

So they rounded up three young hotshots of Russian political journalism, had them interview Putin and his friends and family, and put out the resulting Q&A as a slapdash biography, called *In the First Person* (which is now nearly impossible to find in print). It is the source for much of what we know about Putin's early life, including his education in the *dvor*.

"I liked the *dvor*," he told them. He only liked school "as long as I could be the informal leader, so to speak." He was able to do this, he said, because "my school was next door to my *dvor*, and the *dvor* was a dependable home front, which really helped." His *dvor*, in other words, offered a safe retreat as well as a reserve of manpower—and enforcement. His leadership style, he said, was formed when he tried to take charge in the school using what he had learned in the yard. "I wasn't trying to boss everyone around," he swaggered to the journalists in *In the First Person*. "It was more important to retain my independence. And if I were to compare it to adult life, then the role I played then would be most similar to the role of the judicial branch, not the executive." School was interesting to him only insofar as he could maintain this social dominance. "While I managed [to do this], I liked it," he said. "Then it became clear that the skills I learned in the *dvor* weren't enough, so I took up sports."

This is when Putin entered the world of martial arts, for which he is also well known in the West: Putin the judo master, Putin the master strategist. But what most of them don't know is why he took up judo.

### *He was a short, scrawny kid in a world where size and strength meant power.*

Being so small placed him at the bottom of the *dvor* hierarchy and he needed something else to compensate: cunning, vengefulness, or the tricks of a professional fighter. "I took up sports when I was ten or eleven, as soon as it became clear that just having a pugnacious personality wasn't enough to be first in the *dvor* and in school," he told his biographers.

He first took up boxing but got his nose broken almost immediately, so he quit. Then he signed up for sambo, a martial art invented in the U.S.S.R., where he met the man who would become his surrogate father, his coach Anatoly Rachlin. Then Rachlin and the team—where he met Boris and Arkady Rotenberg, who would become two of Russia's richest and most powerful men during Putin's rule—switched to judo. It immediately appealed to Putin. "Judo is not just a sport, it's a philosophy," he explained. "It's respect for your elders, for your opponents." Tellingly, he added, "There are no weaklings [in judo]."

His parents, however, weren't happy about their son's new hobby. "At first, they thought that I was gathering some kind of negative knowledge that I would put to use in the *dvor*, and who knew what that would lead to," Putin recalled. "So they looked at it with suspicion." But the community he found in the sport was what set him on a different path than the other boys in the *dvor*, many of whom ended up in organized crime and the penal system to which it was so inextricably linked. "It was Anatoly Semyonovich [Rachlin] who pulled me out of the *dvor*,"



Putin said. "Because the situation there wasn't great, I'll be honest."

Decades later, when he had retired from the K.G.B. and was working in the St. Petersburg mayor's office in the freewheeling 1990s, cutting shady trade and economic development deals, he would immerse himself in this world once again, but this time, he was not the short, scrappy upstart. This time, he was coming to these other boys from other *dvors* from a position of power.

The *dvor* taught Putin many things, lessons that shape his thinking and actions to this day: that might makes right, that existing hierarchies can only be changed through violence, that force is the only language that matters, that power is always a zero-sum game. There are no win-win outcomes in the *dvor*.

But he also learned another important lesson there. The stairs leading up to Putin's communal apartment on the fifth floor were dangerous and rickety, full of gaping cracks and holes. "There, on this staircase, I understood the meaning of the phrase

"backed into a corner," he told the journalists interviewing him. "There were rats living in our entryway. My friends and I were constantly chasing them around with sticks. One time, I saw a huge rat and began pursuing it until I backed it into a corner. It had nowhere to run. That's when it turned around and threw itself at me. It was unexpected and very scary. Now, the rat was chasing me. It was leaping over the steps, jumping into the gaps [between them]."

It was like he was teaching his interviewers and whoever read their book that lesson, too: to not back him into a corner. Still, even in that situation, Putin used what skills he had to save himself. He managed to reach the safety of his apartment before the rat. "I was still faster and I slammed the door in its face," he said, clearly pleased with himself.

**Julia Ioffe**  
*puck.news*



## ON PSYCHOPATHY, POWER, EMPIRE & EGO

I've been watching *The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* on Netflix, which features previously unheard recordings of the serial killer known as "The Killer Clown" who murdered at least 33 teenage boys and young men in the 1970s. I wasn't able to finish it because I don't have that kind of stomach, but what jumped out at me listening to him was the way he talked about how much he loved power and what an easy time he had manipulating his way up the ladders of political influence.

