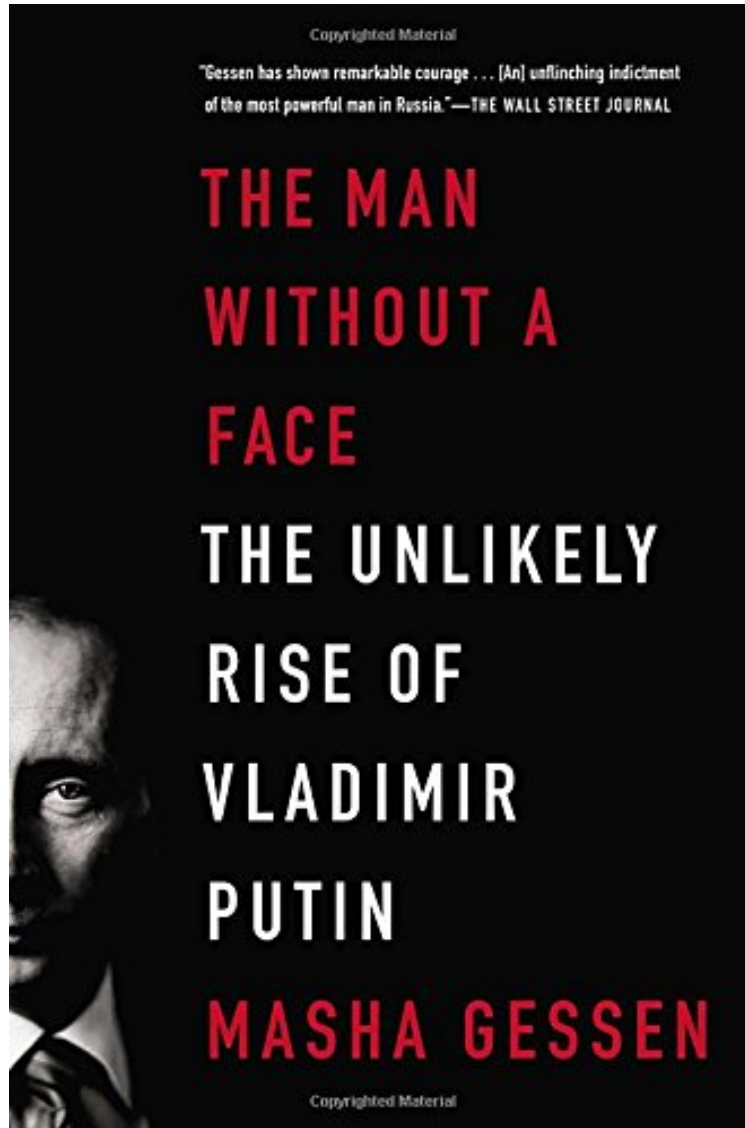


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The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin

Masha Gessen

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Look out for Masha Gessen's new book, *The Future is History*, coming October 2017
From journalism's bravest, Masha Gessen—whose regular appearances on Samantha Bee, Rachel Maddow, the pages of the *New York Times*, and more have been a beacon of clarity in our troubled times -- comes a portrait of a ruthless man's ascent to near-absolute power. In 1999, the “Family” surrounding Boris Yeltsin went looking for a successor to the ailing and increasingly unpopular president. Vladimir Putin, with very little governmental or administrative experience—he'd been deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, and briefly, director of the secret police—nevertheless seemed the perfect choice: a “faceless” creature whom Yeltsin and his cronies could mold in their own image. Russia and an infatuated West were determined to see in him the progressive leader of their dreams—even as Putin, with ruthless efficiency, dismantled the country's media, wrested control and wealth from the business class, and destroyed the fragile mechanisms of democracy. Within a few brief years, virtually every obstacle to his unbridled control was removed and every opposing voice silenced, with political rivals and critics driven into exile or to the grave. Masha Gessen has experienced and reported this history firsthand, and brings it up to its present moment of unrest and uncertainty. Her spellbinding account of Putin's rise and reign will stand as a classic of narrative nonfiction.

