

# **PUTIN'S LABYRINTH**



**Steve LeVine**



**R A N D O M   H O U S E**

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# PUTIN'S LABYRINTH

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*Spies, Murder, and the Dark Heart  
of the New Russia*

Steve LeVine

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ALSO BY STEVE LEVINE

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*For Dolores LeVine  
and for  
Avery LeVine*

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## PREFACE

Just before midnight on November 1, 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian intelligence agent living in political exile in London, awoke terribly sick. Within days, a ghastly photograph of his wasted body in a hospital bed shocked the world. Three weeks later, he was dead. He had been poisoned by polonium-210, a radioactive isotope that investigators believed had been slipped into his beverage.

The forty-three-year-old Litvinenko had fled his native country with his wife and six-year-old son six years earlier. He was an unrelenting and harsh critic of President Vladimir Putin and the methods of Russia's intelligence apparatus, which he labeled immoral.

In life, Litvinenko had been only a foot soldier in the opposition to Putin, and his outbursts were often dismissed by journalists, politicians, and researchers. But his death became an international sensation, and many suspected the president's involvement. The poisoning of Litvinenko riveted attention on Russia's visible slide toward autocratic rule and its increasingly bellicose attitude toward the West, even as Russia's economy was booming, thanks to the surging value of its energy exports, and Putin was seeking to restore his nation's lost stature after the Soviet collapse.

I could find no precedent for an assassination of this type. Who was responsible? I traveled to Moscow to sort through the circumstances of his death. My investigation gradually widened to encompass what seemed to be an epidemic of assassinations and bloodletting, both inside and outside the country.

I came to view Litvinenko's assassination—and the spectacular use of polonium to kill him— emblematic of the dark turn that Russia had taken under Putin's rule.

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# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about death in Russia.

The world is familiar with Russia's long history of murderous rulers and ruthless assassins. But even now, a decade into the twenty-first century, brutality and violent death is so ordinary that it is usually ignored by all but the victims themselves, their families, and their friends.

After sixteen years of living in or visiting the former Soviet Union, I have come to believe that Russia's acquiescence to this bloody state of affairs sets it apart from other nations that call themselves civilized. I realize this is a harsh judgment, and can only say that it was not hastily reached.

When I first arrived in the country after three years of reporting in Pakistan and Afghanistan, I was mainly felt awe. Russia's enormous size, remarkable history, and rich language wholly engaged me. I was assigned to cover territories on the fringe of the old Russian empire—Georgia, Armenia, Central Asia, the northern Caucasus mountain regions of Chechnya and Ingushetia. I maintained a Moscow apartment as a base of operations.

There were discordant notes from the outset. Resident foreigners and a disgruntled minority of Russians said the country was meddling beyond its borders—provoking wars in the Caucasus, blocking oil deals and energy pipelines in Central Asia, and generally working to preserve Moscow's influence in the neighboring republics that comprised the former Soviet Union. At first, these complaints seemed unfounded; yes, Russia was seeking to reinvent and perhaps enrich itself, but it was not attempting to reestablish an empire. I would soon be disabused of this somewhat benign view.

In December 1994, a number of foreign journalists, including myself, gathered in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. We were Americans, Britons, French, Russians, Azeris, and Georgians, including our translators and drivers. I was accompanied by my Georgian driver, Yura Bekauri, and assistant Nana Kiknadze.

We headquartered in an inn that became known as the French Hotel and waited for the Russian military to attack the city. Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin, and his defense minister, Pavel Grachev, had threatened just such an assault—a show of force to quell the region's pretenses of independence.

Russia and the region of Chechnya had been antagonists for hundreds of years. They fought a long guerrilla war in the nineteenth century before Chechnya was subjugated. In the next century, the Chechens chafed under Soviet rule, and in 1944 Stalin, who thought they were siding with the Nazis, deported them en masse to Kazakhstan. Nikita Khrushchev allowed them to return, and when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the Chechens saw an opportunity at last for independence. The

behaved as though they were governing an autonomous land. That led to Yeltsin's threat three years later to compel the Chechens to return to Russia's fold.

Yeltsin had set a deadline of December 12 for all foreigners to be out of Grozny. Journalists were separately warned that Russia could no longer assure our safety, but there was nothing about the notification that I construed as threatening. Western correspondents had heard similar cautions in other war zones, and we were unworried. But there was a palpable rumble among the Georgians in our group. Two or three Georgian drivers, Yura among them, began packing their cars. They intended to leave, and quickly. "You don't know what the Russians can do," Yura replied when I protested.

Why was Yura, an ordinarily unflappable man, so agitated? His behavior seemed unreasonable, but it forced me to reassess the situation. For one thing, his panic was clearly genuine. For another, he intended to take the car with him, which would leave us without personal transport in a war zone.

We left with him—Nana, my colleague Carlotta Gall, then of *The Moscow Times*, and I. As we drove away, I wondered how to explain to my editor that I had left the scene of a story. We traveled east, and a half-hour later Yura drove into a gas station and employed his usual magic. He struck up a friendship with another motorist, who invited all of us to eat and stay the night at his home in the city of Gudermes.

So began a several-months-long discovery of what was behind Yura's terror.

I returned to Grozny in January, in time to witness the main Russian assault for *The Washington Post* and its sister publication *Newsweek*. In my absence, the dispatches of my colleagues Anatol Lieven and Bill Gasperini, who had stayed behind, had kept me abreast of events there. Now Gasperini told me how he had been pursued by a Russian helicopter, first while on foot and then in a car, being shot at all the way. He was certain that the pilot had known he was a foreigner. It was my first realization that Western correspondents weren't necessarily regarded as neutral noncombatants by the Russian military.

