Michael Thumann

REVENGE

How Putin Created the Most Menacing Regime in the World

ibidem

Michael Thumann

Revenge

How Putin Created the Most Menacing Regime in the World

Michael Thumann

REVENGE

How Putin Created the Most Menacing Regime in the World

ibidem Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover photo: ID 242050777 | Russia War Ukraine © Rokas Tenys | Dreamstime.com

The Original German-language version was published in 2023:
Michael Thumann: *Revanche. Wie Putin das bedrohlichste Regime der Welt geschaffen hat*.

Copy-editing by Academic Consulting Services, Oxford

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7903-9

Table of Contents

Foreword

The Vladimir Putin that Michael Thumann describes in this book is a radical nationalist and a revolutionary. He is the Russian ruler who, since he returned to the presidency in 2012 after a single term as Prime Minister, has been bent on overturning the European and international orders that have prevailed since the end of the Cold War. In the name of "revenge," Putin has revolted against the 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving the United States the lone superpower astride the world stage. Putin has invaded Ukraine and unleashed the largest land war in Europe since World War II to boost Russia's diminished position in the region. And, Putin has upended the security and foreign policy calculations of countries well outside the European arena.

For Vladimir Putin, the dissolution of the USSR was not the end of the Communist system; it was the disintegration of the historic, imperial Russian state. Other large former Soviet republics, like Ukraine and Kazakhstan, may have seen this as a liberation and the chance to build a new country, but for Russia it was a catastrophe. Putin saw the Soviet collapse as marking the loss of territories that Russia had seized over centuries and of Moscow's geopolitical influence. Since first annexing Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, Putin has returned to the kinds of imperial obsessions that the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, and first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, seemed to cast aside. Putin has returned to the "ash heap" of Russia's history to gather up the pieces and shape a monument to its present. In launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin has made it

clear that *his* version of Russia's past is now the only acceptable foundation for Russia's future.

As Michael Thumann notes, Putin claims that the invasion and war in Ukraine was imposed on him. He and Russia had no choice but to react to Western actions and to a long succession of events dating back to the 1990s, including the expansion of NATO, and US decisions to intervene in the Balkan conflicts, invade Iraq, recognize Kosovo, or interfere in Libya. Everything he has done, Putin says, is in response to the US—every action must have a swift and severe counteraction. Putin is simply mounting an offensive defense of Russian interests. In fact, as Michael makes clear, Russia is in many respects reacting to itself, to Putin and the Kremlin's interpretations and often misinterpretation of events.

The West—the US and Europe—certainly made many mistakes along the way, particularly in not fully grasping the import of Putin's perspectives on world affairs; but the West also had limited impact on Russia's internal political development. Russia is not a small or peripheral state. Vladimir Putin has been in power for a very long time—a quarter of a century by 2024. The progress and regression of this country that spans eleven time zones is largely independent of the West—and so are the decisions of its ruler. Vladimir Putin, alone and with full sovereignty over his own actions, chose to attack Ukraine in February 2022. Well before taking this decision, Putin also chose to wage a hybrid war against the West, including interfering in the 2016 US presidential election. Putin did this, because, in his view, America was weak. The time was ripe for his own actions.

After this book was completed, Vladimir Putin seemed to have reached peak political strength. At home, in March 2024, he relegitimized his reign with 88% of the vote in the Russian presidential election—his highest ever result since 2000. Putin's only real political competitor, Alexei Navalny, died in a Siberian prison camp exactly a month before Russians went to the ballot box. Other presidential

"contenders" were either marginalized or marginal figures, largely unknown inside or outside Russia. In the 2024 election, Putin was essentially re-anointed as a modern Tsar, and seemingly set on course for a six-year term that would take him out to 2030. He also had the possibility to "run" for yet another term after that, which would see him in office until 2036.

