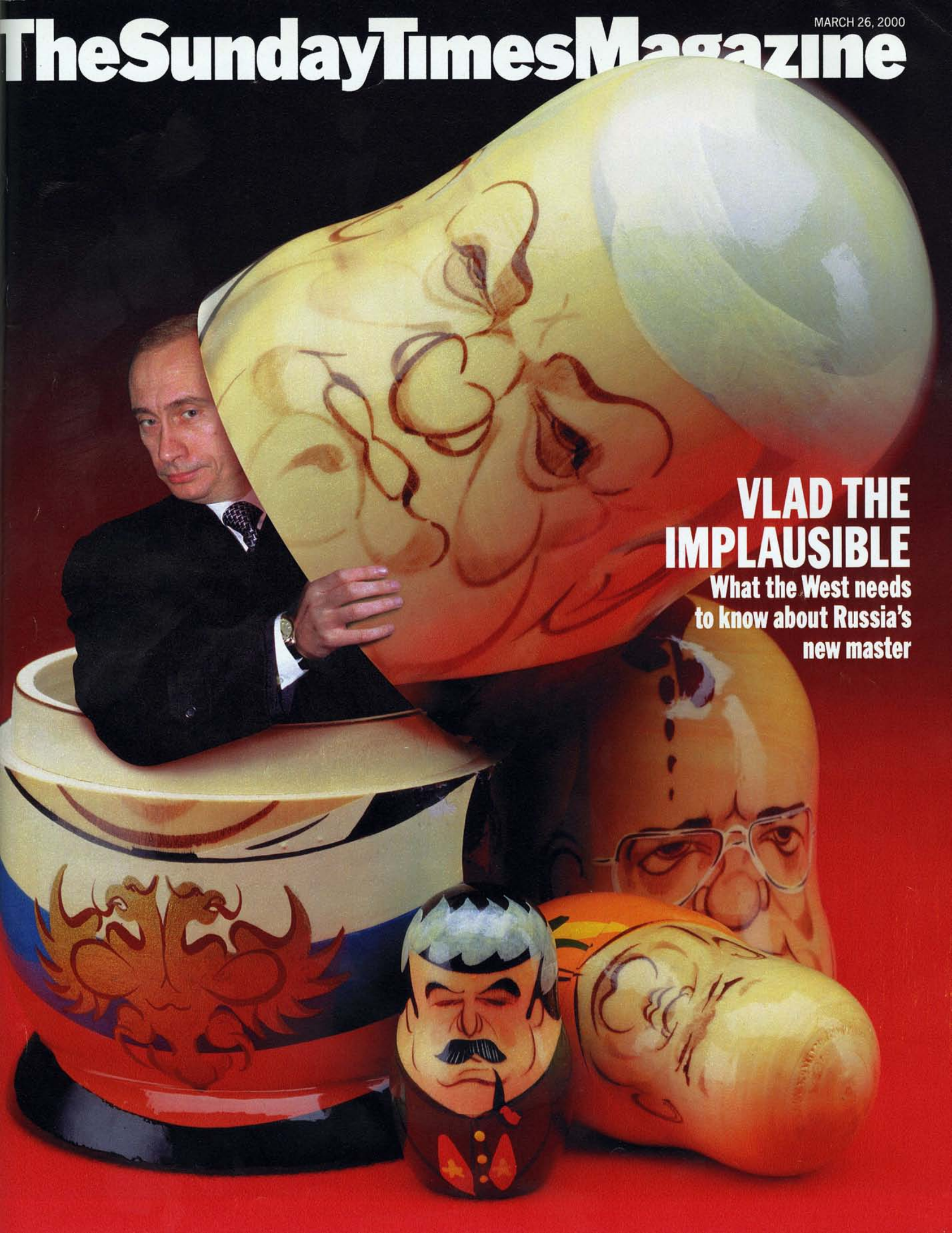
TheSundayTimesMagazine
MARCH 26, 2000

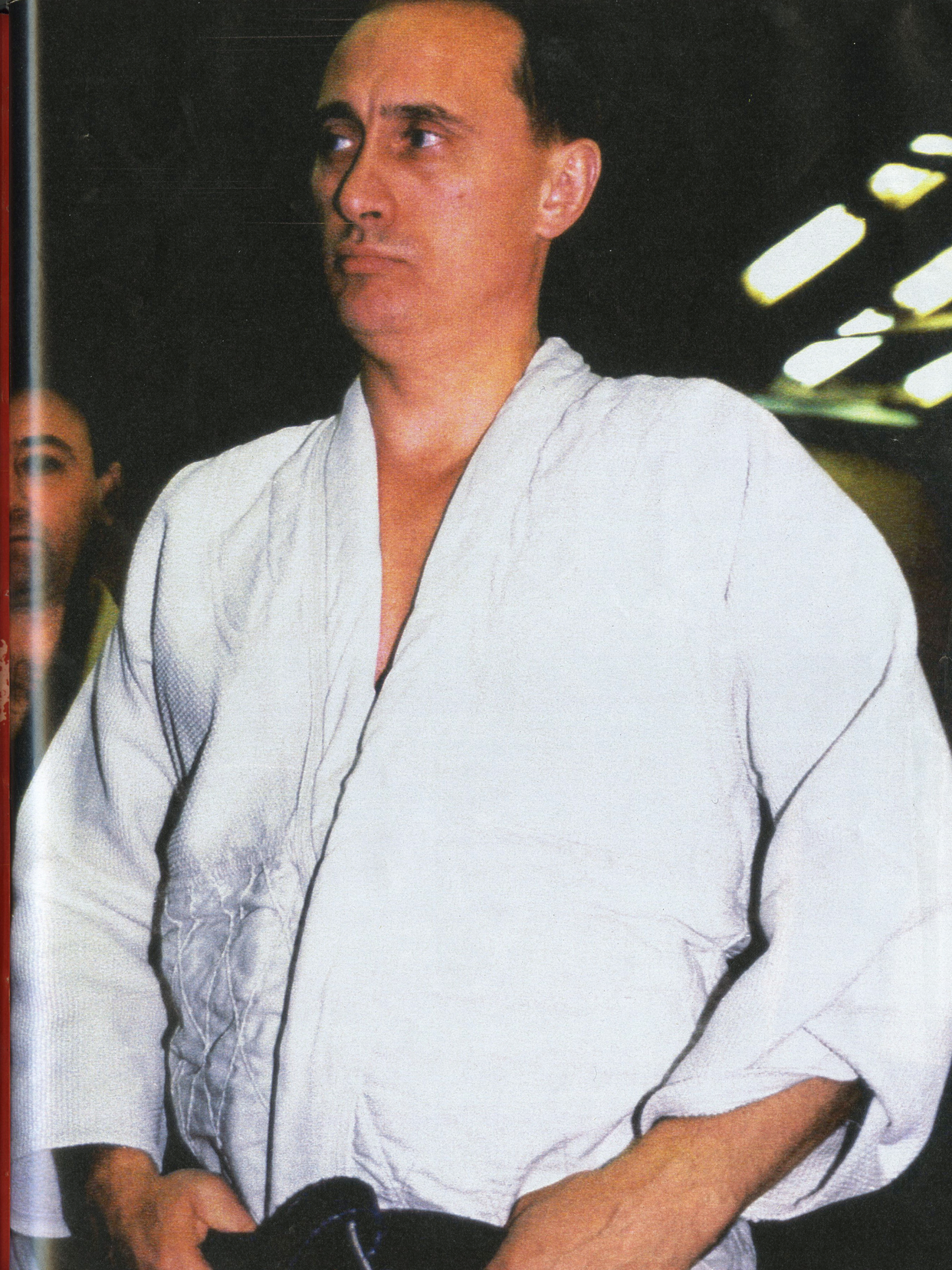


VLAD THE IMPLAUSIBLE

What the West needs to know about Russia's new master

Vladimir Putin is seen as a hard-line nationalist who ruthlessly crushes rebellion, and his past suggests he is an implausible reformer. As Russia goes to the polls today to elect its next president, some believe his true mentor is Joseph Stalin, and that this could be the beginning of a new era of repression. Christine Toomey investigates

ANOTHER REIGN OF TERROR?



Right: Vladimir Putin, a judo black belt, at his St Petersburg club last December. 'He can throw his opponent 200 times,' says the club's director

Opposite: Putin (second left), a new law graduate, with friends on a skiing holiday at Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, 1975. Left: he looks on with Yeltsin while the duma approves Putin's candidacy for the post of prime minister, Moscow, August 16, 1999. As a child, Putin had wanted to be a seaman and a pilot before fixing on a career in the KGB

Muscovites have a dark sense of humour. In the days when the KGB struck fear into the Soviet soul, some referred to its notorious Lubyanka headquarters by the name of a large toy store nearby – Detsky Mir (Children's World). By the time Vladimir Putin took over as head of Russia's secret service in 1998 a visit to the Lubyanka no longer signified brutal interrogation. But the balding spymaster knew how to intimidate visitors. His office was not ostentatious, only a little larger than those of others at the renamed Federal Security Bureau (FSB). It lay on the second floor of the Lubyanka at the end of a long, gloomy corridor where visitors describe men with "dead-fish eyes" hovering in attendance. But it had one strange feature: two walls were lined with floor-to-ceiling white curtains, and vaguely visible behind them were the outlines of several large picture frames.