The Russian term *bespredel* translates roughly as "anything goes." That describes how the Russians pursued their campaign in Chechnya. Grozny was a city under siege. More than half of its four hundred thousand inhabitants had fled. The Russian military subjected the remaining population to around-the-clock artillery bombardments, block by block, street by street, and building by building. They regarded no one as an ally, no one as a civilian.

Outdoor markets were a favorite target. After such attacks, people usually emerged from cover to retrieve the dead and wounded, only to be fired upon by Russian choppers returning for a second round. They typically dropped cluster bombs that fired shrapnel in an upward trajectory, seemingly designed to decapitate their victims. That was how a young Boston photographer named Cynthia Elbaum was killed in late December—decapitated when she left the safety of a bombed-out building to photograph the slaughter in a bazaar outside.

The assault reduced the city to rubble, leaving behind only the carcasses of buildings. Grozny



resembled scenes in photographs from World War II depicting the carnage of Europe.

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At the end of January, Nana and I returned without Yura, and we began to visit outlying villages. The war had shifted there as the Russians widened their assault. Now there was a new wrinkle in the stories we heard. Oleg Orlov, a distinguished investigator with the Russian human rights group Memorial, provided cassette recordings and written depositions from people claiming to be victims of torture and witnesses to murder by Russian officers and soldiers. The statements were said to come from both Chechens and ethnic Russian citizens of Chechnya.

We set out to find some of these victims and, in the cattle-breeding town of Goity, met Isa Matayev, a forty-year-old truck driver. His family went back three generations there, but he was born in Kazakhstan, his family among those exiled to that land by Stalin in 1944.

Matayev described eighteen days of imprisonment by the Russian army. He and about thirty other Chechens and ethnic Russian civilians had taken cover inside a Grozny bomb shelter, then heard troops outside. “The Russians gave us a two-minute ultimatum either to open the shelter door or they would smoke us out,” Matayev said. “We opened the door, they checked us for weapons—none of us had any—and then they locked us back inside.” The next day, the entire group was loaded into an enclosed truck, hands cuffed behind their backs. Guards whom he described as towering men wearing masks ordered everyone to lie facedown on the truck floor in rows. Then more prisoners were ordered to lie on top of others until there were five layers in all, “like lumber,” Matayev said.

The truck hauled its human cargo seven hours north to Russian military headquarters in the city of Mozdok. En route, guards beat some prisoners with rifle butts and fired occasional gunshots. Matayev said one Russian man shouted that the troops “had no right” to shoot. The man was not heard from again. “I think he was shot, because he wasn’t among us at the end” of the journey, Matayev said.

At Mozdok, the captives were ordered out of the truck two at a time and made to step over the bodies of seven or eight men who had perished along the way, having suffocated or been shot. They were marched to a makeshift prison that, in the Chechen wars, became known as a “filtration camp.” It was ostensibly a way station for the Russians to separate Chechen fighters from mere civilians. The camp was that, but it also became a place where the Russians decided who would live and who would die. And that decision often was reduced to which captives’ relatives could pay the soldiers enough to win their freedom. Some who had no one to pay the requisite bribe disappeared without a trace.

Matayev was imprisoned in a compound consisting of two sets of railway cars fitted with blackened windows and grates, and surrounded by barbed wire. About a dozen soldiers guarded the yard, along with incessantly barking German shepherds. The guards regularly clubbed the men; when Matayev went to the bathroom, two soldiers beat him along the way.

During interrogation, a masked man randomly struck his feet, his back, and handcuffs that had been positioned over his knuckles—“wherever was convenient.” He was threatened with death: “Today is your death; we’re definitely going to do away with you tonight; enjoy your last few hours.” Matayev was released after relatives came up with enough money to free him and five others.

We left Matayev before dusk to make the long drive west to Nazran, in neighboring Ingushetiya.

where most correspondents were staying because Grozny had become too dangerous. Nobody wanted to be on the roads after nightfall, when nervous Russian soldiers seemed to shoot anything that moved.

The next couple of days, we visited villages where residents had signed pledges of neutrality, hoping that the Russians would not fire on them. At Achkhoi-Martan, a city dotted with large red-brick houses, local men armed with rockets, grenades, and assault rifles were lounging outside an office building. A local woman named Mariam Madiyeva, worried that they could attract hostile fire, shouted at them: “Go outside the village; don’t do this here. I am asking you on behalf of the mothers and children to leave.”

The neutrality pledges seemed to have dubious value. Mayor Abu Oshayev told us he was blindfolded and put in a flooded basement with other Chechen prisoners even after he had safely transported a wounded Russian officer to a Russian detachment. It was the very unit with which the mayor had negotiated the pledges.

“They were pushing us with the guns. They pushed us to our knees. Someone said, ‘Shoot the bandits. All of them are bandits,’” Oshayev recalled. “Then they hit a person kneeling next to me. He fell down and shouted, ‘Help me. Don’t kill me!’”

Oshayev’s ordeal finally ended when a Russian officer heard his account of assisting the wounded officer and ordered him released. “I told him, ‘If you treat us like this, those helping you, how are you treating the civilians who you don’t know?’” Oshayev said.

For the next few months, such stories were commonplace. It was tempting to dismiss them as the wages of war—there are excesses in all conflicts, everywhere. Yet this was something else—the Russians were not just trying to put down a rebellion. They were killing, attacking, and brutalizing anyone found on Chechen soil, including not only fighters for the resistance but also civilians and the elderly.

