

RAISED BY THE KREMLIN

BAZAR

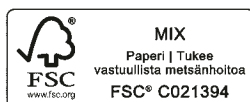


JULIA MATYUKHINA

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First edition

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To my children

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PREFACE

“The duty of every human is to speak out—whether he will be heard by others is their choice.”

—ANDREY ZUBOV, RUSSIAN
HISTORIAN AND ACADEMIC

It wasn't until Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 that my eyes were fully opened. Only now, at 43, am I ready to confront the heavy past, to shoulder responsibility for the atrocities committed by my Russian ancestors, and for the wars they have unleashed.

Each day I am touched by sorrow for the destruction that Russia, the country I was born in, has wrought upon Ukraine and the world, and for my own failure to understand it sooner. This is the story I feel compelled to share, a cautionary tale for others, so that they might avoid becoming part of an irreversible tragedy, one that lasts for generations.

This book took shape slowly, often in stolen moments while my baby girl napped. At first, I wrote down my

feelings, just to stay sane, because too much had happened in a short period of time. For a long time, I doubted these words would ever form a book, let alone be shared here. A part of me hesitated, fearing the consequences. Sometimes I wish these words would stay hidden, because what I wrote defies everything I was taught to accept.

Besides being a Finnish citizen, I also carry a Russian passport. I know what it means to speak against the regime, to condemn the war. Writing these words may lead to me never again setting foot in the land in which I was born.

But some stories must be told, no matter the cost. Because silence feels heavier.

Someone once said, *“Write your book as if no one important to you will ever read it. Write it for yourself, not for others.”* That advice forced me to confront how deeply I was tied to my parents’ approval and judgement. An anxious knot was in my stomach whenever I imagined them reading it. It is overwhelming. I love them dearly, yet the urge to untangle myself from the immoral framework they and my ancestors represent has become unbearable.

Still, I hold onto the hope that, one day, my parents will understand. If they understand, most Russians will too. As long as that hope exists, not all is lost.

When writing this book, I have had no access to classified information, nor have I been influenced or funded by any government or organization. My insights are drawn from extensive reading, scientific articles, media reports, and above all, by my own lived experience.

I grew up under the weight of Soviet ideological narratives, seeing things through a lens that still sometimes colors how I see the world, even though I live in Finland. Perhaps it gives me a unique understanding, or perhaps a profound misunderstanding, of the mindset of my fellow countrymen. Either way, this is an attempt to understand why so many of them did not stand against the war or the regime.

While I am sharing my personal story, my academic background in political science has equipped me with tools to understand the deeper political structures and the forces that shape them. I examine these dynamics through the lens of a Nordic societal narrative, a system of shared values through which Nordic societies are described. To me, it simply exemplifies a well-established democracy. Additionally, my studies in social psychology and therapy provide insight into group behavior and the complexities of the human mind.

The shadow of my family line, filled with the most loyal servants of the Soviet system—such as NKVD, KGB, Soviet Army and political structures—still haunts me. I am not sure if I will ever fully be free. I am painfully aware that a part of this venom will remain within me forever. Just like Maxim Leo wrote in *Red Love*, reflecting on his family's past in Communist Germany: "*The East isn't far away at all, it goes with me everywhere. It's like a big family that you can't shake off.*"¹

Breaking from this harmful mentality has been neither simple nor straightforward. To my deepest disappointment

and alarming concern, it required a profound catastrophe, a full-scale war, to confront uncomfortable truths about my own beliefs, values, and identity, many of which were shaped by the very system I now try to escape. The process of detangling myself from the narratives imposed by culture, education, parenting and traces of the past regime felt like peeling back layers of inherited pain, fear, and indoctrination. Those layers I strive to unfold.

This book is dedicated to those who stood by me during these challenging times, my husband Jasi, my children Elisabeth, Alexander and Nathalie, friends, and colleagues. It is also for those I lost on the way, to my brother Alexey, who is no longer here to challenge nor to support me in this difficult journey. And finally, it is for those struggling with the same questions. For future generations.