"So what have you got hidden behind there?" joked Ruslan Linkov, a young politician from St Petersburg. "Secret maps? A video camera? Pictures of Dzerzhinsky ['Iron Felix', the tyrannical founder of the Soviet Union's first secret police]?" Putin did not smile. He ignored the question and waited for the conversation to move on. "When I asked him why he did not have all the portraits of Dzerzhinsky I had seen elsewhere in the building taken down, in line with a parliamentary decree, he said it would cause a 'mutiny' among his men," says Linkov. "To this day, I have no idea what he was trying to conceal behind those curtains."

As Putin stands on the brink of becoming Russia's second elected president, interest in what lies behind his own inscrutable facade has become intense. The closer the pouting 47-year-old has climbed to the pinnacle of Russia's political pyramid, the more private he has become. "He is the man with the mirror," says one analyst. "He holds it up and lets you see what it is you want to see in him. This is a basic art of an agent of deception, and he has mastered it brilliantly." Mikhail Gorbachev is more brutal in his assessment: "Putin is holding on, thanks to his mystery. Mysterious appearance, mysterious glance, mysterious phrases... It so happens when the man opens his mouth he has nothing to say."

Kremlin spin doctors have gone to great lengths to portray Putin as the dynamic young peacetime leader his country desperately needs: honest, hard-working, highly intelligent and a convinced democrat. But those who knew him before he came within reach of controlling the world's second largest nuclear arsenal remember a far more vulnerable and volatile character, given to high emotion, vanity, manipulation and deceit. To understand what drives this diminutive leader who masterminded the latest barbaric war in Chechnya, it is necessary to return to his roots in St Petersburg (then Leningrad), where links to alleged corruption, blackmail and political murder paint a far more sinister picture.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Putin's childhood was marked by tragedy. Two older brothers died before he was born: one in infancy, the other of diphtheria during the 900 days in which the German army laid seige to Leningrad in the second world war. By the time his parents were reunited after the war – his father, Vladimir Spirodonovich, was wounded in a grenade attack and remained a partial invalid – his mother's health was failing. But in her early 40s, Maria Ivanova, a janitor and cook, gave birth to a third son, Vladimir, known as "Volodya", on October 7, 1952. "Volodya was a late child, much loved. His parents were very protective of him," says Alexander Nikolaiev, one of his earliest school friends. Putin's father was tough, however. "No hugs and kisses; there was no sentimentality in their house," says one of Putin's teachers, Vera Dmitrievna Gurevich. Vladimir, small for his age, seemed at pains to prove he was no weakling.

Nikolaiev remembers watching in horror as Putin, in his early teens, bet friends he could hang upside down from the railings of the balcony in his parents' rat-infested studio flat. "The flat was on the fourth floor, but Volodya climbed out onto the ledge and hung there for a while." In another attempt to impress his peers, Putin took to carrying a hunting knife around. One day, as he edged past a group of militiamen, the knife slipped out of a rolled-up newspaper and toppled to the floor. As a result, his name was put on a list of juveniles to be kept under close supervision. "I was a hooligan... Seriously, I was a real ruffian," says Putin.

Behind this exterior, however, friends describe Putin as "emotional" and "choleric". Nikolaiev remembers that when he and his friend, then both 20, sat watching televised footage of Pinochet's military overthrow of Salvador Allende's socialist government in Chile, big tears rolled down Putin's cheeks: "He wanted to go to Chile immediately to fight for the socialist cause." Putin's mother was never a party member, but his grandfather worked as a cook in Moscow first for Lenin, and then for Stalin. "Few of those who were with Stalin all the time survived intact," says Putin. "But my grandfather did." Friends describe Putin as "very nationalistic".

Nikolaiev, whose father was a lieutenant colonel with the KGB, recalls his friend soaking up stories about the secret service as a teenager. "Volodya loved listening to my father talk of his travels to distant parts of the Soviet Union. He seemed to think it romantic," says ➤

PAGE 34: BETTMANN/CORBIS. PAGE 35 AND LEFT: MOSCOOP. ABOVE: CAMERA PRESS

Above: Putin (ringed), aged 15, with classmates in 1968. He already wanted to join the KGB. Left: in 1960, aged seven. His parents were very protective of 'Volodya', an only child after the death of two older brothers – one of diphtheria during the 900-day siege of Leningrad in the 1940s, during which his mother almost died of starvation. Opposite: at the dacha of his KGB chief, Yuri Sergeevich (right), 1980

Nikolaiev, who shared his own mother's distaste for the work of the secret police. "One day he asked me if my father could arrange for him to meet a KGB recruiting officer. I passed his request on. I did not want to know what came of it." Teachers also remember Putin showed a particular interest in espionage. "He came and asked us for a book about spying," said one. "We gave him one, but he never returned it."

