

The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin

Masha Gessen (Riverhead, 2012), 314 pp.

Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin

Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy (Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 390 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Late in the administration of George W. Bush, a senior policymaker concerned with developments in Russia sent a query through his intelligence briefer to CIA's analysts. Did we know of any case, he asked, in which a country's intelligence services had taken over the government? A small group of us convened to consider an answer and, momentarily setting aside the question of whether this had happened in Russia under President Vladimir Putin, found no such case.

There are good reasons for this. Intelligence services generally are led by career bureaucrats rather than ambitious politicians and, in any case, are too small and lacking in weapons to carry out a coup. In countries with large, powerful services—China, Cuba, North Korea, and the former Soviet Union—the political leadership watches the organizations closely or pits them against one another to prevent plotting. However, when we began to discuss the situation in Russia—where former intelligence officers, including Putin himself, filled a large number of senior government positions and the services appeared to hold a great deal of power—a lively debate ensued as to whether the services actually had taken over.

Reading Russian journalist Masha Gessen's *The Man Without a Face* reminded me of that debate, now some six or seven years past. The book actually is two—a biography of Putin and a memoir of the clos-

ing of public life in Russia since Putin first came to national power in 1999. As a biography it is satisfactory, but no more than that. Gessen goes over well-worn ground, recounting Putin's background as a poor and poorly educated young tough in Leningrad and then as a KGB officer whose career could be described, at best, as mediocre. She then sketches his meteoric rise from city politics in St. Petersburg to national power. This is useful but does not tell readers anything about Putin that most do not already know.¹

Gessen does somewhat better in her recounting of the collapse of Russia's civic life. She reviews the best-known episodes of the Putin years—the bombings of apartment buildings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd in 1999, quite possibly by the FSB itself; the sinking of the submarine *Kursk* in 2000; the hideously botched responses to the Moscow theater and Beslan school terrorist attacks in 2002 and 2004, respectively; and the murders of prominent Putin critics, like journalist Anna Politkovskaya—as well as Putin and his cronies' use of trumped-up criminal charges to destroy political opponents and seize the country's wealth. As with the biographical portion of this book, journalists and scholars already have gone over this material, and little of what Gessen has to say is new. Her lively and passionate prose, however, gives a sense of the combination of disappointment and rage that must be simmering among politically engaged Russian liberals and intellectuals.²

¹ For other books on Putin's background and rise, see Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (Scribner, 2005); Anna Politkovskaya, *Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy* (Owl, 2007); and Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005).

² For the deterioration of Russian public and political life since 1999 see, for example, Marie Mendras, *Russian Politics: The Paradox of a Weak State* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

The core of what Gessen has to say about Putin and his impact on Russia comes in two passages. In the first, she notes that the young Putin had “loved the Soviet Union, and he loved its KGB, and when he had power of his own, effectively running [St. Petersburg] he wanted to build a system just like them. It would be a closed system, a system built on total control—especially control over the flow of information and the flow of money.” (134) In the second, near the end of the book, Gessen describes the nature and power of Putin’s astonishing corruption and concludes that he has “claimed his place as the godfather of a mafia clan ruling the country. Like all mafia bosses, Putin barely distinguished between his personal property, the property of his clan, and the property of those beholden to his clan...he amassed wealth...by placing his cronies wherever there was money or assets to be siphoned off.” (254) In other words, Gessen argues, Putin has established himself as the chieftain of what is, literally, a gangster state. In this system, any independent actors who refuse to knuckle under become targets and, indeed, many of Putin’s opponents have had their careers ruined, had assets seized, or been forced into exile.

Gessen’s analysis of Putin certainly has its attraction. It supports the consensus in academic and popular media analyses that, after 13 years, Putin’s chief accomplishment has been to create a privileged elite that has systematically enriched itself by stripping Russia of just about any asset that can be stolen. While Gessen’s metaphor oversimplifies—a Mafia don, after all, does not have to oversee the administration of a country or deal with the intricacies of international politics—it is easy to grasp and enables her readers to understand her point in an instant. The image of Putin making offers no Russian can refuse is exactly what Gessen wants us to see and is effective as anti-Putin propaganda.

