



# Vladimir Putin

**Russia's Autocratic  
Ruler**

John Allen

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
A Danger to the World	
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>8</b>
From the KGB to the Kremlin	
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>18</b>
Tightening His Grip on Russia	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>28</b>
Silencing Critics and Maintaining Power	
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>38</b>
Rising Tensions with the West	
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>47</b>
Invading Ukraine	
<b>Source Notes</b>	<b>56</b>
Important Events in the Life of Vladimir Putin	<b>59</b>
For Further Research	<b>60</b>
Index	<b>62</b>

## Chapter One

# From the KGB to the Kremlin

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in the Soviet city of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on October 7, 1952. An only child, he was named for his father, Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin, who worked as a foreman in a metal works factory. Putin's mother, Maria Ivanovna, took odd jobs that she could do at home while caring for their child. Despite the Soviet Union's ban on religion, she had her son secretly baptized as an Orthodox Christian.

In 1952 Leningrad lay mostly in ruins, the result of a punishing siege eight years before by Hitler's Nazi armies. Like their city, Putin's parents still bore the marks of that conflict. Serving in the infantry, his father suffered shrapnel wounds to both his legs and was left with a painful limp. His mother nearly died of starvation during the 872-day siege. Nonetheless, with more than 1 million inhabitants killed in the city's ordeal, the Putins considered themselves lucky to have survived. They shared a rat-infested apartment with two other families on the top floor of a five-story building. "There were hordes of rats in the front entryway," Putin recalls in his official biography. "My friends and I used to chase them around with sticks."<sup>4</sup> But his family were also given certain perks that set them apart, including a telephone, a television, and a dacha (or vacation cottage) outside the city. Apparently, Putin's father was on active reserve for the

KGB as an informer. The Putins took great pride in their nation and its victory over Germany in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War.

## A Scrappy Childhood

Putin waged his own personal wars as a child. His classmates remember him as aggressive and always ready for a fight. In the trash-filled courtyard of his apartment building, where the neighborhood kids would gather, he did not hesitate to use his fists when challenged. Although slightly built and younger than most of the street toughs, he never backed down. “If anyone ever insulted him in any way,” a friend recalls, “Volodya [Putin’s childhood nickname] would immediately jump on the guy, scratch him, bite him, rip his hair out by the clump—do anything at all never to allow anyone to humiliate him in any way.”<sup>5</sup>

**“If anyone ever insulted him in any way, Volodya [Putin] would immediately jump on the guy, scratch him, bite him, rip his hair out by the clump—do anything at all never to allow anyone to humiliate him in any way.”<sup>5</sup>**

—A childhood friend of Vladimir Putin’s



*At age ten, Vladimir Putin poses for a school classroom picture. Although slightly built, his classmates remember him as aggressive and always ready for a fight.*

At age eleven, Putin began to take martial arts classes to improve his fighting skills. His training was in sambo, a hodgepodge of judo, karate, and wrestling developed by the Red Army. These classes interested him much more than schoolwork, for which he got only mediocre grades. He could also be a discipline problem. When he botched a project in shop class, he got so angry that the teacher had to drag him out by the collar. Forced to sit alone in a corner, young Vladimir repeatedly cursed in frustration. For punishment, the school kept him out of the Young Pioneers, a Communist youth group. He was the only student forbidden to wear the club's bright red kerchief. Later in life, Putin took this rejection as a badge of honor, marking him as a tough guy.

Finally, he began to apply himself, and his grades slowly improved. In his spare time he devoured spy stories. As Putin has admitted to his biographers, he imagined himself as a fearless agent in the KGB, the Soviet intelligence service. He would pursue the regime's hidden enemies and be privy to secrets known only to the most trusted operatives. At the height of the Cold War with the United States and the West, young Vladimir saw himself as defending the Soviet empire.

## Putin's Revenge in Chechnya

Vladimir Putin's destruction of the city of Grozny in Chechnya was not the first Russian assault on that tiny Muslim republic. Rebels there had been pushing for independence since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1994 Russia invaded Chechnya with air strikes and artillery barrages that killed thousands of civilians. Even though the two-year campaign laid waste to many Chechen cities, the rebel fighters held out and eventually won their autonomy, if not full independence.

