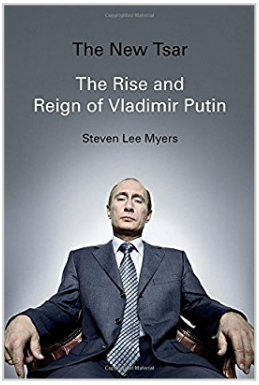

The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin

By Steven Lee Myers

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The epic tale of the rise to power of Russia's current president—the only complete biography in English – that fully captures his emergence from shrouded obscurity and deprivation to become one of the most consequential and complicated leaders in modern history, by the former *New York Times* Moscow bureau chief.

In a gripping narrative of Putin’s rise to power as Russia’s president, Steven Lee Myers recounts Putin’s origins—from his childhood of abject poverty in Leningrad, to his ascension through the ranks of the KGB, and his eventual consolidation of rule. Along the way, world events familiar to readers, such as September 11th and Russia’s war in Georgia in 2008, as well as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, are presented from never-before-seen perspectives.

This book is a grand, staggering achievement and a breathtaking look at one man’s rule. On one hand, Putin’s many reforms—from tax cuts to an expansion of property rights—have helped reshape the potential of millions of Russians whose only experience of democracy had been crime, poverty, and instability after the fall of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Putin has ushered in a new authoritarianism, unyielding in his brutal repression of revolts and squashing of dissent. Still, he retains widespread support from the Russian public.

The New Tsar is a narrative tour de force, deeply researched, and utterly necessary for anyone fascinated by the formidable and ambitious Vladimir Putin, but also for those interested in the world and what a newly assertive Russia might mean for the future.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Steven Lee Myers’s *The New Tsar* is not the first biography of Putin, but it is the strongest to date. Judicious and comprehensive, it pulls back the veil… from one of the world’s most secretive leaders. What is most striking, given the aura of steely consistency that Putin cultivates, is how he has changed over the years…. The great strength of Myers’s book is the way it shows how chance events and Putin’s own degeneration gradually cleared the path to the Ukraine crisis… Putin emerges as neither a KGB automaton, nor the embodiment of Russian historical traditions, nor an innocent victim of Western provocations and NATO’s hubris, but rather as a flawed individual who made his own choices at crucial moments and thereby shaped history.”
—Daniel Treisman, *The Washington Post*

“What Steven Lee Myers gets so right in *The New Tsar*, his comprehensive new biography — the most informative and extensive so far in English — is that at bottom Putin simply feels that he’s the last one standing between order and chaos… What Myers offers is the portrait of a man swinging from crisis to crisis with one goal: projecting strength… A knowledgeable and thorough biography… Putin himself now represents the chaos he so abhors — the chaos that will surely come in his wake.”
—Gal Beckerman, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Steven Lee Myers coherently, comprehensively, and evenhandedly tells the story not only of Putin’s glory years, but also of his hardscrabble childhood in Leningrad, his checkered academic career, his undistinguished work as a KGB agent in East Germany, his remarkably loyal service to the mayor of post-Soviet St. Petersburg, and his reluctant but speedy climb through President Yeltin’s ministries in the late 1990s."
— Bob Blaisdell, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“Combining skilled story telling, psychological examination and political investigation, Steven Lee Myers succeeds brilliantly in this biography of Vladimir Putin. Explaining the dangers that Putin’s Russia may and does pose, Myers effortlessly and expertly guides the reader through the complexities of the Russian Byzantine governing style and the country’s politics and identity. In the end, the book provides one of the most comprehensive answers to a puzzling question: Despite all the changes that Russia has gone through during communism and post-communism, why is it still an empire of the tsar?”
—Nina Khrushcheva

“Such an understanding of Putin’s early life and the evolution of his leadership is lacking. [Myers’s] methodology is sound and, I believe, the only way to capture such an intimate understanding of Russia’s iron man.”
—Ian Bremmer, author of *Superpower*

“Personalities determine history as much as geography, and there is no personality who has had such a pivotal effect on 21st century Europe as much as Vladimir Putin. *The New Tsar* is a riveting, immensely detailed biography of Putin that explains in full-bodied, almost Shakespearean fashion why he acts the way he does.”
–Robert D. Kaplan

