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Classic Book Notes #119

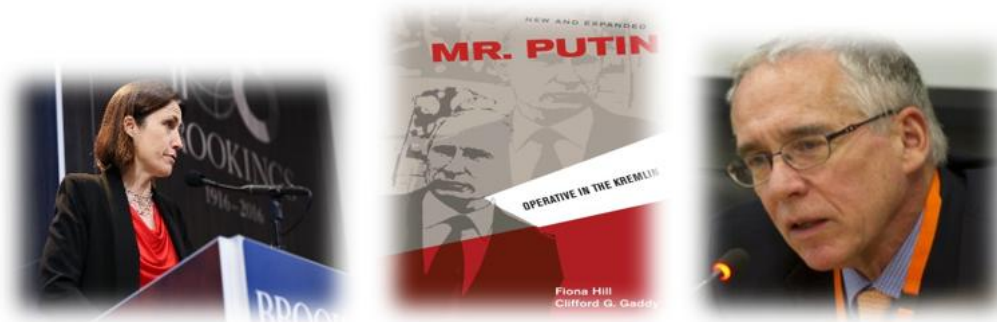
April 2025

Originally Published October 2022

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Who is Vladimir Putin?

Editor's note: Following is a Book Notes Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It was first published in October 2022.



Who is Vladimir Putin?

Who is this man rattling the nuclear saber threatening to end humankind's 300,000-plus year journey on Mother Earth? Is he serious? Or is he just bluffing?

Is he just another tinpot despot, or would he really go, mixing my ethnic metaphors, full *Gotterdammerung*? [1]

The short answer is “beware,” because he is not just another “tinpot despot.” The very phrase would arouse his cold, calculated anger hearing in it a play on the wisecrack describing Russia as “Upper Volta with rockets.” Putin is a proud man. The root of his pride is his “Russianness.” He is a restorationist. Restoring Russia as a stable, coherent political state anchored in Russian history and tradition and restoring Russia to its proper (and respected) place as a world power is his primary strategic goal.

Surprisingly, Putin was a student of late-20th century American business school strategic planning methods. He would probably amend that statement to say “Restoring Russia to its role as a global power by restoring Russian state and cultural integrity” is his vision/mission statement. Everything else flows from that. As Robert Kaplan opined in “The Return of Marco Polo’s World,” Putin sees himself not as a Soviet commissar, but as a restored tsar. [2] More precisely, Putin does not see himself personally as a tsar (although that might be changing), but based on his vision/mission his world view is tsarist.

To understand Putin, Kaplan suggests, you need to think like a tsar. Putin’s strategic initiatives have roots deep in Russian history: 1) secure the borders along Russia’s western and southern flanks protecting itself, on the west, from European incursions both militarily and culturally, and on the south gaining warm water seaports; 2) extend Russian dominance over the Eurasian middle ground between Europe and China, a ground that by definition Russia occupies; 3) to build the Russian economy beyond its dependence upon extractive industries, like gas and oil; and 4) to restore Russia’s ancient cultural integrity, hence his alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church.

So, the question “Who is Vladimir Putin?” needs to be amended to “Who is the man seeking to restore both Russia’s historic integrity and its role as a world power by rattling the nuclear saber?”

As noted, he is a cold and calculating individual. He does not bluff. He learned nuclear saber rattling from Richard Nixon’s “Madman Theory.” Nixon wanted the North Vietnamese to negotiate. To get them to the negotiating table Nixon wanted them to think his threats to use nuclear weapons were real. Would he have used them? Irrelevant. Similarly, Putin wants the West to think he is crazy enough to use nuclear weapons. [3] He has made the cold calculation that Germany, the European Union, and the United States will blink.

So, who is the man who has brought us to this point?

Who is Vladimir Putin?

In many ways, Putin reminds me of Luigi Pirandello's "*Six Characters in Search of an Author*." It is a play about authors, their characters, the theatrical people who bring them to life, the audience's reaction to the characters on stage, and how the characters then play to the audience. Putin is the author of his own story. He has six personas or facets of personality that he deploys in a theatrical fashion to elicit reactions from those around him to understand what they are thinking so that he can manipulate them to the ends he seeks.