For Putin, this result was a stain on Russian honor. Three months after becoming Yeltsin's prime minister, Putin ordered bombing raids on rebel positions in Chechnya. This time, the relentless shelling and bombing, especially against the rebel stronghold of Grozny, overwhelmed the Chechens. In March 2000 the now-president Putin, wearing an orange flight suit, flew to Grozny in a Russian fighter jet to celebrate the victory. Thomas de Waal, a former war correspondent, sees the same destructive mindset in Ukraine today. "There are some pretty disturbing parallels," says de Waal. "The use of heavy artillery, the indiscriminate attacking of an urban center. They bring back some pretty terrible memories for those of us who covered the Chechnya war of the 1990s."

## Joining the KGB

Despite less-than-stellar marks in school, Putin managed to get accepted to Leningrad State University, one of the most prestigious colleges in the Soviet Union. Even experts on Putin's career are not certain how he managed this. It has been suggested that some Communist Party official must have spotted hidden potential in the young man. At any rate, Putin took advantage of the opportunity. He won the judo championship at Leningrad State while also passing his law courses. One of his law professors, Anatoly Sobchak, offered encouragement to Putin and became his mentor. In 1975 Putin followed the path taken by many law graduates and joined the KGB.

As a beginner assigned to the lower ranks, the new recruit did his share of menial tasks and paper pushing for a few years. He lacked good communication skills for an agent. However, he did meet with success on one important front. He began dating a flight attendant named Lyudmila Ocheretnaya. After a lengthy courtship, the couple were married in 1983.

Soon afterward, Putin was chosen for a yearlong training program for the foreign intelligence corps—the KGB's so-called spy school. There Putin could indulge his childhood fantasies of a life filled with danger and glamor. He felt closer to his ambition of somehow making a difference in the world and changing people's lives. "I was most amazed by how a small force, a single person, really, can accomplish something an entire army cannot," he explained later to his biographers. "A single intelligence officer could rule over the fates of thousands of people. At least, that's how I saw it."<sup>6</sup>

The reality, however, failed to live up to his dream. Posted to Dresden, an industrial city in Communist East Germany, Putin was still far away from the espionage centers in East and West Berlin, where agents would smuggle informants across the border. Instead, he learned to speak fluent German (with a strong Russian accent), drank lots of beer, and put on weight. Not much of a Communist believer himself, he noticed how East Germany's Socialist economy struggled to provide goods for its people. On



*Pictured is Putin's East German identification card issued while he worked as a KGB agent in 1985. As a KGB agent, Putin could indulge his childhood fantasies of a life filled with danger and glamor.*

November 9, 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall—a concrete barrier erected by East Germany to prevent its citizens from escaping to the West—began the collapse of the Soviet empire. The event struck Putin as a major catastrophe. His calls to Moscow for help were met with silence. “I had the feeling that the country was no more,” he recalled a decade later. “It had disappeared. . . . But I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That’s what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away.”<sup>7</sup> With his wife and two young daughters, he traveled back to Leningrad and an uncertain future.

## **A Fresh Career in a New Russia**

The Soviet Union to which Putin returned in 1990 had changed utterly in his four years away. Mikhail Gorbachev, who had be-

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# Important Events in the Life of Vladimir Putin

- 1952** On October 7 Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is born in Leningrad, the second-largest city in the Soviet Union.
- 1975** Putin graduates from Leningrad State University and joins the KGB, the Soviet intelligence service.
- 1983** Putin marries Lyudmila Ocheretnaya after a lengthy courtship.
- 1985** The KGB assigns Putin to work in Dresden, East Germany.
- 1991** Putin heads the foreign relations committee of the St. Petersburg mayor's office.
- 1998** Putin is named director of the Federal Security Service, the agency that succeeds the KGB.
- 1999** In August Putin is named prime minister of Russia and on December 31 is named acting president; Putin orders a full-scale military assault on rebel territory in Chechnya.
- 2000** On March 26 Putin is elected to the presidency of the Russian Federation.
- 2002** Putin orders an assault with poison gas to end a Chechen-led hostage crisis in a Moscow theater.
- 2003** In October Putin has oil oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky arrested and jailed.
- 2004** Putin does away with elections for leaders in seven federal districts, putting his own handpicked people in charge; Putin easily wins reelection as president, with more than 70 percent of the vote.
- 2006** Two of Putin's harshest critics, journalist Anna Politkovskaya and former FSB officer Aleksandr Litvinenko, are murdered under mysterious circumstances.
- 2008** Because of term limit laws, Putin chooses Dmitry Medvedev to run as president while he serves as prime minister for four years.
- 2012** Putin is elected for his third term as president.
- 2014** Putin annexes Crimea, a peninsula in southern Ukraine, and sends troops into Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.
- 2016** Putin authorizes a brutal military assault on Aleppo, a rebel-held city in Syria.
- 2021** Putin amasses a large number of Russian troops around the border of Ukraine.
- 2022** Putin orders a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and threatens the use of nuclear weapons.

