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should be sent to: Dr. Andreas Umland, Department of Political Science, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, vul. Voloska 8/5, UA-04070 Kyiv, UKRAINE; andreas.umland@cantab.net

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Taras Kuzio (ed.)

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

Bias and Prejudice in Journalistic, Expert, and
Academic Analyses of East European, Russian and
Eurasian Affairs

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Affiliations of the Contributors

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|--------------------------|--|
| Olga Bertelsen | Tiffin University |
| Sergei Zhuk | Ball State University |
| Taras Kuzio | National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy |
| Paul D'Anieri | University of California at Riverside |
| Sanshiro Hosaka | University of Tartu |
| Veronika Krátká Špalková | European Values Security Centre |
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Introduction

Taras Kuzio

This book brings together twelve chapters about the influence of Russia's information war on Western scholarship after the 2014 crisis and up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Western scholars, think tank experts, and journalists were unprepared to understand and write about Russia's military aggression and often followed the Kremlin's templates.

One major reason they were unprepared for a Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, and especially in 2022, was that Western historiography of Russia since World War II uses a nineteenth-century Russian imperial nationalist framework that fits the Kremlin's imperial nationalist templates. Both Western historians of Russia and the Kremlin's propagandists portray Ukraine as an error of history, an appendage of Russia, that was born together with Russia and Belarus in Kyivan Rus'. Both credit Russia with being the main inheritor of Kyivan Rus' through Vladimir-Suzdal', Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation. Ukraine appears only occasionally in this imperial nationalist framework, leading to the abnormal outcome of the sudden appearance of an independent Ukrainian state run by Ukrainian squatters on 'Russian land.' Thus, the Western approach to 'Russian' history mirrors that propagated by the Kremlin (Putin 2021); firstly, portraying the eastern Slavs as a united group confusingly identified as 'Russians,' and secondly, interpreting Ukraine as an accident of history.

An outgrowth of this has been a long tendency among Western scholars and policymakers to tie Ukraine's fate to that of Russia's. This was especially the case through to the launching of the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2010. Prior to this the EU had viewed Ukraine as an appendage of Russia and believed it could not invite Ukraine into membership without Russia. It took the Euromaidan Revolution, 2014 crisis, and 2022 invasion for the EU to grudgingly change its attitudes and come round to viewing Ukraine as separate

to Russia. NATO meanwhile always argued that inviting Ukraine into membership would antagonize Russia while south-eastern Ukrainians did not support membership. Both factors are no longer applicable after Russia's invasion which has increased support for NATO membership to high levels in Ukraine's south-east.

Closely tied to the use of a nineteenth-century imperial nationalist framework is a view about Crimea among Western historians of Russia that excuses Russia's 2014 illegal land grab. Many Western historians of Russia, and their fellow historians, see Crimea as having been 'unnaturally' included in Ukraine and therefore agreed with the Kremlin line that Crimea's return to Russia rectified an historical injustice.

This line is an anomaly in Western historical scholarship, and it is one that could open accusations of racism against Western historians of Russia. Beginning Crimea's history in 1783, when the Russian Empire annexed the peninsula, they ignore six centuries of life under the First Nation who were Tatars. Present-day Western historians of Canada, the US, and Australia would never deem it fit to begin their histories with Quebec, Jamestown, and the arrival of Captain Cook respectively as such an approach would ignore the First Nations who already lived there. In contrast, the approach taken by Western historians of Russia towards Crimea is an outgrowth of their adoption of outdated nineteenth-century imperial nationalist frameworks. No Western history of Russia is based on the Russian Federation nation-state; all are based on the Russian and Soviet empires. In continuing to pursue this approach Western historians serve to reinforce the weak Russian support for a (non-imperial) civic identity grounded in the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, Western scholars tend to write the histories of Ukraine and the other non-Russian former Soviet republics as histories of those nation-states that came into existence in 1991.

This should not be surprising. Western university departments and think tanks devoted to the former USSR are run by Russianists who overwhelmingly dominate the field of post-Soviet studies and Eurasian affairs. Russianists provide the bulk of the external reviewers to specialized journals and therefore act as gatekeepers (in reality, censors), determining what is and is not

published. Since 2014 I have experienced this firsthand in my dealings with numerous Western journals devoted to the post-Soviet space.

