

KREMLIN RISING

VLADIMIR
PUTIN'S
RUSSIA AND
THE END OF
REVOLUTION

PETER BAKER AND
SUSAN GLASSER

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A LISA DREW BOOK
SCRIBNER
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY



A LISA DREW BOOK/SCRIBNER
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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Designed by Kyoko Watanabe
Text set in Minion

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005044157

ISBN 0-7432-6431-2

Boris Yeltsin (*right*) made Vladimir Putin his handpicked successor after advisers concluded the onetime KGB spy would protect their interests. Putin was no baby-kisser, but he did don military uniforms (*below*), and he even flew to Chechnya to win votes in 2000. (Photos by Ilya Pitalev/Kommersant.)

Tycoon Boris Berezovsky (*below right*) helped bring Putin to power with a secret plot called Project Putin but later fell out with the new president and fled to Britain.

(Photo by Pavel Kassir/Kommersant.)





Tatyana Shalimova (*above*) was one of our early guides to the new Russia, showing us the divide between her life in fast-changing Moscow and her backwater hometown of Mokshan. (Photo by Paul Miller.) Mikhail Kozyrev (*below left*) started Nashe Radio to promote Russian rock but struggled with the nationalist wave he rode to success. (Photo by Sergei Mikheyev/Kommersant.) Boomtown Moscow (*below right*) boasted more billionaires than anywhere else in the world. (Photo by Aleksei Kudenko/Kommersant.)

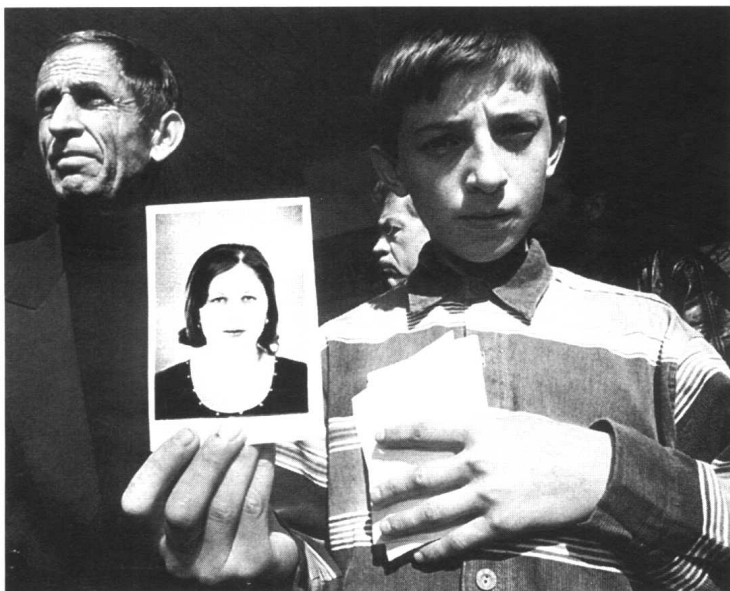




George W. Bush (*above left*) embraced Vladimir Putin as a friend after the Russian told him a story of a cross his mother once gave him. But after looking into Putin's soul during their first meeting, Bush would later discover that his friend was no democratic reformer. (*Photo by Dmitri Azarov/Kommersant.*)

One of Putin's first targets was the independent NTV network, whose anchor Yevgeny Kiselyov and his team of journalists (*below*) fought a losing battle to stave off a state takeover. (*Photo by Pavel Smertin/Kommersant.*)





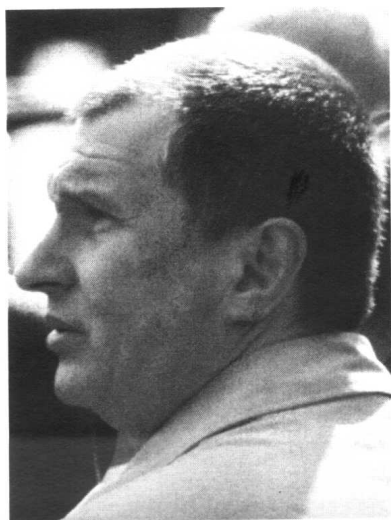
The war in Chechnya claimed many lives, including eighteen-year-old Elza Kungayeva, who was murdered by a Russian colonel the day Vladimir Putin was elected and whose family (above) waged a bitter campaign for justice. (Photo by Sergei Veniavsky/Kommersant.)

