POST-IMPERIAL BLUES;
Billionaire oligarchs, Chechen suicide bombers, generals nostalgic for empire-and the reign of
Vladimir Putin.

DAVID REMNICK

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On a murky day twenty years ago, I sat in a Soviet railcar (Helsinki-Leningrad; rain-drizzled
windows) reading a collection of stories by Vladimir Nabokov. There was then, as there no longer is,
an illicit thrill in crossing over, West to East: the neat Finnish streets and houses thinning, then
vanishing, near the border; just minutes later, the signs of Soviet dilapidation. A puttering Zhiguli
towing another Zhiguli by a rope along a muddy road; waterlogged posters ("Communism = Soviet
power plus Electrification of the whole country!") nailed to the sides of a shack; a scaly drunk in a
padded jacket, oblivious of the rain, stomping his boots in a puddle. The train stopped with a creak at
the border town of Vyborg. The ventilation coughed and went still. A trio of clean-jawed men in
uniform—they could not have been more than twenty years old-climbed on board and made their way
down the aisles, checking passports and visas, making cursory searches of our bags. As agents of
state security, the guards tried to affect a haughty expression, but they managed to radiate only
nervousness, the sense that, just as they were watching us, someone of greater consequence was
watching them.

By the time the guards reached my row, they had already gathered a small stack of Bibles tied
together with twine and a cache of German skin magazines. They looked through my duffelbag and
saw nothing of interest. Then one of them extended his index finger and tipped back the book of
stories in my hand in order to examine its foxed cover. The cover illustration was of a generically
pretty girl with shimmery light hair, though curiously un-Russian, more like a model for the House
of Breck. The guard paused and narrowed his eyes. The book was not "Lolita," but it was Nabokov,
illegal all the same. Authors are banned not by title; they are banned whole. He knew. And yet he
looked me over and moved on, leaving me to my counter-revolutionary pleasure.

A few minutes later, the train eased once more into the trip eastward, the pleasingly numb
hours of birches and rain, the villages going by. Soon it was dark and the windows were
fogged. I turned to "The Visit to the Museum," in which a Russian emigre finds himself
wandering through a provincial museum in France. In a dreamlike state, he comes to realize
that he has passed through a magical portal into his native land, into Russia, and yet he has
the dawning sense that this is not quite his Russia. Everything is vivid: the coolness of the
air, and "the stone beneath my feet was real sidewalk, powdered with wonderfully fragrant,
newly fallen snow." But as he approaches a shoe-repair shop and sees the word "shoe," he
realizes that something is wrong; there is no tvyordy znak, the "hard sign" at the end of the
word. The letter was largely eliminated by the Bolsheviks. They'd set out to remake the
world, including its orthography:

I knew irrevocably where I was. Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual
Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land. . .
. Oh how many times in my sleep I had experienced a similar sensation! Now, though, it
was reality.

Nabokov left Russia in 1919 on a ship called the Hope and became a permanent exile:
Berlin, Paris, Cambridge, Ithaca, Montreux. His revulsion for what had become of Russia
was such that in "The Visit to the Museum" he could never bring himself to call the place
"the Soviet Union."

The train slowed. The suburbs of Leningrad, then the ghostly apartment blocks of the outer
city, sluiced by. With a jolt, we arrived. The Finland Station. The doors opened with a
rubbery kiss. The air that rushed in was damp and cold and smelled of cheap tobacco. On
the platform, I bought a roll stuffed with a few pebbles of bluish meat. I needed help getting
around, and so, for a few kopecks, I bought a copy of Pravda and a map and set off on my
way. 2

"The Visit to the Museum" is a story steeped in the exile's nostalgia. When I return to
Moscow now, I find myself thinking that this state of temporal, even historical,
disorientation also resembles a quality within Russia, within Russians. Twelve years after
the collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union itself, Russians live in a state of historical
disjunction and simultaneity. The kopecks I spent at the Finland Station are no longer in
circulation; Pravda's readership has dropped from nine million to a hundred thousand; in
some cities, many of the street names on the map have been changed to new or pre-
revolutionary names; in others, the streets are named for Lenin, Labor, the Red Banner.
Russians exist in an economy that is neither socialist nor capitalist; they live in distinctly
Soviet apartments, in Soviet conditions, and yet in television commercials they are
comfortable, clean, rich, in a Scandinavian sort of way. In the larger cities, even in smaller,
unexpected places, every material delight or spiritual degradation known to the modern
world is available for cash or credit; and yet there are still thousands of towns and villages
where men and women wear high boots and walk on muddy roads that are just as they were
in the time of the tsars.

Not long ago, I took a room in Moscow on the city's main drag, Tverskaya Ulitsa. In the
nineteenth century, Tverskaya was among the most fashionable streets in Russia: Tolstoy
lost a fortune playing cards at the English Club; the food stores supplied the tsars. In the
Communist era, the English Club became the Central Museum of the Revolution, and Food
Store No. 1 still had its chandeliers but hardly any food. Now the delicacies, the caviar and
the crab-at Tokyo prices-are back. Few can afford them; many come just to gaze, the way
they once did at Lenin's cap and his Rolls-Royce at the museum devoted to his memory.
When consumerism (legal and not) began to appear in the early nineties, it seemed to matter only to a few wealthy Russians and foreigners. This was the era of "the New Russians": vulgar, brash, and, often enough, criminal. It was the era of American gangster movies, bulletproof windows, strip joints, porn palaces, casinos with naked women swimming in enormous fish tanks.

The grotesqueries and the poverty of the first years of post-Soviet life are still reality. The naked women still swim in their tanks. Gangsters abound. But now, in the post-revolutionary era, there is something else in evidence in Moscow and in many other cities: a certain stifling calm, a disinterest in politics, a slowly growing middle and professional class, a more normal commercialism, a sense that while a new Russia-independent, prosperous, and linked to the West has not yet been achieved, not by a long shot, it is no longer inconceivable. And the embodiment of modern times in Russia is its President, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Putin is not a man of imagination or spark. He is intelligent, competent, blandly agreeable-a bureaucrat thrust forward in history. His is the bearing of the vigilant listener, of the intelligence agent. After he joined the K.G.B., he used to tell his close friends, "I am a specialist in human relations." His language is usually flavorless in a particularly Soviet fashion. His gaze is flat, even dead, and gives nothing away. That is why most Russians thought it riotously funny when President Bush declared in 2001 that he had "looked the man in the eye" and got a "sense of his soul."