In contrast to Gessen’s passion and simplification, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy in *Mr. Putin* use cool, analytical, and heavily footnoted prose to examine the subtleties of Putin’s background and behavior. This befits their backgrounds—Hill was formerly a National Intelligence Officer for Russia, and both she and Gaddy are scholars at the Brookings Institution. Their book provides a sophisticated analysis and, even though it reaches essentially the same conclusions as *The Man Without a Face*—Hill and Gaddy also use

the mafia model to describe Putin’s style of governing—it is the more satisfying work.

Hill and Gaddy explain Putin by looking at him through six different identities, divided into two groups. The first basket includes identities they label “Statist,” “History Man,” and “Survivalist.” These are labels that Hill and Gaddy believe reflect the views and values of many ordinary Russians. Putin’s statist persona, for example, appeals to the Russian political tradition of the strong state and allows Putin to portray himself as a figure above the political fray, “selected...to serve the country on a permanent basis and [believing] only in the state itself.” (36) Similarly, Putin in his history man identity makes appeals to Russia’s heritage and Russians’ sense of the country’s greatness to build support for his policies. In his Survivalist mode, he reminds the country that “Russia constantly battles for survival against a hostile outside world...Russia is always put to the test by God, fate, or history” and so must always be prepared for the worst. (79) In Russian political culture, each of these identities reinforces the others. Putin draws on them as needed to gain the support of various constituencies for his centralized and authoritarian economic and sociopolitical domestic policies, and his neo-imperialist, strong anti-American positions abroad. In this analysis, Hill and Gaddy show Putin to be a very clever politician, indeed.

In their second set of identities, Hill and Gaddy examine Putin as an “outsider,” “Free Marketer,” and “Case Officer.” The idea of Putin as an outsider may be their most intriguing. In Hill’s and Gaddy’s view, Putin has been an outsider during every phase of his life—as a native Leningrader in a country run from Moscow, as a KGB officer assigned to East Germany and Leningrad rather than outside the Bloc or at Moscow Center, and then as the man who came from the provinces to Moscow. Even after 14 years in power, Putin still manages to use populist language and cultural references to portray himself as apart from Russia’s corrupt elites.

It is an image Putin cultivates with care and, as when he promised to pursue terrorists into their outhouses, combines effectively with his survivalist persona. In contrast, Hill and Gaddy use their free marketer analysis to show that Putin is a dismally ignorant student of economics. Even though Putin has not reversed the

basic market reforms of the early post-Soviet years, they note that he received his formal education in economics during the Soviet era and learned practical business methods in the corrupt, lawless environment of the early 1990s. Consequently, Putin has no true conception of how modern economies and businesses operate. “Capitalism, in Putin’s understanding, is not production, management, and marketing. It is wheeling and dealing...personal connections with regulators...finding and using loopholes in the law, or creating loopholes.” (163-64) In other words, his view of capitalism is simply that it provides an excuse for looting the country. Whatever prosperity Russia has enjoyed in the 2000s, Hill and Gaddy note, is almost entirely the happy result of high global oil prices, not smart or effective policymaking.

Hill and Gaddy’s chapter on Putin’s case officer identity is the longest and richest in the book. Here they place Putin in context as part of the so-called Andropov levy, a generation of KGB officers recruited during the long (1967–82) chairmanship of Yuriy Andropov. According to Hill and Gaddy, Andropov saw himself as an enlightened, liberal secret policeman who emphasized the need to “work with people”—that is, to try persuade dissidents to change their minds and support the Soviet regime, but with obvious coercive threats looming in the background. They see Putin as adapting this approach to Russian politics today, trying to win through persuasion, but always ready to bring the full force of the state to bear on any opponent who does not see the wisdom of agreeing.

Most notably, Putin used this method to bring the oligarchs to heel. Putin made it clear they would be allowed to make their fortunes but had to become apolitical, pay their taxes, and follow Putin’s policy line. He made it clear that their “property rights were ultimately dependent on the good will of the Kremlin,” with former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkhovskiy’s fate—a long jail term and seizure of his assets—serving as an example of what would happen to anyone who stepped out of line. It is the same method that Andropov used with dissidents, who knew that psychiatric hospitals and labor camps awaited anyone who failed to be persuaded by the KGB’s arguments.

