

# In 'Memory Makers' Author Jade McGlynn Investigates the Politics of the Russian Past

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September 17, 2023



Author Jade McGlynn **Courtesy of author**

This year Jade McGlynn, a researcher in the war studies department at King's College London, published two groundbreaking books on the use and misuse of memory in today's Russia. The first book released, "[Russia's War,](#)" a finalist for the Pushkin House Book Prize, considered how the Russian population came to support, or at least not protest, the war Russia is waging against Ukraine. In "Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia" she lays out how memory has been used to create something of an alternative reality that citizens believe in, or at least want to believe in.

The Moscow Times spoke with Prof. McGlynn about how Russia — or indeed any state — uses and misuses memories of the past and why they are accepted, often eagerly, by their citizens.

*The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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*The Moscow Times: How did you get drawn into the very rich topic of memory?*

Jade McGlynn: I was always interested in Russian memory, Russian intellectual history. But it was mainly during 2014 when the Revolution of Dignity was happening... We only had Russian TV, and I found the number of historical references and how detailed they were really bizarre. I was fascinated by the narrative creation.

As I began to research it more, I saw it wasn't just about a narrative. It was something much deeper about creating a post-Soviet identity and a sense of what Russians can be proud of, what Russia is. Why is Russia a nation? What is its role?

*TMT: One thing puzzling in that identity is the allure of victimhood and humiliation. You'd think it would be the opposite, that people would want to be victorious. Could you talk about why that is?*

JM: That sense of humiliation — it's there, it's organic. If we think about the 1990s, clearly a lot of people did feel humiliated in different ways on a personal level. Either because they weren't being paid properly or they had a sense of, "My dad was a colonel in the army, and then all of a sudden he has to start bricklaying." You had a certain status and then it was just lost. And all of a sudden, the people who had the status were the "new Russians."

You'll find certain aspects of this in any society. But there's this sense of personal humiliation that some political leaders are very adept at playing on and turning into something that's a national or a political problem. And then it makes it easier to handle because rather than your own personal shame, you can deal with it on a national level, especially if you have somebody saying, "You know what? Russia is on its knees and now I'm getting Russia off its knees."

*TMT: How can you counter this? It's not just a problem in Russia — it's a global problem.*

JM: The first issue is the platform. In Russia the vast majority of platforms are influenced, if not outright owned and controlled, by the state, even including online and the algorithms. Of course, that's going to have a big effect because that's something people are hearing all the time.

The issue that troubles, or interests me more because it's less explored, is the issue of resonance. When I was in Russia, 90% of what I watched was Russian TV. But at no point did I believe it because it didn't resonate with how I understood of the world.

So we need to also ask: Why does it appeal? And I think that's a question that isn't asked enough, often because people want to see their country as something different than what it is. Think about Trump or Brexit and people's acrobatics to explain why people voted for them, other than just maybe they wanted to vote for them, maybe they agree with them on some level. It might be better to think about why that is and how we could target that with a more constructive narrative or build a story that could appeal to those audiences.

*TMT: How has it succeeded so well in Russia?*

JM: Although the state has been the main actor in doing this, in parallel society has often been involved in different activities, sometimes quite apolitical, genuinely about memory or respecting memory.

The state has been very good at taking over or at aiming influence or control over some of these activities. I'm really talking on the local level: different kind of children's clubs, the Russian Military Historical Society writing manuals, and so on. I think this is one of the reasons why it's been quite powerful. These initiatives are seen as grassroots, often because they originally were, but over time the state has managed to wield its influence over them. In different ways, sometimes quite benign, like with funding. We all require some funding! And sometimes in less benign ways with more hostile things or hidden agendas.

In the West people often ask, "Oh, okay, but what if people reject it?" If people see it as their own, it's much harder to reject it. Russians are not silly, they know that the state overuses the Great Patriotic War. A lot of people really don't like it. But that doesn't mean that, broadly, the narrative that's used isn't appealing or meaningful to people or doesn't have emotional power. Sometimes we focus so much on the outlandish Russian propaganda that we forget that there are a lot more subtle things going on that will probably have a more lasting impact.

## **From Chapter Six: Attaining Cultural Consciousness**

### *Beyond post-truth: history as allegorical truth*

...In Russian, there are two words for truth: *istina* and *pravda*. While *istina* has connotations of essential religious or spiritual truth, *pravda* has 'connotations of justice and "rightness" at least as much as of truth'. The conceptualization of truth being discussed in relation to 'historical truth' or 'history as truth' would be translated as *pravda*. The roots of this word in justice and righteousness point to a moral order rather than a legalistic one shaped by Western technocratic forces. The historical context here is also important: the Soviet legacy of ideological thinking, with its understanding of the world using reasoning based not on fact but on ideology, or an axiomatic premise, may also have facilitated the current government and media's framing of lies and half-truths as types of 'allegorical' truth. If there is a tradition of deferring to, or at least not openly ridiculing or challenging, interpretations from authority that directly contradict objective fact and reality, this makes such patterns of discourse easier to accept when they re-emerge.

