

The Official Story of the Ukraine War Grossly Misleads

Russia and Putin are the only perpetrators; everyone else is either an innocent bystander or an unfortunate victim—so goes the official story.

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Just after Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, [President Biden](#) walked into the East Room of the White House and condemned the invasion with a barrage of adjectives: unprovoked, unjustified, brutal, without cause, premeditated, unnecessary. One of these quickly rose to prominence. Following Biden's initial statement, government spokespeople, the mainstream media, professional pundits and many others routinely call the war in Ukraine "unprovoked."

It is a well-chosen term, a rhetorical *bon mot*, and central to the official story that sole responsibility for the war in Ukraine belongs to Russia and Putin alone. It is also a term that gets continually reinforced by rampant speculation seeking the origin of the invasion in [Putin's brain](#): Is he insane? Terminally ill? Suffering from a messiah complex? Obsessed with reconstituting Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Based on patchy, ambiguous or often no evidence, the list is potentially endless but always dubious.

The overriding function of presenting the war in Ukraine as a crime perpetrated by one country, even by one allegedly whacked-out leader, is to relieve the U.S., NATO and actors within Ukraine of even the slightest responsibility for the war. Russia and Putin are the only perpetrators; everyone else is either an innocent bystander or an unfortunate victim—so goes the official story.

A much-needed antidote to this story is provided by Benjamin Abellow's recent book, [How The West Brought War To Ukraine](#). Based on the critiques of a range of scholars, U.S. government officials and military observers, and on his own investigations and

interpretations, Abelow shows in compelling detail how the official story misleads. His short, seventy-one-page book is a compendium of the many ways that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was provoked.

In the current political climate dominated by the official story, saying any such thing easily gets one tagged an apologist for Putin or Russia. Abelow makes clear, however, that he is neither a fan of Putin nor a supporter of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Without specifying what they were, Abelow contends that Russia and Putin had alternatives to war. The implication, of course, is that these alternatives should have been pursued. Since they were not, considerable responsibility for the horrifying and condemnable war in Ukraine, insists Abelow, falls on Russia and Putin.

But Abelow departs from the official story by showing that others were also responsible for the war in Ukraine. Although beyond the scope of and never mentioned in Abelow's book, these would include various political actors within Ukraine itself, all of whom have been amply and deftly explored in Richard Sakwa's [Frontline Ukraine](#). Abelow's focus is on the many ways in which the war in Ukraine was provoked by the U.S. and NATO.

Here are a fraction of the provocations that Abelow examines:

During German reunification in 1990-91, U.S. and NATO officials assured Soviet leaders that NATO would never expand into Eastern Europe. Despite such initial assurances and subsequent Russian complaints about having been duped, NATO proceeded to expand right up to the borders of the Russian Federation. Western assurances were never reduced to writing, but their abrogation undermined Russian trust in Western promises. Many prominent diplomatic experts, including [George F. Kennan](#), famous for formulating the Cold War policy of containing Communism, warned that disregarding Russia's real security concerns and pushing NATO eastward was foolhardy and would likely lead to war.

As NATO expanded, the U.S. and NATO engaged in a variety of actions that Russian leaders would predictably see as militarily threatening. The U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic and the intermediate-range nuclear missile treaties, and then ignored Russian attempts to negotiate a bilateral moratorium on deployments. The U.S. deployed nuclear-capable missile launch systems in Romania and planned them for Poland and perhaps elsewhere. The U.S. and NATO conducted live-fire rocket exercises in Estonia to practice striking targets within Russia, and the U.S. and NATO conducted massive 32-nation military training exercises near Russia's border.

In Ukraine specifically, the U.S. and NATO exacerbated the country's internal divisions. The U.S. involved itself in the 2014 coup against the democratically elected President of Ukraine and in the choice of his replacement. Instead of pressing for a negotiated settlement between Ukraine's post-coup government and pro-Russian autonomists in the Donbas, the U.S. poured armaments into Ukraine, stepped up military training of Ukrainian forces, and supported ultra-nationalist and anti-Russian (some Neo-Nazi) groups and militias,

Even on the precipice of war in late 2021, the U.S. and NATO refused to renounce plans to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. Indeed, the U.S. refused to even discuss the question.

Abelow makes two convincing points about these U.S. and NATO provocations:

- First, if Russia had committed even some of the above actions above close to U.S. borders, the U.S. surely would have gone to war, even nuclear war, as it

almost did during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the Soviets installed missiles in Cuba.

- Second, but for these provocations by the U.S. and NATO, it is virtually inconceivable that Russia would have invaded Ukraine in 2022. The war in Ukraine, with all its horrors and its potential for escalating and spinning out of control, would not today be raging.

Abelow's conclusion about the war in Ukraine is notable: "when all is taken into account, primary responsibility lies with the West, in particular with the United States." I agree, but it is not necessary to go so far to recognize the importance of Abelow's arguments. Any reader of Abelow's book who is not irreversibly blinded by the official story has to see that responsibility for the war in Ukraine is at least shared.

This point is not of just historical interest. For the official story informs not just the question of how the war in Ukraine began but also of how it might be ended. Since the U.S., NATO and Ukrainian spokespeople persist in viewing Russia and Putin as the war's sole perpetrators, they insist that the war cannot end until Russia is totally defeated, strategically weakened and forced to return all previously Ukrainian territory, including Crimea. Such goals are not only unrealistic, they block any serious effort to end the war through negotiations.

Realistically, the only alternatives to negotiations now are a long, simmering slog back and forth through Ukrainian fields and towns, a slog that will eventually grind down both sides and grind up their fighters and civilians, or another endless and escalating war that may spread uncontrollably beyond Ukraine and that may end us all in [Nuclear](#) Armageddon.

Despite its misleading nature and its ugly consequences, however, the official story is likely to persist. Erasing the official story and ending the war in Ukraine will require more than books like Abelow's. It will require pushing peace initiatives like China's (a topic for a future essay), which despite U.S. and NATO attempts to discredit it as biased toward Russia, is remarkably even-handed in seeing the war in Ukraine as a shared responsibility between Russia and the U.S. and NATO. Beyond that, ending the war in Ukraine will require sustained opposition by a growing peace movement, a peace movement that will surely find Abelow's short book extremely useful.

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