Really makes you think about how many psychopaths who are just a *little* bit more functional must be in politics today, on all levels. Psychopaths who are deeply messed up inside but not quite so messed up that they enjoy strangling teenage boys to death after raping and torturing them. Or if they are that messed up they're clever enough to avoid getting caught. Or if they are that messed up and not clever enough to avoid getting caught, but their fetish for murder and suffering is satiated by something that's considered politically acceptable in our society, like war.

I mean, think about it. What kind of person seeks power over others? Psychologists have been saying for years that psychopaths routinely ascend to power not just in political spheres but in business, academia and law enforcement as well. The competition-based models that shape our society tend to reward those who are willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top, and the type of person who is willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top happens to be the type of person who enjoys the power which comes from being at the top.

When all your systems inevitably reward psychopaths with power and money, you will necessarily find yourself ruled by psychopaths. That hunger for power which saw John Wayne Gacy photographed with the wife of a US president is the same hunger for power which caused him to enjoy strangling young men to death while they were handcuffed and powerless in his control.

Our lives are directly affected by the fact that psychopaths consistently both seek and attain ascension into the halls of power. But our lives are also directly affected in countless ways by the same dynamics of power which are especially manifested in the worst psychopaths.

Power is control over other people. The extent to which you control someone's fate is the amount of power you have over them. The number of people whose lives you can exert control over, and the extent to which you can do so, is the total amount of power you have. If you are a government official, a billionaire CEO, a judge, an influential pundit, or the pastor of a giant megachurch, you will have a great deal of power. If you're an ordinary working person, you won't have much.

But we've all experienced the impulse to exert control over others in our lives, even if it's been relatively slight. You might not seek power for its own sake or obtain gratification from holding someone's life in your hands like Gacy did, but you've surely wanted to control what a loved one does or doesn't do at some point, or wanted society to be a certain way that aligns with your ideals. Even if it's for the noblest-looking reasons, we've all desired control at one point or another.

The impulse to control is so pervasive throughout our species that it plays a foundational role in the emergence of our personal psychology. The emergence of the ego, the illusory sense of being a separate self in the world who stands apart from life and from the



rest of humanity, is born out of the human organism's desire to exert control over its fate in early childhood when presented with the frightening prospect of being a powerless infant surrounded by giants. Building a conceptual framework around a "me" character provides us with the reassuring sense that we can use thought and language to exert control over what happens to that character, a sense that is ultimately entirely illusory since nothing's ever really under control in this world.

A psychopath is just an ego taken to its most toxic and destructive extreme. A desire to control which pervades every aspect of one's personal experience.

It's this same impulse to control which has seen the emergence of empires throughout history. The inability to just be okay with the fact that there are people in other lands doing things you can't control is intolerable for particularly inflated egos; recorded history is largely a story of troops being sent out to conquer foreign people to bring them under control and give those inflated egos a temporary sense of security.

We see this desire for control plainly with today's dominant empire in the Wolfowitz Doctrine, a US government policy laid out immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union that no other superpowers should be permitted to emerge who might challenge US hegemony. The goal of perpetual US unipolar domination, now simply the standard orthodox position throughout the entire western political/media class, is the ultimate expression of this desire to control as many humans as possible to the furthest extent possible. And it undergirds the dynamics behind every major international news story of our day.

Whether it's out of fear of the barbarian hordes or fear of a rising China, every empire that has ever existed was created and maintained out of an impulse to control. Empire building is just egotism at mass scale. Varying gradations of psychopathy controlling the fate of vast numbers of people.

And now this impulse to control has our species on the brink of a nuclear war with Russia due to the US-centralized empire's agenda to encircle the nation and topple Moscow. We are at a point where our desire for control is threatening not just our ability to live harmoniously with one another, but our very survival.

If humanity is to survive into the future and move out of its psychopathy-enabling competition-based models into a collaborative relationship with all of humankind and with its entire ecosystem, that future will necessarily come with an abandonment of our ancient impulse to control. Our impulse to control nations, to control each other, to control life itself. It will come with an abandonment of empire, an abandonment of power agendas, and an abandonment of the human ego.

Every species eventually hits a point where it must adapt to changing conditions or else go extinct. It is clear now, as we face existential threats on multiple fronts due to our destructive attempts to control each other and our ecosystem, that our own species is at such a point right now.

If there is a humanity on the other side of the existential hurdles we now face, it is a humanity that has let go of its impulse to control and has instead learned to move in harmony with what is. It's hard to imagine from where we're at right now, but that's only because we've never seen it before. We've also never seen anything like our current situation, though. There's a first time for everything. We'll either pass this test or we won't.

**Caitlin Johnstone**  
*caitlinjohnstone.substack.com*