

# Vladimir Putin: A Life

## Lecture 2: The pre-presidential decades, 1952-1999

**Osher Lifelong Learning Institute**

**UC Berkeley**

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# A few notes from last week's chat:

- **Videos posted on Fridays. PowerPoints also posted, separately from video, though they also appear on video.**
- **Philip Short book: 2022**
- **Short book: “The Grey Cardinal”**
- **Yes, I speak Russian.**

- **How characterize the grown-up Putin, circa 1999/2000?**
- **Russian imperialist?**
- **Aggrieved statesman?**
- **Pragmatic modernizer?**
- **Autocratic restorer of “order”?**
- **Thuggish strongman? Strong leader?**
- **Realist re feasibility or a dreamer?**
- **Governed by emotion or by reason?**
- **And if elements of each, how (and why) did they co-evolve over time during his presidencies?**

# Father, 1911-1999

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# Mother, 1911-1998



[Zumapress.com/Australscope](http://Zumapress.com/Australscope)



# Putin as early teenager

By Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4970092>



# **Family and Childhood**

- **Parents and ancestors; deceased brothers; WW II: impact on father, mother, uncles and grandmother. Impact on Leningrad itself.**
- **Baptism**
- **Living conditions**
- **The courtyard culture**

# Early personality formation (or “revelation”?)

**As a kid: sought out trouble. The adult Putin would call himself a “hooligan” in those days.**

**A friend reported: “...always looking for conflicts.... Thin and wiry...The first to pile in.... No fear.... Could beat anyone.... Would go into a frenzy and fight to the end....Rushed to the defense of friends...” Classmates respected this. Teachers scorned it. (pp. 27-28)**

**He “would always esteem toughness and scorn those who were weak.” (61)**

**Courtyard attracted criminals and thugs, to whom kids looked up**



# Teenage development

- **Evolving school interests: from general disinterest to engrossed by German language, Russian literature and Russian history**
- **Hobbies: Age 12: sambo and judo. Martial arts channeled his aggression.**

[Zumapress.com/Australscope](http://Zumapress.com/Australscope)



## **Strongman traits?**

**“He did not simply play his cards close to his chest, mask his emotions, and send out ambiguous signals: he maintained an impenetrable shell.” (85)**

**“As a young man, he did not vouchsafe information unless there was good reason.” (94) (All = traits that would be valued by the KGB.)**

**GB story re eyes in 2002 in Moscow**

- **But when forced to declare, he was opinionated and rarely smiled. “He had his own point of view in everything.” (p. 48)**

# **Vlad grew up during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years**

- **1956: secret speech denouncing Stalin; start reforming the secret police**
- **1956: Hungarian revolution**
- **1959: “Overtake and surpass the USA”**
- **1961: Public denunciation and reburial of Stalin**
- **1964: Khrushchev overthrown**
- **1967: Andropov appointed to head KGB; priorities**
- **1968: Crushing of the “Prague Spring”**

# Putin's posture toward the times

- **Born October 1952**
- **Political activities in 1960s**
- **Fascination with spy movies**
- **Approach to the KGB, 1968: Stiglitz; vs. parents' and coach's preferences. Told to go to law school.**
- **CPSU and communism? USSR and Statehood? Never questioned Brezhnevite statist doctrines**

- **Political orientation: Called self “a pure and utterly successful product of Soviet patriotic education” (Short, 73-74). Note: not “communist” education. Young Pioneers and Communist Youth League.**
- **Did not think much about the extent of Stalin’s crimes or of NKVD culpability.**
- **No interest in “Prague Spring.”**
- **Interest in authority of the state (Patriotism and Russian cultural heritage a background theme in much of what Komsomol [Communist Youth League] did---Short).**

# **Law School years at Leningrad State University**

- **Interest in the law: not adversarial; not “rule of law” but rather “rules for order”: statist**
- **KGB liked what they saw in him**
- **Singular focus: didn’t attend parties, drink or smoke.**



August 1975: appointed to KGB at level of “junior lieutenant” (age ~23)

- **After training courses, appointed to Fifth Directorate; focus on counter-intelligence and monitoring of actual and potential dissidents. Intimidate and compromise them.**

# Putin as KGB officer ~1980

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- **Late 1978: begins training in foreign intelligence: contact and lure or compromise consular officials and foreign students**
- **1979-84: Posted to Leningrad; introduce Danny Grossman, US Vice Consul in Leningrad during these years, re KGB operations there.**
- **1984-85: Training for KGB work abroad**
- **1985: Posted to KGB office in Dresden, East Germany**

