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**THE CHARACTER
OF RUSSIAN ELITE:
INTELLIGENCE AND
INTELLIGENTSIA,
DICTATORSHIP AND
CONTRADICTION**

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Ключові слова: таємна поліція, ФСБ, шпигунство, диктатура, Путін, Росія, теологія.

У цьому дослідженні простежуються кроки, які ведуть від певного типу освіти, закладеної в розвідувальній службі (підозрілість і насильство), до диктаторського режиму, який підозріло ставиться до будь-яких суперечностей своїй політиці і, отже, вибирає певний вид характеру як основу своєї еліти. Іронія полягає в тому, що модерне наполягання на критичному мисленні тут досягає свого завершення в режимі, який базується на кодексі поведінки розвідувальних служб (intelligence) і стає повністю відірваним від справжнього інтелекту (intellect), тому що модерн неправильно розуміє, що насправді “тримає нас на землі” – те, що в російській мові “інтелігенцією” називають лю-

дей, у яких інтелект пов’язаний з певним видом моральної чутливості та політичної відповідальності, чий дискурс формується в публічній дискусії та постійних критичних відгуках, у розвитку через протиріччя. Протиріччя – це саме те, чого не вистачає сучасному режиму в Російській Федерації, тому що такий режим не залишає місця для тих людей, що є здатними суперечити тому, що диктує диктатор.

1. ‘The Dark Side of Statecraft’

It is often said condescendingly that, after all, we all know that Putin was a KGB agent and that it explains so much. But I think it’s worthwhile to examine what exactly does it explain. What does the secret service represent? Graeber & Wengrow argue that the secret service is essentially a weaponisation of previously unimaginable potency of the modern state [15]. It’s as if the secret service is the dystopian ‘dark side of statecraft’ to which the nation has outsourced its coercive faculty. “Secret agent has become

the mythic symbol of the modern state... James Bond, with his licence to kill, combines charisma, secrecy and the power to use unaccountable violence, underpinned by a great bureaucratic machine” [15]. In a certain sense, we can think of the secret police as the ego of the state: just like my ego is a schemer obsessed with my status in the dominance hierarchy, the secret police is obsessed with the state’s status in the geopolitical realm. The reconnaissance officers are like paranoid conspiracists who don’t believe in anything except the lowest explanations that are to be uncovered by violence.

To put it even more provocatively, the secret agent is the opposite to the version of personhood upon which the West is predicated, the inverse of everything a Christian should be, a sort of antichrist. You can think about antichristian ethos by considering the chronological enactment of vices that comprised the biblical account of human Fall into the Bronze Age slavery: ‘hiding’, ‘lying’, ‘killing’. Is the secret agent a ‘hider’, a ‘liar’, and a ‘killer’? First, the secret agent is of course a hider, he is secretive. If, in Christian terms, the person’s identity comes from actual participation in conversations and relationships, the identity of the secret agent is nothing but a mask behind which other interests and relations lurk. In this sense, secret servicemen embody Faustian modernity – they sell their soul, the faculty of participation in relationships, for the sake of acquiring power, knowledge, and (in *siloviki*’s case) wealth, provided by the modern nation state. It is the modern re-enactment of pagan pre-eminence of ‘having mode’ over ‘being mode’, the will over personhood, as if personhood is nothing but a property of the will, as if the personality was indeed a mere *persona*, a mask. Masha Gessen insightfully referred to Putin as a ‘man without face’ [24]. The secret agent is a killer, an unlikely fusion of refined mendacity and savage cruelty, a caged beast – the inverse of the non-violent ‘cheek-turner’ Jesus. The secret agent is a liar – the inverse

of a sin-confessing parishioner. Moreover, he mistrusts everyone and everything, he is a paranoid conspiracist – the inverse of the believer who ‘always trusts’ (1 Corinthians 13:7). And since the secret police approaches everything as if there is a secret plot hidden behind it, a cabal plotting to subvert and steal the power of the state, they run the danger of getting lost in the debris of their own conspiracy theories. Their bad faith makes them particularly susceptible to wilful blindness.

