

**Accidental Czar: The Life and Lies of Vladimir Putin**

Andrew S. Weiss and Brian “Box” Brown (MacMillan, 2022), 272 pages.

**Reviewed by Ursula Wilder**

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Chinese President Xi recently made headlines by saying to Russian President Putin: “I have a similar personality to yours.”<sup>a</sup> In this Xi was half right. These two leaders may in some ways be twins, but they are fraternal twins, not identical ones. They share a genius for accumulating power, navigating ever upward in byzantine political systems, defending their positions at each step as the stakes rise and the knives come out. Both men govern with seemingly guilt-free business-as-usual ruthlessness. Both have said that they were destined to achieve the peak of power in their countries, joining the ranks of emperors and czars. Beyond their domestic triumphs, they equally consider themselves fit to inhabit the pantheon of global powers, and as entitled to use the same methods internationally that secured their positions domestically if they can get away with it. In these ways they do appear to have similar personalities.

Yet despite such similarities in political philosophy and methods, Xi and Putin differ markedly in key personality characteristics. Xi is a physically tall and large man. Though his body has become rotund with age—hence the once ubiquitous caricatures of Xi as Winnie the Pooh until they were banned in China—in his youth Xi was unusually strong. A notably swift runner, at age 13 Xi outran a pack of young Red Guards roaming the streets of Beijing during the Cultural Revolution bent on catching him and his friends; one of his slower friends was not so lucky and endured a severe beating. As China’s president, Xi is a watchful presence, seemingly impervious to stress, pleasure, and grief. Ultimately Xi is cold and expressionless.

Despite maintaining a similarly inscrutable public façade, Putin’s face is less granite like. He is hotter, his presence more intense, sometimes even charming. Famously athletic—though age has also caught up with him—from his youth Putin demonstrated raw physical courage in moments of violence or dangerous crisis. He loves animals and star athletes, with whom he apparently shares an easy kinship. Putin’s famously explosive temper

would likely strike the icy, impervious Xi as self-indulgent and impulsive. But a reputation for explosiveness can be useful and deployed as a tactical tool of politics just as much as a reputation for perpetual sub-zero emotional flatness.

*Accidental Czar*, co-written by Andrew S. Weiss and artist Brian “Box” Brown, is a pictorial book, an imaginative experiment in graphic biography for adults that is advertised as “a life” of Putin. It is in fact something beyond a biography, a compilation of several books about a range of topics. These include Putin’s personal history and Russian history ancient and modern; a survey of key events in the US-Russia relationship spanning the 20th and 21st centuries; a commentary on the global implications of current cultural political dynamics in the US and tangentially in other nations; and an autobiographical short of Weiss’s time and experiences in office as a second-level adviser on Russia during the Clinton administration.

Despite a somewhat fractured timeline that risks becoming confusing at times, many sections of Weiss and Brown’s experiment in biography are deeply immersive. Weiss’ expertise and passion for all things Russian shine through in the sections focused on that country’s history and Putin’s place in it. Similarly, Brown’s artwork excels at capturing the tone of places and dynamics of historical events. He is particularly talented at depicting action, of either individual people or en masse. His use of monochromatic color—which shifts with each section—and of bold line and curves submerge readers into his visual storytelling. When the text-driven aspects of the book lagged, the visuals often revved things up. In many sections author and artist worked together seamlessly to create something utterly engrossing. This was particularly true for the sections on Russia and Putin acting in Russian or European settings.

*Accidental Czar* rests on a theory of political leadership that firmly rejects the “great man” approach to

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a. Lingling Wei and Marcus Walker, “Xi Jinping Doubles Down on His Putin Bet. ‘I Have a Similar Personality to Yours,’” *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2022.

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evaluating political leaders, favoring analysis of culture and context rather than individual characteristics or personality. Weiss served in the Clinton administration and personally witnessed some of Putin's outbursts, once while serving as a note-taker in a meeting with President Clinton. He writes that "Putin basically exploded" and compares Putin's "hotheadedness" to the "smooth as silk Clinton" (83); his assessment of Putin never goes much beyond thuggishness to explore other depths in the leader.

"Box" Brown's artwork echoes this approach, drawn as it is in a style that erases personal differences between leaders' appearances. The result is a wash of mostly white and male faces; Brown's technique for individual portraiture is so minimalist that it is difficult to identify the different leaders, except through historical or physical context. Many of the portraits are simply unrecognizable as the famous faces that readers have seen in numerous photographs and media, with the exception of an elegant little cameo of Condoleezza Rice. Brown's style of portraiture reflects Weiss' political theory: in *Accidental Czar*, individuals—at least those at the top—are both indistinguishable from each other and ultimately interchangeable. It is context and events that count.

Regarding the book's take on Putin as a human being, Hannah Arendt's famous dictum "the banality of evil" seems apt. *Accidental Czar* periodically returns to the theme of Putin the youthful street thug, killing and being chased by feral rats and bullying the weak. It is on this theme that the authors mostly measure him. But knocking Putin down to size and denying him a more complex

personality impede insight into how this particular young thug, one among many running on the mean post-war streets of Leningrad, rose to highest office and stayed there, whereas most of the other youths in his gang remained anonymously mired in the muddy snow. Refusing to see Putin's complexity does not make it less real. *Accidental Czar's* approach simply sidesteps his dark genius as a political leader, leaving the reader with an unconvincing shadow of the man we all scrutinize with appalled fascination.

This review was written the day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the United States on December 22, 2022. We might call Xi, Putin, and Zelensky great political leaders of our current moment in history, some good and great, others bad and great. But all three are flesh and blood humans as well as leaders, not Hollywood caricatures of themselves or of our imaginations. If we want to understand them, we need to see them completely. So, yes, Putin may indeed be a thug ... but is this all there is to him?

Do not read this book to gain a full understanding of Putin, the man, and the life thus far. Read it as a panoramic survey of the last 20 years of US-Russia relations from an author who served in the US government during the Clinton years; read it for the beautiful, austere art (minimalist portraiture aside); read it to understand the environmental take on history and politics. If you long for more on Putin, read his autobiography,<sup>a</sup> and together with this book, you will get the picture and will be equipped to decide for yourself who is good, bad, great, or banal.



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a. Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (Public Affairs Reports, 2000).