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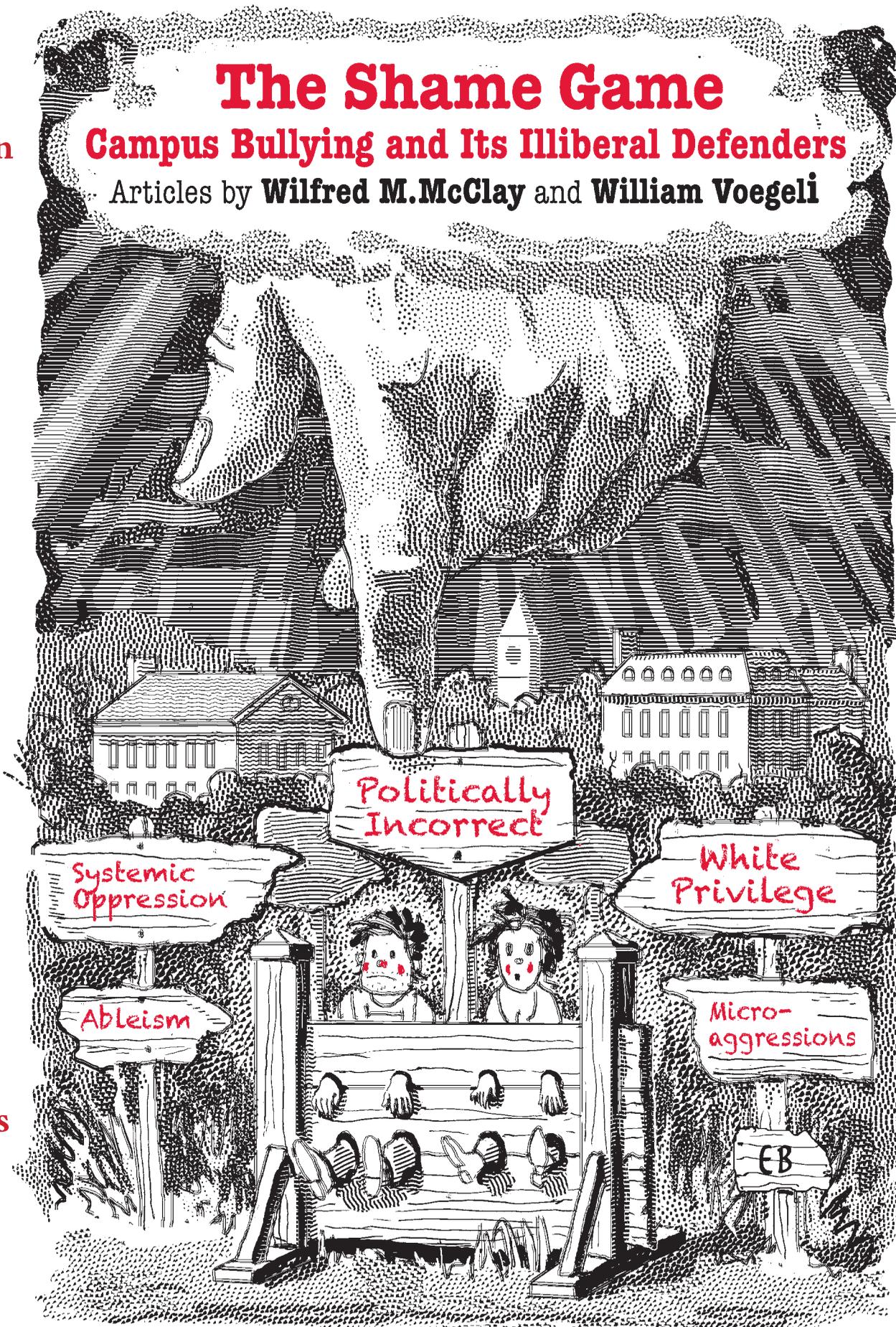
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

