

Review – Russia's War on Everybody

Written by Emma Isabella Sage

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EMMA ISABELLA SAGE, NOV 18 2025

Russia's War on Everybody And What It Means for You

By Keir Giles

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024

"You may not be interested in Russia. But Russia is interested in you." So reads the description on the back cover of *Russia's War on Everybody*, a book whose title is meant literally. Giles argues that Moscow has been engaged in conflict – often covert, political, and informational, but also kinetic – around the world for decades, and that no one is beyond its hostile reach. Originally slated to be published in 2022, it had to be updated to reflect Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but in a testament to the book's foresight, its concept and execution had only grown in relevance. Giles' work is a darkly humorous analysis and an impassioned call to action, combining rigorous research with sharp-tongued policy analysis to drive home a central message: we underestimate the Russian threat at our peril. His unnervingly direct tone and grim subject matter is lightened by wry wit and skilful writing, making this book as enjoyable as it is informative.

"This must be the essence of our greatness. . . enemies everywhere" (p.20) The central thesis of *Russia's War on Everybody* is that the Kremlin defines its enemies sweepingly, such that only a fraction of these "enemies" consider Russia to be *their* enemy. As Giles documents, "the Kremlin's daily business" includes what some in the West would consider "acts of war" – poisoning dissidents, shooting down planes, election meddling, cyberattacks, and blatant political assassinations. Giles describes the Kremlin's zero-sum worldview, in which anything benefitting others is a threat to Russia, and demonstrates that the Kremlin's ambitions are far broader, and its methods more pervasive, than most realise.

"We would like to be playing chess, but they are already punching us in the face" (p.21). Every decision in this book is strategic. Giles willingly trades away a perception of academic impartiality for a chance at making an impact on policymakers and the public. In fact, the book's greatest success derives from Giles' greatest risk: his willingness to dive into the murky and epistemologically-challenging world of strategic culture. *Russia's War on Everybody* serves as a kind of sequel to Giles's earlier book, *Moscow Rules* (2019), which similarly focused on Russia's strategic culture, urging Western policymakers to recognise the dangers of Russia's obsession with power and prestige and willingness to bend the truth to the point of breaking.

Russia's War on Everybody takes those forces to their natural conclusion: the lives disrupted, destroyed or ended by Russian state actions. Classic academicians might be more comfortable describing these actions without any inferences about Russia's 'mindset,' and might even be unwilling to admit that such a thing exists, but Giles blows past the methodological challenges in substantiating Russia's "status obsession," "paranoia," and "conspiratorial view of absolutely everything," allowing him to advance more innovative and impactful analysis than his more reserved peers. He appears to consciously employ the tactics which he described in his working paper for the Hybrid COE, both debunking *and* deriding Russian narratives.

"Russia can only look strong if its enemies are weaker, and President Putin has made this... his promise to the Russian people" (p.xvi). Giles actually dedicates the book to Putin for making his job easier, but Putin is far from the main character. I think Giles would agree that even if Putin suffered an unexpected defenestration (although he is far

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too entrenched and cautious for this to be more than a remote possibility), the world's problems with Russia would be far from over. Giles describes a system of control and manipulation so extensive and so committed to a shared view of Russia's rightful place of domination, that it could not possibly be undone with a decapitation strike. Yet it is still Putin who set the state's machinery on a direct collision course with the West.

The portrait Giles paints of Putin's role is at once poignant and upsetting. One of Giles' interviewees recounts Putin's calamitous failure of imagination on the ways the West has changed while Russia's essential functioning has remained the same, describing how Putin expected to be invited to (either a literal or metaphorical) castle in the alps to define spheres of influence and determine the fate of the less powerful states, and when no invitation to such an event came, he took it as a snub. Giles would agree that the mindset of being 'either at the table, or on the menu' describes Russian strategic culture.

"Western leaders continue to succumb to the triumph of hope over experience" (p.54). This motif of the mirroring fallacy is so prevalent, and so well-substantiated through case studies, that it would not be outrageous to claim that this book could actually chance the way you think about international relations. In fact, one of Giles' best points is how the mirroring fallacy impedes understanding on both sides, as each believes the other is operating just as they are, and both are very, very wrong. Russia operates on the belief that NATO operates in the same way as the USSR, namely, ownership of other countries, and operates through the Soviet default that international relations are inherently hostile.