# 1983, Marriage of Vladimir and Lyudmila

- By Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4970134>



# 1983: Marries Lyudmila

- **Work-life (im)balance**
- **Secrecy: affiliation vs. day-to-day work**
- **Would have two daughters**
- **Attitude to division of labor within household**
- **Macho**

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- **Five-minute break**





# The East Germany experience, 1985-1990

- **Main job in Dresden = recruit agents + liaison to Stasi**
- **Attitude to work; enjoyed own apartment; friends.**
- **Noticed EGe standard of living**
- **Attitude to Germans: He admired German work ethic and efficiency. “orderly and diligent” “They knew how to work and how to have fun without getting blind drunk...” (110)**
- **BUT: November 1989**

**Dismay at collapse of the East German state and at Moscow's "silence." Collapse of "state authority" (both in Berlin and in Moscow). Not bemoaning collapse of communism per se. Bemoaning betrayal of "friends" (East German state). Loyalty vs. betrayal as theme in his life. Help loyal friends; destroy those who betray.**

## **View of Gorbachev's reforms**

**One associate said that, by the late 1980s he “was no longer a communist” (108); in private, considered communism an impossible dream. “Private ownership, Putin concluded, was key. If people were to be motivated they had to be allowed to accumulate property and to pass it on to their children. If the economy was to develop, there had to be competition.” (108) And “when it became clear that Gorbachev was aiming at more than mere cosmetic change, Putin became more enthusiastic.” (109)**

# Return to Leningrad, 1990 (note: USSR still exists, but not for very long)

- **Social and economic conditions (GB story re Jehovah's Witnesses in Leningrad and re Moonies in Moscow, June 1992)**
- **Appointed assistant to Mayor of the city**
- **Foreign economic relations: formal task: avert hunger**
- **Liaison to local KGB and criminal gangs: informal role**
- **Attitude to galloping collapse of USSR, 1990-91**

- **Personality: thug or posturing?**
- **“Respect was fundamental for Putin. (194) He was furious when Boris Berezovsky [a leading oligarch and would-be political “king-maker”] fell asleep at a meeting with Mayor Sobchak and him (in St. Petersburg, early 1990s). Said: if he ever shows his face here again, “I’ll break his legs.” (note: private, not public, statement.)**
- **1999 re Chechnya: “we will hunt them down in the outhouse”**
- **Putin, early 2000: “Anyone who insults Russia won’t be long for this world”**

# Russian-imperialist “patriot”? Views of collapse:

- **Putin was incensed by the ingratitude of new states that had been subsidized within the USSR now treating Russia as an enemy. Cut loose with his feelings in private.**
- **He expected the Near Abroad (former Soviet republics) would remain under dominant Russian influence and “would serve as a go-between, linking Russia with Western Europe and Asia.” Unacceptable that they join NATO. (235)**
- **In Putin’s St. Petersburg office: a portrait of Peter the Great**
- **Views re Near Abroad widely shared within the political establishment: Duma re Ukraine, Crimea, Sevastopol, Black Sea Fleet, Ru diaspora.**

## **Attitude re Russian statehood**

- **United, federal state: strong center; single tax and customs regime**
- **“Statist”**
- **Russia as “nation-state” + expansive definition of the “nation” to include diaspora? Diaspora + Ukrainians and Belorussians?**

# Views perhaps fluid at this time

- **Profound and widespread disorientation within Ru pol elite and population**
- **Why?**



# Early 1990s in Russia

- **While it remained a nuclear superpower, it had lost, quickly and suddenly:**
- **---Economic viability; impoverished; galloping inflation; hunger; homelessness**
- **---Social stability: fear; rampant crime, both petty and organized**
- **---Political stability: democratic transition looks chaotic; secessionists even within Ru (Chechnya)**
- **---The country/civilization it had built (the Soviet Union)**
- **---Its ability to speak for, and protect, ethnic Russians in Baltics, Ukraine, Belarus', Kazakhstan, and, in fewer numbers, elsewhere in the "Near Abroad." Was suddenly a very large "Russian diaspora" who were minorities in new states.**

# Losses, cont'd

---Its *cordon-sanitaire*/empire in Eastern Europe.

---Reunification of Germany within NATO

---Its role as a global power, able to compete for influence throughout the world

---Its role as leader of a world communist movement

---Its goal of being respected as a “great power”

How long can such humiliation last before a backlash?