In a very real sense, he is a self-made man, somewhat, it would surprise and probably displease him, in the fashion of the American dream. In a strange way, he is quintessentially American, for he has created himself out of his own experience. He and *The Great Gatsby's* Jay Gatsby have more in common than either might suspect. Except that Putin is smarter, less romantic, more focused, and more ruthless in pursuit of his goals than the love-besotted Gatsby. Putin, unlike Gatsby, would know that the light at the end of the dock was not green and that Daisy did not beckon. A dock light is red, signals stop, beware. Cleareyed, uber-realistic Vladimir Putin would have gotten the message, pivoted, survived, and moved on.

In their superb *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy do not present us with a traditional biography. Instead, they provide a deep psychological portrait of the Russian president. Hill is a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe. "She served Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump as a deputy assistant. She was President Trump's senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council from 2017-2019." [4] Clifford Gaddy is also a senior fellow at Brookings. He is an economist specializing in Russia. He has written several books on Russia, including *Bear Traps on Russia's Road to Modernization*, *Russia's Virtual Economy* (with Barry Ickes), and with Fiona Hill *The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold*. [5]

A biography of Putin might be impossible to write because Putin himself obscures facets of his background, shifting and inventing facts as he controls his narrative. As Hill and Gaddy say, Putin "is a master at manipulating information, suppressing information, and creating pseudo-information." [6] Instead, they create a psychological portrait of Putin based on what is known about his origins in St. Petersburg; his formative experiences as a KGB operative in Dresden in the 1980s; his years in politics in St. Petersburg in the 1990s; his election as Russian president in 1999; his own writings, including an autobiography and his "millennium message," a manifesto delivered in December 1999 outlining his

goals to “make Russia great again” [7]; and how he has shaped and reacted to various experiences during his now almost 25 years as Russia’s leader.

Born in Leningrad in October 1952, Putin grew to maturity in the Soviet Union. All of his preparation was to not only survive, but to thrive in that environment. Joining the KGB, the Russian security apparatus, he was posted to Dresden in the German Democratic Republic, the most hardline and authoritarian of the Soviet satellite republics. As a result, Putin missed the flowering of Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika that ultimately brought down the Iron Curtain. He missed the period of hope created by Gorbachev’s burst of freedom.

Returning to now, the historically renamed St. Petersburg in the 1990s, Putin did not experience the fall of the Soviet Union as a positive step into the future. Instead, witnessing the political and economic chaos of the Boris Yeltsin years, he saw a humiliated Russia emerge from the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. Putin is in some ways the embodiment of the resentment Gorbachev predicted would arise if the United States, Europe, and NATO did not work together to respect Russia and to help make it economically and democratically successful. Gorbachev issued his warning after NATO’s bombing in Yugoslavia during the 1990s’ Balkan Wars saying Western politicians wanting “to see Russia play second fiddle in world politics ... will never reconcile itself to such a humiliating position.” [8] Gorbachev’s warning is important, for Putin sees himself as the “corrective” for Russia’s humiliation in the 1990s.

He sees his mission to “Make Russia Great Again.”

In the process of pursuing that mission, Putin, like those characters in Pirandello’s play, exhibit shifting personality facets. They define how Putin views the world. Understanding how they have manifested themselves in Putin’s career is the heart of Hill and Gaddy’s book. They are Putin as the Statist, the History Man, the Survivalist, the Outsider, the Free Marketeer, and the Case Officer.

As anyone who has ever managed or led anything knows, *Job One* is to establish order. Without order, nothing can be accomplished. In the Russia of the 1990s, it became a consensus of the Russian elite that order must be restored, where “order” means the restoration of the Russian state as a stable, functioning government. As Hill and Gaddy say, “Putin sees himself as someone who belongs to a large cohort of people demanding restoration of the state.” [9] In his “millennium message,” Putin himself said “throughout history, the Russian state lost its status when its people divided, when Russians lost sight of the common values that united them and distinguished them from all others.” [10]