"Removing Twitter from Russia did not have the effect of removing Russia from Twitter" (p.40). As Giles shows, if you choose to "stay out of the fight," that will not save you – in fact, sometimes, it marks you as easy prey. Amnesty International succumbing to a Russian troll campaign aimed at discrediting Alexei Navalny as a political prisoner is an excellent example. He describes both the modern outward-facing evolutions of *maskirovka* and the power and reach of the domestic propaganda effort. Giles writes with compassion towards the Russian population, operating in an information environment described as in excess of Orwellian.

"Malign influence... works best not through high-profile endeavours... but by targeting individual people" (p.72). It is when writing about the Western actors who have closed their eyes and ears to Russia's threats and continued to offer it opportunities for malfeasance that Giles' frustration and derision boils over. While his perspective is increasingly popular and accepted today, the bitterness left over from his unheeded early warnings still runs through much of the book as a strong undercurrent. He channels this bitterness by elevating the voices of the Central and Eastern Europeans whose own warnings were brushed off by more 'partnership-minded' Western allies who played with fire from their perceived position of safety, further from Russia's (current) borders.

"Russian strategy and warfare is [distinguished by] a higher acceptance of risk and a lower threshold for the use of force" (p.20). One of the new insights which was added after the full-scale invasion was the ominous import of the Russian National Guard, the *Rosgvardiya*, being among the forces massed at the border for deployment into Ukraine. Per Giles, the *Rosgvardiya* exists to compel a hostile population to submit to Russian state control – in this case, the Ukrainian population, but in other cases, domestic populations. Giles describes the challenges by Western observers in understanding the true nature of apparatuses of the state, such as this, which have a nominal Western corollary: the fact that these bodies have similar names or structures obscures vast differences in purpose and function.

"The idea that you can unilaterally impose a different kind of relationship on Russia when Russia isn't interested seems never to die" (p.55). Giles describes how "collective amnesia" about Russia "behaving so badly that others do not know how to react" has led Western diplomats into a never-ending cycle of attempts to improve relations with Moscow. Giles is particularly harsh on French and particularly German leaders, whose persistence in seeking "resets" and willingness to forgive and forget all of Russia's many sins. Giles describes Western fallacies such as mistaking more communication with better communication, assuming that both parties in any conflict are equally at fault, and deciding that ending the fighting takes primacy over justice or deterring future aggression. The majority of the West believes that Russia is different now than it was in the past (without any evidence to this effect), and when proven otherwise, accepts ceasefire agreements which are unfair to the victim country as an "excuse for looking

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away." The second Trump administration's naïve behaviour over its first seven months of negotiations with Russia, whether born of arrogance or wilful ignorance, exemplified exactly the sort of folly Giles has long implored Western policymakers to overcome.

Propagandists argue that it's clear that sanctions on Russia have not had even the slightest effect on Moscow's policy, and that they are in fact utterly meaningless. But they should be removed as soon as possible. And Russia is a rational actor the West can work with. But we also need to remember that excessive criticism of Russia's actions could quickly spiral into a global thermonuclear war, which will certainly be the West's fault (p.76).

Giles is as engaging as he is acerbic, demanding that the audience both think *and* feel their way through the narrative. Underpinning it all is a deep compassion for the overlooked victims, which is more moving and compelling than anger alone could be. Disillusionment is an unavoidable result of reading this book, but even seasoned Russia-watchers will find that they learned something new, or at least experienced some catharsis along the way. Ultimately, *Russia's War on Everybody* earns my strongest recommendation, and I hope that this book will find its way into the hands of those who need it the most.

About the author:

Emma Isabella Sage is a co-founder of the research software startup LIVINI, a research affiliate at the University of Glasgow, and the 2025 Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YPFP) Rising Expert in National Security. Her work has been presented at GLOBSEC, submitted as evidence to the UK Parliament, and discussed on US national television. She graduated with Distinction from the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Security, Intelligence & Strategic Studies, specialising in economic and financial tactics in conflict. She writes regularly on counterintelligence, emerging technology, and irregular warfare.