What crystallized events for me, however, was the arrival of the mothers. From across Russia, the mothers of young men conscripted by the Russian military to fight in Chechnya came to fetch their sons. I had seen similar scenes in Afghanistan during the late 1980s—Russian mothers, fathers, and wives arriving in search of husbands and sons captured by the mujahedin in the Soviet–Afghan war. But this was on Russian soil, not in a foreign land. This was their land. And the officers commanding their sons and husbands were on their side. Only, it didn’t always seem that they were. The angry mothers were responding to the scandal of green, ill-trained Russian soldiers being used as cannon fodder or otherwise abused and neglected by their own commanders. It wasn’t just the citizens of Chechnya who had been dehumanized by Russian indifference.

As with Chechen men who had gone missing, there was no telling where many of the Russian soldiers were. Many had been captured by the enemy. Some were prisoners at the Mozdok filtration camp—Matayev had observed a row of Russian deserters standing in a railcar, faces against a wall, being taunted by their Russian countrymen. “Do you want to be imprisoned with this group of Chechens, or that group of Chechens?” the guards shouted at the unhappy Russian conscripts.

There was one place to look for sure: The bodies of dozens of dead troops were kept in a freezer compartment in a morgue outside the war zone. But there was no systematic effort to identify the remains, and when we returned a year later, there were unclaimed corpses still stored there.

Carlotta Gall would go on to document the fighting, the brutality, and the blood thirst in her classic *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, which she wrote with our mutual friend Thomas de Waal. In the Second Chechen War, launched by Vladimir Putin as prime minister in 1999, the tough-minded Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya wrote similar accounts in articles and books. She herself would be seized in Chechnya by Russian troops and threatened with rape and execution before finally being released.

At first, Muscovites seemed to react with genuine anguish to the ugliness in Chechnya. This was attributable to the Russian media, which provided saturation coverage, including much dispassionate reportage. But even the shocking stories of Russian soldiers mistreated by their own military didn't seem to move many people; the main thing was to pay the necessary bribes so that your son was not conscripted or sent to fight there. Only the poorest, dullest, or most rural Russian youths seemed to end up in Chechnya.

Time softens memories. The images that had caused me to view Russians as callous toward the lives of most others gradually slipped from my mind. But then came a series of reminders of the anguishing events I had seen in Chechnya.

In 2000, a Russian nuclear submarine called the *Kursk* sank in the icy waters of the Barents Sea. A 118 aboard perished while rescue efforts proceeded at a snail's pace and Moscow spent most of its energy trying to blame the West for the slow response.

In 2002, Chechen militants stormed a Moscow theater, taking several hundred spectators hostage. Russian special forces pumped an opiate gas into the building, rushed it, and shot the terrorists dead. Only, they forgot to make preparations for rescuing the hostages, and 129 of them succumbed—untreated—in their seats, on the sidewalk outside, in buses on the way to hospitals, and elsewhere.

In 2004, Chechen terrorists took some 1,200 children, parents, and teachers hostage in an elementary school in Beslan, a town in the southern Russian region of North Ossetia. Bedlam erupted on the third day of the standoff; shooting and explosions killed some 330 children and adults. Hostages and terrorists fled the building.

In the fall of 2006, two outspoken critics of Vladimir Putin, by then Russia's president, were murdered. Anna Politkovskaya was shot execution style and Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko, former KGB officer, died of poisoning by a nuclear toxin.

I had been under no illusions about Putin. His bare-knuckle approach to governing Russia had been apparent for some time. But now it was hard to avoid the conclusion that something more ominous was happening. What I was seeing in Russia went beyond the question of leadership style. Putin had set about restoring the legacy of brute Russia.

It was not that his fingerprints were on every untoward event. They didn't have to be. Rather, it was the complicity of his inaction. A high-profile murder can go unsolved anywhere. A hostage situation can go awry even when police are highly skilled. But after the third, fourth, or fifth such outrage, it becomes clear that something fundamental is amiss. At the very least, in Putin's Russia the state cannot be counted on to protect the lives of its citizens. At worst, hired killers and those who employ them have reason to believe that they can carry out executions without fear of the law.

There has always been a certain amount of disorder in Russia. That is why many Russians are willing—even eager—to support a ruler with Putin's instincts. But I find it troubling that he has been unusually selective in exercising his power on behalf of the law. He seems disinterested in stopping or bringing to justice those who settle accounts with violence or worse. For example, the world has yet to hear him declare, "I will not tolerate, and indeed I will prosecute ruthlessly, anyone who orders or carries out a murder. Neither will I tolerate the death of hostages." If he had exerted such authority and issued such dictums, Russia might not have experienced the botched aftermath of the theater seizure or the retaliatory killings of Anna Politkovskaya and others.

Without question, he is willing and able to crush those who offend him. Consider this hallmark of the Putin era: his unyielding pursuit and prosecution of a select group of Russian oligarchs. The most notable target was oil kingpin Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man, who was arrested in 2003 by masked federal agents aboard his private plane on the tarmac of Siberia's Novosibirsk Airport. He was sentenced to eight years in prison, and his oil company, Yukos, was systematically dismantled and taken over by two state-controlled companies, Gazprom and Rosneft. (In 2008, when under ordinary circumstances Khodorkovsky might have been released on parole, Putin's prosecutors pursued a slew of fresh charges and his imprisonment for two dozen more years.) Khodorkovsky's crime? He had ventured into politics, financing Putin's opponents and presuming to form an influential—perhaps dominant—bloc within parliament. That stepped over the line; politics is the state's purview, specifically the Kremlin's. The importance Putin placed on the case was evident. Dozens of prosecutors, auditors, and tax inspectors collectively spent thousands of hours making Russia safe from Khodorkovsky. There is no leniency for perceived political transgressors; Putin is hypersensitive in this regard.