This has been a journey of self-discovery. A discovery that reveals that I am not merely a victim, as many anti-war Russians tend to position themselves, but for a long time, also actively passing on the inherited cultural burdens taught by generations.

Writing has given me the courage to question and challenge the norms I once accepted as the truth. It has also underlined the weight of collective responsibility and the role each of us plays in either perpetuating or dismantling oppressive systems. This is not just an act of personal liberation, moral reconciliation or decolonization as they also call it; it is a step toward contributing to the fact that future generations are not shackled by the same invisible chains that enable wars and suffering.

After over four years of Russia's full—scale war against Ukraine, the scale of suffering and the loss of countless lives remain beyond words. At the time of writing this, at least 15,000 Ukrainian civilians, including 766 children, have been killed, and the civilian death toll rose sharply in 2025. Depending on estimates, around 400,000 Ukrainian soldiers are dead or wounded.²

By intensifying attacks on Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure, Russia has deliberately worsened humanitarian conditions. During the winter of 2025–26, missile and drone strikes on power and heating facilities have left millions of Ukrainians without reliable electricity or heat, forcing civilians to endure freezing temperatures.

Russia, meanwhile, has suffered extraordinary military losses. Estimates suggest close to one million Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded, with daily losses exceeding a thousand.

And these figures represent only the minimum that can be verified. The true human cost of the war is almost certainly far higher. The final numbers may never be fully known.³

This book, for me, is not just a story of my life: it's a call to action against war, a plea for awareness of a historical burden, and a hope for healing, both for myself and for others who carry the scars of history and guilt within them. Most of all, it is an invitation to understand what we truly are facing.

In the hope that one day, humanity will triumph, and justice prevail.

Слава Україні! Glory to Ukraine!

INTRODUCTION

“I only wanted to live in peace, plant potatoes and dream!”¹

—TOVE JANSSON

On February 24, 2022, the world watched in shock as Russian troops launched a massive assault on Ukrainian territory. I was on the phone with both of my parents, trying to make sense of it all. The first wave of disbelief came from the news itself. The second, more personal shock hit me during those conversations, when I realized how differently we perceived this tragedy. No matter how long we spent on opposite sides of the border, we had never spoken a different language. That day I felt as if we did.

Julja, they said, this only means that Putin did not have another choice! Don't worry, they continued, it will be over in three days, once the Kyiv regime is overthrown.

The war was escalating. People were dying, yet they spoke without making so much as an attempt to question

the rightfulness of these actions. There was not a trace of a doubt, not even the tiniest hint of uncertainty. No empathy. Nothing. Their indifference was appalling. It made me want to throw up. Still, I tried to argue, even though the rage was blinding.

There is always a choice, I exclaimed, why would he start this insanity?

Once again, my emotional outburst was met with belittlement. As if I shouldn't even be thinking about this, because I didn't have the capacity to understand why war was so necessary.

You know nothing, they continued. He, Putin, knows everything.

As it turned out, I indeed knew nothing. For me, it was never about the justification of these actions. Rather, it was a ruthless shock: How could Russia start a war in Ukraine? Furthermore, how did I not see it coming? Why do the Russian people, my relatives, the people I grew up with, whom I worked with, not condemn it. Why do they not protest?

Later that same year, I found myself standing in an Orthodox cemetery in Helsinki. Right beside my brother's grave. Alexey was his name, but we called him softly: Alyosha.

How ironic, I thought, that in a country with such a harsh history as Russia, there are countless softer, more affectionate versions of names.

I felt tired and disoriented. I was shivering from the cold. As I looked around, I saw countless statues, crosses

and stones that carried old Russian last names. They were significantly touched by time, as many of them have been there for a century. Old, wet and moldy, they silently stared back at me.

