

Intelligence in Public Media

Putin

Philip Short (Henry Holt and Company, 2022), 854 pages, notes, index.

Reviewed by J.E. Leonardson

Who is Vladimir Putin? It may seem a strange question at this date, as the KGB officer-cum-dictator never has been reticent about describing his geopolitical views and plans while, during his more than two decades in power, the number of dead opponents at home and in exile has grown almost as fast as the pile of books seeking to explain him.^a Still, despite the large number of insightful Putin studies by scholars and journalists, Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and his escalating brutality since then somehow have taken many by surprise, especially in Western Europe. Sadly, it seems the need still exists for an updated, thorough explanation of what drives the man.

This is the gap that Philip Short seeks to fill in his new biography, *Putin*. Make no mistake: at 670 pages of text and another couple hundred of notes and references, this cinder block of a book is the longest and most detailed biography of Putin to date, as well as the first to include the early stages of the Ukraine war. It is not for the weak. Beyond its physical heft, *Putin* dives deep into the details not just of its subject's life story but also of recent Russian political history and personalities, as well as Moscow's relations with the United States and the West. Short, a British journalist and author of biographies of Mao and Pol Pot, writes clearly and as concisely as his topic allows, but the complexity and detail make for slow going. Reading *Putin* takes commitment.

Nonetheless, *Putin* is worth the effort. Much of the ground Short covers is, not surprisingly, well-trod, and the basic story of Putin's journey from poverty in postwar Leningrad to the Kremlin has been told many times. But unlike some who have recounted Putin's rise to power, such as Masha Gessen and Catherine Belton, Short doesn't write with outraged passion. His is a cool, dispassionate approach, more like that of Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy in *Mr. Putin*.

Critical to understanding Putin, Short says, is realizing that since his childhood and youth in Leningrad he has displayed two distinct, intertwined characteristics. The first is that Putin never, ever has shied away from a fight. Whether on the streets or the schoolyard, "whenever a fight broke out, Putin was the first to pile in," and no matter the odds, he fought to the end. (28) Related to that was his demand for respect, which has carried through to adulthood. "Respect was fundamental for Putin," writes Short. "Whether for himself as a boy...or for Russia as a great power, the need to be respected was a constant principle all his life." (194) These traits combined, moreover, to make the young Putin a risk taker "who refused to be bound by the same rules as everyone else." (47)

The teenage Putin channeled his aggressions into martial arts training and then, after university, his unemotional calculations of risk made him an ideal candidate for the KGB. Short thus gives us a Putin who, even if he no longer brawls on the streets, hasn't changed a bit. "Anyone who insults Russia won't be long for this world," Short quotes him as saying soon after he became president. (293) Since then, any number of oligarchs, dissidents, Chechens, Syrians, Georgians, and now Ukrainians have learned that he always seeks to crush his opponents and never backs down once he has taken his stance. (293)

With this as the foundation of his analysis, Short goes on to chronicle Putin's rise in the 1990s from functionary in Leningrad to the presidency of Russia, and then on to the gradual consolidation of almost total power. This is a complex tale, filled with detail and subtleties, and all but the most determined readers will skim parts of it. Short's bottom line, however, is that Putin is far from a cartoon villain. Rather, he is a shrewd and cunning operator, working relentlessly toward his goal of restoring Russian pride and power. At home, "Putin's ultimate goal was to

a. For a sampling, see Lillia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (2003); Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face*, (2012); Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin* (2012); Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy* (2014); Catherine Belton, *Putin's People* (2020); and Richard Sakwa, *The Putin Paradox* (2020).

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refashion the body politic, to control the regional satrapies and the main political parties and, above all, the central apparatus of power.” This, in turn, required deft maneuvering in a system unforgiving of failure and, “to a large extent he succeeded,” says Short. (458–59) Here is the Putin who brought order from the chaos of the 1990s, tamed the oligarchs, suppressed the Chechen rebellion and, by the late 2010s, had doubled the size of the economy. Abroad he reasserted Moscow’s role in global affairs by taking advantage of opportunities in Georgia and Syria to make sure the West no longer could ignore Russian interests, as he believed it had in Eastern Europe and the Balkans after the Soviet collapse.

