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Putin's Survival: War of Attrition as a Double-Edged Sword

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ABSTRACT

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. It was a blatant war of aggression led by a revanchist autocrat, Vladimir Putin. The war has not gone according to Russia's plan. It has stagnated into a war of attrition. The question of whether the world is witnessing the last act of Putin as president of Russia has become relevant. To answer this question, three variables were identified, (1) the character of the war; (2) Putin's relationship with the people of Russia and; (3) Putin's relationship with his inner circle. This paper is a content analysis of academic and popular sources of information to review the war in Ukraine and modern Russia as it relates to these variables. The case is made that Putin doubling down on the current war of attrition is a double-edged sword as it relates to him surviving as president. Russia could outnumber Ukraine and achieve territorial gains. Putin could spin those territorial gains and taking on the entire West at once as a victory through nationalized media. Russia is never as strong or as weak as it seems. On the other hand, if the war drags on and the sanctions imposed hurt the Russian economy it could eat away at Putin's popular support. If stressed, the fragile set of compromises a personalist autocrat has made between the country's people and the country's insiders could lead to a popular uprising or a coup.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it launched a war of aggression in the name of territorial conquest. This kind of territorial conquest had been largely obsolete among the great powers in the post-WWII era of the liberal order. Russia had false pretenses for invasion alleging that there was a Nazi junta persecuting ethnic Russians in Ukraine. However, to most of the rest of the world, it was an act of naked aggression. A revanchist autocrat—Vladimir Putin—has long wanted to resurrect the Soviet empire. With support from NATO and the fact that the Russian military has under-performed, Ukraine's ability to withstand Russia's military has exceeded expectations. The attack has led to biting Western sanctions. The underwhelming nature of the Russian military effort has changed Western perceptions of Putin's strength and cunning. Putin had built a Machiavellian reputation by undermining the 2016 US presidential election and successfully annexing Crimea in 2014. The impulsive mistake to blitz Ukraine has resulted in a war of attrition Putin did not anticipate. This has made the Russian military might look pedestrian at best. When a world power on the UN Security Council launches a blatant war of aggression of this magnitude, the rest of the world wonders how it got to the point of hundreds of thousands of deaths on either side and the West has been forced to help finance the Ukrainian war effort. With Russia being an autocracy led by a vindictive strongman, the blame falls primarily on Putin. The lackluster war effort has raised the question of whether we are witnessing the last act of Vladimir Putin.

This paper examines modern Russia to answer the question of whether Putin will survive the war in Ukraine as president. To determine this, an understanding of the war, Putin's relationship with the people of Russia, and his relationship with his inner circle

are the salient variables. It appears Putin's place within Russia is never as strong or as weak as it seems. Putin and his cronies have decided to double down on the war. The war could lead to a negotiated settlement by an outnumbered and fatigued Ukraine. Territorial gain for Russia could be spun through Russia's propaganda machine as a moral victory. In this best-case scenario, Putin could salvage what territory he can while spinning a false narrative. That narrative could explain the war effort as a noble exercise in liberating ethnic Russians from the grips of Ukrainian "Nazis" while taking on the West. However, if the war goes on too long it may become impossible to spin this tale. In that case a seemingly weak strongman, who relies on fragile compromises between Russia's elites and the Russian people, could lead to his ousting.

Few criticisms within Russia have been aimed directly at Putin. However, the fledgling war effort has produced a revolving door of military chiefs, rival in-fighting, and low troop morale. Most of Putin's popularity with the people of Russia exists in a carefully manufactured bubble of reality spun by the nationalized media. They have portrayed Putin as the national ideal of a strong champion to overcome Western and domestic foes. By and large, the Russian populace lives in a "post-truth environment" where the Kremlin sells whatever lie it has to keep its esteem. Still, if the truth of the Russian war effort becomes too acutely felt, it could bleed into the Russian consciousness in terms of lost fathers, sons and brothers. On top of that, the everyday Russian citizen will feel a nasty bite from the Western economic sanctions. A war of attrition could go either way for Putin at this point. Extending the war effort could do just enough for Putin to hold on to power or backfire horribly because Putin's brand has now been inextricably

intertwined with the result of the war effort. A war of attrition is the last-ditch effort to make something out of a gross miscalculation.

This paper begins with a focus on the war in Ukraine. The weakness of Russia's war effort and the strength of Ukraine supported by NATO has opened the door for doubt as to Putin's longevity as president. There is an element of game theory to Putin's strategy of doubling down on the war effort in Ukraine. There is an outcome where Russia implodes from within. The rest of the paper addresses the variables at play regarding the prospect of Russian implosion. A brief history of modern Russia provides context as to how Putin's appeal to order was welcomed by the people of Russia. The history and contrast with China's system tracks how Putin's competitive authoritarian system masquerading as a managed democracy has become a blatant personalist autocracy. A personalist autocrat must make trade-offs between insiders and the people to maintain power. With that fact in mind, the paper goes on to address Putin's co-constructed relationship with the people of Russia and the changing nature of Putin's inner circle. The conclusion is drawn that Putin doubling down on the war in Ukraine is a double-edged sword. It is a gambit that could lead to negotiated settlement or wear thin on the compromises a personalist autocrat must make between his insiders and the people.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

This paper had two objectives 1) to review the war in Ukraine to the present day; and 2) to use academic and popular sources of information for content analysis. An inductive approach was utilized where patterns, themes, or trends were drawn from

collected insights in newspaper articles, academic journals, and published books. The thesis was drawn that a war of attrition was a gamble for Putin that could prove to be a double-edged sword. Newspaper articles from two reputable international industry publications, *New York Times* and *BBC News,* were subject to content analysis if they were written after the war began in February 2022. The objective of using the content analysis of newspaper articles was to capture the day-to-day events of the war and analysis based on those current events to complement some of the wider discourse in academic journals and published books. The academic journal *Foreign Affairs* was selected as the primary subject of content analysis for current discourse on the war in Ukraine, and the state of modern Russia as it pertains to the war. It publishes bi-monthly so articles were primarily selected from after the invasion. Other peer-reviewed journal articles were used to supply complementary insights based on the themes, patterns, and trends discussed in the paper.

A selection of published books was used to place the current conversation on the War in Ukraine in a structural and historical context. In terms of structural context, a consistent theme in literature was identified from the work of Timothy Frye and Samuel Greene—noted authors on the subject of modern Russia—that Putin's position in Russia is a set of compromises between co-opted elites within the country, and the country's people. This work provided the structure for the three variables under discussion regarding Putin's survival: the war itself, the composition of his network of insiders, and his relationship with the people of Russia. In terms of historical context, another consistent theme emerged based on the work of Sean Walker and Sergei Medvedev, which was the importance of the Soviet Union collapsing, the chaos of the nineties, and

how vital re-claiming the historical myth of the nation was to Putin as a driving force which led to the war in Ukraine. Other published books, peer-reviewed academic journals, newspaper articles, and lecture material were used to supply complementary insights on the themes and patterns found in published books relating to modern Russia's structural and historical context.

This paper is organized into four sections. These are: (1) The War in Ukraine, which will examine the history of the war so far, as well as review some of the factors that got us into the present stalemate; (2) Russian History, which will examine how the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin led to him becoming a personalist autocrat; (3) Putin, the Insiders, and the People, which examines Putin's co-constructed relationship to the people of Russia, and the changing nature of Putin's inner circle; and (4) Final Observations and Conclusions, which takes the insights from the previous three sections and concludes that Putin doubling down on a war of attrition with Ukraine is a double-edge sword in terms of his survival as president.

PART 1 THE WAR IN UKRAINE

CHAPTER 3

WAR OF ATTRITION—A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD FOR PUTIN

According to Nigel Gould-Davis (2022) in his *Survival* article, "*Putin's strategic failure",* Putin's blitz on Ukraine has been an unmitigated disaster and the best Putin can hope for at this stage is to salvage some face-saving negotiated settlement. Putin and his military chiefs thought they would run through Ukraine easily but have been met with an organized, defiant, and determined Ukrainian defense. Putin expected Ukraine to roll over from the outset. So much so, that he called on Ukraine to lay down its arms, but the

mobilized citizens of Ukraine have done the opposite, led by a reinvigorated President Zelensky (Gould-Davis 2022). According to New York Times's Anton Troianovski (2022), Putin was fed disinformation by his inner circle goading him into attacking what they perceived as a feeble Ukrainian defense. Putin is said to have admitted weeks into the invasion that the Ukrainians were tougher than he was led to believe. The Ukrainians in their successful stand in Eastern Ukraine have demonstrated leadership in their military command, tactical skill in signaling intentions, good logistics, and troop morale (Crocker 2022). With Ukraine over-performing and Russia under-performing, the difference in troop morale has been significant. Ukraine's forces have been fighting with the spirit of the aggrieved and benefit from robust nationalist fervor. Desertion, a lack of adequate preparation, and massive casualties have plagued the Russian forces, which has led to increasingly low morale among the troops, with some even refusing to report to the front lines (Slisco 2022).

As per its history, Russia utilized internal secrecy going into the invasion. Even high-ranking military officials were kept in the dark until days before the invasion. Putin and his small team of advisors devised a plan that went against Russian military doctrine. Traditionally, air attacks and missiles lead any invasion. Once the air and missile attacks wear down the opponent and establish clear lanes for the ground forces, then ground forces are deployed to accomplish the objectives. In this case, Russia led with a ground invasion that attempted to capture multiple parts of Ukraine at the same time. They stretched their logistics and support systems too thin by being overly ambitious and blitzing on the ground (Massicot 2023). Had Russia taken a more cautious approach and understood the nuances of its capabilities, the invasion may have been more successful.

Russia had modernized its military over the past few decades, but its mobilization efforts left something to be desired. New Russian military equipment had technical malfunctions, corruption within the military led to unaccounted equipment shortages, and the troops were unprepared for the type of combat they faced (Massicot 2023). This lead to inexperienced troops, a lack of munitions, and a lack of reserves. They lept before they looked, with no special period for organizing resources before a major invasion. Having so many strategic misconceptions will likely be held against Putin and his inner circle if the war continues to flounder.

Putin's next miscalculation was underestimating NATO's cohesion and resolve. NATO has responded with far more unity and determination than Putin and his inner circle anticipated. NATO has been sensitive to growing Soviet power in the past. In the late seventies, it deployed intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe as a response to the Soviet build-up (Gould-Davis 2022). The West has terminated its business arrangements with Russia, imposed harsh sanctions, and supplied Ukraine with finances and various military technologies. The war in Ukraine is the type of unprovoked act of aggression that is difficult to spin to the rest of the world, so unprecedented is this blatant move for territorial conquest in the post-WWII period. The optics of the action were horrible and left little doubt as to who was wronged and who was perpetrating the violence. The justification for defending territorial integrity as a principle, especially the territorial integrity of a smaller state, is clear in this case. Russia is the unpopular bully attempting to destroy its far smaller neighbor, Ukraine.

