

[https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/17/putin-revenge-nato-west-ukraine/?utm\\_source=PostUp&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Flashpoints%20OC&utm\\_term=44783&tpcc=Flashpoints%20OC](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/17/putin-revenge-nato-west-ukraine/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Flashpoints%20OC&utm_term=44783&tpcc=Flashpoints%20OC)

# How Putin Learned to Hold Deadly Grudges

Russia's president has been shaped by decades of bitterness and revenge.

July 17, 2022, 7:00 AM



Foreign Policy illustration/Getty Images

By [William Taubman](#), author of *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 2004, and of *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*.

The invasion of Ukraine caught many analysts of Russia off guard. Russian President Vladimir Putin had long been thought of as rough, tough, and brutal—but also calculating and cautious. The wild and reckless Ukrainian adventure seemed out of character.

Some observers believe Putin has changed as a result of his deep isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic or that he has some secret illness that renders him irrational. Both U.S. President Joe Biden's former press secretary, [Jen Psaki](#), and Republican Sen. [Marco Rubio](#) have observed that Putin seems different since the pandemic, and [rumors](#) about a hidden illness are circulating in

Russia and among Russian émigrés. But Putin’s personal history reveals that his decision to go to war is entirely in character—and that he is very likely to continue it indefinitely.

Putin has justified his invasion by [citing](#) a long list of grievances against the West, especially NATO’s expansion into the former Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, and against Ukraine itself. Pandemic isolation may have [warped](#) his thinking. But the roots of Putin’s recklessness go back to a tendency he has shown since childhood to lash out when he has felt wronged or betrayed. Later passages of his life are more than stages he has lived through; they are layers that have built on one another, turning a boy who brawled his way through adolescence into a man who has directed his wrath against a U.S.-led West that he once tried and failed to get along with and that he now blames for betraying him.

---

## LAYER ONE

### Early Life—The Brawler (1952-1975)



Left: Vladimir Putin with his mother, Maria Ivanovna Putina. Right: Putin wrestles with a classmate at the St. Petersburg Sportschool in 1971. Russian Archives and Laski Diffusion/via Getty Images

Putin's family barely survived the siege of Leningrad during World War II, and although his father was a factory worker and Communist Party member, they were stuck after the war in a large, run-down apartment complex framing a central courtyard frequented by neighborhood toughs. Little Volodya—a diminutive of Vladimir used by friends and family—found a way to defend himself. “If anyone ever insulted him in any way,” a friend of his [recalled](#), “Volodya would immediately jump on the guy, scratch him, bite him, rip his hair out by the clump—do anything at all never to allow anyone to humiliate him in any way.” Putin's wrath became even more dangerous when, at age 11 or 12, he discovered judo and the Soviet-developed martial art of sambo. He was standing at a tram stop in the eighth grade, another friend remembered, when “two huge drunken men got off and started trying to pick a fight with somebody. They were cursing and pushing people around. Vovka calmly handed his bag over to me and ... sent one of the men flying into a snowbank, face-first.” The second man started screaming, “What was that?” A few seconds later, “he was lying there next to his buddy.” “If there is anything I can say about Vovka,” his friend continued, “it's that he never let bastards and rascals who insult people and bug them get away with it.”

Putin's grade-school teacher, Vera Gurevich, [noticed](#) a similar pattern: Volodya “never forgives people who betray him or are mean to him.”

---

## LAYER TWO

### **KGB—Brawling Institutionalized (1975-1989)**



Putin (right) with his parents in 1985 just before his departure to East Germany as a KGB officer. Laski Diffusion/via Getty Images

The KGB, which Putin joined in 1975, codified the pattern that Gurevich described. The KGB and its predecessors (the Cheka, the NKVD, and others) had defended the infant Soviet republic in a bloody civil war, carried out massive purges that [killed millions](#) of people under Joseph Stalin, and [persecuted](#) post-Stalinist dissidents. Externally, they targeted foreign intelligence services in a bitter, decades-long struggle. But internally, the secret police was plagued by intense competition for advancement and other bitter internecine squabbles.

The result was a pervasive cynicism. The only former KGB chief who rose to become supreme Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, was theoretically open to the liberalization of the regime he headed. “In 15 to 20 years we’ll be able to allow ourselves what the West allows itself now,” Andropov once [told](#) a Soviet diplomat, “freedom of opinion and information, diversity in society and in art. But only in 15 to 20 years, after we’re able to raise the population’s living standards.” But Andropov, a veteran party apparatchik who took over the KGB in 1967, wasn’t a KGB-lifer. Much more representative was Stalin’s longtime secret police chief Lavrenty Beria, who was so entirely cynical that the hyper-suspicious Stalin was quite right to fear that Beria was plotting against him. Beria’s predecessors Genrikh Yagoda and Nikolai Yezhov were executed under Stalin’s orders: Beria would meet the [same fate](#) in the power struggle after Stalin’s death.