So far, so ordinary, at least as strongmen go. Had this been the extent of Putin’s achievements, he might be seen as a run-of-the-mill dictator, rather like Franco or the pre-Ethiopia Mussolini—thuggish, but not an outcast. Instead, however, Putin set about developing an ideology to support his power and, as Short details, it was one that gradually became harsher and more reactionary. Russia’s history meant that Putin could not use an updated Communism or, because the turmoil of the 1990s had done much to discredit Western-style democracy in the eyes of Russians, anything that seemed too similar to Western liberalism. Thus, while Putin made soothing statements early in his tenure with the idea that Russia could become a “normal democratic society,” accepted by the West, what truly appealed to him was the idea that what Russia needed “was not a state ideology but ‘an organic unification of universal human values with the traditional values of Russia,’ first and foremost patriotism and belief in the country’s greatness.” (294, 442) To Western ears this may sound like empty platitudes, but Short notes how it appeals to Russian social and cultural conservatism, much as defenses of states’ rights or the Progressive tradition resonate with Americans.

As relations with the West gradually declined, Putin’s views hardened. Starting in the mid-2000s, he began to read the political philosopher Ivan Ilyin, a refugee from the Bolshevik Revolution who flirted with fascism in the 1930s and wrote of Russia’s special mission in the world. Going forward, Putin decided, Russia would have a unique Eurasian identity “under the banner of Russian culture and Orthodoxy...guided by a strong centralized power.” (445) Putin went further in the 2010s, proclaiming Russia to be a “civilizational state, bonded together by the Russian people, Russian language and Russian

culture...which unites us and prevents us dissolving into this diverse world.” (549) From this flowed an embrace of Orthodoxy, accompanied by a vehement rejection of Western notions of tolerance and a growing conviction that Western talk of human rights and democracy was merely a cover for provoking color revolutions that would destroy Russian civilization. These ideological threads came together in Ukraine, which led Putin to become obsessed with the idea that the United States and the West were using events in Kyiv as another front for attacking Russia.

While this might hold domestic political appeal, Short makes clear that Putinism isn’t much of a guide for day-to-day governance. In fact, his centralized team is a collection of corrupt mediocrities and incompetents, cronies appointed for loyalty rather than ability and kept on so as not to risk alienating powerful allies. Unable and unwilling to hold his subordinates responsible for their poor performances, Putin shuffles them from job to job; only in particularly egregious cases has he sent a few off to retirements, their landings made comfortable by stolen fortunes. Meanwhile, Putin has concentrated power in himself to the extent that “nothing [can] happen unless he personally [signs] off on it,” thus leaving him to spend his days immersed in minutiae but accomplishing little. (459) Short leaves no doubt that Putin has created a hollow regime, unable to do much more than stay in power for its own sake.

This would matter little were it not for the real-world catastrophe that has resulted from the regime’s ossification, of which Short’s account of Putin’s relationship with the military is emblematic. When the submarine *Kursk* sank in August 2000, the military leadership assured Putin that all was under control and, as the truth emerged, Short says that he was shocked to learn that they had lied to him. This revelation, coming on the heels of the army’s disastrous performance in Chechnya, led Putin to approve a complete overhaul of the military, with the aim of turning it into a modern, Western-style professional force. Unfortunately, corruption and bureaucratic resistance made the reform effort a failure—something that became painfully apparent in the war with Georgia in 2008. Another decade of reform and modernization followed, costing additional billions of dollars, only to produce a Potemkin military that has failed miserably in Ukraine. It should be no surprise, moreover, that almost a year into

the war, neither the defense minister nor the chief of the general staff has been fired.

Short's analysis has stirred some controversy. When *Putin* appeared in Britain and then, a few weeks later, in the United States, some reviewers accused Short of excusing much of Putin's behavior. Indeed, as he sets out the story of Putin's actions, Short bluntly summarizes what he sees as various Western missteps—failing to consider how Russia would view the eastward expansion of NATO; confused and inadequate responses to his moves in Georgia and Syria; and casual statements about Ukraine possibly joining NATO—that either angered Putin or reinforced his conviction that the West would stop at nothing to destroy Russia. Short also notes that not all assumptions about Putin's culpability for various crimes have been proven; whether he was responsible for the apartment bombings and Boris Nemtsov's murder, for example, still is uncertain. The criticisms of Short,

however, confuse excuses with carefully considered judgments. The United States and its partners made decisions and issued statements that looked very different in Moscow than they were intended to in Washington and Brussels, and Short is right to point out how these affected Putin. Nowhere does Short say that Putin's actions, especially in Ukraine, have been justified, only that context makes them more comprehensible.

Putin is one of those books that comes along at just the right moment. While much of what Short has to say is familiar, his contribution to Putin studies is to show how Putin's personality and ideology have brought him to grief in Ukraine and, perhaps, Europe and the United States to the brink of war with Russia. This is not the end of the story, of course, and how it will end is anyone's guess. But at least a reader of *Putin* will have a solid understanding of how we got there.



The reviewer: J.E. Leonardson is the pen name of a CIA analyst.