## THE PRINCE



**B**Y CERTAIN TRADITIONAL MEASURES, Russian president Vladimir Putin is the pre-eminent statesman of his time. When he took power in the winter of 1999–2000, his defenseless and bankrupt country was being carved up by its new kleptocratic elites, in collusion with its old imperial rivals. Much as Kemal Atatürk had done in Turkey seven decades earlier, Putin rescued a nation-state from the ruins of an empire and gave it coherence and purpose. He disciplined his country’s unaccountable plutocrats, restored its military strength, and refused, with ever blunter rhetoric, the subservient role in an American-run world system that foreign politicians and business leaders had drawn up for Russia. His voters credit him with having “saved his country.” So do many of his Russian detractors, although they worry he has stayed in power too long. He is among the more popular democratically elected leaders in the civilized world and, incidentally, a hero to certain right-wing rebels against the international order, particularly in Europe. This is awkward for him and for them, since, unlike Atatürk, Putin has no programmatic ideology.

But traditional measures of statesmanship have, since the end of the Cold War, cut little ice with Western leaders and the pundits who judge them. We have rebaptized as “human rights” the system of identity-group and interest-group politics by which America is ordered, and by which America orders the world. Putin, who plays by an older set of rules, is cast as a brigand or a desperado. Or even as a madman. After Russia’s incursion into Crimea in early 2014 the *New York Times* reported:

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany told Mr. Obama by telephone on Sunday that after speaking with Mr. Putin she was not sure he was in touch with reality, people briefed on the call said. “In another world,” she said.

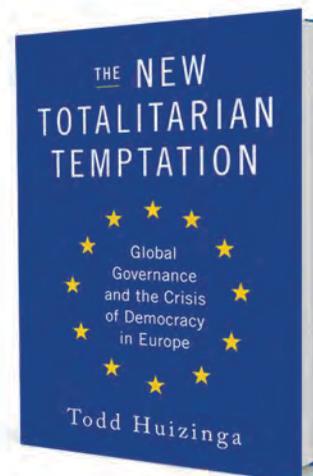
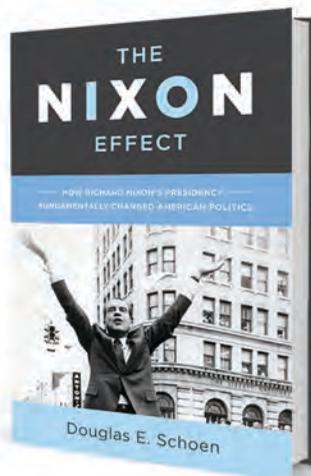
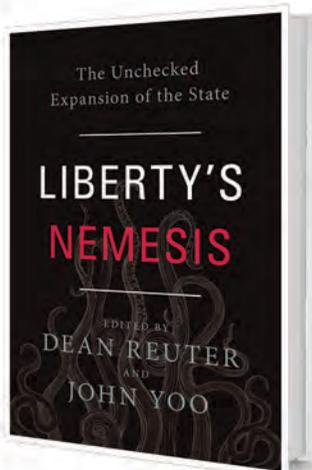
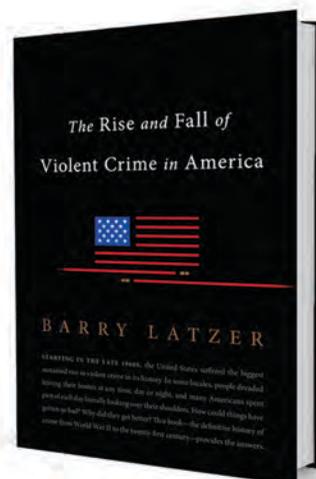
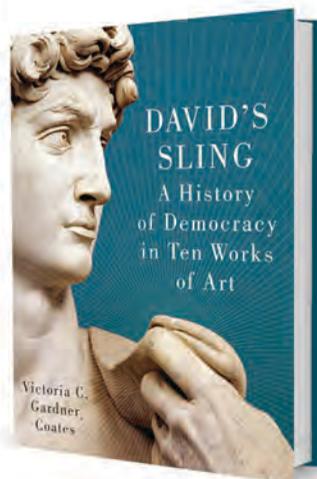
This snippet has become part of Putin folklore, with the implication that those who know him best think him a psychopath. But the chances that things took place as described are slim. We have a conversation between the fluent Russian-speaker Merkel and the fluent German-speaker Putin, conveyed (to our