Praise for "Perfect Rigor"
"A fascinating biography." --John Allen Paulos, *The New York Times Book Review*
"A brilliant reconstruction...[Gessen] has written something rare: an accessible book about an unreachable man." --*The New York Times Book Review*
"[A] luminous study of Russia's forever leader... a dogged researcher, [Gessen] has written a brave book, demolishing the numerous myths and legends that have accumulated around her subject...fascinating." --*The Guardian*
"Gessen has clearly put in the hours and the miles finding people to tell her about Putin's days in the KGB, in the St Petersburg City Administration, and in the Kremlin. She paints a portrait of a man who dislikes democratic movements, who is committed to the ideals of the KGB, who is happy siphoning money from the state for his friends, and who would rather fight than negotiate." -- *Sunday Telegraph*
"Gessen is a talented and versatile journalist." -- *Financial Times*
"Gessen conveys the atmosphere - whether of the last months of the Soviet Union, the chaotic years of Yeltsin, the strange transfer of the presidency to Putin or the disappointments of his period - more accurately than any recent chronicler of the period." - *The Independent*
"A compelling and exhaustive portrait...Gessen argues that as the product of a highly secretive institution, the KGB, Putin has been able to control the details of his life, and shape his own mythology, more than almost any other modern politician - certainly any Western one." - *The Telegraph*
"The Putin who emerges from this brave and important book appears to be a grudge-driven mass murderer and extortionist ... [Gessen's] engaging prose combines a native's passion with a mordant wit and caustic understatement that are characteristically Russian." -- *Daily Telegraph*
"[This] clear, brave book ... and the tenor of reports from Russia over the past years suggest that if Putin's power is challenged it will not be because his enemies die mysterious deaths but because the scale of the plundering he has enabled becomes intolerable ...Gessen offers intriguing details of the scratching, biting, hair-tearing, undersized, brawling boy Putin, refusing to be bullied in the grubby back yards of"
Part psychological profile, part conspiracy study...As a Moscow native who has written perceptively for both Russian and Western publications, Gessen knows the cultures and pathologies of Russia...[and has] a delicious command of the English language...A fiercely independent journalist...Gessen's armchair psychoanalysis of Putin is speculative. But it is a clever and sometimes convincing speculation, based on a close reading of Putin's own inadvertently revealing accounts of his life, and on interviews with people who knew Putin before he mattered." - *The New York Times Book Review*
"In a country where journalists critical of the government have a way of meeting untimely deaths, Ms. Gessen has shown remarkable courage in researching and writing this unflinching indictment of the most powerful man in Russia... Although written before the recent protests erupted, the book helps to explain the anger and outrage driving that movement." --*The Wall Street Journal*
"Masha Gessen steps into the fray with a perceptive account of the new czar." - *Newsweek/Daily Beast*
"Engrossing and insightful." - *Bloomberg*
"[An] incisive bildungsroman of Putin and his regime...Alongside an acute apprehension of the post-Soviet dynamics that facilitated Putin's rise, Gessen balances narratives of Putin-as-bureaucrat and Putin-as-kleptocrat with a wider indictment of the "Mafia clan" that retains him solely as its Godfather." - *The Daily*
"Illuminating... Gessen sprinkles telltale signs of the Putin who would eventually emerge and rule Russia with an iron fist...It is with these explosive revelations that Gessen truly excels...[She] presents her case calmly, picking holes in Putin's character, his policies, and his rule without stooping to hysterical condemnation. ...an electrifying read from what can only be described as an incredibly brave writer." - *Columbia Journalism*
"A chilling and brave work of nonfiction...Gessen has succeeded in convincing"Although Gessen is enough of an outsider to write beautifully clear and eloquent English, she is enough of an insider to convey, accurately, the wild swings of emotions, the atmosphere of mad speculation, the paranoia, and,

yes, the hysteria that pervade all political discussion and debate in Moscow today." -- "The New York of Books