With his eye seemingly fixed on a future career path, Putin's early recklessness gave way to greater discipline. When he was accepted into one of Leningrad's most prestigious high schools, Technological Institute No 281, he became, according to his teachers, a serious student who sang revolutionary songs with enthusiasm and was awarded a commendation for summer work on a collective farm. He was also a sports enthusiast, keen on sambo, a form of Mongolian wrestling, and judo.

Vasily Shestakov, another close friend, who is now head of St Petersburg School of Sports Mastership, says Putin learnt his will to win from both sports. He and Putin would often get up at 5am to go jogging and complete their circuit training before school. Both became judo black belts. One teacher recalls how Putin once rushed home to get his judo outfit when a visiting gymnastics team failed to turn up at the school. "Vladimir Vladimirovich got up on the stage and treated us all to a one-man display of his skills. We were amazed by all the moves he knew," enthuses Raisa Polunina, describing Putin as a "sweet boy with lovely eyes". After graduating from high school he again ➳

'FEW WHO WERE WITH STALIN SURVIVED. MY GRANDFATHER DID'

RIGHT: LASKI/FSP OPPOSITE: MOSCOOP

approached the secret service, according to one former KGB officer. "On the whole, we were suspicious of those who volunteered their services," says the officer. "Their loyalty and credentials had to be carefully tested. But he was persistent. He asked what degree would be most suitable for the best KGB career. He was told law." The following year, Putin applied to Leningrad State University to study international law and German.

At university he became more reclusive. Friends attributed this to the death of a friend in a martial arts contest, for which Putin blamed himself. He had talked his friend, who had little experience in the sport, into competing and wept loudly at his funeral. More likely, his reticence is explained by his conviction about his future career. One fellow law student, who also went on to join the KGB, says that throughout their university years both were interviewed repeatedly by the secret police. "Neither of us realised we were heading for the same career until, one day after university, he ended up working in the same office," says Pavel Koshelev.

Koshelev, who is now president of a club of former KGB officers in the city, says Putin did not make a resounding success of his time with the secret service. "He did not make any major mistakes... But he did not have a high career." Koshelev believes his former comrade asked too many questions and lacked the sort of loyalty the KGB demanded of young officers. But Kremlin spin doctors have been busy peddling a different version, portraying Putin as a dashing James Bond figure on the front line of foreign intelligence.

What is clear is that, while Koshelev remained within the KGB's domestic intelligence service, Putin was earmarked for a more ambitious posting. After spending a year at a KGB school in Moscow, he returned to Leningrad to work in the KGB's counter-intelligence department and then in the First Chief Directorate as a foreign intelligence agent. Valery Golubev, who shared an office with him for three years and now heads St Petersburg's tourism department, says his former colleague enjoyed "quite some success" as an intelligence officer, establishing contact with delegations of foreign businessmen and academics, recruiting some as informers. "Putin was good at his job, knowing who to approach and how. To make a mistake in such work could have disastrous consequences." His particular strength was as an "expert in human psychology" – he was adept at detecting others' weaknesses. "He was very sensitive to what people felt and thought and would pay great attention to details about their troubles."

During this time, in the early 1980s, Putin met his future wife, Lyudmila, who was working as an air hostess for Kaliningrad Airlines, at a concert in St Petersburg. He initially told her he worked for the police. Later, he encouraged her to move to the city and go to university to study languages. First specialising in Spanish and French, she went on to become a teacher. They married in 1983. Golubev and other friends of Putin are cautious in what they say about Lyudmila – who survived a car crash in 1994 that fractured her skull and broke a vertebra – but describe her as "determined", "forceful" and "tough". Golubev ungallantly speaks of her as a woman who "has her problems, but knows how to apply make-up well... She has fair hair and fair eyebrows, but very big, beautiful blue eyes and passionate lips... She has good taste in clothes and knows how to make herself, not glamorous, but nicely presented". He concludes that in the Putin marriage, it is "Lyudmila who wears the trousers".

"She wants to be in control, it is true," says Sergei Roldugin, the principal cellist at the Mariinskiy Theatre Orchestra in St Petersburg, a close friend of the couple and godfather to their elder daughter. "She has been studying business management recently because she wants to start her own business. She wants to rule something. She has surrounded herself with a group of ambitious women who want to use her husband's position to further their own aims. But Volodya is well aware of this. In important matters his decision is final."

