

‘The Gates of Europe’ by Serhii Plokhy, and
‘Borderland: a journey through the history of Ukraine’, by Anna Reid

‘The group set the ambitious target of reading these two books over the festive period, which proved to be a difficult challenge. The Gates of Europe is written by a Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University and the lack of familiarity with this period of European history, including such figures as Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv and Prince Yaroslav the Wise, presented the group with a lot of material to assimilate. The task was not made any easier by the publishers (Penguin) using a densified text that pushed our ageing ocular systems to their limit. Help was provided by a set of maps, a historical timeline and a list of Who’s Who divided into the various groups who have inhabited the land now known as Ukraine.

In comparison, Borderland was written by a journalist and sheds a more human consideration onto the major periods of history covered by Plokhy and was a much easier book to read. The history of Ukraine is a depressing saga of man’s inhumanity to man, exemplified by the great famine (Holodomor) of the 1930’s and the terrible treatment of the Jewish population. Both authors have captured the nuances and complexities of the different historical factors impacting upon this part of the world and if very few ‘good guys’ emerge it serves to reinforce the effect of both internal and external conflicts on that beleaguered part of the world.’