By 2030, Putin will have outlasted all elected Western leaders, he will also overtake Soviet leader Josef Stalin, who was in office 30 years (from 1922-1952). By 2036, Vladimir Putin will have reigned (as president and also prime minister) longer than formidable Empress Catherine the Great, who ruled Russia for 34 years (from 1762-1796). He will still fall short of Tsars Peter the Great, Ivan the Great, and Ivan the Terrible, who each had more than four decades on the Russian throne. Nonetheless, as Michael makes clear, Putin views himself as a historic figure at home and abroad. Based on his political permanence as Russia's dominant leader of the first quarter of the 21st Century, and his dramatic deeds, Putin believes he deserves his place in Russia's pantheon of the "greats."

Abroad, Putin's obsession with restoring Russia's great power position, and ending "American dominance" once and for all, has surfaced in every foreign policy move he made after invading Ukraine. As Michael writes, Putin views the US as the puppet master behind global developments. He sees himself leading an international coalition of disaffected states opposed to the West and US hegemony. In this regard, Putin and Russia benefit from the fact that, as an imperial power, the expanding Russian state did not take territories in Latin or South America or Africa and establish colonies there. Russia is subsequently given a "pass" by major regional states like Brazil and South Africa that other European powers and the United States are not accorded.

Putin has capitalized on this by seeking to cement Russia's role as a leader of what he deems the "global majority" (or what we also might call the global community beyond the US and the

transatlantic alliance) in a contemporary revolt against Western colonial imperialism. The irony, of course, as Michael details in the book, is that Russia has a long history of brutal conquest and colonial wars in parts of Europe and Asia. Russia wrested Ukrainian lands from the Polish, Swedish, and Ottoman empires. It annexed land in the Caucasus from the Ottomans and Persians, and in the far east from China. Russia clashed with the British Empire in Central Asia and the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent and fought a war with Japan over the Korean peninsula.

Russia subjugated the peoples it incorporated with just as much violence and disregard for their rights as any other European colonial power. And it retained imperial subjects and territories long after other empires disintegrated. Indeed, Putin rode into power on the wave of the Chechen wars of the 1990s–2000s, when Moscow viciously suppressed the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya's efforts to secede from the Russian Federation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is nothing other than an imperial landgrab to retake a former colony. Nonetheless since February 2022, Ukraine's efforts to make common cause with other colonized peoples and states that received their independence after the two world wars of the 20th Century have failed to get traction. Putin's version of Russia's globally "blameless" history and the legacy of Western misdeeds has proved too potent.

On October 7, 2023—on Putin's 71st birthday no less—a new, exploitable opportunity to turn the tide of world affairs against the US and Western imperialism emerged in the Middle East. Hamas attacked Israel, and Israel launched a devastating counterattack in Gaza. This dramatic series of events brought three sets of conflicts where both the US and Russia are protagonists together in sharp relief: in Ukraine, in the Middle East, and in the Indo-Pacific, where mounting tensions between the US and China raise the specter of new cold and hot wars. And it also joined the wars in Ukraine and Gaza in unexpected ways as

an anti-US axis of sorts began to form from Europe to the Middle East to Asia, among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.

On the sidelines of the Beijing Olympics in early February 2022, Putin seemed to secure Chinese President Xi's acquiescence in his decision to invade Ukraine. China had no prior disputes with Ukraine. Nor did Iran and North Korea, which stepped into the Ukraine war as arms suppliers to compensate for Russian shortages of drones and ammunition. What attracted Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang to Moscow's attack on Kyiv were Putin's assertions in 2022–2024 that Russia was fighting against the US, NATO, and the West in Ukraine. Putin presented his war in Ukraine as a *proxy* war with the US. He offered an opportunity for China, Iran, and North Korea to thwart US policy in their own regions. Assisting Russia in Ukraine, and watching the US become increasingly embroiled and even potentially bogged down in the largest European land war since World War II, was an attractive means of signaling displeasure with US actions elsewhere.

With these other countries now in the mix, Putin's decision to invade Ukraine and to focus his efforts on undermining the United States at every possible turn took post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in new directions. In the Middle East, Iran's support for Russia, and its hostility toward both the US and Israel, encouraged Moscow to rupture previously cordial relations with Israel. Prior to October 7, Russia had, in some respects, been a strong supporter of Israel's regional position; but after October 7 Putin made a choice between Iran and Israel in the Middle East. In Asia, Putin similarly threw in his lot with China and North Korea—in the latter case noticeably changing Moscow's longstanding post-Soviet policy of keeping Pyongyang and its mercurial leaders at arm's length.