Rather than mark himself completely a man of the future, a democrat, a European-or, to the contrary, a Soviet, a man of traditional autocratic values-Putin has achieved the distinction of seeming everything to nearly everyone. His embrace of the ideals of the democracy movement in Russia—a free press, constitutionalism, civil liberties—is slight. He never fought for an end to Communism; he merely inherited a set of post-Communist realities. Putin is, first and foremost, a gosudarstvennik—a "statist"—who values the growth and stability of Russia before all else. If that means prosecuting a media baron or a business leader who displays even a trace of political ambition, so be it. If that means filling the state bureaucracy with thousands of former intelligence officers, then it must be so. And yet, paradoxically, no less than Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin, Putin has decided that Russia does not have an ideologically or mystically determined "special path" of development; rather, Russia's destiny is allied to Europe's and to the United States'-its future could easily include membership in the European Union and nato.

Yeltsin staked his historical reputation on destroying the Communist system and the empire known as the Soviet Union. Putin has cast himself as a man of evolution. He makes gestures toward the old order, if only to soothe the bruised feelings of the Russian people. He praises the honesty of the dissident hero Andrei Sakharov, but he also has kind words for Stalin's dubious military acumen. Although Putin is realistic about Russia's diminished standing in the world, and even admits (up to a point) to a history of horrific cruelty and loss, he constantly assures his countrymen that theirs is a nation of historical greatness and that greatness, in some new form, will surely return. At the celebrations this spring for the three-hundredth anniversary of his native St. Petersburg, he lauded the city's imperskii blyesk-its
"imperial splendor." The pro-Kremlin party in parliament, United Russia, uses figures such as Pushkin and Stolypin, the early twentieth-century economic reformer, to advertise its virtues.

Putin, who was appointed acting President when Yeltsin suddenly resigned, on December 31, 1999, won election in 2000, with fifty-two per cent of the vote. He will surely win reelection in 2004. His popularity rating runs to more than seventy per cent. Some new Russian textbooks describe his childhood in the same hagiographic terms once reserved for general secretaries of the Communist Party.

For now, Russia is lucky, floating along on a tide of profits from the oil-and-gas industry. The ruble is strong, world energy prices are high, inflation is declining, and economic growth, for the fifth year in a row, is robust. Nevertheless, Putin's opponents, be they Moscow liberals or provincial Communists, complain that oil provides only a fleeting security; they talk of zastoi-"stagnation"-a term evocative of the Brezhnev era. A Web site called vladimir.vladimirovich.ru features dozens of absurdist anekdoty about Putin's cold-bloodedness, his neo-Soviet habits; political jokes have not been in such fashion since the days of the last Kremlin dinosaurs, in the early eighties. "The atmosphere is not as oppressive as it was under Brezhnev, but it's sickening, and it says a lot, that such a Web site would appear and gain such popularity," Masha Lipman, a political analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said. Putin's supporters just shrug. They welcome the lethargy.

"Putin arrived as the man to stop the revolution," Gleb Pavlovsky, a bumptious intellectual with a dissident past who cultivated an image as the shadowy operative in Putin's last campaign, told me. "This is why the theme of his election campaign was Thermidor. His message to voters was that this will be the end of revolution.

"Putin is an unrealized Louis Philippe," Pavlovsky went on. "He prefers family life and would like to keep his workday to eight hours and forget about it afterward. He's like the rest of the country in that way. After twenty years of revolution and surprises, people are tired. They're exhausted by the notion of thinking about an entirely new world, a new state, a new form of economy and thinking-new everything! And so they forgive Putin his weaknesses, because they know he feels the same things that they do." 3

When Yeltsin handed power to Putin, Putin, in turn, handed Yeltsin a package of comforts (the dacha, security, cars, drivers, etc.) and, more important, a grant of legal immunity. By the time he left office, Yeltsin was despised by so many people, and by so many politicians, that there was always the chance that he could become the object of prosecution. His rash and disastrous decision to unleash a war in Chechnya, the new economy of corrupted winners and resentful losers, and the collapse of basic industries and social services all made it impossible for most Russians to give Yeltsin credit for making the break with Soviet Communism. Indeed, the majority resented what the West most celebrated: the demise of the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin and "the Family"-a team composed of his daughter Tatyana Dyachenko, various business tycoons, and several close aides such as Valentin Yumashev (who married
Dyachenko) and the chief of staff, Aleksandr Voloshin—gave Putin the Russian Presidency mainly because he seemed competent and loyal. Putin ascended, in part, because after a decade of revolution hardly any political reputations had survived. As Boris Nemtsov, one of the many Kremlin ministers once thought to have a chance to succeed Yeltsin, told me, "Revolutions eat their young, to say nothing of their young politicians." In less than four years, Putin was summoned to work as a Kremlin aide, then was made chief of intelligence, then prime minister, then President. "Yeltsin's people created Putin out of a pot of clay," Leonid Parfyonov, one of Russia's leading television journalists, said. "We don't have a real party system, so the Kremlin gave birth and breath to this man."

In many respects, Putin has maintained, and even furthered, Yeltsin's political course, especially in foreign policy and in his general support for the legislation needed to create a functioning market economy and legal system. Yeltsin has complained publicly only once about his successor. That was when Putin supported an effort to reinstate the Soviet national anthem, composed, with Stalin's approval, in 1943. Putin called on the deeply conservative writer Sergei Mikhalkov, who co-wrote the Soviet-era lyrics ("Party of Lenin, the strength of the people / To Communism's triumph, leads us on!"). to write some new verses to suit the modern era:

From the southern seas to the polar region

Spread our forests and fields.

You are unique in the world, inimitable.

Native land protected by God!