The war effort has been so impotent that Russia's purported allies have turned their backs on Russia's cause. Asian states have created export controls for

semiconductors, while Singapore has imposed several sanctions beyond that (Gould-Davies 2022). China chose to abstain from the UN Security Council vote to condemn the Russian invasion, raising doubts about the unlimited friendship pact the two countries had signed recently (Gould-Davies 2022). If the Russian military had not fallen flat initially, they might have received more support from like-minded countries. However, both the controversy of the decision and the ineptitude of the execution has led to a cold shoulder from some countries considered allies. Countries like China or authoritarian governments in Asia and Africa still have much to lose in their international business if the West sees them as co-conspirators. China has had a common cause with Russia over the West, and Russia supports Chinese demands in Tibet, and Hong Kong (Pierson 2023). However, China has been uncharacteristically struggling economically this year. They have been torn between preserving their critical business relationships in Europe and distancing themselves from Russia (Pierson 2023). These miscalculations have isolated Russia with fiercer opposition than expected in Ukraine, greater cohesion than expected from NATO, and less support than expected from Russia's few allies.

The Ukraine-Russia war has settled into a war of attrition, which means a protracted struggle of shelling and bombing without the prospect of significant territory gained on either side. It's a war of depriving the other side of the will or resources to go on—possibly to sue for peace with favorable terms for the side more willing to negotiate. In terms of sheer numbers, this could be a strategy where Russia throws its numbers at Ukraine in waves as they grind down Ukraine's far smaller population of 44 million people. If the death toll for the Ukrainians reaches one percent of their population, that would be a substantial figure of 444,000 dead, which may give Ukraine pause to go on.

The death toll is exacerbated by the material damage with bombed infrastructure and destroyed electrical grids making the living conditions unbearable for those under siege. A taxed Ukraine being much smaller than Russia may lead them to relent and consent at some point to conditions that are favorable to Russia.

Putin has made it clear that he is committed to this offensive for the long haul, almost certainly considering his political positioning if he were to leave Ukraine empty-handed. With that in mind, he is treading carefully, cautiously bringing the Russian people into the war effort. His first mobilization effort of conscription in September 2022 was met with street protests. Traditionally, Putin has had an unspoken compact with the people—he will provide an adequate standard of living and they are not to question the arena of foreign affairs or military adventure. The key to Putin's survival as a leader lies in this war effort, so he is breaking from tradition by beginning to draw the Russian public into the war effort through media as well. On New Year's Eve, he gave his annual address from a military base surrounded by soldiers in uniform, rather than his usual seat in the Kremlin (Troinovski 2022). Putin has begun to admit to the people that the war effort may be a long process—longer than expected—which is an unusual concession for a leader that does everything he can to self-aggrandize in the media (Landry 2022). Accompanying this concession, Putin is making clear his determination to double down on a war effort he has likened to Russia's most significant historical military struggles. He has been adamant that the military has a limitless budget and will receive anything it asks for even if it means tightening the belt elsewhere (Troianovski 2022). A war of attrition puts Putin in a precarious position with the people of Russia if they are forced into conscription and denied social welfare because of a reallocated budget. Additionally,

the lack of morale among the troops is certainly a problem. The death toll, lowered standard of living, and declining troop morale may impact Putin's popularity.

The war in Ukraine has surprised some analysts in how it has been fought. Putin had built a reputation for using unorthodox means of warfare through the 2010s—methods like cyber-war, media disinformation, false flag operations, disinformation, and unmarked fighters (Fisher 2023). Russia has had success in the last decade using a less direct method of attack. They had some success in the 2016 US election using cyber tactics, false flags, and disinformation. They also successfully annexed Crimea using unmarked fighters. The war in Ukraine has been fought in rather conventional terms, "with traditional 20th-century dynamics instead dominating: shifting battle lines of tanks and troops; urban assaults; struggles over air supremacy and over supply lines; and mass mobilization of troops and of weapons production" (Fisher 2023, par. 2). This approach has left Russia stymied with some marginal gains in the Eastern Donbass region, currently attempting to overtake Bakhmut, but far from capturing the capital of Kyiv. There are contemporary examples of the gridlocked war between Russia and Ukraine. These include wars between territorial rivals like the two Korea's in the 1950's, Iran and Iraq in the 1980's, and Egypt and Israel in a period for 1969-71.

In wars of attrition, the battle lines on the ground become fairly entrenched. Territory is seized and then relinquished. Tanks and ground troops contest the middle along fault lines. Bombing from the air, and shelling from a distance take out both sides' tanks and troops as they engage over strategic targets. Each side takes mass casualties, and the urban assault destroys the territory's infrastructure under siege. In such conflicts, air supremacy becomes integral because fighter aircraft are capable of taking out vehicles

or missile systems on the ground. Each side's rate of attrition in these conflicts tends to revolve around which side has air superiority (Fisher 2023). The fate of the war between Iran and Iraq was determined by who controlled the skies. Concerning the Russia-Ukraine conflict, whether Ukraine, with Western technological support, can keep pace with anti-air weaponry to counter the numerous Russian aircraft remains a dominant concern.

The character of this war in many ways resembles the War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel in the late 1960's and early 1970's. On multiple occasions, Arab nations have joined forces in attempts to reclaim territories lost in prior conflicts. The War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel had a similar overarching nature in terms of a larger opponent attempting to bully a smaller state into submission through its numerical advantage. Egypt's president Gamal Abd Nasser set out to compel Israel to vacate the east bank of the Suez Canal, and in time, the Sinai Peninsula (Bolia 2004). Nasser's strategy considered Israel's potential weakness being its size disadvantage in terms of relative population. (Bolia 2004) He inferred that the rate of casualties would put a greater strain on Israel than Egypt. With a relatively small standing professional army, Israel's reliance on citizen soldiers would severely impact the morale and economic function of the country, in his estimation.

Nasser's overall conclusion was that Egypt could absorb more casualties than Israel (Bolia 2004). This calculus is likely similar to Putin's estimation that a smaller Ukraine will at some point reach an unacceptable casualty figure or become so taxed economically that they will have to surrender. Like Putin underestimating the Ukrainians, Nasser underestimated the Israeli will to fight. Extended mobilization did not cause the

Israelis to fold. The Israelis set up static fortifications—erecting the Bar-Lev Line—engaging the Egyptians in trench warfare. Israel absorbed the necessary casualties as the Egyptians shelled them with artillery fire and then launched punishing retaliatory strikes. It was sound military thinking from Nasser but it did not work, much as Putin's logic to this point has not worked.

The muddled war effort has been a mess of incompetency from the Russian side, evidenced by the revolving door of generals within the Russian military high command, a sign of weakness within Russia. The game of musical chairs among the Russian military high command has become an absurd reality (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023). Nine Russian generals have been fired or demoted over eleven months (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023). Putin has fallen back to re-appointing General Valery Gerasimov as lead general, putting him back in charge after he was originally dismissed from the position for designing the initial hyper-aggressive blitz on Ukraine, which failed miserably. He is said to have studied the American military misadventures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya to avoid getting bogged down in a protracted conflict, but he clearly failed (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023). Gerasimov has managed to wait in the wings long enough through this stagnated war effort that he has now convinced Putin again that he is the man for the job.

The fact that Gerasimov is back in charge with such a black mark on his resume is a clear sign of desperation. The Russian military is focused on all the wrong things in terms of a successful military effort. It can't see the forest through the trees by focusing on tactical issues like whether troops should travel in civilian vehicles and the dangers of cell phone use rather than fundamental problems like ammunition shortages and a lack of

well-trained soldiers (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023). Gerasimov has been in charge of disastrous military engagements, as in Northern Ukraine, where an ill-equipped deployment lacking basic necessities was eviscerated by Ukrainian defense (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023). His tactics have led to disastrous outcomes where his forces have been picked off by shelling and artillery. The revolving door of generals, and lack of cohesive military leadership, has not inspired confidence that the Russian military will transform itself. Putin is now on his third war commander, having accomplished few of his main objectives—they have failed to take the capital, President Zelensky is still in power, and even taking the eastern region near the border seems up in the air (Barnes, Cooper, and Schmidt 2023).

The personnel moves of the Kremlin indicate a high-tension environment within the military high command. The troika does not have clear answers as to how to proceed, causing elites within Russia to be critical. Putin has begun deflecting blame onto his military command by allowing media elites to criticize Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (Stanovaya 2022). Media elites have become much bolder in their criticism of the military which is dangerously close to the domain of Putin. They are spitting venom at the defense ministry and making notes of all of the internal opposition (Stanovaya 2022). The revolving door of the military high command has become more embattled as the elites surrounding the war effort have grown more restless, which does not bode well for the patience needed in a war of attrition.

Conversely, the Kremlin hopes a prolonged war with Ukraine may lead to similar fissures in the so-far aligned front of NATO, which supplies the Ukrainians with weapons and resources to keep pace with Russia. There has been conflict within NATO, with the

various countries disagreeing over the speed of aid and whether Ukraine can launch a successful offensive in the spring (Schmitt and Sanger 2022). Britain, the Scandinavian countries, and the Baltics seem to believe that Ukraine can launch a successful offensive, while the US and Germany seem less confident. Recently, the hand-wringing over whether the US and Germany would send Leopard 2 tanks is the type of reticence to send aid to Ukraine that Russia hopes a protracted struggle will engender. Russia hopes that as the war goes on, NATO will be less inclined to pour resources into the war effort, especially in Europe, whose military budgets pale compared to the US (Schmitt and Sanger 2022). It seems that NATO is aware that this is Russia's aim, as the US and Germany have now agreed to send the Leopard 2 tanks. The US has taken further steps recently, deciding to send a 2.2 billion dollar aid package consisting of long-range missiles and the promise of F-16s. Comparatively, there appear to be more cracks in Russian cohesion than there have been cracks in NATO to this point.

Lianna Fix and Michael Kimmage (2023) see four potential scenarios for the war: (1) full-scale withdrawal of Russian forces, (2) a negotiated settlement, (3) Russian escalation; or (4) Russian implosion from within. They see the first scenario of full-scale withdrawal as the least likely. To them, much more likely is the second scenario that the Russians drag this out long enough to keep Crimea and sue for peace while maintaining some new territorial gains to hang their hat on (Fix and Kimmage 2023). Within this scope, Putin and his cronies could blame NATO and the West for their technical support of Ukraine rather than giving Ukraine any credit for their strength (Fix and Kimmage 2023).

With the nature of the aggression, and an estimation of Putin's recent maniacal disposition, Fix and Kimmage (2023) see a third scenario being a Russian escalation. This scenario would include broadening the scope of their targets to acts of sabotage aimed at Ukraine's allies (possibly using cyber-war tactics abroad) or using tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine. If Russia were to resort to this, it would add a new grim dimension to the suffering of the Ukrainians. Russia would descend deeper into rogue state status, and their few remaining allies could abandon them if they reached the level of pariah that Bashar Al-Assad became when he used chemical weapons on his people in Syria. Stooping to WMD usage would most likely lead to NATO intervention through conventional forces in Ukraine which would expedite Russia's defeat (Fix and Kimmage 2022).