By 2024, Putin's war in Ukraine had become a pivotal test for the European and international security systems. A Ukrainian capitulation to Russia and Putin's demands would not bring a lasting peace to Europe. It would mark the evident success of the Kremlin's nuclear

bullying that Michael describes in this book and the fulfillment of Putin's determination to change borders by force. A failed state in Ukraine would invite increased Russian coercive attention toward other former Soviet and Eastern bloc countries and bring more instability. The rupture of the post-Cold War European security order would mean the lack of European diplomatic bandwidth to deal with the war in Gaza and other conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, as well as a dearth of development funding as European countries dashed to build-up their militaries and even a European nuclear deterrent.

Putin's depiction of the war in Ukraine as a war with the US and NATO, also meant that Ukraine's potential defeat would highlight the weakness of the Western alliance and the failure of its security institutions. Russia would be emboldened, but so would Iran and North Korea, and also China, to act in other arenas. Indeed, outside the transatlantic alliance—as Putin seemed to peak in his political power after March 2024—many countries already believed that Putin had won his war, and Ukraine and the West had lost. Russia appeared poised to dominate Eastern Europe again, and project power against the United States. Pessimistic Western rhetoric ahead of European parliamentary and US presidential elections on top of Russian propaganda helped to consolidate this view.

In the first half of 2024, as this book moved to publication, relations between the US and Europe also shifted. European leaders seriously began considering the prospects for reducing their heavy security reliance on the US and stepping up defence production to match Russia's rearmament efforts. Europe's military posture and defense capacity beyond the NATO had not deterred Russia from moving against Ukraine in 2022. The key challenge was how to show European military as well as political resolve to shift Russia's calculations—as well as the rest of the world's—so they would not count Europe down and out as a global security player.

In sum, Putin's revolt against the 1990s has returned Russia to its traditional role of threatening its European neighbors. The last great European land empire has bitten back, with a vengeance.

April 2024
Fiona Hill

Attack

Russia is out for revenge

The day Vladimir Putin mobilized his people for war, I met an old Moscow friend. We went to a café near the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, where many young people usually gathered. It was almost empty on September 21, 2022, and only women sat at the sparsely occupied tables.

»The men are probably hiding at home in case the field hunters come,« my friend speculated. He didn't feel safe either. Although in his late 40s, he had served in the army and was not allowed to leave the country. He told me about his son, who was 31 and had a secure job in Moscow in administration. Unmarried and without children, he was a prime candidate for the front.

»We talk on the phone every few hours, and I urge him to leave.« The son fought back, believing none of this concerned him. The war, the draft, the front, death or the penal camp if he retreated or went into captivity voluntarily, all that had nothing to do with his life. His father saw it differently. It was only a matter of time, he said. »If they need more soldiers, they'll come for all of us.«

That's why he so carefully planned his son's departure. Never talking about it, only writing or texting, buying flights with return tickets to show at the border to cover the escape to Istanbul. He persistently tried to convince his son. He begged him, nagged him, yelled at him, »Go!« It tore his heart apart. Two days after our meeting, my friend called me. His son had just flown out to Turkey. He didn't know if he would ever see him again.

It was the right decision. The Russian ruler had brought the war from Ukraine to his own people in September 2022. Young people like my friend's son have been mobilized from the streets since the end of September. Draft orders were delivered by the janitor, the pizza delivery person, the electricity meter reader, and the neighborhood police officer. In Moscow, buses drove through the city to pick up anyone reporting to the front. Anyone who protested against the war was sent to the front in handcuffs. I talked and texted day and night with friends and acquaintances about border crossings, about the children, about asylum applications, and about life in the West. Many of them left, until the end of September 2022 when Russia largely closed its borders to its citizens of military age.

