

About a Boy: Putin's Wild Roots

On May 9, as the war for Ukraine thundered on far to the south, Vladimir Putin walked across Red Square with thousands of his subjects, each holding old black-and-white photos of their loved ones. It was part of the Immortal Regiment, a recently created tradition in which Russians all over the country—and the world—march with photographs of their ancestors who fought, and often died, in World War II. This year, as in years past, Putin carried a photo of a young man with bulging eyes and the uniform of a sailor. It was Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin, the Russian president's late father, in a picture taken of him in 1932, when he was first drafted into the Soviet military, where he served as a submariner.

The Immortal Regiment was created by pro-Kremlin activists a decade ago, a kind of Putinist answer to the pro-democracy protest movement gripping the capital and other big Russian cities. The Regiment was yet another step in Putin's long drive to bend the nation's memories of the war into his political cudgel. Putin's Russia had lacked an organizing ideology—it was no longer a communist state, nor was it a free-market, liberal democracy—and World War II, or the Great Fatherland War, as it's known in Russia, provided something of a communal glue.

And it worked to a large extent because, for pretty much every Soviet person born before the Soviet collapse, the national trauma of the war was genuinely, deeply, and painfully personal. In the four years that the U.S.S.R. fought Nazi Germany, the country lost 27 million people, or 15 percent of its population. Of the six million Jews killed in the Holocaust, almost half—2.7 million—were Soviet citizens. Every family sent people to the front, and many of them didn't come back—not one, not two, but many, many more. Ever after, every Soviet family was populated with ghosts, the dead uncles and fathers and sisters and cousins who never got to grow old. I've tried to count how many people my family lost in the war, both as soldiers and as victims of the Holocaust, and I usually lose count after two dozen.

I don't know what it's like for the younger generation, but for the Russians and Ukrainians of my generation that I know, those of us born in the 1980s, even for us, born decades after the war, it has remained a painful obsession. We all have photos of those who came home from the war and those who didn't; we know their stories and often post about them on social media. We all grew up with the tales of those who survived and what they suffered to do so. Even for us, the war, passed down to us as a macabre family heirloom, one that taught us that there is nothing worse than war, is still a powerful, unifying trauma.

For people born into the rubble, as Putin was, it is more personal still. For all his cynical manipulation of the memory of the war, he and his generation were shaped by it in ways that are still obvious today.

Putin was born in October 1952, seven years after the end of the war, in a city that still bore its scars. Leningrad, which endured a nightmarish 900-day siege, had lost more than a million of its citizens to starvation. One of them was Putin's older brother. Putin's mother Maria nearly became another, but, according to family lore, someone heard her moaning and pulled her off a pile of corpses. She had fainted from hunger and was taken for dead.

Putin's father Vladimir was also very nearly killed. In the summer of 1941, when the Nazis invaded, he volunteered, at the age of 30, for the front. He became a member of the forces of the N.K.V.D., the predecessor to the K.G.B. and the employer of his father, Spiridon, who was one of Stalin's chefs. (Spiridon had many sons, and though all of them went off to war, according to his grandson, many did not return.)

In the first winter of the war, the elder Vladimir was pinned down by fighting on a bend in the Neva River, just to the east of Leningrad. "It was a horrible meat grinder," his son Vladimir recalled decades later. A German threw a grenade at his father at close range and shattered his legs. He nearly bled out but a fellow soldier—a neighbor from back home—saw him and carried him on his back to a field hospital, which is where Maria Putina, haggard and gaunt with hunger, found him. Seeing the state his wife was in, Vladimir started sneaking her his meals until the nurses noticed he was fainting from hunger and banned Maria from visiting. "As a result, they both survived, but my father limped for the rest of his life from this injury," Putin said. "One of his legs was bent like a wheel."

When Putin was born, his mother was 41, impossibly old for those times. He was her third son: one had died in infancy, and the other in the siege. She was determined to have this son live, and she and a neighbor secretly baptized him. But she also had to work. Barely literate, she rotated between menial jobs—working as a security guard in a consignment shop, washing test tubes in a lab—while her husband put in long hours at a local factory, making subway cars. During the war, Vladimir and Maria had lost their house outside the city and now, along with their young son, were crowded into one room in a dank and filthy communal apartment. It was a fifth-floor walk-up—despite Vladimir's disability—with cracked and dangerous stairs. It didn't have a bathroom or a real kitchen, just a dark, windowless closet retrofitted for the residents' cooking.

Still, in many ways, young Volodya Putin was lucky: he knew who his father was and his father had come home from the war. The years of his youth later came to be labeled by Soviet sociologists as the age of bezotzovshchina, the era of no fathers. Tens of millions of Soviet men had been killed in the war but the Soviet authorities were bent on engineering their own baby boom, with or without the men. They introduced a number of policies aimed at incentivizing single women to have children outside of marriage and incentivizing the men, married or not, to help them.

As a result, in the years after the war, over a third of Soviet babies were born out of wedlock—and, because of the new Soviet law, they had no idea who their fathers were. The children who did have fathers often had them in name only. Many had been shattered by the war, physically and mentally, and were ghosts in their own homes. Around this time, male alcoholism took off. There was no other way for these men to process what they had been through—or to find their place in a society where they had been sidelined politically and economically.