monoglot president) through a translation, thence (somehow) to a briefer, and thence to a leaker whose goal is to promote U.S. strategic interests, which grow ever harder to tell from domestic partisan ones. If the phrase “another world” was used, it was likely meant in the sense of “another context”—the context being, as Putin would have seen it, the armed overthrow of the elected Ukrainian government on Russia’s border, with the diplomatic (and, eventually, military) support of the United States.

There is a standing invitation to think of Putin in terms of caricature, an invitation that most biographers have accepted, though there are exceptions. *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, by the Brookings Institution scholars Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy (2012, updated in 2015), showed Putin as a multifaceted leader reacting to real problems. Now we have two more new works of genuine subtlety: *The New Tsar*, a biography by former *New York Times* Moscow correspondent Steven Lee Myers, and *Putinism*, a study of contemporary Russian ideology by the polymath historian and reporter Walter Laqueur.

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## Loyalty and Risk

**P**UTIN ROSE OUT OF NOWHERE. BORN IN Leningrad in 1952 to parents who had lost their other two children by the end of World War II, he grew up in a communal apartment without hot water. He was bookish, with a taste for the Russian classics, and diminutive. He threw himself into sports, particularly karate, in which he acquired a black belt. Romantic ideas of the secret service led him to join the KGB. This was not, as one might assume, a good career track for an authoritarian or an ideologue. The KGB was, in a sense, the most cosmopolitan wing of the Soviet state. The man who hired Putin in the 1970s, Yuri Andropov, then the ruthless head of the KGB, was the only top Communist open-minded enough to question whether a Communist economy could ever work in the first place. It was his protégé, Mikhail Gorbachev, who finally grew convinced that it could not. As Myers notes, spying required “deeper and deeper training in local [Western] customs that often betrayed foreign origins—basic aspects of capitalist life, like mortgages, could stump and betray a Soviet operative.” The enemies the KGB wound up monitoring during Putin’s time in Germany, which coincided with the era of Gorbachev’s reforms, were mostly those considered *too* zealously Communist. One thing about Putin stood out as bizarre: he told his fellow agents he believed in God. In the KGB of the time, this was, one of them noted, “an inconceivable thing.”

How accidental his ascent seems. He showed little outward ambition. When the Berlin Wall fell, he moved his family back into his parents’ St. Petersburg apartment. Someone sent him to the upstart city councilman (later mayor) Anatoly Sobchak, who was looking for an advisor from the intelligence world. He wound up learning the ins and outs of a succession of jobs. In St. Petersburg, he worked as a state property controller, then as an economic liaison to Otis Elevator and other businesses, as well as to Ted Turner and Jane Fonda’s Goodwill Games. After Sobchak was chased from power in 1996, Putin considered working as a martial arts instructor. But when his Petersburg colleague Alexei Kudrin signed on with President Boris Yeltsin, Putin went to Moscow, slept on Kudrin’s sofa and looked for work. Kudrin found him a post as a manager of presidential properties. Putin moved on to become a financial investigator and then head of the KGB’s successor agency, the FSB.

You can get a better idea of why certain Russians not only tolerate but revere Putin if you remember that, within a few years of

Communism’s fall, average life expectancy in Russia had fallen below that of Bangladesh. Putin did not found a kleptocracy; he inherited one. The ignominy falls on Boris Yeltsin, whose opportunism made him an indispensable foe of Communism in the late 1980s, but made him an equally poisonous founding father for any modern democratic state. “Most Russians have come to believe that democracy is what happened in their country between 1990 and 2000,” Laqueur writes, “and they do not want any more of it.”

