



A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia

Searching for Truth

Edited by
Karyne E. Messina

“A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia: Searching for Truth presents an important approach to political discourse. Edited by psychologist and psychoanalyst Karyne E. Messina, the book’s essays explore the need to seek truth and reasons for behavior of political actors.

Messina provides an essential contextual setting in American and Russian history that led to the current situation of a new Cold War and a hot war in Ukraine. She also stresses the need to distinguish what we know and do not know about Vladimir Putin.

Dr. Harry Gill looks at the war from the perspective of Eastern Europeans, who have seen many internecine conflicts and shifting borders. He warns of the danger of oversimplifying the relationships by fitting them into solely Western constructs of how the world works.

The historian Peter W. Petschauer delves into Putin’s biography for clues into his behavior. Childhood traumas and a longing for a stable regime, evinced in his reading, influenced Putin’s development.

Psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan and psychologist Jana Javakhishvili examine leader-follower relationships and Putin’s leadership style. Does he follow in the footsteps of such dictators as Stalin and Milosevic?

Quantitative research by psychologist Robert Gordon compares the mental functioning of Putin, Trump, and Zelensky, presenting a matrix to judge authoritarian behavior and intellectual stability.

Novelist Austin Ratner looks at Putin through the lens of Russian literature, showing that *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky is not a paean to Russian imperialism and should not be seen as a paradigm for modern politics.

An important aspect of this study is that the authors are women and men who come from backgrounds that give them a different point of view on both America and Russia, an experience of war and confrontation that many writers about Putin lack. Their combined insights, coming from various angles, build a picture that teaches us that we must examine not only the psychology of world leaders but our own as well, to understand the reasons for our willingness to accept easy and incendiary answers instead of doing independent research and thinking. Reason and respect may yet save the world.”

Antonina W. Bouis *is an award-winning translator of Russian literature. She was the founding director of the Soros Foundations during the perestroika in the Soviet Union. She is on the board of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation and Track Two: An Institute for Citizen Diplomacy at Esalen. Member of the Council on Foreign Relations and PEN*

“A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia: Searching for Truth, edited by Dr Karyne Messina, who also contributes several chapters, is an important study. The book begins with a psychoanalytically informed exploration of why truth is essential in a democracy. Messina makes the case that we can use factual and even historical evidence as well as external expressions of leadership such as documents and treaties to understand world leaders and their underlying psychology. This forms the backdrop for understanding what is going on in present-day Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, as well as his relationship with the United States and the war he instigated in Ukraine. One of the strengths of the book is that it uses multiple methods of inquiry ranging from historical to quantitative analyses, qualitative case history, and literary analysis.”

Kevin Volkan, *EdD, PhD, MPH, Professor of Psychology at California State University Channel Islands; Adjunct Professor of Clinical Psychology, California Lutheran University; Medical Education Faculty, Community Memorial Health Systems*

“Psychologist-Psychoanalyst Karyne Messina takes us on a personal odyssey from youthful illusionment to mature disillusionment with American political leadership. Becoming aware, at least by the time she studied at university, that her generally honest father was capable of ‘unnecessary’ narcissistic lies, she eventually realized how widespread such lying was among major American political ‘parent figures.’ She usefully informs or reminds readers of the lies President Truman told ‘justifying’ the US atomic bombing of Japan, claiming we were attacking military bases, as opposed to terrorizing civilian populations to undermine morale, much like Putin does in Ukraine. She also reminds us of the lies President Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara told to justify our killing of over 5 million people in Viet Nam; Reagan’s lies denying sending illegal weapons to Iran; lies about the My Lai rape and massacre; lies about torture at Abu Ghraib; President Biden’s lies; and on it goes. Dr. Messina ends with a passionate plea for truth-telling, very much including facing up to lies and atrocities we have already perpetrated. Her opening chapter is almost a page-turner, almost a murder mystery. In fact, it is a murder mystery. In it, disturbingly, we meet the mass murdering group, and we are part of it.

