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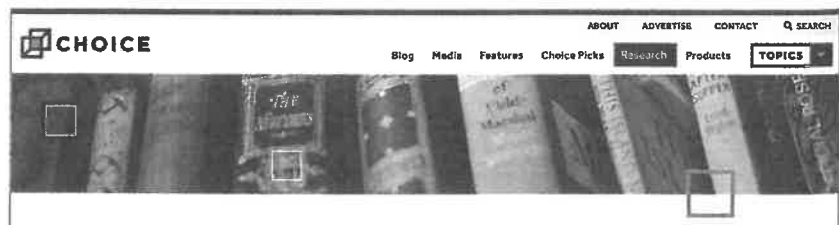
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From Nicholas to Putin: Russia Since 1900

By David M. Durant

“Russia is a country with a certain future; it is only its past that is unpredictable.”

— Soviet-era joke. (Quoted in Galeotti, *A Short History of Russia*, 9)

After a two-decade hiatus following the end of the Cold War, demand for books about Russia has exploded in the last decade. Ever since the 2014 occupation of Crimea, the efforts to influence the 2016 US elections, and now the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, books about Vladimir Putin’s Russia are a hot commodity. This essay seeks to guide readers wishing to explore this burgeoning literature by offering a survey of those works that will be most useful for offering historical perspective and understanding of the invasion of Ukraine and the nature and origins of Putin’s regime. It is by no means comprehensive, in terms of both the books included and the topics covered. Rather, it seeks to provide nonspecialists, undergraduates, and general readers with a starting point for research, one that

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helps guide the reader toward useful and accurate works and away from instant books and sensationalism.

The books featured in this essay share one major characteristic. All of them have been published since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the vast majority have been published in this century. There was an extensive selection of books published regarding Russia and/or the USSR during the course of the twentieth century. However, none of those authors enjoyed access to archives controlled by the Soviet state. Authors working since 1991 have had access to these archives and other previously unavailable primary sources, and as a result have developed a much richer and more sophisticated understanding of modern Russian history. Readers who want to explore the older literature on twentieth-century Russia will find plenty of citations to it in the works referenced below.

General Histories of Russia

THERE IS NO WAY TO TRULY UNDERSTAND the history and development of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Russia without some appreciation of the broader sweep of Russian history. For readers looking for a brief overview, there are two recently published short surveys that can be read with profit: Rodric Braithwaite’s *Russia: Myths and Realities* and Mark Galeotti’s aptly titled *A Short History of Russia*. Both emphasize overarching themes and patterns over historical detail.

Readers who want lengthier and more detailed accounts will find Orlando Figes’s *The Story of Russia* and Abraham Ascher’s

Russia: A Short History well worth their attention. Figes’s work in particular offers an indispensable overview and a solid blend of narrative and analysis. If readers should choose only one book from this section, this is the one this reviewer would recommend.

Among useful works focused on twentieth-century Russia are two volumes: Robert Service’s *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* and Figes’s *Revolutionary Russia, 1891–1991: A History*. The strength of these books is that they discuss historical trends and patterns that put modern Russian history in context without resorting to crude reductionism. Among these trends is the development of Russian autocracy beginning no later than the thirteenth century. The role of the autocrat would survive the fall of Tsarism in 1917 and come to be embodied in two very different Russian rulers, who between them have held power for 52 of the 106 years since the Russian Revolution: Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin.

Another key theme stressed in these works is the intense relationship between the story Russia tells about its past and present-day political imperatives. So prominent is this theme that the joke cited in the epigraph about how only Russia’s past is unpredictable, taken from Galeotti’s book, can be found in Braithwaite and Figes as well. Of course, this phenomenon is hardly unique to Russia. However, in Figes’s words: “No other country has reimagined its own past so frequently; none has a history so subjected to the vicissitudes of ruling ideologies. History in Russia is political” (*The Story of Russia*, p. 4). This politicization of history will likewise be another prominent theme of this essay.

World War I, Revolution, and Civil War

UNTIL RECENTLY, MOST SCHOLARS OF Russian history have treated the history of Russia's involvement in the First World War as a mere afterthought. Fortunately, recent scholarship has begun to rectify this oversight. In part, this is evidence of a recent turn in Russian historiography away from a strict focus on social and cultural history and toward a greater consideration of political, military, and geopolitical factors.