Yeltsin took the revival as an affront. He had replaced the Soviet red flag with the tsarist-era tricolor and the hammer and sickle with the two-headed eagle, a symbol originating from the fifteenth century. Throughout the Yeltsin era, when a national anthem was called for, orchestras played Mikhail Glinka's 1833 hymn, "A Patriotic Song"—a tune without lyrics. Putin's anthem was an offense to the leaders of the democracy movement. "This is the music that accompanied the murder of tens of millions of people!" Aleksandr Yakovlev, a close adviser to both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, told me. "The entire literary and musical and artistic intelligentsia spoke out against it—Rostropovich, Solzhenitsyn, all of them! But Putin felt he had to make some sort of compromise with the Communist Party," which is still the leading opposition party in the country. "He also decided to revive the state prize called the Order of Lenin. And yet Lenin was a criminal who should be tried for crimes against humanity!"

Putin's reasoning for having what Russians call a "postmodern" collection of symbols—some tsarist, some Soviet, some sui generis—is part of his everything-to-everyone strategy. Most Russians do not regret the loss of Communist ideology or their dominion over Eastern Europe, but they do mourn the past greatness of the "inner empire," the non-Russian republics that are now on their own. The Soviet Union, like the tsarist empire before it,
commanded respect and fear in the world, and the anthem was consonant with that sense of position. Putin always wins applause when he tells a crowd, "Anyone who does not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart, but anyone who wants it restored has no brain." Putin's anthem is a hymn to past greatness and a promise of return-a popular and unifying sentiment. And so Putin felt he could summarily dismiss Yeltsin's objections. "We respect the first President, we listen to his opinions, and take them into account making decisions," he said. "But we act on our own."

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, I rarely met anyone who did not say of Putin that he is "a good guy," "a normal fellow," "trying his best." He is even more unassailable in the provinces. To be sure, there were plenty of urban journalists and intellectuals who told me that they find Putin weak, indecisive, or even a closet authoritarian guilty of war crimes in Chechnya and determined to stifle dissent and an independent judiciary. For some, he resembles Alexander III, the conservative tsar who followed Alexander II, who liberated the serfs. "This is a time of an inert public," Aleksei Venediktov, the chief editor of the independent radio station Echo of Moscow, said. "Putin has no understanding of democracy in the Western sense. For him, order precedes everything else in the social contract."

But that is an elite, minority view. Putin is equally popular among poor retirees, who often vote Communist, and young professionals, who barely remember the world before Gorbachev's perestroika. Yeltsin, too, came to office with high approval ratings, but he quickly exhausted those reserves by instituting painful (and often botched) economic reforms and committing, as with Chechnya, horrendous mistakes. Putin is intent on husbanding his rating, not merely because it will insure reelection but also because such a rating represents the very idea of his Presidency: post-revolutionary calm.

In private, Yeltsin objects to a great deal more than the Stalinist anthem. "Now Boris Nikolayevich complains about Putin all the time," one politician told me. "It's not just the symbols. It's everything they stand for. He thinks Putin is too cautious. I think if he didn't depend on Putin for his well-being he would be a lot more open about it. As it is, he sits at home and bitches to the people he thinks he can still trust. And Putin knows this. Putin's relationship is easier now with Gorbachev than it is with Yeltsin. Sometimes it's easier to get along with your grandfather than it is with your father."

Yeltsin, since leaving the Kremlin and transferring custody of the nuclear-weapons codes to Putin ("Take care of Russia!" he told his successor as he walked out the door), has lived almost obscurely, in a village about an hour from the capital, at the same gated dacha compound that he used while he was in power. In the last several years of his Presidency, Yeltsin was a feeble sight. He was often drunk, sometimes in public, and almost always sick. Weeks would go by with Yeltsin bedridden, incommunicado. "Boris Nikolayevich is reviewing documents," the Kremlin press service would tell reporters. "You should see him now," one of his closest advisers, Anatoly Chubais, told me not long ago. "Boris Nikolayevich has not looked so healthy in years. He barely drinks. He swims."

In Yeltsin's totalistic scheme of the world, you were with him or against him. Putin, by contrast, has repeatedly said, through statement and gesture, that he bears no grudges, makes
no judgments, about the past. At his inauguration, in 2000, Putin invited his former boss at the K.G.B., Vladimir Kryuchkov, who engineered the failed 1991 coup against Gorbachev and has never apologized for it. "We have nothing to regret," Kryuchkov said at a roundtable discussion of former K.G.B. chiefs. "We only tried to save the Union. It's those who unleashed the present chaos who should think about repentance."

"Kryuchkov was a true believer in Communism, who sided with the coup plotters," Putin has said, "but he was also a very decent man. To this day, I have the greatest respect for him." Another of the plotters, the former Soviet prime minister Valentin Pavlov, went out of his way to celebrate the new regime. "Today, they are trying to do what we attempted to do in the Soviet Union in 1991," he said. On the tenth anniversary of the defeat of the coup, two years ago, Putin made sure to draw no attention to an event that he knew the world recalled with joy and his countrymen with profound ambivalence: there were no Kremlin parades, no official speeches. The President went trout fishing in Karelia.

At a dinner at "21" hosted by Tom Brokaw a few years ago, I sat with Putin, his translator, and some other media guests. Unlike Gorbachev, a notorious boltun-"windbag"-Putin spoke only when addressed. (And, unlike Yeltsin, he hardly touched his wine.) He parried our questions with cursory answers and even an occasional charmless roll of his eyes. In the interviews he has granted to Western outlets, generally before a foreign visit, he seems to go out of his way to be as boring as possible. When he spoke to students and invited guests at Columbia University a couple of weeks ago and at a meeting with American reporters at his dacha outside Moscow recently, he droned on in a style familiar to the reader of "The Collected Speeches of Yuri Andropov." As I sat with him at the "21" dinner, I felt that I had been with such men dozens of times in Moscow-ascetic former officers of the K.G.B. who were, thanks to their preparation and years abroad, comfortable in any setting yet who often betrayed a steely disdain for all the ignorance and opulence around them. ("I am not sure you understand what you are talking about," he told Katie Couric at one point.)

With time, it's become clear that Putin's blandness and reserve are only in part a matter of innate character and professional posture; they are also a tactical choice, a determination that Russia endured long enough Gorbachev's soliloquies and Yeltsin's unpredictable and autocratic nature. This year, one of the most popular television programs in the country was a serialization of Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot." In the novel, the narrator says of Russia that "people are constantly complaining that we have no practical men," that the civil service is filled with incompetents who let the crops rot in the fields and the trains smash into one another. Although Putin is late to every appointment, he has carefully cultivated an image as Russia's first practical man, a distinctly un-Russian efficiency expert. Putin, the saying goes, "is our German."