"What Gessen sees in Putin is a troubled childhood brawler who became a paper-pushing KGB man and, by improbable twists and turns, rose to the top in Russia...[She] does not attempt to weigh up Putin's record but rather examines his biography, mind-set and methods...as a thug loyal to the KGB and the empire it served who never had a clue about the Earth-shattering events that blew the Soviet Union apart." -- "The Washington Post "[An absorbing portrait...Gessen is most illuminating when she details the historical accidents that allowed an unexceptional bureaucrat to rule Russia" -- "The New Yorker "Part psychological profile, part conspiracy study...As a Moscow native who has written perceptively for both Russian and Western publications, Gessen knows the cultures and pathologies of Russia...[and has] a delicious command of the English language...A fiercely independent journalist...Gessen's armchair psychoanalysis of Putin is speculative. 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[she] displays impressive control of her prose and her story, painting a portrait of a vile Putin without sounding polemical." - "San Francisco Chronicle" "Written in English but with Russian heart, Gessen focuses on the places and institutions that bred the nation's most resolute leader since Stalin... Some might say that Gessen's interpretation is political. Of course it is... but more importantly, it is thorough. She has seen fellow journalists killed, has been harassed herself, and yet continues to write from Russia... Her urgency is felt on nearly every page." - "Bookforum" "[Gessen] shines a piercing light into every dark corner of Putin's story... 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She contributes frequently to Vanity Fair, The New York Times, Newsweek, Slate, and many other publications. The author of several previous books, she lives in Moscow. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. ON MAY 13, 2000, six days after he was inaugurated, Putin signed his first decree and proposed a set of bills, all of them aimed, as he stated, at "strengthening vertical power." They served as the beginning of a profound restructuring of Russia's federal composition, or, put another way, as the beginning of the dismantling of the country's democratic structures. One of the bills replaced elected members of the upper house of the parliament with appointed ones: two from each of Russia's eighty-nine regions, one appointed by the governor of the region and one by the legislature. Another bill allowed elected governors to be removed from office on mere suspicion of wrongdoing, without a court decision. The decree established seven presidential envoys to seven large territories of the country, each comprising about a dozen regions, each of which had its elected legislature and governor. The envoys, appointed by the president, would supervise the work of elected governors. The problem Putin was trying to address with these measures was real. In 1998, when Russia defaulted on its foreign debt and plummeted into a profound economic crisis, Moscow had given the regions wide latitude in managing their budgets, collecting taxes, setting tariffs, and creating economic policies. For this and other reasons, the Russian Federation had become as loose as a structure can be while remaining, at least nominally, a single state. Because the problem was real, Russia's liberal politicians—who still believed Putin to be one of them—did not criticize his solution to it, even though it clearly contradicted the spirit and possibly also the letter of the 1993 constitution. Putin appointed the seven envoys. Only two of them were civilians—and one of these very much appeared to have the biography of an undercover KGB agent. Two were KGB officers from Leningrad, one was a police general, and two more were army generals who had commanded the troops in Chechnya. So Putin appointed generals to watch over popularly elected governors—who could also now be removed by the federal government. The lone voice against these new laws belonged to Boris Berezovsky, or, rather, to my old acquaintance Alex Goldfarb, the émigré former dissident who just a year earlier had been willing to be charmed by Putin. He authored a brilliant critique of the decree and the bills that was published under Berezovsky's byline in Kommersant, the popular daily newspaper Berezovsky owned. "I assert that the most important outcome of the Yeltsin presidency has been the change in mentality of millions of people: those who used to be slaves fully dependent on the will of their boss or the state became free people who depend only on themselves," he wrote. "In a democratic society, laws exist to protect individual freedom. . . . The legislation you have proposed will place severe limitations on the independence and civil freedoms of tens of thousands of top-level Russian politicians, forcing them to take their bearings from a single person and follow his will. But we have been through this!" No one took notice. The bills sailed through the parliament. The installation of the envoys drew no protest. What happened next was exactly what Berezovsky's letter had predicted, and it went far beyond the legal measures introduced by Putin. Something shifted, instantly and perceptibly, as though the sounds of the new/old Soviet/Russian national anthem had signaled the dawn of a new era for everyone. Soviet instincts, it seemed, kicked in all over the country, and the Soviet Union was instantly restored in spirit. You could not quite measure the change. One brilliant Ph.D. student at Moscow University noticed that traditional ways of critiquing election practices, such as tallying up violations (these were on the increase—things like open voting and group voting became routine) or trying to document falsifications (a nearly impossible task) fell short of measuring such a seemingly ephemeral thing as culture. Darya Oreshkina introduced the term "special electoral culture"—one in which elections, while formally free, are orchestrated by local authorities trying to curry favor with the federal center. She identified their statistical symptoms, such as anomalously high voter turnouts and a strikingly high proportion of