Yeltsin “made” Putin, even though the two were never close. Putin combined two traits that almost never appear together: iron loyalty and an appetite for any kind of risk. The zealous prosecutor Yuri Skuratov had leaked compromising details from an investigation into Sobchak’s city government, an irregularity that appalled Putin. In 1997, Skuratov was on the verge of arresting Sobchak, when Putin, then in his job as investigator, spirited his old boss out of the country on a plane. This act of loy-

### Books discussed in this essay:

*The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, by Steven Lee Myers.  
Alfred A. Knopf, 592 pages, \$32.50

*Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West*, by Walter Laqueur.  
Thomas Dunne Books,  
288 pages, \$27.99

alty—risking his career, his reputation, everything, for a onetime mentor who had already fallen from power and could no longer help him—wowed Yeltsin, even though he disliked Sobchak. Other political operatives may have been demoralized. Putin understood that the Russian government still held a few trumps. When Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov tried to topple Yeltsin, Luzhkov’s wife’s business came under investigation. In March 1999, Russian media obtained videotapes showing the crusading Skuratov at an orgy. Whether or not the tapes were genuine, the reassertion of political power was. That is surely part of the reason why Yeltsin named the relative political novice prime minister that summer, and then shocked the country on New Year’s Eve by resigning as president and naming Putin to succeed him.

### High Stakes

**A**T A TIME WHEN BILLIONAIRES SPENT lavishly to buy politicians, Putin did not line his own pockets. Boris Bere-

zovsky, a media oligarch with whom he would later clash, recalled that when he, Berezovsky, tried to open a car dealership, “Putin had refused even to consider a bribe.” As the number-two man in St. Petersburg’s government, Putin built a house in an exclusive lakefront cooperative—but it was only 1,600 square feet, the dimensions of a modest urban apartment. When it caught fire in 1996, he rushed into the burning house to rescue a briefcase containing his savings: \$5,000. At the FSB, Putin did not move into the palatial office that had been occupied by spymasters from Lavrenti Beria to Andropov. He made their office a museum, and chose humbler quarters elsewhere in the building. By the time he became prime minister at the turn of the century, Putin’s fortune amounted to \$13,000. His wife was making \$1,500 a month as a rep in a telephone company. Ordinary Russians saw him as one of them. And, despite abundant allegations that Putin has enriched himself in power (one sensational account credits him with a fortune of \$70 billion), many ordinary Russians still do.

Young men on the make are favored when revolution sweeps all the chips off the table. The natural-resource oligarchs who would turn Russia into an armed plutocracy within half a decade of its having defeated Communism in 1991 included men who had been groomed as the Communist *nomenklatura* of the next generation. With their understanding of the scope of state assets, their control of privatization programs, their access to Western financing, and their willingness to use violence and intimidation, they took power as planned—but as owners, not bureaucrats. Since the state had owned *everything* under Communism, this was quite a payout, one that leaders of Western financial institutions were eager to abet. It was at the World Economic Forum in Davos that Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and other billionaires met in 1996 to arrange financing for Yeltsin’s re-election. This was a top priority. So many fortunes depended on Yeltsin that he had become a ruler who could be permitted any liberty except that of giving up power.

These “state-appointed billionaires,” as Putin came to call them, were a conduit for looting Russia, and they were too entrenched to root out. But Putin was able to avoid an outright oligarchic takeover of the state, of the sort that happened in neighboring Ukraine. It was for reasons good and bad that Yukos oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who served ten years in prison before being released on the eve of Russia’s 2014 Winter Olympics, became the center of Putin’s crackdown. Khodorkovsky’s



was among the most obscene of the privatizations: Myers calculates that Khodorkovsky and fellow investors paid \$150 million in the 1990s for the company's main production unit, which was valued at about \$20 billion by 2004.

Khodorkovsky began leveling accusations of corruption at the very Russian state from which he had appropriated one of the world's great fortunes. Putin saw his own task as restoring to the country what had been stolen from it. In his view, here was Khodorkovsky preening before his powerful American friends, hoping they might help him consolidate his theft. But no matter what Khodorkovsky did, he would have fallen afoul of Putin. The two wound up in arguments over, for instance, whether building a new pipeline to China was the prerogative of the state or of Khodorkovsky. As Putin saw it, the Russian government could not afford such arguments. It needed to reclaim control of its vast reserves of oil and gas, on which much of Europe depended, because that was the only geopolitical lever it had left.

