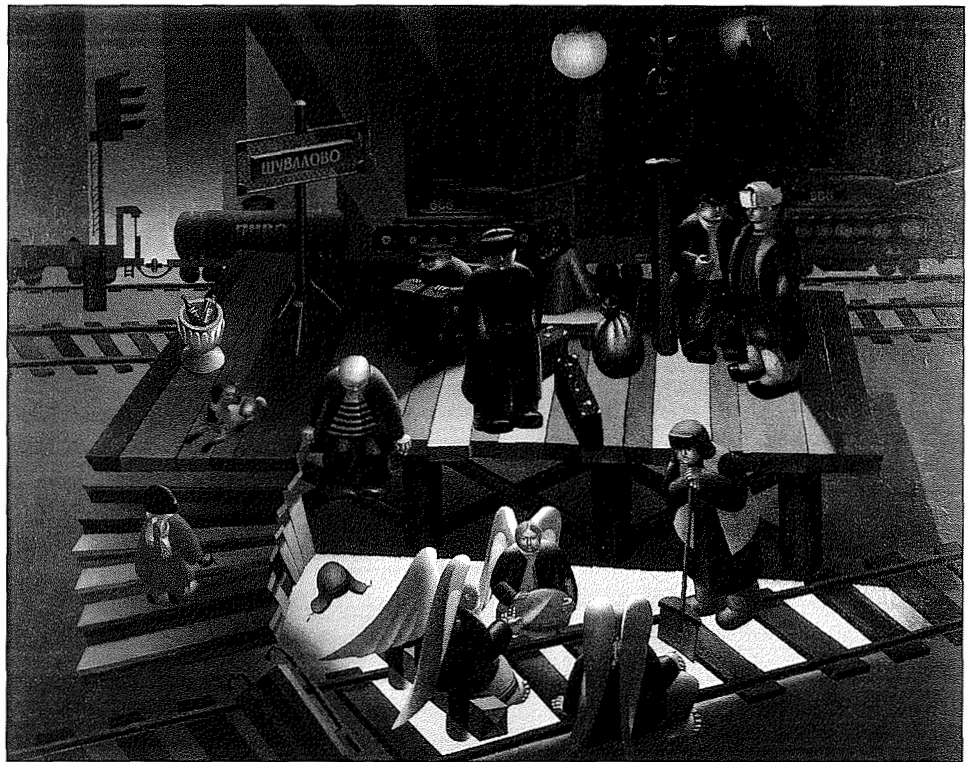


THE ONCE AND FUTURE RUSSIA

Who could have imagined a dozen years ago that the Soviet Union would vanish, or that an independent Russia would choose its second president at the polls? Yet Russia's March election has provoked international consternation and concern rather than celebration. The victor, Vladimir Putin, has a dark history and rhetoric to match. The nine years since the end of communist rule have brought welcome freedoms for Russia but much hardship and civic discord, as well as war. Our contributors assess the Yeltsin years and peer into the Russian future.



Shuvalovo Station (1978), by Vladimir Ovchinnikov

- 32 & 37 *Amy Knight and Blair Ruble on the two worlds of Vladimir Putin*
42 *Michael McFaul appraises Boris Yeltsin's successes and failures*
48 *Nina Tumarkin recalls the troubled history of Russian moral renewal*
59 *Alexei Pimenov argues that reform was always a mirage*

The Two Worlds of Vladimir Putin

I. The KGB

by Amy Knight

I was introduced to Vladimir Putin's KGB in the summer of 1981. I was in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), the city where he was born and spent much of his career before his improbable rise to Russia's presidency. That summer I was visiting as a tourist more interested in the city's splendid architecture and museums than in bucking the system as I had as a student traveler in 1967. Fourteen years had not changed the rule: Forging acquaintances with local Russians was strictly out of bounds. Foreigners, especially Russian speakers like me, were still cordoned off from contacts with ordinary Russians by the efficient operations of Intourist and the infamous *dezhumye*, the elderly ladies who were positioned on every hotel floor to monitor the comings and goings of guests. So it was very odd when an unusually friendly Russian man approached me as I sat in the lobby of my hotel, right under the watchful eyes of Intourist, and began earnestly telling me about the woes of Soviet life and expressing sympathy for American ideals. It took a while before I realized what was going on. I was the target of an entrapment effort. Shaken, I quickly broke off the conversation and hurried away.

My new "acquaintance" was doubtless an employee of the local branch of the KGB. Part of his job was to hang around hotels spying on visiting foreigners and trying to single out a few—as in my case, apparently—who could be more directly exploited. This was the kind of elevated activity Vladimir Putin did during the nine years he worked for the Leningrad KGB, from 1975 to 1984. (For all I know, the man in the Hotel Moskva's lobby may have been Putin, who has been aptly described as "professionally nondescript.") It is hard to imagine what people like Putin felt when they went through daily routines such as this, but I will never forget my own reaction. I felt like going up to my room and taking a long shower. I had come face to face with an organization I knew chiefly in the abstract from reading the samizdat writings of Soviet dissidents whose lives had been destroyed by just such mundane KGB functionaries. What came to mind



“Red on the Inside,” the Russian newsweekly Itogi screamed in January. The image of Vladimir Putin is a composite photo.

was Hannah Arendt’s phrase about the Nazi regime—the banality of evil.