Hill and Gaddy wrap up their analysis of Putin with chapters describing how he has structured the Russian political system and the challenges he now faces. Hav-

ing cowed all meaningful opposition, Putin now sits at the center of Russian politics. He maintains a fine balance of forces by, on the one hand, protecting oligarchs and elites from having their properties confiscated by the state or one another, and on the other hand, enforcing loyalty to him by overlooking corruption among politicians while maintaining enormous files of compromising information (*kompromat*) that could be used for legal blackmail. While this is fine for controlling Russia, Hill and Gaddy point out the obvious truth—it is not a system for governing a country. “It is piecemeal and ad hoc” as well as personalized, they note, and relies completely on Putin, not any coherent structure or ideology. (213) Under this ramshackle system, they conclude with great understatement, “Russia cannot make the transition to a modern, economically competitive, democratic society without large disruptions.” (272)

Hill and Gaddy, therefore, arrive at the same point as Gessen, albeit by a different road. Both books describe how Putin’s rule has been disastrous for Russia and, in a sense, for the rest of the world. They show Putin to be a narrow-minded man schooled mainly in the ways of the thug, lacking any concept of how to run a 21st century country. At home, he sees politics not as a contest for influence, but rather as a primeval struggle for survival in which the threat of force is all that matters. With Putin preoccupied with continuing the balancing act that maintains his personal power and wealth, Russia drifts along without coherent social or economic policies, plundered by its elites, and its political and governmental institutions hollowed out. Given that Putin’s only significant experience abroad was as a KGB officer in East Germany—hardly the place to develop an understanding of international politics—it is not surprising that his foreign policies are driven by an urge to maintain the status quo rather than by a willingness to accommodate or take advantage of change.

Indeed, this fear of change leads Putin to react to events rather than to shape them. Abroad, he works to preserve the Syrian regime and, closer to home, his government publicly threatens the use of oil and gas exports as weapons to cow other states rather than to strengthen Russia’s economy and alliances. These policies have hardly proven to be prescriptions for helping Russia to recover from the catastrophes of the Soviet period; the costs of the lost opportunities of the

Putin years can be seen, however, through simple comparisons with what Poland or the Czech Republic have achieved since 1989.

As valuable as *The Man Without a Face* and *Mr. Putin* are in incorporating Putin's intelligence background into analyses of his political performance, both books underestimate the continuing influence of his KGB service on his performance as president and prime minister. Becoming rich and powerful were the result of opportunities that came to Putin in middle age. From childhood, however, Putin wanted to be an intelligence officer, and it was this ambition that did the most to shape his adult outlook.³

That Putin wanted to work for the KGB is, in a sense, no surprise. The Soviet regime in the 1960s tried to make popular culture more appealing to young people and, as part of this effort, sought to make the KGB an attractive career option. Beyond the effort to emphasize persuasion over naked coercion, Moscow copied the West by glamorizing espionage work in films, television, and novels. The vision of glory and adventure no doubt appealed to a young man growing up poor in postwar Leningrad. As Gessen reminds us, moreover, Putin was a street tough—a young man who never walked away from a fight or allowed himself to show any weakness—which must have increased the KGB's allure. Fighting the enemies of the socialist state provided an acceptable outlet for what Putin liked to do best.⁴

The KGB that Putin joined, however, was not necessarily the organization he thought he was joining. There were, in fact, several KGBs by the late 1970s. One was the mythic KGB—the brave Chekist defenders of the revolution—that Putin may have told himself he was entering. This was the brutal internal security service, which monitored the population and squashed dissent. The internal service coexisted with another side of the KGB, the foreign intelligence service, which had declined from its glory days in the

1930s and 1940s into a poorly performing organization whose ideological rigidity left it unable to provide political leaders with accurate information about events abroad. Uniting them was the third KGB, a sclerotic and corrupt bureaucracy that was typical of state agencies during the late Soviet period.