*Kukly*, a weekly Russian TV show that employed puppets to represent the country's leaders, is another example. The Putin doll was a wickedly funny dwarf. Putin objected to the skits performed in his likeness, and the producers were warned that the president was off limits, I was told by Grigori Lubomirov, one of the show's creators. That didn't disturb the *Kukly* team, which was accustomed to such reactions. In Yeltsin's time, for instance, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin at first strenuously objected to his portrayal. But he relented under the pressure of friends and critics who advised him to acquire a sense of humor, and ended up appearing in a photograph grinning next to his puppet character. Putin was not so gracious. Two years after he became president, the show was canceled.

Khodorkovsky and *Kukly* were hounded out of the public sphere.

I don't mean to suggest that other countries occupy a higher moral plane than Russia. The post-9/11 world has upset many people's presumptions—including my own—that the West in general and the United States in particular can lay claim to generally noble status. We've discovered that an American president can treat foreign allies with swaggering bluster while conducting a war of opportunity and employing torture as a policy—with the support of a majority of Americans. In fact, a comparison of contemporary events in Russia, the West, and elsewhere in the world suggests that distinctions between countries and cultures have become barely discernible.

Except that they haven't. Notwithstanding America's slippage during the Bush years, the United States, Europe, and large swaths of Asia are not places where journalists are freely assassinated, defecting spies poisoned, or theatergoers gassed to death by their own police.

I deliberately use Japan, Canada, Germany, Britain, France, Italy, and the United States as a comparison group. These are the industrialized countries that were known as the G-7 until Yeltsin successfully argued that Russia was entitled to be a member of the club, and the G-7 became the G-8. In 2007, Putin threw an extravaganza in St. Petersburg as host of the organization's annual gathering.

But if you are a citizen of Russia, you are more likely than a person in any other G-8 nation to die a premature death, and to do so in a bizarre or cruel way. When I say premature death, I'm not thinking of disease, stillbirth, or an automobile accident—although Russians die at a far higher rate in all these categories than citizens of the other seven countries. I mean the kind of death experienced by Anna Politkovskaya or Alexander Litvinenko or the theater hostages—all deaths that were countenanced or at least tolerated by the Russian state.

This book is a chronicle of violence in modern-day Russia, a place that seems unwilling or unable to escape its horrific past. My goal was to tell the story of some of the most prominent victims, people who are remembered largely for what they endured, and how they died. I sought—through the eyes of their friends, family, and colleagues, in addition to the victims' own writings and private and public utterances—to write a more complete portrait of their lives. Many survivors recounted their own ordeals. The shared testimony paints a disturbing picture of assassination and other brutality, and leaves the unmistakable impression that the Russian state under Putin is at least partly responsible.

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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## ELENA BARANOVSKAYA, IRINA FADEEVA, AND ILYA LYSAK

Hostages in the 2002 terrorist takeover of a Moscow theater staging the musical *Nord-Ost*. From events before and after, the three were indelibly linked to Anna Politkovskaya.

## BORIS BEREZOVSKY

Former Kremlin kingmaker largely responsible for Boris Yeltsin's 1996 reelection, and for Vladimir Putin's surprise elevation to power. He thought he would continue to manipulate events, but Putin rebelled and the two became blood enemies. Berezovsky is the financier of the London-based Putin opposition. His team included Alexander Litvinenko, the defector and former KGB officer.

## NIKOLAI KHOKHLOV

The first-known victim of deliberate poisoning by a nuclear isotope. A KGB officer, Nikolai defected in 1954 while on an assassination mission; three years later, he survived the KGB's attempt to assassinate him. He regarded the Litvinenko assassination as a replay of his own experience.

## PAUL KLEBNIKOV

Editor of *Forbes Russia* and American-born scion of Russian aristocracy. Klebnikov's best-known work was his highly critical biography of Berezovsky, whom he called "Godfather of the Kremlin."

## ALEXANDER LITVINENKO

Former KGB officer, defector, critic of Putin, and member of Berezovsky's London-based opposition political team.

## DMITRI MEDVEDEV

Law professor, chairman of Gazprom, and Putin's hand-picked successor as Russian president.

## ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

Having grown up as a member of the Soviet Union's privileged *nomenklatura*, Anna eventually became perhaps Putin's fiercest critic, and a literary celebrity abroad.

## VLADIMIR PUTIN

Anointed as president by an ailing Boris Yeltsin, who sought a successor who would protect his family from charges of corruption. Soaring oil prices under his rule transformed Russia from a broken country into an increasingly prosperous land with renewed global ambitions. But Putin also created an atmosphere of impunity for killers.

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# CHAPTER 1

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## Russia's Dark Side

### *A Land in the Grip of a Brutal History*

THE BOULEVARDS OF MOSCOW ARE VERY MUCH TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY Russia, a kaleidoscope of flashing neon, ostentatious wealth, and the hectic traffic of a city too busy to stop. But walk down Malaya Karetniy Pereulok, a backstreet in the city's prestigious central Petrovski district, and step through the wooden door of the simple red-brick building at number 12. Here, time reverses itself. Visitors find themselves inside a musty archive of repression. Photographs of Russians executed during Stalin's purges in the 1930s are displayed in open shoe boxes. Storage boxes and cardboard file folders, their contents a history of state-sanctioned savagery, are stacked floor to ceiling along narrow corridors and crammed into seemingly every niche. Personal items that belonged to prisoners of the gulag invite inspection.

