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Interview – Jade McGlynn

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dr Jade McGlynn is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at Dept of War Studies, KCL. She holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford and is the author of two recent books: *Russia's War* (Polity) and *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* (Bloomsbury). Jade's research has focused on Russia's war on Ukraine since 2014, Russian domestic media, Russian state-society relations, and Russian and Ukrainian memory politics and soft power globally. She is a frequent contributor to international media, including BBC, CNN, DW, Foreign Policy, The Times, The Telegraph and The Spectator.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I am an autodidact Russianist (I taught myself Russian from a book as a twelve-year-old and learnt about the country in my spare time from books). So, the biggest influence on me as a young Russianist was George Orwell, for which I am eternally grateful. George Orwell's commitment to social justice, enjoyment of Russian literature and culture, but refusal to make excuses for the excesses of the Soviet regime, meant that I understood the need for a critical eye towards one's object of research. In terms of my specific research area of Russian identity, memory and relations with Ukraine, that emerged as a result of living in Moscow in 2014 and being grimly fascinated by the celebrations of the annexation of Crimea and the (re)activation of a popular, grievance-fuelled, and revanchist patriotism.

In your latest books, *Russia's War* and *Memory Makers*, you link themes of memory politics to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. How has Russian propaganda used memory politics to influence Russian public sentiment on the conflict?

I think it is difficult to underestimate the role of 'memory politics' in preparing the Russian people for war, both in 2014 and 2022. Russian official and societal obsession with sanitizing history, and moulding it into something usable to prove exclusive heroism and victimhood, has been fuelled by an insecurity borne of changing ideological regimes and the senselessness of the historical traumas Russia experienced in the twentieth century. The power of these cultural memories is immense, and the Kremlin has wielded this power to prepare its nation for war and repression. By framing the 2014 invasion of Ukraine as Russia defending 'Russian people' in east Ukraine against 'Ukrainian Nazis' from the West, it activated a sense of Russian heroism, while simultaneously playing on a sense of restoration, as Russia lost in 1991 but now it was regaining some of what it lost. The annexation of Crimea was wildly popular among Russians, and I think it is reasonable to ask whether, if there had been a different reaction, or more outrage at Russian direct intervention in the Donbas, or even at the downing of MH17, we still would have seen a full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The propaganda narratives set out in 2014 have framed many Russians' understanding of the war in 2022. However, propaganda doesn't work by brainwashing — that is a dismissive term. In Russia, 60 million people use Telegram every day, and there they can access many sources. In 2014, you could read almost any source online, from BBC

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Russian to watching Dozhd on YouTube. But people chose to listen to the propaganda, because of the pressure projected by the repressive state machine, because it was more pleasant to believe the Kremlin's lies than accept the truth, because it appealed to their worldview, and many more reasons besides. Throughout 2014-2022, the memory politics intensified, with Russia's alleged need for a strong state and its right to be a great power with a sphere of influence becoming a defining feature of new film releases, murals, children's patriotic clubs, battle re-enactment festivals, the daily news schedule, education, tourism, leisure, and fiction books (popadnichestvo genre). It was ubiquitous, easy not to notice, but there, influencing and shaping people's worldviews even as they insisted that they stayed out of politics.

How has Russian propaganda proved to be so powerful, and do you think it has much influence outside the Russian border? How can it be tackled?

I answered the first part of this question above, so I will simply reiterate here that Russian propaganda at home has proved powerful because it has grown and adapted around public appetites and prejudices, which it has then grossly distorted and exacerbated. Moreover, it is often designed to be highly entertaining (to its audiences) in the vein of Fox News, and is buttressed by similar narratives as propagated in popular culture (television series, film releases, books, etc).

Abroad is a large place, but ultimately, Russian propaganda is effective wherever it can latch onto existing prejudices, hopes, fears, and beliefs. The strength of Russian propaganda — indeed, any propaganda — is in finding out which messages work to stir up emotions and shut down critical faculties in a given audience, and then to make those same messages work for you. That is what the Kremlin did at home, playing on historical grievances, traumas, and a sense of deep pride in the great Soviet victory of 1945. And that is a similar approach abroad, albeit since Russian interests are defined differently there than at home, they are of course applied in different ways. So we must not overestimate the power of Russian propaganda in the West, or elsewhere. In Russia, the Kremlin can control the platforms and threaten citizens with persecution in a way it simply cannot replicate in the West, for example. Which means it can only bolster certain messages artificially and play on organic resonance of certain topics that would lead to political outcomes that play in the Kremlin's favour (e.g. Trump as an anti-elite crusader who should be President; the UK should leave the EU; Scotland should leave the UK; France is a neo-colonial force). But none of these narratives are powerful because of Russia, they are powerful because they resonate with audiences, and then Russia tries to use, or harness, or increase this power for its own interests. If we want to understand Trump, Brexit, or African disdain for the West, then we would do best to listen to the often legitimate complaints of those who align with these positions, rather than seek to delegitimise them, and remove their agency, by ascribing these political positions as Putinist.

