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In 'Overreach' Author Owen Matthews Goes Inside Putin's War

By Cameron Manley

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In 1999, then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin emerged as a force to be reckoned with in Russian politics after a decisive victory in Chechnya. His confidence grew with successes in Georgia in 2008 and the audacious annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Yet it was in the early hours of Feb. 24, 2022, that Vladimir Putin finally overreached. With the order to invade Ukraine, he crossed a line, stepping into a perilous territory where he risked not only the stability of his regime, but of Russia itself. The question is: Why?

In his Pushkin House Book Prize-nominated "Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin's War Against Ukraine," Owen Matthews explores the sources of this monumental miscalculation.

Matthews is both historian and journalist, whose meticulous research and extensive contacts lets him give readers access to the Kremlin, Kyiv and the Oval Office. We witness first-hand

the machinations of international diplomacy and the grim personal testimonies of civilians caught in the battles.

Drawing on the history of his mother, a Russian-speaker from Kharkhiv, and his Crimean-born grandfather (whose stories he has told in his best-selling book "Stalin's Children") Matthews' personal perspective resonates throughout the book.

Matthews opens "Overreach" with diary-style fragments that begin on the night of Feb. 23, 2022. From the halls of Putin's Novo-Ogarevo residence to the presidential palace in Kyiv, to the cities of Belgorod, Bucha, Kherson, and even a small town in Oxfordshire, U.K., this introductory chapter sets the stage, weaving together the individual threads that will form Matthews' narrative.

Divided into three sections, the first 150 pages explore the years preceding the invasion. Using Putin's historical essay entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021 as a launchpad, Matthews tracks Russian history from the formation of Kyivan Rus' to the fall of the Soviet Union and Putin's rise to power, laying bare the factual errors embedded in Russian nationalist ideology.

Then comes the invasion. Mistakes were made; opportunities missed, by both Russia and the West. Matthews presents a nuanced portrait of Vladimir Putin and his inner circle—a depiction that defies caricature and avoids the clichés often associated with the Russian leader. He uncovers the simple truth: there is less to Putin than meets the eye. Putin's affinity for power is coupled with a devastating habit of overestimating his own abilities.

Standing quietly in Putin's shadow are Nikolai Patrushev, Aleksandr Bortnikov, and Sergei Shoigu. These are the siloviki (literally "powerful men," representatives of the security and law enforcement ministries) who wield great influence in the Russian leadership. Matthews delves into their backgrounds and roles to show the complex dynamics that drive their actions and shape their relationships with the president.

His analysis of Zelensky's inner circle is less extensive but equally compelling. Through quotes from the Ukrainian president's closest advisers, Matthews documents Zelensky's unparalleled optimism in the first week of the war as well as the effect of his visit to the horrifying scenes at Bucha.

The third section exposes the manipulative tactics employed by Russia to control the discourse of the war on home turf through lies and propaganda. He questions the true sentiments of the Russian people: do they genuinely support the war? Have they been swayed by a carefully crafted narrative? If so, how? Or are they simply silenced by fear? Matthews notes that many of his own longstanding contacts in Russia refused to be interviewed after the war began.

Matthews details the exodus of some million people from Russia to countries across Eastern Europe and beyond and then considers the far-reaching ramifications of sanctions as well as Putin's failed attempts to weaponize gas.

Amidst this analysis, however, Matthews remains acutely aware of the glaring disparity between the consequences faced by Russia and the devastating toll exacted upon Ukraine's

economy, infrastructure and, most importantly, its people.

"Overreach" stands as a testament to the perils of unchecked ambition and the dangers of geopolitical brinkmanship. And it is a reminder that the mightiest of leaders can succumb to their own hubris.

From Chapter 6: Truth or Bluff

The Tsar and His Court

The Security Council meeting of 21 February was remarkable in many ways. The setting of the Kremlin's St Catherine Hall was unique in its formality and grandeur – a clear signal that something momentous and historic was afoot. The vast, garishly restored ceremonial halls of the Kremlin were familiar to Russian TV viewers from various spectacles of adulation by the collected members of Russia's political and cultural elite as they listened to and applauded Putin's annual state of the union addresses. This time, the Kremlin hall was not packed but empty save for the president himself, seated at a vast white table, and the members of the Council seated at a bizarre distance from him. And as the meeting progressed, the content of the broadcast, too, became more and more extraordinary. The spectacle of humble ministers dutifully reporting to Putin was a staple of Russian television. So was the occasional ritual humiliation by Putin of oligarchs and senior officials. But for the first time the Russian public saw the chilling spectacle of the entire security establishment of their country assembled for a ritual, public obeisance to – and abuse by – their supreme leader.

In the Soviet era, the only public display that could hint at the changing power relations inside the inner Politburo was the order in which the USSR's gerontocratic rulers would file onto the roof of Lenin's Mausoleum for the annual May Day parade. Putin's regime offered something far more interesting – an hour-long spectacle of Russia's new Politburo offering their 'opinion' of a possible recognition of the independence of the Donbas republics, followed by a personal response by Putin himself. The spectacle was certainly carefully orchestrated. But it was also very revealing – including in ways that the Kremlin spin doctors did not intend.