Putin and his wife, Lyudmila, with their younger daughter, Katya, in 1986, when they lived in Dresden

Former neighbours describe Lyudmila as a devoted mother who spent hours hand-sewing dresses and party costumes for her children – Masha, now 14, and Katya, 13 – and playing hide-and-seek with them on the way home from school. But they say Lyudmila often fought with Putin's father while the family shared a flat with her parents-in-law, both of whom died of cancer in recent years. "She was very independent-minded," says Olga Turin. "That was the thing that I liked about her."

Masha was aged one when Putin was posted by the KGB to Dresden in East Germany in 1986. The couple lived in a grim row of breeze-block flats next to a Soviet army base, on the outskirts of the city. According to their friends in St Petersburg, the Putins loved their time in Dresden, where food was plentiful and they had a car. The year after they arrived, Lyudmila gave birth to their second daughter. Putin became so fluent in German that he could recite poetry at length and enjoyed picking up expressions in the thick local dialect. His job was deputy director of the Society of German-Soviet Friendship, both in Dresden and nearby Leipzig. One of its aims was to foster good relations between the KGB and the Stasi.

His office was on the second floor of a large villa on Angelikastrasse near Stasi headquarters. After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the villa was used by the Rudolf Steiner Foundation for "healing therapy". But there is no healing the bitterness felt by those in the Stasi who collaborated with KGB officers. "We feel betrayed by what they did," said one. "We were used."

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Horst Jehmlich, an amiable former Stasi officer, sits in his slippers in the sitting room of his small flat close to Angelikastrasse and serves coffee before settling down to discuss his grievances. "We always referred to our Russian guests here as 'the friends'. We had a deep conviction that our work was important to the security of our country. We believed they were here to help us, that we were working together for a common cause. We did not realise what they were really up to until long after they had left." Jehmlich, 65, who worked for nine years as personal assistant to Horst Boehm, the man who ruled Dresden's Stasi operation with an iron fist, came into fairly regular contact with Putin, whom he describes as "conscientious" and "matter-of-fact. He was not one of those Russians who liked to drink hard spirits. I never saw him let himself go". He remembers how he once saw Putin tip a glass of vodka into a pot plant during an evening's festivities.

SPIN DOCTORS TRY TO PORTRAY HIM AS A DASHING JAMES BOND

One of Jehmlich's tasks was to inform Putin when interesting foreign visitors were due to visit Dresden. Although considered a political backwater compared with Berlin, the city was home to the prestigious Technical University and the Robotron microelectronics factory, which manufactured computers used throughout the Soviet bloc. Robotron had well-established contacts with western giants such as Siemens and IBM, and both the Stasi and the KGB had agents working within the company. "If one of our 'friends' requested it, I would organise for certain of these foreign visitors to be accommodated in rooms in the Bellevue Hotel that were bugged," says Jehmlich.

In response to growing glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, the level of dissent behind the iron curtain increased dramatically from the mid-1980s. In an attempt to ease the pressure, East Germany, like other eastern-bloc countries, started to relax restrictions on migration. But in the early years of Putin's posting, it meant that even young, highly qualified people were being allowed to leave. The Stasi did not consider them suitable as potential agents. "If they wanted to get out," said one former Stasi officer, "their loyalty was in doubt. How could we rely on them?" The KGB had no such qualms. The 59-year-old senior officer, who does not want his identity revealed, says: "They made many people sign a piece of paper agreeing to provide them with information in return for being given permission to leave. They used this agreement to blackmail them if they failed to perform. While we would prepare our agents for years before they left, the Russians just gave theirs a false passport and a slap on the back."

What Jehmlich, his co-worker and the rest of the former Stasi hierarchy are furious about is that their "friends" were busy working on a hidden agenda. Called Operation Looch (Sunbeam), its aim was to build a network of spies throughout Germany that could continue to supply the Russians with intelligence, even if East Germany's communist government collapsed. "It is macabre," says Jehmlich. "I feel we were made fools of. It is clear now that our 'friends' had no trust in us."

According to one friend of Putin's in St Petersburg, the former spymaster confessed after returning home early in 1990 that the weeks following the fall of the wall had been "extremely stressful". In an attempt to protect the identity of agents recruited to work for the Soviet Union, Putin said he had been forced "to rush around with bundles of documents stuffed inside his clothes".

When he returned to Leningrad he took up a relatively minor position in the rector's office of Leningrad University. This is taken as a sign that his secret-service career was less than sparkling. Some have suggested he returned to Leningrad under a cloud because of "unauthorised activities" while posted abroad. Like the rest of the country, the city was in a state of upheaval. The Baltic port had traditionally been the country's most western-leaning city, and ambitious plans to turn it into a free-enterprise zone were hatched.