The war struck Moscow when guerrillas seized a theater showing the musical *Nord-Ost* (below left, photo by Valery Melnikov/Kommersant). After Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov argued with Putin (below right) over plans to raid the theater, Putin sent him to Mexico to be out of the way. (Photo by Dmitri Azarov/Kommersant.)





The *Siloviki*: The former military and secret-police officers known as the men of power rose to new heights under Putin, including a trio of KGB veterans, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov (*above*, photo by Dmitri Azarov/Kommersant), presidential envoy Viktor Cherkesov (*above right*, photo by Yevgeny Pavlenko/Kommersant), and Kremlin deputy chief of staff Igor Sechin (*right*, photo by Dmitri Azarov/Kommersant). Ivanov positioned himself as a successor to Putin, while Cherkesov rebuilt a giant state police force and Sechin maneuvered to take over the country's biggest oil company.





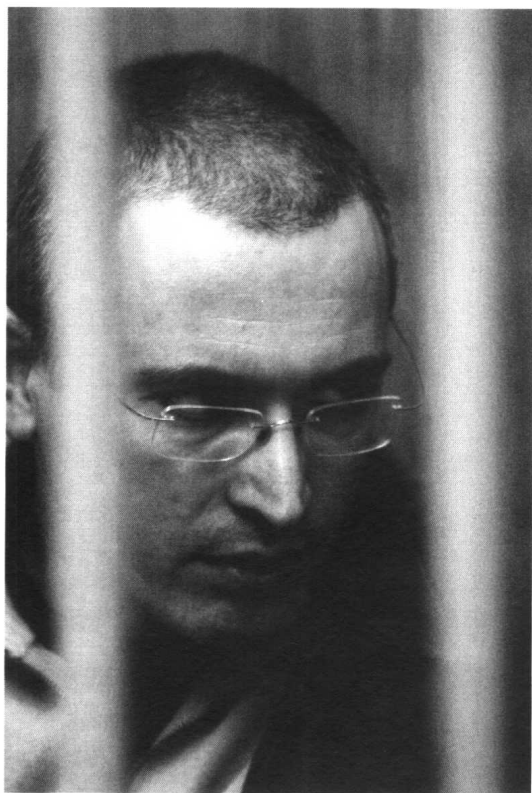
The Opposition: Irina Khakamada (*above*), a Western-oriented democrat, ran a doomed campaign against Putin for reelection in 2004. (Photo by Susan Glasser.)

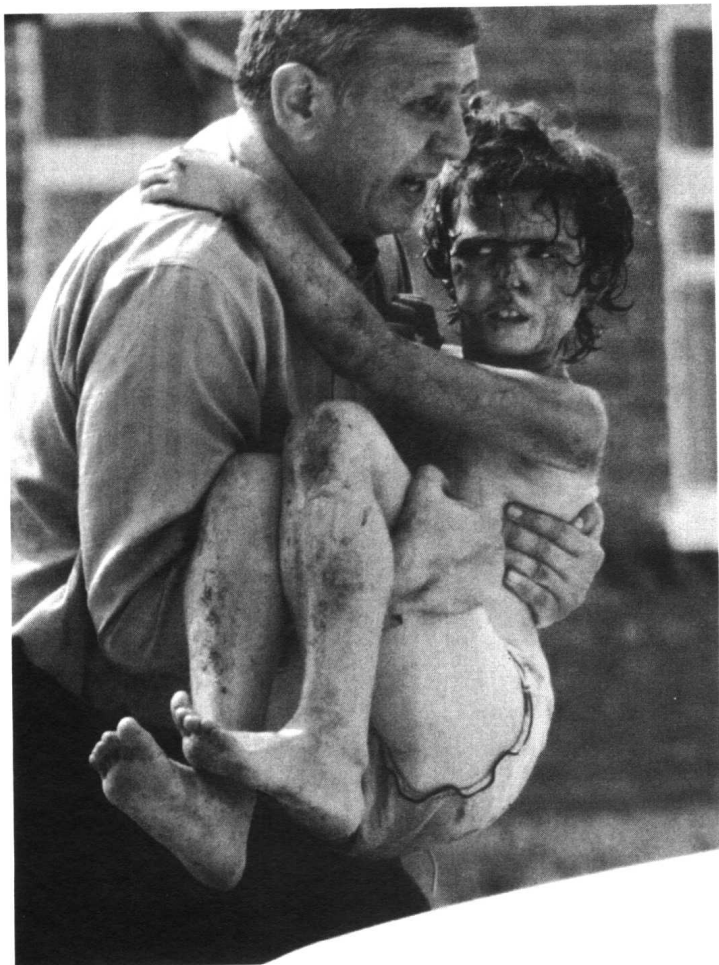
Her colleague, Boris Nemtsov (*below left*), fought to reform the military and investigate *Nord-Ost* but was blocked by Putin's Kremlin. (Photo by Dmitri Lebedev/Kommersant.) Sergei Glazyev (*below right*), a disaffected Communist, created a new nationalist party with Kremlin blessing only to be crushed when he tried to go independent. (Photo by Dmitri Lekay/Kommersant.)



Oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky (*right*), Russia's richest man, defied Vladimir Putin's monopoly on power and wound up in prison as the Kremlin dismantled and effectively renationalized his Yukos Oil Company. (Photo by Dmitri Lebedev/Kommersant.)

Tanya Levina (*below*) and her Moscow high school history class struggled to understand the changes in their country, with Tanya concluding that Lenin had been right after all. (Photo by Yulia Solovyova.)





Chechen rebels and their allies shocked the world with the seizure of School Number 1 in the southern Russian town of Beslan, which left hundreds of children and their parents and teachers dead. The burned-out school building became a shrine for Russians, who trooped through and left behind tokens to mourn the tragedy.

(Photo above by Valery Melnikov/Kommersant. Photo right by Peter Baker.)



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INTRODUCTION

Tatyana's Russia

In this country, something happens and you never know where it will lead.

—TATYANA SHALIMOVA

A bit of this, yet also half of that.

—YEVGENY YEVTUSHENKO

TATYANA SHALIMOVA'S high heels sank into the mud as we rounded the corner to her brother's house. To our left, four chickens feasted in a large, open garbage bin. Ahead, her brother's wife stood alone in the kitchen, a gigantic pot of slops simmering on the stove to feed their pig, Masha. Inside the house, there was no toilet, no hot water, and no telephone. Pulling on her Ray-Bans, Tatyana shook her head as she considered the gap separating her life in Moscow from her brother Misha's in the "workers' settlement" of Mokshan. "I can't stay here for more than a few days at a time," she said. Then came a question, *the* question: "Why don't the people here change their lives?" Her unspoken rebuke hung in the air: "I did."¹

It was nearly ten years to the day after the failed coup by hard-line Communists in August 1991 set in motion the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia was now a family divided by differing post-Soviet realities, struggling to come to terms with a painful decade of dislocation. For some like Tatyana, there were new hopes and expanded horizons—"the appetite," she explained to us, "grows while eating." For the majority like her brother, there were the ruins of an old system and no more than rare glimpses of something new to replace it.

In the Kremlin, a onetime KGB spy who had sat out the implosion of the Soviet empire in a backwater posting in East Germany had become president of Russia. Few knew what to make of Vladimir Putin, a political cipher who came into office speaking of democracy while preparing to dismantle democratic institutions. Fewer still had a sense of where Russia was headed after its first tumultuous post-Soviet decade. The age of Boris Yeltsin, with all the

attendant drunken antics and economic crises, had ended. The age of Putin, whatever it would be, had begun.

