
Review Essay: Two New Contributions to “Putin Studies”

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

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

Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference

David Shimer (Alfred A. Knopf, 2020 [Kindle Edition]), 367, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Writing about Vladimir Putin, the former KGB officer and apparent President for Life of Russia, is a growth industry. Visit any bookstore, physical or virtual, and you will see no shortage of biographies, analyses of how his regime operates, and warnings of the threat Russia poses to the West. Many of these have been written by prominent academics and journalists, so anyone who wants to study Putin faces a daunting task just deciding where to start.

This genre, let’s call it “Putin Studies,” has evolved since the first serious works appeared toward the end of the 2000s. The narrative of Putin’s rise from a childhood in poverty in Leningrad to absolute power in Moscow, by way of KGB service in Dresden and then as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in tumultuous days after the collapse of the USSR, was covered in the first generation of Putin literature. In the past decade, academics and journalists have focused internally, on the development of the criminal/autocratic political culture he built.^a Now, however, as Russia behaves more aggressively in the world, new Putin studies are focusing on the roots of his external behavior and, especially, the importance of Putin’s intelligence background in understanding his actions.^b

Catherine Belton, a legal and business reporter for the *Financial Times* with many years of Moscow experience, focuses on how Putin and his gang have looted Russia and then used their gains to corrupt the West and undermine its political institutions. She begins her story in the mid-1980s when the KGB, realizing the deep troubles of the Soviet economy, systematically transferred state

and Communist Party funds overseas, where they could be preserved to finance operations if the USSR itself collapsed. This created networks of intelligence officers, co-opted foreign bankers, and Russian criminals that still endure, and further meant that the intelligence officers would have the resources to remain politically and financially powerful in post-Communist Russia. These officers also were determined, Belton points out, to avenge what they viewed as Moscow’s humiliation by the West and to restore Russia as a global power.

With this as background, Belton recounts Putin’s rise from the time of his return to Leningrad in 1990 until he consolidated power in the mid-2000s. She portrays him as a gray man, a background figure who did vital jobs in St. Petersburg (as Leningrad was renamed) and then in the Kremlin after he moved to Moscow in 1996. Despite Putin’s mix of case-officer skills, administrative capability, and ruthlessness, Belton believes that everyone underestimated him. Thus, when President Boris Yeltsin and his cronies sought a successor who would protect their financial interests and Russia’s nascent democratic institutions, they turned to Putin. Unfortunately, she writes, they “didn’t realize that he might have been lying when he appeared to support them,” and that he was loyal only to himself and his KGB colleagues. (151)

Belton portrays Putin as an uncertain leader at first, sometimes overwhelmed by such events as the *Kursk* sinking, but one who soon found his footing. During the early 2000s, he and his associates from the security services, the *siloviki*, gradually brought to heel potential

a. On Putin’s rise, see for example, Masha Gessen *Man Without a Face* (Riverhead Books, 2012), and Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013). For the development of his criminal state, see Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy* (Simon & Schuster, 2014). On current political culture, see Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

b. For example, Thomas Rid, *Active Measures* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

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opposition in the media, business, and regional governments. Most important for the long run, however, were Putin's moves to reduce the power of the oligarchs—the seizure of Yukos and the jailing of Mikhail Khordokovskiy in 2003 set the pattern of using asset confiscation and show trials to eliminate potential political rivals. These successes, combined with an economy buoyed by high oil prices, led Putin to believe that he truly was a world-historical figure who had saved Russia “from certain collapse . . . from the thrall of the oligarchs and the destructive power” of the capitalist West. (248)

Saving Russia proved to be immensely profitable. With no effective check on their power, Putin and the *siloviki* moved from state seizures of large corporations to using the Russian legal system to grab companies of all types and sizes. Belton describes how they looted assets and then used the KGB networks established in the 1980s to launder the money in Western Europe. Their efforts, moreover, were aided by a new generation of Western bankers and lawyers who didn't ask inconvenient questions, as well as by ethnic Russians abroad who were pleased to assist in the restoration of Russian power. Within Russia, the system became self-reinforcing as the state sold expropriated assets to favored oligarchs for a pittance and then forced the oligarchs to pay enormous kickbacks for government contracts or to prove their continuing loyalty by undertaking various show projects without objection and at their own expense.