Putin's grandfather was a cook for Stalin at one of his country estates near Moscow. During the Second World War, Putin's mother nearly starved to death during the nine-hundred-day Nazi blockade of Leningrad (at one point, she fainted from hunger and was thrown onto a stack of corpses); his father was wounded at the front and survived only because one of his comrades dragged him across the frozen Neva River to safety; one child, a son, died of diphtheria.
Putin was born after the war, in 1952. He grew up in Leningrad, and, like so many in that city, he and his family lived in a kommunalka, a communal apartment, where there was no bath, no hot water, and plenty of rats. "My friends and I used to chase them around with sticks," Putin once said. He was a mediocre student and spent most of his time playing in the city courtyards. If he had a real ambition, he got it from reading thrillers. "Even before I graduated from school, I wanted to work in intelligence. It was a dream of mine, although it seemed about as likely as a flight to Mars," he told the interviewers for a book-length conversation called "First Person," published in 2000. "Books and spy movies like 'The Sword and the Shield' took hold of my imagination. What amazed me most of all was how one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not. One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people. At least, that's the way I understood it.

"In order to find out how to become a spy, sometime back around the beginning of the ninth grade I had gone to the office of the K.G.B. Directorate," Putin continued. "A guy came out and listened to me. 'I want to get a job with you,' I said. 'That's terrific, but there are several issues,' he said. 'First, we don't take people who come to us on their own initiative. Second, you can come to us only after the Army or after some type of civilian higher education.' I was intrigued. 'What kind of higher education?' I asked. 'Any!' he said. He probably just wanted to get rid of me. 'But what kind is preferred?' I asked. 'Law school.' And that was that. . . . When I accepted the proposition from the Directorate's personnel department, I didn't think about the Stalin-era purges. My notion of the K.G.B. came from romantic spy stories. I was a pure and utterly successful product of Soviet patriotic education." Putin studied law at Leningrad State University, and in his fourth year was recruited to join the K.G.B.

Eventually, Putin was assigned to work in East Germany. A tremendous amount of journalistic energy has been spent trying to discern what Putin actually achieved in East Germany, and the answer is, clearly, not a lot. Dresden, where he was stationed, was a third-rate assignment, as opposed to, say, Berlin. Putin collected information on visiting foreigners, he spent time trying to cultivate agents and sources, but he never had the chance to emulate the heroes of "The Sword and the Shield." His work was, in the main, dull. There were many idle days and nights in Dresden for Putin, his wife, Lyudmila, whom he married in 1983, and their two young daughters. "We used to go to a little town called Radeburg where there was one of the best breweries in East Germany," he said in "First Person." "I would order a three-litre keg. You pour the beer into the keg, you add a spigot, and you can drink straight from the barrel. So I had 3.8 litres of beer every week. And my job was only two steps from my house, so I didn't work off the extra calories." Putin gained twenty-five pounds in Dresden.

The most eventful time in Putin's career as a spy came in his last weeks in Dresden, when signs of the collapse of Communism-and the Berlin Wall-became plain. Rather than face a potential insurrection and exposure as agents of the Soviet oppressor, Putin and his colleagues at the K.G.B. and the East German secret police, the Stasi, began to burn their files. "We destroyed everything—all our communications, our lists of contacts and our agents' networks," he said. "We burned so much stuff that the furnace burst. We burned papers night and day. All the most valuable items were hauled away to Moscow." Crowds began to
demonstrate around the Stasi buildings and the K.G.B. outpost. "Those crowds were a serious threat. We had documents in our building. And nobody lifted a finger to protect us. . . . These people were in an aggressive mood. I called our group of forces and explained the situation. And I was told, 'We cannot do anything without orders from Moscow. And Moscow is silent.' . . . But that business of 'Moscow is silent'-I got the feeling then that the country no longer existed. That it had disappeared."

Putin experienced Moscow's silence not as an ideological loss but, rather, as a betrayal of loyal professionals. He was a salaried satrap of the empire, and, as if in an instant, there was no empire, no rivalry with the United States, no stature, no money. Putin was ill-prepared for this. He and his family had not experienced at first hand the changes that Gorbachev had initiated in Moscow, the revelations about the Soviet past, the protests against the Party and the K.G.B. One former K.G.B. associate told me that if Putin had had any sort of future after Dresden he would have been assigned to the K.G.B.'s central headquarters, in Moscow. Instead, he was charged with watching foreign students at Leningrad State University—a lowly calling. The K.G.B. was already beginning to cut back on personnel as it became clear that the Cold War was over, and it was equally clear that Putin's intelligence career was coming to an end.

Before it did, however, he encountered Anatoly Sobchak, a law professor at the university and a leading democrat, who would soon become mayor. A man of liberal ideals but a hopelessly inept administrator, Sobchak eventually hired Putin to help him run the city. Putin proved adept at learning the new rules of the market, though many of the deals he made collapsed. Boris Fyodorov, who served as finance minister under Yeltsin, told me that in those days he met "a dozen times" with Putin. "He was always extremely careful. He didn't look you in the eye. He mostly listened. He was still living in a communal apartment"—with his wife and daughters—"and he talked only about business and politics."

When the coup plotters sent tanks into Moscow on the morning of August 19, 1991, Yeltsin led the resistance there; in Leningrad, the leader of the resistance was Sobchak. Putin, despite his K.G.B. background and his high regard for Kryuchkov, returned from vacation to help his boss. Sobchak, with Putin working the phones in the Mariinsky Palace, rallied the city against the coup; the demonstration on the square behind The Hermitage rivalled the biggest rallies in the capital.

The post-coup euphoria was pervasive in Leningrad; Sobchak, like Yeltsin, was enormously popular. But as the years passed, and as Yeltsin's Kremlin came to resemble a Byzantine court, with warring factions of business barons and security chiefs, idealists like Sobchak became less welcome. Sobchak came up for reelection in 1996, and the most conservative faction in the Kremlin, led by Yeltsin's personal bodyguard, Aleksandr Korzhakov, propped up an opponent named Vladimir Yakovlev, who won by less than two per cent.