Messina’s second chapter provides a balanced overview of the personal, historical, and sociopolitical motives for Putin’s serial invasions of Ukraine. She underscores NATO’s betrayal of Russia via not living up to promises to not expand NATO ‘one inch’ beyond Germany into countries formerly controlled by the Soviet Union.

Historian Peter Petschauer situates Putin in a long-term temporal context. He provides interesting hints of possible effects of the Russian President’s

possible identifications with Russian historical figures, some of whom were extremely brutal within and outside their families. Petschauer notes that Putin abused his first wife.

Psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan and psychologist Jana Javakhishvili contribute a chapter on leader–follower relationships. They usefully remind us that Soviet officials in 1932–1933 confiscated the entire grain supply from eastern and central Ukrainian villages and closed the roads to restrict movement. In this Holodomor (Ukrainian term meaning ‘to kill by starvation’), approximately four and a half million people died. (Putin follows in this ‘strongman, savior’ tradition, favoring genocide to acquire resources.) Volkan and Javakhishvili wonder if Putin aspires to become more well-known and ‘important’ than Stalin, his House of Horrors predecessor. They place Putin in the context of other totalitarians, like Milosevic, who foster a sense of victimization, followed by a sense of entitlement for revenge, leading to genocidal acts.

Stating that malignant mental illness of autocratic leaders causes the worst possible, avoidable suffering, psychologist Robert Gordon argues that it is the duty of experts to educate and warn of such dangers. Approximately 190,000,000 died due to the leadership of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, and our tendency to follow these idealized, charismatic, alpha males. Gordon and his colleagues’ rating scale research points to extreme liabilities in Putin and Trump (versus mental health assets in Zelenskyy).

In a very creative essay, novelist and physician Austin Ratner looks at Putin through the lens of Russian literature, lamenting that if only Putin could have learned more about psychological development from these brilliant authors, we would not be suffering his horrific invasion of Ukraine.

Harry Gill, a physician and neuroscientist of East European origin, stresses the disastrous consequences of not understanding opponents’ psychological, historical, cultural, religious, and economic perspectives. Our preference for simplistic narratives has cost millions of lives and trillions of dollars. We are slow to learn from history and experience. Gill pleads with us to give up our fondness for simply demonizing our opponents. We must replace that stance with communication, validation, compromise, empathy – a willingness to walk a mile in their shoes – ingredients that have proved so important in all therapeutic relationships.

Messina bookends this volume with a plea for evidence-based truth-telling to establish trust. She usefully reminds readers of Bion’s concept of the alpha function needed to transform others’ anxiety and our own into something workable. A Truth and Reconciliation process may be required as a container for promoting this necessary transmogrification and evolution.

Dr. Karyne Messina has brought together a welcome diversity of voices, creating a powerful conceptual choir. This volume contains something for

every reader interested in the never-ending geopolitical crises we create and encounter as we blunder blindly from one disaster to the next. This chorale's diversity will challenge those of us whose position may be insufficiently comprehensive, and likely will be constructively stimulating, expanding understanding in necessary ways. In the diverse views of this multidisciplinary group, there are similarities and differences – a state of affairs calling for what I have elsewhere termed a *comparative-integrative* perspective. Messina's collective offers us a wealth of facts, ideas, perspectives, and crucial concepts needed to help us emerge from our otherwise endless repetition compulsion in which we continue destroying millions of lives, and squandering trillions of dollars' worth of valuable resources. The gauntlet has been thrown down in front of us. Will we rise to the occasion, or opt to continue in our catastrophic ways?"

Brent Willock, *Ph.D. has had a distinguished career as a psychologist and psychoanalyst. He is the Chief Psychologist at the Hincks Treatment Center in Toronto and has been an adjunct faculty member at York University as well as an associate faculty member in the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto*

A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia

A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia: Searching for Truth provides psychoanalytic insight into the motives of this complex and contradictory figure.