We had arrived in Russia as correspondents for the *Washington Post* on the eve of Putin's election as president in 2000 and would stay on through nearly four years of change in a country the world thought it had gotten to know under Yeltsin. We found the place in the throes of a nationalist reawakening, cheered on by a proud, young leader, and yet such a weakened shadow of its former superpower self that it faced an epidemic of young conscripts running away from an army that couldn't properly feed them. It was a time of economic boom as oil revenues floated Russia out of the bank runs and ruble collapses of Yeltsin's presidency. And yet it was also a place ruled by ambivalence and anxiety, when fears of the future crowded out memories of the brutalities in the not-so-distant Communist past. This was a newly assertive Russia, rejecting international loans instead of defaulting on them, glorifying its lost empire rather than exulting in the downfall of dictatorship, a Russia where the clichés of the 1990s, of begging babushkas, gangster capitalism, and oligarchic excess, were no longer operative. The grinding, brutal war in the breakaway region of Chechnya—and the spill-over wave of gruesome terror attacks against subway riders and airline passengers, schoolchildren, and theatergoers—became a grim constant linking the two eras.

A friend of a friend we first met at an Italian café in the center of Moscow, Tatyana would turn out to be one of our first and most reliable guides to Putin's Russia, helping us explore the post-Soviet fault lines that fissured the vast country. Hers was a Russia banking on the promises of an unfinished capitalist revolution; her brother remained behind in the crumbled wreckage of their childhood, trapped in isolation and the unforgiving legacy of the past. Tatyana's was the world of Moscow's emerging, tenuous middle class, a whirl of European vacations and after-work aerobics classes, supermarkets and traffic jams, rising expectations and perpetual insecurity. Brother Misha's Mokshan, 440 miles to the southeast, was a place of rusting factories and Communist-era bosses, where money remained more concept than reality and the summer harvest of cabbage and potatoes supplied food for the long winter.

"All the positive changes that happened in my life are the consequences of the new system," she said.

"Things are harder now," he countered. "There's not enough jobs and not enough money."

On the overnight train from Moscow to Mokshan, a twelve-hour-and-

forty-five-minute journey from one country to another, Tatyana told us her story of wrenching change in Russia's decade of upheaval. At thirty-four, she was part of the transitional generation, the last to receive a fully Soviet education and the first to work mostly in the free market. She grew up with Leonid Brezhnev's stagnation in the 1970s, came of age during Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika in the 1980s, and became an adult amid the democratic chaos and corrupted capitalism of Boris Yeltsin's 1990s. Now she had forgotten her mandatory classes on Marxism and worked for a foundation trying to reform the Russian judiciary. Ten years earlier, she had never been outside the country. Today, she was fluent in world capitals, most recently Paris and London, a connoisseur of beaches from Spain to Egypt. Where once she lived in a crowded communal apartment with four roommates, one grimy kitchen, and no shower, now she rented a tiny studio and dreamed of owning her own home.

The gulf between her Moscow and her family's Mokshan had always existed. But never had it been so wide—the difference between the \$1,500 a month that Tatyana considered “normal” for herself and her Moscow friends and the \$70 monthly salary of her brother, between the French cognac she now preferred and the home-brewed vodka he kept in his cupboard. On the short walk from Misha's house to the polluted river where they had swum as kids, he described the berry-picking season just ended, the mushroom-hunting soon to begin, and the cow he wanted to purchase that fall. Tatyana, meanwhile, was looking back at his crooked wooden outhouse. “I am between two worlds,” she told us.

So, too, was Putin's Russia, no longer Communist yet not quite capitalist, no longer a tyranny yet not quite free. The heady idealism of the day that Yeltsin had clambered atop a tank in 1991 and brought down the Soviet Union was long since dead and often unmourned. “Democracy” was not now—if it had ever been—a goal supported by much of the population, and the very word had been discredited, an epithet that had come to be associated with upheaval rather than opportunity. Polls consistently found that no more than a third of the population considered themselves democrats a decade into the experiment, while an equally large number believed authoritarianism was the only path for their country.² Yeltsin had, in other words, succeeded in killing off Communism but not in creating its successor.

Instead, the Russia we found on the eve of the Putin era remained a country in between, where strong-state rhetoric played well even as the state collapsed, where corruption and the government were so intertwined as to be at times indistinguishable, and where the president from the KGB set as his

main priority the establishment of what he euphemistically called the “dictatorship of the law.” Like everyone else, we were left to wonder where these slogans would in reality lead, certain only that the Putin presidency would be very different from what had preceded it.