A human rights organization called Memorial, which documents the crimes of Stalinism past and present, maintains this museum and has its office here. The quarters have the feel of a relic, and the museum visitor traffic is low. But during the golden era of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika—roughly from 1988 through the first half of 1991—the building buzzed with researchers, journalists, visitors, and foreign dignitaries. Curiosity about the Stalinist period was intense then. (Remarkably, the reform-minded FSB, which had replaced the KGB in a convoluted bureaucratic change in 1991, assembled the photographs of purge victims that ended up in the museum's collection. "The current FSB wouldn't do something like this, but then they did," said Nikita Petrov, Memorial's KGB expert. Petrov himself is a throwback to an earlier time, with long gray hair parted on the side, green T-shirt, denim jacket and pants, and trimmed gray beard.)

Perestroika was a flash in time when many Russians dared to hope for a break with the past. Tens of thousands marched in the streets for an evolving list of causes, scanned newspapers for the latest exposés of the Communist Party, and forced genuine change in the country. But when the economy crashed and the government of Boris Yeltsin wiped out their savings—not once, but twice—by summarily devaluing the ruble, Russians felt tricked.

Now Russia is again Russia, its dark side emergent and, for the most part, tolerated by the population. Petrov, a chemist by training and a historian by profession, tried to explain why.

"Russian history taught its people to be indifferent toward the suffering of others at their death," Petrov said. "It's hard to say whether history produced the culture or culture produced the history."



Whichever, it's the consequence. People are used to death. It's a psychological defense toward death.

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To underline his point, Petrov turned to Europe. "In 2004, there was a terrorist act in Spain," he said, referring to the Madrid train bombing by al-Qaeda that killed 191. "Lots of people went into the street in protest. That would never happen here. Why? Here it's 'Why should we go into the street?' would have no impact.'

"That's actually quite a logical response. [But] it has resulted in people not being brave. They take no responsibility toward events—they can't affect anything."

Some have interpreted this detachment as an inevitable outcome of Putin-era prosperity—many Russians had never lived better and so were not motivated to challenge the system. But my own observation was that Petrov had it right—Russians had reverted to what they had always been, which was generally passive.

It was not hard to find evidence that the state had turned back to its old self, too. In 2004, Qatar convicted two Russian intelligence officers of murdering Chechnya's former president, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, by blowing up his car in the tiny Gulf country. Moscow asked that the men be permitted to serve their sentence in Russia, and Qatar agreed. But once the officers were home, Russia set them free. That seemed to demonstrate that if one carried out a killing on behalf of the state—even if it was arguably terrorism—one would be protected. It reinforced an atmosphere of impunity for such crimes; there were few examples of anyone convicted for a major Russian murder. The Qatar episode and others like it mainly suggested that people should keep their heads down.

One of those who surprisingly did so was Olga Kryshtanovskaya, who for two decades was Russia's premier expert on the nation's elites and their wealth and position in government. Her most recent study, she told me over coffee, was a measure of the wealth accumulated by military officers and the FSB leadership under President Vladimir Putin, including their shares of ownership in Russia's biggest companies. Almost offhandedly, I asked where the study would be published so that I could pick up a copy. I didn't want to burden her with a request to send me one. She is an enormously busy woman, frequently published in Russia and the West and widely quoted on the Russian power structure. Even the Kremlin has sought her advice.

Her expression turned dark and awkward. She said she wasn't sure where—or if—she would publish her findings. After so many years of demystifying the elite, she suddenly felt at risk. "This type of information is dangerous to life," said the sixtyish woman. "A lot of people had unpleasant things happen to them. There can be accidental car crashes. A lot of people died and that is why I can't stop thinking about it. I don't know what I'm going to do."

I learned later that Kryshtanovskaya turned over her study to friends in a think tank abroad, who paid her and used it under their own byline.

One of the things that foreigners least understand about Russia is why ordinary Russians seem largely unperturbed by the violence and death around them.

Yuri Sinelshchikov, a former deputy Moscow city prosecutor who had dealt with murder his entire professional life, thought it was a matter of practicality or personal priorities. People simply lacked the inclination to care, he said. There was nothing in it for them.

“If people go in the street, they won’t gain materially,” he said. “Any murder can be compared to a show where an actor comes to entertain them. It doesn’t really affect someone unless it happens to them directly. People get angry if they lose a meter of land, or their children are hurt, or someone installs a door that is heavy and could hurt someone.”

The keenest observers on almost any matter in nearly any country are often the bankers, who have much to lose if their judgment is wrong. So I asked a few in Moscow to analyze the Russian mind-set. They were Americans and Europeans who admired Putin’s government and were earning eight- and nine-figure payouts as lawyers, investment bankers, and investors thanks to the Russian juggernaut.

“The local attitude is, ‘Shit happens,’” said Rory MacFarquar, Moscow research director for the venerable Goldman Sachs. Slender, baby-faced, and bookish, MacFarquar was persuasive partly because of his long years and deep study of Russia, and also because of his clear and painstaking choice of words. He tended to see things in a historical context. “There is an enormous perception gap about life. It’s not something trivial like ‘life is cheap,’” he said. “Russia has gone through unimaginable tragedies in the twentieth century.”

The United States reacts with great shock to events such as 9/11 and the 1999 Columbine High School massacre because they are so out of the ordinary, he said. But “enormous tragedies” occur with such relative frequency in Russia that its people become almost numb to them.

“One thing the West noticed [after 9/11] is how many people were put in danger. [But] that wasn’t the big thing here,” MacFarquar continued. “The level of routine ecological danger here is enormous. The systematic official lying has led to a universal assumption that the danger is pervasive, which leads to fatalism.”

Al Breach, an executive at United Bank of Switzerland, put it this way: “Life isn’t straightforward here. It’s not significant enough.”