War returned to Europe in 2022. It is the biggest quake since World War II and has profoundly changed the lives of Europeans. And we are only at the beginning. Putin's criminal war of aggression has robbed tens of thousands of Ukrainians of their lives and ripped the roofs off the heads of millions who were turned into refugees. The European continent has plunged into a protracted social and economic crisis, and no one knows when or where it will end. Rapid demonetization and a crisis of scarcity have shaken many countries, including those in the Global South. Humankind will have to bear the consequences of this war for years to come. The causes do not lie in geopolitical power rivalries or storms of capitalist speculation. One man, his regime, and his supporters are to blame. They invaded a neighboring country not for need or distress but with imperial intentions and terrible consequences for the whole world.

Vladimir Putin was a narrow-faced and almost-shy head of government when I met him for a first interview at the end of 1999. He seemed awkward and angular in his movements, and he spoke a very awkward Russian riddled with bureaucratic formulas. At the time, he acted as if he wanted to build good relations with the West. He spoke of democracy, cooperation, and the joint fight against terrorism. Even

then, I didn't really believe him. I thought he was an authoritarian secret-service man who rang in his term of office with a brutal war against Chechnya. I would never have guessed that I was meeting a man who, a good 20 years later, would threaten the entire world with nuclear catastrophe from his bunker.

In this respect, Putin surprised us all. The real question is »who realized that the man was not to be trusted and when?« The timing is highly political. After all, Western credulity, cronyism, and a huge leap of faith are what made Vladimir Putin great. Former US President George W. Bush's error in 2001 is often cited: »I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy.[. . .] I was able to get a sense of his soul«. So, too, is the clean bill-of-health proclaimed by former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who in 2004 called Putin a »flawless democrat.« Schröder repeated this several times years later, by which time the ex-chancellor had long since become an oligarch in Russian corporations. But many of his party friends in the SPD also refused to see what was so obvious about the Kremlin ruler long after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. People in the other German parties, in the FDP, the CDU/CSU, even in the Greens, were also happy to be deceived by Putin—not to mention the leftists and the AfD, who openly took sides with Russia and its president. The Germans talked themselves into believing the man. When Ukraine was invaded, those who trusted were suddenly surprised. German politicians, German businesspeople, and German representatives of associations were »severely shocked« and »disappointed.« They said, »We could have never expected!« Why not? Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a war that began back in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. All they had to do was look and listen.

The illusions of Western politicians and businesspeople have helped Vladimir Putin threaten the world to the extent that he has today. Germany stubbornly capped its defense budget until 2021 but increased its gas dependence on Russia from 38 percent in 2012 to 55

percent in 2021. The rationale, already false at the time, was that Russia had always been a reliable supplier. Putin has had years of good fortune in international relations because many believed him. Because many underestimated him. Because many thought that were one to talk to him diligently and hold him in high esteem, he would be ready for any form of partnership. Two errors helped Putin in particular: the assumption that he was actually a good man even if easy to provoke and the fear that everything would be much worse in Russia should he leave. But could things be worse?

When Russian troops invaded Ukraine in the early morning of February 24, I was asleep in my Moscow apartment. The editors of *Zeit Online* rang me out of bed at half past five in the morning. Before I even had my first tea, I wrote the lead story. It warned that this war was not a local affair between Russia and Ukraine but a threat to all of Europe. A few hours later, the first reactions came in. One reader protested that this was a matter between two former Soviet republics. Why would I scare everyone and claim that »we« were also threatened? A few weeks later, an indignant reader wrote to me: »Putin is not waging war against us, he is only reacting to the Western sanctions.« Months later, I read in the letters: »Putin was only reacting to our arms deliveries to Ukraine with the threats against Germany. NATO had provoked Russia.« Again with the exculpatory arguments. Again with the insinuation of harmlessness.

Again with a gross underestimation of Putin.