Shortly after Putin's return, Ruslan Linkov, a young student of politics, met him for the first time. Linkov was working as an aide to Galina Staravoitova, one of St Petersburg's leading forces for democratic reform, when Putin turned up at her office and, somewhat improbably, offered to work voluntarily as her chauffeur. It seems inconceivable that Putin, then still a lieutenant colonel with the KGB, could have had such a dramatic change of heart as to have decided to dedicate his spare time to helping politicians intent on fighting for political change. It is much more likely, as Linkov now suspects, that he had been assigned to spy on the city's ⟶

flourishing democratic movement.

"Apparently he spent some time driving us around to rallies and meetings," says Linkov. "I had no recollection of it until he reminded me when I went to visit him last spring." Linkov had gone to see him at the Lubyanka some months after Staravoitova's assassination by an unidentified gunman in the stairwell of her apartment block in December 1998. Her supporters had feared her killers would never be brought to justice. "Putin reminded me of his time as our chauffeur. He said, 'Of course I am interested in the result of this investigation. I am not indifferent, because you remember when I helped you by driving you both around.' In those early days of democracy we were naive. We thought anyone volunteering their services genuinely wanted to help."

In the years leading up to her death, Staravoitova had acquired a reputation for fearlessly digging into corruption in her home town. Putin later became a key official in one of the city's allegedly most corrupt administrations. The fact that, when he became head of the KGB's successor, the FSB, he appointed a former KGB officer notorious for persecuting dissidents to lead the team investigating her death was taken by many as a sign of his reluctance to have her murder solved.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

During the first year after Putin moved back to Russia, he and his family lived once again with his parents at their cramped three-room apartment in the Okhta district of Leningrad. Neighbours report that initially he seemed to have time on his hands. "He used to spend hours tinkering with his Volga car in the back yard," says Felix Shulman, 72, who got talking to him when the KGB officer took his caucasian shepherd dog, Tiny, for a walk. Neighbours recall that Lyudmila never took the dog out. According to Roldugin, who once asked her to look after his doberman and returned to find it partially emaciated, "She did not seem to like dogs."

In May 1990 the reformist politician Anatoly Sobchak became mayor of Leningrad in the city's first free municipal elections. He voted to restore its original name of St Petersburg. Looking around for a loyal team to support him, Sobchak, a former law lecturer at Leningrad University, started combing his old faculty for potential candidates. Putin's political career was born.

His first job was as head of the city's foreign relations committee, charged with granting licences to foreign companies wishing to set up joint ventures in St Petersburg. Western businessmen who had frequent contact with him say that, despite his powerful position, Sobchak's assistant made little impression: "He was always standing so close to Sobchak at any public meeting that he was often mistaken for a bodyguard or interpreter," says one. "He was a totally colourless person." Golubev says Putin "started to wear a mask while he was working at Smolny [the building where the city hall is housed] because he realised every gesture was being scrutinised. He has worn that mask ever since".

Acutely aware that his KGB links could become a liability in the new political climate, Putin contacted his old friend Koshelev and the two men debated how best to sever his links with the secret service. "It was just then becoming possible to resign," says Koshelev, who was also offered a more minor position with the Sobchak administration. "We agreed to become members of the KGB's active reserve," a position Putin officially gave up some years later. Some are sceptical of this: "There are no ex-KGB officers, just as there are no ex-german shepherds," stresses one leading dissident.

Politicians who worked with Putin in St Petersburg City Hall, where he quickly rose to the position of deputy mayor, say he was adept at manipulating people. "He took a particular interest in people's sexual orientation," says Marina Sallier, a former city councillor. "When the mayor's office eventually came under investigation for corruption I believe this information was used to stop some inquiries being taken further."

Allegations about his corrupt dealings with western companies have never been proven. But there is no dispute that during the years Sobchak and Putin led the administration, the Baltic port became the organised-crime and contract-killing capital of Russia.

After Sobchak failed in his attempt to be elected governor of the St Petersburg district in 1996, he fled to Paris amid allegations of corruption and fraud. Putin's friends became concerned for his future. "I remember asking him what he was going to do," says Sergei Roldugin. "I said, 'I'm a professional musician. What can you say is your profession?' He replied that he was a professional in human relationships – he understood very well human psychology. I think he meant he knew how to control people."

His friends need not have worried. Putin's reputation for discretion and ruthlessness made him an attractive candidate for government positions far beyond St Petersburg. In the summer of 1996, Anatoly Chubais, another native of the city who was then Yeltsin's chief of staff, recommended Putin for the position of deputy head of the government department overseeing the Kremlin's extensive foreign economic assets. The department is now at the centre of a Swiss police probe into Kremlin kickbacks and money-laundering.

