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Author Jade McGlynn Takes On 'Russia's War'

Manipulation of a mythical past makes for a violent present.

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Jade McGlynn **Courtesy of author**

Almost from the moment Vladimir Putin announced the start of Russia's "special military operation" against Ukraine, it was perceived to be Putin's war — a war conceived and guided by one man's obsessions, personal grudges, and idiosyncratic reading — or invention — of history. While that is true, it could not be fought without the support — or at least acquiescence — of the Russian people.

And if citizens back the war, then it's not just Putin's war, it's "Russia's War."

This is the title and subject of a new book by Jade McGlynn, a researcher at the War Studies Department, King's College London, and at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. A specialist in Ukraine and Russia, she has been studying the two countries and their relations for more than a decade with particular emphasis on the role of propaganda, the politics of memory, and public opinion.

McGlynn begins “Russia’s War” with a question: if Russians largely do support the war, “what does support mean, and to what extent are these phenomena peculiar to Russians?” She does not believe it is “some genetic Russian exceptionalism.” Instead it is, to some extent, what she calls “an acquiescence borne of many factors" that includes apathy, lack of sympathy, self-interest, and avoidance of cognitive dissonance.

All of this stems from the peculiar perception and manipulation of memory and history in Russia. That is what “Russia’s War” lays out in compelling detail.

McGlynn has divided the book into two parts. The first chapters examine the popularity of Vladimir Putin, the various forms that propaganda takes and what appears, at first glance, to be its success. But “success” is not what it seems to be at first glance. Propaganda, she writes, “doesn’t work by persuading [people] that this or that event is true because of this or that fact. It works by reinforcing people’s emotions and prejudices; confusing them so they think there is no truth and just fall back on what they do know, or instinctively feel is true; making them think everyone has a point so they should just stick with their side; or that there is absolutely no point in saying anything as the propaganda is everywhere and you are the odd one out.”

In the end, the goal of the propaganda is not to get the entire population of Russia to back the war wholeheartedly, “but manipulating public acquiescence and encouraging ritual support in certain target audiences (e.g. mobilization-age men).” That has been successful.

And so the second part of the book investigates why this is so, why the propaganda resonates with so many Russians, why they continue to engage with it rather than reject or challenge it. Here McGlynn delves into Russia’s mythologized past to “unpick the ressentiment, resentment and desensitization that underpin Russia’s especially aggressive form of patriotism, denigratory attitudes towards Ukrainians, inferiority complex towards the West, refusal to acknowledge historical realities, and conflation of victims with perpetrators in the past and present.”

That’s the rub. If the war ends with a military defeat or Putin’s ouster (or arrest), the Russia people will continue to live in their resentful version of reality. McGlynn writes that “while the war is over or about Ukraine it cannot be solved in Ukraine because its roots lie in the Russian political and societal imagination of what their own country is and what it must be.”

McGlynn makes the case that the war is ultimately "about" Russia's belief — among both the leaders and the led — that it has the right “to spheres of interest, to be a great power, to avenge the humiliation of the 1990s as it has misremembered it, to be a separate civilization, to call out Western hypocrisy. It is about security concerns that gave rise to paranoid thinking. It is about fetid obsessions that are now doing more to undermine Russian security and great power status than NATO could ever wish to achieve.”

The war is also about, and facilitated by, the West, which “needs to be honest with itself about the ways it has facilitated this war — not by NATO expansion but by allowing Russian elites to steal at home and spend abroad, to use London’s law courts while they removed any prospect of criminal justice at home, and to keep their families in Spain or Cyprus so they don’t have to invest in Russian schools, infrastructure and public amenities.”

This includes Germany's vulnerability "to Russian pressure due to its dependence on NordStream gas... [which along with] the UK's warm welcome for dirty Russian money, French weapons sales, and Italian efforts to soften existing sanctions, all paved the way for Putin's February invasion by convincing him there would be no real consequences."

There is plenty of blame to go around.

In the end, McGlynn writes, "There can be no grand reset in European–Russian or US–Russian relations that does not begin with a fundamentally different Russia professing a fundamentally different view of the world."

But until then, it is Russia's war, and future generations will pay the price of this "terrible sin."