Amid concerns that the West might abandon Ukraine, and news of President Zelensky's latest visit to the U.S., what is your assessment of the future of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the role the West can play?

I think Ukraine can win, but that is no excuse for complacency. Ultimately, every weapon supply that isn't provided in a timely fashion or appropriate quantity means that more young Ukrainians will die than needed to. I appreciate that we also have to balance weapons supplies against the risk of escalation but: a) Russia has shown again and again that its redlines are little more than bluffs (tanks, attacks on Crimea, ATACMs); and b) there is a risk of escalation — specifically nuclear proliferation — if the West also gives the message that nuclear powers can do what they want to smaller neighbours with little consequence. I don't think the West will abandon Ukraine in the sense of 'letting Ukraine lose' because it isn't in the US interest to imperil European security, nor is it in Europe's! However, they also seem to lack a strategy, or indeed a deep commitment, to Ukraine winning. So we are in a limbo land where they are not arming Ukraine to win, but they also won't let it lose. This lack of a strategy, so far into the full-scale war, is perplexing. Ukraine's heroism offered a chance to revivify the ideals on which Euro-Atlantic security and political order is supposedly based, and which have felt at best rhetorical (at worst moribund) in recent years, even decades. So far, Europe and America have missed that opportunity, or failed to see it. All of this makes it hard to be certain of any predictions, but for now, my working assumption is a long war, with huge casualties continuing on both sides. Russia has already lost strategically — it is very unlikely to ever take Kyiv and even if it did, it can only count on

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hatred from Ukraine and Ukrainians for generations — but that does not mean it is not a formidable fighting force or an easy foe.

Many contemporary political campaigns such as Trump’s “Make America Great Again” and the Brexit campaign in the UK appear to rely significantly on memory politics. Is the politics of memory on the rise in the West, and if so, what are its implications?

As I argue in *Memory Makers*, while the preoccupation with history may be especially pronounced in Russia, it is far from a uniquely Russian phenomenon or pathology. Across the secular world, historical (re)tellings have displaced the parabolic role of religion in explaining morality, good, and evil. This also helps to explain why the use of history in Russia, and elsewhere, functions so much like ideology, that other replacement for religion, mirroring Nikolai Koposov’s argument that Europe as a whole, not just Russia, is moving from the age of ideology to the age of memory. Our societies are polarised, and this is reflected in historical debates, which are often just historicised political debates, ways of affirming one’s beliefs, values, identity, through recounting one’s cherry-picked narratives of the past.

In many countries, there are forces at play similar to those in Russia where politicians and certain sections of the media conflate the past with the present, frequently using the former to explain why something is happening or will happen in the future. Ministers and journalists turn an interpretation of history into a question of who is a patriot and who belongs. The fact that a historical narrative is always a reflection of who elites think should belong (i.e., should be reflected in the narrative) is reversed into the equation that if you do not espouse the narrative, you do not belong. The presence of a free and democratic media in countries like the UK and other liberal democracies will not necessarily undermine the potency and potential of such narratives, but they will provide a contestation and prevent the codification that has stifled historical enquiry and objective truth in Russia. That said, in a worst-case scenario, this freedom could also work to enhance polarization and undermine some of the positive or unifying aspects of the Kremlin’s intense uses of the past in Russia.

I think the best way to deal with these turbo-charged political uses of history is, first, to acknowledge and study them in their local and comparative contexts and then, second, to try to use them for good. This involves recognising that political uses of history are not about history, they are about politics and identity. Ordinary people use narratives, or stories, about the past to explain who they are and how they see the world, not to enter into a debate on what did or didn’t happen. Since there will always be political actors trying to appeal to these stories, and identities, it is best to accept the emotive memory narrative and to try to use it for good. For example, a study of documentaries in Sweden and Germany on migration showed that they made considerable use of historical parallels to justify a pro-migrant stance following the 2015 migrant and refugee crisis. Invoking history, therefore, is not an inherently negative act or impulse towards ‘othering’. In fact, I increasingly think that it is only by counterposing different, nuanced, historical narratives, or different interpretations of history, to those invoked by populists on all sides, that it is possible to counter the emotional appeal of the more negative types of historical framing described in this book, as well as the attendant claims to authenticity and a higher sense of truth. It is important that the emotive power of historical language is not simply ceded to the demagogues.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently on a six-year Leverhulme research grant, looking at how Russia uses history in its foreign policy and international relations. I am also writing a book on the Kremlin’s version of history, under Putin, how its story differs from that in many Western countries, and how this impacts the dominant worldview among Russian elites. Finally, I am often in Ukraine, where I am researching Russian propaganda towards Ukrainians and its efforts to indoctrinate children in occupied territories as well as those children it has kidnapped from Ukraine.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

To trust your instincts on research and trust your eyes, which does often mean time in the field. Remember that many of the older, more ‘established’ experts are often not as close to the material, or the field, as you are. Their research

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is usually not as fresh or as original, so don't feel like you have to fit your research around their more experienced perspectives. You are the expert in your specific area, be confident in your knowledge.