That is why I am writing this book. Ukraine is still the theater of hot war as I write these lines, but the hybrid great war is, more broadly, targeting us. Putin wants to bury liberal democracy. He is attacking Europe's way of life, its security, and its economic foundations. He wants to use a gas embargo to destroy Germany's industrial base. He wants control over the continent. This attack is all the more dangerous because Russia is part of Europe. Former President of Russia and current Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council Dmitri

Medvedev exposed the Russian view of European civilization when he shouted to the Baltics and ultimately to all Europeans: »That you are in freedom is not your merit, but our failure.« An unrestrainedly imperial and belligerent Russia has become a threat to all of Europe and the world. This book recounts the unstoppable radicalization of one man, his regime, and Europe's largest country.

Three basic ideas guide my analyses and reports. First, Vladimir Putin is taking revenge. The Russian ruler sees the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the shrunken Russian nation-state not as a liberation but as a catastrophe. His war is an attempt to turn back time: Putin is leading a revolt against the 1990s, the opening of his country, Russia's polyphony, power-sharing with the republics, disarmament treaties with the West. He has returned to an imperial obsession that the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, had ended. The war against Ukraine is »Russia's armed response to the fall of the Berlin Wall«—this is how Italian philosopher and publicist Angelo Bolaffi tried to answer the question about the deeper reasons of the historical caesura of February 24, 2022. But here it should be added: The war is the reaction of those nationalists and Soviet imperialists who, even then, believed that the GDR citizens and the non-Russian peoples of Eastern Europe should not have been released from eternal Soviet captivity in 1990. Putin is leading these imperialists today—against the Russians who saw the end of the Reich and the 1990s as liberation. Putin has been out for revenge for the past three decades.

Second, Russia is not reacting to us. It is reacting to itself. The search for a sense of meaning and what we did wrong that is popular in the West is pointless when it comes to interpreting Russia. The West undoubtedly made mistakes, from Iraq to Afghanistan, but these had little impact on Russia's political development. Nevertheless, the opinion that conditions in Russia and the actions of its ruler depend on what the West does or does not do has become entrenched among part of the German public. From my perspective as a correspondent

and temporary Muscovite, this is an intolerable arrogance. Indeed, this view assumes that Russia, a world power, is dependent on the West for its internal development or shapes its policies as a reaction to the West. Russia is not a small state. The progress and regression of this country that spans eleven time zones is largely independent of the West—and so are the decisions of its ruler. Vladimir Putin, alone and in full sovereignty, chose to attack Ukraine; he chose to wage a hybrid war against the West because, in his view, the time was ripe, and the West was about to go under. People should stop belittling him by constantly implying that he is only acting in response to larger, more important powers. He is self-sufficient.

The same applies to the attempt to constantly see Russia through the prism of Western history. There are many attempts, to explain Russian actions via Western history. This is especially true of the frequent comparison of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine with the German war of extermination in Eastern Europe up to 1945. These are all observations by people who have never lived in this country and who lack an appreciation of the tsarist and Soviet legacy that has never been overcome in its monstrosity and that shapes all Russian society, but above all its ruling elite. What is unfolding in Ukraine, with all its horrors, crimes, destruction, looting, chaotic warfare, and indiscipline, is not the return of the Third Reich. It is a continuation of a colonial, imperial, and Soviet tradition, a precarious historical amorphousness that comes from within.

Third, Putin's rise is a variant of the radical new nationalism that dominates many countries in our era. In Turkey, Hungary, and China, new nationalism dominates; in France and Brazil, it is the strongest opposition force; in the United States, it was in power from 2016 to 2020 and may return in 2024. Putin proves that new nationalism leads to war and that state stabilization by hook or crook leads to dictatorship. The maximum tolerated dose of authoritarian nationalism is zero. Authoritarian violence at home will eventually turn into violence

abroad if the nationalists are not forced out of government in time. Auto-aggression turns into aggression against neighbors. Every voter must think carefully about what they are doing on election day. There is no protest vote, as some AfD voters believe, only a mandate or empowerment vote. Those who unleash the new nationalism must know there is no going back. There is no such thing as a little nationalism or a little hatred. Nationalism is a total program. Russia offers a cautionary model for the whole world. At the end of the pluralistic, semi-democratic 1990s, an exhausted majority in the country believed that a little stabilization might not hurt. In the Putin Pact, they traded their freedom for ephemeral prosperity. Many Russians undervalued their democratic achievements after the fall of the Soviet dictatorship. After his rise to power, Putin brought the media to heel, expanded the secret services, and manipulated and falsified elections. Nevertheless, millions of people voted for Putin again and again, after his repressive return to power in 2012, after the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and after the bombing of Aleppo in 2016. Putin's loyal voters legitimized him and made themselves complicit in their country's fall into a totalitarian dictatorship and in unleashing a war that is now coming back to bite the Russian people.