This system worked well, at least from Putin's perspective, until around 2008. The business confiscations caused a decline in investment, but Putin, with only a primitive understanding of economics, believed the resulting slowdown was caused by the same US-led machinations that had brought down the USSR. Then, in 2011, Muscovites took to the streets to protest the political sham that Putin had staged to regain the presidency (term limits had forced him to step down and serve as prime minister from 2008 to 2012); he viewed the demonstrations as engineered by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Ukraine, especially, became a sore spot. Putin believed the 2005 Orange Revolution was another American strike at Russia, and that the 2014 Maidan Revolution was just one more step in Washington's effort to wrest Kiev from Moscow's orbit and degrade Russia's resurgent power.

How to fight back? The best known case is Putin's post-Maidan strike at Ukraine, but more threatening to

the rest of the world, Belton argues, is the Kremlin's deployment of its stolen funds in the West. The United Kingdom plays an especially important role in this, and Belton provides a fascinating description of how Russian companies, often made up of stolen subsidiaries, corrupted British finance. UK financial regulations were so loose and politicians so accommodating that few questions were asked of the companies and their financing when they went public in London, especially as “British lords were paid lavish salaries to sit on the boards” of the companies even though they had no real oversight roles. (364) London gradually became a “laundromat” for tens of billions of stolen Russian dollars, and understaffed and underfunded Western financial law enforcement agencies could not cope with the influx. The Kremlin also has funneled money directly to such Western politicians as Silvio Berlusconi, Gerhard Schröder, the LePen family, and a long list of others from both the left and right, to stoke political turmoil in Europe. Revenge for the fall of the Soviet Union, indeed.

Even if it is overly long and at times becomes so detailed that parts are difficult to follow, *Putin's People* is valuable for understanding the thinking behind Russian foreign policies and the structure that supports its actions. With 500 pages of text backed by 90 pages of notes, *Putin's People* is the product of an extraordinary amount of research—Belton seems to have interviewed just about everyone worth talking to, including shady figures who warned her about asking the wrong questions—which updates what previous authors have reported and makes her points all the more compelling. The problem comes when she moves on to more speculative points. Did Putin, when he was posted to Dresden, help provide KGB support to Baader-Meinhof and other anti-Western terrorist gangs? Belton suggests that he did, if only as a minor functionary, but then admits the point is speculative, leaving the reader to wonder why she brought it up.

The same problem appears when Belton discusses whether Russian intelligence targeted then-businessman Donald Trump in the 1990s and early 2000s. In her final chapter, she describes how various sketchy Russian businessmen and criminals in New York and New Jersey seemed to flock to Mr. Trump and wonders if they might have been part of a Russian effort to compromise him. Belton acknowledges, however, that no firm evidence exists to support this speculation—her account is sprinkled with phrases such as “it's impossible to know”

and “we may never know”—and, in any case, that the schemes these Russian proposed never got off the ground. Moreover, Belton acknowledges that President Trump’s views on Russia—whether one agrees with them or not—are the products of his own convictions, not some Putin-controlled blackmail operation. The chapter is intriguing, but not convincing.

Belton concludes on a pessimistic note. Putin has created a true gangster state, one in which everyone is tainted and no one is secure. Putin loyalists can fall from favor in an instant and for the most bizarre reasons, and then find themselves arrested for theft, bribery, and tax evasion—charges that are as true as they are convenient. The insecurity extends to Putin himself. He has taken all power into his own hands and eliminated any potential rivals or successors, leaving him with no one in his inner circle he can trust and no way to change or reform his regime. The implication is chilling: as long as Putin is in charge, Russia is on a dead-end path and Putin, no doubt blaming his increasing problems on the West, will continue to lash out.



