

CANTERBURY ROTARY BOOK CLUB

Notes of a rather chaotic meeting held unexpectedly chez Brian on 1st September 2022

1. PRESENT: Viv, Pefer W and Brian. Judith was in the vicinity , didn't quite make it, but provided a valuable note
2. APOLOGIES: Georges, Neil and Biddy, Diana, Caroline, Gill,Pauline
3. THE STORY: Gill had developed Whitstable gardening itis, ,Caroline 's back door had stopped working and couldn't be left,Pauline had just discovered she was about to go on holiday With all of 5 minutes to go chez Brian became the default venue
- 4.PREQUEL: Tea, scones,jam, clotted cream and raspberries on top and thus suitably fortified our doughty little band sallied forth to consider the BOOK - "The Gates of Europe - a History of Ukraine by Serhii Plokhy. Apparently the area that is now Ukraine has been occupied for 45,000 years. Luckily we didn't have to read about them all, but did start off with Herodotus in C5 BC, moving swiftly on to the mysterious Scythians , Greeks, Romans Vikings Byzantines until we pitched up with Yasroslav The Wise (also known as the father in law of Europe due to his success in marrying hjs daughters to so many crowned European heads) who died a few years before the Battle of Hastings There seems no certainty if Yaroslav was Russian or Ukrainian or even existed but whatever, things seem to have been very fluid until around the time of Henry VIII and the advent of the Cossacks - largely country dwelling bandits with a speciality in freeing slaves taken by the Tatars and Ottomans.

If by this time you feel you are not keeping up, fear not, for neither did we . The main thing is to understand that the steppe dwelling Cossacks were attached to more or less independent nobles , and that seeking alliances with stronger polities was the unstable order of the day, until with the C17 and 18, much bigger and more powerful states including Lithuania, Russia, Poland Austria and Sweden carved the area between them with the inevitable fighting It was not simply a matter of disputed territory but also of warring religions with Greek and Russian Orthodox churches and Roman Catholicism introduced via Poland. Although the peasants had been free, serfdom was introduced to the country by Catherine the Great.

Of course, a terrible history got even worse in the C20 especially when Stalin enforced collectivisation of agriculture and simply seized all produce in the 30s, causing 4 - 6 m people to die from starvation with full Soviet dictatorship.Perhaps it was understandable that towards the end of WW2 , when the Germans` offered support against the Russians acceptance of fascist help was seen as preferable to Russia . And then came the Iron Curtain , the Cold War , KGB and so on - andz, with glaznost, the same sort of oligarchs and dictators as Russia itself.

It was against the background of all these and other terrible things as recounted in the book that our discussion took place- but obviously there is far too much for us to have had more than a brushing acquaintance with the facts

We looked at some of the issues relevant to the current war with Russia. Viv reminded us that for a long while Thatcher opposed the reunification of E and W Germany as creating a danger to the West generally, but of course that weakened Western Europe . Putin accused Ukraine as fascist - but of course, the country did join with fascist Germany. Likewise, there is a certain amount of truth in Putin's allegation of fascism given the situations in Turkey,Hungary `and parts of ItalyHow are we to restore/ keep the peace? There might be something in the suggestion that for some years mass global travel has brought peace- but that seems no longer to work. We considered the claim that Russia has no defensible boundaries West of the Urals, hence its security obsession - but most continental states are in a similar position yet do not act so aggressively.

World bodies , such as the UN , have stepped in - notably in the Balkans- to keep the peace fairly successfully -but it does not seem to work where very large, powerful countries like Russia, are concerned - Might is right

What should we do? Boris Johnson said that we should not be more Ukrainian than the Ukrainians meaning taking things further than they currently go. Viv felt the Russians would have to have something and that Putin would not simply go away. He didn't think Truss realises that and might want to resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons

The build up to war in Ukraine seemed to have some parallels with the situation in Europe before WW1, when there was a build up over 20 years.He also mentioned having played the game

"Diplomacy" which is based on a map of pre-WW1 Europe. Everything in the game depended on building alliances . The game resulted in the action being based on Turkey, Germany and Russia, where indeed it did all happen

In this country we thought there are defects in the political process resulting in politicians making promises they cannot keep.

Could China act as mediator? It has not come down on the side of Russia, as it might have done, but seems to have no interest in taking active steps, and has given some sort of assurance to the Russians.

Peter pointed out Russia's weapons are inferior to those of the West and in any case rely on microchips only the West has. Peter also pointed out that quite a lot of people around Putin have been killed (but not enough) The chances of the matter being settled by some sort of world forum seemed remote after the relative failure of Cop26. We felt the attitude of Macron in trying to keep the negotiating door open had been sensible (and that of Truss towards him unhelpful)

One of the problems is that Ukraine is in many ways very like Russia, with its corrupt oligarch class and equally corrupt presidencies (such as that of Yanukovich) Perhaps the best we can do is to keep trying to ensure Putin does not win - but then what happens

Judith has sent a note that she found the book very interesting is a hard read (as did the rest of us). She referred to the death of Gorbachev and said she had not realised he is not seen as a good guy in Russia. We all thought this a good read, if hard. It really needs much more consideration than we can give in one of our meetings, but as a means of coming face to face with one of our biggest problems it seems worth reading - and perhaps re-reading

5. OTHER READS: Judith - Tracy Bloom: the Last Laugh, Michael Dobbs - The Reluctant Hero, Bernard Cornwell - Sharpe's Havoc; Frances Boddy - The body in the train' Lucinda Riley- The Shadow Sister; The Pearl Sister (I presume 2 books) , Alex Reeve The House on Half Moon Street, Georgie Hall - Woman of a certain age (particularly recommended for female members of the group). . Viv - Lee Childs - Reacher - ridiculous but good fun, Also " Sophie" - Anthea Anand - non fiction about an Indian princess effectively adopted by Queen Victoria - 400 pp Perhaps our next time read. Me - "English Journey" - J B Priestley - a journey round England in the period of the Depression - 1933. Lots of comparison with the current situation in this country,. Original was unillustrated but mine is a Jubilee edition with about 80 period photos and I would think much better. Some dreadful social conditions emerge and Priestley appears quite the socialist

6 THINGS DONE: Viv - Very interesting Tour round and in Ludlow. Me - visit to Nat Trust "Quebec House" at Westerham. Boyhood home of General Wolfe , victor of the Battle of Quebec in 1759 resulting in our getting the French possessions in N America - which of course we soon lost mostly. Really interesting guided tour of a small house.

7. DONM NB this is Tentative as we could not check with Pauline. Wednesday 6th October 2.15pm chez Pauline - 32 Nunnery Fields Canterbury CT13JT - 01227 761758

TO BE CONFIRMED. Book 0 suggested by Gill - Elif Shafak - Island of Missing trees (based on the troubles in Cyprus around the 70s