

review essay

The War for Ukraine: Strategy and Adaptation Under Fire

Mick Ryan (US Naval Institute Press, 2024), 360 pages

Downfall: Prigozhin, Putin and the New Fight for the Future of Russia

Anna Arutunyan and Mark Galeotti (Ebury, 2024), 272 pages

Essay by John Ehrman

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Editor's Note: Book reviews in Studies during the past decade-plus—most written by frequent contributor John Ehrman—have followed the growth of what he has dubbed “Putin Studies,” biographies and political analyses of the ruthless man who rose from mediocrity in the middle ranks of the KGB to become dictator of Russia.” Looking back on those reviews, a clear theme emerges: The longer Putin has been in power, the worse things have gotten for Russia, its people, his opponents, and the West. Indeed, the war in Ukraine, now nearing the end of its third year, is but one in a long line of Putin’s moves that have brought disaster to Russia and its neighbors.

The story of Putin’s rise and consolidation of power is by now well known. That is why two new books, *The War for Ukraine*, by Mick Ryan, and *Downfall*, a joint effort by Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan, that examine his rule since the start of the war in February 2022, are so

welcome. In looking at the events of the past three years they emphasize different aspects of the structure of Putin’s regime. Together they provide a well-rounded analysis of the reasons for Putin’s military and political blunders.

The War for Ukraine

Ryan, a retired Australian army general and writer on military reform and strategy, has produced a concise and highly readable analysis of the war’s lessons to date. This is a comparative study, with Ryan alternating his chapters

between Moscow and Kyiv as he works his way through Russian and Ukrainian prewar strategy, how each shifted after the start of the conflict, different leadership styles, and then learning and adaptation at the operational and

a. See endnote for list of books described as “Putin Studies.”

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tactical levels. While aimed at an audience of military professionals and intelligence analysts, Ryan's direct and concise style make it easily accessible to the lay reader. For an intelligence audience, much of what Ryan details—that Ukrainian strategy, leadership, and learning and adaptation have been superior to that of the Russians—will be familiar. Nonetheless, *The War for Ukraine* still is a thoughtful summary of developments and their implications for future conflicts.

For the purposes of understanding Putin and the nature of his rule, moreover, Ryan has useful observations that build on what previous writers have noted. In 2022, Philip Short pointed out that because Putin surrounded himself with corrupt cronies chosen for their loyalty rather than abilities, he could rely on no one else to make decisions.^a He wound up centralizing power within himself to the point where nothing could be done without his approval. Consequently, according to Short, Putin's workload increased to the point of impossibility and, overwhelmed by the volume and details, he accomplishes little. Ryan points out that the COVID years only made this problem worse, as Putin isolated himself more and more, listening only to a smaller and smaller circle of hardline yes men. (129)

In the realms of strategic and military decision-making, this led to disaster. "Putin appears to be a good opportunist but a poor strategic thinker," says Ryan. (94) His overall strategy for Ukraine rests on a flawed, to say the least, narrative in which Ukraine is not a real nation-state, Russia is entitled to imperial greatness and, therefore, no reason exists to stop Moscow from

swallowing its neighbor whenever it decides to. (19–20) Separately, while the Russian military in the decade before 2022 had undergone a decade of reform and reorganization intended to build a smaller, more professional force with Western-style technological capabilities, the military actually was understaffed, poorly trained and equipped, and rotted by corruption. With his advisers unwilling, or perhaps unable, to tell him the truth about his army or that the Ukrainians might fight back, Putin went to war with his capabilities and strategy hopelessly mismatched.

The result was that rather than the expected quick victory, Putin found himself creating a strategic disaster. In response to the invasion, neighboring Finland and Sweden joined

NATO and, as a result, Russia no longer has neutral states on its northernwestern flank. The alliance so far has given Ukraine enough weapons, training, and financial assistance to turn the war into a brutal slog that has exposed the hollowness of Russia's conventional military forces. Despite these reversals, notes Ryan, "Putin has shown no willingness to adapt his political objectives" of subjugating Ukraine and, instead, has shown himself willing to fight on, regardless of the cost. (23) (No surprise. Short pointed out that, once in a fight, Putin has never backed down.) Ryan believes that rather than admit his errors, Putin has decided the West will eventually tire and that US and NATO exhaustion will be his path to victory. Putin may be right, or this may turn out to be another miscalculation, making it a "course of action that holds significant peril for Putin." (37, 38)



