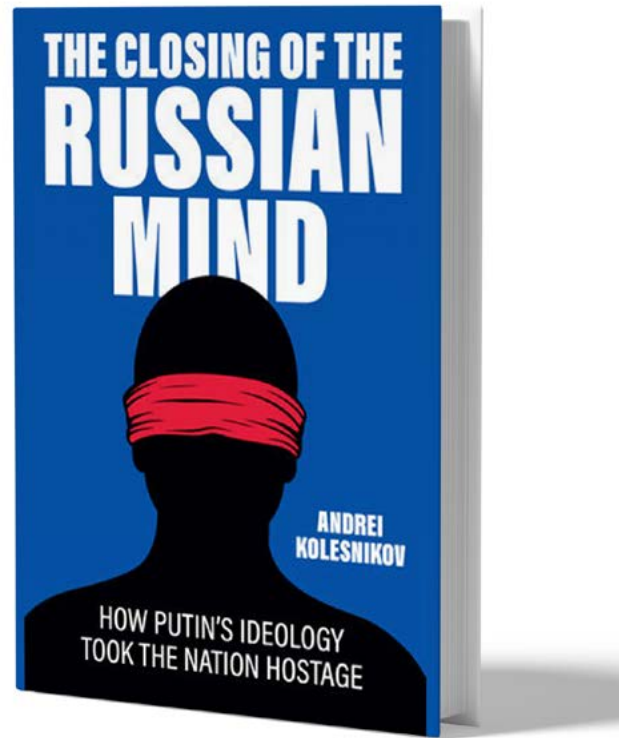


intelligence in public media

The Closing of the Russian Mind *How Putin's Ideology Took* *the Nation Hostage*

Reviewed John Ehrman

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Published By: Polity, 2026
Print Pages: 250 pages; notes, index
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An editor's note in the December 2024 edition of *Studies* pointed out that the “longer [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has been in power, the worse things have gotten for Russia, its people, his opponents, and the West.”^a That statement is even more true today as the human and material costs of the war in Ukraine, growing political repression, the loss of allied governments, and increasing dependence on China combine to make Russia poorer and weaker than at any time in the quarter-century-plus of Putin's rule. Still, the mystery remains: given all this, why does Putin's grip on power appear to remain unshakeable? Other ruthless, repressive regimes—East Germany, Ceausescu's Romania—collapsed, so why not Putin's? These are the questions that lie at the heart of Russian political journalist Andrei

Kolesnikov's insightful analysis of the Putin regime's ideology and its effects on Russia. His answers make *The Closing of the Russian Mind* an important, and sobering, contribution to “Putin studies.”

Putin's leadership, Kolesnikov tells us at the start, is a special case because “his ideology has led to war in Europe” in an era when such an event was supposed to have become unthinkable. (2) How Putin has “managed the impossible”—that is, both starting the war in Ukraine and getting the Russian people to go along with it, even if only as passive supporters—is what Kolesnikov explains.

Kolesnikov sees the post-Soviet, modernizing Russia of the 1990s as an emerging, if imperfectly so, Western-

a. “Editor's Note,” *Studies in Intelligence* 68, No. 4 (Review Special, December 2024), 1.

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The Closing of the Russian Mind

style liberal democracy and consumer society. Putin, however, was from the start a rigidly anti-liberal and anti-Western authoritarian figure and rejected this path. Instead, he has developed what Kolesnikov in the first chapter describes, as a “hybrid totalitarian state with a semi-mobilized society built upon nationalist-imperialist messianic ideology and state capitalism.” (21) It is a mix of nineteenth-century Slavophilism and Stalinism, with the fascism of Ivan Ilyin and the pseudo-history of Alexander Dugin providing an intellectual gloss.

The basics of this order are familiar to anyone who has had a class in Russian history: the centuries-old belief in the superiority of Russian civilization and its redemptive mission on the one hand, combined with, on the other, a sense of victimhood and conviction that Russia is under nonstop attack from outside forces and internal traitors. These, in turn, require a strong government to protect Russia. Thus, says Kolesnikov, Russian identity and politics are negatives, “forged through the denial of everything alien to Russia.” (33) During the Cold War this meant rejecting the US-led ideologies of democracy and capitalism, and updated with the addition of opposition to the Western idea of open, tolerant societies. It is, Kolesnikov concludes, a backward-looking and comprehensive rejection of modernization in favor of a world of ethno-nationalism, brute force, and competition for territory. (36)