For Tatyana and her friends, there was respite but no real refuge from the uncertainty. And this perhaps was the most useful introduction for us to Russia, a reminder that while Moscow was now a place of sushi for the few and new cars for the many, of seemingly unlimited freedoms and a decade’s worth of openness to the West, there were no guarantees. One Sunday afternoon, at the health club that was her favorite hangout, Tatyana sipped freshly squeezed pear juice at the sports bar after changing out of her neon yellow leotard and electric blue spandex shorts. She and her friends were preoccupied with the minutiae of life in the big city at the turn of the millennium, with Internet dating and vacations abroad and families in the provinces who couldn’t relate. But unlike the pre–September 11 cocoon of Americans who felt free to ignore the realities of the wider world, Russians did not have the luxury of completely tuning out.

“In this country, something happens and you never know where it will lead,” Tatyana told her friends.

Heads nodded and soon the conversation broke up. Two of the women were late for appointments to get their legs waxed.

FROM OUR first trip there together, the Russia that we experienced was Putin’s. During his election campaign in 2000, in a grim March that was neither winter nor spring, we had our initial encounter with what would become an ever more artfully “managed democracy”—a term that came into wide use for the first time that political season as Moscow’s intelligentsia struggled to understand the political goals of the little-known secret police chief who on New Year’s Eve, 1999, had become Boris Yeltsin’s handpicked successor.³

Trying to understand the Putin appeal, we flew to Magnitogorsk, the rusting steel town straddling Europe and Asia in the Ural Mountains whose founding had been the proudest achievement of dictator Joseph Stalin’s first five-year plan back in 1929. When we got off the plane late at night, we were met on the tarmac by a local police official who had been informed that the *Washington Post* was coming to town and insisted on checking our documents—an echo of a Soviet past we thought long gone. After negotiating our way through that encounter, we found a city where the plant managers themselves organized Putin’s campaign and workers shrugged at the inevitability

of the anointed president's victory. As the sky turned a hideous orange outside the mammoth steel plant's gates in a daily light show of environmental hazard, we talked to Soviet leftovers who were so indifferent to politics they told us that it did not matter to them that Putin refused to offer a program for governing the country. If anything, they said, it was a positive. "Stalin's words—that each person is just a small wheel in a big state machine—are still in our psyche," mused the editor of the local newspaper, founded like the rest of the gritty town by Stalin's political prisoners. "That is why people are content with slogans and don't feel they need detailed programs."⁴

On television, on billboards, in the newspapers, were all the apparent hallmarks of democracy—a large field of competing candidates, genuine differences over the country's future, shamelessly pandering photo ops. But rather than being the flourishes of a vibrant new political culture, these proved to be deceptive, reflecting Russian expertise in the arts of *pokazukha*—displays meant only for show. In the end, what struck us about the election was not only the absence of real choice but the mystery of Putin's appeal. After not yet a decade of democratic experimentation, how could it be that this product of the KGB was the best the country had to offer itself?

On election day, when Putin would become Russia's second elected president in its thousand-year history in an election marred by vote fraud, media manipulation, and irregularities politely overlooked by the world's other great powers, we spent the afternoon in Moscow asking voters about the spy who became president. Their answers surprised us then and still do.

"He knows what order is," Putin voter Tatyana Gosudareva told us, a sentence we heard so often in the coming years it would come to seem a refrain. We found a young couple huddled together in the sculpture garden of fallen Soviet statues outside the House of Artists, paying homage to the stern visage of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police. The monument had been pulled off its pedestal outside KGB headquarters in August 1991 in one of the signal moments of the revolution that spelled the end of the Soviet Union. But more and more these days, the curious who came to glance at the fallen spymaster were not democrats thrilled at his symbolic toppling but Russians like Sergei and Lena, who idolized the strong hands that ruled a state they were barely old enough to remember. Sergei, twenty-four, worked for the latest incarnation of the secret police, the Federal Security Service, the domestic successor to the KGB that was known by its Russian initials as the FSB. He and his teenage girlfriend, Lena, had voted for Putin because of his background. "Absolutely it prepared him to be president," Sergei said before patiently explaining to us why Russians would be proud