Now, with the political ascendancy of Vladimir Putin, that banal evil has reached the summit of power in the Kremlin—a situation that should cause more concern to U.S. policymakers than it apparently does. At home, journalists and political pundits scour the past of American presidential contenders to see if they have smoked marijuana, dodged the draft, or committed adultery, but the background of

the new Russian leader is, policymakers tell us, irrelevant. The important thing is that Putin is “someone we can do business with.” It is not hard to understand the rationale behind this approach. But if you judge Putin by his past, it does not bode well for the future of Russian democracy or for Russia’s relations with the West.

Contrary to the myth generated by the Kremlin and perpetuated by the Western news media, many authoritative sources agree that Putin was never a spy of the sort so romantically depicted by John le Carré—a sophisticated, suave cynic who hobnobs in Western diplomatic circles abroad, sipping cognac in elegant, book-lined rooms. If such a person existed, he might conceivably have realized that the Soviet system was a sham and warmed to the democratic ways of the West. (The Kremlin exploited a similar myth when former KGB head Yuri Andropov came to power in 1982, suggesting that he was a jazz-loving Western-style sophisticate.) But the spymaster group was an old-boy elite to which Putin, the son of a factory worker, had no entrée. When Putin was hired by the KGB after finishing law school in Leningrad in 1975—a training ground for police and administrators, not foreign intelligence officers—he was sent to its Leningrad branch rather than a more desirable foreign post.

According to former KGB spy Oleg Kalugin, who was banished to Leningrad in 1980 by disapproving superiors, the local office was a backwater. As he recalled in his 1994 memoir, "Our 3,000-person KGB office in Leningrad continued to harass dissidents and ordinary citizens, as well as to hunt futilely for spies. But I can truly say that nearly all of what we did was useless. . . . In the twenty years before my arrival in Leningrad, the local KGB hadn't caught one spy, despite the expenditure of millions of rubles and tens of thousands of man-hours." As a low-level cog in this machine of repression and deceit, Putin, as Kalugin has since put it, was a "nobody."

After a year of study at the KGB's Red Banner Institute of Intelligence in Moscow, Putin finally won a stint abroad in 1985. But he was sent to Soviet-controlled East Germany, not the West, and, contrary to many press reports that now suggest he was engaged in high-level espionage, he had the same sort of job he had in Leningrad. Working in close cooperation with the Stasi, Putin spied on German and Soviet citizens and recruited informers. Not very lofty work, by any stretch of the imagination.

Putin, who speaks fluent German, appears to have been heavily influenced by his five-year immersion in Stasi culture. In *The File: A Personal History* (1997), journalist Timothy Garton Ash estimates that by 1988, when Putin was in East Germany, the Stasi had more than 90,000 employees and some 170,000 collaborators. In other words, at least one out of every 50 adult East Germans was directly connected with the secret police. The East German police state, Garton Ash observes, was "less brutal than the Third Reich, to be sure, far less damaging to its neighbors, and not genocidal, but more quietly all-pervasive in its domestic control."

Garton Ash sees a strong parallel between the Stasi mentality and that of the Nazis. Both appealed to "secondary virtues" such as discipline, hard work, and loyalty, while completely ignoring the "systemic wrong" of the totalitarian state they served. Putin's words since his rise to prominence certainly fit the pattern Garton Ash describes. The new president speaks of reviving the "moral fiber" of the Russian people and of "exterminating" the Chechens in the same breath. He emphasizes the need for honest leadership, yet he also extols the accomplishments of the KGB—which was not only morally corrupt, we now know, but riddled with more ordinary corruption as well.

When the collapse of communism in East Germany in 1989 brought his career there to an end, Putin returned home to Leningrad. He formally retired from the KGB in 1991, going to work for the city's mayor, Anatoly Sobchak. Some say that he continued spying for the security services. Eventually, Boris Yeltsin's cronies in St. Petersburg, part of a far-flung clan of often corrupt oligarchs, tapped him for service in the president's administration in Moscow. The rest of Putin's prepresidential résumé is straightforward. In

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They called it victory: The Russian flag rises over the Chechen capital of Grozny in March.