"When Sobchak lost the election, Putin submitted his resignation," Sobchak's widow, Lyudmila Narusova, told me. "He said, 'Better to be hanged for loyalty than live rich from betrayal.' " Sobchak lived for a while with his family at his dacha outside St. Petersburg and then accepted a job in Moscow, in the Kremlin's property office. Even out of power,
Sobchak remained a focus of attack: the St. Petersburg press became filled with accusations of corruption. In 1997, Sobchak, who was in his fifties, suffered a heart attack, and Putin, calling on his old connections in the K.G.B., organized a private plane to smuggle Sobchak to Paris for medical treatment. When Sobchak died of another heart attack, three years later, Putin wept at the funeral. "He did not die of natural causes," he told Narusova.

Putin's demonstrations of fealty to Sobchak were a crucial part of what led Yeltsin and the Family to accelerate his career and, finally, to appoint him tsar. "They figured that he was a man of loyalty," Anatoly Chubais said, "and that his loyalty was transferrable." 4

Not long after he became President, Putin said he would tame the small group of self-described "oligarchs" who had used their political connections to take ownership, or control, of the oil industry; banking; mineral, chemical, and metal plants; construction and real-estate concerns; and, the most political of the economic sectors, the media. In 1996, the oligarchs had joined forces to help Yeltsin win reelection over the Communist Party candidate; they acted out of pure self-interest. "Don't forget the seriousness of that threat," Yegor Gaidar, the most liberal of Yeltsin's many prime ministers, said. "A return of the Communists to power in Russia really would have been a terrible danger for the world. Expectations are always high after a revolution and people are invariably disappointed, and so the Communists come to power again." The benefits that came to the oligarchs after Yeltsin's reelection—the properties, the contracts—were incalculable.

As President, Putin soon met with the principal oligarchs and delivered a message: So long as you stay out of politics, you will be allowed to keep your properties, no matter how they were obtained. The Kremlin was already moving against the two who showed the greatest impudence: Boris Berezovsky, an industrialist and media magnate, whose political pretensions were too blatant for Putin to tolerate, and Vladimir Gusinsky, who had made his fortune in banking and Moscow real estate and his name by starting NTV, the first privately owned network in the country. Both were forced out of the country. Berezovsky lives in London, where he has tried, with little success, to launch an opposition movement against Putin. Gusinsky lives in Israel and in Greenwich, Connecticut; he lost control of NTV to a state gas monopoly, and now the network, while still less obsequious than the rest, is far less rambunctious than it had been.

The most prominent oligarch remaining was a moonfaced oil executive named Mikhail Khodorkovsky. A former officer in the Young Communist League, Khodorkovsky is now forty and, according to Fortune, wealthier than any other man or woman in Europe. During the Gorbachev era, he was among the privileged young people who were granted the chance to test the new semi-capitalist market. In the late eighties, Khodorkovsky used Communist Party sponsorship and connections to begin a successful bank called Menatep; and by becoming an adviser to the Russian government he had unparalleled access to crucial information. Eventually, Khodorkovsky got into the most lucrative of all Russian businesses, the oil business, and through his connections, and through a ruthless series of maneuvers, he came to run the newly merged oil conglomerate Yukos-Sibneft. His company is so wealthy, and the rest of the economy so weak, that Khodorkovsky, by his estimate,
contributes seven per cent of Russia's total tax revenue. He is worth around a billion dollars personally and told me that another eight billion is "under my control."

I met Khodorkovsky at his head-quarters in Moscow, a glass office building that looked as if it had been airlifted from Houston. The Moscow of the twenty-first century is filled with such buildings. The old-style Soviet offices still functioning have the customary worn red runner carpets and smell like an overflowing ashtray; these offices have the smell of a new car, and they are invariably equipped with dozens of armed security men and six-foot-tall beauty queens dressed in Versace and Armani suits and bearing leather binders.

Khodorkovsky grew up in a middle-class family, but his years of experience in the Young Communist League business offices and in the new Russian economy show. Many of the figures in big business felt that in the conference rooms of Europe and the United States a decade ago they were regarded as rubes—"They treated us like educated monkeys," the banker Pyotr Aven complained—but Khodorkovsky betrays no resentment. He seems at ease, self-contained, as if he had been born to riches.

Although Khodorkovsky has never been as brazen in his political ambitions as Gusinsky and Berezovsky, he discovered that he was not immune from Kremlin pressure. Occasionally, Putin meets with the leading business figures in Moscow, and at one such session, earlier this year, the President attacked him sharply. When I asked Khodorkovsky about it, he flushed and smiled. He told me that he had been called on to talk about corruption involving a financial transaction between two oil companies. "Evidently, this was not the first time the issue had been raised with him, and it struck a raw nerve," Khodorkovsky said.

Putin, various sources told me, grew angry with Khodorkovsky and, in paraphrase, told him to watch who was calling the kettle black where corruption was concerned. Everyone, the President said, knew how the men in the room had become so rich so fast.

Khodorkovsky does not feign innocence. "I don't set myself up as a shining example," he told me. "Nor have I ever said that I've been a model citizen. On the other hand, it's possible to develop and change, especially in rapidly changing times. You can't just accord the right to change to successive generations. My life is a good example of this. It shows that in a single lifetime there can be two or more watersheds. Until I was in my mid-twenties, I was raised as a model Soviet citizen. I thought there was no other way to live. There were people, with more humanistic educations, who thought there was something not quite right with our lives. But not me. I thought it was all going quite well. It's funny to hear myself saying this now, but it's true. Then, from twenty-five till my mid-thirties, I was convinced that everything had been wrong and that absolutely everything was permissible. You could get away with not breaking any laws because there weren't really any laws. People, even in the West, tried to say I broke the law, but they were never able to prove it. Not everything was ethical. This is not something for me to be proud of. Those were tough times; the way we dealt with minority shareholders was not ethical. Then, from thirty-five onward, I've had a third life. You can't be involved in business and engage in politics successfully. Many have tried. They are abroad now."
In his "third life," Khodorkovsky has championed "transparency" in corporate accounting and in the economy generally. He established a charitable foundation that has contributed huge sums to universities, the arts, and other causes. When he travels in the United States, he meets with top figures in Congress and the federal bureaucracy and mixes easily with other oil barons. These moves are as purposeful as Putin's seeming blandness. To encourage foreign investment, to borrow from foreign banks at normal rates, Russian businessmen like Khodorkovsky cannot have outlaw reputations. They must advance yet another generation or two, from John D. Rockefeller to David Rockefeller, from robber baron to scion of established industry.