A seminal example of this trend is Dominic Lieven's 2015 work *The End of Tsarist Russia*. Lieven provides a brilliant analysis of the political and strategic factors that led the Tsarist empire to go to war in 1914, particularly the struggle between empire and nationalism. As a multinational empire, one of several that still dominated eastern Europe at this time, Russia was very concerned about the spread of nationalism among its non-Russian populations. The greatest fear was of Ukrainian nationalism, which flourished in the western Ukrainian region of Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. In Lieven's words, "[W]ithout Ukraine's population, industry, and agriculture, early-twentieth-century Russia would have ceased to be a great power" (p. 1). As other scholars have noted, the same was true of Josef Stalin's mid-twentieth-century USSR and even of Putin's contemporary Russia. In addition, Russians looked at Ukraine as "Little Russia," which along with Belorussia and Russia formed the Great Russian nation. To have Ukraine go its own way was unthinkable.

As for the reason for Tsarism's collapse in 1917, it was not because of lower-class unrest, which was nothing new, or military defeat per se, but rather that the middle and upper classes had lost confidence in Nicholas II and his regime. When massive unrest broke out in Petrograd in March 1917, there was no one still willing to defend the autocracy. It was this collapse of central authority that allowed the Bolshevik party to seize power in November 1917, and over the course of the next several years impose their own autocracy, one far more brutal and encompassing than its Tsarist predecessor.

Two very good recent histories provide an introduction to this process. One work, written for a general audience, is Antony Beevor's *Russia: Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1921*. Drawing heavily on first-person accounts, Beevor has written a highly accessible account of the key events of the revolution and civil war. For a more in-depth narrative, historian Laura Engelstein's *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914–1921* is essential. Both volumes focus far more on the role of non-Russian nationalities, especially Ukrainians, than does earlier scholarship. Returning to the theme of empire versus nationalism, each author shows how the Bolsheviks, while advocating for national self-determination, set about creating their own version of Russia's multinational empire.

Stalin and Stalinism: 1924–1953

IN 1922, WHAT WAS SOVIET RUSSIA officially became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. During the course of the 1920s, the USSR was what historian Terry Martin has dubbed the "affirmative action empire" in his seminal 2001 monograph of that name. The Soviet Communist Party actively fostered and encouraged the development of indigenous culture, language, and national consciousness among its various non-Russian peoples. To the Soviet leadership in the 1920s, helping develop non-Russian nationalism was a necessary stage on the road to the communist utopia to come. Plus, it provided a useful weapon that could be wielded against imperialist adversaries such as Great Britain and hostile multinational neighbors such as Poland.

At the end of the 1920s, this "affirmative action" policy, known as *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), was substantially reversed, and national sentiments were increasingly denounced as "bourgeois nationalism." By the late 1930s, Moscow saw non-Russian nationalism not as a weapon against others, but as a trojan horse directed at itself. Entire non-Russian ethnic groups, especially those living in border regions such as the Poles and Soviet Koreans, were subjected to mass arrests, executions, and/or deportations.

The man responsible for this change of policy toward non-Russian nationalism was himself a non-Russian. Born in Georgia in 1878 as Ioseb Jughashvili, he eventually became a Bolshevik and adopted the name Josef Stalin. After the Bolsheviks took power, he became head of the Communist Party's administrative apparatus and, by the late 1920s, had become a virtually unassailable autocrat. Stalin, more than anyone else, made Russia what it is today. He transformed Russian society from being primarily rural to largely urban in nature and made the country a superpower. He did so at a terrible human cost and expanded the already brutal and dictatorial Soviet regime into one of the bloodiest and most repressive despotisms in history.

Few areas of scholarship have benefited as much from the opening of Soviet archives as have the history of Stalin and Stalinism. Among other things, these documents confirm that Stalin was very much a hands-on dictator, firmly in control of decision-making. For example, he personally approved execution lists containing the names of tens of thousands of victims, often adding marginal notes demanding measures be taken against their families. Stalin was also a voracious reader and a diligent editor. He had a large personal library at his disposal, frequently underlining and making notes in books as well as documents submitted for his review.