It seemed to me that five or six hundred years of Russian history provided ample reason for its people to become inured to suffering. But two Russian historians told me that my thinking was too simplistic. “I would advise you not to make too much of a continuum of history,” warned Alexander Miller, on a visit home from Budapest, where he was teaching at Central European University. Miller was especially contemptuous of anyone who would mention Putin and Russia’s iconic sixteenth-century czar, Ivan IV—known as Ivan the Terrible—in the same sentence. Alexander Kamenskii, an oft-quoted professor at Russian State University for the Humanities, felt much the same way. “People say that Russians are used to being slaves, are used to dictatorship, and that’s just the way it is. That’s a myth,” Kamenskii said. “Why should we think that people who lived under dictatorship liked it?”

Miller’s and Kamenskii’s admonitions made sense in the abstract—history is not science, and the past doesn’t necessarily dictate the present. But it was hard to understand why in this instance they didn’t see what seemed obvious: that Russians in a sense have chosen to live in the tradition of the

medieval ancestors.

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It isn't that Russians *favor* dictatorship. But they have gone along with autocratic rule even when offered an alternative, as in the parliamentary and presidential elections over eight years that cemented Putin's grip on power. And there does seem to be a straight line to the present from Ivan the Terrible and the Russian tradition of fear-based rule.

Russia's first crowned czar and grandson of the creator of the Russian state, Ivan, who took power in 1547, had thinning hair, deep wrinkles on his forehead, and was physically impressive, with a rippling beard and a barrel chest. His more sympathetic biographers thought that he was initially a conscientious and even empathetic leader. Emulating Spain, England, and Portugal in the pursuit of empire, he captured parts of Siberia, fought against Poland for control of the Baltic Sea, and again against the Tatars in the east. Ivan opened Russia to the West, welcoming trade with Europe and forming a particularly warm relationship with Elizabeth of England; Elizabeth had a soft spot for Ivan and on at least two occasions offered him asylum should he require it.

Yet, though Westerners were accustomed to savagery against one's own kind, they were startled at what they witnessed in Ivan's Russia. An English merchant named Jerome Horsey wrote of a prince named Boris Telupa who, accused of treason, had a stake "thrust into his fundament through his body which came out at his neck, upon which he languished in horrible pain for fifteen hours." Telupa's mother was gang-raped, Horsey wrote, and Ivan "commanded his huntsmen to bring their hungriest hounds to eat and devour her flesh and bones, dragged everywhere." Anthony Jenkinson, England's envoy to Russia, described the punishment of an unfortunate aristocrat, as Ivan's men "cut off his nose, his tongue, his ears and his lips." Ivan had a particular fascination with potions. Convinced that one Prince Vladimir was out to destroy him, he handed a goblet of poisoned wine to the unfortunate man, who died in great agony. His wife and nine-year-old daughter similarly perished after being given the same concoction. When some of Vladimir's retinue refused to beg for mercy, they were stripped naked, shot, and left for birds and wild animals to eat.

That was how Russians grew up in the sixteenth century. Ivan was out to destroy Russia's power structure—shared by the Church, wealthy and politically powerful landowners called boyars, and individual princely rivals to the throne—and become its sole, almighty ruler. His enforcers were an ultra-loyalist six-thousand-man band of thugs whom he called the *oprichniki*. They roamed the countryside on horseback in black robes, a dog's head and broom etched into their saddles, massacring thousands, including much of the population of the ancient city of Novgorod. To retain their loyalty, Ivan granted them control of the richest part of the country, along with Russia's principal trade routes.

The consequence of Ivan's violence was a terrorized, terrified, and cowed population. In a letter to England's Queen Elizabeth, King Sigismund Augustus II of Poland asked in wonder why Russians, while no doubt fearful of their czar's savagery, also seemed to defend him as a mark of patriotism.

The most-admired historical figure in Russia is Peter the Great, who two centuries later presided over the torture and execution of hundreds of actual and alleged traitors, including his own son Alexei. He doled out such punishment "to make an example, to terrify, to force submission," wrote biographer Robert Massie, but with the ultimate aim of gaining "the power to work his reforms and—for better or worse—to revolutionize Russian society." He fretted that the pain and death he inflicted

might cause his Western friends to think less of him, and ordered that a lengthy letter be delivered to Europe's heads of state imploring them to ignore reports of his brutality against his son. At the end of the self-serving missive, composed the day after Alexei's death, Peter advised his European counterparts, "In case also that anyone wished to publish this event in an odious manner, you will have in hand what is necessary to destroy and solidly refute any unjust and unfounded tales."

The czars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also to be feared, as exemplified by the organized attacks on Jews that they carried out. But some were victims of assassination themselves. Among those suffering that fate were Czar Alexander II, who was killed by a bomb in 1881, and of course Nicholas II, who was shot dead along with the entire Romanov family in 1918.

Soviet rule brought a new wave of official violence. Josef Stalin executed nearly all of his senior-most comrades from revolutionary days, almost his entire upper echelon of military officers, and millions of others when one included deaths in labor camps and from forced collectivization. Stalin was Ivan's natural heir, and said as much himself. During the darkest days of Hitler's invasion, Stalin could be found scribbling the words "teacher, teacher" on the pages of a biography of Ivan. He "constantly compared his terror to Ivan's massacre of the boyars"—the landed aristocracy—according to a biographer of the twentieth-century dictator. Stalin thought that Ivan's only fault was that, in slaying the boyars, "he should have killed them all, to create a strong state."