"In the West, things evolved more slowly," he said. "It took more than one hundred years to develop contemporary society. We've started from scratch. But we have a model to look at. It's easier to do your homework when you have the answers."

A few weeks after we met, Khodorkovsky and his company came under attack from the Kremlin. Police arrested his partner and chief financial adviser, Platon Lebedev—himself a billionaire—on charges of theft, and prosecutors announced that they were investigating instances of tax evasion, fraud, and even murder. For weeks, there were interrogations, searches, threats. Analysts in Moscow said the affair was the result of an ongoing feud in the Kremlin between those who support the new capitalists and those who support the traditional bureaucracy. They say that Khodorkovsky's involvement in politics, his support for potential opposition factions, was something neither Putin nor the security forces would tolerate. Putin, for his part, denies as "utter nonsense" that he is behind the pressure; it is just the law at work. Either way, one Russian journalist said, "Everyone is taking bets about if and when Khodorkovsky will be forced to leave the country." 5

Putin may periodically lash out at the oligarchs, but, in general, the arrangements of power and influence have altered less than one might think. Putin, unlike his volatile predecessor, rarely fires anyone. Yeltsin's chief of staff, Aleksandr Voloshin, a bald and bearded man in his forties, has remained in place under Putin and, if anything, is more powerful than before. Two of the most influential aides, Igor Sechin and Viktor Ivanov, come from Putin's old haunt, the K.G.B.'s headquarters in St. Petersburg. And then there are smaller factions centered on the oil companies, the state gas monopoly, and other concerns.

There is constant talk in Moscow political circles about Putin's lack of commitment to democratic principles, especially civil liberties. When I asked Anatoly Chubais, who now runs the state's vast electric-power system, whether Putin was a democrat, he laughed and said, "Is Silvio Berlusconi a democrat?" (As it happens, Putin is personally close to the Italian leader; his family has vacationed with the Berlusconis in Sardinia.) "The question should not be if he is a democrat or not," Chubais went on. "There is a spectrum of democrats that ranges from, say, Berlusconi to Tony Blair. Putin is somewhere within the spectrum, but he is closer to Berlusconi than he is to Blair. What he is not is Fidel Castro."

Perhaps the comparison to Berlusconi is apt. Putin's control of the airwaves is, in its way, as complete as Berlusconi's. Putin has systematically neutered serious opposition in the media. In an international press-freedom index, Russia ranks a hundred and twenty-first out of a
hundred and thirty-nine nations, according to the respected monitoring group Reporters Without Borders. Yelena Tregubova, a columnist at Kommersant, a leading daily newspaper in Moscow, told me that Presidential aides routinely call editors and threaten to "freeze out" their papers if they don't install "friendlier" correspondents at the Kremlin. Tregubova says that her own editor transferred her out of the Kremlin after feeling the pressure. "Putin reacts to criticism like a K.G.B. person," she said. "Everything that is not praise is some kind of threat to him." At his recent meeting with American reporters, Putin admitted, "I don't like provocative questions."

Twelve years after the fall of communism, there is no Soviet-style censorship at work, no Central Committee's ideology department reviewing every news broadcast. Instead, in 1999, the Kremlin, which has full control of state television, installed a genial, like-minded fellow-Konstantin Ernst, a former scientist-to run Channel One, the main station. Putin and his advisers know they can rely on him to keep matters under control. There are, of course, politicians and commentators who criticize the government. But within limits.

"Freedom of speech is a relative notion," Ernst told me one afternoon in his office, a sleek lair of steel and leather where several televisions were playing soundlessly. "It does not exist anywhere in its ideal form. It's like an ideal gas that does not exist in nature, only in theory. In reality, freedom of speech depends on the government, on the editors and producers. Everyone has a different sense of what it means."

Ernst admitted that he spoke from time to time with Kremlin officials, especially with Voloshin, and when I asked what would happen if they disagreed about editorial policy he flapped his hand and smiled, as if to dismiss so absurd a notion. "That's impossible," Ernst said. "It's easy for me to work here, because the Kremlin's foreign and domestic policy is always clear and understandable to me. A minimum of mistakes have been made. There is no mental distance between the majority view and government policy."

Putin's opposition is weak, sporadic, disorganized, and ill-defined. Although the Communists remain the biggest opposition party in Russia, they are an aging party, one that likely missed its chance to capture the Kremlin in 1996. The leading liberal opposition parties these days are small and timid: the Union of Right Forces, which is "liberal" in the Friedmanite-Thatcherite sense; and Yabloko, which is "liberal" in the European social-democratic sense. These factions are represented in the Duma by some intelligent voices, but they are pathologically incapable of forming a coalition and tend to draw nearly all their votes in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a few other large cities. When they show any sign of influence, Putin easily coopts them or slaps them down.

I've known Grigori Yavlinsky since he was a young economist in the Gorbachev circle. Since 1993, he has led the Yabloko faction in the Duma. Now he is fifty-one, and he seems even more caustic, more frustrated than when I first met him. When I asked him about the opposition to Putin, he scowled and grew defensive. "Do you have a real opposition in Great Britain or Japan, much less in the United States?" he said. "So, if you are looking for one here, it's rather difficult. To have an opposition you need serious preconditions—an independent media, or at least a media that are not all in one hand. You need independent
financial resources, a civil society, a special environment. The Duma is filled with people who are on the take, as if they were staff members for the government administration or one interest or another. We have no independent elections. This is almost a corporate, semi-criminal system, and there are no alternatives that can be presented to the people. The system entirely serves one person."