“The reptilian, poker-faced former KGB agent, now Russian president seemingly for life, earns a fair, engaging treatment in the hands of *New York Times* journalist Myers… [who] clearly knows his material and primary subject… Putin used the perks of power to create a complex system of cronyism and nepotism. Myers shows how Putin convinced everyone that this way of operating was part of the Russian soul and how he perpetuated it through an archaic form of Russian corruption… Myers astutely notes how Putin’s speeches increasingly harkened back to the worst period of the Cold War era’s dictates by Soviet strongmen… A highly effective portrait of a frighteningly powerful autocrat.”
–*Kirkus* **(starred review)**

“What could be more timely and relevant than a new, thorough biography of Russian President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, from a writer who was *The New York Times* correspondent in Moscow for seven years of the Russian chief's reign?... Russia has lived through numerous prime ministers, a stock market crash, a debt default, moments of paralysis, wrenching warfare in Chechnya, brutal murders and good and crooked elections, all recounted succinctly by Mr. Myers… Putin's and Russia's relations with the United States are dealt with candidly.”
—Dan Simpson, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

About the Author
STEVEN LEE MYERS has worked at *The New York Times* for twenty-six years, seven of them in Russia during the period when Putin consolidated his power. He spent two years as bureau chief in Baghdad, covering the winding down of the American war in Iraq, and now covers national security issues. He lives in Washington, D.C. This is his first book.

CHAPTER 1
Homo Sovieticus

Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin edged forward through the cratered battlefield beside the Neva River, roughly thirty miles from Leningrad. His orders seemed suicidal. He was to reconnoiter the German positions and, if possible, capture a “tongue,” slang for a soldier to interrogate. It was November 17, 1941,1 already bitterly cold, and the Soviet Union’s humiliated army was now desperately fighting to avoid its complete destruction at the hands of Nazi Germany. The last tanks in reserve in the city had crossed the Neva a week before, and Putin’s commanders now had orders to break through heavily reinforced positions defended by 54,000 German infantrymen. There was no choice but to obey. He and another soldier approached a foxhole along a dug-in front, carved with trenches, pocked with shell craters, stained with blood. A German suddenly rose, surprising all three of them. For a frozen moment, nothing happened. The German reacted first, unpinned a grenade and tossed it. It landed near Putin, killing his comrade and riddling his own legs with shrapnel. The German soldier escaped, leaving Putin for dead. “Life is such a simple thing, really,” a man who retold the story decades later would say, with a characteristic fatalism.

Putin, then thirty years old, lay wounded on a bridgehead on the east bank of the Neva. The Red Army’s commanders had poured troops across the river in hopes of breaking the encirclement of Leningrad that had begun two months earlier when the Germans captured Shlisselburg, an ancient fortress at the mouth of the Neva, but the effort failed. The Germans laid a siege that would last 872 days and kill a million civilians by bombardment, starvation, or disease. “The Führer has decided to wipe the city of Petersburg from the face of the earth,” a secret German order declared on September 29. Surrender would not be accepted. Air and artillery bombardment would be the instrument of the city’s destruction, and hunger would be its accomplice, since “feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us.” Never before had a modern city

endured a siege like it.

“Is this the end of your losses?” Joseph Stalin furiously cabled the city’s defenders the day after the siege began. “Perhaps you have already decided to give up Leningrad?” The telegram was signed by the entire Soviet leadership, including Vyacheslav Molotov, who in 1939 had signed the notorious nonaggression pact with his Nazi counterpart, Joachim von Ribbentrop, which was now betrayed. It was by no means the end of the losses. The fall of Shlisselburg coincided with ferocious air raids in Leningrad itself, including one that ignited the city’s main food warehouse. The Soviet forces defending the city were in disarray, as they were everywhere in the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion that began on June 22, 1941, had crushed Soviet defenses along a thousand-mile front, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Even Moscow seemed in danger of falling.

Stalin never considered surrendering Leningrad, and he dispatched the chief of the general staff, Georgy Zhukov, to shore up the city’s defenses, which he did with great brutality. On the night of September 19, on Zhukov’s orders, Soviet forces mounted the first assault 600 meters across the Neva to break the siege, but it was repulsed by overwhelming German firepower. In October, they tried again, hurling forth the 86th Division, which included Putin’s unit, the 330th Rifle Regiment. The bridgehead those troops managed to create on the eastern bank of the Neva became known, because of its size, as the Nevsky Pyatachok, from the word for a five-kopek coin or a small patch. At its greatest expanse the battlefield was barely a mile wide, less than half a mile deep. For the soldiers fated to fight there, it was a brutal, senseless death trap.