This book traces the main stages on the way to this war and looks ahead to what comes next. First, I describe the German illusions about Russia and their consequences, without which the Russian 1990s and Putin's thirst for revenge cannot be understood: the failed coup of the secret services and imperialists in 1991, the laborious attempts at democracy, and the Chechen war. After that, I devote myself to an in-depth analysis of the Putin system: his nationalist ideology, the propaganda army, his archipelago of penal camps and the repressive apparatus, and Russia's slide into dictatorship. The third part of the book describes the country at war. It discusses how Putin invaded Ukraine and on what grounds, how he sealed off his country from the world and reality and mobilized his people, how he unleashed the holy, great

war against the West and used the atomic bomb as a threat. With this war, he initiated the last, extended phase of his rule.

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia, the largest European country, is leaving Europe. Once again, an Iron Curtain is being lowered across the continent. When I travel to this country, I am repeatedly stopped at the airport. The border guard holds my passport and makes long phone calls to his superiors. A man in a dark suit, probably a secret service agent, picks me up and leads me into a basement room. There is a desk, an old mattress with springs, broken chairs, and dust in the corners. I must answer questions: Where do you live? What do you think about the military operation? What are your plans in Russia? I answer curtly and ask myself: Will I even get into the country? Will I get in on the next trip? And will I get out again?

Russia is closing its borders against the world. Most of my Russian friends and acquaintances now live abroad. In September 2022, those who felt directly threatened by the mobilization left. This book is also a farewell to a Russia in which I once liked to live, which was very welcoming to me. And which no longer exists today under this regime.

Misguided

How German politicians helped Putin

The scene gave many German correspondents in Moscow an uneasy feeling at the time: Gerhard Schröder and Vladimir Putin standing close together in Moscow's Cathedral of the Redeemer at the Orthodox Christmas celebrations in January 2001. The chancellor and the president, the former Juso chairman and the former head of the secret service, the social democrat, and the security bureaucrat. An incongruous group at first glance. The politicians had their black coats neatly buttoned up to the knot of their ties and were led by the Orthodox patriarch through the gold-covered cathedral on the banks of the Moskva. An oversized structure, Stalin had it blown up, and an ambitious Moscow mayor with family ties to the construction industry had it rebuilt in the 1990s. The chancellor and the president lit candles and whispered in each other's ears as the patriarch wished them »Merry Christmas« in German. The next day, the two and their wives sat in a red sleigh and crisscrossed the snow-covered Kolomenskoye park, once the tsar's residence in Moscow. This was the beginning of a scandalous friendship that years later would lead Schröder to the supervisory boards of Russian energy companies and Germany to its fateful dependence on Siberian gas fields.

I was surprised by the warmth of the visit at that time.

I had also seen Schröder on his first visit to Russia in November 1998. I waited for him for hours in the library of the Hotel Kempinski because he was still discussing Bonn issues with his delegation. At that time, he was late everywhere in Moscow and conveyed a general attitude of, »I'm not particularly interested in anything here. Above all, I

don't want to go to the sauna!« (His predecessor in office, Helmut Kohl, had enjoyed this ritual with President Boris Yeltsin). But with Putin, Schröder was a changed man. The atheist Schröder was converted in the cathedral of salvation. He fell not only for Putin as a person, but also for an idealized vision of Russia that he henceforth defended against any criticism of the regime. He later adopted two Russian children. Twenty years later, after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Schröder broke not with Putin but with his party, the SPD, which distanced itself from him. He blew the whistle on Germany and stood by Russia. Schröder is a particularly blatant example of German Putinophilia but only one example among many.

