

Putin's Declassified KGB Record Shows He Was No High-Flier, but a Solid B

A recent report about Vladimir Putin as a KGB officer shows that he was seen as worthy, serious and reliable, but not as a high-flier or a leader.

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Vladimir Putin **Alexei Panov / TASS**

Vladimir Putin's past as a KGB officer has long been part of the mythology around him, both in Russia and the West. In the official narrative, he was a remorseless and resourceful warrior on the 'hidden battlefield,' a successor to the fictional Soviet super-spies in the films and TV series that enthused him as a child. To others, in the West, it proves that he is a trained master-manipulator, with the heart of a secret policeman. The truth, of course, is rather more complex, and the recent release of one of his KGB assessments highlights the more prosaic aspects of the job and his record.

The report is one of a series of declassified documents on show at the Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documents of St. Petersburg in an exhibition celebrating its 90th anniversary. In this context, of course, we have to be conscious that this was no doubt carefully selected to convey the right impression, and it is a positive report on 'Comrade V.V. Putin' who, it notes, has been a member of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) of the KGB since 1975 (when he was 23) and 'constantly improves his ideological and political standards. He is actively engaged in the Party education network' and 'he constantly improves his professional skills.'

As if that were not enough, he is described as 'morally stable' and someone who 'enjoys well-deserved authority amongst his work colleagues.' It concludes by noting that he is a sportsman in his spare time, a Master of Sport in both judo and sambo (Russian combat wrestling).

This is all perfectly creditable but it is worth considering in light of the usual language and etiquette of such profiles. 'Moral stability' is a euphemistic way of saying he is not a drunk or a womanizer, for example. 'Actively engaged in the Party education network' means he attends the meetings, applauds the speaker, says the right things.

Absent, though, are the markers that demonstrate real praise and attention. 'Authority' with his peers is not the same as 'leadership,' while improving professional skills is not as good as demonstrating mastery of them. These are the kind of grace notes which adorn the records of the real star.

In other words, what this report card is describing is a worthy, serious, reliable officer, but not a high-flier.

Putin the middle-flier

This was reflected in his subsequent career.

Having infamously initially presented himself to the KGB as a schoolboy, Putin joined the agency right out of university, in 1975. After initial training at the 401st KGB school, he was assigned to the Second Chief Directorate, responsible for counter-intelligence. To use a lighthearted Harry Potter analogy, this was a Hufflepuff directorate, largely for serious and hard-working recruits, but not the Slytherins of the Fifth Chief Directorate (which monitored and persecuted dissidents) or the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws of the elite First Chief Directorate, which spied abroad.

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Putin was undeniably determined, though, and he was later able to make it into the First, although even then not the best of the best, which ran operations in the West. Rather, he was involved in tracking foreigners for potential recruitment in his native Leningrad. Later, after higher education at the Yuri Andropov Red Banner Institute, he was sent to Dresden, reflecting his good command of German.

Technically, this was First Chief Directorate work, but in many ways it was not. He was not

recruiting and running agents so much as collating reports, liaising with the East German Stasi (who gave him his own access pass) and responding to queries from Moscow. He even seems to have lost his fire, settling back into his relatively privileged life in a country apparently more Soviet than the Soviet Union — until the wall came down in 1989.

Putin returned home to a country in crisis, and the KGB didn't seem to know what to do with him. Eventually he was placed on the active reserve and looked for new jobs, which took him first to Leningrad State University, then working for the mayor of what had been renamed St. Petersburg, and his rapid ascent towards power.

Putin the led

The point is that he had never really had a managerial role within the KGB, nor been an agent-handler. He had never really been exposed to the political and bureaucratic realities of life in the Lubyanka buildings or what happened to intelligence after it left the field. He left with the rank of lieutenant colonel, but had really been a major: a usual perk was to receive a one-rank career bump on leaving, to help round out one's pension.

What this meant was that, in his short-lived tenure as director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), between July 1998 and March 1999, he was by all accounts a supportive but not especially masterful figure. He understood the challenges, and was always enthusiastic and well-briefed, meticulous in his preparations.

At the same time, though, he was willing to be led by his senior staff, the generals who had been often the high-fliers of their cohorts and who had stayed within the agency through the rough 1990s.

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There is nothing wrong with that: almost any outside appointee will have to lean on the experience and insights of the career professionals around him or her. What made that something of a pathology, though, was that this was driven not just by a pragmatic appreciation of the skill set he lacked, but Putin's entranced enthusiasm about the so-called Chekists (after the first Bolshevik political police) of the agencies.

This has manifested since, during his presidency. A willingness to take the intelligence services at their word and to accept their worldview, over other agencies (most notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has become an increasing feature of his approach to the world. Often this has led to serious miscalculations, such as the intervention into the Donbass.

It also means that he leans heavily on those same services as instruments of governance. The Russian people getting restive? The outside world looking hostile? Rather than addressing the fundamental issues behind either problem, he has unleashed his spies, provocateurs and disinformationists as his response of choice. The result has often been tactically successful — Navalny's movement is facing a serious challenge, and existing divisions within the West have been worsened — but likely strategically dangerous for a Kremlin that becomes perceived as hostile and heavy-handed.

Furthermore, the intelligence and security agencies have become politically powerful and deeply corrupted, and even attempts to cleanse them of their worse abuses — visible in the current reshuffle within the FSB's infamous Economic Security Service — quickly simply become another battleground for factional advancement and the capture of opportunities for enrichment.

Of course, there is a sharp limit to what one can read into a single, carefully-chosen personnel file. Nonetheless, it is striking in hindsight how one can extrapolate his trajectory from that report and its backstory. The meticulous, dedicated young man, not an A-lister, but a strong B, who got into the KGB and then the First Chief Directorate on the basis of not brilliance but determination. The wannabe Chekist for whom this was the only career track of choice. The perennial second-drawer officer who never got to experience the complex and often contradictory realities of KGB management and who thus was unable truly to manage the FSB when he headed it, and arguably the full range of services once he was president. In other words, the spook fanboy who would let the Chekists shape and drive his policy and exploit the indulgence he gives them to the fullest.

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