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The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington, DC. It conducts in-depth research to help solve problems facing society at the local, national, and global level. Its website features many articles and analyses about Vladimir Putin and his regime.

# Index

*Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.*

- Assad, Bashar al-, 41, 44–45,  
*Atlantic* (magazine), 44
- Belarus, 41, **49**
- Berezovsky, Boris, 19
- Bermann, Sylvie, 5
- Beslan, 21–22
- Biden, Joe, 48, 49
- Bucha, Ukraine, 4, **5**
- Bush, George W., 6, 41
- Chechnya, independence movement  
  bombings in Russia and, 15  
  Moscow's Dubrovka Theater hostage situation,  
    20–21, **21**  
  Politkovskaya's reporting on, 28  
  Putin and assault on Grozny, 6, 15–16  
  Putin and 1994 Russian invasion of, 10  
  school raid in Beslan, 21–22
- Cherkasov, Aleksandr, 15
- China, 53
- Clark, Mason, 46
- Clinton, Hillary, 32
- critics of Putin, fate of  
  murder of  
    Klebnikov, 29–30  
    Litvinenko, 30–31  
    Nemtsov, 35–37, **36**  
    Politkovskaya, 28–29, 30  
  poisonings of  
    Kara-Murza, 37  
    Navalny, 37
- Daalder, Ivo, 48
- democracy  
  illiberal, 41  
  Medvedev and, 32  
  Putin and  
    control of elections in Russia, 25  
    creation of new federal districts, 22  
    meddling in other nations' elections, 7, 46  
    verbal support of, 6, 25  
  Yeltsin and, 13, 16
- de Waal, Thomas, 10
- East Germany, 5–6, 11–12, **12**
- elections  
  Putin meddling in other nations', 7, 46  
  Putin on problems with, in democracies, 26  
  Russian  
    2004, 25, 26, **26**  
    2012, 34–35  
    2018, 42  
    candidates' media access during, 25, 26  
    new federal districts and, 22  
  ethnic Russians in Georgia, 41–42  
  ethnic Russians in Ukraine, 43–44  
  European Court of Human Rights, 21, 37  
  European Union (EU), 42, 47
- Federal Security Service (FSB)  
  basic facts about, 14  
  “Chechen” bombings in Russia and, 15  
  poisoning of Litvinenko and, 31  
*Forbes* (magazine), 29  
*Frontline* (television program), 34
- Gaddy, Clifford G., 14
- Gazprom (state-run natural gas firm), 32
- Georgia (nation), 35, 41, **49**
- Gorbachev, Mikhail, 12–13
- Grozny, bombing of, 6, 10, 15–16
- Gusinsky, Vladimir, 19, 20
- Haines, Avril, 52–53
- Hill, Fiona, 14
- Human Rights Watch, 40
- Hungary, 41, **49**
- Illarionov, Andrei, 27
- India, 53
- Ivanovna, Maria (mother), 8
- Kabaeva, Alina, 50
- Kara-Murza, Vladimir, 37
- KGB  
  government of Putin and, 25–26  
  poisoning methods used by, 14  
  Putin in  
    as new recruit, 11  
    resignation of, 13  
    as spy in East Germany, 5–6, 11–12, **12**  
    training, 5  
  Putin's father and, 8–9  
  successor to, 14
- Khodorkovsky, Mikhail, 24–25, 35