And this is the irony of the secret service – the people who are entrusted to collect intelligence often become the ones most detached from it. The enthronement of the secret agent brings this detachment to comical proportions. Recall that the *siloviki* don’t have any issues with the government as long as they stay in the privileged position. It means that the ruler who relies on *siloviki* is bound to become blinded by their sycophancy: they will filter out everything that might sound as critique. As the Russian saying goes, “To be promoted, you need to report only what the boss wants to hear”. The ruler gets out of touch with reality because his courtiers are possessed by their will-to-power. ‘For most of history, this was the dynamic of sovereignty. Rulers would try to establish the arbitrary nature of their power; their subjects... would try to surround the godlike personages of those rulers with an endless maze of ritual restrictions, so elaborate that the rulers ended up, effectively, imprisoned in their palaces...’ (The Dawn of Everything, Page 396). In *Tyrants Destroyed*, Nabokov brilliantly articulates this dynamic by describing how a ‘tyrant calls himself a “prisoner of people’s will” [27]. The tyrant’s palace becomes an echo chamber and an echo chamber becomes a prison – a dim place where the spark of truth rarely flickers. This reciprocal enslavement is key to this essay: as your choices get more arbitrary, that is more free from morality and reality, your repertoire of choices narrows. The information, the intelligence you get deteriorates

because your relationship with other people deteriorates. And for limited mortals like us, whose sanity depends on exchange of perspectives with each other and whose freedom depends on renegotiation of our relationships with each other, this spells disaster. The more 'freedom of will' you have, the less free you become.

2. Dictatorship & Contradiction

I like to think that proper statecraft is a rational 'contradiction' between science and desires – a creative converse on a healthy *ratio* between the forms of life we want to conduct and the forms of life we know as realistically possible. Statecraft turns into dictatorship when it stops being a place for such contradiction, a place for dialogue, and turns into a monologue of those who happen to be in power. Because dictatorship is the state where statesmen dictate but can't be contradicted, can't listen, dictators lose their critical feedback with reality – get out of sync with facts and values. When this happens, governance succumbs to the will-to-power of the authorities whose arbitrary decisions cease having any relation to the common good.

The styles of central governance are promiscuous: they tend to be replicated on all levels of society. Across Russia, administrators 'build imitations of Mr. Putin's regime – in local government, the charity sector, even volunteer associations – just to prevent anyone from starting something not subservient to the state' [9]. Once people lost their agency of self-governance to the vertical *diktat* of the sovereign, they found themselves at odds with their own nature as political animals. Once people stopped being citizens who have a say in common affairs they felt as if their lives were handed over to fate. The only way to regain the sense of control was to embrace the arbitrariness of life and displace their agency on those down in the 'food chain' in the form of violence. Hence the vertical of arbitrary power had penetrated all levels of society. The so-called *dedovshchina* (Rus. for violent 'hazing' or

'bullying') crept into every level of relationships: in households husbands coerced wives and children, in companies managers coerced staff, in the public realm *siloviki* coerced activists, and soon on the international scene big countries would coerce the small ones.

Without the chance to verbalise their desires within the processes of communal self-legislation, without the chance to articulate their will non-violently, that is politically, people were left to attune their will to the wills of those who could articulate it – that is, they were left to participate in the imposition of the will of the authorities on the subordinates, of masters on slaves. Those unable to articulate their passions and resentments politically were used as fuel for the vertical of coercion. A state where there are no conversations in which people deliberate on sensible and desirable decisions is a state where, behind closed doors of cabinets, 'little putins' make decisions that are arbitrary – that is, neither desirable nor sensible, but calculated to make those who make them stay in power. It is a society where 'might makes right' in every dimension of life, where the anti-law, call it Thrasymachian, Machiavellian, or Nietzschean, has at last triumphed.

Law proper is designed to promote cooperation or at least make the current style of competition less self-destructive for the competitors. In contrast to this, the thieves' law (Rus. *blatnoi zakon*) is the anti-law – a legalisation and legitimisation of antisocial behaviour, of the right of the strong to act with impunity. In short, *blatnoi zakon* centres around the principle of non-cooperation. And, in a state where human freedom was fettered by asphyxiating artificial limits with the drab monotony of Soviet life, the life of a thief seemed to epitomise freedom. Against this background occurred a romanticization of thievery. Across the country, when asked who they want to be when they grow up, the boys answered – "We want to become thieves!"

But this was only the underworld of society. It is only once this 'underworld' came to concord with the 'dark side of statecraft', the *siloviki*, that the whole society started to be corrupted by the evil of *kriminalitet*. The *silovik* 'starter pack' of 'hiding – lying – killing' was supplemented with the *blatar* practice of 'stealing'. Admittedly, secret police and crime syndicates exist in every country. Yet in Russia they became allies and filed a joint bid for power. It happened because, in contrast to post WW2 Germany, in Russia, dictatorship was never condemned. Russians *en masse* never came to terms with the Stalinist perversion of morality through inversion of freedoms.