The final scenario that Fix and Kimmage envision is implosion within Russia with a resulting regime collapse through a coup or popular uprising. The media monopoly Putin enjoys will eventually wane to the harsh reality of lost Russian lives. A general disgruntlement at a lack of results for these losses may come to account. The Kremlin has tried to get out ahead of this by stage managing televised events with grieving mothers to confront Putin in staged environments. This, coupled with the consequences of being frozen out of the West, with a besieged economy due to sanctions, could change the calculus of former supporters. They could turn on Putin if the war leads to disorder and privation. This speaks to the double-edged sword of a war of attrition for Putin. If he wants to drag out this conflict long enough to test the mettle of Ukraine and NATO, Russia will become fatigued by the death toll and the Western sanctions. Putin is doubling down on a prolonged war to possibly salvage some of this botched invasion in

the form of new gains. These gains could be spun into moral victories for Russia. However, if he continues to miscalculate and underestimate his opponents, Putin's own house of cards could collapse into an elite coup or popular uprising.

CHAPTER 4

NEVER AS STRONG OR WEAK AS THEY SEEM

In their overview of the various stressors facing Russia and speculation about the impact those stressors might have, Andrea Kendall Taylor and Michael Kofman (2022) still perceive Russia as a dangerous and wiley foe when cornered. The Western world has, in essence, rallied to crush what they can of the Russian economy, with Russia's GDP contracting by six percent throughout 2022 (Koffman and Taylor 2022). The International Criminal Court has also indicted Putin as a war criminal for the abduction and deportation of Ukrainian children (Simons, Savage, Patil 2023). However, Putin is well-insulated within Russia and is unlikely to ever stand trial in the Hague. Export controls will deprive many of Russia's key industries of Western-made component parts. These include the components and foreign inputs that make operations run in tanker shipments, automotive industries, the energy sector, etc. Biting sanctions and price caps on Russian oil will steer the prized and vaunted Russian oil elsewhere at a discount—primarily to China and India. The burgeoning oil arrangement with Germany appears dead. Most of Europe has supported Ukraine by ending their various business arrangements with Russia at multiple levels. Russia will resort to illicit means and back channels to circumnavigate these sanctions.

One such back channel has been the strengthening military partnership between Russia and Iran, where Russia provides military/technical resources and Iran provides

drones (Patil 2022). The US has sought to prevent this growing partnership by attempting to ensure Iran does not get the necessary components to manufacture the drones (Barnes, Sanger, Schmittpar 2022). This is a case of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and marriages of convenience are sprouting between Russia and new partners like Iran. As these back-channel arrangements form for the Kremlin, their Western foes will work to thwart them. Constantly having their foreign business arrangements blocked puts tremendous strain on the powers that be in the Kremlin. Russia must be ever-more creative to keep these arrangements secret. Taylor and Koffman see a potentially detrimental impact of these various measures to squeeze the Russian coffers and isolate them. They remain convinced that cornering a wounded Russia is a dangerous game because Russia has lost wars before and has remained dangerous. Russia remains a significant nuclear power with a nuclear arsenal of 4,447 warheads which is a significant offset to its conventional vulnerability (Koffman and Taylor 2022).

In the 2022 *Foreign Affairs* journal article, *Can Putin Survive?'* Vladislav Zubok cautions that Russia under Putin has been more cautious in insulating its wealth from the ups and downs of Western markets. The wealth of the nation and its reserves have been strategically guarded by Putin and his cronies. They anticipated Western sanctions and blowback for the war. They expected sanctions similar to those following their Crimea annexation in 2014. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be considered a political misstep, the internal composition of Putin's Russia is much different than that of Gorbachev's Soviet Union. Gorbachev actively loosened the Kremlin's grip on finances in a way Putin has not.

Putin's Russia is much more centralized in terms of finance and stifling in terms of opponents' influence. Putin prioritized macroeconomic stability, demanding a balanced budget and little accrued foreign debt. This was partly possible by the oil price boom of the aughts' first decade. (Zubok 2022) During this time, Russia managed to pay back 130$ billion in foreign debt and kept its future debts down to a bare minimum. With their annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin turned "biting oil sanctions and a low oil price into a budget surplus over time because shrewd Russian economists allowed the ruble to devalue and maintained strict financial discipline throughout the pandemic" (Zubok 2022, pg. 88). Russia's hard line against debt, and strict financial conservatism, allowed the Kremlin to hoard a war chest of nearly 600 billion US dollars going into the invasion of Ukraine.

The Western sanctions that have resulted from the invasion were harsher than Putin anticipated (such as the cutting off of Russian banks and freezing of foreign reserves). However, even with the sanctions, the country's financial brain trust has made moves in a defensive posture to counteract the economic offensive. When the ruble tanked, Russia suspended its free convertibility, insisted that ten percent of the oil revenue made by companies was sold to the central bank, and prohibited Russian citizens from sending big amounts of money abroad (Zubok 2022). Russia has begun to use the currency's strength as an incentive for buying discounted oil, bringing new customers like India. India has decided to put India first, rejecting Western pressure to condemn the Russian invasion (Cohen 2022). They cite Western hypocrisy and a chance to make Russia their largest oil supplier. India needs all the cheap oil it can get from Russia to sustain its 7% annual population growth rate (Cohen 2022). When there are willing

buyers like India ready to put their own country's interests first, it gives Russia new outlets to move their product. New arrangements with other African and Asian states may fill the void left by Europe's embargo. The blanket of sanctions created by the West has other holes in it with countries like China and Turkey increasing exports to Russia helping to fill some of the void left by the freeze out (Cai, Holder, Leatherby & Troinovski 2023).

Although Zubok (2022) acknowledges the tremendous strain of the most drastic economic decoupling since WWII, he sees the significant repercussions of that economic warfare landing primarily on the Russian entrepreneur. With the freeze out, the Russian entrepreneur will be forced to go through back channels to access Western markets. These individuals may not have the same opportunities to network abroad as Russia has had with the likes of Iran and India. The lack of economic opportunity for the Russian business class may lead to growing resentment of the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine. Russian internal security is well-funded and well-trained, with a brutal capacity to put down uprisings if people decide to take the streets. Zubok (2022) emphasizes that the true opposition to Putin is reflected in the upper-class urban intelligentsia in cities. City dwellers represent only a small fraction of Russia, no more than a fifth of the population. Nearly eighty percent of Russia is comprised of "residents of poor industrial cities nostalgic for the Soviet past, people who live in declining urban towns, and multi-ethnic non-Russians of the Caucus" (Zubok 2022, pg. 92). It is within these areas, and these demographics, that Putin has drawn his traditional popular support within Russia's vast spaces that mitigates the displeasure of young urbans, or urban intelligentsia with a

more progressive orientation. The Russian security apparatus is more than adequately equipped to target the population segments that Putin seeks to mollify.

The Western sanctions and the push to neuter Russian banks worldwide are straining aspects of Russia's power. Despite this, Russia can stabilize the ship if the Kremlin has control over the ruble, the central bank, and the country's fiscal instruments. If these factors are skillfully maneuvered, the Russian war chest will not dwindle at a rate that suggests immediate collapse (Zubok 2022). The more time goes on, the more likely that sanctions may erode some of the macroeconomic stability which has kept Russia afloat. This erosion may be seen in potential cost overruns in infrastructure projects lacking supplies and Western know-how. In a country with as much corruption as Russia, bloated budgets and shady contracts do not mix well with supply chain issues. Bad business under strain may begin to take a toll on the Russian coffers. Russia prepared for Western sanctions but did not reasonably anticipate the extent of them. Despite robust security services, and macroeconomic insulation, the toll on the Russian people could spell danger for the Putin regime.

PART 2 RUSSIAN HISTORY

CHAPTER 5

FROM THE SOVIET UNION TO RUSSIA—FROM STALIN TO THE RISE OF PUTIN

The pre and post-WWII Soviet Union was defined by the iron grip rule of Joseph Stalin from the 1930s to his death in 1953. It was a challenging period of brutal authoritarianism characterized by the repression and execution of many former comrades and revolutionaries. He essentially cleared space for himself by kiling anyone who was a

threat, intelligentsia and revolutionaries alike. The growing coercive repressive mechanisms used by Putin to rid himself of opposition, is often compared to the particularly paranoid period of Stalinism. Stalin saw enemies everywhere—the rise of enemies in the peasant sector and among the working class. The gulag system condemned millions of people to penal labor (Nikolova, Popova, Otraschenko 2022). Many of those condemned were sentenced for infractions that would not amount to a crime in a modern system (Nikolova, Popova, Otraschenko 2022). Stalin enacted a centralized collectivization process, leading to rapid modernization but extreme suffering. His paranoia of the West motivated Stalin to advance Russia forward industrially at whatever cost. He thought the rural and backward USSR was susceptible to penetration, even invasion, so he led an arduous forward march, whatever the collateral damage. By the time of his death in 1953, Stalin had eliminated the entire old guard and anyone who had previously been a rival. Putin's purging of any dissent or opposition is likened to Stalin's brutal methods of repression.

Khrushchev took over after Stalin's death in 1953. The USSR moved to more routine authoritarianism, declaring a domestic thaw to innovate the USSR economy. In the heat of the Cold War with the US, the USSR entered the 1960s with nationalist optimism, although the economy remained stagnant. There were nationalist youth movements that attempted to revive the Soviet command economy with the help of ideology rather than the harsh repressive methods of Stalin (Maltseva 2021). By the mid-sixties, optimism waned, and the Soviet Union's stagnated economy was considered a 'sick man'. Khrushchev was accused of being full of hair-brained schemes, outlandish promises, arbitrary methods, and disorganized re-organizations (Torigian 2022). The

economy was not progressing under Khrushchev, while the West had shown advanced material improvements and soaring living standards. The Soviets lagged far behind, in virtually all aspects of an advanced, industrial country.

Economic stagnation became the norm through the seventies and early eighties, with new waves of Soviet citizens struggling in bread lines. There were several older successors to Soviet leadership like Brezhnev, who was quite sick and incapable of performing the role of leader. Although Brezhnev considered the accumulation of military power as part of the Soviet identity, he was more pragmatic than Khrushchev when it came to dealing with the United States (Zubok 2018). He thought a bargain with the US in the form of detente would help improve Russian living standards and economic growth (Zubok 2018). Despite this, the regime was highly centralized fiscally and illiberal. There was a growing disconnect in accountability between the Kremlin and the people. The Kremlin still spent heavily on arms, heavy industry, and the space race despite civilian concerns. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the mid eighties, he inherited a country in an internal crisis. The Cold War competition had pushed the USSR to the brink of collapse.

By this time, the population felt the country needed to develop in the right direction. During the eighties, dissent emerged, and the intelligentsia started challenging the Soviet structure. There were dissenting voices in Moscow and St. Petersburg handing out pamphlets preaching liberalization and reforms to the Soviet system. There are the signs of a mismanaged economy such as the overproduction of milk and huge food shortages in the grocery store (Maltseva 2021). There would be a discrepancy between reality and what the media told the people. This discrepancy created a cognitive

dissonance too large to ignore. The Kremlin had a crisis of legitimacy problem by the mid-1980s with the people questioning whether they were on the right side of the Cold War. Gorbachev set out to be a reformer because there was a strong current that it was time to give the people ownership over their own lives (Brown 2021). Compared to the shortcomings of the USSR, the images that slipped through of a vibrant US had the Soviet people lusting over the Western vision of a liberalized economy. In contrast to the elderly leaders who were the face of the stagnant seventies, a youthful Gorbachev was met with a demand for change by younger people who felt they could transform the system from within.