This graveyard holds the stories of countless Russian immigrants, many of whom found refuge in Finland when their homeland failed them. Perhaps they were fleeing the Bolshevik revolution or Stalin's repressions. Maybe they held hope that this journey was just temporary, unaware that they would never return. Many of those resting there believed that Russia would one day change, that people would come back to their senses, that humanity will win. But as I stood next to my brother's grave, I realized I had no words of comfort for them. I could only wonder:

What side would you have chosen, Alyosha?

The cold wind offered nothing but silence, a feeling of deep emptiness and grief. That silence took me back to the summer of 1991. That year marked the collapse of the Soviet Union and started a new chapter in our life. It was also a breaking point that altered every life it touched. For most, it brought chaos and uncertainty. For us, it opened a door, a possibility to settle in a western country.

I was nine years old then. I remember sitting on my grandmother's lap, on the glass-enclosed terrace of their beloved dacha. It was a small wooden country house near Moscow. We were watching the news on a tiny, red-colored TV. Its crooked antenna stuck out in one direction. That terrace, my grandmother's dream project, was as flawed as the state of the country. Built hastily by shady workers, it

was crooked, and the roof leaked during heavy rainstorms. But none of that mattered to her. She had something her neighbors did not, a round glass terrace, almost like the ones she saw in Latin soap operas often shown on TV. To her, that was enough. It made her feel special, different from everyone else. This desire to have something of your own was like a forbidden fruit under the Soviet regime. For creative souls, those who longed to shape beauty around them, this restriction was even harder to bear. Only after the regime came crumbling down was she free to create.

While living in Finland, my brother and I spent every summer at that dacha. I loved it; my brother probably hated it. But what we felt never really mattered much. We had to spend every summer there until we were teenagers. It was important to keep up the tight bonds with Russia. It was a way to keep the thread of Russianness tightly wound around us, to make sure we did not drift too far into Finnish ways—or worse, become European. For a long time, we did not know what lay ahead of us, so we had to be prepared to return home.

I remember the heavy rain at the beginning of August 1991, and as we placed buckets under the leaks in the terrace roof, I overheard my grandmother mention that my parents were going to join protests in support of Boris Yeltsin. The man who was attempting to bring the Soviet reign to an end. My grandmother wasn't pleased with my parents' actions, and my grandfather, as always, said nothing. He often held his feelings to himself and spoke out rarely, but he was clearly not happy either.

It was also dangerous to participate in those demonstrations. The bridge and the square in front of the parliament, the White House, were all filled with tanks and army men. The crowds were upset and the atmosphere was tense. Nevertheless, my parents, together with thousands of other demonstrators, bravely climbed onto tanks in front of the White House, demanding change.

You can still grasp the feeling of that night in the video of the song by the rock band Scorpions, called “Wind of Change”, which was composed to mark the historic events at the beginning of the 1990s.

”An August summer night, soldiers passing by, listening to the wind of change... Take me to the magic of the moment on the glory night, where the children of tomorrow dream away, in a wind of change...”²

That wind of change stirred the air with a promise, not only in Moscow, but around the globe. The Berlin Wall had already fallen, and the Cold War had come to an end. Shortly after, the Soviet Union would cease its 70-year-long existence. This was not just a flicker of hope, but a giant step towards humanity, a belief that the future could be different. Less violent, less dividing. Young and hopeful, little did they and millions of other Russians know that, one day, their bravery would fade in the shadows of their loyalty.

We were thinking then, just as you are thinking now, Julja. We believed in democracy. It was a mistake, they would say, remembering those times.

For me, that moment felt both frightening and momentous. Deep down, I sensed that my future was somehow tied to these events. What I didn't realize was that, even then, I was bearing the heavy weight of the generations, a burden I would one day have to confront.