The essential starting point for any study of Stalin's life must be Stephen Kotkin's extensive two-volume biography, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928* and *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*. The third volume is forthcoming. While recognizing Stalin's ruthlessness and paranoia, Kotkin eschews facile psychoanalysis and looks instead at the importance of structural and geopolitical factors that shaped Stalin's actions. As he summarizes this dynamic, "The problems of the revolution brought out the paranoia in Stalin, and Stalin brought out the paranoia inherent in the revolution" (*Stalin: Paradoxes of Power*, p. 597). Thus, for Kotkin, "a biography of Stalin ... comes to approximate a history of the world." In his view, the modern world was the result of "a vicious geopolitical competition" in which Russia, like its neighbors, had to modernize in order to keep its rivals from crushing it. In Kotkin's estimation, this ruthless contest meant that two Germans in particular

shaped twentieth-century Russian history. One was Karl Marx. The other was Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck.

As Stalin embarked on his “revolution from above” in 1928–33 and cemented his absolute authority over the party and society in the Great Terror of 1937–38, he was guided by a paranoid vision in which external geopolitical threats merged with domestic unrest and internal party opposition to his policies into a single, all-encompassing menace that had to be ruthlessly crushed. As Kotkin describes Stalin’s motives, “Perceived security imperatives and a need for absolute unity once again turned the quest in Russia to build a strong state into personal rule” (*Stalin: Waiting for Hitler*, p. 430).

As outlined by David Brandenberger in his work *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity*, at the same time that Stalin began to suppress forms of non-Russian identity, he also encouraged the rebirth of Russian patriotism and nationalism. Russian rulers and heroes were rehabilitated, and history textbooks revised to show pre-revolutionary Russia in a much more positive light. Stalin himself embraced the legacy of Tsars such as Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, considering himself their successor in terms of modernizing Russia and expanding Russian state power and borders.

At the same time, there were limits on the rebirth of Russian nationalism, and Stalin, based on what scholars have learned, clearly considered himself a faithful Marxist-Leninist. If Stalin preached patriotism, then he preached what scholar Erik van Ree in *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin* calls “revolutionary patriotism,” rooted in a belief that communism represented the path to achieving Russia’s modernization and thus survival in a world of hostile capitalist nation-states.

Finally, there are two more books that are useful to anyone seeking to understand Stalin and Stalinism. For those looking for a brief one-volume examination of the Soviet dictator, Russian historian Oleg V. Khlevniuk has penned a superb overview of his life and rule, *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*. Scholar Geoffrey Roberts has examined the archival records of Stalin’s book collection and produced a fascinating analysis of them

in *Stalin’s Library*. Confirming the dictator as a committed autodidact, he notes Stalin’s keen interest in works of Marxist theory and analysis, among many other topics. Also included on Stalin’s reading list were the memoirs of Otto von Bismarck.

The Great Patriotic War: 1941–1945

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THE PUTIN regime or contemporary Russia without examining the Soviet experience of the Second World War. In many ways, the Great Patriotic War, as it would come to be called in the USSR, was a microcosm of Stalin’s rule. The Soviet Union would prevail over a tremendous challenge and expand its empire beyond the farthest western boundaries reached by the Tsars. But it would do so only after many disastrous setbacks and amid endemic levels of inefficiency, incompetence, oppression, and brutality. In the end, it would pay an unimaginably horrific human cost, some twenty-seven million deaths, far more than any other nation at war has ever suffered.

Above all else, the Eastern Front of World War II was the largest and bloodiest armed conflict ever waged. Beginning with the military history of the Great Patriotic War, the best, current single volume is *When Titans Clashed* by David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, published in a revised edition in 2015. Glantz is arguably the foremost historian of the Eastern Front, and he and House produced a richly detailed overview firmly rooted in Russian archives. Also valuable is Jonathan Dimpleby’s 2021 book *Operation Barbarossa: The History of a Cataclysm*. Dimpleby focuses on the first six months of the war, June through December 1941, which culminated in the German defeat before Moscow. In his view, “it was on the killing grounds of the Eastern Front between June and December 1941 that the fate of Nazi Germany was sealed” (p. 488).

During the Cold War, one of the most challenging areas of scholarship was documenting the experiences of ordinary Soviet citizens, military and civilian, during the Great Patriotic War. As noted earlier, the fall of Soviet communism opened a wealth of primary source materials to Western scholars.

As a result, there are now a trio of books that shed valuable light on the social history of ordinary Russians and other Soviet citizens during the war. The essential work on the experiences of Soviet soldiers in World War II is Catherine Merridale’s 2005 classic *Ivan’s War*. The Nazis occupied large parts of the western USSR, eventually prompting the rise of partisan warfare against the invaders. Historian Kenneth Slepyan produced a seminal work on the partisan experience, *Stalin’s Guerrillas*. Finally, Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald Filtzer’s *Fortress Dark and Stern* offers a groundbreaking look at the Soviet home front.