Six months later, Putin was promoted to be deputy to Yeltsin's most trusted aide, Valentin Yumashev, and was in charge of the president's powerful oversight department, which ensures that presidential decrees are implemented. The KGB-style loyalty that he instilled in his staff – many were convinced their phones were tapped – so impressed key members of Yeltsin's inner circle, otherwise known as "the family", that in July 1998 he was named head of the KGB's successor agency, the FSB. While there, he showed his ability to play hardball by releasing a videotape showing the prosecutor-general, who was then in charge of an investigation into Kremlin corruption, cavorting naked with three teenage prostitutes. Putin took the unusual step of going on air to proclaim the tape was genuine. Despite calls for his resignation, Yuri Skuratov refused to step down and has been a thorn in Putin's side ever since.

Skuratov has called for a full investigation into the circumstances under which Putin left the KGB: "The public should know why there was a serious drop in his career after he left Germany and why he was sent back to St Petersburg." But his suggestion has found no backers and his opposition has done nothing to slow Putin's rapid rise to power. Last August he was designated Yeltsin's fifth prime minister within a space of 17 months. At a gathering in the Lubyanka shortly afterwards, Putin addressed a group of top secret servicemen and said, with a smile: "A group of FSB colleagues dispatched to work undercover in the government has successfully completed its first mission." Some were not clear whether it was meant as a joke.

As Yeltsin cast desperately about for a successor who could be trusted not to turn on him once he left power, Putin was ideally placed. On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin announced he was standing down, calling early elections for March 26 and appointing Putin acting president. In return, Putin signed a decree granting Yeltsin immunity from prosecution for any wrongdoing committed during his corruption-riddled eight years in power. Putin says he faced internal torment when offered the job: "I wasn't sure I wanted such a destiny. But it would have been silly to say, 'No, I'll go sell sunflower seeds instead.'"

He describes his relationship with Yeltsin as warm and says they now meet more often than before Yeltsin's retirement. "Quite recently I dropped by about work, and Boris Nikolayevich said, 'Stay for dinner. We're having sushi.' Afterwards we sat up for ages drinking beer and chatting. He's phoned a few times."

Tony Blair expressed western concerns over Chechnya when he met Putin in St Petersburg on March 11

Lyudmila says that when she heard about Yeltsin's resignation, she "cried the whole day – because I realised that our private life was over, at least for three months... perhaps for the next four years." Their children are now educated at home, and bodyguards accompany them everywhere. Putin says his few close friends have remained loyal, and vice versa: "I don't really know what would make it worth being disloyal to your friends."

The speed with which Putin has moved towards the Kremlin's inner sanctum has astonished even the most seasoned observers of the former Soviet Union. From being a complete unknown with a popularity rating of just 2% in September, within three months he became Russia's most popular politician, with a rating as high as 70%. This rapid transformation is largely a result of his ruthless handling of the latest conflict in Chechnya. He launched a huge attack on the breakaway republic after an incursion by Chechen rebels into neighbouring Dagestan last summer, and a series of bomb blasts in residential areas of Moscow that killed more than 300. The rebels have consistently denied responsibility for the bombings. Many suspect Russian special forces were behind the attacks, claims dismissed by Putin as "delirious nonsense". Certainly they propelled him into the spotlight when he sanctioned all-out war on the grounds that he was fighting international terrorism rather than repressing an independence movement. The conflict has enabled him to portray himself as a man of action, flying to the front line on New Year's Day to deliver hunting knives and a hard-hitting speech to Russian troops, and using crude army slang – saying all terrorists would be wiped out "even if they are sitting on the bog" – which won him enormous popularity. After the humiliation of Yeltsin's drinking antics and erratic rule, many weary Russians yearn for a strong leader.

Constant media coverage of the Chechen conflict also enabled Putin to turn public attention away from Russia's crumbling economy, which has left between a quarter and a third of the population below the poverty line. But as the conflict has dragged on, and the truth about the Russian army's mounting casualties and brutal conduct in Chechnya has leaked out, so Putin's popularity has started to decline, settling at just under 50% earlier this month.

His supporters deny his popularity rests solely on his tough stance over Chechnya. Before Sobchak's death from a heart attack in late February – Putin wept openly at his funeral too – the former mayor, his reputation rehabilitated by his one-time protégé, strode energetically up and down his office, jabbing his finger in the air and barking: "Putin is tough. He is a man of his word... And he's sober. He is not going to surround himself with men who believe every working day should kick off with a stiff drink."