While *Putin's People* explains why Moscow behaves as it does, David Shimer’s *Rigged* provides an unsparing description of the consequences for the United States. Shimer, a journalist with a PhD from Oxford, has written several books in one—a nuanced political history of superpower interference in third countries’ elections, an intelligence history of covert action and its limitations, and an account of the consequences of a colossal US intelligence failure. Half the length of *Putin's People* and written in a more clear, concise style, Shimer relies not only on declassified archives and previously published material but also interviews with an impressive number of former CIA and KGB officers, retired directors and deputy directors of the CIA, former directors of national intelligence, Bill and Hillary Clinton, officials from the Obama and Trump administrations’ National Security Councils and State Departments, and executives from internet companies. The scope of his research provides a history that likely is as thorough as we will have for years to come.

Shimer starts with a brief history of electoral interference, beginning with Soviet efforts in the years between the world wars to meddle in Western elections. These

efforts generally failed, but he points out that the Soviets developed the basic tools of blackmail, fraud, bribery, disinformation, and intimidation that Moscow continues to use today. After World War II, driven by the fear of Soviet expansionism, the United States began its own covert election manipulation efforts, of which the Italian election of 1948 and repeated efforts in Chile to prevent the election of Salvador Allende are the best-known examples. Lest anyone be confused, however, Shimer is careful to point out the differences between US and Soviet efforts. Washington used the tools of American electoral politics—advertising and persuasion, backed by large amounts of cash—in efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, while the Soviets sought to weaken those institutions and sow discord within democratic societies.

The Soviets, too, tried to manipulate US elections, and their efforts were admirably bipartisan. Fearing the policies of a potential Richard Nixon presidency, they offered support in 1960 to Adlai Stevenson and in 1968 to Hubert Humphrey; in 1976, they attempted to smear Sen. Henry Jackson, a strongly anti-Soviet Democrat. Their efforts went nowhere, however. Stevenson and Humphrey firmly rejected the Soviet offers, and the attempt to disseminate a fake dossier on Jackson fizzled because, as Shimer writes, in the pre-internet era when the US media was dominated by a few major newspapers and the three television networks, “Moscow could not upload disinformation directly into America’s information ecosystem.”

The two sides’ efforts evolved, too. Shimer documents how the success in Italy made electoral interference appear easy and effective and shows how it became a go-to covert action for US policymakers during the next three decades. After Chile and the revelations of the investigations of the mid-1970s, however, Washington scaled back its electoral programs (though in some cases, such as in El Salvador in the 1980s, interference remained an important tool). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington no longer had an ideological competitor and, instead, saw an opportunity to expand democracy around the world. US efforts shifted from covert interference to a large-scale overt program of democracy promotion in East European and other nascent democratic states. Russia, meanwhile, also dropped its interference campaigns during the 1990s, and even became a recipient of US assistance for running open and fair elections.

Putin's ascension in 2000, soon followed by the rise of social media, changed everything. His goal, Shimer writes, was to "corrupt democracies from within, in part by corrupting their elections" and, conveniently for Putin, "the digital age has made covert electoral interference an increasingly appealing policy option," one that Moscow now uses to attack the democracies cheaply and without the risks of overt action. Many attacks relied on the use of disinformation techniques pioneered decades ago but now made far more potent by the internet—unlike in Soviet times, when a messaging campaign took months and could be blocked in the West by the major media companies, Moscow now disseminates its messages in real time directly through Facebook, Twitter, and a host of other platforms.^a The regime began experimenting with digital methods in its cyberattack on Estonia in 2007, and then refined its tools in Georgia and Ukraine. As the 2016 US elections approached, Shimer notes, Russian intelligence was well-practiced in a range of new methods for electoral interference.