With this as his foundation, Kolesnikov goes on to describe Putinism in detail. It is, he contends, a mash-up of “nationalist and imperialism, ultra-conservative, and fundamentalist” views that assert Russia is a “state-civilization”—a system wherein the regime claims to embody and protect Russia’s distinct civilization and its history.(30) The messianism, for example, leads Moscow to claim that it represents the true values of Western civilization, as opposed to the decadence that has overtaken Europe. This, in turn, leads to an imperialism that cloaks expansionism as standing up to the outside threat of Western influence. From there, it celebrates the use of military force, justifying war as a path to peace, and glorifies heroic death in state service. Again, much of this thinking goes back centuries, but given Putin’s KGB background, it is unsurprising that it shows a lot of Soviet influence. In particular, says Kolesnikov, it echoes Stalin’s use

of alleged Western threats to justify repression and leads to nostalgia for the time when the USSR was treated as a superpower on par with the United States. And make no mistake: “scientific Putinism,” however strange or incoherent it may seem to us, is now Russia’s official state ideology, one that tolerates no dissent.(82)

From here, Kolesnikov examines the impact of Putinism on various aspects of Russian life and society. Whether looking at how it has been inserted into the curricula of the education system, the rewriting of history and memorials, or its use as a tool of political repression, Kolesnikov sees the effects as reinforcing one another. The emphasis on the ancient roots of the state-civilization means that everything is explained with reference to the past. “History is everywhere,” says Kolesnikov, but manipulated to serve Putin’s ends with the mistakes of the past forgotten or ignored, while victimhood becomes a justification for militarization and the continual consolidation of state power.

State and society, as in the Soviet era, have merged, and individuals are in the process of being “nation-alized” by the state—that is, losing their autonomy. Violence against dissenters has returned, which leads to self-censorship among intellectuals; it leads, as well, to passivity among the remaining population. These may be Kolesnikov’s most critical points, as they explain why no viable opposition to Putin exists. People who don’t emigrate simply withdraw from civic life as they seek only to protect themselves and their families.

The Closing of the Russian Mind is a compelling analysis of Putinism and, living in the belly of the beast, Kolesnikov certainly is the man to have written it. A 1987 law graduate from Moscow State University, he initially worked at the Supreme Court of the Russian SFSR and then, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, moved to journalism and a fellowship at the Carnegie Moscow Center. Long a harsh critic of Putin, he has bravely remained in Moscow, despite being labeled a foreign agent. His examination draws on extensive current research and applies the work of the mid-twentieth-century scholars—Hannah Arendt, George Kennan, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, among others—who analyzed the politics of totalitarian states.

That said, Kolesnikov's prose has the flaws common to the writings of Russian intellectuals. He writes with passion but can be ponderous at times and, while he makes solid points, most come in the first half of the book. Indeed, as Kolesnikov looks at the workings and impact of Putin's ideology across different fields, he frequently repeats himself. As Kolesnikov makes the points about the role of history, the glorification of the state, and cults of war and heroic death over and over, the arguments quickly become predictable.

While you may find yourself skimming the middle chapters, Kolesnikov's conclusion is worth a close read. Russia, he tells us, is now a country without a future, trapped by an official ideology that looks back and never forward. Any hope for modernization, whether economic or political, has evaporated as war and emigration reduce the population. This will only get worse—families, “living in a permanent state of military and psychological conflict with the civilized world,” have given up having babies.(174) The world is passing Russia by, leaving it technologically and economically backward, and ever more impoverished. Most frightening, at Putin's level the cult of glorious death for the Motherland is leading to talk of a nuclear apocalypse. Still, Putin and his cronies carry on, unable to conceive of alternatives to their policies and uninterested in finding any. Indeed, if the *Financial Times* is

correct, Putin has retreated to his bunkers, listening only to yes men, and too afraid of assassination to come out—hardly a situation likely to result in a search for solutions to Russia's problems.^a

Putin's is a “banal regime,” says Kolesnikov early in *The Closing of the Russia Mind*, and “dictatorships of this sort are ultraconservative and leader-centric.”(21) He returns to this point at the end, when he considers how reform might come to Russia. Kolesnikov's answer is that there will be none until Putin passes from the scene, and given that he is only 73, he could be around for some time. The longer Putin is in power, says Kolesnikov, the worse the situation will become and the more painful the aftermath. Moreover, given Russia's record on modernization, the prospects for successful post-Putin reforms are not bright.

Russia in the last two centuries has compiled a long record of efforts to move away from authoritarian rule that have wound up dead-ending in even worse situations. If Kolesnikov is correct, and the depth of his research and sophistication of his analysis suggest he is, then Russia is on a path to disaster. For this reason alone, *The Closing of the Russian Mind* is an important book for anyone interested in Russian affairs, worried that Moscow's political failures might spill over into Europe and the wider world, or still harboring the view that Putin's regime is not as bad as often portrayed. ■

a. “Vladimir Putin Hunkers Down for Fear of Assassination,” *Financial Times*, May 4, 2026.