Gorbachev was also influenced by the Chinese, who had successfully opened their economy in the late seventies, allowing their people to own and sell resources on a privatized market. China was able to remain authoritarian politically, while the implementation of a liberalized market model boosted its economy. Gorbachev felt he could accomplish the same structural reform to steer the Soviet economy back on track. Gorbachev's solution was a set of structural reforms called perestroika and glasnost (openness), which called for an opening of Soviet politics and its economy. Glasnost was meant to decentralize the management of the national economy, allow more rights for enterprise, jump start self-financing, and enhance production (Strovsky & Schleifer 2021). Gorbachev allowed underground intellectual movements to have more recognition, and the dissenting voices within those movements would be more visible and legitimate in influencing civil society (Maltseva 2021). Gorbachev essentially legalized criticism of the Kremlin and honest intellectual debate. This openness unleashed the ire of public scrutiny at broadcast communist planning sessions, which the Gorbachev

regime wasn't prepared to navigate. With more transparency and more empowered opposition, the rot within the Soviet Union became apparent. The country began to unravel.

According to Shaun Walker (2017), in his book *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past*, the Soviet Union suffered three losses quickly. The political system imploded, the imperial periphery seceded to form new states, and the home country ceased to exist (Walker 2017). It was a traumatic dissolution of a country, where citizens immediately lost their identity in the wave of neoliberalism. The question for the everyday citizen was if they were not Soviets, then who were they? (Walker 2017) The Soviet Union under Gorbachev collapsed for both broad and specific reasons. Broadly, the economic rot of the country had been exacerbated by the modest opening of the economy. The country had also changed demographically; the population was more educated and more literate than it had been. This made the country more discerning about how it was failing (Walker 2017). It was a marked change in social composition that essentially created the opposition that would tear strips off the Kremlin under Gorbachev. Also, the obsession with trying to keep pace with the West technologically had put an immense strain on the civilian economy. The failed pursuit of the West in terms of modern technological progress bankrupted the country. The ethnic federations/republics had begun to smell weakness at the core of the Kremlin, and fissures emerged. More and more ethnic minority challengers from the various segments of the Iron Curtain began to use their general disillusionment to make claims for secession. These underlying forces fomented a cancerous core in the Soviet empire.

At the intermediate level, the structural reforms of perestroika and glasnost opened the door for intense criticism and backlash aimed at the Kremlin. The admission of a need for self-review was an admission that things were not working which opened the door for the opposition. The political liberalization and structural reform splintered and became factions. This weakened the Communist party's hold on power. This was best represented by the rivalry between Gorbachev's camp and the populist democratic Yeltsin camp. The Yeltsin camp were throwing rocks at a throne once unimaginable to challenge (Walker 2017). Gorbachev's financial maneuvering was too little, too late to rejuvenate the economy with a market model. Although Putin has not invited political openness nor economic liberalization, parallels have been drawn between the war in Ukraine's disappointing outcomes and the outcome of the humiliating Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in the late eighties. Weakening and decay of Russia and Putin's hold on power could be accelerated by a similar defeat in Ukraine. The unsuccessful effort in Afghanistan demonstrated to the international scene, and at home, that the Soviets were weaker than they seemed.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, and the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union, led to a chaotic 1990s. Everyday Russians suffered as they tried on democracy and capitalism for size, "all that had constituted the fabric of every life—accolades and punishments, status and rank, linguistic and behavioral codes—was suddenly rendered meaningless" (Walker 2017, ch. 1). Gorbachev was ousted, and the notorious alcoholic Yeltsin entered the void for a nation-building exercise. The republics were breaking off and seceding quickly. Yeltsin was forced into a battle on multiple fronts to prevent them from doing so. There was an attempt to hammer out numerous bilateral treaties at once

with the republics that threatened to secede. Yeltsin faced a constitutional crisis, namely the question of what structure of democratic governance would take hold in its infancy stage. The IMF-led neoliberal shock therapy of capitalism led to the rise of the oligarch class in a game of rigged Monopoly. The people believed that there would be anarchy if Yeltsin left. Most people did not see the Russian Federation as real—they felt they lived in a strange offshoot of the Soviet Union (Walker 2017).

A form of "gangster capitalism" took hold as the privatization process in the nineties was extremely kleptocratic. Entrepreneurship in the country was under nurtured, so the former communist managers of the country's major industries looted the country's high value assets (Klebnikov 2000). Shrewd businessmen leveraged their positions to scoop up major companies in vital industries for pennies on the dollar because of insider information (Klebnikov 2000). Oligarchs like Roman Abramovich, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Boris Berezovsky amassed fortunes and became major political players with direct access to Yeltsin. For select individuals, meteoric rises like Berezovsky's progression from car salesman, to oil titan, to media mogul were possible for those in the know at the right time (Klebnikov 2000). For a time before Putin, it appeared Russia was headed toward a cabal-like oligarchy rather than a strong man working in concert with a tamed oligarchy. The 1990s were a time of steep government debt and a broken everyday bureaucracy where people wouldn't get their meager salaries. The rule of law was absent with all the corruption, business profiteering, and illicit crime like mafia extortion. All the reshaping of political institutions meant that Russia was nascent and weak. It seems like it could do little to stop the everyday citizen from being used, abused, or forgotten all within the violence of sudden capitalism.

There was a longing for a return of some stability, along with some of the consistency that came with communism. The botched experiment of transplanting a Western political model and the Western market model at the same time scarred the everyday Russian psyche; “life in the 1990s had progressed along the lines of a particularly implausible episode of a job swap reality TV show, biochemists were now taxi drivers; market stallholders were CEO’S. People longed for normalcy and stability, and this much craved stabilization became an altar at which many freedoms would later be sacrificed.” (Walker 2017, ch. 2) When Putin emerged in the late nineties, he was a faceless ex-KGB political fixer for Yeltsin, who had risen from obscurity to become the head of the FSB (the successor to the KGB). He had the backing of the oligarch class, who felt he would be easy to control, so many bankrolled his campaign in the late 1990s. However, Putin had his own agenda, and when he came to power (on the eve of the new millennium) he betrayed the oligarchs by reigning them in. He reigned everything back in, including the obstinate republics like Chechnya. This led to the re-ignited Chechnya war, an early defining moment for Putin’s political career. Putin’s task was to make Russia vital and stable again. He would do this by manipulating history (Walker 2017).

Putin launched an aggressive purge similar to what Stalin did by engaging in a full-court press against all the oligarchs to make them serve the state or be expelled (Mezrich 2015). He invited them all to his dacha (formerly Stalin’s residence) to inform them they would stick to business and stay out of politics if they wanted to keep their wealth (Mezrich 2015). The people of Russia were very critical of the democratic reforms of the nineties and embraced Putin’s pledge for a return of order. Putin’s inner circle consisted of ex-KGB from the communist Cold war era. The oligarch class was former

communist managers, so the anti-West logic and Cold War thinking lurked in the 21st-century consciousness. There were historic hooks to hang the appeals for stability where the collapse of the Soviet system was re-cast as a dismantling by Western forces rather than an implosion from within (Walker 2017). An attempt to change the Russian narrative from one of a collapsed state to something the Russian people could be proud of was launched by elevating the victory in WWII to a founding national myth (Walker 2017). Initially, Putin's version of autocracy was a competitive authoritarian regime that brought back communism with corporate capitalist elements. Everything was retrenched and centralized under the Kremlin, which would become the profiteering corporation, (ie. "Russia Inc.").

This centralization began in the late 90s and early 2000s by bringing the provincial elites back in line with an institutionalized retrenchment of their consolidated power after the Soviet Union collapsed. The Kremlin under Putin instituted laws which centralized executive power and limited regional governors' ability to make policy on their own (Charap 2007). He installed Kremlin-approved super-governors to monitor the republics regional governors (Charap 2007). Putin also nationalized the oil fields. This brought the oil revenue back under government control and away from the oligarchs who had enjoyed unfettered revenue streams during the privatization period. The Kremlin brought Chechnya and Tartarstan back in line. The remaining republics would be forced to pay heavy taxes and send wealth back up the chain of command to the burgeoning vertical power structure being manufactured by the Putin regime (Maltseva 2021). Other seceding new states in Eastern Europe would remain elusive to reintegration. Putin

attempted an unsuccessful invasion of Georgia in 2008. Putin was also unable to reintegrate Ukraine which remained a thorn in his side.

Putin's overall philosophy borrowed from many places. He would purge rivals like Stalin. He would attempt an adapted form of the corporate capitalism used by China by co-opting big players in major industries and making them work for the benefit of the state. There would be an element of managed democracy with regular elections that would take pains to appear legitimate, although they would not be. A heavy illiberal component would come down hard on dissent that gained too much of a following. With corporate capitalism, Putin did away with the more Marxist-Leninist features of communism by retrenching nearly all of the former Soviet welfare state. This bloated state had drained resources from the coffers of the Kremlin leading up to the Soviet collapse. Any form of welfare would be much more circumspect in the Putin era.

Gellman (2016) calls Putin's political system neo-patrimonialism, where he is the hub patron to a network of clients with a mafia logic that assumes that the patron has certain responsibilities to his clients. However, everything goes through the patron as a result. It is an internal system built on loyalty, where loyal cronies rise, and the disloyal are severely punished. Everything revolves around the don's approval or disapproval. Within these networks, the patron dispenses opportunities and benefits. Within the insulated network of loyalty to the don—in this case, Putin—select network members are required to step up when called upon for the prior benefits and positions they received. In Russia, the saying goes that you are only as strong as your roof (Mezrich 2015). Putin is the apex don that acts as a benefactor protecting his network under his roof. To the public, Putin was to become anything that mirrored the national public sentiment to

insulate him from his rivals. As a result, he became a political chameleon that took on different backdrops and mood music but always with the same agenda in mind (Walker 2017). The goal was to restore Russia to its rightful place and restore what was lost when the Soviet Union collapsed (Walker 2017). Essentially, with all these borrowed elements, Putin became a machine for consolidating and protecting his growing power so he could pursue this ambition.

CHAPTER 6

CONTRASTING RUSSIA AND CHINA: FINANCIAL CENTRALIZATION VS. MANAGED DEMOCRACY AXIS

Russia under Putin and China under Xi Jinping have many similarities regarding a personalist authoritarian approach over a large, diverse country. However, they also have stark differences. Until recently, independent liberal media outlets were allowed to exist along the margins of society without any oversight in Russia until one or more crossed the line. In China, state officials are much more vigilant in communicating with critical journalists about topical boundaries. There is no such communication in Russia which employs more of an all-or-nothing approach. In China, relationships with critical journalists set up structured ambiguity. Chinese officials provide constant signals, pre-emptively outlining a red zone of untouchable topics and a grey zone of semi-sensitive issues (Koesel, Bunce, Weiss, 2020). The red line is very consistent with topics like Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, etc., while the grey zone constantly changes, tending to include societal issues such as corruption, social inequality, local protests, environmental degradation, etc (Koesel, Bunce, Weiss, 2020).