- **Think of concept of the “Near Abroad” (not Putin’s invention)**
- **Analogous to “backyard” and “Monroe Doctrine”?**
- **Or still more beyond a “sphere of influence”?**

- **But Putin had a job to do in St.Petersburg. What other traits did he display?**

# Pragmatic modernizer?

- **By 1992 he was second most important decision-maker in the city. Viewed (162-63) as efficient, workaholic, “impressive operator,” keen mind, understands how to work with people and use them to his interest, closed and secretive. ‘quiet and evasive...He listened but avoided taking a stand.’ ‘He is not spontaneous and he is least of all stupid.’ (165). He was always in control, both of himself and the situation.’ (165) Hated small talk and socializing; saw as waste of time.**

- **Personal orientations and traits**
- **Revealing story (Short, p. 163):**
- **American goes to his office to ask for a tax break for Gillette to build a factory in Leningrad. Putin grumpy: “I get it!” American assertive: “what do you ‘get’?” Putin: “I’ll tell you what I get. We’re new to power. We want to stay in power. Staying in power means providing people with practical benefits from our period in power, which basically means jobs. Jobs require capital. We don’t have any of that just now and foreigners do. So that requires foreigners, And foreigners require tax breaks. So tax breaks mean we stay in power.”**

- **What traits does this exchange reveal?**

## **1990-1992: Other personal traits observed in this role**

- **Role as mediator**
- **Attitude re organized crime: “None of Sobchak’s deputies could have done their jobs without channels to organized crime.” (185) Prevent one gang dominant. Sent daughters to Germany.**
- **Attitude re corruption: bribes vs. gratuities and helping friends**
- **Attitude re politics vs. business vs. administration**
- **Attitude re democratic elections and campaigning**
- **Demonstrated administrative talents**



- **Not just a statist re Russia: also committed to strong executive authority at city level: After joining Sobchak, “determined to bring all the city’s foreign affairs work directly under his personal control.” (168)**
- **Ever vigilant against those who would intrude on his turf.**
- **His actions “demonstrated a ruthless will to prevail, patient and well hidden, coupled with profound mistrust of the motives of those around him” (137)**

## **View of communism**

**---economic organization (vs. capitalism)**

**---ethnic republics**

**---barbed wire**

**---“dead end”**

**---“that ship has sailed”**

**December 1991: CP/Sov flag episode (in audiobook):  
state authority**

# **Foreign policy perspectives, 1990-95**

- **Emotions re collapse of USSR; Estonia**
- **Emotions re “Near Abroad”; perceived ingratitude**
- **Emotions re NATO expansion; betrayal of Baker’s promise**
- **Emotions re lack of “respect”**

**DEPUTY MAYOR (OF ST.  
PETERSBURG)  
VALIDIMIR PUTIN WITH  
U.S. TEAM WORKING ON  
CONVERSION OF  
RUSSIAN MIL'Y  
INDUSTRY, 1995** Courtesy of  
Harold Smith



**Desires (“emotions”) versus perceptions of feasibility (“reason”):**

**He was negative in private about the prospects of losing Baltic republics (having already lost EE and now prospectively the USSR); also against changing name of Leningrad. At time of putsch in August 1991, though, he had come to believe that turning back the clock on secessions was impossible (145).**

- **Emotions versus reasoning: a key issue as we survey the evolution of his presidencies.**
- **Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow***

- **Movin' on up:**
- **1996: recruited to serve in central administration in Moscow. Why?: Traits? Performance? Connections?**

# **The Moscow years, pre-presidency, 1996-2000**

- **Work habits and personality traits**
- **Main tasks: financial flows to and from the regions; anti-corruption; property management.**
- **Orientation to issues: statism; strengthen central authority vis-à-vis regions; attitude toward oligarchs; attitude toward grand corruption; lack of fear about exposing powerful people.**
- **Charged with purging the FSB (successor to KGB)**
- **Appointed PM (1999) → Chechnya offensive. “Outhouse.”**



# The year 1999

- **Putin rising**
- **Chechnya seceding (+ terrorism within Ru)**
- **NATO expanding**
- **Kosovo seceding → NATO attacking Serbia**
- **Impact on Putin's attitudes?**
- **Apartment bombings**

# Meetings with Clinton

- **Nuclear issues; terrorism; Iran---flexible**
- **Chechnya and Near Abroad---“didn’t give an inch”**
- **Well briefed**

# **How widely shared within the Russian political elite were his attitudes re:**

- **Economic order and progress**
- **Political order: state authority + executive authority**
- **Internal security**
- **Political leadership**
- **Loss of empire**
  
- **CP + Chauvinists + Democrats in opposition, but on defensive**

# The reluctant president?

- **August 1999: Yeltsin offers Prime Minister post, which he accepts. Yeltsin then asks whether he is willing to become president: “I had not thought about that. I don’t know if I am prepared for that.” (277) When, months later, Yeltsin told him he planned to resign and appoint VP acting president, Putin “was taken aback. ‘I’m not ready for that decision.’” (287)**

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