It is arguably a necessary evil, perhaps a 'dark side' of statecraft, when secret servicemen exercise hiding, lying, and killing for the sake of national security, but it is something else entirely when they exercise it for the sake of stealing – their own kleptomania. Before their confluence with the thieves, the secret servicemen might have been used in service of the democratic politics. After the merge, they were in service of one thing – greed. Once it happens, slowly but surely, governance becomes undermined by violent zero-summism. And because the critique of democratic politics poses the biggest threat to the kleptocrats, they narrow the public square to just one kind of politics, the geopolitics, the rooting for a state's zero-sum fight for the 'spheres of influence' against other states. It's as if the 'dark side' of statecraft devours the whole of the state, even in its international relations.

3. The Character of the Elite

I think that to ask "Who is responsible for the death of democracy?" is to pose a sloppy question. Autocracy is the end game of the erosion of responsibility itself. If there is an exchange of perspectives at the heart of decision-making, then we can talk about responsibility, if there is none, then there is no responsibility at all – the ruler stops being responsible to the critique of other people and thus be-

comes detached from reality. In absence of critical feedback, the ruler will only 'respond' to the imperative of staying in power, thus becoming possessed by the logic of escalation that justifies concentration of decision-making in the hands of arbitrary authority. In other words, the emperor will inevitably confuse himself with a god and take on the conquest of the world. The critical feedback ends when people who 'say truth to power' are eliminated from decision-making (and eventually from media as well) so that the ruler no longer talks with people who pose unpleasant questions. Which means that the key question is this: "What is the selection process of the people who have a say in common affairs?" or "How is the elite constituted?"

We often forget that to talk of any political regime is to talk of a regime of human life, to talk of a certain **character** for which the people who take part in decision-making are selected. Putin's regime is downstream of political repressions in Soviet Russia which, perhaps for the first time in human history, blew up the process of 'unnatural selection' in the realm of social processes to industrial proportions. This involved "philosophical steamships" and "political cleansings" of all who were devoted to abstract principles from the heights of which the power could be critiqued. People were taught to believe power cannot be critiqued – that "those on the top see better". Putin's regime's preference for the law-breakers and law-enforcers over law-makers led to an unnatural style of governance that didn't take any human interest into account – except the insatiable greed that necessitated an escalation of self-destructive imperialism.

The *siloviki* laid the foundation for their ascent even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, but by 2004, thanks to the first cadence of their fellow secret serviceman in the presidential office, they've occupied all the titbits of bureaucratic hierarchy, gained control over the entire country, colonising it to serve two inter-

dependent aims: private enrichment and imperial expansion, internal and external colonisation.

First, the people: Russians hated the didactic idealism of Soviet culture. With each song, movie, painting, book, and theatre play, Soviet authors taught people how to live, how to become conscientious citizens. In reaction to this, people wanted to throw politics out of their lives and breathe the air of private freedom, freedom of will. The liberal turmoil of the 1990s, when politics was seemingly everywhere, also did not seem to do Russians any good. By the 2000s, Russians essentially abandoned their civic duty of holding the authorities responsible by giving them *carte blanche* as long as they did not impinge on people's private lives. There was this 'Faustian' contract by which people sold their political freedom for the freedom of private enrichment. This helped to recruit the elite among thieves who were only interested in private profit and 'patriots' who were only interested in the geopolitical supremacy of their fatherland – both had nothing against arbitrary rule. Nor were they committed to political freedom and social justice.

Second, the ruler: Putin's secret service education taught him radical distrust. Instead of being an integrated person, he sports many *personas* at will so as to infiltrate and gain trust within various communities. Since he fears double loyalty behind everyone he meets, it is easier for him to deal with 'his people' stained by the blood they shed during their secret in the

secret police, and with the thieves, whose corruption gave Putin absolute control over them. Since he fears ulterior motives behind everyone he meets, it is easier for him to deal with the *siloviki* who are just as obsessed with imperial pride and the *blatari* whose greed demonstrated a lack of ulterior loyalty – for them, enrichment was visibly an end in itself. Putin selected the elite on the basis of such loyalty.

In short, as a result of Putin's secret serviceman's habit of paranoid mistrust and the political apathy of the people, it were the thieves-in-law and secret police who became the prime recruits for the elite. Yet, with the passage of time, these people less and less resembled an elite. By the point of the February 2022 Security Council meeting, Putin was able to laden all the upper echelon officials with shared responsibility by forcing them to dip their hands in blood, to voice support for the launch of a 'special military operation', because they visibly feared saying anything that wouldn't please him. The elite that couldn't contradict the dictator couldn't prevent the development of a regime based on the intelligence detached from reality, law reduced to 'might makes right', and narrative reduced to the mythology of geopolitical struggle between empires. At the same time, history as the process of civilising, outgrowing zero-sum-gaming, the very historiography that was the backbone of the Soviet regime, was deemed naive and replaced by the history of zero-sum fluctuations in the carve-up of 'influence spheres'.

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