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By Miriam Lanskoy

Since his inauguration, Russian President Vladimir Putin has waged an ever-widening assault on every potential source of political opposition -- the media, the governors, big business. Although far from perfect, these institutions do represent the rudiments of a pluralistic society, the development of which is threatened at present by the vast powers of the presidency and Putin's growing reliance on the security forces.

Some recent commentary on Russian politics no longer stigmatizes an association with the bloodiest organization in human history. Quite the opposite: Joining the KGB is likened to studying at a prestigious American university -- the natural destination for the brightest and best.

Some have gone far beyond such comparisons, arguing as Tatiana Tolstaya did in her review of Putin's biography (May 10 issue of the New York Review of Books, p. 10) that KGB oversight was indispensable for democratic governance. "At a time when everyone was in a rush to declare his changed views, Putin remained true to the discipline of the Corporation," she writes approvingly. "One can only think that his unprecedented rise to the position of deputy mayor under Sobchak meant that the Corporation trusted him with this high position, anticipating that the inexperienced democrats were likely to botch things up."

In its flight of fantasy about the wise KGB agents looking out for the social good, the review neglects to analyze the book in question, which contains some very interesting insights into Putin's unapologetically chekist views, the implications of which are now becoming operational.
Afghanistan

Putin was a KGB agent for 16 years, from 1975 to 1991. He first became interested in this work as a teenager after seeing the movie "Sword and Shield" which glorified Russian spies. Having recently joined the KGB, the young idealistic Putin, whose feelings for everything connected with the war in Afghanistan are "one big hurrah!," meets a more seasoned colleague who has returned from a tour there. Putin asks the agent how he would judge the results of his work. The man responds that he judges his own performance by the quantity of documents he didn't sign. Putin explains that every bombing mission required the signature of a KGB agent. (p. 61)

Putin uses this anecdote to paint his fellow spies as the advance guard of liberal reforms, but a different point is of greater import: If KGB officers in Afghanistan were overseeing military operations, this is an astounding revelation. The institution of political commissars had been eliminated after World War II, and even then the political officer looking over the shoulder of the military commander was a representative of the party, not of the KGB. It could be that Putin is mistaken and the KGB did not have that degree of responsibility for military operations in Afghanistan, but the very fact that this level of KGB intrusion can be presented in such an offhand way raises a related issue: Last February, when Putin's decree assigned FSB agents to every military unit in Chechnya, what role did he grant them? Are those agents performing counterintelligence or are they there in a decision-making capacity?

Stasi

The chapter devoted to Putin's stay in the GDR is the most emotionally and politically charged part of the book. Consider the gulf between the sensibility of most reformers and that of the Putins revealed in the following comment from Vladimir's wife, Ludmilla: "[W]hen the Berlin wall was being destroyed and it became evident that this is the end, there was this terrible feeling, that the
country which almost had become your own would no longer exist." (p. 68)

While Ludmilla grieved over the passing of the GDR, Vladimir pitied the fate of his Stasi colleagues to whom he was deeply devoted. Even when he became the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, he used the position to lobby in their interest by warning the German consul, "Keep in mind that I am getting letters, these are my personal contacts. I understand you have a campaign against former state security agents -- they are hounded for political reasons -- but they are my friends and I will not abandon them." (p. 67)

Putin comments that the GDR was decades behind the Soviet Union in its rigid adherence to communism but later he had to watch, powerless and furious, as this seemingly doctrinaire society undid the police state, disbanded the Stasi, and imposed lustration laws. Seeing his Stasi chums suffer public humiliation, Putin considered the odds of having to undergo a similar fate.

**St. Petersburg administration**

Shortly after his return to St. Petersburg, Putin, whose credentials don't seem to have any particular relevance to city administration, applied for a position with Anatoly Sobchak's team at the urging of an unidentified acquaintance. Putin barely knew Sobchak, although he took the mayor's course at the law department of St. Petersburg University. The "corporate" representative presented himself at Sobchak's office, explained that he was on staff with the KGB, asked for a job with the mayor, and was hired on the spot. (pp. 78-79)

At present, we have no way of evaluating the accuracy of that story, but what we are being asked to believe is fairly incredible: That it is entirely natural for one of Russia's leading democrats to hire a chekist as his right-hand man. At the same time Putin suggests that some members of Sobchak's team were uncomfortable with Putin's KGB employment and had threatened to expose him. This prompted Putin to disarm his opponents skillfully by making a televised disclosure. (2) Putin
portrays these opponents, the persons trying to keep a chekist out of the city government, as corrupt, intolerant, and opportunistic.

**August coup**

Then came the August 1991 coup attempt, which dissolved against the wave of democratic enthusiasm. These events gave Putin the jitters. "Do you remember the situation in which the security organs found themselves then? That wave wanted to destroy [the KGB], break [it] apart, rip [it] to shreds. There were suggestions to open up the lists of agents, to declassify files. " (p. 129) Putin's savior was a democratic figure, a former policeman, Sergei Stepashin, who became the new head of the St. Petersburg FSK (heir to the KGB and predecessor to FSB). "Stepashin behaved in a completely unexpected way. In effect, he used his democratic credentials to shield the security services," thereby winning Putin's eternal gratitude. (3)

The storm passed, "our Cheka" remained intact, and Putin survived to repay his debts. When Putin was working in the presidential administration he suggested that Stepashin be appointed justice minister. When Putin became president, he nominated Stepashin to be the head of the Audit Chamber-- a nightstick with which to beat the oligarchs.

Source Notes:

(1) All the quotes represent my translations from Ot pervogo litsa: razgovory c Vladimirom Putynym (Moskva: 2000); the page numbers refer to the Russian book. The Russian text can be obtained from www.vagrius.com. There is an English translation available in bookstores by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

(2) The incident recalls an earlier passage in the book where Putin describes how the KGB would undermine dissident activists by preempting them. The KGB
would sponsor an event identical to the one the dissidents were planning, thereby robbing the dissident event of any news value. (pp. 43-44)

(3) Putin also mentions personalities who obstructed the progress of his career. In 1996 Putin needed a job because Sobchak had lost the gubernatorial elections. First, he was promised a diplomatic post but this fell through, apparently due to Yevgeni Primakov's hesitations. (p. 110) As foreign minister and previously head of Russia's foreign intelligence, Primakov would have been able to obtain and evaluate Putin's professional record. That rejection must have hurt. Subsequently, Nikolai Yegorov, then-head of the president's administration, intended to make Putin his deputy. But Yegorov was removed before he could make good on the promise and his replacement, Anatoli Chubais, eliminated the position. (p. 120) Of course, Putin professes to hold no grudges.