In thirty years of reporting on Russia, I have met many of Putin's supporters in Germany. They saw him as a realistic man with whom one could do business, the German in the Kremlin, the approachable president, a young, sober politician who seemed so very different from the Yeltsins, Brezhnevs, and Khrushchevs before him. German politicians, managers, and journalists, even in my own newspaper, *Die Zeit*, were quite taken with the man. During my visits to Hamburg, senior editors encouraged me to look on the bright side, if possible. The editor and former chancellor Helmut Schmidt said nothing; he always let me write what I wanted. But in the *Zeit* political conference, over menthol cigarettes and cookies, he declared: »Putin has a realistic picture of the world.« He said that we had to work with him and that he was an opportunity for Germany.

Many Germans saw it the same way. In September 2001, Putin gave a speech in the Bundestag, partly in German, that took the hearts of some of my compatriots by storm. Industrialists hoped to reach personal agreements with Putin and overcome the uncertainties of the 1990s. Politicians, businesspeople, and foundation representatives in Moscow were taken in by Putin. The head of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Moscow, Peter W. Schulze, tried to convince me in heated discussions that Putin was pursuing an »authoritarian path to

democracy.« The new president was met with an enormous amount of understanding among the German elites. What is more, there was a willingness to ignore or persistently excuse his darker side. Blame was laid elsewhere: with the Americans, with the West, with NATO. In this way, they helped Putin expand his influence in the West. At that time, I got the impression that many German politicians and managers wanted things to work out with Putin, no matter the cost. It became even more expensive than they thought.

In many cases, the desire to establish good relations with Russia at all costs was not based on any particular insight or closeness to Russia but on three main motivations. The starting point was often fundamental criticism of America and unease among Germans who saw themselves at the mercy of US dominance, especially in times of American wars and interventions. Russia was seen by some German politicians and their voters as a geopolitical deterrent. They valued Russia as a counterweight to »US imperialism,« »Wall Street capitalism,« NATO's eastward expansion, and liberalism. Second, some Germans were attracted to Russia because they attributed a sense of depth and truthfulness, a genuineness that had been lost in the superficial West, to Russians. This was a very effective stereotype. Third, German industrialists not only saw Russia as a market as early as the 20th century, but also as an alternative source of raw material to American and British oil supplies. These links between German energy companies and Russian state monopolists continued from the 1970s onward. Some even associated this with a crude idea of geopolitical power multiplication: Moscow and Berlin could reorder the world with Russian raw materials and German technology.

None of this is new. Schröder had his forerunners, for example, in the 1922 government of the center politician Joseph Wirth, when the Chancellor of the Reich signed the Treaty of Rapallo. This agreement deserves a closer look because it is where the stage was set for the whole drama of an ill-considered intertwining with Russia. Rapallo

is a lesson that hardly anyone in Germany wanted to remember after Putin came to power. Or, if one could speak with Karl Marx: The construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was the repetition of history as farce. The Rapallo Treaty and the Nord Stream projects were based on a shared misconception: Russia and Germany were bound by higher interests more important than good or untroubled relations with the states of East–Central Europe and the West. Both the 1922 treaty and the construction of the pipelines against the opposition of many EU countries placed Berlin under general suspicion of collaboration with an authoritarian regime that was difficult to shake off and burdened German foreign policy for many years to come. Both events merit a comparative examination.

The Treaty of Rapallo and its consequences mark a German tradition that extends to the present, as we shall see. Its roots lie in the Prussian–Russian alliance that led to the partition of Poland in the 18th century and sought to contain the consequences of the revolutions since 1789 in the first half of the 19th century. In 1922, the main issues were military cooperation, oil supplies, and dreams of an economic alliance beyond the West. Thus, the German Reich—internationally isolated after World War I and burdened by reparations, inflation, coups, and assassinations—wanted to find its way back onto the world stage with the help of Russia, similarly isolated and devastated by revolution and civil war.