While China provides this structural ambiguity and harsh consequences for overstepping the bounds, Putin's former experiment in managed democracy let liberal media foment and coalesce until they became problematic. Critical journalists in Russia lived within a much more arbitrary reality where they did not communicate with the Kremlin and never knew when the shoe would drop. Conversely, the frequent interplay between CCP officials and media professionals is core to media management in China (Koesel, Bunce, Weiss, 2020). The fact that journalists are notified ahead of time in China means there is relational stability where the opposing critical journalists have lines of communication to gauge the response to their output and figure out how to negotiate with the CCP oversight. The CCP strategy of demotion and detention for overstepping clear boundaries is seen as more risk-averse than just bringing a full-out assault against whistle-blowers. The arbitrary violence and imprisonment used by Russia can galvanize underground movements if the relationship becomes as antagonistic as it has between the government and dissenters.

According to Koesel, Bunce, and Weiss (2020), the different approaches to media management are partly due to where the locus of control resides in each regime. Whereas Putin's Russia prioritizes strict fiscal centralization, where all the republics/provinces kick back most revenue to the Kremlin, China cedes more entrepreneurial control to the provinces. That fiscal decentralization allows revenues to stay within the regions that produce them. This means less hoarding of revenues in the coffers of Beijing. The Chinese provinces can keep some revenue but in return they must give up democratic trappings. China's market model gives more freedom to entrepreneurs, provincial elites, and multi-national corporations, so the CCP cannot manage economic liberties and open

dissent. In Russia, before the Ukraine War, allowing opposing voices along the margins of society was partly used to justify restrictive measures like strict fiscal centralization. It was one of the features of the managed democracy that Putin wanted to fashion. With all liberal media silenced and strict fiscal centralization, it is difficult to argue within the country that Russia is anything but a full-on autocracy. Putin's unilateral decision to end all liberal media, without any cross-the-aisle relationships built with critical journalists as in China could backfire. Russian critical journalists were allowed to print what they wanted for a long time, and then would wince at potential whack-a-mole with the state. Completely silencing the people while hoarding all the wealth could be a potentially volatile mix for a regime that liked to put on the air of managed democracy. China built a social infrastructure to manage dissent, whereas Russia has no such system. Both the embattled Russian entrepreneur and the silenced critical journalist could unite underground against a regime that has become almost wholly autocratic.

CHAPTER 7

WEAK STRONGMAN

There is a tendency for many analysts of Russia to be preoccupied with Putin-centric analysis that treats his rule as omnipotent and omnipresent. However, Timothy Frye sees Putin's grip on power as much more fraught with conflict and compromise in the vein of many personalist autocracies. In personalist autocracies, there is a figurehead strongman whose system of governance is highly personal to the ruler. The autocrat faces dual threats from an elite coup and a popular uprising within this system (Frye 2022). Putin relies on bureaucratic administration, which involves many people to implement his approach, and is not immune to public opinion. Personalist autocracies rely on trade-offs

that are often contradictory. Special dispensation for oligarchs, security services, elites, governors, etc. often run at cross purposes to appeasing the common citizen and vice versa. Personalist autocrats tend to strive to buy off or intimidate the opposition while seeking high approval ratings from the public to stave off competition from rivals. There are only finite resources to accomplish this. If the corruption and graft used to enrich cronies are overdone, the opportunity cost of what the public is denied may lead to an uprising. If the resources are used for pensions or social programs, there is less of the pie to share with the elites and cronies who rely on bribes, contracts, and pole positioning to align with the autocrat's rule.

Personalist autocrats use a standard playbook: anti-Western sentiment to rally their base, twist the economy to benefit cronies, target political opponents using the legal system, and expand executive power while weakening other institutions (Frye 2022). To have the flexibility to rule in a personalist manner, one major trade-off is the resulting weak institutions. Strong institutions might stand in the way of the autocrat's whims. However, strong institutions are what often bring order to those around the ruler (Frye 2022). Also, one man cannot rule a country. It takes a system of mob-like patronage under personalist autocracies. Compared to other dictatorships, the typical features of personalist autocracies are higher corruption, slower economic growth, greater repression, and less stable policy (Frye 2022). A few prominent examples of personalist autocracies include Orban's Hungary, Duterte's Philippines, Erdogan's Turkey, and Maduro's Venezuela, and they all have common features. Looking at Putin's regime through this lens takes some of the mystique out of the house of cards he has skillfully built. Putin is forced to delegate because of Russia's tremendous size and bureaucratic

complexity (Frye 2022). All of Putin's underlings have their own interests. The patron-client relationship relies on “you-scratch-my-back-and-Ill-scratch-yours philosophy.” The chain of command can become fraught with in-fighting if the system is put under strain and neglected clients do not receive their benefits. The system under stress may lead to increased fissures and ruptures due to the series of compromises and trade-offs he has made to stay in power.

According to Frye (2021), Putin's rule depends on a public image of strong popular support. Elections have a corrupt element to stack the deck for a successful outcome. The Kremlin goes through pains to make elections look legitimate. The regime curries favor with the populace by co-opting popular agenda items with the people. From both elections and popular opinion polls, Putin uses these numbers to insulate himself against elite rivals. Those rivals may sense blood in the water if his polling dips to an unfavorable level. If Putin relies too heavily on popular support, he risks being too dependent on the will of the people, but too much repression can turn into a bottom-up populist revolt. If Putin relies too heavily on his cronies' wealth or the security apparatus's repression, he risks being too dependent on them. In this case those cronies may become tempted to orchestrate a coup. Putin's greatest skill to this point has been deftly maneuvering between these forces. However, a personalist autocracy under strain in a war that has not gone according to plan can disrupt the tenuous equilibrium of compromises Putin has had to make to stay in power.

PART 3 PUTIN, THE INSIDERS & THE PEOPLE

CHAPTER 8

PUTIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PEOPLE

In Samuel Greene's 2021 book, *Putin vs. People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia,* politics in Russia is co-constructed through political struggle. As with Timothy Frye, Greene believes that the people project the meaning of Russia onto Putin as much as Putin has any actual ability to control the public's psyche. He doesn't think it's Putin's Russia but Russia's Putin. Putin has begun to put himself in an untouchable place, but Greene believes it was the general public who participated in making him the center of the country, its politics, its society, and its history. Putin has shrewdly done everything to fashion this image through media manipulation and ideological warfare. However, the public buy-in to Putin buoys him, with strong approval ratings and making him nearly institutional. There are many people in Russia who exist in a world of emotional politics. These people eat up national patriotic stories (Greene 2021). They are resistant to change and disconnected from reality. So, the success of Putin's efforts to manufacture consent is a co-constructed edifice. Aside from the discerning intelligentsia in urban centers, most Russian people reflect what Putin has taken pains to present himself as. He uses their polled values to present himself as the embodiment of how Russia wants to see itself. Most of Russia cheers on the FOX news type coverage that shows their values as under siege by foreign and domestic enemies.

According to Greene (2022), Russian society has the same internal divisions, and moods, as American political and civic society. Russian society "is diverse and boisterous, fractious and exciting, riven by the same conflicts and contradictions—

between progress and conservatism, ambition and anxiety—that rack most democratic countries. This exists despite the state's tight grip on the media, on the economy, and on most of the public spaces in which ideas are formed and debated" (Greene 2021, ch. 1). The volatile nature of the public sentiment results in a juggling act for the Kremlin. The Kremlin must reflect public dynamics enough to win support while competing with other forces within the country seeking to circumvent coercion and position themselves as possible better emblems for the people's current values. Often, the Kremlin's hands are, in reality, tied in the face of events, and there is a feeling of powerlessness, whether on the ground in Ukraine or in the world's currency markets (Greene 2021). The source of Putin's power is his being a popular dictator, but that reliance on popular support also makes him vulnerable to world events and shifting public sentiment.

This fragility was on display during the 2011-2012 election cycle when Putin received an unexpected shock at the backlash to his running for a third term as president after he had passed off the responsibility to his long-time crony, Dmitry Medvedev. When Putin reached his two-term limit in 2008, he stepped back as prime minister in name only so that Medvedev could be president. However, during the 2011-2012 election cycle, Medvedev was clearing the way for Putin's return to the presidency. This crossed a line with more people than Putin expected, and the maneuver was met with outrage. Citizens took to the streets, and some decided to monitor polling stations for fraud (Greene 2021). The numbers from urban centers came back inflated, further stirring the anger of a considerable population. The result was six months of rolling protests (Greene 2021).

Putin responded with coercion that instilled fear in the protesters. Still, the experience left a scarring impression on Putin at the tenuousness of his power and how the protests grew in fervor before the crackdown. For his third term, Putin would lean into his modus operandi ideologically, *'don't excite the people'.* He sought to use the full power of his media manipulation machine through television and growing-in-capacity internet propaganda ploys. Rather than a mobilizing political agenda, Putin sought to keep the people away from politics, and politics away from the people. His new strategy would be to put wedge issues front and center, transforming passive acceptance of Putin's rule into active participation using political technologies to mobilize support and demonize opponents (Greene 2021). The wedge issues trumpeted on state-owned media would revolve around lifestyle choices and the subversion of Orthodox Christian religious values. These issues would preoccupy the viewer distracting them from the hard power machinations of the country.

The focus was to be kept on the emphasis that Russian values were under attack and being corrupted by the West and liberal competitors in the country. LGBT rights and foreign adoptions received a lot of media play. This focus was a winning strategy in Russia because compliant media outlets connected with the world of emotional politics by playing on the role of society and pride in the individual's psyche (Greene 2021). Even if the content was fictional, the sense of danger was widely believed (Greene 2021). With the use of red herrings and straw men, Putin could distance himself from the country's political sausage-making in many people's minds. He became associated with an almost holy war in the arena of ideology—that he was doing whatever it took to keep the fabric of Russian society Russian. He aligned himself with the core values of the Conservative

Russian and the media strategy produced results. The use of religious sentiment and anti-LGBT rhetoric as the primary wedge issues widened the ideological divide between the pro-Putin majority and the opposition minority (Greene 2021). In essence, the tactics stripped layers off of the opposition minority who may have garnered a wider following if not lambasted in the media as representing some amoral heretic value for some liberal component to their platform. The wedge issues found the point of leverage in the axis of competition and cleaved off support for Putin's opponents. This strategy worked to an extent. The failed poisoning and imprisonment of opposing voices, like Alex Navalny, led to street protests rivaling the 2011-12 post-election protests. Putin cannot keep the Russian public away from everything that may provoke backlash.

CHAPTER 9

MAKE RUSSIA GREAT AGAIN

Sergei Medvedev's (2020) book *The Return of the Russian Leviathan* echoes Samuel Greene's work but magnifies the mobilization and full-scale regional battle for reality construction and ideology. Putin's third term as president was where "the portal into the past opened up, and the dinosaurs of autocracy and imperialism took over the political arena" (ch. 1). Putin brutally cracked down on the people's protests of 2011-12, passed repressive laws, annexed Crimea, declared a hybrid war against the West and intervened in Syria. Putin saw Russia as a large, wounded animal capable of tremendous strength but with a fragile psyche from the pain of the Soviet Union's collapse. Medvedev conceptualizes the overall ideological war fought by the Kremlin as a four-wars-in-one overall crusade for reclaiming the Russian identity; essentially a four-dimensional war to

reconstruct the reality of Russia along the fault lines of space, symbols, the body, and the collective memory.