By the time Putin joined, the KGB was less murderous, but its office politics were both brutal and cynical. The KGB expanded Putin's childhood instincts into the world of adulthood: Politics, whether international or domestic, is a dog-eat-dog struggle. Everybody lies, cheats, and steals. Everyone is suspect. One must always be on guard, ready to fight fire with fire. That is the way of the world. When U.S. leaders portray themselves as "holier than thou," they are hypocrites.

Putin didn't distinguish himself in the KGB. Beginning as a lowly spy-chaser in Leningrad, he was then assigned to Germany—not to West Germany, a prime target of Soviet espionage, but East Germany, where he ran agents operating in the West and [kept his eye](#) on the Stasi, the dreaded East German intelligence service, which KGB agents didn't trust any more than they trusted each other. But he worked hard, played by the rules, and found a way to please his bosses rather than trying to outshine them. Ironically, these habits and skills equipped him to adapt to post-communism when what was left of the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the 1991.

---

### LAYER THREE

#### **Adapting to Post-Communism (1990-2001)**



Left: Putin, as a member of the city administration of St. Petersburg, signs an agreement about the marketing of inventions in 1993. Right: Putin (left) and former Russian President Boris Yeltsin attend an inauguration ceremony for Putin, after his election as Russian president, at the Kremlin in Moscow on May 7, 2000. Newsmakers and Antoine Gyori/via Getty Images

As East Germany collapsed and moved toward reunification with West Germany, Putin returned from Dresden to Leningrad. He rose rapidly to become deputy mayor of post-Soviet St. Petersburg and then, astoundingly, to become post-Soviet Russia's second president. The skills he had cultivated in the KGB turned out to be needed in the turbulent decade that followed the Soviet collapse. St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak needed hard-working, efficient, disciplined aides, and he chose Putin, who was not only competent, resourceful, and loyal but admirably unprepossessing. He [struck](#) Sobchak as someone who "does not like to stand out," as a "person devoid of vanity, of any external ambition, but inside he is a leader."

Putin dealt with politicians and foreigners of all sorts in St. Petersburg. But he trusted most his old Leningrad friends, many of them from the KGB, such as [Nikolai Patrushev](#) and [Aleksandr Bortnikov](#), who are still his closest associates today. He "distrusted almost everyone else," his biographer Steven Lee Myers [concluded](#). "He always remembered acts of loyalty ... just as he never forgave betrayals."

These same qualities impressed President Boris Yeltsin in Moscow. Yeltsin was charismatic, bombastic, and anti-communist but an erratic administrator who needed competent aides, especially those inconspicuous enough not to pose any threat to his own power, image, and authority. He also needed a successor who would protect him after he retired from charges of corruption while in office. So he continued to promote Putin, who became head of the KGB's successor, the Federal Security Service; then prime minister; and, finally, acting president of Russia, when Yeltsin himself, ailing and depressed, stepped down.

In 2005, Putin famously [labeled](#) the Soviet collapse a "major geopolitical disaster" of the 20th century. He didn't miss communism itself, but his preference for a strong Russian state was already obvious. "Russia needs strong state power and must have it," he [wrote](#) in December 1999 in a 5,000-word manifesto published just days before he became acting president. But Putin also sounded open in the long run to democracy: "I am not calling for totalitarianism," he wrote. "History proves all dictatorships, all authoritarian forms of government, are transient. Only democratic systems are lasting."

Putin also seemed to welcome a kind of alliance with the West. He was the first [foreign leader](#) to phone U.S. President George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks. He helped Washington get men and supplies to Afghanistan. "Russia knows firsthand what terrorism is," he [declared](#) on Russian TV. "I would like to say that we are with you. We entirely and fully share and experience your pain." He even suggested that one day Russia might join NATO. That helps to explain, if not excuse, Bush's [infamous appraisal](#): "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get sense of his soul."

---

## LAYER FOUR

### Disenchantment (2002-2007)



From left: Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and U.S. President George W. Bush joke as they sit together during the first day of the G-8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, on June 7, 2007. Ralph Orlowski/Getty Images

It's tempting, in retrospect, to see Putin's openness to democracy and to the West as pure dissimulation at a period of relative Russian weakness. But if they were real, although partial, attempts to adapt to post-communism, they eventually brought a bitter disillusionment between 2002 and 2007—and with it a deep sense that he had been betrayed by the West.