Putin was an uneducated laborer, one of four sons of Spiridon Putin, a chef who once worked in the city’s famed pre-revolutionary Astoria Hotel. Spiridon, though a supporter of the Bolsheviks, fled the imperial capital during the civil war and famine that followed the October Revolution in 1917. He settled in his ancestral village, Pominovo, in the rolling hills west of Moscow, and later moved to the city itself, where he cooked for Vladimir Lenin’s widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, at her official Soviet dacha in the Gorky district on the edge of Moscow. After her death in 1939, he worked in the retreat of Moscow’s Communist Party Committee. He was said to have cooked once for Grigory Rasputin at the Astoria and on occasion for Stalin when he visited Lenin’s widow, beginning a family tradition of servitude to the political elite. Proximity to power did nothing to protect his sons from the Nazis; the entire nation was fighting for survival.

Vladimir Putin was already a veteran when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. He had served as a submariner in the 1930s before settling down not far from Leningrad, in the village of Petrodvorets, where Peter the Great had built his palace on the Gulf of Finland. In the chaotic days that followed the invasion, he, like many citizens, had rushed to volunteer to defend the nation and was initially assigned to a special demolitions detachment of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, the dreaded secret police agency that would later become the KGB. The NKVD created 2,222 of these detachments to harass the Nazis behind the front, which was then rapidly advancing. One of Putin’s first missions in the war was a disaster. He and twenty-seven other partisan fighters parachuted behind the Germans advancing on Leningrad, near the town of Kingisepp. It was close to the border with Estonia, which the Soviet Union had occupied the year before, along with Latvia and Lithuania, as part of the notorious prewar pact with Hitler. Putin’s detachment managed to blow up one arms depot, as the story went, but quickly ran out of ammunition and rations. Local residents, Estonians, brought them food but also betrayed them to the Germans, whom many in the Baltic nations welcomed, at least at first, as liberators from Soviet occupation. German troops closed in on the unit, firing on them as they raced along a road back to the Soviet lines. Putin split off, chased by Germans with dogs, and hid in a marsh, submerging himself and breathing through a reed until the patrol moved on.8 How exactly he made it back is lost to the fog of history, but only he and three others of the detachment survived the raid. The NKVD interrogated him after his escape, but he managed to avoid suspicion of desertion or cowardice and was soon sent back to the front. It might have been courage

alone that drove Putin, or it might have been fear. Stalin's Order No. 270, issued on August 16, had threatened soldiers who deserted with execution and their family members with arrest.

Inside Leningrad conditions deteriorated rapidly, despite efforts by the authorities to maintain a sense of normality. Schools opened, as always, on September 1, but three days later the first German shells landed inside the city. With the blockade completed and the city now under regular assault from above, the authorities intensified the rationing of food.

Rations would gradually decline, leading to desperation, despair, and finally death. As Vladimir Putin fought outside the city, his wife, Maria, and their infant son were trapped inside. Vladimir and Maria, both born in 1911, were children of Russia's turbulent twentieth century, buffeted by World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, and the civil war that followed. They met in Pominovo, where his father had moved after the revolution, and married in 1928, when they were only seventeen. They moved back to Leningrad as newlyweds, settling back in Petrodvorets with her relatives in 1932. After Putin's conscription in the navy, they had a boy named Oleg, who died in infancy. A year before the war started, they had a second son, Viktor.

Maria and Viktor only narrowly avoided occupation in Nazi-held territories. She had refused at first to leave Petrodvorets, but as the Germans closed in, her brother, Ivan Shelomov, forced her to evacuate. He served as a first captain in the Baltic Fleet's headquarters and thus had military authority and what privileges still existed in a city under siege. Captain Shelomov retrieved them "under gunfire and bombs" and settled them into a city whose fate was precarious. Conditions became dire as the winter arrived, the cold that year even more bitter than usual. Maria and Viktor moved into one of dozens of shelters the authorities opened to house refugees pouring in from the occupied outskirts. Her brother helped her with his own rations, but her health faded nevertheless. One day—exactly when is unknown—she passed out and passersby laid her body out with the frozen corpses that had begun to pile up on the street for collection, left for dead, as her husband had been on the front. She was discovered, somehow, in this open-air morgue, her moans attracting attention.

