

What Putin and Thatcher Have in Common

By [Martin Sieff](#)

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There was a great irony in seeing the outpouring of heartfelt tributes to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after her death on April 8. Many of the loudest, most exaggerated expressions of praise came from fierce critics of current President Vladimir Putin. Conservative admirers, especially in the U.S., repeatedly maintained that no British or European leader of comparable stature had been seen anywhere since she was forced out by her own party in a political coup in December 1990.

Yet Thatcher does have a true heir in the world today — a leader who shares her iron will, her shrewd, crystal clear political judgment and her determination to restore and uphold the rights and interests of her long impoverished, long-demoralized people and restore them to their historic leading role on the world stage.

That leader is Putin.

During both the Soviet Union under the bungled leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, and Russia under the incompetent presidency of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, there were entirely justified fears that society might break down in chaos, famine, urban riots and even civil war. Terrorist groups from ethnic minorities on the territorial fringes of both nations carried out repeated mass bombings that killed hundreds of civilians. The disintegration of both nations appeared inevitable.

Those conditions faced Thatcher when she entered No. 10 Downing Street as prime minister in 1979 and Putin when he became first prime minister and then president of Russia in 2000.

Both leaders responded with energy, intelligence and integrity to the challenges facing them. Both of them were motivated by an old-fashioned, straightforward, simple patriotism. Their domestic policies and the reactions they provoked were remarkably similar.

Putin was widely criticized as president for ending the direct election of governors, an innovation less than 15 years old. Thatcher ended a tradition of self-government in Britain's major cities in order to destroy a system that had been hijacked by socialist elements and that had brought the great city of Liverpool into a total state of impoverishment and despair.

Thatcher proved determined and ruthless in fighting the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. When a group of IRA prisoners, who were jailed for committing terrorist acts, went on a hunger strike demanding political status, Thatcher did not try to bargain or pretend to show compassion. She let 11 of them starve to death and broke the back of the protest. Putin proved equally determined and implacable in fighting Chechen terrorists who were responsible for multiple terrorist attacks in Russia.

At home, Thatcher waged an undeclared war on a scale no one in Russia has dreamed of over the past 20 years to break the power of the militant trade unions. For months at a time, riots injuring hundreds of people flared virtually daily as she broke first the National Union of Miners in the North and then the print unions in London.

Thatcher did not hesitate to wage full-scale war when necessary. She ran enormous risks sending the small British fleet 13,000 kilometers to the other end of the world to recapture the Falkland Islands. Putin acted in a similar manner in 2008 when he sent forces into independent Georgia to defend the security of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Both leaders were straightforward, realistic patriots who despised self-righteous preaching and hypocrisy on the international stage.

More than 22 years after she left office, Thatcher's remarkable achievements still stand. Britain today is still the Britain she remade. The changes she made were important and lasting. Putin's are too.

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