If a scholar or expert is an expert on Brazil or China, they do not usually claim to be also expert on all of Latin America or Asia. The situation is different in the case of the former USSR where many Russianists believe they are experts and therefore have a right to comment, publish, and lead analysis not only on Russia but on the other fourteen former Soviet republics as well. Russianists have predominated among those experts invited to comment about the 2014 crisis and Russian invasion via TV, radio, webinars, and podcasts.

This is despite the fact Russianists have a poor understanding of Ukraine. They tend to view the country through Moscow's eyes, and to rely exclusively on sources from Russia in their commentary in Ukraine, using Ukrainian sources only very rarely. One of the first books to be published about the 2014 crisis by a British scholar, for example, extensively used Russian sources but only the *Kyiv Post* from Ukraine. There are of course some exceptions, such as Paul D'Anieri who has traced the origins of the 2014 crisis to Russia's long inability since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 to accept an independent Ukrainian state.

A second factor is that Western journalists continue to cover the former USSR from Moscow — just as they did during the Soviet period. This reinforces the viewpoint commonly found in the West that Moscow-based journalists are also automatically 'experts' on the fourteen non-Russian republics. In fact, there is no reason why this should be the case; such journalists usually visit the other republics only very rarely, perhaps once in every few years to follow elections. There are of course exceptions, such as *The Guardian's* Luke Harding who has been based in Ukraine throughout the time since the Russian invasion.

Given the above, it is perhaps not surprising how much of the writing about Ukraine in 2014–2022 drew, wittingly or not, on the Kremlin's disinformation templates. A long-time favorite was the notion that Ukraine was a severely divided country and therefore more brittle than a 'normal' country. This Western media cliché was

remarkably like the Kremlin line for the last two decades that Ukraine is a 'fake' artificial country that had been cobbled together.

According to the Western stereotype, Ukraine is supposedly composed of two different civilizations, one of which in the south-east has always been closely tied to Russia and is a natural part of the 'Russian World'. This is music to the ears of the Kremlin as it reflected the Russian view of Ukraine as an artificial construct whose south-eastern part comprised 'ancient Russian lands' wrongfully incorporated into Ukraine by Vladimir Lenin with the western territories taken from Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

Over the past three decades the greatest number of Western scholarly articles on Ukraine dealt with regional diversity in Ukraine and the alleged conflict between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. Numerous studies focused on the fate of Russian speakers in Ukraine and whether they were being subjected to Ukrainization by a 'nationalizing state'. No Western studies ever condemned Russia's pursuit of Russification in occupied Crimea and the Donbas, or earlier in Russian official statements condemning Ukrainian language policies. Some scholars bizarrely portrayed the DNR (Donetsk People's Republic) and LNR (Luhansk People's Republic) as examples of 'multiculturalism', while claiming that Ukraine was run by 'nationalists' (effectively synonymous with 'Nazis' as per Russian disinformation) who had come to power violently in 2014.

With little or no grounding in theories of nationalism, when it came to Ukraine, Western Russianists used the Kremlin's definitions of terms such as 'nationalist.' This had nothing to do with the scholarly understanding of 'nationalism' and everything to do with anti-nationalist propaganda in the Soviet Union. In the USSR, and later in the Russian Federation, the label 'Ukrainian nationalist' was applied to anybody, irrespective of their position on the political spectrum, who did not support Ukraine's future in the USSR or the 'Russian World' and instead opposed Russification and Soviet nationality policies and backed greater sovereignty for the Ukrainian SSR within the Soviet Union or Ukrainian independence and European integration. A political science definition of nationalism

would show Ukraine has the one of the lowest levels of electoral support in Europe for populist nationalists and the far right.

The above factors came together in the early days of the 2022 invasion when Western ‘experts,’ who influenced the views of policymakers, agreed with the Kremlin that the ‘mighty’ Russian army was certain to defeat Ukraine within two to three days. Again, there are some exceptions, such as Lawrence Freedman whose insightful analysis is a product of a long career in international security studies that took place outside the field of Russian and Eurasian studies.

