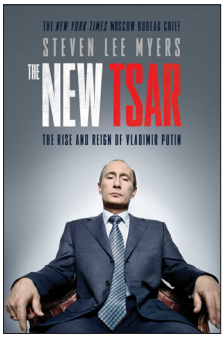
Book Reviews

The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin



By Steve Lee Myers
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Reviewed by Dr Vladimir Rauta

Biography: Dr Vladimir Rauta is a University of Portsmouth Teaching Fellow in Strategic Studies based at RAF College Cranwell. His expertise is in indirect third-party military intervention, or, simply put, proxy wars. His research has focused on unpacking the concept of proxy wars theoretically against a wide empirical research (from Africa to the recent Ukrainian crisis).

Introduction

US President, Barack Obama, once described Russian President Vladimir Putin as the "bored schoolboy in the back of the classroom". Yet, as a schoolboy, Putin was "highly disruptive in and out of class, more inclined to hang out with boys, […], considered a bad influence" (p.15). One is tempted to wonder if this is still the case just by looking at Putin's political and personal friendships with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. Steven Lee Myers' recently published book, *The New Tsar – The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, achieves this exact, rare feat: it engages the reader in a comparison of present and past history. What makes this an intellectually refreshing exercise is that the reader ends up comparing contemporary events as 'history' with the personal history of the people shaping them. How much does indirect Russian support to Transnistria owe to Putin's trips to Moldova attending judo competitions? Is Abkhazia still the place of Putin's summer camps? And, more importantly, does Crimea hold both historical relevance to the Russian state and personal significance to Putin as his honeymoon retreat?

Of course, the conjectures are far-fetched when translated into policy-making concerns and considerations. Nevertheless this is the purpose of a biography: to build context – personal

context actually – around moments in and of history. *The New Tsar – The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* is the most compelling, extensive and complex biography of Vladimir Putin to date, in the English language. It is a remarkable account of Putin's life and how it has influenced the Russian leader's quest to bring the Russian state to its former glory. The book walks the reader step by step through Putin's childhood, adolescence, and university experience. It observes at length his KGB career and the transitioning into politics. With minute patience, Myers describes and analyses Putin's formative experience in the 1990s and then his transformation from an unknown politician to the tsar who brought Russians pride in their country.

The reader gets to see a star gazing Putin: "the stars seemed to just hang there, [. . .], sailors might have been used to that, but for me it was a wondrous discovery" (p.21); a fitness-obsessed Putin; one listening to the Beatles, reading banned literature circulated in carbon copies and emotionally reticent, "even stunted" (p.29) in the presence of women. What is extraordinary is that, almost like a novel, the book captivates through its ability to bring, parallel to Putin's personal narrative, a view of the Russian state in and out of communism. It is a splendid account of Soviet life and society with the KGB in centre stage: "it was a state within a state ever in search of enemies within and without" (p.24). The cruel realities of day-to-day life were nothing short of those portrayed by American propaganda: shared housing, food rations, state surveillance. But, most importantly, the reader gets to see a confused, disappointed and furious Putin. Directed at the inability of the Russian state to further face the West, Putin is shown vowing never to allow Moscow to be silent. The collapse of the Soviet Union caught Putin alone in East Germany in rioting Dresden with no support from the centre. Democracy, thus, challenged Putin's beliefs in the strength of institutionalised communism in a brash, unexpected personal encounter.

Myers argues that twenty-first century Vladimir Putin is the construct of an order-disorder binary. Putin encapsulates the former and repels the latter. His core objective, both personal and political – though in Russian politics the two are found overlapping – is strength. For Putin, order and strength are mutually constitutive, often used interchangeably both as means and ends. This explains Putin's pursuit of domestic and international policies. Looking inwardly, Putin carved a personalised type of democracy with no political parties and a farcical representation of popular will. Looking outwardly, Putin has built an assertive state legitimised and reinforced by the consolidated domestic control. At the international level, Putin epitomises a dying breed of politician: a Cold War warrior with nineteenth century imperial ambition who employs a hard geopolitical language at odds with the post-modern political discourse. Military intervention, proxy wars and defiance of international law are marks of Putin's engagement with the international community, as well as a sign of a troubled relationship. Myers' account stands out for its ability to project the future of Putin's plan for Russia as a victim of the order-disorder binary it stems from, on grounds of the uncertainty it is shrouded in. As such, Myers' book is a welcomed and valuable addition to an emerging cluster of research, *Putinology*.