### No More Humiliations

PUTIN SEALED HIS BOND WITH THE public by beating back, with the utmost brutality, the military advance of Islamist separatists in the Russian border regions of Chechnya and Dagestan. Like Margaret Thatcher in Britain in the 1982 Falklands War, he sensed his people's fury at seeing their country counted among the has-beens of history. He sensed it because he shared it. "We will not tolerate any humiliation to the national pride of Russians," he said on the eve of becoming president, "or any threat to the integrity of the country." NATO had, months earlier, bombarded Serbia in order to back a nationalist-Muslim independence movement in Kosovo, and had used the opportunity to show Russia its lowly place in the international order, treating it as a nuisance and an afterthought. This degradation—not any desire to return to Communism—is what Putin meant when he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."

Putin has a gift for making the best of a bad strategic hand. But he was not a natural defense-policy whiz. When the nuclear submarine *Kursk* sank in Arctic waters in his first year in office, he dithered, and refused Western offers to help raise it. The refusal was understandable, given the primacy he placed on the country's autonomy. The dithering may have cost dozens of sailors' lives. Over time, though, Putin's unorthodox foreign policy worked, particularly in the Caucasus. Part of his strategy was a decision not to negotiate with hostage-

takers, even in secret. In the autumn of 2002, armed Chechens occupied a musical theater in Moscow and took 912 spectators hostage. A Russian special operations team flooded the theater with a sleeping gas and killed all 41 terrorists; 130 hostages died. Myers, like almost all journalists who covered the episode, is inclined to see this outcome as a "disaster":

Officials refused to discuss how forty-one fighters with arms and explosives managed to slip into the capital undetected. They refused to divulge the formula for the gas used to anesthetize those inside the theater. The Duma, under pressure from Putin, refused to authorize an investigation.... The doubts—even the questions—infuriated Putin.

The raid on the theater was not a disaster, certainly not as the Russian public saw it. It was a victory, won in battle, under high pressure, against a particularly heinous foe. If the price was high, it was not Putin who willed it to be high. *C'est la guerre*. A siege just as

### One thing about Putin stood out as bizarre: he told his fellow agents he believed in God.

horrible followed two years later, in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, when Islamists took more than a thousand hostages, including elementary school children. Almost 400 of the hostages were killed in the raid. In his address to the nation, Myers says, Putin "offered no apology and accepted no responsibility. He did not use the occasion to defend, justify, or explain his policies in Chechnya."

Again, Russian citizens saw it differently: where does one get the idea that terrorists willing to kill schoolchildren are entitled to any such explanation?

### World Power

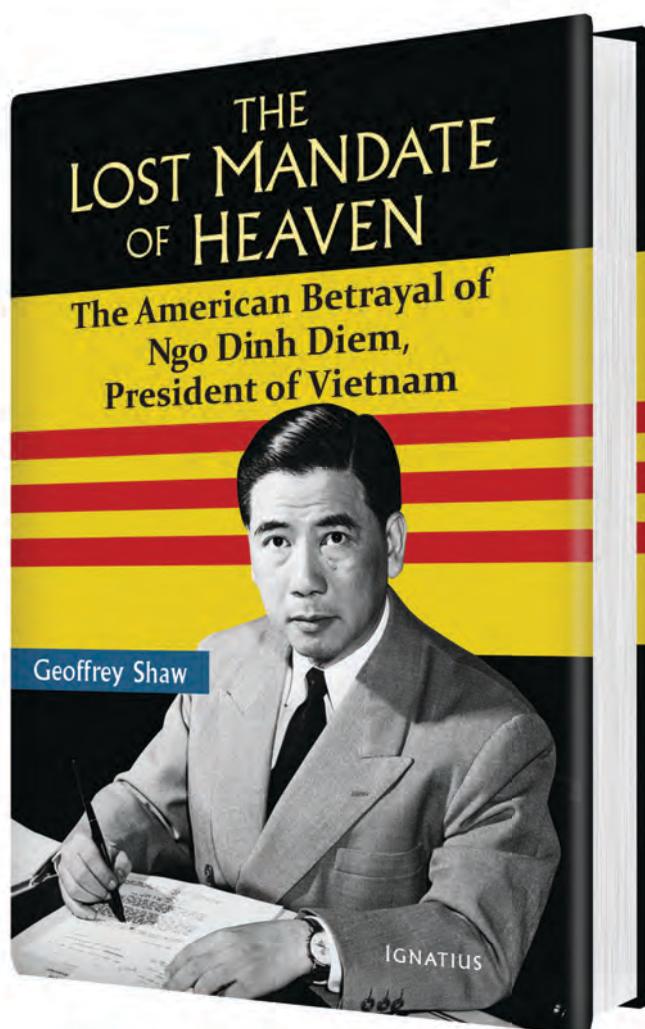
NOW RUSSIA HAS REEMERGED AS A geopolitical power, both through its intervention to protect the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and in its reincorporation of culturally Russian Crimea from Ukraine in the wake of the revolution there. Myers's account of the Ukraine conflict is one of the more balanced to have appeared from a mainstream Western reporter. He does not ignore that, while the 2013-14

