

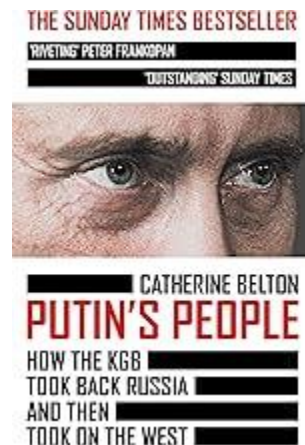
Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and then Took on the West

Catherine Belton

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Years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it seems like Vladimir Putin is and has always been the implacable enemy of the west – apart perhaps from patsies Donald Trump and MPs of the racist Reform UK party. Yet this need not have been the case. There have been moments since the fall of the Soviet Union that Russia could have been brought into a much more amenable framework. For example, after the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001, Putin was the first world leader to call President George W Bush to express his condolences and then, against the advice of his own defence minister, allowed US forces to have access to Russia's Central Asian bases so as to launch attacks against Afghanistan (pp.188-9). However, these moments slipped away and, instead, a sense of grievance has come to grip much of the Russian executive power. As a result, we now witness apparently relentless assaults against the west, especially in the cybersphere, wherein Russian actors have demonstrated the ability to interfere in democratic elections such as for the US presidency and the EU referendum in the UK. Although Russia is a large and complex country with a multitude of different interests, it appears that they have all or mostly all been united into a coherent front under the leadership of Putin. How this has happened is the story Catherine Belton has chosen for this book and it is one she does with distinction and an abundant amount of detailed discussion. The result is very convincing.

Putin's rise is brutal: his enemies are brushed aside or crushed and his continually evolving coalition of interests, joining financiers with organized criminals, can help achieve his goals. Notwithstanding his grander goals, such as the recreation of the Russian Empire and the supposed denazification of Ukraine, Belton identifies a psychological issue that resulted from his past that may in part explain his subsequent actions:

“It was a telling indication of Putin's mindset, of how quick he would be to take offence at perceived slights in the years to come ... he ... had climbed to the top from a background of poverty, from the back streets of Leningrad, where he'd had to fight to win respect. A chip on his shoulder, the mark of an inferiority complex, was always there (p.186).”

It is, of course, necessary to support this kind of assertion with evidence and so the relation of his early life, his work for the KGB and the creation of his inner circle (*siloviki*) from that period is of crucial

importance. His role in the war in Chechnya shows him as a dynamic leader who could speak the language of his people and share their horror of terrorist attacks (p.157). It marked a significant difference from the chaos of the preceding Yeltsin years, one which might see Russia restored to its rightful position among the forefront of the company of nations. Although not discussed so much today, it is important to remember that the economies of the former members of the Soviet Union, particularly Russia, were devastated by the structural adjustment policies inflicted by the International Monetary Fund at a time of triumphalism in the west. These caused "... hyper-inflation, falling standards of living, and tumbling output." The program of privatization, meanwhile "... has in practice most usually enriched directors and managers rather than workers, while failing to provide incentives for transforming production (Burawoy & Krotov, 1993)."

As people on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, suffered as a result, the rupture between the state and its people was completed. The hard march of capitalism through the country made opportunities for those who had the means, the determination and the ruthlessness to seize them. In essence, an oligarchy emerged with a central executive able to use its constituent parts for his own purposes. A psychological flaw and a revanchist campaign have already been mentioned but these alone do not explain Putin's subsequent career: his ascension must be accompanied by the destruction of his enemies. When these are domestic, they can be persecuted through the means of the legal system or else become the victims of apparently accidental violence. When they are from elsewhere, then they can be suborned through a combination of embroilment in investment opportunities, establishment of complex personal relationships and the indulgence of personal appetites. Which leads to the most well-known example of this process, the current president of the USA.

The KGB's interest in Trump has been longstanding and he was approached as early as 1987 to visit Moscow, when the prospect of a Trump Tower Moscow was first dangled in front of his eyes (and it would continue to be dangled without resolution in the years thereafter). They thought they had their man then (p.477) because of the combination of greed, the desire to be seen to be important and his evident interest in Slavic women. Belton describes Trump after this initial contact as living in a world in which "... a network of ... money men and intelligence operatives surrounded him (p.477)." It is certainly the case that Trump's electoral victory delighted the Putin regime, who openly celebrated because they knew that they had at least some control over him and because his chaotic incompetence and divisive policies would damage the USA and, indeed, the rules-based multilateral system of globalization that had done so much to further American interests. Trump, for example:

"... actively encouraged Britain's prime minister Theresa May – and then her successor Boris Johnson – to deepen the UK's split from Europe, threatening to withhold a trade agreement with the US unless this did so (p.482)."

Belton stops short of claiming that Trump is actively and consciously working for the Russians but his actions betray his intentions. As Humbert Wolfe said of bribing a British journalist, "... seeing what the man will do unbribed, there's no occasion to."

It is clear that Belton has had exceptional access to sources often very close to the action. She uses the results well and presents what seems to be a comprehensive account of the career of Putin and his inner circle. There is less interest in trying to draw conclusions or implications, other than that the KGB has remained prevalent throughout the country and have returned to power as a result of routing the would-be reformers. It has appeared 30 years before that Russia had been "... on a new market path towards global integration," but that those who had been leading the way were either quickly compromised or it was revealed that they had been working for the KGB all along (pp.499-500). If this is the case, then what about the central role of Putin? Is he relegated to being the instrument of a much bigger power

that rarely takes the limelight? Belton's argument is that he has been central to recreating a new police state that now serves him.

References

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John Walsh, Krirk University