At the core of this was the steady expansion of NATO. Putin has contended that Western leaders had promised Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 that NATO would not expand “one inch” to the east. [This isn't true](#). U.S. Secretary of State James Baker did [orally promise](#) “not one inch” but never in writing, and he later claimed he was referring to East Germany, not barring a more general eastward expansion; West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher declared more broadly that NATO would not expand to the east. But U.S. President George H.W. Bush shut down such talk, [telling Kohl](#), “To hell with that. We prevailed, and they didn't. We can't let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat.”

So NATO incorporated Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 and added Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, plus three former Soviet republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in 2004. Worse still would be George W. Bush's insistence in 2008 that NATO remain open to Ukraine and Georgia, too.

But Putin's list of grievances went much further: the NATO bombing of Belgrade; the U.S.-led war in Iraq; and two critical "color revolutions" in other post-Soviet states—the [Rose Revolution](#) in Georgia, leading to the 2004 election of pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili, followed by the [Orange Revolution](#) in Ukraine, which prompted an election redo and brought to power pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko over his pro-Russian opponent Viktor Yanukovich. Putin [saw these upheavals](#) as having been created and manipulated by Washington, with the Georgians and Ukrainians playing an essentially passive role—part of his pattern of detecting the U.S. hand behind everything, a view that gives the CIA too much credit but is a natural product of his KGB background.

By 2007, Putin had had enough. At the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy that February, he issued a [blazing indictment](#) of the United States, citing "unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions," "almost uncontained hyper use of force," overstepping "its national borders in every way," "military operations that are ... killing people—hundreds and thousands of civilians," and substituting "NATO or the EU for the U.N.," which is "the only mechanism that can make decisions about using military force as a last resort."

---

## LAYER FIVE

### **Interregnum (2008-2012)**





Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (right) and Putin, then prime minister of Russia, ride bikes outside Moscow on June 11, 2011. DMITRY ASTAKHOV/via Getty Images

Putin could have followed these bitter complaints with a burst of actions against the United States. But 2008-2012 marked a lull in the growing tension, resulting from changes in both Russian and U.S. leadership.

The Russian Constitution barred Putin from serving a third consecutive term as president. He wasn't prepared to ignore that restriction (although he later arranged to eliminate it and thus clear the way for him to serve as president until 2036), so he chose his prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, to replace him for the next four years. Although Medvedev was effectively his puppet, Putin allowed him to set a more liberal tone and gave him one more chance to improve U.S.-Russian relations. The new U.S. president, Barack Obama, set out to do likewise.

In response to Obama's attempt to "reset" relations, Medvedev agreed on a new nuclear arms control treaty, [New START](#), that extended limitations on intercontinental missiles for another 10 years. He [refrained](#) from vetoing a U.N. resolution authorizing the use of force to prevent Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi from obliterating opponents in the city of Benghazi.

Obama spokesperson Robert Gibbs [summarized](#) the president's view of Medvedev this way: He "genuinely feels like they can sit down or call each other and work through a series of issues in a

very frank and honest way, that each side is always negotiating in good faith, and that there's a level of confidence and trust also that's built up in the two sides working together." In contrast, Obama [regarded](#) Putin, whom he saw slouching behind Medvedev in Moscow, as "looking like the bored kid in the back of the classroom," a taunt that [apparently](#) infuriated Putin. Perhaps it reminded him of his childhood struggles.

Putin [remarked](#) later that he found the U.N. resolution on Libya, which Medvedev failed to veto, "flawed and inadequate," allowing the United States and its allies not just to protect Benghazi but to pursue and destroy Qaddafi. As for Saakashvili, Putin [told](#) French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, "I'm going to hang him by the balls. ... Why not? The Americans hanged Saddam Hussein."

---

## LAYER SIX

### Putin's Gorge Rises; the U.S. Seems Irresolute (2012-2016)



Demonstrators carry a model of a prison cell with a figure of Putin inside as they march in an anti-Putin rally in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Feb. 4, 2012. The sign on the cell reads: "[Convicted] for the usurpation of power." OLGA MALTSEVA/via Getty Images

In 2011, Medvedev and Putin announced that Putin would stand for the presidency in the 2012 election. The fact that the two men alone dared to decide such an important matter (although voters later reelected Putin), along with grievances over 2011 Russian legislative election results, sparked mammoth protests in Moscow. Putin [blamed](#) U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. “She set the tone for some of the actors in our country and gave them a signal,” he said three days after the 2012 vote. “They heard the signal and with the support of the State Department began active work.”