In Russia, the state means something different than it does to Americans. For Russians, according to Putin, the state “is the source and guarantor of order, the

initiator, and the main driving force of any change. ... Society desires the restoration of the guiding and regulating state.” [11] Putin sees himself in the role of restorer of the state. He does not see himself as a politician advocating negotiable policies, but as a builder and servant of the state who believes only in the state. Further, in Russia, the relationship between the state – “Mother Russia” – and the individual is different than in the United States. In the United States, the state – the government exists to protect the individual – but in Russia the roles are reversed. The individual exists to protect the state – “Mother Russia,” the motherland – which is seen as indistinguishable from the government. They are one and the same. In a sense, the state is the tangible expression of the intangible essence of “Russianness.”

That means Putin, or whomever would govern Russia, must somehow create a sense of “Russianness.” That is a challenge, for Russia as a political entity is home to a multiplicity of ethnicities. To meet that challenge, enter Putin as History Man for “Putin recognizes the power of history both to accomplish his and the state’s goals and to cloak himself and the Russian state with an additional mantle of legitimacy.” [12] Like American legal originalists, Putin sees history as an evidentiary grab bag that can be used to justify a shifting matrix of positions. Putin believes in “‘useful history’ in policy – the manipulation of the past and its application as a policy tool. History is a social and political organization that can help shape group identities and foster coalitions.” [13]

Putin seems to subscribe to Plato’s idea of the Noble Lie – that is, to form a coherent nation, a coherent sense of the people, it is necessary to create an organizing story, a narrative – factual or not – that binds the many people together into a people. To that end, Putin dipped into Russian imperial history to revive Tsar Nicholas I’s Minister of Education Sergei Usarov’s 1833 concept of “Official Nationality” based on the trinity of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. [14] The first explains Putin’s partnership with the Russian Orthodox Church as a key part of Russian identity. Autocracy is self-explaining for it is the unified “state,” or in Putin’s formulation “sovereign democracy,” in which the leader’s legitimacy rests on the will of the people. Although that sounds suspiciously like liberal democracy, it is not. It depends upon the leader’s ability as Outsider, Free Marketeer, and Case Officer to manipulate public opinion. Nationality, however, presents a problem, for Russia consists of more than simply ethnic Russians. Over the course of his tenure, Putin has oscillated between defining the people – the *narod* in Russian – as both those of Russian ethnicity and all other’s residing within the Russian state, or, as he phrases it, the “*All-Russian* people’s front,” which for Putin is all inclusive. It is a concept Putin uses when it is useful to him and sets aside when not. [15]

If Putin sees his mission as restoring Russian greatness and his understanding of history as an evidentiary grab bag from which he can derive justifications for his

behavior, the behavior trait he feels most qualifies him for his role is “the Survivalist.” Putin identifies himself with a core trait of the Russian character. In 1942, Putin’s father survived a commando raid into Nazi-held Estonia, in which he was one of only four to return alive. Putin’s parents survived the Nazi siege of St. Petersburg between 1941 and 1944 in which 670,000 of their fellow Leningraders died, including Putin’s 5-year-old elder brother. [16] Putin’s family experience meshes with Russian history, for Russians see themselves as survivors. Russian history is replete with catastrophes, but one thing remains true: The state and the people survive. As Hill and Gaddy note, “those individuals who make it through are survivors. Their collective experience has turned the Russian population into survivalists, people who constantly think and prepare for the worst.” [17]

In their account of Putin as survivalist, as the man who sees himself as the incarnation of Russian survivors, two discordant experiences seem most significant. One is from Putin’s childhood; the other his study of American strategic planning theories. The lessons Putin learned about American strategic planning date from his KGB training. Putin studied the University of Pittsburgh’s William King and David Cleland’s ***Strategic Planning and Policy***. The major idea Putin took away from their work “was that the essence of true strategic planning is not long-range planning” but contingency planning, planning for the unexpected. One had to be prepared and able to adapt to the worst-case scenario. This fit Putin’s experience so neatly it became a defining characteristic. One always had to be prepared for the unexpected and to know what one would do to overcome it. [18]