The election was vitally important for Putin. Like almost all other observers, he expected Hillary Clinton to win the Democratic nomination and, once it became clear that Donald Trump would be her opponent, the general election. Putin, however, had a visceral hatred for the former secretary of state, whom he held responsible for the 2011 Moscow demonstrations and other perceived efforts to engineer his removal from office and undermine Russian power. The Russian effort, therefore, was meant to denigrate Clinton; whip up social divisions within the United States; and ensure that, after her presumably inevitable victory, she was politically weakened even before her inauguration. "They were already anticipating" a Clinton victory, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Shimer, "and were bent then on what they could do to undermine the legitimacy of her presidency."

Shimer is searing in his criticism of the US government's performance in 2016. The Intelligence Community saw what was happening but did not realize the scope of the effort or imagine its potential impact. David Cohen, the CIA's deputy director in 2016, told Shimer that the community failed to understand that "what we were seeing was . . . the tip of the iceberg," and one of Cohen's predecessors, Michael Morell, simply labeled this an

"intelligence failure." President Obama, Shimer points out, watched the Russian messaging campaigns unfold but did little, in part because of Republican non-cooperation and in part because he did not want to appear to be trying to tip the election itself. Obama's characteristic tendency toward indecision, moreover, made matters worse. Fearing that publicizing Russian influence efforts would lead Moscow to escalate to hacking the vote itself, Obama decided that as long as the Russians "did not manipulate electoral systems, retaliation could wait until after the election," when it could be coordinated with, presumably, president-elect Clinton. This, says Rid, meant settling for a "policy of managed interference" and thus allowing the Russians to meddle in the election on their own terms.

Players outside of government did no better. Shimer quotes a *Washington Post* White House reporter as admitting that, in obsessively covering the trivial contents of emails that Russian hackers disseminated through Wikileaks rather than the hacking itself, the paper was "used as a tool of a foreign interference operation." Facebook's chief security officer also admitted culpability for missing the scope of Russian use of the platform. "Nobody had a full grasp of it," he told Shimer.

What, then, is to be done? Shimer expects that Russian electoral interference, both in the United States and elsewhere, will continue, if only because Moscow has discovered a cheap and effective tool. He believes an effective response requires two broad sets of steps at home and abroad. Domestically, Shimer's first and most important goal is to improve all facets of election security, to prevent the Russians (or anyone else) from manipulating voter lists or vote tallies. He also urges campaigns of public education to enable people to recognize and understand foreign efforts at disinformation, social media manipulation, and electoral interference. Finally, he proposes a private-public sector partnership with the goal of reducing the misinformation and distortions on social media. This certainly is a worthy set of suggestions, though how effectively they could be implemented is open to question, given the current divisions within the United States.

More promising are Shimer's proposals for external action. Washington should complement the work at home by partnering with its allies not only to educate and warn, but to retaliate against what is a threat to all democratic

a. Rid, in *Active Measures*, provides an extensive discussion of this aspect of Moscow's updating of its disinformation campaigns.

states. "Putin has suffered almost no consequences for interfering in elections," notes Shimer, and he quotes former Clinton and Obama administration officials as advocating retaliatory technological, financial, and media operations. "We should be prepared to respond with technology-enabled attacks on their infrastructure," Morell told him, for example. Shimer cautions, however, that Washington should not engage in covert electoral meddling of its own. Any such attempts in the internet age, wherever directed, would quickly be exposed and only undermine the US case against Putin.

Putin's People and *Rigged* both are important contributions to Putin studies, though together they make

for disturbing reading. Belton's is a portrait of a major country that has been hijacked by a gang of criminals, a depressing example of what can happen when a democratization project fails. That Belton believes Russia is on the road to nowhere is not much comfort; after all, North Korea has been on the same route for far longer and still lurches along. Nor can we take comfort in telling ourselves that Russia's woes are its own, not ours; Shimer has detailed how the Kremlin exports its problems to the West. Because political interference now is Russia's leading export, and the West is an expanding market, Moscow no doubt will develop improved and more sophisticated versions to sell. Don't say you weren't warned.



The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the pen name of a CIA Directorate of Analysis officer.