The great achievement of these three volumes is that they succeed at restoring agency to ordinary Soviet citizens. They were not mindless automatons. They had a variety of reasons for acting as they did. They also knew all too well that Soviet authorities lied to them on a regular basis. To take just one example, Goldman and Filtzer note how the phrase “fighting in the direction of,” featured in official communiqués, soon became recognized as a euphemism for having been driven out of the location in question. Interestingly, both Russian and Ukrainian military communiqués during the present war regularly use this same phrase.

There are a number of other books worth examining on the Soviet experience of World War II. Mark Edelen’s *Stalinism at War: The Soviet Union in World War II* offers an excellent brief overview, including the 1939–1941 period of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the brutal postwar reimposition of Soviet rule in Ukraine and the Baltic states. Alfred J. Rieber’s *Stalin as Warlord* makes clear the contradictory, or in his words *paradoxical*, impact of Stalin’s leadership. Through his horrifically brutal and arbitrary actions as autocrat, Stalin simultaneously strengthened and weakened the USSR. The terrible price of victory in 1945 was the result. Finally, Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* traces the broader history of how both totalitarian tyrants sought control over Poland, the Baltics, Belorussia, and Ukraine. As with Nicholas II in 1914, both Stalin and Hitler required control of Ukraine to fulfill their respective visions of empire.

Decline and Fall of the USSR: 1953–1991

AFTER STALIN'S DEATH IN 1953, NONE OF his eventual successors was willing or able to amass the kind of all-encompassing, autocratic control he wielded. Realizing that the paradoxical, self-destructive nature of Stalin's rule made it unsustainable, the leaders who replaced him, ultimately led by Nikita Khrushchev, sought to reform the system. Khrushchev was replaced in 1964 by Leonid Brezhnev. His reign ushered in an era of stability, which gradually turned into stagnation. It eventually became obvious to many of the party's top leaders that the Soviet system needed some form of change to rejuvenate it. Thus, in early 1985, the relatively young Mikhail Gorbachev became head of the USSR. Six years later, the USSR and Soviet communism ceased to exist.

Scholar William Taubman has written definitive biographies of both Khrushchev and Gorbachev, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* and *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*. The most interesting commonality between them is that both men saw themselves as committed Marxist-Leninists, each seeking to revitalize Soviet communism and return it to the true path of Lenin. As to why Gorbachev's reform program led to the system's demise, two very different books offer useful insights. Stephen Kotkin in *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* and Vladislav M. Zubok in *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* echo Taubman's emphasis on Gorbachev's Leninist idealism and desire to implement "socialism with a human face." The problem was that Gorbachev sought to produce revolutionary change without using revolutionary methods, thus losing control of the process. While 1991 was very different from 1917, in both cases the existing elites proved unwilling to defend the old order at the moment of crisis. Above all, both authors recognize the importance of contingency. While the decline of the Soviet system may have been inevitable, its sudden collapse likely was not.

One last aspect of the Soviet experience worth discussing is its conduct of the Cold War. A good overview of Moscow's efforts to export revolution and expand its influence

can be found in Zubok's *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Of particular relevance is the role of the Soviet intelligence and security services, whose main organization became known in 1954 as the KGB. These organizations were tasked with waging an undeclared political war against the United States and its allies from the end of World War II until the fall of the USSR, using espionage, propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion. A detailed account of the KGB's campaign against the West is Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin's *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB*. A solid, accessible overview of Soviet foreign intelligence can be found in Jonathan Haslam's *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence*.

The most important takeaway from these studies is that by the end of the Soviet era, the KGB believed it was winning, only to have the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath it by the collapse of Soviet communism. In Haslam's words, "The end of the Soviet experiment thus left those services and the men who gave their lives to them with a deep-seated and justified feeling of having been cheated on the very eve of their most momentous successes" (p. xxiii). This sense of resentment would have major implications for the present, when a former KGB officer would become the head of a twenty-first-century form of Russian autocracy.

Vladimir Putin and the Rise of Putinism: 2000–present

NUMEROUS BOOKS HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED about Vladimir Putin in recent years, and readers can be overwhelmed trying to find a reliable account of his life. One excellent, recent biography is Philip Short's *Putin*. Short offers a lengthy but highly readable introduction to the Russian dictator, making clear his ruthlessness without portraying him as a James Bond villain. Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy's *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* is similarly thoughtful,

discussing the various beliefs and influences that have made Putin who he is. A third work, French scholar Michel Eltchaninoff's *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*, takes a relatively measured look at the ideas that have helped influence Putin's worldview.