votes accrued by the leader of the race. She was able to show that over time, the number of precincts where “special electoral culture” decided the outcome grew steadily, and grew fast. In other words, with every election at every level of government, Russians ceded to the authorities more of their power to decide. “Geography disappeared,” she said later—meaning, the entire country was turning into an undifferentiated managed space. IN MARCH 2004, when Putin stood for reelection, he had five opponents. They had overcome extreme obstacles to join the race. A law that went into effect just before the campaigns launched required that a notary certify the presence and signature of every person present at a meeting at which a presidential candidate is nominated. Since the law required that a minimum of five hundred people attend such a meeting, the preliminaries took four to five hours; people had to arrive in the middle of the day to certify their presence so that the meeting could commence in the evening. After the meeting the potential candidate had a few weeks to collect two million signatures. The old law had required half as many signatures and allotted twice as much time to collect them; but more important, the new law specified the look of these signatures down to the comma. Hundreds of thousands of signatures were thrown out by the Central Election Commission because of violations such as the use of “St. Petersburg” instead of “Saint Petersburg” or the failure to write out the words “building” or “apartment” in the address line. One of Putin’s St. Petersburg city hall colleagues told me years later that during his tenure as Sobchak’s deputy, Putin had received “a powerful inoculation against the democratic process.” He and Sobchak had ultimately fallen victim to the democratic menace in St. Petersburg, and now that Putin was running the country, he was restoring the late-Soviet mechanisms of control: he was building a tyranny of bureaucracy. The Soviet bureaucracy had been so unwieldy, incomprehensible, and forbidding that one could function within it only by engaging in corruption, using either money or personal favors as currency. That made the system infinitely pliant—which is why “special electoral culture” functioned so well. During the voting itself, international observers and Russian nongovernmental organizations documented a slew of violations, including: the deletion from the rolls of over a million very elderly people and other unlikely voters (when I went to cast my vote, I was able to see that my eighty-four-year-old grandmother’s name was in fact missing from the list; my voting precinct was also, coincidentally, located next door to an office of the ruling United Russia party); the delivery of prefilled ballots to a psychiatric ward; precinct staff arriving at an elderly voter’s home with a mobile ballot box and leaving hastily when they saw that she was planning to vote for someone other than Putin; and managers and school officials telling staff or students’ parents that contracts or financing depended on their vote. In all likelihood, none of these steps was dictated directly by the Kremlin; rather, following renewed Soviet instincts, individuals did what they could for their president. During the campaign, opposition candidates constantly encountered refusals to print their campaign material, air their commercials, or even rent them space for campaign events. Yana Dubeykovskaya, who managed the campaign of nationalist-leftist economist Sergei Glazyev, told me that it took days to find a printing plant willing to accept Glazyev’s money. When the candidate tried to hold a campaign event in Yekaterinburg, the largest city in the Urals, the police suddenly kicked everyone out of the building, claiming there was a bomb threat. In Nizhny Novgorod, Russia’s third-largest city, electricity was turned off when Glazyev was getting ready to speak—and every subsequent campaign event in that city was held outdoors, since no one was willing to rent to the pariah candidate. Around election time, I interviewed a distant acquaintance, the thirty-one-year-old deputy director of news programming on All-Russia State Television. Eight years earlier, Yevgeniy Revenko had become the youngest reporter working at a national television channel, Gusinsky’s independent NTV. He had quickly become known as one of the more enterprising and dogged reporters. The way he worked now seemed to be very different. “A country like Russia needs the sort of television that can effectively deliver the government’s message,” he explained. “As the state grows stronger, it needs to convey its message directly, with no interpretations.” He described his channel’s editorial policy as a simple one: “We do show negative stories—we will report a disaster, if it occurs, for example—but we do not go looking for them. Nor