Vladimir's survival seemed no less improbable. He lay wounded beside the Neva for several hours before other Soviet troops found him and carried him back toward the regiment's redoubt on the bank. He might have died, one of more than 300,000 soldiers who lost their lives on the Pyatachok, except that an old neighbor found him on a litter at a primitive field hospital. He slung Putin over his shoulder and carried him across the frozen river to a hospital on the other side.

As it turned out, Putin's injury almost certainly saved his life. His unit, the 330th Rifle Regiment, fought on the bridgehead throughout the winter of 1941–1942. The battle, in scale and carnage, foreshadowed the terrible siege of Stalingrad the next year, a "monstrous meatgrinder," it was called. The forces there endured relentless shelling by the Germans. The forested riverbank became a churned, lifeless landscape where nothing would grow for years. New recruits crossed the Neva to replace those killed or wounded at a staggering rate of hundreds a day until the spring of 1942, when the bridgehead collapsed and the Germans regained the ground on April 27. The 330th Rifle Regiment was entirely destroyed except for a major from its command staff, Aleksandr Sokolov, who managed to swim to safety, despite serious wounds.15 It was one of the deadliest single battles of the entire war, and for the Soviet military command, a folly that squandered tens of thousands of soldiers and probably prolonged the siege instead of shortening it.

Putin spent months in a military hospital, recovering in a city that was dying around him. By the time the last road out of the city was cut, three million civilians and soldiers remained besieged. Maria, who refused to be evacuated when it was still possible, ultimately found her husband in the hospital. Against the rules, he shared his own hospital rations with her, hiding food from the nurses until a doctor noticed and halted

Maria's daily visits for a time. The city's initial resilience succumbed to devastation, starvation, and worse. Essential services deteriorated along with the food supply. Corpses lay uncollected in mounds on the streets. In January and February 1942, more than 100,000 people died each month. The only connection to unoccupied territory was the makeshift "Road of Life," a series of precarious routes over the frozen waters of Lake Ladoga. They provided minimal relief to the city, and the siege ground on until January 1943, when the Soviet army broke through the encirclement to the east. It took another year to fully free the city from the Nazi grip and begin the relentless, ruthless Soviet march to Berlin.

Vladimir and Maria somehow survived, though his injuries caused him to limp in pain for the rest of his life. In April 1942, he was released from the hospital and sent to work at a weapons factory that turned out artillery shells and antitank mines. Their son, Viktor, did not survive. He died of diphtheria in June 1942 and was buried in a mass grave at Piskaryovskoye Cemetery along with 470,000 other civilians and soldiers. Neither Vladimir nor Maria knew where exactly and evidently made little effort to learn. Nor did they ever talk about it in detail later. The war's toll was devastatingly personal. Maria's mother, Elizabeta Shelomova, died on the front lines west of Moscow in October 1941, though it was never clear whether it was a Soviet or a German shell that killed her; Maria's brother Ivan survived, but another brother, Pyotr, was condemned by a military tribunal at the front in the earliest days of the war, evidently for some dereliction of duty, and his ultimate fate was never known, and certainly not mentioned. Two of Vladimir's brothers also died during the war: Mikhail in July 1942, also in circumstances lost to history; and Aleksei on the Voronezh front in February 1943.

These were the stories of the Great Patriotic War—tales of heroism and suffering—that Vladimir and Maria's third son would grow up hearing and that would leave an indelible impression on him throughout his life. From "some snatches, some fragments" of conversations overheard at the kitchen table in a crowded communal flat in a still-devastated Leningrad, he created his family narrative, one reshaped by time and memory, one that might have been apocryphal in places and was certainly far from complete. The Putins were simple people, unlikely to know much of the darker aspects of the war: Stalin's paranoid purges in the Great Terror that had decimated the army before the war; the connivance with Hitler's plans to conquer Europe; the partitioning of Poland in 1939; the forceful annexation of the Baltic nations; the chaotic defense once the Nazis invaded; the official malfeasance that contributed to the starvation in Leningrad; the vengeful atrocities committed by Soviet troops as they marched to Berlin. Even then, after Stalin's death in 1953, it remained dangerous to speak poorly of the state in anything above a whisper. The victory—and the Putins' small part in it—was an inexhaustible fountain of pride. What else could it be? One did not think of the mistakes that were made, the young boy would say later; one thought only of winning.

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