Absently doodling a series of rising steps on a notepad, Putin's old friend Golubev puts it more pragmatically: "He was in the right place at the right ⋙→

IVAN SEKRETAREV/REUTERS/POPPERFOTO

time." Some believe Putin lacks the political skill – seeking the presidency is the first election he has ever contested – to steer his own course in the Kremlin. They argue that balancing the country's military rulers and powerful communist forces against the more liberal influence of the young economic advisers he has recruited leaves little room to manoeuvre. Others fear he is so determined to reverse his country's decline from superpower status that it will revert to a police state.

In one of his rare public addresses, Putin declared recently: "Russia has only one ambition – to enjoy respect from other nations." On another occasion, he asked his countrymen, "Why did the Soviet Union break up?" and answered himself: "Because things were allowed to happen: laxness. If we continue like this Russia will fall to pieces... We do not have the right to be lax; we do not have the right."

Already this year, he has announced a 50% increase in arms spending and approved a new security doctrine that increases the circumstances in which Russia would be prepared to use nuclear weapons. He has also decreed that neither parliament nor the prosecutor-general's office has the right any longer to monitor the counter-intelligence activities of FSB agents attached to military units. The government has announced the reintroduction of military training for schoolboys over the age of 15, including lessons in patriotism.

Putin has a record of relentlessly persecuting dissenters. Environmental activists have been harassed and put on trial. One campaigning publisher has been banished to a closed nuclear city to face a trial no journalists are allowed to attend. An investigative journalist was arrested recently and ordered to undergo psychiatric testing – a threatening throwback to the days when dissidents were imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals. Another journalist, Andrei Babitsky, who angered the Kremlin over his reporting from Chechnya,

'UNDER PUTIN, A NEW STAGE IN MODERNISED STALINISM HAS BEGUN'

disappeared after Russians claimed they had handed him to Chechen rebels in return for captive soldiers. Babitsky resurfaced a month later, saying that he had been held and beaten at a Russian-run torture camp he compared to Stalin's Gulag.

Severe curbs on press freedom have meant Russians have not been told the full truth about barbarities committed by their armed forces in Chechnya, including the mass slaughter of civilians, and reported atrocities such as the systematic rape of both men and women in so-called "filtration" camps set up to weed rebel fighters out of the civilian population.

Human-rights campaigners berate the West for treating Putin with kid gloves. They warn that Russia faces a return to a form of totalitarianism. "Under Putin, a new stage in the introduction of modernised Stalinism has begun," says Yelena Bonner, widow of the leading Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov. While most consider an analogy with the regime responsible for the deaths of tens of millions exaggerated, a growing fear of what Putin could be capable of is palpable.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

As the date of the presidential election has approached, Putin's campaign team has struggled to transform his image from that of a thuggish former KGB lieutenant colonel whose character was forged at the height of the cold war. Gone are the sharp suits, black leather jackets and permanently shifty look from under hooded eyes. In their place Putin has adopted a more casual style. He now favours broad grins and polo-neck jumpers. He attempts to project a softer image by posing for pictures with his wife and children, as he did on a recent skiing holiday. He has even allowed himself to be filmed at the family's dacha sitting on a bright orange sofa with a fluffy white poodle on his lap. He told viewers his daughters talked him into getting "the little doggy" after their last pet ran under the wheels of a car. "We are all very fond of her," he said, patting the poodle's head and ignoring his wife's apparent aversion to dogs.

Just how many are buying into this image of Putin as a regular *muzhik* (bloke) is unclear. On Russian television's equivalent of Spitting Image – Kukly – Putin has been portrayed as a wooden-mannered egghead given to speaking in staccato expletives. His supporters have called for the makers of the programme to face criminal charges for defaming their hero.

The reality is that none of this matters. Today's election is a foregone conclusion, and most Russian voters know it. Over the past six months, Putin has taken full advantage of state-run newspapers and television stations to crush potential opponents. His popular prime-ministerial predecessor, Yevgeny Primakov, has been depicted as a frail has-been, while Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, is painted as an untrustworthy crook. Neither has bothered to run. The only uncertainty in the election is whether Putin's leading rival, the Communist party chief, Gennady Zyuganov, will win enough votes to force the election to a run-off.

Many Russians feel they have little choice but to vote for Putin – variously dubbed "Rasputin", "the Shark" and "the Terminator" – or not vote at all. The sense of inevitability they feel about the outcome of today's elections is reflected in their weary reference to an adage that the country is alternately run by leaders who have plenty of hair, or none: Lenin was hairless, Stalin hirsute; Khrushchev hairless, Brezhnev had hair; Andropov hairless, Chernenko hairy; Gorbachev had only a birthmark on top, Yeltsin a mop. Putin is going bald ■