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Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West

Michael B. Petersen
The U.S. Naval War College

Catherine Belton

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breezy, informal writing style. The result is easy to read and engagingly illustrated.

In addition to the usual reasons to treat sea stories skeptically, historians have tended to be wary of them as sources because of an argument put forward most prominently by N. A. M. Rodger: that many of the memoirs published in the nineteenth century were thinly disguised political polemics aimed at ending the practice of impressment and improving conditions on the lower deck. In Rodger's view, historians should not fall into the trap of perpetuating the myths of ships as floating jails and press-gangs running rampant, because so much of the source material is unreliable. Taylor addresses this view directly and argues, on the contrary, that most of the memoirs he uses were published well after the debates about impressment and corporal punishment had passed.

By taking sea stories seriously, then, Taylor has brought together a range of valuable sources for the social history of the lower deck. All of Taylor's memoirs were readily available to naval historians before, but his great accomplishment is to have synthesized their perspectives in one volume and demonstrated the value in analyzing them. There is some irony here, in that Taylor provides plenty of evidence to support Rodger's depiction of the lower deck, despite using sources that Rodger avoids. But there is plenty of fuel for alternative interpretations as well; Taylor repeatedly shows the social and emotional cost of impressment, the range of shipboard disciplinary regimes, and the uncertainties of naval pay and pensions. Taylor has not settled the debate, but he has made a useful intervention in it.

A number of points emerge from Taylor's retelling of sailors' experiences.

The most important is that they were not victims but rather rational assessors of the maritime labor market who sought competent captains and comfortable cruises. That is not to say that they did not suffer in the age of impressment, but rather that they did not accept their fate passively. They voted with their feet, deserting unhappy ships and volunteering for happy ones. That brought them into conflict with the Admiralty's need to maintain ever-larger naval forces on ever-more-distant stations, so what held them together in difficult conditions was teamwork. Sailors who were pressed together stayed together—or, in the words of Robert Hay, one of Taylor's key witnesses, "they bec[a]me endeared to each other by a similarity of sufferings" (p. 383). Sailors also had a voice, and Taylor has helped us hear it more clearly. As Taylor puts it, "One characteristic stands out above all others in [Jack's] storytelling, and it is self-respect" (p. xv).

There was not one singular experience of life on the lower deck, but the more we can learn about that experience from the men themselves, the closer we can get to understanding their shared experiences. Whether or not all of Taylor's sea stories are true, they provide a vivid account of life at sea in the age of sail.

EVAN WILSON



Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West, by Catherine Belton. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2020. 640 pages. \$35.

Catherine Belton's *Putin's People* has received positive acclaim from most reviewers, and with good reason. It is a brave and impressive work of

investigative journalism, packed with details about the Russian officials who assisted Vladimir Putin's meteoric rise to power and fascinating insights into the mechanisms of power in modern Russia. Belton has made an important contribution to a broader understanding of the topic. Nevertheless, scholars should be judicious with Belton's claims. *Putin's People* is simultaneously a tour de force of investigative journalism and exhibit A in the discussion over the differences between first-rate journalism and rigorous historical scholarship.

Belton, an investigative correspondent for Reuters, has extensive experience in Russia. She has reported for the *Moscow Times* and *Business Week*, and from 2007 to 2013 was the Moscow correspondent for the *Financial Times*; her credentials in this regard are impeccable. Her book begins by tracing how KGB officials, seeing the writing on the wall at the end of the Cold War, looted Soviet coffers of funds intended for influence and intelligence operations around the world. Belton then follows the money and influence through the Yeltsin period, exploring how the people around Putin—then a competent but nondescript bureaucrat—enabled his rise. Once in power, Putin and his people made use of their extralegal power structures to enrich themselves at the expense of the state and to conduct ostensibly deniable Kremlin influence operations in Europe and the United States. Her narrative of these events is bracing throughout.

Belton's research is thorough and meticulous, but her tone is conspiratorial—a problem that hinders much writing on Russia—and her handling of sources is unlikely to pass muster with professional historians. For example, intelligence operations clearly

fascinate her, but she falls for common cloak-and-dagger tropes. Her opening chapter on KGB operations in eastern Europe, where people “disappear off the grid” and Putin's activities are “shrouded in mystery,” is written breathlessly. But it barely connects the future president directly to that work, and only once does she allow for the fact that intelligence work is characterized largely by mundanity, not drama—a fact that any reader of John Le Carré or member of an intelligence agency would know all too well.

Belton's sources sometimes work in service of her narrative rather than the opposite, and can fail to meet the higher standards that professional historians expect. For example, after recounting the loss by Putin's mentor Anatoly Sobchak of the 1996 Saint Petersburg mayoral election, Belton writes that “many believed” the loss was the result of dirty tricks by people around Sobchak's rival Boris Yeltsin. While such a campaign by Yeltsin was possible, even likely, Belton's sources for this assertion are an interview with Sobchak's widow and a documentary film produced by his daughter—hardly objective stuff. This occasional combination of ambitious conclusions and weak sourcing sometimes weighs down the book's otherwise interesting arguments about the nature of power in Russia.

To be fair, Belton is a journalist, an excellent one, but not a historian. If the minor dustup over this book on Twitter between historian Sergey Radchenko and the Atlantic Council's Dylan Primakoff is any indication, this is a distinction that sometimes is lost on both professions. As an investigative journalist, she is writing the proverbial “first draft of history.” Viewed in these terms, the book provides an excellent

set of guideposts for future historians to explore the power dynamics of modern Russia, and should be read alongside scholarly contributions such

as Brian Taylor's *The Code of Putinism* and Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy*.

MICHAEL B. PETERSEN

OUR REVIEWERS

Kevin McMullen is an attorney who holds advanced degrees in law, diplomacy, and comparative government. He retired from the U.S. Army Reserve as a lieutenant colonel of infantry.

Jacob Meusch is a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, Judge Advocate General's Corps. An active-duty lawyer, he currently is assigned to the Military Commissions Defense Organization.

Richard J. Norton is a professor of national-security affairs at the College.

Michael B. Petersen is the director of the Russia Maritime Studies Institute and an associate professor at the College. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Jeffrey P. Rogg is a postdoctoral fellow in the National Security Affairs Department at the College. He received his PhD from the Ohio State University.

Craig L. Symonds is the Ernest J. King Distinguished Professor of Maritime History at the College and professor emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy. He is the author or editor of twenty-nine books and a recipient of the Roosevelt and Lincoln Prizes, the Morison Award, and the Dudley W. Knox Lifetime Achievement Award.

Evan Wilson is an assistant professor in the Hattendorf Center for Maritime Historical Research at the College. His most recent book is *Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present* (Routledge, 2020), which he edited with Paul Kennedy.