Blame should not be laid too firmly at the feet of Russia's communist past, however, given that in some ways the Kremlin's current allegorical approach can be seen as a departure from the Soviet era when the authorities expended considerable energy on making the 'evidence' match their story. If we return to the legend of Panfilov's Twenty-Eight discussed earlier, then examining how the Soviet authorities reacted to efforts to demythologize the story reveals interesting contrasts with the approach of the current Russian authorities. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Soviet authorities suppressed reports, such as the Afanas'ev Report, which concluded that the legend was pure fantasy, with Leonid Brezhnev himself speaking out to discredit the report and attendant rumours. Such efforts would obviously have been more effective in the highly restrictive and restricted information space of the USSR, but they also reflected a concern with making objective truth appear to align with what the government wanted to pretend was true.

By contrast, the Putin-era Russian governments have displayed considerably less concern about aligning their version of history with that of objective fact. In 2016, the head of the State Archive, Sergei Mironenko was sacked after he published and promoted evidence that the Panfilov's Twenty-Eight legend was demonstrably untrue. While this may appear to be a continuation of the Soviet approach, it is complicated by the fact that Medinskii himself, who was at the centre of the dispute with Mironenko, admitted that the Panfilov's Twenty-Eight story was objectively false. In his view, it was not important whether the event happened: what was important was that it represents truth, that it functions as allegorical truth. In an article justifying his decisions with regard to this affair, Medinskii argued his case by claiming that absolute objectivity did not exist, that myths were also facts and that there were no definite events, only interpretations of history: 'There are no historical conceptions that are the "one and only truth" or "genuinely objective".' The then Minister of Culture continued by arguing that history should be seen from the point of view of national interests. His confused interpretation of truth and history in this affair was encapsulated in the following quotation: 'This legend has become a material force – more terrible and more wonderful than any fact from any real battle'. The director of the film, Panfilov's Twenty-Eight, Andrei Shal'opa, a close ally of Medinskii, expressed similar sentiments: 'The feat of Panfilov's Twenty-Eight is part of our national culture, a myth that is so powerful it does not make any sense to argue about it. The historical dispute over Panfilov is senseless and immoral'. Thus, although the government and its favoured cultural practitioners frequently decried the risk of historical falsification, they cared little for historical objectivity: this was a question of moral correctness, of consciousness.

Taking this moralizing into account reveals a perverse logic to the authorities' insistence on upholding and defending the 'truth' of official, often disproven, versions of history. The government's dismissive attitude towards historical objectivity does not necessarily contradict their simultaneous invocation of history as truth or evidence insofar as politicians reference history as a higher form of truth, as an event that, even if it did not take place, should have done because it revealed something significant and accurate about the Russian people. The government presented the ability to see this 'something' as the purpose of studying history: 'if you can't see fact in the myth then that means you cease to be a historian'. In other words, myths like Panfilov's Twenty-Eight, or the claim that the mass graves of Sandarmokh contain Soviet POWs, are presented and at least partially accepted as true not because people are certain these events took place (that does not matter) but because they are symbols of the greater truth of Russian/Soviet bravery and suffering in the Great Patriotic War.

By contrast, in challenging the symbol, one also challenges the truth that it symbolizes. Taking this approach, the crux of any matter resides not in the concrete facts of what took place in the past but in whether the historical episode being invoked reveals a deeper truth about the heroism of the Russian people, their sacrifices and their messianic global role to spread this truth. Applying such logic, to deny the veracity of a historical episode on the basis of specific documents, or lack of proof, is akin to denying the whole wider truth attached to it, an act that would be perceived as unpatriotic, as seen in the case of Sergei Mironenko. This is the process by which a person's view of history is extrapolated into a choice between different realities and also different identities. In the broader scheme of cultural consciousness, people who focus on historical inaccuracies in (usable) Soviet war myths show themselves to be unconscious of this higher truth.

This approach to truth is in itself an assertion of Russian identity, of cultural consciousness, of the right to a different truth, posited as more powerful than fact. An understanding of history as a type of higher truth informs and is informed by the use of historical framing to present current events through a detailed historical analogy, as detailed in Chapter 3. This media technique familiarized audiences with the use of history as an allegory for understanding the present and the broader truth of what is happening in a confusing and overwhelming world. Ultimately, if cultural memory disguised as 'history' is the (main) vehicle used to promote the template of cultural consciousness, then cultural consciousness is the process by which you learn to discern the truth contained within this history. But while emotionally compelling, such approaches are based in insecurity, in the anticipation that facts will contradict the message. To avoid this investigation, everything is moved onto the level of emotional gratification while historical enquiry is delegitimized and codified, with consequences for the understanding not only of the past but also of reality. Unfortunately, this is not a process that is unique to Russia. The tendencies described in this chapter are observable around the world [...]

*Excerpted from "Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia," written by Jade McGlynn and published by Bloomsbury Publishing. Copyright © Jade McGlynn 2023. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Footnotes have been removed to ease reading. For more information about the author and this book, see the publisher's site [here](#).*

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