overthrow of the corrupt Russophile Viktor Yanukovich began with a peaceful occupation of Kiev's main square, it culminated in armed violence. He does not dismiss as theatrics Putin's description of the revolutionary government as "fascist." (The anti-Semitic Svoboda party held three cabinet posts in the first post-uprising government, and armed members of the right-wing Pravy Sektor patrolled polling stations outside Kiev during that spring's elections.) Nor does Myers dispute that Russian historical claims to the Crimean peninsula are strong. The historian Perry Anderson recently reminded readers of the *New Left Review* that Russian armies lost more men defending the Crimean city of Sebastopol in two sieges than the U.S. lost in both world wars. In the end, strategic considerations were decisive. Putin seized Crimea because it is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and it was on the verge of becoming enemy territory.

If Myers has certain liberal biases common to Western reporters, he never assumes that people hardened by 75 years of tyranny and two decades of robbery will share them. Still, as *The New Tsar's* narrative advances towards the present, it gets very focused on movements of money. Myers suspects that Putin's crowd, and Putin himself, have been motivated by self-dealing and greed. Corruption there surely is, but Putin's decade and a half in power has been too successful for graft to have been its primary motivation. Hugo Chávez ruled the same sort of oil-dependent economy over the same years with a similarly strong hand. The result for the state-owned *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PdVSA) was bankruptcy, not flourishing. The focus on money corruption may stem from a historiographic problem. Putin has made the Russian presidency less transparent. Those who report on it tend to consult international authorities, who focus on such things as financial flows.

Myers strikes the right note between analytical neutrality and skepticism when he discusses the high-profile murders that have become a part of Russian political life in the past decade: Anna Politkovskaya, the crusading Chechnya correspondent shot in her apartment building in Moscow in 2006; Alexander Litvinenko, the spy poisoned with polonium-210 in London months later; Sergei Magnitsky, an ailing lawyer for American investors who died in prison under murky circumstances in 2009; the anti-Putin activist Boris Nemtsov, shot on a bridge in Moscow in early 2015. "No direct evidence has yet emerged that Putin had any involvement in Litvinenko's death, or Politkovskaya's, or any of the other mysterious and unsolved

“The Vietnam War need not have been lost...”



### THE LOST MANDATE OF HEAVEN

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**Geoffrey Shaw, Ph.D.**, received his doctorate in history from the University of Manitoba, with a focus on US diplomatic and military history in Southeast Asia. He was an Assistant Professor of History for the American Military University for 14 years, and has written and spoken widely about US military involvement in Vietnam and the Middle East.