As someone who creates stories about himself, Putin’s recollection of a childhood street fight might be fiction. If it is, however, that Putin feels the need to share his lessons, it tells us something about him. What were those lessons? As Putin says, it was a disgrace because he got beat up. He said he deserved it because he was wrong. The lesson he learned? Don’t insult people. But he also learned, right or wrong, that in every situation he had to be strong, that he had to be able to respond, that he had to be able to defend himself. But he also learned, and this is the most important lesson and the one we need to heed as we contemplate Putin in Ukraine, “that if you want to win, then you have to fight to the finish in every fight, as if it was the last and decisive battle.” [19]

As a St. Petersburg, who think of themselves as outsiders, Putin’s sense of himself as the Outsider is innate. But it is also a byproduct of his experience in Dresden. Putin did not experience the positive changes Gorbachev’s policies promised Russia. Watching the political chaos of the 1990s, Putin developed the persona of the Outsider watching and learning from the incompetence of those in charge. He created distance from them and then delighted in criticizing them in the language of the people. He and his PR people quickly learned that the people

liked Putin because he sounded like them. Currying their favor, he consciously adopted the populist position of the Outsider challenging the fallibilities of the insider elites. In this role, Hill and Gaddy assert, Putin provided a classic view of the Outsider. The Outsider is pragmatic, has no binding policy or ideology, is always open to contingencies and the need to pivot. As such, he could jettison communist orthodoxy and its commitment to state ownership and central planning. He could state that private property was an essential element of a functioning economy and that the free market was a superior system. [20] In short, Putin, while committed to the state – “Mother Russia” – and the restoration of Russian pride, integrity, and global power, abandoned ideology in favor of whatever means might enable him to achieve that vision/mission.

One of which was Putin the Free Marketeer. But Putin’s notions of free market capitalism are biased by his experience in St. Petersburg in the chaotic world of the 1990s. During those years, Putin learned almost nothing about entrepreneurship, production, management, and marketing. As Hill and Gaddy note, “St. Petersburg capitalism was all about making deals.” [21] In short, whatever affinity exists between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump emanates from a mutual appreciation of the “art of the deal,” in which instance it was Donald Trump who was/is the innocent abroad. Putin’s notion of dealing involves finding leverage – how to manipulate the other to one’s own advantage. Based on his St. Petersburg experience, Putin decided that Russia’s survival required a market-based economy. In his understanding of a market-based economy, however, winners were not determined by their entrepreneurial skills or their skill at introducing new products and services. For Putin, winners in a market economy emerged based on their ability to “exploit other’s vulnerabilities. Those vulnerabilities were greed and often flagrant disregard for the law.” [22] And to that task Putin brought the final facet of his character – that of the KGB case officer.

As a KGB officer, the skill Putin mastered was communicating with people to convert them to one’s cause. Whether working one-on-one with an individual or with the mass of people as a whole, that can be done either through intimidation or persuasion, the latter, of course, if necessary, aided by the threat of intimidation. To accomplish that, Putin self-identifies his two key traits: 1) the ability to nurture loyalty in subordinates and 2) the ability to work with and quickly analyze masses of data. [23] Through a detailed analysis of Putin’s taming of the oligarchs and his management of political contests, Hill and Gaddy reveal his deep, if intuitive understanding of classical rhetoric’s malign underside.

In broad strokes, used malignantly, rhetoric teaches that if you would persuade someone to your cause, you must understand who they are, what they value, and, most importantly, what they most want. Understanding that, one then crafts a persona – a “personality” – designed to win their favor, to convince them you see

the world as they do and want the same things they want. Lastly, you then deploy the only three arguments available to you – integrity, facts, and emotions. Integrity means trust me, I am on your side. Facts, well, in Putin’s hands facts are malleable and can be made to fit the situation. Emotions come in two buckets – love and fear. Love can be selfless – “I am only working to save our beloved Mother Russia” – or erotic. The latter is purely exploitative and the essential element of blackmail. Fear is the threat of reprisal.