1998, Yeltsin, under fire for the rampant corruption in his regime and for the bungled first war in Chechnya of 1994–96, named Putin chief of Russia’s domestic security agency, the Federal Security Service (FSB). When the Russian parliament was about to impeach Yeltsin on a variety of charges, he gave Putin the additional job of heading the president’s Security Council, which oversees the entire security and defense apparatus. Putin pulled out all the stops for Yeltsin, bullying the parliament with a threatening speech and using an embarrassing videotape to discredit the Russian prosecutor-general, who was bent on the prosecution of a Yeltsin crony. Putin’s good works were rewarded last year when Yeltsin named him prime minister and then made him acting president when he stepped down on December 31. He was elected president in March without ever having held elective office.

How could the Russian people accept as their leader a dyed-in-the-wool KGB apparatchik with unexceptional credentials? Frightened by the specter of Chechen terrorism and fed up with Yeltsin’s dysfunctional “democracy,”

Russians have embraced Putin because he pressed hard in the war against Chechnya and built an image as a tough, aggressive, anti-Western superpatriot. Human rights activist Sergei Kovalev aptly summed up the current attitude of his fellow Russians in a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*: “We don’t want to return to communism, but we’re fed up with your democracy, your freedom, your human rights. What we want is order.”

Putin did not come to power alone. He is part of a cohort of professionals from the Russian security services who have used the support of Yeltsin and corrupt oligarchs such as business tycoon Boris Berezovsky and former Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais to infiltrate the Kremlin. Early in his presidency, Yeltsin began courting the security services and building up their powers because he needed them, with their investigative and surveillance capabilities and their elite troop units, for support in his political battles. Before long, Yeltsin was surrounded by former KGB officials, and they came to play a prominent role in determining both domestic and foreign policy. It is hardly a coincidence that the last three Russian prime ministers hailed from the KGB and its successor organizations. If Putin had not been the designated successor to Yeltsin, it would have been someone very much like him—an iron-fisted, tough-talking former KGB officer who promised to restore law and order by cracking down on criminals. (Not members of the Yeltsin clan, of course, just the Chechens and others, such as journalists, who embarrass the Kremlin.)

Have Russians forgotten the heavy price they paid for “law and order” and national pride in the heyday of the KGB: no meaningful elections, no freedom of the press, and no ability to travel freely or exercise religious beliefs? To be sure, Russia has not yet turned back the clock to the Soviet period, but the signs of regression are everywhere: the brutal onslaught against the Chechens, the harassment and arrest of journalists who are critical of the government, and the growing state control over the news media. This should surprise no one. Why expect people who spent most of their careers callously abusing human rights suddenly to stop, especially in the chaotic and ruthless world of Russian politics?

As Aleksandr Nikitin, the outspoken environmentalist who was arrested on charges of treason in 1996 for exposing the Russian Navy’s harmful nuclear dumping practices, observes: “There is no such thing as an ex-KGB employee, just as there is no such thing as an ex-German shepherd.” Nikitin, whose arrest and prosecution were orchestrated by Putin’s long-time Leningrad colleague, Viktor Cherkesov, was unexpectedly acquitted at the end of December. The man who persecuted him for more than two years, however, is now second in command of the FSB.

The greatest risk for Russia’s future will come if and when ordinary Russians become disenchanted with Putin. Then he and his allies may decide that courting public opinion is simply more trouble than it’s worth

and fall back on the familiar methods of the security services. Putin has already placed a number of former KGB colleagues in high positions. In addition to Cherkesov, for example, the new chief of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, went to law school with Putin and served with him in the Leningrad KGB. The head of the president's Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, graduated with Putin from the KGB's Red Banner Institute.

Given Russia's increasingly belligerent anti-Westernism, the United States and other Western governments can do little in the short run to influence events in Russia directly. But by acknowledging the implications of having another former KGB apparatchik as Russia's president, U.S. policymakers would at least avoid giving an impression of naiveté that would encourage the Kremlin to be even less inhibited about flouting world opinion than it already is. The fact that almost a decade after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991 someone like Putin could rise to the top of the political leadership in Russia is a grim reminder that the legacies of police states die hard. □

II. Leningrad

by Blair A. Ruble

More than three months after Boris Yeltsin startled the world by resigning in favor of Vladimir Putin, Western analysts are still groping for insights into the new Russian president. They debate the significance of his KGB past and his role in St. Petersburg's democratic movement during the 1990s. They wonder what the Russian war in Chechnya tells us about the heart and mind of the man who prosecuted it while serving as Yeltsin's prime minister. In truth, we are not likely to learn enough about the inscrutable Mr. Putin to predict what he will do as Russia's president. Yet one important and neglected piece in the puzzle of his character undoubtedly resides in St. Petersburg, where he was born and spent many of his politically formative years.

During those years, two distinct realities coexisted within the city's official boundaries. The first, and by far the weaker, was that of the historic city center and the pre-revolutionary values it embodied. This community was known in unofficial shorthand as "Peter." Around it in the years after World War II grew a new Soviet industrial city, representing all the values of the Soviet Union. This sprawling urban center was rightly known in local parlance by the city's official name, "Leningrad."