Western ‘experts’ held rose-tinted views of the Russian military, believed the Putin regime’s propaganda about its military reforms, and ignored deep levels of corruption in what has been described for over a decade as a ‘mafia state’. As Russianists they had always been assumed – especially after the 2014 crisis – to be also ‘experts’ on Ukraine, which of course they never were. Their approach to Ukraine as an appendage of Russia made them unable to explain or analyze why Ukrainian society was so resilient and displayed such high levels of national integration, or why most of Ukraine’s Russian speakers were Ukrainian patriots. Indeed, both Kremlin propagandists and Western Russianists find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to get over their view of Ukraine’s Russian speakers as disloyal and ‘pro-Russian.’ Yet sustaining this view will become even more untenable in the wake of the invasion as opinion polls show there are no longer regional variations in attitudes to language policies, memory politics, and foreign policy orientations.

Ukrainian society is so much more resilient than Russia’s because it has a deeply imbedded civil society that is a product of three popular revolutions (1990, 2004, 2013–2014) that have successfully demanded the country’s rulers deal with them as citizens and have become involved in local politics after the decentralization of the state following the Euromaidan Revolution. Since the late 1980s, Ukraine has undergone de-Sovietization and de-Stalinization and, since 2015, de-communization. In contrast, Russia’s last revolution was in 1917 and its people have stagnated even further into subjects with no rights during Vladimir Putin’s re-Sovietization and the revival of the religious cult of the Great Patriotic War and Joseph Stalin. Ukraine’s extensive volunteer movement and better performing

armed forces are the product of a horizontally organized society of citizens with agency. Russia is a vertically organized society of subjects with no volunteer movement and is unable to function without the boss barking orders.

Being only able to view Ukrainians through Moscow's eyes, drawing as they do on the Kremlin's disinformation templates, Western Russianists find it very difficult to understand both Ukraine's fight back during the 2014 crisis and especially the successes of the Ukrainian armed forces since the 2022 invasion. Ignoring two decades of dehumanization of Ukrainians in the Russian media has made it impossible to analyze the roots of Russia's genocide in Ukraine. Barely any of the many studies of the Russian media focused on its obsession with dehumanizing Ukraine and Ukrainians. Meanwhile, downplaying and denying the existence of nationalism in Putin's Russia was all the vogue among western Russianists; indeed, two major book-length studies of Russian nationalism published in 2016 and 2020 ignored the dominant influence of White Russian émigré imperial nationalist perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Taken together these developments produced the intellectual vacuum that formed the backdrop to the publication in July 2021 of Putin's long essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.' Western Russianists had no intellectual resources or tools to explain the ideological drivers behind Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and the brutality of Russian soldiers against Ukrainian civilians. Putin's essay, published at the same time as the decision was made to invade Ukraine, did not appear from nowhere but was a product of the transformation of Russian imperial nationalism over the previous two decades that now culminated in an ideological treatise justifying Russian imperialist territorial claims towards Ukraine and denial of the existence of a Ukrainian nation.

The stagnation of Russian nationalism, which still relies heavily on the ideas prevailing among pre-war White Russian émigrés, has been accompanied by a loss of memory. For all their widespread and growing Soviet nostalgia, Russians have forgotten—or have chosen to ignore—the fact that Ukraine was not a peasant

nation in the latter decades of the USSR but in fact an urbanized, industrialized, and modernized republic. The Soviet Ukrainian republic was a major industrial and intellectual center for the Soviet Union and the home of a large military-industrial complex. The first Encyclopedia of Cybernetics in the USSR was published in the 1960s in Soviet Ukraine. *Pivdenmash* (*Yuzhmash*), which employed fifty thousand people in the closed Ukrainian city of Dnipropetrovsk, was the biggest producer of nuclear missiles in the world. Studies published by the Rand Corporation think tank in the 1980s described Ukrainians as prized soldiers in the Soviet army who dominated the rank of sergeant and were disproportionately found among middle-ranking officers. Taking all this into account, it is striking how much Russians had been made to forget to be convinced liberating Ukraine would be a cakewalk; presumably they believed that Ukrainian peasants would only have pitchforks to hand!