Chaotic competition

Within pro-Kremlin media, there is a competition raging for audiences and state approval. The approach is one of neoliberal capitalism, where hosts and bloggers jostle for audience figures and advertising revenue so that they might catch the eye of the Kremlin or its associated editors and be rewarded with their own show. It is this competition between media actors that explains what can sometimes look like chaotic narratives: as they vie for influence and emotional impact, the television hosts try out different storylines to see what works: is it an overdue rescue mission to liberate Ukraine or punitive retribution for their refusal to be Russian? A technical and limited operation or an all-encompassing epic battle between civilisation states? A battle to rid Ukraine of its sovereignty or a crusade to reassert the right to sovereignty? An imperial war of anti-colonialism in which Russia is only defending Donbas? Or an imperial war of anti-colonialism in which Russia is only defending itself? These claims are simultaneously specific and lofty; they are all things to all men, deliberately, dizzyingly, variegated. But, while the mishmash disorientates the audience, the core message, of a good Russia reasserting its moral right to great power domination of others, seeps in unimpeded.

The sheer range of narratives is suggestive of how most Russians articulate and understand the war in their own way, rather than just following a strict pre-written government line. That is where the Russian government excels in its storytelling: it provides the characters and plot lines but you can arrange them how you like, focus on one story over another, recasting characters. As such, while everyone has their own view of the war, some of them have aspects in common. There are core ideas and assumptions underpinning support for and understanding of the war and without which the Russian position makes very little sense. These assumptions include the following: the decaying West is hell-bent on destroying Russia; Russia is fighting nationalist Ukrainians to save Ukraine from banderovtsy and Western machinations; Russian moral rectitude will succeed against Western hypocrisy and degradation; Russia has undertaken a defensive, pre-emptive military operation; eastern and southern Ukraine are essentially Russia; the 'special military operation' is one step towards creating a fairer international order.

Threaded throughout all these stances is a sense of insecurity, a constant need to extrapolate the war out to a greater meaning, to justify it, often with reference to past suffering and a more expansive worldview. I discussed the comprehensive philosophical background to pro-

war narratives with Natalia Sevagina, a curator from the Tretyakov Gallery, who speaks about Russian art with a sincere and impressive eye for beauty and detail and who is also a strong proponent of the war. In her view, the war 'is not political but about worldview, philosophy. Sooner or later any thinking person has to ask why do I live, what is my purpose on the Earth, what is the why of my life. This is the why. Russia doesn't wage wars of conquest or aggression. Just don't touch us, don't touch our church, our people. And if you do, then we will fight you.' Such narratives, often intellectualisations of 'the West should just keep their nose out of this' are common refrains from media and cultural figures alike.

Many foreign-policy elites and government officials have chosen to rationalise Russia's invasion as a preventative strike against a Ukraine that was growing stronger militarily and politically thanks to systematic support from the West. There have been bold and unsubstantiated claims that Ukraine was going to invade Crimea or develop a nuclear bomb. Given the shock in Russia when Ukraine did strike the Kerch Bridge in October 2022, it doesn't seem likely that anyone seriously believed in those plans. Moreover, it painted a picture of Ukrainians that did not correlate to fact – a common theme in Russian depictions of Ukrainians. Bluntly, most diplomats and Ukrainian officials are not unduly bothered about Crimea. As Vadym Prystaiko, former Foreign Minister of Ukraine and now Ambassador to the UK expressed with some exasperation in his interview with me: 'Nobody needs Crimea, yes it's okay to have a couple of beaches but that's not Crimea, Crimean beaches aren't that good, there is only a bit that hasn't been bought up by oligarchs – the rest of it is nothing, there is nothing, no water, just steppe. And anyway we have the Black Sea.'

While Ambassador Prystaiko was not voicing the official Ukrainian position or suggesting that the territory does not legally belong to Ukraine, his on-the-record statement echoes off-the-record conversations with numerous other Ukrainian officials, diplomats and advisers, all espousing a marked lack of interest in retaking Crimea beyond laughing at the Russians. Prior to the war, there was also some reluctance to reclaim the territory of the D/LPR occupied since May 2014, even if the symbolic importance of the claim remained very high. This is what made Russian accusations, in late 2021 and early 2022, that the Ukrainian armed forces were preparing to attack Crimea or Russia or Donbas so very absurd.