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crimes that bore the hallmarks of political assassination during his rule,” he notes. Arguments for Putin’s involvement tend to be of a *cui bono* nature. They involve what a British report into Litvinenko’s death, released to fanfare in January, calls “strong circumstantial evidence.” Myers never ignores that there is a lot of it. (The British report largely follows the arc of his own narrative.) He spends much time on a bizarre incident in the city of Ryazan that took place just days after a series of apartment bombings in Moscow. FSB agents were alleged to have hidden explosives in an apartment building’s basement. When they were discovered, it was passed off as a training exercise, although government officials denied having known of it. “Independent lawmakers and journalists who pursued the question died with such disturbing regularity,” Myers writes, “that it was difficult to consider their deaths mere coincidence.”

#### Any Alternative?

**P**ERHAPS IT IS UNREASONABLE TO EXPECT better of Russia. The country is less aggressive than when it led the Soviet Union, and calmer than it was during the violent and penurious Yeltsin years. Despite austerity dictated by low energy prices and Western sanctions, Russian GDP is still almost ten times what it was in the late 1990s, and life expectancy has risen over 70 for the first time in the country’s history. Its mass media are trammled, even if there is a lot of independent journalism on the internet. Its party system is anemic. Opposition leaders are harassed and thwarted. Russian conservatism in an age of mass media is necessarily populist, and this, Laqueur writes, “is bound to bring it fairly close to fascism.” But the ideology that drives Putin, Laqueur argues, un-

savory and illiberal though he finds it, is not fascism. Its roots are elsewhere. Putin is an avid and a rather deep reader who has built a worldview from the work of pre-Communist and anti-Communist thinkers, chief among them Ivan Ilyin, Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He has made the reading of the *Gulag Archipelago* compulsory in secondary schools. Nor should we take Putin’s anti-Communism for granted. Laqueur has long argued that, had Russia been led by someone steelier than Mikhail Gorbachev when falling oil prices drove it into crisis in the 1980s, the collapse of Communism “might have happened only two or three decades later in a world situation quite different from the one in 1991.” Putin’s Russia is a system of “sovereign democracy” moored between Orthodox Christianity and Machiavellian realism.

Putin’s defensive stance towards U.S. hegemony can sound paranoid to Westerners. Russians find it commonsensical. They have come to believe the West is not content to live with a weakened and humbled Russia; it wants Russia broken and humiliated. Are they wrong? Executives at Yukos, the company stripped from Khodorkovsky, got a judge in Texas to block Russia’s auction of it. They lacked standing to do so, but the delay threw Russia’s financing of the sale into question. The Obama Administration has harassed Putin’s government over laws that forbid the promotion of homosexuality to young schoolchildren, even though Russia’s laws on homosexuality are, in general, more liberal than those that prevailed in the U.S. until the Supreme Court’s *Lawrence v. Texas* decision in 2003. In 2012, new ambassador Michael McFaul met opposition leaders on his second day on the job. At the Normandy celebration of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings

in 2014, in the wake of the Crimea incursion, Putin was “ostracized” by Western leaders, Myers recounts; the Soviet Union’s 24 million war dead apparently did not suffice as an anti-fascist credential under Western eyes.

Myers describes a meeting of Russian soccer-team owners discussing what they should do in the aftermath of Putin’s annexation of Crimea. One asked whether they should go out on a limb and welcome Crimean teams into the Russian soccer league. Might Western authorities impose sanctions on them? Of course they will, another club owner said, but that was no reason to stop. “No matter what you do, even if you crawl before them on your stomach—they’ll do it! Understand? So either bug out of this country or behave appropriately, like a citizen of this country.”

It is sovereignty that plays the role for today’s Russia that secularization did for Atatürk’s Turkey. The ability of U.S. and other Western authorities to intrude abroad into what once were thought strictly domestic, and even local, arrangements has confounded and challenged those who still see a use for national autonomy. Putin is one of these. He views his job as every leader outside the Communist bloc did a generation ago, and as pretty much every head of state outside of the U.S. and the European Union does today: as defending the interests of his people, the first of which is its independence. At this task he has succeeded against long odds. Since the Ukrainian revolution, this success has come at a considerable price, in both diplomatic isolation and lost trade. We will understand nothing about Putin until we realize that, in the eyes of most of his countrymen, he has been right to pay it.

*Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at the Weekly Standard.*

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