

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

Catherine Belton (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020), 624, notes, illustrations, index.

Reviewed by Matthew J.

In 1954, the Soviet Union created the Committee for State Security (KGB) and, as the Cold War intensified, the service grew in capability and status, advancing the Kremlin's interests around the world and stifling dissent at home. The "sword and shield" of the Communist Party—as the organization became known—ceased to exist in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, but Catherine Belton demonstrates in *Putin's People* that remnants of the KGB remain alive and well.

A former Moscow-based reporter for the *Financial Times*, Belton tells the story of how Russian intelligence officers, particularly Vladimir Putin, maneuvered from the shadows to the corridors of power. Belton begins by tracing Putin's early years in the KGB and his posting to Dresden, East Germany, in 1985. While conceding that much is still unknown about his time there, Belton argues, primarily on the basis of interviews, that Putin and the KGB did much more than just meet with the Stasi and recruit sources. In her telling, KGB officers in Dresden worked to implement active measures against the West by supporting the Red Army Faction. At the very least, Putin's time in Germany helped Russia's future leader cement connections in the intelligence world that later helped propel him to the presidency.

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Putin was back in Russia and went to Leningrad (which soon afterward reverted to its original name, St. Petersburg). The KGB assigned him to work undercover in the rector's office at Leningrad State University, and he quickly connected with a former professor from his student days, Anatoly Sobchak. Putin became part of the inner circle and when Sobchak, a key leader in the democracy movement sweeping the country, became mayor in June 1991 their relationship became very important. It is at this point that Belton's thesis becomes clear: rather than trying to forestall the Soviet Union's tilt towards democracy, some former KGB officers sought to co-opt the movement. Putin rose to serve as one of the mayor's deputies and as Belton writes, "Sobchak came to rely on Putin, who maintained a network of connections with the top of the city's [former] KGB." (87) Putin's time in St. Petersburg

gave him status among two of the most important elements in Russian society at the end of the Soviet Union: pro-democracy advocates and the old guard of the KGB, who now held sway in the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Political reformers respected Putin's close relationship with Sobchak, while members of the security services understood that Putin remained "one of them." Belton notes that, "true to his KGB training, Putin had reflected everyone's views back to them like a mirror: first those of his new so-called democratic master, and then those of the old-guard establishment he worked with, too. He would change his colours so fast you could never tell who he really was." (49)

In 1996, Sobchak lost his reelection bid and Putin moved on from St. Petersburg, taking an administrative position in the Kremlin for the Boris Yeltsin government. Once in Moscow, he experienced what Belton describes as a "dizzying rise." (112) Yeltsin's aides viewed him as a skillful bureaucrat and within just two years, Yeltsin appointed Putin to head the FSB. Putin's stock rose just as Yeltsin's health, and political standing, declined. Belton's chapter on the political dynamics surrounding Putin's ascension, "Operation Successor," is quite good, as she clearly lays out how—following the dismissal of Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, a former head of the KGB—Yeltsin was looking for a strong figure with a security background to serve as his second-in-command. Putin fit the bill, becoming prime minister in August, 1999, and when Yeltsin resigned at the end of that year, he was named acting president of Russia. One of Yeltsin's aides recalls receiving a warning from Putin's own mentor, Anatoly Sobchak, about elevating the former KGB man: "This is the biggest mistake of your life. He comes from a tainted circle. A *komitechik* [committee man] cannot change. You don't understand who Putin is." (149)

Following Putin's electoral victory in the March 2000 presidential election, the halls of the Kremlin were littered with former intelligence officials who came with the new president from St. Petersburg: Nikolai Patrushev, Sergei Ivanov, and Igor Sechin, just to name a few. While

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Belton writes that “for the first few years of Putin’s presidency, these Leningrad KGB men . . . shared an uneasy power with the holdovers from the Yelstin regime,” fairly quickly Putin went after the press and oligarchs. (187) He expressed outrage after receiving negative media coverage for his handling of the *Kursk* submarine incident and sought to eliminate the editorial independence of key Russian media outlets. The Putin regime also targeted Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the richest man in Russia and head of the powerful Yukos oil company, who was seeking to integrate his business interests with Western partners, which Putin probably feared meant Western encroachment on Russia’s energy sector. The conviction of Khodorkovsky on fraud charges sent a signal that in Putin’s Russia, oligarchs could exist, but they would serve the interests of the state.

Putin also looked to reestablish Russia as a regional power, building “a bridge to its imperial past” as Belton writes. (273) Putin’s Kremlin focused intently on keeping Ukraine within its orbit and when in 2004 the Orange Revolution prevented a pro-Russian leader from taking power in Kiev, Putin was incensed, viewing the events as being orchestrated by the United States and West European powers. A decade later, following the Euromaidan demonstrations that overthrew a pro-Russian government in Ukraine, Putin had seen enough. He sent forces into Crimea, eventually annexing the peninsula and, in August 2014, Russian security services helped foment an uprising in eastern Ukraine. Belton adeptly illustrates how the Kremlin utilized private business to covertly project power into Ukraine, a hallmark of how the KGB previously waged the Cold War and how Putin’s Russia now approached foreign policy. The Kremlin relied on Konstantin Malofeyev, a Russian businessman who became a billionaire in the 2000s. Belton writes that Malofeyev “was in the middle of it all . . . [his] former security chief . . . led the ad hoc Russian forces arriving in East Ukraine from Crimea . . . [and] Malofeyev was believed to be the linchpin in funneling cash to pro-Kremlin separatists, working through a network of charities.” (425–26)

The final chapters of *Putin’s People* cover Moscow’s saturating Western capitals with Russian money, as

Kremlin-aligned oligarchs looked to Western banks and financial institutions to continue growing their portfolios. Belton titles one chapter “Londongrad” and argues that the “companies coming to London were now mainly the new behemoths of Putin’s state capitalism, which had zero interest in liberalizing the Russian economy.” (351) In Belton’s view, Western leaders and institutions were too accepting of Russian businessmen, many of whom were doing the bidding of the Kremlin, writing that “emboldened by the apparent Cold War victory, and the expansion of the European Union into the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the West believed in Russia’s global integration and opened its markets even wider to it.” (349) In fact, the West’s failure to understand that post-Soviet Russia had been become dominated by former KGB officers committed to manipulating the economy to help fund their operations abroad in order to reassert the Kremlin’s role in the global order is a key theme of Belton’s book.

On balance, this is a useful and thought-provoking book on the trajectory of post-Soviet Russia and the continued influence of the KGB inside the Kremlin. Belton probably goes too far at times, though, particularly when describing the collapse of the Soviet Union as a byproduct of a coordinated KGB plan to take power (the subject of chapter 2). The truth is more complicated, owing to political realities, economic decline, and, at times, happenstance. However, Belton is on much safer ground with the argument that Putin and his fellow KGB alums have been adept at taking advantage of political opportunities. In explaining the ability of former KGB officers to navigate post-Soviet Russia, Belton’s quoting Thomas Graham, former senior director for Russia at the US National Security Council, is instructive: “The institutions the security men worked in did not break down . . . the personal networks did not disappear. What they needed simply was an individual who could bring these networks back together.” (153) Ultimately, trying to understand what motivates the top man in the Kremlin will always be a challenge and as Putin begins his third decade in ruling Russia, Belton’s look back at how he took power and has wielded influence can be instructive for both intelligence professionals and policymakers.



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