Putin has mastered all of this. Working with individuals on his team, Putin’s relationships are all purely transactional – if you do this for me, I will do this other thing for you. Using this technique and, in certain instances, a genuine caring for his loyalists, Putin has sowed great personal loyalty. Using the same techniques, but in a more malign fashion, he has co-opted others by uncovering their vulnerabilities and then threatening exposure or criminal liability. His mastery of television and media, his theatricality in dealing with the Russian people is peerless, but the underlying agenda remains the same: convincing them that only he can preserve the state – can preserve Mother Russia. Presenting himself as their selfless servant, he has become in fact if not in name President-for-Life.

The key takeaway from Hill and Gaddy’s chapter on Putin the case officer raises the question is he a genius or just lucky? I’d opine that he’s both, but he’s also shrewd, cunning, and ruthless. More importantly, he learns from his personal experience, his understanding of history, and his subtle but acute observations of those around him. Putin is always the case officer – aloof, watching, calculating, looking for the weakness that gives him the edge. And when he sees it, he does not necessarily act, for he is not impulsive. He waits. Then when the opportune moment arises, he pounces.

So, what does all of this tell us about the six-faceted man honing his own character?

Hill and Gaddy offer some concluding observations. First, he is willing “to fight as long and as hard (and dirty) as necessary to achieve his goals.” [24] Second, Putin is not a mere tactician. He thinks strategically and for the long term. Third, Putin’s experience of the West is very limited. He does not really understand the West and that makes him dangerous. Similarly, Europeans and Americans don’t really understand him. He does, as Angela Merkel once said, live in another world. That mutual myopia threatens us all. While he has shifted both strategies and tactics, he has not varied from his vision/mission to restore Russia’s geographic integrity, its cultural pride, and its role as a global power to be respected. He wants a new Yalta in which the United States and Europe recognize his sphere of influence in Eurasia and eastern Europe. He is fighting a long struggle to attain that goal. His 2022 incursion into Ukraine is but a continuation of that strategy begun in 2014’s seizure of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. As a survivalist, he will not concede

because that would be defeat. As a result, as Hill and Gaddy say, the 2014 seizure of Crimea was the opening of “a game of chicken” to see who would blink first – the U.S. and the West or Russia. Since “blinking” would be the end of Mr. Putin, they say “this game of chicken will be a long one.” [25]



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“Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin” at Brookings Institution available at [Brookings experts’ Russia reading list](#) accessed October 14, 2022.

“Clifford Gaddy” at [Clifford GADDY | PhD | The Brookings Institution \(researchgate.net\)](#) accessed October 14, 2022.

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Classic Book Notes End Notes

1. An aside, does anyone know how to insert an umlaut in Word? The “Help” instructions might as well be hieroglyphics for all their practical value!
2. Cf. Kaplan, Robert, “*The Return of Marco Polo’s World and the U.S. Military Response*” in **The Return of Marco Polo’s World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the Twenty-First Century**. (New York: Random House, 2018), pp. 2-45.
3. Hill, Fiona and Clifford Gaddy. **Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin**. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), p. 13.
4. “Fiona Hill,” at **Brookings** available at [Fiona Hill \(brookings.edu\)](#) accessed October 17, 2022.
5. “Clifford Gaddy,” at **The Globalist: Rethinking Globalization** available at [Clifford Gaddy - The Globalist](#) accessed October 17, 2022.
6. Hill and Gaddy, cited above, p. 7.
7. Hill, Fiona, “*Putin and the Kremlin are experts at reading popular mood. And they were watching America*” in **Foreign Policy in the U.S. Presidential Debates** at **Brookings** available at [Putin and the Kremlin are experts at reading the popular mood. And they were watching America. \(brookings.edu\)](#) accessed October 18, 2022.
8. Hill and Gaddy, cited above, p. 36.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
13. *Ibid.*

14. Ibid., pp. 64-65.
15. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
16. Ibid., pp. 76-77.
17. Ibid., p. 77.
18. Ibid., p. 82.
19. Ibid., p. 89.
20. Ibid., p. 130.
21. Ibid., p. 132.
22. Ibid., p. 133.
23. The series of incidents illustrating how he did this are too extensive for a Book Note, but confer Hill and Gaddy, pp. 153-189.
24. Ibid., p.385.
25. Ibid., p. 395.

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