The war for the body is represented in Greene's work as the wedge issues Putin used to stir the passions of Russian conservatism. As Medvedev (2020) frames it, it was a new area of state regulation that interfered in the private lives of citizens concerned with their sexual practices, consumer habits, religious education, and even the destruction of Western food products. Very similar to how Trump and FOX News kept the political discourse and dialogue in America in the realm of the highly personal and the highly inflammatory, the war for the body in Russia went a step further. The new state regulations enacted many conservative anti-gay laws and dictates on religious education that would appeal to a certain segment of the Kremlin's base. They essentially glued that segment to their platform even if their base disagreed with other policies.

The war for symbols was the next dimension of Medvedev's conceived four wars for reconstructing Russian reality. This dimension included dominance over locations, signs, rituals, and performances. Military parades on V-Day, the Kremlin, and the red square were ordained as sacred and examples of ceremonial and location symbols (Medvedev 2020). Nuclear missiles became the symbol of military power paraded through the streets and pictured on t-shirts. Enormous screens were used for speeches to aggrandize Putin. There were all manner of symbolic shows of power and spiritual righteousness. Ensuring the environment reflected what Putin wanted it to reflect would become the new Russian self-awareness (Medvedev 2020). Russia has a past fraught with conflicted idols. The question of who to lionize and who to push to the margins is constantly in flux. They have conflicted symbols from the perestroika era and the

oligarchs' rise. Putin has emphasized selecting idols for a statue, selecting the signs of military strength through parades on Victory Day over the Nazis in World War 2. The use of political technology and size to present himself as a crusader king attempting to purge Russia of its weaknesses and streamline its strengths is stressed visually.

Recently, Putin used both Victory Day over the Nazis, and gigantic screens to project his message likening the war in Ukraine to the triumph of WWII saying that again Russia is being ganged up on by the collective West. He pointed to the symbols in the surrounding V-Day ceremony. He said it represents "the legacy of generations, values, and traditions — this is all what makes Russia different, what makes us strong and confident in ourselves, in our righteousness and in our victory" (Troianovski 2023, par. 2). Museums and theaters have removed any anti-war artists and performers and replaced them with exhibits for children called NATOizm, a play on Nazism that seeks to symbolize the Western alliance as an existential threat akin to WWII (Troianovski and Hopkins 2023). The war over symbols extends to the former Iron Curtain and the different multi-ethnic republics that have their own heroes and depictions of what has value. In essence, Putin is attempting to centralize his strength using these unifying symbols placing himself as the country's selector of what has significance, and what does not.

The war for symbols is inextricably tied to the war for memory. The Kremlin has become desperate to live on dreams of a heroic past to create a myth that Russian history is a string of unbroken victories (Medvedev 2020). This dimension has manifested in a particular history textbook in schools, the choice of memorials as state policy, and the growing rehabilitation of Stalin as a figure of strength (Medvedev 2020). The regime is

obsessed with pushing down any traumatic memories or past failures in the country. This war for memory is at the heart of the war for physical symbols. For example, one of Putin's key identifiers is the erasure of the Gorbachev era, and the chaotic nineties of Western experimentation. The war for memory is to hyper-focus on WWII, a place of triumph. Places like America do not have a similar disintegration and collapse where the country did an about-turn ideologically. The only period in American history of identity malaise may be the Vietnam war, and to some extent the current era. Overall, Putin is trying to re-write Russian history by stoking nationalism in the old and indoctrinating the young into a particular historical lens of cultural pride in a strong state, a strong man, and military might.

The war for memory is a key underlying axis of the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, where Ukraine has its own overlapping history. It has its own confounding nationalist heroes like Stepan Bandera. In Ukraine's attempts to become more European and less Russian, its very existence and attempts to form its own nationalist history often undermine the Russian attempts to fashion one consistent narrative for themselves within what used to be their sphere of influence. This is where the recurring theme of Nazism as one of the motivations for invasion keeps cropping up. In the war for memory within Russia, the victory over the Nazis in WWII plays an outsized role. Having this former highly prized Soviet space full of ethnic Russians ingesting a different historical narrative is anathema to Putin. The narrative where Ukraine had former ties to the Germans, is both something Putin wants to emphasize in stark contrast to Russian values and bury as a competing narrative to the reality he is trying to construct within Russia.

The final dimension of Medvedev's four wars (2022) is also connected to the war for symbols and memory, the war for space. The war for space occurs domestically in Moscow's squares and boulevards between authorities and the people of Russia (Medvedev 2020). The war for space also extends to what Putin believes to be rightfully Russian—the militarization of the Arctic, the neocolonial war in Syria, and post imperial invasions of Crimea and the Donbass (Medvedev 2020). Putin in his heart of hearts would love to restore the Soviet Union, and all the seceding Baltic and Eastern European nations that once belonged under the purview of the Kremlin. The war for space is the war for size, re-asserting the strength in numbers, resources, and land mass that the Soviet Union previously enjoyed in its ongoing ideological war with Western encroachment and expansion. Putin is aggrieved that Russia's sphere of influence has shrunk as the West's sphere of influence has grown. Ukraine is a symbolically loaded gateway for Western values penetrating Russia.

In her *Foreign Affairs* article, *Putin's War on History*, Anna Reid (2022) touches on how the synthesis of the war for symbols, memory, and space in Russia directly relates to the invasion of Ukraine. Putin gave an angry televised speech unleashing a tirade against Ukrainian history, saying, "Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. Ukraine's borders have no meaning other than to mark a division of the Soviet Union" (pg. 54). This rhetoric ties directly into what has consumed Putin within Russia and what he has attempted to transmit to the Russian populace. This four-dimensional war is what has been informing their views. For example, the Kremlin published an essay under Putin's by-line titled, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' where it asserted that

Russia and Ukraine had a common destiny as required reading for all service members of the Russian armed forces (Reid 2022). The theme of Ukraine belonging to the Russian space has been drilled into the people of Russia. This was partly why they celebrated the annexation of Crimea.

To reclaim that space, Putin has packaged together all the themes of the war on memory, symbols, and space to frame Ukraine as a failed state run by Neo-Nazis in line with his WWII fixation. Now, the perverted story is that the Russian soldier is a liberator of fellow ethnic Russians who are subjugated by Ukrainian Nazis and the meddling West supporting them. Reid's conception of Putin's war on history and Medvedev's conception of Putin's war on space align, because both take issue with Russia being "pushed back into her gloomy pine forests, away from such ringing old place names as Odessa and Sevastopol" (Reid 2022, pg. 56). The common denominator of these four wars through the manufacturing of a reality is a battle for sovereignty against any outside influence. This re-packaging of narrative along multiple axes has consumed Russian culture, enveloping them in a reality driven by Putin. When the Kremlin has so much control over every facet of life, it is difficult to break way from the pervasive brain washing.

CHAPTER 10

THE SOVIET MAN PSYCHOLOGY: ACQUIESCE TO WORK AROUND THE STATE

In Joshua Yaffa's 2020 book, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia*, Yaffa dedicates substantial time to discussing Levada's conception of the Soviet' Wiley man'. This conception offers some insight into the everyday Russian person's relationship to the state psychologically as this larger-than-life

entity that has and always will be there. In the Russian psyche, it is parallel to a super institution. The fixed nature of the Russian state leads to the citizen exercising patience over protest, adaptation over resistance, and passive displeasure over a struggle for rights in the face of perceived futility (Yaffa 2020). The citizen is forced to make do and work within the rules of the game with their own angling for self-betterment. Yaffa's work provides insight into why the Russian people have been so generally compliant to this war effort. He sheds light on why cynicism within collectivism snowballed into the current condition where the world is wondering how the people within the country let Putin gradually steer the country into this mess over the years and continue to acquiesce as it persists. There has been such a whiplash between the varied bad conditions of the Soviet Union and the Russia that followed its collapse that the generalized Russian person's noted apathy and cynicism to politics (documented through literature) stems from that trauma.

Consider a hypothetical Russian citizen who has been faced with either backward authoritarianism, corrupt oligarchy, or some mix of the two. To navigate the chaos, the disillusioned individual becomes their own active agent playing their own game while attempting to go undetected within the system. Many citizens just grafted themselves onto the state that they may not have respected but cannot imagine ever being without (Yaffa 2020). It is almost a battered subjects syndrome where the state's constancy in some form is all they have known, despite it regularly cheating and abusing them. According to Yaffa (2020), "so much of Soviet life had been dictated by the two-way untruth perpetrated by both state and citizen: the citizen pretended to be an enthusiastic and loyal subject, and the state pretended to be both competent and interested in

providing for individual well-being" (ch. 1). There is a telling old Soviet adage that "the worker pretends to work and the state pretends to pay them" which speaks to the deep cynicism between state and civilian. The backwardness and corruption in the country have been so pervasive for so long that there is generalized political fatigue. The average citizen recognizes that although Putin is corrupt, he is projected constantly as strong and may have an overlapping value cause with them. This is especially true for conservative, orthodox Christians who watch state-owned media, which dominates the country.

The post-Soviet collapse, and the disastrous flirtation with democracy and capitalism in the form of shock therapy, produced a citizen archetype that was beleaguered. The person that overcame the Soviet collapse was not fabulously liberated, but someone disgusted with the old system that figured that democracy couldn't be any worse (Yaffa 2020). When the nineties' kleptomania turned out to be worse, it produced nostalgia for a time when at least the country projected some strength abroad. The cynicism and apathy of the average citizen towards politics have been described as *Homo Sovietcus.* The citizen is willing to be deceived by the system, as long as they can find gaps within the system to operate (Yaffa 2020). Muzzled by oppressive forces, the idea of the "wiley man" archetype describes someone looking for personal control within chaotic forces outside of their control. This feeling of lack of control is one common explanation for why the everyday Russian supports and tolerates authoritarian strong men so lackadaisically, especially the rural poor. For the "wiley man", interacting with the state is a game of half-truths dressed up as offerings from the bureaucratic machine (Yaffa 2020). The paradox of Russian life is that a weak level of social bonds with underdeveloped institutions is one reality. At the same time, the system as a whole as a

super-institution is another reality (Yaffa 2020). This battered psychology, coupled with coercive repression, may help explain why the Russian people have been so acquiescent to the Ukraine war effort.

Multiple mass protests have occurred over the past decade stemming mainly from the country's urban intelligentsia. For example, protests erupted during the 2011-2012 election, after Nalavny's poison and arrest in 2019, and after the conscription attempt in September 2022. However, there has been a mass exodus of Russian intellectuals who fear reprisal over their opposition to the war and the loss of access to Western prospects due to the sanctions. One estimate has as many as 200 000 people (and counting) as having left since the start of the war (Demyrtie 2022). This brain drain exodus depletes the ranks of those who may stand in opposition to a state that has essentially outlawed any form of protest. It is possible to detect a kernel of the Soviet Man beleaguered psychology in the testimony of those who left with one fleeing woman saying, "fear of closed borders, political repression and forced military service is in our DNA. I remember my grandmother telling me stories about the state of fear they lived in during Stalin's time, and now we are experiencing it" (Demytrie 2022, par. 10). This is the type of dialogue you hear from those leaving in large numbers. They fear the further loss of control over their own lives and the wrath of the state.