While Hill and Gaddy differ with Eltchaninoff on the extent to which Putin is influenced by certain thinkers as opposed to cynically appropriating them, they do broadly agree on the nature of Putin's worldview. Above all else, Putin is committed to restoring the power and authority of the Russian state as well as its status as a Great Power. He also feels embittered at the United States and the West for having exploited Russia's weakness in the 1990s to expand their power and influence at Russia's expense. American and Western support for the 2014 Maidan uprising, which overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovich, was the final straw.

As a result, Putin and his regime see themselves as essentially at war with the United States, NATO, and their allies. While Putin is a very different type of autocrat than Josef Stalin, he and the former KGB men who populate his regime share the obsession that conflates external threats with the possibility of internal subversion. Putin and his cohorts believe that the West deliberately brought about the collapse of the USSR. Now, through everything from "color revolutions" and support for NGOs to NATO's eastward expansion, America and its allies seek to undermine Russia again. Thus, all-out political war is once again justified and, indeed, necessary. This includes asserting Russia's leading role in the former Soviet space, especially in Ukraine.

One major aspect of Putin's efforts to legitimize the Russian state he has rebuilt is once again the use of history for ideological purposes. Just as Stalin rehabilitated Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, so has Putin substantially rehabilitated Stalin. This does not mean that Stalin's crimes, or at least some of them, are not officially acknowledged. However, they are treated largely as the unfortunate side of a great leader who modernized Russia and made it a

superpower. Emphasized above all else is Stalin's role in leading Russia/the USSR to victory in World War II. Putin has adopted the cult of the Great Patriotic War—which as Jonathan Brunstedt shows in his 2021 book *The Soviet Myth of World War II: Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR* was implemented in the mid-1960s to foster a sense of cross-ethnic Soviet patriotism—for use as a historical pillar of his regime. As documented by Shaun Walker in *The Long Hangover* and Katie Stallard in *Dancing on Bones: History and Power in China, Russia, and North Korea*, the official Soviet myths about Stalin and the war, which were deconstructed in the 1990s, have been increasingly restored to prominence.

Putin's Political War: 2007–present

THE ORIGINS OF PUTIN'S TURN AGAINST THE West, as noted above, date back to the 1990s. Journalist Peter Conradi in *Who Lost Russia?* and scholar M. E. Sarotte in *Not One Inch* examine this period in detail. While Sarotte denies that NATO expansion was the main cause of the current conflict between the West and Russia, the way expansion was handled certainly made matters worse. In essence, she argues, the West chose the interests of its new central and eastern European allies at the expense of better relations with Moscow. A defensible decision, but one that was pregnant with consequences.

The best introduction to the theories, methods, and means of political war practiced by Putin's Russia is Mark Galeotti's aptly titled *Russian Political War*. This slender volume ably explains the subject while also debunking popular myths such as the alleged Russian commitment to “hybrid war.” The same author has also written the definitive work on Russia's overt use of military force in this century with his recently published *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*. Beyond providing a detailed yet accessible description of Russian military operations up until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Galeotti also offers an overview of the Russian armed forces. While his analysis of

Russian ground forces has been overtaken by the events since the invasion, it is still useful background for those interested in military developments in Ukraine.

An excellent source on Russia's seizure of the Crimean peninsula and its subversion of portions of eastern Ukraine in 2014 is Anna Arutunyan's *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow's Struggle for Ukraine*. Arutunyan refutes simplistic analyses of these events and shows how Moscow's proxies operating in eastern Ukraine were anything but Kremlin puppets.

The most infamous act of Russian political warfare in recent years is undoubtedly the effort to influence the 2016 US presidential election in favor of Donald Trump. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* remains the clearest and most objective account of this campaign. There are also several works that seek to put Russia's 2016 election efforts into the broader context of disinformation and political warfare dating back to the Cold War. Most useful in this regard are Thomas Rid's *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* and David Shimer's *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference*. Both books clarify that political warfare was not the exclusive province of the USSR. The US also engaged in propaganda, disinformation, and covert efforts to influence politics in foreign nations. However, the US began to abandon the most questionable of these activities by the late 1950s, and eventually conducted the rest in an open fashion. The KGB, on the other hand, intensified its efforts just as America began to scale back, and did so at a level substantially beyond what the USA engaged in. For further reading, Calder Walton's 2023 book *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War between East and West* draws out these contrasts.