The industrialist and foreign-minister Walther Rathenau was a contradictory and tragic figure who signed the German–Soviet Treaty of Rapallo more than 100 years ago. Tragic because he actually wanted to prevent the agreement onto which he affixed his name. While the *Völkisch* nationalists in the German Reich condemned the rapprochement with Bolshevik Russia, German leftists and conservatives celebrated Rapallo as a triumph over the liberal-capitalist West. The treaty became a symbol of Germany's seesaw policy, praised by Soviet

propaganda, condemned in England, demonized in France, and signed by a pro-Western German foreign minister.

What amazes me most about Rapallo in retrospect is why a liberal foreign minister, of all people, signed the treaty.

This question leads us back to the Italian port city of Genoa, where at a conference held in April 1922, Great Britain wanted to negotiate a new economic order and, to this end, correct some of the provisions of the Paris Suburb Treaties that had ended the First World War in 1919/20. The delegations lodged like monarchs in the city's many palace hotels: the British took up quarters in the hilltop Villa d'Albertis, the French held court in the Savoy Hotel, the Germans had booked an all-inclusive stay in the more modest Eden Hotel, and the Bolshevik negotiators resided in the Imperiale Palace Hotel in Rapallo, 30 kilometers from Genoa, like the tsar's family at a spa. On April 10, the negotiations began in the medieval Palazzo San Giorgio at the port of Genoa. The reporter Harry Graf Kessler later recalled: »Imposing barriers, military chains in field gray; patrolling cavalry; white-gloved, red-bosomed royal guardians around the perimeter of the palazzo leading to the potted plants and red stair runners of the old bank palace decked out in courtly pomp.« Under the high ceilings of the palace's grand Renaissance vault, the heads of 34 states sat at green tables surrounded by white antique statues on black marble tiles.

British Prime Minister Lloyd George was the leading figure. He campaigned for free world trade, disarmament, and the »detoxification of the world.« He wanted to get the German economy going again and build up Soviet Russia at the same time with an international financial consortium. The French foreign minister, however, insisted on all the reparations that his country had imposed on Germany at Versailles. German Chancellor Joseph Wirth sought to ease the burden of debt.

Germany was plunged into a permanent crisis. Wirth even feared an increase in reparations after Genoa. According to Article 116 of the

Treaty of Versailles, Russia could have joined the reparations demands against Germany, and France encouraged Russia to do just that. The Moscow delegation was led by the brilliant Foreign Minister Georgy Chicherin, who spoke not only French but also perfect German. He was pursuing a very specific goal. Moscow wanted Berlin to waive pre-war loans and privatization debts, as well as a most-favored-nation clause that would facilitate trade. Above all, however, it wanted to keep the Germans out of all capitalist alliances against Soviet Russia, including the international consortium, condemned as »imperialist,« that the British were planning. Soviet government emissaries had already negotiated with the Germans in the months before about a corresponding agreement, but Chicherin's initiative threatened to fail in Genoa. The liberal and industrialist Walther Rathenau, who had been appointed Germany's foreign minister at the beginning of 1922, was about as accessible to Chicherin as Annalena Baerbock with her »feminist foreign policy« was to her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in 2021.

Rathenau had many connections to the West; he knew Lloyd George well. At Genoa, like Wirth, he hoped for debt relief and a loan for Germany. He shied away from a separate agreement with Russia, however. He considered the preliminary negotiations with Moscow »unforgivable.« Nor did he like the extensive, secret German–Russian cooperation in the military, armaments, and raw materials, about which he had learned only shortly before the conference. On this, he was alone. Army chief of the Reichswehr, General Hans von Seeckt, German industry, and the chancellor all pushed for a special German–Russian agreement. And they were thus part of a tradition of German Ostpolitik that sought to close ranks with Russia to bypass, divide up, or neutralize East-Central Europe.

The Soviets' closest ally in Rathenau's ministry was top diplomat Ago Freiherr von Maltzan, the gray eminence of Weimar Ostpolitik: Maltzan kept in touch with the Russians and strategically prepared the