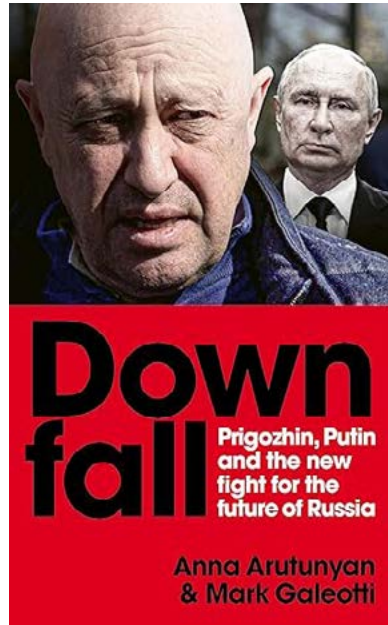
a. Philip Short, *Putin* (Henry Holt and Company, 2022).

Downfall

If Ryan gives us a strategic-level look at the consequences of the Putin regime's dysfunction, Anna Arutunyan and Mark Galeotti provide the micro-level details in *Downfall*, their biography of the late, unlamented Yevgeniy Prigozhin. Arutunyan, a Russo-American journalist, and Galeotti, a London-based historian of Russia, know how to tell a story, and Prigozhin certainly provides great material. Their well-paced and carefully documented account follows him from his youth in Leningrad through prison, his rise as a businessman in the chaos of post-Soviet St. Petersburg, and then his role as all-around servant to Putin until his fatal decision to rebel against his master.

One could almost—almost—read *Downfall* as a Greek tragedy were it not for the fact that, as high as he rose, Prigozhin never came close to fulfilling his ambitions. Born in Leningrad in 1961, Prigozhin had an unremarkable childhood but as a teenager started to run with petty criminals. In 1980, he participated in the violent robbery of a woman and soon was arrested and sentenced to 13 years in a labor camp. Prigozhin served nine years in this “serious school of life,” as he later termed it. (17) To his credit, Prigozhin did a lot of reading and became a successful small-scale entrepreneur in the black-market system of the camps. The skills he learned, along with his violent streak, prepared him well for business in post-Soviet Russia.

Returning to Leningrad in 1990, Prigozhin hustled in a number of jobs before opening a stand selling sausages in buns. The novelty of a Western-style hot dog put him on the road to success, and by the



mid-1990s he owned restaurants, grocery stores, and bars catering to newly wealthy Russians. Prigozhin made connections and became a facilitator, serving as “midwife to the emergence of a new elite,” and becoming wealthy in the process. (51) This new elite included Putin, then a rising political figure in Leningrad; the two became close associates, though not close friends.

When Putin took power in Moscow, however, Prigozhin's ambitions grew. He used his connections to turn his St. Petersburg food business into

a national operation, supplying food (often rotten, according to *Downfall*) to schools and the military. Prigozhin craved to be part of the inner circle, a power in Putin's court whose status was confirmed when Putin vacationed or played hockey with him. Still, however wealthy and connected he became, Arutunyan and Galeotti point out that Prigozhin was not part of Putin's old KGB St. Petersburg political crowd, while his criminal record, poor manners, and thuggish look meant that “he would never be good enough for the snobs of Moscow and St. Petersburg.” (82) In American terms, he was the ambitious young man from the outer boroughs, resentful of the Manhattan elite whose acceptance he craved but could not gain.

But Prigozhin was nothing if not persistent and the December 2011 protests against rigged elections gave him a new opportunity to make himself useful to Putin. He began a fresh line of business, intimidating opposition journalists and then moving on to online trolling through his new company, the Internet Research Agency (IRA). From there it was a short step to using the IRA for anti-US propaganda and

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election meddling. The IRA was Prigozhin's initiative, according to Aruntunyan and Galleotti, but it further strengthened his alliance with Putin—"the more reviled Prigozhin was in Washington, the higher his stock in Moscow." (95)

This background explains Prigozhin's next step in his project of ingratiation, the founding of the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC). The Kremlin started using PMCs in 2012, and in 2014 called on Prigozhin to create one to help with its operations in eastern Ukraine. Wagner grew quickly and deployed to Syria and Africa, providing Putin with another useful, profitable, and deniable tool. But for Prigozhin himself, Wagner's success became fatal. In Syria, write Aruntunyan and Galleotti, "it was too much to watch someone else take the credit" for Wagner's performance. Simmering with resentment but unable to confront Putin directly, Prigozhin took out his frustration on Defense Minister Shoygu and Chief of Staff Gerasimov. (123)