Yavlinsky blamed Yeltsin for the "rotten" state of affairs. "We tried to bring the Yeltsin era to a close as soon as possible. His time was over in 1993," he said. "Everything that came after was counterproductive: Chechnya, the default in 1998, criminal privatization. But Yeltsin tricked us in a special way. He brought a successor onto the scene. And his system was cemented in place. This system can create one successor after another. So be prepared for a very long and winding road. In this situation, you can either be a dissident or help to create a civil independent party. You need a strategy and you need to keep on the vector of human rights, liberal policy, human dignity, private property. The challenge is to be independent while accepting money from the likes of Khodorkovsky." Yabloko is almost completely funded by Khodorkovsky. "or keeping an open dialogue with Putin, and understanding the regional bureaucracy, which is as loyal as animals to the President. Either people wake up and act or you wait indefinitely for the appearance of a 'good tsar.' My task in this system is to create an independent Russian democratic party. Eventually, we have to overcome, we have to create a post-Yeltsin era. Maybe in twenty years we'll get there." 6

In the days when Moscow was still the capital of an empire, the city was militarized. It wasn't just a matter of the occasional parades on Red Square, with all the ICBMs and tanks rumbling across the cobblestones, and the Politburo members waving absently atop Lenin's tomb. Everyday life was somehow militarized. Driving to work, you were forever following a troop truck with the sign "Lyudi" - "People"-tacked to a wooden back panel. Inside, a few dozen recruits in khaki uniforms sat on benches smoking and kidding around: there were recruits from every corner of the empire.

The Russian Army, the inheritor of the structures, arms, and tactics of the Soviet armed forces, is now a shambles: a psychological wreck, a material ruin. Conscription is still universal, but only notionally so. It's easy to bribe your way out of the draft for a couple of thousand dollars. It is only the least skilled, the least educated, who enlist. Many of the draftees are illiterate and in such poor physical condition that they are useless as anything more than cannon fodder in Chechnya or as sources of abuse for their predatory superiors. Dyedovshchina, the sadistic, often fatal, hazing of recruits, is ubiquitous: soldiers are routinely humiliated and tortured by their commanders, beaten with sticks, chains, chairs, anything at hand. Every year, thousands are wounded and hundreds are killed or commit suicide; thousands more go AWOL as a result of the abuse. The Russian Army is preposterously top-heavy-there are five times the number of generals as in the American armed services-and, for many of those officers and commanders, life has been so leached of a sense of mission and pride that they destroy themselves with drink; their salaries are so low that they ease into a life of corruption, petty or grand. In a rare case of prosecution, Colonel General Georgy Oleinik, a former financial official in the Defense Ministry, was convicted last year of "misappropriating" funds; it seems he misappropriated four hundred and fifty million dollars.
Dmitri Trenin, a former career officer in the Soviet Army, is now a scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center. He remains well connected at the Defense Ministry. When we met one afternoon for coffee, he described the ministry as a "ghost town," with innumerable generals sitting at their clean desks doing little more than trying to maintain some semblance of the status quo and their own positions. These generals and officers, Trenin said, suffer from "a huge inferiority complex." Having spent their careers as the heads of a colossal military machine preparing for the possibility of an Armageddon clash in Europe, they have refused to change strategy or tactics. Even as Putin talks about the possibility of Russia one day joining NATO, the Russian commanders still spend their energies devising ways to defeat it. Putin has so far been unwilling to reform the Army, to make it professional, smaller, more modern.

The Army has lost, in effect, its last three wars: after a decade of fighting, the Soviet armed forces retreated from Afghanistan; in 1994-96, Yeltsin foolishly tried to bomb Chechnya into submission, but failed; the revival of that war in the late nineties has, until now, resulted only in-as Russians say-the "Palestinization" of Chechnya, a conflict that now includes suicide bombers. The Russian troops in Chechnya are incapable of keeping any kind of peace in the region, and routinely rape, harass, loot apartments, demand protection money from local merchants, execute prisoners, and even sell arms to the rebels. Key Chechen militant groups have accepted help from Islamic radicals, including Al Qaeda.

"As a nuclear power, Russia is still potent. It still makes Russia the No. 2 country in strategic nuclear power," Trenin said. "But, apart from that, this military is so bad that it is a miracle that people are willing to go to Chechnya and risk their lives for the meagre pay that they get. The commander of the Kursk submarine"-which sank in 2000 owing to a mysterious explosion in the Barents Sea, killing a hundred and eighteen sailors-"got a salary of two hundred dollars a month. It is hard for me in Moscow to find a kid who will work here as an assistant for less than five hundred dollars a month. And this was a nuclear submarine with the power to annihilate a major country."

The politicians who support fundamental reform of the Army insist that Russia requires around five hundred thousand troops, not the more than one million in uniform today, and a total rethinking of its structures and strategy. Alexei Arbatov, the deputy chairman of the Duma's defense committee, told me, "We are still oriented toward a war against the West. This stems from Russian military strategy since the days of Peter the Great. To change this is like telling the astronomers to stop relying on Newton and Kepler." When we met at his office in the Duma, I asked him how the Russian military leadership had reacted to the American military performance in Iraq. I expected him to attack the motives for the war and the manipulation of intelligence, the failure to discover chemical or biological weapons.

"They reacted with shock and awe," he said with a smile. "They still do not understand that the American victory was due not just to technological prowess. It's civilian control of the military since the days of McNamara. In order to use that technology, you need a highly professional army."
Obsession with American power is universal. The Russians are obsessed with American power in their own way. Theirs is the reaction of the humbled rival learning to deal with an unaccustomed sense of weakness. This may be the most important emotion in all of Russian politics, and it shapes Putin's foreign policy almost completely.

Two of Russia's leading political pollsters, Aleksandr Oslon and Lev Gudkov, both told me that anti-Americanism in Russia is far different from what it is in, say, France. The feeling comes and goes. During the American military actions in Kosovo and Iraq, and during the last Winter Olympics, when Russian skaters were accused of winning a gold medal through bogus judging, antipathy toward the United States ran high. But then it faded. "Generally, Russians have a positive attitude toward the United States, but there is this complex of defeat and humiliation and even neurotic sensitivity that flares up," Gudkov said. "Fifty-five per cent think the West and the United States are trying to colonize Russia, but the U.S. is still seen as a utopia because it is the most vivid example of a normal country."

