

“The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin”: Book Review

A Book Review

By [Bryant Brown](#)

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In the mid 1950's I was a teen, the cold war was at its peak and I subscribed to Pravda, The Russian newspaper to learn about propaganda. That turned out to be good training for understanding the news today. As the western media increasingly demonize Putin, this biography is timely.

The New Tsar is by Steven Lee Myers, a New York Times journalist with a master's degree from the University of Reading who spent more than 7 years in Russia as a correspondent. He was there to see the emergence of Putin as he was becoming arguably the most powerful man on earth. The biggest surprise from the book, is that Putin does not emerge as the villain he's being increasingly characterized as in the west today.

He doesn't emerge as perfect either! He comes across as petulant, aloof, cool and distant as a person, as a husband and as a father but he comes across more often as normal. The book follows Putin from his boyhood and school years through university, his law degree, starting his career and up to 2016.

He was born in Leningrad in 1952, his parents were working class, dad had been wounded in the second war, mom was a factory worker. Meyer doesn't elaborate on the horror of the Stalin years (1941-1953) when literally millions of Russians were killed. He provides a few details from World War II like how a grenade almost killed Putin's father but at the same time saved his life. Because of his injuries he was not sent back to the front lines and thus escaped the almost certain death of his fellow soldiers. Nor does Meyer mention the fact that the Soviet Union, not the west, paid the larger price to defeat the Germans. They lost over eight million people (the US lost just over four hundred thousand, Canada forty two thousand). After the war millions of dollars in compensation were paid by Germany to the Soviet Union and nothing to the western nations. This fact confirms how everyone at that time saw who had paid the higher price to defeat Germany. This was the world in which Putin was raised.

As a child, and he was a small one, he was not doing well in school until he was enrolled in martial arts. Then his marks went up, his disdain for drinking and smoking increased and he started to succeed.

When he was twenty (1972) his mother won a new car in a lottery and like many a doting mother gave it to her son. This is the type of normalcy that Meyers writes about, like the fact he's a dog lover and married an airline stewardess. Putin graduated with a degree in law in 1975 and went to work for the KGB, a dream that he had had since he was a

teenager. (The letters KGB are for the Russian Committee for State Security, Russia's equivalent to the CIA.)

Putin began as a junior KGB officer during the Brezhnev era when life was improving for the people; the gross domestic product was expanding and people were living better. However good times were followed in the later seventies by a ten-year decline in manufacturing and an era of stagnation.

In 1991 the nation of the Soviet Union collapsed and was replaced by the Russian Federation of Independent States. In the same years, neo-liberal economic ideas were dominating the west and the new country, with no experience with free market economics, fell victim to them. They were convinced by Wall Street brokers and the International Monetary fund that they should embrace the trendy shock therapy of austerity to put their economy on a sound footing. Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine* explains what happened; in 1989, before shock therapy 2 million Russians lived in poverty. By the mid-nineties 74 million were living below the poverty line. By the late nineties 80% of farms had gone bankrupt, seventy thousand state factories had closed and a new wealthy class of millionaires was emerging.

Advice from global capitalists on what the new Russian Federation should do was used to rape the newly emerging naïve nation. Today, the speed at which new Russian millionaires emerge is slowing down. JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs remain as the nations major deal makers.

In 2000 Putin was elected President. He was 48 and new to international political economics and had a political and economic mess to deal with. If he had known that the IMF and global brokers served only the wealthy, he would have been better prepared.

The simple fact that 96 billionaires (billionaires, not millionaires) emerged in the 18 years since the new nation emerged, signifies something was very wrong! That's hardly enough time to honestly earn a million much less a billion. It was apparently enough time to swindle it.

Meyer's does not even hint that Putin has benefited financially as President. Nor was there evidence in the 'panama papers' account that he benefited as was bandied about a few years ago. The New York Times sums up Meyers view of Putin; 'Putin simply feels that he's the last one standing between order and chaos.' The New York Times assessment sounds more like that for a patriot than an oligarch. Putin's own people give him an 80% approval rating.

So, the question that follows as the reader of old Russian propaganda is, if Putin is not evil personified what is the reason that image has been created and promoted here?

Qui bono? Who Benefits?

Certainly, western arms manufacturers who milk every chance to create arms spending, they benefit. A new cold war would suite them well. Since it's creation in 1949 NATO has continued the cold war as it has encircled Russia moving closer and closer with nuclear armed missiles. Without the Russian enemy, NATO has no purpose. As Eisenhower pointed out decades ago, it is the military/industrial estate that benefits, and to that we can now also add the western stock markets. Today I believe Putin has a better grasp of this.

Meyers has written an excellent readable, detailed picture of Vladimir Putin that contrasts with the current efforts to demonize him. The book is worth a read.

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