

The Putin I knew; the P



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I met Vladimir Putin and trusted him in the early 1990s, when he was deputy mayor of St Petersburg. Now, he's different and no friend of democracy

President Vladimir Putin of Russia celebrated the new year by having an American tourist, Paul Whelan, arrested as a spy. Whelan was in Moscow to attend a wedding. But Putin needed a hostage as a potential trade for a Russian woman with Kremlin connections — Maria Butina, who had pleaded guilty of conspiring with a Russian official “to establish unofficial lines of communication with Americans having power and influence over U.S. politics.” So Putin grabbed Whelan, who has not been released.

Of course Putin did that. I've known him since the early 1990s. As a businessman in St. Petersburg, I spent scores of hours with Volodya, as he was known in those days, while he was the city's deputy mayor. He sat in my headquarters on Stone Island as we conversed, in the almost-perfect German he likes to speak, over beer and Bavarian food. My trust in those early days was based on the fact that he acted rationally and appeared to be sincere in his interest in St. Petersburg. He didn't take bribes, but he did cover for those who did, including his bosses — Mayor Anatoly Sobchak

and later President Boris Yeltsin. Putin signed the registration papers for my security company and personally registered them. He advised and counselled me. He helped me expand my business. And at his request, I built, trained and equipped St. Petersburg's first Western-style KGB SWAT team, in preparation for the 1994 Goodwill Games there.

From our conversations in 1992, I realised that Putin understood that it was not the West, but the Soviet socialist system that was responsible for the social and economic downfall of the Soviet Union. Indeed, when we spoke about my native Germany, there was every indication that he had accepted German reunification as inevitable once the Berlin Wall came down. It was after he became president in 2000 that he worried increasingly about Russia's political and economic failures and bemoaned a lack of what he considered proper respect from the West — and turned Russia inward with ideology and religion as tools.

For me, a different moment of change came in 1996, when my company and the headquarters in which I'd invested more than \$1 million was expropriated by President Yeltsin. Volodya shrugged and told me there was nothing he could do to help. And I began watching him metamorphose from a minor bureaucrat into the authoritarian four-times-elected president of Russia. I can tell

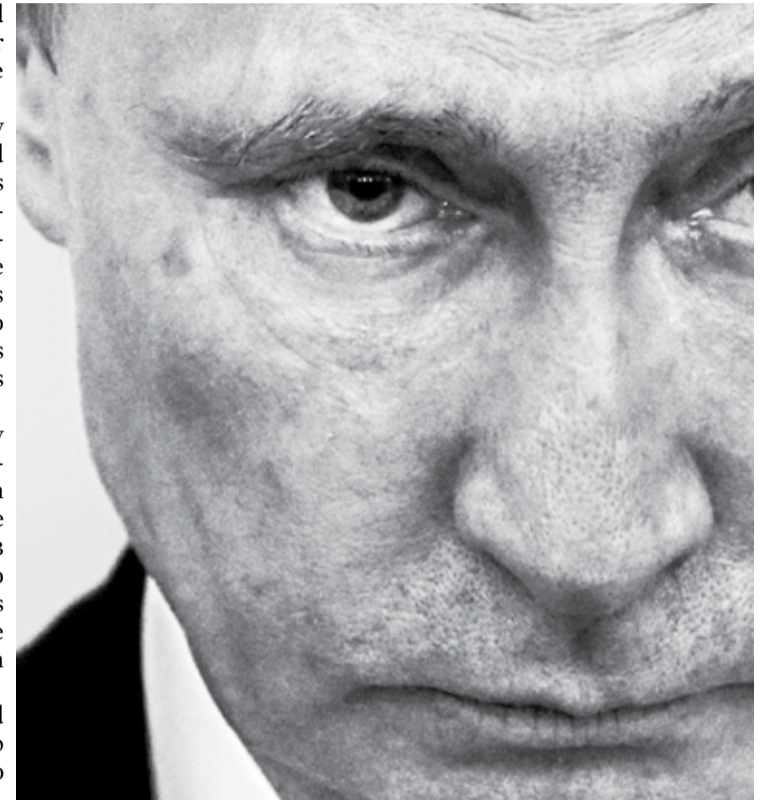
you the Putin that Americans read about today is nothing like either the Putin I knew at first or the one I know now.

The Putin I know is in many ways similar to President Donald Trump. Like him, Volodya makes decisions based on snap judgments, rather than long deliberation. He's vindictive and petty. He holds grudges and deeply hates being made fun of. He is said to dislike long, complicated briefings and to find reading policy papers onerous.

Like Trump, the Putin I know reacts to events instead of proactively developing a long-term strategy. But in sophistication, he is very different. A former KGB officer, he understands how to use disinformation (“deza”), lies (“vranyo”), and compromise (“kompromat”) to create chaos in the West and at home.

A couple of months ago, I moved to the United States and set up a company to help others who have lost their businesses or assets, or had them stolen. I had by then spent two decades suing the Russian Federation — not just in Russia but also by laying claim to Russian government property in Sweden and Germany — and emerged as the only party ever to collect damages from the Russian Federation.

That long, long march convinced me that neither Putin nor Russia was my friend. Like me, Western leaders had trusted Putin. But they



Putin has built a vast empire for himself valued in billions, according to critics.

did not understand that to him, politeness and friendship were often signs of weakness, not friendship. More than anything, he wants to be taken as an equal or a superior, trying to destroy anything with which he cannot compete.