Then came the invasion of Ukraine. When the Russian campaign was near collapse in the spring of 2022, it was Wagner—with Prigozhin hastily expanding its ranks by recruiting in Russian prisons—that came to the rescue. Prigozhin saw himself as having saved "the regular military ... from the war into which they had blundered." He was made a Hero of the Russian Federation and seemed to be on the verge of realizing his dreams. (159) But as the Russian army stabilized the front and began to recover from

the early disasters, Prigozhin found his usefulness declining. When his soldiers were chewed up in World War I-style assaults, Prigozhin's years of resentment exploded into a series of increasingly bitter public denunciations of Shoygu, Gerasimov, and finally and unforgivably, Putin and the war itself. The war, he said in May 2023, was started to denazify Ukraine, "but we ended up legitimizing Ukraine. We've made Ukraine into a nation known all over the world. As for demilitarization ... Fuck knows how, but we've militarized Ukraine." (174)

Prigozhin had overstepped his bounds, and his downfall was swift. In June 2023, Shoygu ordered that all mercenary forces come under Defense Ministry authority. Prigozhin knew that this would be the end of his empire, but Putin would not intervene. Prigozhin then sent Wagner forces marching toward Moscow not to depose Putin, as Aruntunyan and Galleotti point out, but instead to pressure him to rescind Shoygu's order. Putin, after initially dithering, stood firm and it was Prigozhin who had to back down and ask for a face-saving deal. But no one expected it to last. "In six months Prigozhin will either be dead or there will be a second coup," predicted investigative journalist Christo Grozev in early August.^a Grozev was off only on his timing—Prigozhin died on 23 August, two months from the date of his rebellion, when the FSB bombed the jet taking him from Moscow to St. Petersburg.

In Sum

One wishes that Aruntunyan, Galleotti, and Ryan had collaborated to write one book rather than two. As good a job as Ryan does in pointing out Putin's flaws as a strategist, Aruntunyan and Galleotti provide

a more useful framework for understanding why his regime performs so poorly overall. In their view, nothing in Russia really unfolds according to any sort of plan. Complementing Short's observations, they

a. Edward Luce, "Bellingcat's Christo Grozev: 'Prigozhin will either be dead or there will be a second coup'" in *Financial Times*, August 11, 2023 (in <https://www.ft.com/content/03f220e1-6a7e-4850-bf4e-4b0f521d8f8c>)

term Putin's regime an "adocracy," in which state functions are carried out not by established institutions run by experienced administrators, but by individuals and nonstate groups acting on spur-of-the-moment orders from the top. (112) It is, they write, a weak and disorganized regime with "scrabbling opportunists ... doing whatever the Kremlin wants doing today and trying to predict what it will need tomorrow." (208) They compete nonstop for the dictator's favor, knowing that none of them ever are secure in their positions. With subordinates like that, it's small wonder Putin is unable to formulate workable strategy.

That said, Ryan, Aruntunyan and Galleotti are too optimistic about this ramshackle system's life expectancy. Just as Ryan sees Putin as making additional, possibly fatal, miscalculations, Aruntunyan and

Galleotti argue that Prigozhin's mutiny and subsequent murder exposed the "hollowness of an aging regime that didn't believe anything," and imply it won't last much longer. (213) Maybe we'll be lucky, and this will turn out to be the case, but the examples of Cuba and North Korea show that isolated leaders atop brittle regimes can go on a lot longer than usually expected.

Putin is 72 years old as of this writing and could easily soldier on for another decade or more. As unfortunate as that would be, it means that policymakers will continue to need insightful analysis to help them understand the Russian dictator. It will be a long time before we have definitive accounts of Putin's life and rule but in the meantime, as we look for guides to dealing with him, books like *The War for Ukraine and Downfall* will be helpful contributions to such work. ■

Bibliographic Note: Following is the body of literature the author described as "Putin Studies" in the introduction—listed in order of publication:

Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Riverhead, 2012); reviewed in *Studies* 57, No. 4 (December 2013).

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Brookings Institution Press, 2012); reviewed in *Studies* 57, No. 4 (December 2013).

Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (Riverhead, 2017); reviewed in *Studies* 62, No. 2 (June 2018).

Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (Oxford, 2018); reviewed in *Studies* 62, No. 2 (June 2018).

Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020); two reviews in *Studies* 64, No. 4 (2020).

David Shimer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2020); reviewed in *Studies* 64, No. 4 (December 2020).

Philip Short, *Putin* (Henry Holt and Company, 2022); reviewed in *Studies* 66, No. 4 (December 2022). ■