do we go looking for positive stories, but we do focus the viewers’ attention on them. We never speculate about the reasons for something—say, an official’s firing—even if we happen to know the reason. All our information comes from official government statements. In any case, the logic is simple. We are a state television company. Our state is a presidential republic. That means we do not criticize the president.” Very occasionally, admitted Revenko over a mug of beer at an Irish pub in the center of Moscow, he felt he had to stifle his creative urge. “But I say to myself, ‘This is where I work.’” He grew up in a military family and had some military training himself. That clearly helped. The late Soviet state had depended on using the many and punishing the few—and the KGB had been in charge of the latter. This system had been more or less restored now. While the vast majority enthusiastically fell in line, those who did not paid the price. Marina Litvinovich, the young woman who had helped create Putin and had urged him to go talk to the families of the Kursk crew, was now managing the campaign of his lone liberal opponent in the race, former parliament member Irina Khakamada, who had herself supported Putin four years earlier. During the campaign, Litvinovich got a phone call telling her, “We know where you live and where your child plays outside.” She hired a bodyguard for her three-year-old. She was also robbed and beaten. Yana Dubeykovskaya, Glazyev’s campaign manager, was also beaten and robbed, and once started driving her car before discovering that the brakes had been cut. A step down on the persecution ladder were apartment burglaries. In the months leading up to the election, opposition journalists and activists of Committee 2008—a group organizing to bring about a more fair

election in four years—had their apartments broken into. Often these burglaries occurred concurrently in different areas of Moscow. My own apartment was burglarized in February. The only things taken were a laptop computer, the hard drive from a desktop computer, and a cell phone. On election night, Khakamada planned a great defeat party. Her campaign rented a spacious Southwestern-themed restaurant and splurged on a spread of salmon, lobster, artichokes, and an open bar. Popular music groups lined up at the microphone, and the country's best-known rock journalist emceed. Nobody came. Waiters seemed to outnumber the guests, and the artichokes lingered. Still, the organizers continued to check all comers against a strict name list. Russian liberals were still struggling to come to terms with just how marginal they had become. Watching the guests, I was thinking it was understandable that it had taken a while. Four years after putting Putin in office, the few liberals who had switched to the opposition still had personal connections to the many former liberals who remained part of the Russian political establishment. In a vacant dining room off the main hall, Marina Litvinovich perched at one end of a long empty oak table next to Andrei Bystritsky, deputy chairman of the Russian state television and radio conglomerate. Bystritsky, a red-bearded bon vivant in his mid-forties, complained about the wine. "The wine is no worse than our election results," Litvinovich shot back. Bystritsky immediately ordered a hundred-dollar bottle of wine for the table, and then another. It seemed he had come to assuage his guilt. He assured anyone who would listen that he had voted for Khakamada and had even told his two hair-and-makeup people to vote for her. Of course, he had also run the campaign coverage that went out to about forty-five million Russian homes, and told them, over and over again, to vote for Putin. Seventy-one percent of the voters did. I went to see Bystritsky in his office three days after the election. We had known each other a long time—in the mid-1990s he had been my editor at *Itogi*—so there was no point in pussyfooting around the main question. "So tell me," I said, "how do you conduct the propaganda of Putin's regime?" Bystritsky shrugged uncomfortably and busied himself with hospitable preliminaries. He offered me tea, cookies, chocolates, chocolate-covered marshmallows, and finally a CD with the collected speeches, photographs, and video footage of President Putin. The slipcover had five photographs of the president: serious, intense, impassioned, formal smiling, and informal smiling. The serious one had been reproduced widely: on Election Day alone, I came across it on the cover of school notebooks, on preframed portraits for sale at the Moscow Central Post Office (a bargain at \$1.50 for a letter-size picture), and on pink, white, and blue balloons for sale in Red Square. The sale of any of these items on voting day was a violation of election law. "We don't especially do any propaganda," Bystritsky said, settling into a leather armchair. "Look at the election, for example." Russian law left over from the nineties required media outlets to provide all candidates with equal access to viewers and readers. Bystritsky had his numbers ready, and it was funny math: the president, he claimed, had engaged in only one election activity—meeting