One final work worth noting in this category, considering the importance of the alliance between Putin's Russia and China, is Philip Snow's recent study *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord*. This is truly a definitive work on the history of Sino-Russian relations in terms of both content and bibliography.

Putin's War in Ukraine: 2014–Present

A NUMBER OF BOOKS HAVE ALREADY BEEN published on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For now, the literature related to the Russo-Ukrainian War is a far better source on the historical, political, and military background of the conflict than it is on the actual events since February 2022. A study of this background reveals a microcosm of all the major trends this essay has discussed: autocracy; Russian empire versus Ukrainian nationalism; the Russian regime's fear of external and internal threats merging; and a politicization of history to justify present policies.

For the history of Ukraine and the development of Ukrainian identity, a good starting point is Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy's *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*. This book is best combined with Plokhy's subsequent work, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation, from 1470 to the Present*. The latter volume discusses the rise of Great Russian nationalism, with its belief that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussian form one nation under Russian leadership. Plokhy also examines how this ideology shaped Russian responses to the rise of Belorussian and especially Ukrainian nationalism. The notion that Ukraine and Russia are inextricably linked is a key motivation behind Putin's brutal war to return Ukraine to Moscow's orbit.

Finally, returning to a theme presented throughout this essay, it is worth looking at how Putin and his regime have utilized ideologically driven historical narratives to justify their invasion. Drawing on the dark history of Ukrainian nationalists during the Second World War, the activities of the Ukrainian radical Right today, and the memory of the Great Patriotic War, Putin's Russia has spun an overwrought propaganda narrative in which the war against Ukraine is a literal continuation of the struggle against the Third Reich. Scholar Jade McGlynn recently published a fair-minded study of the effect of this propaganda on the domestic Russian audience in her work *Russia's War*. McGlynn rejects simplistic explanations involving “brainwashing”

and emphasizes that Russian narratives work because they tell listeners what they want to hear. This is also worth keeping in mind with regard to Russian information and disinformation campaigns directed at foreign audiences.

Conclusion

FITTINGLY, THIS ESSAY ENDS WITH A BOOK that focuses on the nexus between Russia's history of warfare and its preferred historical narratives. Scholar Gregory Carleton provides a fascinating study of this topic in *Russia: The Story of War*. He discusses not Russia's actual military history, but what he calls its "mythic history," the narratives that Russia tells itself about its wars and its role in them. As one would expect, this mythic history portrays Russia and its soldiers as unfailingly noble and heroic. Key themes that Carleton focuses on are the cult of self-sacrifice, in which fallen Russian soldiers are regarded as martyrs who laid down their lives for God and the Motherland, and also the fear of domestic disturbance, ranging from the seventeenth-century Time of Troubles to the upheavals of the 1990s. Carleton ably summarizes how Putin employs this mythic history to legitimize his autocratic rule:

"Crushing the oligarchs, attaining unrivaled political power, making Russia a force to be respected once more—these are his signature achievements... Putin is Russia's savior, which, more than anything, fuels his domestic support, no matter how he might appear to the outside" (p. 215).

As Carleton goes on to put it, without Putin and his ruthless dictatorship, "Russia's very survival would fall into question—or so mythic history would teach us."

In short, it is impossible to understand Putin—his regime, his beliefs, his actions, or his appeal to ordinary Russians—without understanding the history that shaped him and his country.

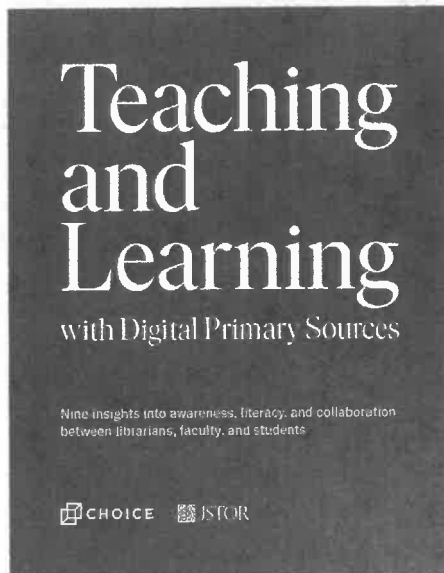
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