This absurdity did not prevent Russian officials, even anti-war ones, claiming that Ukrainians were bloodthirsty warmongers or that anti-Russian Ukrainian advisers had lured Zelensky away from peaceful dialogue. In an interview with me, one Russian MFA official claimed that 'direct dialogue with him [Zelensky] started in a promising way in 2019 but was blocked due to ultra-rightists and very anti-Russian elements'. This same official pointed to Zelensky's 'loose remark at the Munich security conference about revising Ukraine's non-nuclear status', calling it 'the last straw' that broke the Kremlin's military restraint. In these versions of events, the Ukrainian president is a mere puppet of nefarious, more powerful, forces: the Americans, the British, the Balts, the Poles, NATO, the EU, the OSCE, Germany, liberals, fascists, Soros, the LGBT community, or just whoever takes their fancy.

So who is Russia fighting then? The West or Ukraine? Yes, them, both of them. And lots of other people besides: satanists; drug addicts; liberal fascist cancel culture; pagans; Russians' own unerring sense of nobility; LGBTQ+ parades; migratory birds carrying genetic bioweapons; NATO; militant Baltic gays. Such a variegated list of enemies has given rise to a similarly incoherent set of aims. Reading Russian media, you understand that the Russian

Army will give Ukrainians life by killing them. It will decommunise Ukraine by rebuilding Lenin statues. It will free Ukraine from the Anglo-Saxon yoke and help Americans not to have to finance Ukraine. By unleashing so many confusing and confused narratives at once, you bamboozle people. The viewer feels overwhelmed and stops relying on facts for contours, reaching instead for familiar concepts, things they definitely know, like national identity, historical parallels, general emotions, their own memories, perceptions of which are often reinforced by popular culture and the media.

It is against these superficially confusing but profoundly resonant narratives that many Russians will make sense of the war and accept its depiction as a defensive response to shapeshifting threats. The 'special military operation's' two core objectives were originally demilitarisation and denazification. I have heard many interpretations, of which Modest Kolerov's (founding editor of the IA Regnum news agency) made the most sense in terms of its logic, although that doesn't mean it is the way it is perceived by the Kremlin (and nor did Dr Kolerov suggest that): 'Demilitarisation is the only way to end this. War is terrifying, awful, the purest evil. The idea of the special military operation is to stop the bombardment of Donbas, to demilitarise Ukraine so that it stops being a threat to Russia.' Asked if this necessitated neutrality, Dr Kolerov said yes, but also the total removal of Ukraine's army so it could never be a threat to Russia again.

Denazification of Ukraine is the most obscene objective and proof in itself that negotiated settlement with Putin is inconceivable: how can a democratic state with a Jewish president need denazifying? It reflects the bamboozling internal reality the Kremlin has constructed and tries to impose on others. In such instances, the constant political and media analogising with the Second World War adds a sense of gravitas to absurd demands. But the Second World War also casts its long shadow in other ways; in Fedor Lukyanov's view: '22 June syndrome has left its mark on strategic thinking in Russia – this trying to never end up in the same position. We can't let it happen that they attack us, if war is inevitable then we have to attack first. Putin's worldview endowed the Ukrainian question with existential importance for him – it couldn't be left for later, for his heir. He saw it as his mission to solve it.'

In hindsight, and several months into a war that was supposed to last three days, perhaps Putin and his supporters would have done better to reflect on the unprovoked war of aggression they launched on their neighbour before 22 June 1941, namely the 1939–1940 Winter War with Finland, in which the USSR struggled and lost many more lives than expected. As objectives, both demilitarisation and denazification are completely intangible and incomprehensible. This is why they both failed to resonate with audiences and were soon replaced with an ostensible existential battle for truth and justice and just a general feeling of what is right. These narratives built on years of casting Ukrainians as Nazis, Westerners as Russophobes, and Russia as under attack.

Update: "Russia's War" has been shortlisted for this year's Pushkin House Book Prize*, which will be awarded on June 15 in London. Tickets for the ceremony are available* here*.*

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