The mothers, on the other hand, had to work. The country needed rebuilding and their children, often growing up in single-income households, had to eat. Though nearly a million Soviet women had fought in the war—as machine gunners, snipers, and fighter pilots—they had to work and raise children and keep house, all without technology like vacuum cleaners or washing machines, and while navigating growing shortages of food and basic goods. There was no time to sleep, let alone to sit with their trauma.

Putin's was a generation of latchkey kids.

If girls were drafted into household work after school and were subject to strict behavioral limits, the boys grew like wild grass in the dvor. The dvor, literally, was the yard, the open spaces between blocks of newly built apartment complexes or, as in Putin's neighborhood, in the cavernous courtyards, built like wells, of the old Leningrad buildings. But it was also a social Serengeti, a school of life that shaped the boys who graduated from it. The curriculum included everything from chasing soccer balls to fighting over turf, and learning to live according to an exacting code of conduct, one founded on physical force, strict hierarchies (which could only be changed through violence), and a warped, cartoonish idea of male honor. And because the dvor was small and intimate, it stripped its inhabitants of the anonymity afforded to them by the big city outside, making it easy to enforce this code. There was no hiding in the dvor. Reputation was destiny here, and image had to be meticulously tended to, because its staining was nearly impossible to undo.

This was Putin's school. This is where he spent most of his time, in the dvor, brawling, running along the rooftops, and getting up to no good with the other vaguely parented children of the Soviet baby boom. He was a C student who was so often in trouble for misbehaving that he was not allowed to join the young Communist Pioneers with the rest of his class in fifth grade, an unheard of detention. "I wasn't a Pioneer, I was a hooligan," Putin later told his biographers. "I was a punk."

The West's obsession with Putin's K.G.B. past often misses the biographical detail that for most Russians, especially those of his generation, is especially glaring: Putin is the street urchin, all grown up. The way he sits, slouching contemptuously; the way he only trusts childhood friends (and doesn't fire them despite their incompetence); the way he punishes betrayal because he values loyalty above everything else. The way he enforces social hierarchy, like waiting until oligarch Oleg Deripaska was seated at the other end of a long table to ask for his pen back.



The way he talks, using the slang of the dvor that, because of where so many of these street boys ended up, is also the argot of the vast Russian penal system.

There was the time, for instance, in a Milan press conference, when a journalist posed a hypothetical about the course of the ruble and Putin responded with, "we have a saying, it's a little rude, about grandma, about grandpa, that if grandma had the external genitalia of grandpa, she'd be grandpa, not grandma." Or the time he invited a French journalist, who challenged him on war crimes that Russian troops were committing in Chechnya, to come to Moscow and have a circumcision so extreme "that nothing ever grows back." Or the time, in a press conference with the Kazakh president just before this war, when Putin said Ukraine must adhere to its obligations under the Minsk agreements—and used an old rape joke to express himself. (It is best translated as, "it is your duty, my beauty.")

When he first came to power, Putin horrified the Moscow and St. Petersburg intelligentsia not just because he was a K.G.B. man, but also because of the way he spoke. He said things like "smoke them in the outhouse" and talked about "wiping away your bloody snot and bowing your head," expressions that lose absolutely everything in translation.

But none of this was lost on Russians. My grandmother, who liked to fancy herself a member of Moscow's cultural elite, would clasp her hands to her chest and swoon in horror when Putin would drop some more of the dvor-prison jargon. She would bemoan that the whole system now spoke like him, which is why I'm glad she wasn't around to hear Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, say four days before Russia invaded Ukraine: "We have this understanding: patsan skazal, patsan sdela." It meant, "the guy said it, and the guy did it"—essentially, "word is bond." Even the word he used, ponyatie, which I've translated as "understanding," is itself a reference to that code of honor: an unspoken, unwritten set of rules in which you have to watch what you say and follow through on promises you make to maintain your credibility—and safety. (Lavrov also added that this ponyatie, this code, "should be adhered to on an international level.")

It is why, when trying to understand Putin, I often turn for translation advice to my father, who was also born in the 1950s and grew up in the dvor of a blue-collar Moscow suburb. He was a good student whose parents made sure he did his math homework, but he scrapped in the yard with the rest of the boys and he—as well as his college buddies—have proved an invaluable source in decoding this aspect of the Russian president. And though they all went a different route, becoming respectable, white-collar professionals, they all grew up with boys like Putin. And they see right through him.

They all see, for example, how much he is still bothered - despite his age, wealth, power - by the fact that he is short.

Being so short and slight would have been a massive handicap in the dvor, and it bred bitterness, resentment, and insecurity in the boys unfortunate enough to be petite late bloomers. You can see it to this day: Putin has a designated photographer who knows which angle will transform the Russian president, making him look no smaller than his interlocutor. It is also something that Putin tacitly acknowledged shortly before he became president. After Boris Yeltsin surprised everyone by naming Putin acting president on December 31, 1999, Kremlin spin doctors had only three months before the March 2000 presidential election to sell Putin to the Russian electorate.

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