One of the most credible and revealing accounts of Stalin's time is *Special Tasks*, the memoir by Pavel Sudoplatov, who directed overseas assassinations for the dictator. Contemplating his own and others' acts during the Soviet era, Sudoplatov wrote that "victorious Russian rulers always combined the qualities of criminals and statesmen." Indeed, his book is a dispassionate catalogue of official poisonings, stabbings, and other plots, including the killing of his first victim, Yevhen Konovalets, a Ukrainian nationalist whom he cultivated for five years before blowing him up in Germany with a booby-trapped box of chocolates. Sudoplatov played a leading role in one of the most infamous political assassinations of the twentieth century, that of Leon Trotsky. The revolutionary leader had fled to Mexico after earning the enmity of Stalin, who ordered Sudoplatov to make his slaying a priority. So in 1940, Ramon Mercader del Rio, a Spanish national working for a Sudoplatov deputy, dispatched him with a pickaxe to the head.

Musa Eitingon Malinovskaya is the daughter of Mercader's supervising agent, the legendary Soviet master spy Leonid Eitingon. Dressed in a silk scarf and a denim blouse for coffee at an upscale Moscow café, the sixty-year-old Malinovskaya told me how, as a teenager in the 1960s, she shared ice cream with Mercader and her father. She had no idea who he was, nor of her father's role in the Trotsky assassination, but the two men had an evidently warm relationship. "My father introduced him to me as 'my friend from the Spanish resistance,'" Malinovskaya said. "...I heard about his killing Trotsky only in 1989 when I read about it in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*." Malinovskaya was clearly proud of her mother, Musa, for whom she was named. She showed me a 2005 advertisement featuring a 1935 photo of her mother as a gorgeous twenty-two-year-old Army parachutist. But she was singularly devoted to her father and eager to talk about his association with Trotsky's slayer. One got the impression that it was the most important thing she could say about herself. The murder perhaps helped to break the ice at cocktail parties.

In 1954, a Sudoplatov protégé named Nikolai Khokhlov became the first Soviet defector to public

divulge firsthand knowledge of the Kremlin's assassination program. He became a valuable source of intelligence for the CIA and survived an attempt by Russian agents to assassinate him using radioactive poisoning. The West usually prosecutes its traitors but, as Khokhlov was witness, the Soviets regarded them as fair game for murder.

Another defector, Bulgarian novelist and playwright Georgy Markov, died in a most exotic way. He was working as a London-based journalist for the BBC when Moscow and its Bulgarian allies joined forces to kill him. In 1978, an assassin jabbed a tiny ricin-laced pellet into Markov's thigh as he waited at a bus stop near Waterloo Bridge. Although the murder weapon wasn't found, an excited British press reported that the pellet was fired from an umbrella, and that idea stuck with historians.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became a fledgling democracy in 1991. It should have been an opportunity for the nation to demonstrate that murder and mayhem were not embedded in the Russian DNA, that the notion of a centuries-long continuum of violence was fatally flawed. The czars and the dictators were gone; tyranny no longer ruled the land. But its people quickly learned that democracy Russian style could be ruthlessly bloody. A historic tradition seemed to be reasserting itself. The chosen style of rule—tyranny or democracy or something in between—seemed to matter little.

There were, of course, differences between the old and the new. Ivan, Peter, and Stalin alike reserved the right to decide who would live and who would die. Ivan and Peter tortured their unlucky victims to death, and Stalin had them shot in the back of the head or sent to prison camps to be starved and worked to death. This was state murder. But none of these three strongmen permitted murder on the streets. On the contrary, they were very nearly pathological about order and concealing Russia's dark side from the rest of the world.

Under the rule of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, the old order was turned upside down. There was little if any state-sponsored murder. But contract killers brazenly murdered prominent bankers, metals traders, oilmen, and hundreds of others for violating unspoken "rules of the game." Kidnappers chopped off the fingers and heads of their victims, sometimes before even requesting a ransom. Russia's richest billionaires, known collectively as the oligarchs, left a trail of dead bodies—by coincidence or otherwise—as they accumulated unimaginable wealth; these victims were often business rivals. The state solved few cases, and in that way seemed an accomplice to some of them.

But if Yeltsin, the nation's first popularly elected president, appeared to tolerate the bloodbath, it wasn't his creation. Rather, it filled the vacuum created when the once-feared KGB and other law enforcement agencies seemed to vanish in the unraveling of the Soviet Union. Grievances that previously would have been forgotten or settled through legal or other peaceable means suddenly poured into the streets. Bitter scores were settled in shootings carried out directly by, or ordered by, swindled business partners, gangs denied a piece of the action, and so on. The murders and murders were cold-blooded and had unmistakable attitude. Bankers were among the most frequent victims because of their access to money; scores of them were killed in shootings, bombings, and at least one poisoning during the 1990s.

Lesser citizens also could be caught in the cross fire. In summer 1993, three gunmen murdered a café manager and then, at a kiosk where they found service unsatisfactory, shot a saleswoman and a customer dead. In April 1995, two gunmen killed a Russian stockbroker's six-year-old daughter, who was on the way to kindergarten. And in November 1996, a bomb buried in a Moscow cemetery killed some dozen mourners. Organized crime became Big Business. Experts said that more than four-fifths of Russia's banks were controlled by gangs, whose tentacles spread west to Israel, Europe, and the United States. These Russian gangs poured into Germany, for example, bringing with them the most grisly crimes the country had experienced in decades. In a 1994 case, German police came upon the bodies of a bordello owner, his wife, and four prostitutes, all of them apparently killed by a Russian gang. Police agencies such as the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation said they had never faced a challenge so difficult, a shadowy underworld that had come to be known as the "Russian mafia."