Recently, there has been a passive form of protest within the country, with Russian citizens anonymously leaving wreaths and flowers on the steps of a statue of a Ukrainian poet. The grisly images of the carnage in Ukraine have leaked to some of the Russian populace through the internet. In this case, the bombing of Dnipro in a residential neighborhood killing about 50 people and injuring 80 others provoked the protest

(Hopkins and Heitman 2023). The flower protests are the first of their kind since the protests over the first conscription of the Russian populace for the war effort. The security services are monitoring the statue, sending police buses to survey the area, and removing the statue's offerings. These small symbolic protests are a light rallying cry for Russian ex-pats who left the country and those anti-government dissidents still living in Russia. The flowers are meant to signify that dissenters are not alone amid all of the propaganda etched on public buildings (Hopkins and Heitman 2023). However, the protests' tepidness represents the people's fear of reprisal. Even laying flowers may lead to detention.

Pervasive repression and fear of detention over decades take a toll on the civilian's psyche who have only known a central state authority that has dictated the terms of life for so long. When the state takes pains to spin its power into something appealing as Putin does, it becomes much easier to exercise their individual agency within the system by going with the grain and looking out for themselves rather than standing up to a wayward state who may ruin their life if they voice dissent. However, suppose Putin were to force further conscription on Russian society. In that case, he may be met with even bolder dissent than the street protests he faced when he first mobilized the populace in September; "the sudden switch to mobilization –after many months of promises that this measure was not necessary – inevitably led to horrendous chaos, corruption, and arbitrariness that further discredited the state and the leader. This is a natural reaction of a postindustrial, highly demilitarized society to a sudden attempt to treat it as cannon fodder" (Zubok 2022, pg. 304). This continued action would further break the unspoken compact Putin has with the people of Russia—that the arena of

military and foreign affairs would be kept separate as long as the people live with an adequate standard of living. As the Russian death toll soars to approximately 200, 000 dead, and raiding the prisons for poorly trained conscripts dries up, conscripting more of the everyday citizens could be a bridge too far for passive acquiescence to remain (Cooper, Schmitt, and Gibbons-Neff 2023). Further eroding this compact could make Putin vulnerable to public uproar, and vehement protests which may give cause to Putin's inner circle to make a move against him.

CHAPTER 11

THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF PUTIN'S INNER CIRCLE

In the first decade of his rule, Putin was blessed with a boom in the oil price, which helped Russia fiscally. Early into the second decade of his administration, Putin rode the wave of the highly popular annexation of Crimea that suggested to the people of Russia that Russia had re-emerged on the world stage as a great power. As time went on, with a stagnant economy and the annexation of Crimea in the rear-view mirror, Putin has had to increasingly rely on repression to cement his power. According to Daniel Treisman (2022), the changing composition of Putin's inner circle and growing reliance on coercive measures to maintain control suggests that Putin has surrounded himself with yes-men security lackeys rather than discerning voices. Those discerning voices may have cautioned against what appears to be the reckless move to invade Ukraine. Absent is the soft authoritarian regime of Putin's early years, where his inner circle mainly consisted of liberal economists and technocrats who favored economic integration with the West (Treisman 2022). This former brain trust wanted to attract investment with a show of commitment to the rule of law (Treisman 2022). Putin has become less of a 'spin

dictator' in recent years. Instead, his methods to repress dissent have become more brutal as his inner circle has changed, "now a repressive police state run by a small group of hardliners who have imposed ever harsher policies both at home and abroad" (Treisman 2022, pg. 40). More elaborate methods for controlling the population have been discarded, as Putin has become more paranoid of protest activity. He has slowly transitioned from the spin to the stick.

Early in Putin's rule small pockets of independent media were allowed to exist at the fringes of Russian society. Now, Putin's security services have closed all liberal media, threatened war critics with fifteen years in prison, and detained more than 13,000 anti-war protesters (Treisman 2022). This vehement crackdown on dissent has produced an air of trepidation among the discerning segments of the Russian populace. There is a growing recognition that Putin has retreated into the comforting certainties of a smaller and smaller group of yes men and reactionary security officials as many paranoid strong men have before (Treisman 2022). This inner circle thinks the way Putin thinks with the conspiratorial belief that foreign forces are ganging up on Russia. With that outlook, they implement ruthless social control and hard power intimidation tactics. These tactics have put an increasing dent in Putin's popularity.

Each hardliner character of Putin's new inner circle competes with one another to appear brazen, hard-line, and hawkish to curry favor, incentive, and positioning within the Putin-led power structure. The security elites surrounding Putin have only initiated even more uninhibited repressive measures using wartime as a framing device for keeping the population focused on the 'real enemy', ie, conspiring Western forces. Besides media spin manipulation of state-owned media, Putin has increasingly

abandoned the soft power tactics of a spin dictator. He doesn't feel comfortable enough with popular support numbers to allow 'straw man' dissent. He has increased the budgets of the FSB, the Ministry of the Interior, and the national guard by 23 percent (Treisman 2022). He has let them off the leash to roam as watchdogs in order to put down opposition where it stands.

The ratcheting up of the intensity of the security services has led to an even more cynical population and the waning of Putin's popularity. This skepticism is especially the case among the urban intelligentsia, who are more inclined to leave the country outright rather than stay and be subject to a more rabid coercive force. In a 2021 poll to gauge the fear level in the populace, nearly half of the respondents (as opposed to a quarter of the respondents in an earlier poll) feared the anticipated return of mass repression during wartime (Treisman 2022). There is an overlap between the logic of Timothy Frye's work, which sees the popularity-repression mechanism in a personalist autocracy as a delicate trade-off, and Treisman's analysis that Putin has been steadily abandoning the traits of being a spin dictator. The balance between popularity and repression is skewed by over-reliance on the inner circle's coercive tactics. Putin's popularity has been steadily leaking oil from the enhanced repressive tactics. Treisman (2022) comments that early in his tenure in office, "Putin mostly employed non-violent methods to consolidate his power, while preserving the trappings of democracy" (pg. 44). The system worked through manipulation of information rather than a generalized fear of brute force. This eschewing of the formerly managed democracy pretense may indicate that as Putin leans more heavily on security heads, those cronies may sense weakness in a president who increasingly relies on them to put out figurative fires.

As the protracted struggle of war wages on, the more each pseudo-triumph becomes an opportunity for ambitious Kremlin underlings to make a name for themselves. The military men responsible for failures in the protracted attrition war become fall guys. Conversely, those responsible for small triumphs within that struggle rise in the ranks. The risers and the fallers backbite one another to curry favor with Putin. Within these ranks, there may be potential successors should Putin's war effort falter and he becomes the subject of a coup or uprising. To this point, the military leaders active in Ukraine are still ambitiously trying to consolidate their power by removing as many intermediaries between them and Putin's ear. This was allegedly the problem with General Sergei Surovikin, who, according to the BBC (2023), "as the unified commander in Ukraine, Surovikin was becoming very powerful and was likely bypassing [Russian Defence Minister Sergei] Shoigu and Gerasimov when talking to Putin" (par. 8). There is increasing finger-pointing occurring within the ranks of the Russian military high command because of the lackluster Russian war effort. Surovikhin's dismissal, presumably with the authorization of Putin, is likely a way to restore harmony to a broken chain of command.

The threats to Putin's inner circle of military and security chiefs are now coming from outside the Kremlin. Bold mercenary outsiders and hawkish pundits have criticized the troika. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the mercenary Wagner Group, represents one of the outsiders challenging traditional elites within the country (Kurmanaev 2023). Known as the 'chef' because he was once Putin's personal chef, Prigozhin has been making headlines for insisting on taking credit for taking the Soledar mines in Ukraine. He contradicted the Russian defense minister, and publically criticized the Russian

military insider's efforts. He has attempted to fashion himself as a crucial military leader and has engaged in a war of words with the Russian defense ministry (Kurmanaev 2023). His mercenaries are mostly made up of prison convicts and have added tens of thousands of men to Putin's war effort. He has made frequent videos denigrating the high command, visiting cemeteries, and awarding medals. His media efforts have the vague feeling of someone campaigning for office. In many ways, he has become "a symbol of wartime Russia: ruthless, shameless and lawless, while his forces take thousands of casualties in the war's bloodiest battles" (Troianoski 2023, par. 6). This self-promotion has brought a once media-shy mercenary organization out of the shadows. The Wagner Group were unmarked fighters in Crimea, Syria, and Africa. They now have been brought into public view with a new headquarters in St. Petersburg. Politically ambitious sharks like Yevgeny Prigozhin are circling. They sense blood in the water with their rivalries within the Russian military command structure showing a disappointing Ukraine war effort. This is an indicator that there is a division within Putin's inner circle. This infighting spells danger for Putin himself if it remains unchecked.

The elites within Russia are disquieted and anxious due to the disappointing war effort. At the beginning of the war, Putin lashed out at worried government officials in a televised meeting, which was an odd spectacle. The technocrats within the country have been struggling to make sense of a nonsensical move with stilted public addresses from Central Bank governor Elvira Nabiullina (Gould-Davies 2022). Russian influencers and celebrities have spoken out in opposition to the war. The oligarchs have been doing their best to dodge asset freezes and property seizures from the US (Gould-Davies 2022). There is a reluctance to challenge Putin head on, but anyone who knows the reality of the

war effort is left wondering what the country's state will be and their place in it if it continues.

CHAPTER 12

TOO MUCH TRUTH FOR A POST-TRUTH ENVIRONMENT?

In Peter Pomeranstev's 2015 book, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, he describes the modern Russia of the early 2010s as a post-truth environment. There is a triumphant cynicism and reveling in throwing off the glum constraints of coherence shaping the ecosystem. Pomeranstev describes modern Russia as a luridly exciting kaleidoscope of mish-mashed Western/Eastern influences. There are pockets of exorbitant wealth and abject poverty. This variance produces a fun-house mirror of distorted visions in a place with a Post-Soviet identity crisis where facts are unpleasant (Pomeranstev 2015). Moscow in the early 2010s was the accumulated consequence of a country skydiving with spikes and free falling from "communism to perestroika to shock therapy to penury to oligarchy to mafia state to mega-rich in rapid succession" (Pomeranstev 2015, ch. 2). The fact that every role and every position of belief was mutable is how Putin made fiction reality and reality fiction (Pomeranstev 2015). Putin became the man for his time and place as the great stabilizer, a bullet-proof strong man who could hold together the chaotic post-Soviet aftermath.

At the heart of Russian identity confusion is President Putin's instrumental role in turning the state-owned national media into "a reality show, remaking authoritarianism with the logic of twenty-first-century entertainment" (Pomeranstev 2015, ch. 1). When Putin was primarily a spin dictator newly in office, he had a firm grip on the media landscape being a faceless ex-KGB bureaucrat whom the country didn't know.