My parents were born and raised to serve the Soviet regime, and I was next in line to carry that burden. I was to become a true patriot, one who would readily sacrifice her own life for the regime. I was becoming the embodiment of a good Soviet citizen, a living, breathing example of ingrained obedience, fear of dissent, pride and infantilism. A human profile so typical of an autocratic system. This required loyalty—like a silent oath etched into their souls from the first breath. Like an invisible Orwellian tattoo reading: *"The state is more important than the individual."*

To my disappointment, this tattoo only became more visible with time. Even after spending a significant part of their adulthood lives in a Western country, they returned to Russia, to support authoritarianism and wars it had demanded. To them, it was never about money or fame. It is something deeper, like a personal kind of nobility, if you can call it that.

By the time they moved back to Russia, I was already deep into adulthood. I had started a family and built a good career in Finland. Yet I continued living between two realities, caught between two worldviews, torn between identities. Like a prisoner of parallel truths, I constantly shifted between who I am and what I should be. Uncertain and undefined.

Until one day, it was no longer possible.

On February 24, 2022, everything I thought I was, and everything I believed in, shattered. I could never have imagined that my own nation would invade a sovereign state, kill, torture, rape Ukrainians, and that my Russian relatives, even my parents, would not condemn it. The shame of my own ignorance forced me to reevaluate everything I knew. I realized I could no longer align myself with what I once was.

From that moment on, my life shifted, and there was no turning back.

They say the road to freedom begins with accepting the past. This may sound like a cliché, yet to me, this single sentence carries the weight of two immense words: freedom and past. These words, like a distant light at the end of a long tunnel, guided me through uncertainty on my path toward awareness.

The past is often shaped by the societal structures we grew up in, making it difficult to reinterpret or break away from. We try to learn from it, but often we fail. Yet, it seems to me that without honest confrontation of the past, the one that flows quietly into the most silent memories of generations, we cannot grow. We cannot become better.

Freedom, too, is a vast and elusive concept. It means different things to different people. Yet, at its core, freedom carries a universal message rooted in the values of truth, dignity, and solidarity. As an American historian Timothy Snyder writes in his book, *On Freedom*: “Freedom is a process of fighting with the past. It is deeply personal. No ruler

*or government can grant it. It must be claimed, understood, and lived.”*³

Throughout history, humankind has paid a high price for freedom; each of those struggles is marked by its own form of suffering. And suffered we have!

For me, it meant turning inward, confronting the shadows of my past, questioning the very foundations of who I thought I was. It meant redefining my identity, piece by piece, layer by layer. I had to set fire to the bridges that once tethered me to my roots.

For Ukrainians, the price of freedom carries a weight of an entirely different magnitude. While I wrestle with my own confusion and helplessness, they endure hell in the face of war, death, pain, destruction. Our struggles may be connected, but they cannot be measured on the same scale. Those who have never lived through the horrors of war can never fully grasp its brutal reality.

I hope that the evil caused by Russia is documented and remembered, that it is written into history, portrayed in films, and preserved in literature, so that it is never silenced. And that the resilience of the Ukrainian people receives the praise it deserves. That victory will be theirs.

After publishing this book, I know many will likely accuse me of being a Russophobe, a traitor, someone who hates their own nation. My Russian relatives will say I've lost my mind, that I've been consumed by Western propaganda and imprisoned by Western values. To them, I will be a source of shame, an outcast who no longer fits within their cultural frame.

“My mother once told me there are two ultimate betrayals in life: to go against your mother and to forsake your Motherland. By writing this book, she believes I have done both.”

JULIA MATYUKHINA

Julia Matyukhina was four years old when her family moved from Moscow to Finland in 1987. Julia's parents and entire family were loyal citizens of Soviet society, and many of them were officers in the NKVD and KGB, or otherwise party loyalists.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Matyukhin family remained in Finland. Her father was involved in founding an oil export company, which quickly made the family wealthy. However, their values remained the same: the Soviet Union was still respected, Stalin was admired, and the weak were despised. Despite her parents' strict ideological upbringing, Julia gradually adopted Western values.

This is Matyukhina's unique story of her life and extraordinary family. She shares an inside perspective on the imperialist ideology that dominates modern Russia. Matyukhina also considers whether Russians can free themselves from the burden of history and propaganda.



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