It began with a mind game. As Peskov confided to the source with whom he lunched on 28 February, all the members of the Security Council had been told – falsely – that the meeting would be broadcast live. That was a lie. As sharp-eyed reporters noticed, the times on the watches of the participants showed that the meeting took place hours before it was actually shown on TV. It continued with a ritual that Professor Mark Galeotti described as 'King Lear meets James Bond's Ernst Stavro Blofeld'. One by one, the members of the Council stood not to speak their mind on whether the republics of the Donbas should be recognised as independent states so much as to count the ways in which they agreed with Putin.

The ultra-hawks Nikolai Patrushev and Aleksandr Bortnikov were the most obviously assured in their delivery and extreme in their lies and eschatological fantasies. FSB Director Bortnikov ran through an extraordinary list of alleged Ukrainian provocations – including 'genocidal' attacks on the civilians of Donbas. Security Council Secretary Patrushev claimed that the conflict was being driven by the machinations of Western powers whose 'goal is the destruction of Russia'. Defence Minister Shoigu – who, as we have seen, was the most cautious on the invasion of Crimea at the equivalent (though non-public) meeting on 21 February 2014 – bizarrely focused on the left-field idea that Ukraine was planning nuclear

rearmament.

Federation Council Speaker Valentina Matviyenko led a chorus of support with a variation of the 'genocide' line, citing outrages against Russian-speakers in Ukraine. Deputy Chair of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, the former liberal appointed by Putin as his stand-in as president between 2008 and 2011, had reinvented himself as a hawk in a desperate bid to remain in Putin's inner circle. He pleaded for everyone to think of the children of Donbas who – he claimed, in defiance of then-current opinion polls – the people of Russia were clamouring to protect by means of war. Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev went for an even more hawkish position by arguing that Russia should not only recognise the current borders of LDNR along the 2015 line of control but also push to extend their borders to the whole of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, including Mariupol.

But the particularly interesting responses came from the members of the Putin cabinet who were clearly the most uncomfortable with the unfolding events. This group included the men best informed about Russia's position in the world, its economy and on the real situation on the ground in Ukraine.

Sergei Lavrov – playing the consummate diplomat – simply waffled and avoided giving a straight answer on whether he approved of the recognition of the LDNR. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin failed to keep Lavrov's poker face and looked distinctly uncomfortable and disgruntled, especially when Putin cut him off as he attempted to warn the Council of the economic consequences of an invasion. Cowed, Mishustin quickly toed the party line – even though he must have clearly realised that a national political and economic revival project that he headed was crumbling before his eyes.

The two men in the hall who had the most detailed knowledge of actual events and conditions in Ukraine came in for the roughest ride. Dmitry Kozak, the Kremlin's on-the-ground point man for relations with the LDNR and Crimea, had grown up in Ukraine. After a wordy exposition where he admitted that Kyiv was not ready to re-incorporate the LDNR on the terms set out in Minsk-2, Kozak attempted a real discussion on the future of the Donbas republics. But Putin brusquely cut him off, twice.

The spectacle demanded a victim from among the Kremlin courtiers – and Putin chose Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service. Of all the people present, Naryshkin was probably the best informed on the true success of Russia's influence operations in Ukrainian society and establishment. Unlike Kozak or Mishustin, Naryshkin made no attempt to actually debate, much less contradict, Putin's decision. But he did fluff his lines, expressing his support for the recognition of the LDNR in a future tense of Russian suggestive of ambiguity. 'You will support, or you do support?' barked Putin. 'Tell me plainly, Sergei Yevgenievich.' Naryshkin, trembling at the podium like a flustered schoolboy, responded that he supported 'bringing them into Russia'. Wrong again. 'That's not what we are discussing!' Putin snapped.

'Do you support recognising their independence or not?'

Putin had made his official message clear in the characteristically direct and universally comprehensible way he had communicated for two decades – the language of boss–subordinate relations. At its most superficial, he had signalled that recognition of the

Donbas republics was right and proper, in the collective and unanimous opinion of Russia's top public statesmen. Subconsciously, but with equal clarity, he had also denoted who was in the inner circle, who was in the chorus, who was on the edges. And most of all, who was the ultimate boss.

But Putin had also signalled something far more profound, something that would ultimately be far more significant for the coming conflict. The most deluded and the most ideologically driven members of Putin's entourage were on the inside, while those with the most detailed and forensic real- world knowledge were on the outside. Like King Lear, indeed, Putin showed in his Security Council meeting that he was interested not in debate but in ritual public displays of approval. Dissent – such as Shoigu's misgivings about the wisdom of annexing Crimea in 2014 – was no longer conceivable. There could be no clearer indication that the nature and power dynamics of Putin's court had changed. As had Putin himself. He had become the leader of a nation about to launch a great patriotic war.

Excerpted from "Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin and Russia's War Against Ukraine," written by Owen Matthews and published by HarperCollins Publishers. Copyright © 2022 Owen Matthews. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Footnotes have been removed to ease reading. For more information about the author and this book, see the publisher's site here*. It can be ordered online* here *in the U.S. and* here *in the U.K.*

"Overreach has been shortlisted for this year's Pushkin House Book Prize*, which will be awarded on June 15 in London. Tickets for the ceremony are available* here*.*

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