Pomeranstev was writing this when Putin's political technologists' vision for marketing the president was in full bloom. The early 2010s was still a time when Putin would allow dissenting independent media around the margins as long as it orbited the hegemonic national media. The media was expected to package Putin as Mr. Russia, a macho superstar. Putin knew the wide-reaching value of creating a well-oiled propaganda machine. He knew television was the only force that can unite and bind such a vast and diverse country (Pomeranstev 2015). All of the Western catchphrases and techniques for the Trump era such as fake news, infotainment, and strongman idol worship, were mastered by the engineers of content for the Russian state-owned national media. This was disseminated out to the discerning and non-discerning alike, much like FOX news in the U.S on steroids.

Media strategists like Ostankino were tasked with ensuring that television never became dull, that highly saturated content with Putin placed as a crusader king would be championing the country against all foes, red herrings, or straw men. An image would be manufactured of Putin as whatever heroic Russian archetypal the country needed him to be, "morphing as rapidly as a performance artist among his roles of soldier, lover, bare-chested hunter, businessman, spy, tsar, superman" (Pomeranstev 2015, ch 2). The image would be forged by ubiquity and pervasiveness so that even if it strained credulity, those with similar aspirational values would nod along. While portraying Putin as an icon, the media technologists and content producers were given creative license to create a terrifying world of amoral influences that would place Putin's heroic efforts in a civilizational context. Western conspiracy and CIA penetration, malevolent forces outside and within Russia seeking to overturn Orthodox Christian values were staples on

television programming. There is the long-running current in Russian national media of the West sponsoring anti-Russian Nazis in Ukraine. These ingredients coalesced into stories "where US-sponsored fascists are crucifying Russian children on the squares of Ukrainian towns because the West is organizing a genocide against Russians" (Pomeranstev 2015, ch. 15). This is the type of content that the everyday Russian has been exposed to for over a decade. The sensationalist falsehoods of the media would work in concert with fake movements, political parties, and ideologies engineered by the Kremlin (Walker 2017). The illusion of a distracting political culture of fake movements and fake news all safely controlled by the Kremlin were provided to give controlled outlets for protest. The objective was to overload the Russian senses with chaos where the everyday Russian may suspect that there are lies within a greater truth—that Putin was necessary to hold everything together.

While in the West the Kremlin accusing Ukraine of Nazism and invading is surprising, within Russia itself it's a climax to a long-gestating story cycle. In these stories, only the virtuous Kremlin and Putin, the country's champion, can shield Russians from these foes. As with FOX news in the U.S, the lies are delivered so incessantly, so brazenly, with such panache with a straight face, "it's hard to get your head around the idea they are lying quite so much, which means to some extent they have real power, a power to define what is true and what isn't, and wouldn't you do better just to nod anyway?" (Pomeranstev 2015, ch. 15) The Russian propaganda machine's power is to manufacture consent. This propaganda is especially effective in industrial and rural regions that do not have direct access to competing information. Even in the metropolitan regions, the content produced is designed to seduce and persuade the urban Russian

viewer that despite the method, the message is one for the Russian people, for Russian values.

As the years have passed, Putin's media monopoly has only expanded, doubling down on these methods. Gone are the independent media outlets that were allowed to exist for context and dimension to the Kremlin's propaganda. Now, media strategists in Russia have been faced with the complex task of putting lipstick on a pig. They have been forced to provide glowing reports for a disappointing war effort that amounts to about a third of all television coverage in the country (Alyukov 2022). Recently a slew of emails between Russian media content producers offered a peek behind the current curtain of their propaganda machine. The effort has been a mad dash to spin a counter-narrative by cherry-picking the few and far between news items abroad. News items that are encouraging, supportive, and contradictory to the Western coverage of Russian failures are broadcasted. The spin doctors have been forced into the exhausting task of finding pro-Russian content by scouring American cable news, right-wing social media, and Chinese officials (Mozur, Satariano, and Kronik 2022). It stands to reason that the task faced by the Kremlin to spin the war effort into something it is not will become hard to conceal from the Russian people, especially as they face the death toll, the bite of Western sanctions, and the images of carnage in Ukraine on the internet. If there are no fruits of the war effort to report in earnest, then the benefit to cost may be lost on the Russian people. Too many truths could leak into the Russian reality, potentially undermining the Putin regime's greatest weapon, its well-oiled propaganda machine. If the Russian citizens detect too many discrepancies, it may start to eat away at the popular

support Putin relies upon, opening him up to both vulnerabilities from inside and outside the Kremlin.

PART 4 FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER 13

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to answer the question of whether Putin will survive the war in Ukraine as president. He has become such an outsize brand in Western political thought as a Machiavellian villain that his survival is very topical—especially after launching the most naked war of aggression for territorial conquest since WWII. The war shocked the West and begged the question of how NATO had allowed the Russia-under-Putin problem to foment after the collapse of the Soviet Union until the war in Ukraine came to a climax this past year. To both understand the historical context of modern Russia and whether Putin will survive as president, three variables were identified; (1) the character of the war of attrition in Ukraine; (2) Putin's relationship to the people in Russia; and (3) Putin's relationship with his inner circle. The war's outcome will determine his fate within Russia, but as noted earlier Russia is never as weak or as strong as it seems. There is a chance he can salvage some face and spin a hollow victory with a favorable negotiated settlement that allows him to keep gains in the Donbas region. The country's macroeconomic financial insulation or last resort, the nuclear option, are sources of strength that may prove to be mitigating factors. A reticent ally like China could facilitate his success, although it has yet to do so. However, the strain on the country regarding its growing pariah status, and the biting Western sanctions, may lead to internal implosion. This stress may fracture the series of compromises Putin needs to

make as a personalist autocrat. He has to balance the demands of his neo-patrimonial network of insiders verses the people of Russia. His house of cards may yet crumble under the weight of an arduous long-term war effort.

The war in Ukraine is the climax of Putin getting lost in his zealotry with the war on ideology he was waging within Russia—specifically his war on history—which he stoked, especially in his third term of presidency. His fervent zealotry allowed the changing hawkish nature of yes men surrounding Putin to reinforce his ideas that invading Ukraine would be easy. Out of the box, this invasion as a complete rousing victory for Russia was largely dead on arrival. The Ukrainians stood tall. NATO was rejuvenated. Russia's allies backed away from the situation. The Russian military, in terms of conventional force, proved to be pedestrian in terms of capacity bordering on backward in terms of management. The Kremlin's gross miscalculations have left the war effort for both sides mired in a war of attrition. The gridlock drains each side of men and resources until one become more haggard and war-weary than the other and sues for peace. Putin doubling down on a war of attrition is likely in part a gambit to save his skin because his brand within Russia is inextricably tied to this war effort. Using his all-encompassing propaganda machine, Putin had made himself the champion against the Nazis he alleges run Ukraine, the embodiment of military strength and vitality, and the crusader king against Western civilization.

Putin needs at least one war scenario to occur in order to survive. That scenario is that Russia uses its superior numbers of soldiers against Ukraine to force them into a negotiated settlement. This settlement must allow Russia to keep some territorial gains, most likely in the Donbas region. If the numbers of Ukraine's dead mount, and NATO's

united front frays, there is a moderate probability that something like this will occur. If so, then Putin can spin the territorial gains as a moral victory for liberating ethnic Russians under "Nazi control" in Ukraine. He can begin to outsource blame onto the West while asserting that he had to take them on single-handedly. He has already started to do in the country through the media. This is a relatively narrow path to survival as he is already on an increasingly hot seat. The elites and Russian entrepreneurs in the country will continue to feel the bite of severe Western sanctions and loss of reputation abroad. The infighting between the military high command and security services could increase. The everyday Russian could begin to feel the mounting number of casualties, and recoil at the sight of the carnage in Ukraine. They have already begun to resist further mobilization into the war effort. The public could begin to see the discrepancy between what they are sold on national media and what is happening around them.

As a personalist autocrat in the vein of Erdogan in Turkey and Orban in Hungary, Putin's power rests on being both popular enough with the people to stave off rivals and patrimonial enough to rely on coercion to keep dissenters powerless. This delicate balancing act requires trade-offs. If the overall pie were to shrink, as the West intends to ensure with its sanctions, Putin risks the ire of both the country's elites in the form of a coup and the people in the form of a popular uprising. Putin's popularity is critical, particularly with the general public. Since coming to power in 2000, Putin has promised stability, and with the oil boom of the early aughts, was able to provide some measure of that for the Russian people. This return to order was particularly welcome after the chaotic nineties experiment with Western democracy and capitalism. Since then, Putin has used straw men, red herrings, and wedge issues to enhance his aggrandized image

within the country. This has been possible because his national media monopoly is a well-oiled personal propaganda machine. Its primary focus has been manufacturing a reality with an ideological war with the West for space, memory, symbols, and body.

The manufacturing of consent, within both the elites and the people, has all culminated in the war in Ukraine after two decades of propagandist myth-making. Putin believes Ukraine rightfully belongs under Russian dominion from a civilizational perspective. The Russian people are accused of being blasé about Putin's machinations, but they have been through trauma after trauma, making them more amenable to a strong hand providing order. The people have been told incessantly that Ukraine is theirs by right, and it is in the country's interest to reclaim it. They have been sold the idea that their Western foes use a corrupt Ukraine as a breeding ground to co-opt and persecute ethnic Russians. This outlook was part of why the annexation of Crimea was so popular in Russia. Now, with the prospect of defeat in this war, that system will be put to the test as the country feels the pressure form abroad and the sacrifices within. This begs the question of whether all of the lies Putin has poured into his propaganda machine will be met with truths that are too big to spin. As noted by Tatiana Stanovaya in her *Foreign Policy* article, "these days, an important part of the Russian elite—made up of Prigozhin, Simonyan and TV managers in general, Kadyrov, and, with some reservations, United Russia—has started to question the way Russia is fighting in Ukraine: Putin's exclusive zone of responsibility. They are targeting the military leaders, and even if they are not turning against the president (and they will not yet), they want Putin to act differently in order to secure victory" (par. 11).

Putin has an uphill battle to spin potential gains in the war as a victory that the country can hang its hat on, because preparations for sanctions were also underestimated and the Russian war chest has been drained. As Russia gets increasingly squeezed and the Russian public become deeply resentful of further conscription, Putin's popularity is sure to be tested. As the overall pie shrinks making it difficult to pay the elites for ongoing support, and the resources devoted to civilian social welfare are diverted to the war effort, the delicate series of trade-offs that a personalist autocrat needs to stay in power may be in danger. If Putin relies too much on elites to coerce the public, the elites may turn against him and orchestrate a coup. If Putin depends too much on popular support as the elites abandon his cause, he may be vulnerable to a popular uprising. Overall, the war of attrition is a double-edged sword for Putin. He has doubled down on a weak hand. Russia essentially has a three-to-one numbers advantage to keep waves of mobilization bludgeoning the smaller Ukraine. That fact alone may eventually bring war-weary Ukraine to the negotiating table, but Ukrainian and NATO resolve has yet to waver. Despite its considerable size advantage, Russia's incompetency and internal contradictions may not weather the strain placed on them during a protracted war of attrition, and the Putin regime could implode from within.

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