The contributors, from different professional and academic backgrounds, use a range of methods including quantitative research and literary analysis to shed light on Putin's background, outlook and current actions. Reflecting a range of perspectives on how Putin's background may have informed his beliefs and his actions, particularly with respect to the invasion of Ukraine, the book brings together diverse viewpoints.

A Psychoanalytic Study of Political Leadership in the United States and Russia will be of great interest to psychoanalysts and to readers seeking to understand the complex dynamics of populist leadership.

Karyne E. Messina, Ed.D., is a licensed psychologist and psychoanalyst, and is on the medical staff of Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. She is a Training and Supervision Analyst at the Washington Baltimore Center for Psychoanalysis. Her books include *Misogyny, Projective Identification and Mentalization: Psychoanalytic, Social and Institutional Manifestations* and *Resurgence of Global Populism: A Psychoanalytic Study of Blame-Shifting and the Corruption of Democracy*.



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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my parents who taught me to search for truth. They understood what it meant to be honest, to have integrity, and to stand up for principles that are the foundation of our democracy.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband, Gary, who helped me see a wide array of perspectives related to political philosophy and cultural perspectives.

Preface

The USSR and its Major Leaders

Although it would be an impossible task in a book of this type to thoroughly review Russian history, a brief description of the former Soviet Union is included to help readers who may not be familiar with the structure of the USSR to understand the complex nature of what emerged prior to the Putin presidencies.

During The Red Terror, a time when the Bolsheviks put together a secret police they called Cheka, mass executions of people who supported the czar took place. Following that period, in 1922, after the Romanov Empire was overthrown, the Marxist-Communist state was formed and became one of the most powerful countries in the world, consisting of 15 republics.

From 1917 to 1924, Vladimir Lenin served as the head of the government of Soviet Russia. During the years between 1922 and 1924, the name of Russia was changed to the Soviet Union, and Lenin remained in charge until he died, in 1924. Thereafter, Joseph Stalin took over, and ruled by terrorizing citizens in the newly formed country. Nevertheless, for various reasons, an overwhelming majority of Russian people who responded to a 2019 poll indicated they thought he did a good job for Russia. Some 70 percent of those polled saw his role as positive, despite Stalin's having killed an estimated 40 million to 60 million of his own citizens. That level of support reached mythic proportions (Gordon, 2023).

In spite of Stalin's brutal leadership style, he led the Soviet Union from 1924 until he died, in 1953, taking the country from an agrarian state to an industrial and military country that wielded a great deal of power. In addition to making the USSR a superpower, after his Five-Year Plan was implemented, he concentrated on the build-up of armament and military power.

After Lenin's death, a high-ranking member of the communist party, Nikita Khrushchev, who was the party's secretary from 1953 to 1958, took over. Thereafter, he became Premier in 1958. Initially, on the domestic front, he was probably best remembered for reducing repression in the USSR.

However, when relations with China deteriorated and food shortages emerged throughout Russia, Khrushchev was removed by his own party in 1964. In spite his ousting, he did many positive things for the people, particularly when comparing him to Stalin and his oppressive leadership.

Khrushchev's tenure was followed by that of Leonid Brezhnev, who focused on improving relations with the West, but who was tougher at home. He changed some of Khrushchev's attempts to ease the repression that followed Stalin's reign of terror. While these leaders had some things in common, they also had differences. For example, Khrushchev was impulsive. Brezhnev, on the other hand, was more focused on consulting and collaborating with other members of the party. He didn't make abrupt decisions and was reported to care more about loyalty than job performance. When other members of the group showed dissatisfaction with him and wanted to oust him, Brezhnev didn't remove them from the party. Whereas Khrushchev had no problem going around people who opposed him, Brezhnev was conciliatory. He also wanted to ease tensions with the West, and was in favor of limiting nuclear arms, which made relationships with the West much better.

