

Review – Memory Makers

Written by Oleksa Drachewych

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OLEKSA DRACHEWYCH, MAR 15 2025

Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia

By Jade McGlynn

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023

Scholars have focused more on the issue of the instrumentalization of history, memory politics, and the Putin regime in Russia, especially since Russia's escalation against Ukraine in February 2022. Putin has often used history to explain his worldview. His essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" showed Putin's long obsession with Ukraine and provided context to Russian aims during the escalation. He commented on the history of the Second World War in the Western press. He often highlights how he sees himself as a historian, claiming he has gone through the archives himself. Suffice it to say, Putin and many Russian political and cultural leaders around him see a value in creating a useable past for Russia's gain.

Jade McGlynn's first book, *Memory Makers*, outlines the importance of creating this useable past for Russia, and Putin's purposes and she explains how they developed it. McGlynn argues that Putin, upon his return to the presidency in 2012, turned to history to respond to threats to his rule: the protests regarding Russia's electoral processes, a hurting economy, and Western involvement in Libya. They drafted new textbooks, developed new programs, and encouraged Russians to participate in the Kremlin's historical memory politics through a variety of public-facing approaches.

To illustrate her point, McGlynn uses several case studies to show how Russia used a specific version of history to defend its policies abroad. This includes Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015. Through Ukraine, the Russian government, alongside state media, propagated a campaign focusing on the alleged Nazism of Ukrainians, highlighting Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with Nazism during the Second World War, and the continued present-day lionizing of Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera and other members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in Western Ukraine. Russia reviewed these themes in 2022 with its escalation against Ukraine. In Syria, the Second World War again offered the link to the past, although this time, the focus was on the Soviet Union, and thereby Russia's, participation in crafting a rules-based order through a specific understanding of the Yalta Conference of February 1945.

Naturally, this will appear jarring given that Russia seems to be challenging that order today in its escalation of Ukraine. However, internal coherence was not the goal. Instead, Putin utilized key moments of Soviet triumph (the defeat of Nazism, and the Soviet Union as a superpower), dressing them up as Russian triumphs to gain popular support for Russia's current policies. Finally, McGlynn also looks at how Western sanctions in 2014 were reframed through the lens of Soviet collapse and the tumultuous 1990s to position Putin as returning Russia to the stability of the Brezhnev era. From 2012-2021, the period the book mainly focuses on, McGlynn argues that Putin's Russia also highlighted other Russian triumphs, including going back to the Kyivan Rus and the expansion of imperial Russia. The aim was to instrumentalize history in such a way that Russians use it to develop a sense of national pride. It also allowed Putin and his regime to highlight the stability Putin's rule had provided Russia since his coming to power.

But this useable past was also something that Russians could interact with. To do so, the regime developed a series of activities. Russians could attend a museum exhibit, watch a parade of the Immortal Regiment, or commemorate

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past glories. The idea was to develop such an inclusive project so that Russians would engage with the past, particularly a specific past that the government carefully curated. Yet, even with this broader useable past, there are events that resonate more than others, hence the extensive focus on the Second World War. Yet, through its appropriation of the past, the Russian government would develop a curated narrative. This meant a history that would downplay, if not outright erase, parts of the past that the Russian government did not want to be remembered, such as any of the atrocities the Red Army committed or the extensive collaboration of Russian soldiers with Nazism during the Second World War.

Memory Makers came out in 2023, giving McGlynn's work new urgency and only limitedly does McGlynn touch on Russia's escalation in Ukraine after February 2022. If anything, she highlights how Russia continues to do the same. Perhaps because it was mostly written before the escalation, being largely her doctoral thesis, it tends to have a much more measured analysis than her other recent publication, *Russia's War* (Polity, 2023). McGlynn includes the insights of many Russian scholars and figures, some based on interviews she herself conducted, something largely unthinkable today, which helps contextualize how Russian analysts saw Putin's efforts, but also how they defend them. On one hand, February 2022 is where the book is leading, but at the same time, it explicitly is not written that way. While later, McGlynn would argue in *Russia's War* that Russians have accepted this message, hence a need to include the Russian public in who to blame for Russian aggression against Ukraine, McGlynn instead focuses on the processes used by the government, through its instrumentalization of history, and its deployment of those narratives to cultivate support, through both direct and indirect ways. To this end, *Memory Makers* explains why many Russians buy into the narratives put out by the regime. They have become familiar and have been cultivated over time, but also, Russia's government and state media deploy them strategically to build that support.

There have been many books, especially since Russia's escalation against Ukraine, that have attempted to explain the role of history in Russian society, in Putin's regime, and in influencing how Russians interact with these efforts, and the link to Russian aggression or the Russian worldview. *Memory Makers* should be considered among the best of them, and should not be lost in the shuffle. As mentioned, the book was mostly written before the escalation, and therefore, it serves as the foundation for what we have seen since 2022, which has seen these processes, along with the coercion of Putin's regime, go into overdrive. McGlynn states in her introduction that she "hope[s] [her book] will explain why policymakers and analysts need to take 'propaganda' and historical obsessions much more seriously and acknowledge their considerable emotive power." (p.1) McGlynn certainly succeeds in this goal. The challenge is whether policymakers will heed the arguments made in this book.

Today, Russian aggression cannot be seriously understood without understanding its instrumentalization of history. It underwrites how Putin's regime sees everything. Most importantly, McGlynn argues that this search for a useable past reflects Russia's insecurity, given the notable upheavals and traumas of the twentieth century. This argument is now increasingly commonplace, but it reflects the broader appeal of Putin's instrumentalization. While it may have been born out of a specific moment in his rule, "ordinary Russians" have embraced it to some degree and here, McGlynn makes a particularly important point – the level to which they have does not matter; instead, the goal is to get interaction, and to make history an "everyday concern" and encourage people to not only take pride in the Russian past but engage in the Kremlin's version of that past. This memory of the past (McGlynn differentiates smartly between memory and history) also offers a common background most Russian citizens can buy into – it overcomes divisions of religion or ethnicity, instead focusing on a broader memory and appropriation of national history that is accessible to most if not all. It can also be policed, and it can be harnessed. Therefore, the population can buy in on their terms, while the regime can use it as they see fit.

Another reason why *Memory Makers* should stand out from others is McGlynn's attempt, albeit a limited one, to reflect how these processes are not unique to Russia. Whereas there has been a popular desire to try to essentialize what is happening in Russia as unique to Russia, the reality is that the processes it has used are not unique and can be identified in other nations, including in the West. History and memory increasingly are something that can be used for patriotic ends and although McGlynn could be more direct in some of her discussion here, the opening of the comparative door is welcome and a needed reminder that memory politics exist in all societies and nations.

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Oleksa Drachewych is an Assistant Professor of History at Western University and Lecturer in History at King's University College. He currently is in the process of completing a manuscript highlighting parallels and links between Soviet atrocities during and after the Second World War and Russian atrocities in Ukraine today. His other research focuses on the history of international communism during the interwar period. He is the author of *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions* (Routledge, 2018) and the co-editor of *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).