The term “active work,” [used by the KGB](#) to describe ongoing intelligence operations, underlined Putin’s charge that the protests were the result of CIA meddling. In response, he cracked down on dissent at home and stepped up military assistance to Bashar al-Assad as the Syrian dictator attempted to crush his own opposition. Obama warned that any use of chemical weapons by Assad would cross a red line and trigger strong U.S. counteraction. But when Assad did just that, Obama [retreated](#). Putin apparently took that as a sign that he could increase pressure on Ukraine, where Yanukovich, who was elected president in 2010, had been ousted by

In an echo of Cold War thinking, Putin saw the world as a chess game in which Washington and Moscow were the real players. He regarded the Ukrainian upheaval in 2014, too, as inspired and directed by Washington. His response then—seizing Crimea and grabbing more territory for Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine—was harsher and more daring, as if his growing thirst for vengeance had prompted him to take greater risks. The fact that he got away with it makes his moves seem less risky in retrospect than they were. The West did respond with sanctions against close Putin associates. But oligarch Vladimir Yakunin [explained](#) at the time that Putin would reject any effort by them to resist him as yet another betrayal: “He will not forget that—or forgive that.”

Putin lashed out more angrily than ever against the United States in 2014. The U.S. policy of containment had supposedly been devised after World War II to restrain the Soviet Union, but in fact, he [charged](#) in a presidential address that December, “for many years, always, for decades, if not centuries,” its real target was Russia itself. Putin’s recollection of how he had tried to befriend the United States in the 1990s, only to be betrayed, blended self-pity and rage. He continued: “Despite our unprecedented openness back then and our willingness to cooperate in all, even the most sensitive issues, despite the fact that we considered ... our former adversaries as close friends and even allies, the support for separatism in Russia from across the pond ... was absolutely obvious and left no doubt that they would gladly let Russia follow the Yugoslav scenario of disintegration and dismemberment. With all the tragic fallout for the people of Russia. It didn’t work. We didn’t allow that to happen. Just as it did not work for [Adolf] Hitler.”

---

## LAYER SEVEN

### **Pausing for Trump (2016-2020)**



U.S. President Donald Trump (right) and Putin talk during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, on Nov. 11, 2017. JORGE SILVA/via Getty Images

Yet shortly after he lashed out so strongly, Putin found himself facing a new U.S. president who seemed so well disposed to Russia as to spark suspicions that Donald Trump was actually in Putin's employ.

According to [Fiona Hill](#), the Putin biographer who became a Trump expert while working as his lead Russia specialist on the National Security Council staff, Trump was not "intentionally doing something for Putin or for anyone else. Trump was only ever concerned with himself." But Trump helped Putin by fomenting poisonous divisions in the United States that Putin himself had been seeking to widen with Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In March 2017, Putin broached a [broad normalization](#) of U.S.-Russian relations, beginning with the restoration of diplomatic, military, and intelligence channels that had been cut off after Russian incursions in Ukraine and Syria; continuing with talks on "information security" and on Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Korean Peninsula; and then, after meetings between the CIA, FBI, National Security Council, and the Defense Department with their Russian counterparts, a Trump-Putin summit. But the main thing that came out of this initiative was the [infamous Helsinki summit](#), during which Trump declared that he trusted Putin's word (that he had not

interfered in the 2016 election) more than the conclusions of the United States' own intelligence agencies.

Whether because Trump didn't follow through or because harder-line U.S. officials resisted his efforts to appease Putin or because Putin himself soured on Trump, this latest attempt to reset relations with Washington, or at least to pretend to do so, led nowhere. Putin held his fire as long as Trump was in office, but he had had enough and was about to boil over.

---

## LAYER EIGHT

### Going to War (2021-2022)



Left: A boy sits in front of a destroyed building after a strike in the city of Kramatorsk in the Donbas region of Ukraine on May 25. Right: A woman holds a portrait of Putin with a bloody hand on his face as members of Canada's Ukrainian community protest in Montreal on Feb. 25. ARIS MESSINIS and Andrej Ivanov/AFP via Getty Images

Ukraine, as we now know, was the target. In Putin's mind, it had no independent history of its own. It had long been part of the Russian Empire, Putin [declared](#) in a speech three days before

the invasion began, and it must become that again. It had never been a real nation or state, and now the allegedly sovereign Ukraine had allowed neo-Nazis to gain power and commit “genocide.” Moreover, he charged, Ukraine had been “placed under external control” of the West, was being “pumped with arms,” was determined to join NATO, and “intends to create its own nuclear weapons”—after which it would serve as an “advanced bridgehead” for a strike against the missile systems of its main adversary, Russia. Americans “just do not need a big and independent country like Russia around,” Putin continued, and NATO’s “one and only goal is to hold back the development of Russia.”