After Brezhnev died, Mikhail Gorbachev took over the leadership role in the USSR from 1985–1991. He was a politician, who had been a longtime member of the party, and was known as a peacemaker. His idea to restructure the economy in the USSR was called *Perestroika* (a “reconstruction” of the country's economic and political policies). This plan combined communism with capitalism and was led by the Politburo (a group that served as an executive committee of the communist party). While the plan was slowly helping the Russian people, Gorbachev had a long “row to hoe” after the depression of the 1970s and 1980s. This was a time when long bread lines were common, which was partly due to the major divide between the wealthy Politburo and the average Soviet citizen, who frequently did not have adequate food or clothing.

Gorbachev's reforms may have hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union; by loosening controls on individuals, he indirectly encouraged people in Soviet satellite states to undertake their own independence movements. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union was “coming apart at the seams” (Medvedev, 1979).

Following an attempted coup by communist hard-liners, Gorbachev was ousted in 1991. After Gorbachev left office, Boris Yeltsin became President in June of 1991. He was disliked by the power forces in Russia but was the first person to be elected through a democratic process by the Russian people. For a time, he was the most powerful person in Russia, but his popularity was short-lived because his attempts at reforming the Russian economy failed.

Under Yeltsin the Soviet economy quickly collapsed, with GNP falling more than 50 percent and living standards reflecting that situation. Social services deteriorated for the masses even as a small group of

oligarchs enriched themselves by seizing control of state-owned resources (McDonald, 2022).

Meanwhile, while various people were heading up the government of the USSR, Vladimir Putin was in the KGB learning how to be a spy and an assassin, as well as learning other sanctioned ways intelligence officers operated in autocracies. KGB, or Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, was the nation's Committee for State Security.

Prior to his induction into the group, at age 15, Putin was reported to have walked into a KGB office to try to secure a job but was told they didn't accept people who "applied" for jobs. The person with whom he spoke told him he needed to go to school or the military before he could be considered. While this wasn't said explicitly, the message seemed to be, "Don't call us. If we are interested, we'll contact you."

At that point, he attended law school at Leningrad University. As reported by Phillip Short, in his book *Putin*, which was written over a seven-year period, while Short researched Putin's background, the young law student didn't think he would be called upon. One day, however, when Putin was a 4th year student, he was approached by a stranger, who indicated he wanted to speak with him. Putin assumed it was the KGB, and he was correct. He was recruited by the group and entered when he was around 23 years old. "On August 1, 1975, a Friday, Putin entered for the first time the Leningrad Regional Directorate of the KGB, the Big House on Liteiny Prospekt, in his new role as a junior lieutenant" (Short, 2021, p. 67).

Being in the KGB was something he dreamed of for years. As a boy, he read the writings of Marx and Engels, and believed in the goals of communism. Coincidentally, on the very day Putin joined the KGB and was preparing to enter a world of spying and sanctioned violence, Brezhnev and 34 other heads of state, including someone from the United States and Canada, was preparing to sign the *Helsinki Final Act*.

Among the ten guiding principles established in the *Helsinki Final Act* was the recognition that assurances of human rights and freedom for individuals are crucial to "security and cooperation among states" (Gilmore, 2020).

Hence, Putin was in a very different mental space when most world leaders were thinking about peace and working on ways to collaborate. Among other tactics he learned that bolstered his ability to be deceptive and spread disinformation, he was taught to lie, "'The biggest thing[s]' that Putin learned during his time in the KGB is 'how to lie,' Barsky said, 'Well, I did too'" (Haltiwanger, 2023). He also more than likely learned in the KGB to kill and poison people. Both within and outside the Soviet Union, its citizens suffered from KGB-sponsored assassinations and kidnappings. Any threat to Soviet dominance and control could result in sudden tragedy (Ratner, 2018).

While other top-level officials from the USSR and then Russia were attempting to sign peace treaties, Putin had been recruited by one of the most prestigious and dangerous intelligence agencies in the world, with the blessing

of top-level officials in the Kremlin. He, in essence, appeared to have been “taught” to do what he would later do in Ukraine. When looking through a Western prism, this perspective is difficult to understand.

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