine, and makes quite clear the magnitude of the task to be addressed by those seriously intent upon a just, reliable and, therefore, usable understanding of the past out of which the current war has come.

Marko Pavlyshyn
Monash University