Putin's attitude toward the United States has proved flexible. When he began his term of office, the foreign-policy elites in Moscow-the Foreign Ministry lifers, the generals and admirals-anticipated that Putin would "stand up" to the United States more than Yeltsin ever did. With the exception of fairly marginal liberal politicians, most believed that Yeltsin was capable of great bluster with Washington but in the end would cave to every American demand and desire, be it in arms control, diplomacy, or trade. At first, Putin did seem a steelier, more readily offended negotiating partner than Yeltsin. Then came September 11th.

"Right after 9/11, Putin gathered many politicians to talk about the role of Russia in the situation," Grigori Yavlinsky, the head of Yabloko, said. "The absolute majority of politicians said that Russia should be either neutral or even on the side of the Taliban. Only a few spoke up and said that we should support the United States."

Putin went with the minority, with the liberals. He was, as it happened, the first leader of a major foreign country to call George Bush and pledge his support. That support included giving the American military critical intelligence reports on the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. These moves allowed Putin to make the argument to the West that, at this stage, the war in Chechnya was not a brutal assault but, rather, another front in the war against terrorism, and Washington, which had always at least lightly protested Russia's actions in Chechnya, now no longer does so with any conviction.

Putin's decision on how to react to September 11th was easy compared with the question of Iraq. He was wary of an American invasion, and he came under heavy pressure from German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder and French President Jacques Chirac to join their opposition to Washington in the United Nations. He was also under heavy pressure at home. "People in the K.G.B. and the military-industrial complex wanted to block Putin's 'American connection,' " Sergei Karaganov, a former foreign-policy adviser to Yeltsin, said. According to several well-informed diplomatic and intelligence sources, Putin was told by his generals and intelligence chiefs that the United States would have an impossible job finding physical evidence of any weapons of mass destruction and that an invasion would take months, if not years, to accomplish.
Putin does not seem to entirely trust his own Foreign Ministry to conduct day-to-day relations with the United States. During the Iraq crisis, he sent Voloshin, his chief of staff, to meet with officials at the White House. On other occasions, he has dispatched Dmitri Rogozin, the chairman of the Duma's foreign-affairs committee. Rogozin is an emotional nationalist, and is known around Moscow as a skeptic where the United States is concerned. "We see something of ourselves in America, for better or worse, and America is going through its golden age and we are at our nadir," he told me. "But we are having a roller-coaster ride, we are out of phase with each other. This is why our attitude to you is almost condescending."

When I asked Rogozin about the war in Iraq, he smiled, as if with infinite pity, and said, "Everyone in Europe thinks it's a calamity. But we shrugged and realized there was nothing we could do about it. . . . Before the end of the eighties, there were still some forces deterring you. There was the Soviet Union and the balance of pressures. Now, with this having disappeared, it's like in sumo wrestling. The United States simply fell forward for lack of an opponent, and you became responsible for everything. During the Cold War, both sides created their own cyborgs. We created the Palestinian cyborg. You created the bin Laden cyborg, in Afghanistan. And suddenly these cyborgs were no longer under their masters. Now the United States has to fill the entire space, they are responsible for everything-and, therefore, they are to blame for everything."

Putin's view is clearly that Russia can no longer hope to be a rival or a counterweight to American power. It can only seek to influence that power in the interest, above all, of stability at home and abroad, for it is only in the conditions of relative calm-stable oil prices, relative quiet along the southern borders, and integration with the West—that Russia can steadily develop. In the end, Putin played Iraq well, putting up a reasoned opposition to the war, but without damaging his relations with the United States. If anyone won that diplomatic battle, he did.

"Look, many in the Russian leadership resent the United States, but they have decided that it is better to adapt to American power and do the best they can, because the Middle East, Pakistan, and Iran—it can all go up in flames, in revolutions and wars," Karaganov said. "So we have to have someone to do the dirty job of keeping it all together. And that's the United States. And although you do stupid things, the United States is the only steamboat we can hitch ourselves to and go in the direction of modernity." 8

One afternoon, I went to the Kremlin to see Andrei Illarionov, one of Putin's top economic advisers. Illarionov is young, speaks fluent English, and is married to an American. I mentioned that on my way across Red Square and through Spassky Gate I'd noticed that workers were preparing for a parade. A gold tsarist-era two-headed eagle had been mounted on one end of the square and a vast Russian tricolor had been draped over Lenin's tomb. Putin's anthem would undoubtedly complete this postmodern picture.

"Yes, tomorrow is Independence Day," Illarionov said. "Not many people remember, but it's the day Russia was declared independent."
"And what of all these symbols?" I asked.

He shrugged. "These symbols reflect the complexity of Russian history, a fact of life," he said. "We've inherited the legacy of the Russian empire, seventy-three years of Soviet Communism, and, now, twelve years of independent Russia. Mr. Yeltsin tried to remove Lenin's body from Red Square, but the resistance from the Communist Party didn't allow it. Yeltsin reluctantly decided to postpone the action."

Illarionov had worked in the Yeltsin government, and I asked him to distinguish between the two Presidents.

"Mr. Yeltsin's was an era of revolution, and he was a revolutionary who set out to destroy the ancien regime," he said.

In the Putin era, I suggested, the world has all but stopped paying attention to Russia. Television stations and newspapers were closing their Moscow bureaus, or, at least, cutting back.

"Maybe the fact that we're not on the front pages all around the world is a good thing," he replied. "We've always dreamed of such a time. It's a sign of normality." Sometimes, he said, people forget the historical burden that Russia carries, and they focus instead on the decisions, and the personalities, that come and go. "There were seventy-five years of civil war with millions killed since 1917: between red and white, then collectivization, then a real civil war again, industrialization, the purges in 1937, the Second World War-a war against Fascism, but also a kind of civil war in which one million people changed sides. Where else would you find this?

"Then the purges of the P.O.W.s, the war on cosmopolitans, a civil war against nationalities like the Chechens, the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars: twenty nationalities deported or wiped out. Another civil war. At the same time, tens of millions of people were raised on Communist ideology and ideals. You cannot change that overnight. It's like being raised in some kind of orthodox faith, an orthodox form of Islam, say. There is a serious response when you try to change their world. You need a time of calming down. So the state of people now, for the majority, is geared around a sense of survival. That's what's really wanted. That's who Putin is. That's how we live now, with history and histories all around us and everything all mixed up."

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