Putin, as Gessen notes, turned in an entirely undistinguished performance in foreign intelligence. Trained in German, he was assigned to Directorate S, which was responsible for the illegals program, and sent to Dresden, which was as much of a backwater as the KGB had. There Putin's job was to find candidates to become illegals, but serving the KGB had no attraction to the foreign students he tried to recruit, and by all accounts, including Gessen's, he accomplished nothing in East Germany. On his return to the Soviet Union, Putin's performance earned him an assignment to Leningrad, rather than Moscow Center, and Putin seemed destined to be a second-rate KGB officer stuck in second-rate postings.

One thing about Putin that has become clear is that, despite experiences that might have caused others to question their choice of profession or service, he absorbed the ethos of Soviet intelligence without question. He has made no secret of his nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, Putin's longing for the good old days extends to the KGB—Putin made it a priority, as Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan have ably described, to restore the roles and powers of the security services, and many of his appointees to high positions have KGB or post-Soviet security service backgrounds. Given this, it is not surprising that Putin has done much to recreate the Soviet counterintelligence state. Such a state, as John Dziak pointed out 25 years ago in his history of the KGB, is marked by an “overarching concern with ‘enemies,’ both internal and external,” and creates a security service that “penetrates and permeates all societal institutions” and is preoccupied with conspiracies. The growth of the FSB's power during the Putin years, as described by Soldatov and Borogan, along with new laws expanding the definition of treason and reining in the so-per-

³ Gessen's title, it is worth noting, mirrors that of the memoir of Markus Wolf, the East German spymaster (Markus Wolf, *Man Without a Face* [Times Books, 1997]). I do not know if this was intentional, but the similarities between the two men—both were intelligence officers who served communist states and, judging by Wolf's book and Putin's statements, were quite comfortable doing so. Neither has expressed any reservation about the system he served.

⁴ For the glorification of the KGB in the 1950s and 1960s, see Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security: The Chekist Tradition, from Lenin to Putin* (Routledge, 2011), chaps. 2-4.

ceived threatening activities of foreign nongovernmental organizations, provides ample evidence of Putin's internalization of the KGB way.⁵

As these accounts indicate, moreover, when Putin adopted the political methods that the KGB and its predecessors employed, he did not limit himself only to the Andropov-era tactics that Hill and Gaddy describe. Rather, he uses methods that harken to the Cheka and, in fact, to the Tsarist Okhrana. These include assassinating opponents at home and abroad and—if Gessen's and Soldatov and Borogan's analyses are correct—staging provocations such as the apartment bombings to provide a pretext for renewing the war in Chechnya and solidifying his grip on power, much as Stalin had Kirov killed so he could begin the Terror. Political and public trials reminiscent of Soviet-era show trials come at regular intervals, against targets as diverse as Khodorkovskiy, blogger Aleksey Navalny, and the young women of Pussy Riot. Putin also made clear his continuing view of himself as a KGB officer when he greeted the returning illegals after the spy swap in July 2010. In so doing, he showed that he still identified as a Directorate S officer and, in praising the heroism of the illegals, no doubt hoped that some of their glory would rub off on himself as well.

While Gessen sees Putin as driven primarily by a hunger for power and wealth, and Hill and Gaddy view him as a vestige of Andropov's half-hearted liberalism, the truth is more disturbing. Putin remains a Soviet intelligence officer, proud of his Chekist heritage and all that goes with it. Had the USSR not collapsed, he would have continued to serve it loyally. It disappeared, however, and now this cunning and ruthless man dominates Russia, ruling with the ethos he absorbed in the KGB.

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We ultimately ended our Bush-era debate by concluding that the intelligence services had not taken over Russia. To be sure, a former intelligence officer was—and again is—ruling Russia, and had staffed the top levels of the government with men sharing his background. Still, even without the benefits of having read *The Man Without a Face* and *Mr. Putin*, we decided that the services answered to Putin rather than the other way around. This conclusion seems as correct today as it did then, especially as *Mr. Putin* has expanded our insight into how he uses the skills he learned as a KGB officer. Still, as these books demonstrate without any doubt, no one controls Putin. Whatever Russia's fate in the years ahead, he will be the man who is responsible.

⁵ John Dziak, *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* (Lexington Books, 1988), 1–2. For the rise of the FSB's power, see Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (Public Affairs, 2010).