As the 1990s drew to a close, Yeltsin retired from the presidency. He was succeeded by a former KGB spy catapulted into office by powerful men confident that they could manipulate him—but who would turn out to be wiler than any of them. Once again, Russia would be ruled by a strongman.

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## CHAPTER 2

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### How Putin Got Elected

#### *Boris Yeltsin Finds a Guarantor in a Man from Nowhere*

BORIS YELTSIN WAS AN OBSCURE COMMUNIST PARTY FUNCTIONARY in the tough, mafia-ridden industrial region of Sverdlovsk when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 summoned him to Moscow. There, Yeltsin became Gorbachev's political protégé and demonstrated an energy seldom seen among Soviet leaders. His mentor rewarded him with promotions, enabling Yeltsin to rise rapidly through the ranks of party leadership. But the two began to butt heads when Yeltsin pushed the president to enact political reform faster than Gorbachev was willing. Yeltsin quit the Communist Party and soon became a political force in his own right. He captured the imagination of many Soviets with such populist gestures as rushing into a Moscow shop and demanding that their goods be stocked on open shelves, not pilfered by the proprietors. Everything about him seemed larger than life, including his distinctive shock of white hair.

Yeltsin showed he was willing even to put his life on the line, famously standing atop a tank in August 1991 to rebuff an attempted coup against Gorbachev by Communist hard-liners. Although he was no longer a supporter of the president, he would not allow a return to the worst traditions of Soviet rule, Yeltsin declared. Four months later, Gorbachev resigned from the presidency and the Soviet Union collapsed.

Now Yeltsin was president of independent Russia. He set out to improve the lives of Russian people by appointing a team of economic specialists led by a brilliant mathematician named Yegor Gaidar. The team's assignment was simple: to provide Russians the economic lift from democracy that had been promised but not delivered during the last five years of Gorbachev's rule. Gaidar's strategy, dubbed "shock therapy," was driven not only by economics but also politics. It was designed to wrest control of the nation's means of production from Soviet-era bosses in order to create a middle class of stakeholders that would become the foundation of a new, freer Russia. And so the Yeltsin government ended state ownership of Russia's biggest moneymaking enterprises, including nickel, oil, aluminum, and media companies. These giant industries were sold off, at a relative pittance, to a half-dozen well-connected Russian businessmen—"the oligarchs." But the Russian economy ended up being the loser. Like the Communist bosses before them, the oligarchs mainly used their freshly won enterprises as a means to generate cash for themselves. Workers often went without pay, and the promise of modernization of old and inefficient Soviet-era factories never happened.

In 1998, conditions worsened. The world price of oil, a critical source of revenue for Russia,

plummeted below \$10 a barrel. Already, an economic contagion had spread from Asia to Russia; for the second time in five years, the Kremlin impoverished ordinary Russians by devaluing the ruble and making their hard-earned savings nearly worthless.

Yeltsin took a pummeling. His popularity rating wallowed in the single digits. Despite his well-known personal frailties, such as alcohol-binging and depression, he had always been perceived as a giant of a man. Now he seemed physically and politically weak. John Lloyd of the *Financial Times*, perhaps the most able foreign correspondent in Russia at the time, wrote that Yeltsin had become a virtual tool of the oligarchs, “a mixture between an invalid and a puppet, his strings jerked by masters behind his throne.”

The story of Vladimir Putin’s ascent in the ruling circles of Russian government begins with the five heart attacks that Yeltsin suffered during his presidency. Yeltsin was routinely incapacitated for months. His staff ran the country, and it became plain to them in 1999 that the succession process—selecting who would follow Yeltsin, whose term was ending the next year—had to be accelerated. They had two aims: to preserve the political gains that their leader had achieved, and to ensure that the Yeltsin family would not be prosecuted once he vacated the ramparts of the Kremlin. In recent months, allegations had surfaced in Switzerland of Yeltsin and his daughters running up tens of thousands of dollars on credit cards provided by a Swiss man who had received millions of dollars from Russian government contracts. There was also the Russian tradition of political leaders persecuting their predecessors for retribution and political gain. The Yeltsins wished at all costs to avoid such an unfortunate retirement.

There is much conjecture about what happened next, chiefly that the FSB, the main successor to the KGB, decided to seize power. I looked to a longtime Kremlin insider for guidance, and he agreed to fill me in, but only anonymously so as to retain his access. I’ll call him Viktor. As he recalled, at the time Yeltsin named yet another new prime minister, his fourth in fourteen months. The rapid turnover resulted from Yeltsin’s opponents forcing on him candidates whom he did not favor, and Yeltsin in turn finding ways to install successors who were more to his liking. This time the lucky man was Sergei Stepashin, a former Interior Ministry officer from St. Petersburg. Although it was not made explicit, Yeltsin’s camp intended only to give Stepashin a tryout for the presidency, Viktor said. Stepashin almost immediately proved not up to the task. He lacked backbone, Viktor said. He wouldn’t take a stand. And that could only earn disrespect in a place where long knives were the norm. Yeltsin’s handlers and family were dismayed and looked about for a replacement.

Meanwhile, Putin had made his unobtrusive way onto the Kremlin’s radar screen as head of the FSB. By comparison with Yeltsin, he was wholly lacking in political charisma or presence, but he did have demonstrated decisiveness. In June 1999, Yeltsin announced to a visiting dignitary that in ten days he would appoint Putin as his new prime minister. Furthermore, he told his startled guest, he would soon name this up-to-now obscure functionary the next president of Russia.

Vladimir Putin was the archetypal man from nowhere—as in, how did this fellow get so far? He undoubtedly benefited from a convergence of probably unrepeatable circumstances. He had quiet



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