with his campaign activists—and the twenty-nine-minute meeting was broadcast three times in its entirety during regular newscasts, which had to be extended to accommodate it. On every other day of the campaign, the state television channel also showed Putin during its newscasts—usually as the lead story—but these, Bystritsky explained, were not campaign activities but the stuff of the president's day job. An exhaustive study conducted by the Russian Union of Journalists, on the other hand, concluded that Putin got about seven times as much news coverage on the state channel as did either Khakamada or the Communist Party candidate; other candidates fared even worse. Coverage by the other state channel, the one that had once answered to Berezovsky, was even more skewed, while NTV, which had been taken away from Gusinsky, gave Putin a fourfold advantage over the next-best-covered contender. This was what Revenko had called "effectively delivering the government's message." Local officials got the message clearly and conducted elections in accordance with it. SEPTEMBER 1 IN RUSSIA is called Knowledge Day: all elementary, secondary, and high schools all over the country begin the year simultaneously. The first day of school is a rather ceremonial occasion: children, especially first-graders and eleventh-graders (the graduating class), arrive dressed up, bearing flowers, and usually accompanied by their parents. There are speeches, greetings, occasional concerts, collective prayers, and festive processions. In the summer of 2000—the summer when I had had to briefly leave the country after Gusinsky was arrested—I had adopted a child, a little boy named Vova (eleven months later, I also gave birth to a girl). On September 1, 2004, I took Vova to his first day of classes in first grade. He looked very serious in a blue button-down shirt that kept coming untucked. He gave his new teacher a bouquet of flowers, we listened to the speeches, and the children went inside the school. I got in my car for the long drive to work: Knowledge Day is among the worst traffic days of the year. I turned on the radio and heard the news: a group of armed men had taken several hundred children and their parents hostage at a school in North Ossetia. Even though I coordinated coverage of the story from Moscow—I was now deputy editor at a new city weekly—in the following three days I did some of the most difficult work of my life. The three-day standoff in the town of Beslan, full of fear, confusion, and several moments of acute hope, culminated with federal troops storming the school building; more than three hundred people died. On the afternoon of September 1, when I came to work, I had said to my colleagues, all of whom were younger and less experienced in covering these sorts of stories: "There will be a storming of the building. There is always a storming." But when it happened, I sat at my desk, hiding my face in my hands, crying. When I finally took my hands away from my face, I found a can of Coke one of my younger colleagues had placed in front of me in an attempt at consolation. The following weekend, my family and the family of my closest friend huddled together at my dacha. When their

eight-year-old daughter briefly stepped out of the front yard, all four of us adults went into a panic. I had the distinct sense that the entire country was similarly traumatized. It was this shell-shocked nation that Putin addressed, after a fashion, on September 13, 2004. He gathered the cabinet, his own staff, and all eighty-nine governors together, and spoke with them behind closed doors for two hours. The text of his speech was then distributed to journalists. “One cannot but weep when talking about what happened in Beslan,” the speech went. “One cannot but weep just thinking about it. But compassion, tears, and words on the part of the government are absolutely insufficient. We have to act, we have to increase the effectiveness of the government in combating the entire complex of problems facing the country. . . . I am convinced that the unity of the country is the main condition of success in the fight against terrorism.” From now on, he announced, governors would no longer be elected; he himself would appoint them and the mayor of Moscow. Nor would members of the lower house of the parliament be directly elected, as half of them had been. Now Russian citizens would cast their votes in favor of political parties, which would then fill their seats with ranking members. The new procedure for registering political parties made the new procedure for registering presidential candidates seem quaint in comparison. All political parties now had to re-register, which meant most would be eliminated. The threshold for getting a share of the seats in the parliament would be raised from 5 percent of the vote to 7 percent. And, finally, proposed legislation would now pass through a filter before entering the lower house: the president would personally appoint a so-called public chamber to review all bills. After these changes became law, as they did at the end of 2004, there remained only one federal-level public official who was directly elected: the president himself.