And yet, living in America, I couldn't help noticing that the media there are reticent when it comes to telling its audiences that

Putin's Russia will never be democracy's friend. Volodya's Russia wants to divide and to destroy democracies. To that end, Volodya employs his Kremlin apparatus, notably the shadowy and largely unknown Presidential Property Administration of the Russian Federation, or UdPRF.

The UdPRF's black budget is in the billions of rubles. It controls

1919 was undoubtedly the Hollywood

A century ago, the struggle between stars and studios shaped the futu



DAVID BORDWELL

World War I radically changed the landscape of moviemaking. Before 1914, Europeans had dominated the booming industry — France, Italy, Germany and even Denmark had sent films across the globe. At first they were just shorts, but by 1913 companies were developing long-form storytelling in “feature” films that could run an hour or more. Audiences poured into movie houses.

The war brought that European domination to an end. Film stock was rationed. Workers were sent to the front. American film companies, benefiting from neutrality, swept into secondary markets like Australia and South America. Moving into Europe and Asia, several companies established foreign offices to distribute their product directly and set prime prices. By the end of the war, the centre of the global film industry had shifted to the United States, and in particular Los Angeles, where one neighbourhood was already providing the shorthand term for the emerging studio system: Hollywood.

The American studios were

not just lucky to expand at a time of turmoil in Europe. They also brought a new approach to filmmaking. Detailed shooting scripts broke scenes into shots. Specialists were assigned to set design, costuming, photography, editing and other tasks. This system helped manage the complicated plots demanded by feature-length films.

Directors also forged a method of crisp, high-impact storytelling. Fast cutting, close-ups of faces and scene details, plots driven by goal-oriented characters, scenes packed with conflicts, humour, fights, chases and stunts — these techniques crystallised into a distinctive national style.

That style was fully formed by 1919, with films like D.W. Griffith's bittersweet “Broken Blossoms” and Erich von Stroheim's mordant “Blind Husbands.” “America's healthy Lill has created true film,” rhapsodised a German critic in 1920. “What is happening, or rather racing by on the screen, can no longer be called plot. It is a new dynamic, a breathless rhythm.”

The style fit the players. Close-ups enhanced the big-eyed sweetness of Lillian Gish, the sparky mischief of the perpetual adolescent Mary Pickford, the stoic sadness of the cowboy William S. Hart. Cutting had to be punchy to keep up with the exuberance of Douglas Fairbanks, who comfortably leapt over hedges and hurled

himself out windows.

The American boom did not wipe out European filmmaking; as the continent recovered, its filmmakers maintained a high quality of production. In 1919 Mauritz Stiller of Sweden mounted the historical romance “Sir Arne's Treasure,” while in Denmark Carl Dreyer released his first film, the American-influenced melodrama “The President.” The German director Ernst Lubitsch managed, during the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, to create the historical epic “Madame DuBarry.” Filmmaking flourished further afield as well, from Japan to the newly communist Russia. Lenin nationalised the film industry in 1919 and would later declare: “Of all the arts, cinema is for us the most important.”

Still, there was no doubt that for the moment, at least, the standards for film as an art and an industry were being set in America. And things were about to change again, thanks to a percolating struggle among stars, studios and theatre owners.

Most of the entrepreneurs who forged the American film industry — Samuel Goldwyn, Marcus Loew, William Fox, Carl Laemmle, Jesse Lasky, Adolph Zukor — were East European émigrés. While genteel business owners had scorned the crowds pouring into nickelodeons and vaudeville houses, the



From left, D W Griffith, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin (seated) and Douglas Fairbanks Sr signing the original contract, below, that created the United Artists studio in 1919.

newcomers risked setting up production companies. The war had helped their firms achieve success.

But by the war's end, the salaries they paid to their stars were rising astronomically, and driving up production costs. Some producers sought to play down star power by acquiring famous literary properties and hiring celebrity directors. Exhibitors, like theater owners, were starting to merge, and these bigger companies had more bargaining power. On Feb. 5, 1919, a group of actors reasserted their clout.

“Billion-Dollar Trust Is Defied: Revolt of Motion Picture Stars Is Bombshell to Film Producers,” blared a headline in The Los Angeles Times. Defying the studios, four of Hollywood's biggest names — Pickford, Fairbanks, Griffith and Charlie Chaplin — created the United Artists Corporation.

Other stars were creating their own production units, but United Artists' “Big Four” wanted complete autonomy in developing projects. They also aimed to cut out the distribution companies that rented films to theaters. United

Artists would offer the stars' films directly to exhibitors.

Pickford presented the maneuver as a defence against the growing power of theater chains. Griffith, taking the “Artists” label seriously, claimed that if the partners could control their work, they could break with formula. “We are willing to make certain pictures which we do not expect to make money,” he declared.

But the Big Four did have money on their minds. Their employers had relied on booking packages of films, mixing mediocre items with star vehicles. The dominant system, called “program booking,” obliged exhibitors to take a distributor's entire yearly output. Fairbanks complained: “We were used as a club over the exhibitors, and the magnates at the swivel chairs made the money.”

True, the three United Artists stars enjoyed astronomical salaries, with Pickford and Chaplin yearly reaping the equivalent of \$13 million today. But the artists recognised that their drawing power was even more valuable. By offering their product to exhibitors directly, they could recoup a bigger share of rentals.

United Artists aimed high, planning for each partner to produce three films per year. Fairbanks was quickest off the mark with “His Majesty, the American,” which debuted in September 1919 at New