And if Ukraine wasn’t truly a country, it also couldn’t be in control of its own actions. Once again, Putin [compared](#) the United States to Hitler: The Soviet Union had tried to appease Hitler ahead of World War II, he said in a speech on Feb. 24 just before Russian troops moved into Ukraine, but “we will not make this mistake the second time. ... For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation.”

So it is for Putin himself. He sees his own standing, his own reputation, his own future on the line. He had been patient too long. The bastards who insulted him and humiliated him and betrayed him again and again would now get what they deserved. Whoever tries to “stand in our way,” he warned in his Feb. 24 speech, “must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.”

Putin’s many grievances against the West, his revived nationalist ideology and dream of resurrecting the Russian Empire, his recent isolation during the pandemic, and perhaps a hidden illness, too, if he really has one, all help explain his bloody war against Ukraine. But all are baked into the layers of a man whose main theme of life is a fierce determination to avoid defeat by lashing out against those who humiliate and betray him.

---

## LAYER NINE

### **What’s Next?**



Putin attends a concert marking the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow on March 18. MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/SPUTNIK/AFP via Getty Images

How will the Russia-Ukraine war end—if it ever does? One scenario assumes continuing Russian setbacks so severe as to lead Putin to be overthrown or to concede defeat before he can be ousted. But as a biographer of [Nikita Khrushchev](#) and [Gorbachev](#), I can testify that Putin's power exceeds even that of those Communist leaders. The Communist Politburo dethroned Khrushchev not once but twice. The first time, in 1957, he managed to [turn the tables](#) on his opponents; the second time, in 1964, they ousted him.

In August 1991, top party, government, military and secret police officials mounted the [abortive coup](#) that paved the way to Gorbachev's eventual ouster in December. So far there has been no such constraint on Putin, nor does one appear likely. There exists no body like the Communist Politburo or Central Committee with at least the theoretical authority to depose him, and there is no enduring precedent in Russian or Soviet tradition of military coups against supreme leaders, let alone free and fair elections.

As for Putin himself conceding defeat, his whole life testifies to his determination not to do so.

A second scenario imagines Russia defeating Ukraine. This, obviously, is what Putin expected. But it hasn't happened so far, and if massive [Western support](#) continues to flow to Kyiv, this scenario, too, seems highly unlikely.

A third scenario is the kind of compromise that former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has [suggested](#) and that Western European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron seem to favor—that is, a settlement based on the status quo ante with a return to front lines existing on Feb. 23. Would this be acceptable to Putin? Probably not, unless, using his huge propaganda apparatus, he can portray it as a victory. But even if he could, would Ukraine, having been brutalized so savagely, be willing or able to agree?

A fourth scenario is that the war continues indefinitely. This is, alas, the most likely scenario because it fits Putin's personality. It also appears to be what most Russians [expect](#). Whether it continues at the present level or becomes a [frozen conflict](#), as has happened in Georgia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, isn't clear. But after all the savage bloodletting in Ukraine, and the bitter enmity it has created there and in Russia, it's hard to see the fighting fading away entirely.

Unless, in a fifth scenario, Putin opts to break a stalemate, or ward off a seeming defeat, by going nuclear. In the past, few observers would have expected him to do so. But then again few (including this writer) expected him to invade Ukraine, even after he massed nearly 200,000 troops on its border. The reason is that his decision to launch such a war seemed so out of character. But if, as I have argued, it was in fact so squarely *in* character, then who is to say that going nuclear would not be? Whether Putin does so depends on many factors. Will he actually apply the [much-disputed](#) idea in Russian military doctrine of “escalating to de-escalate”? Will he be sufficiently certain that exploding a small tactical weapon won't trigger an all-out nuclear exchange? Will he break the [taboo](#) that has prevented any use of nuclear weapons since 1945? Let us hope not. But if he decides that such a move is the only way to avoid a humiliating defeat, then the once unimaginable will be all too likely.

*William Taubman* is author of *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 2004, and of *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*. He is Bertrand Snell Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, at Amherst College.