

## **The Treacherous Path: An Insider's Account of Modern Russia (2018)**

Author: Vladimir Yakunin

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Winston Churchill once stated he was confident posterity would recall his opponents wrong, since 'I shall write that history.' History, as written by the victor, maybe the purpose of this autobiography.

With a foreword by Richard Sakwa, a Contributor to the Kremlin's Valdai Discussion Club, this 280-page book, the first of possibly many memoirs by members of Putin's inner circle, is a somewhat blatant justification of Putinism. It appears less that Yakunin has 'broken the Kremlin code of silence,' as one reviewer states on the cover, and more that this book constitutes both an exercise in self-justification and an attempt by a former member of Russia's kleptocratic elite to sanitize recent history. It may even represent a further initiative to win the hearts and minds of those Western audiences less familiar with the details of Russia's domestic political history since the fall of the USSR.

Born in 1947, Vladimir Yakunin trained as an engineer. In the 1980s, he joined the KGB and, as a member of its elite First Directorate, was posted to New York to work in the Soviet Diplomatic Mission to the United Nations. After the collapse of communism, he worked in the presidential administration before becoming Deputy Minister for Transport and Railways. In 2005, he was appointed President of Russian Railways, until dismissed by Vladimir Putin in 2015. In March 2014, he was placed on the US State Department's list of sanctioned Russians following the annexation of Crimea. Today, he is a member of the Supervisory Board of the international think-tank, the DOC (Dialogue of Civilisations) Research Institute, which he co-founded.

This autobiography could have offered new and fascinating insights into Kremlin decision making. However, it suffers from too many significant omissions. Yakunin skips over the late 1980s, the period when he worked for the KGB. His involvement in the infamous St. Petersburg *ozero* dacha co-operative is addressed superficially, as are his dealings with Russia's oligarchs, such as Potanin and Prokhorov. These and other historical incidents cry out both for more detail and greater transparency.

Yakunin champions the recurring mantras of exceptionalism, the unique importance of the Russian family and the necessity of influence in the 'near abroad' with little new insight. Like Putin, he has latterly embraced Russian Orthodox faith and strongly advocates its partnership with the modern state. Self-effacing and liberal Yakunin is not. He repeatedly highlights his own altruism. LGBTQ rights are portrayed as a plot to undermine the nation's values and, for this reason, he explicitly opposes the use of Western textbooks in Russian schools.

Railways are a core element of Russia's modern history and culture. If you are interested in the recent development of this form of transport in Russia, then this book may yet have something for you. Yakunin dwells extensively on the challenges of the construction undertaken in the southern Caucasus to improve links to Sochi for the 2012 Winter Olympics. Tunnel-boring is a recurrent topic, along with the development of the Sapsan high-speed train between Moscow and St Petersburg and the renovation of the Trans-Siberian line. Given these Stakhanovite achievements, Yakunin expresses in print his clear frustration that he received little credit for these major infrastructure projects. This he attributes to the fact that the aftermath of the Olympic games was overshadowed by Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Reinforcing his Putinesque credentials, Yakunin remains nostalgic for certain elements of Soviet-era living. He happily recalls his experiences as a *Komsomol* member, while retaining a vitriolic dislike of Mikhail Gorbachev. As a good former-KGB operative, he remains loyal. In commenting on the removal of Dzerzhinsky's statue from outside the *Lubianka*, he urges caution 'before we judge the actions of men and women from the past.'

Yakunin's KGB training and service in New York undoubtedly means his (American?) English is colloquial and flawless. Yet this book contains enough obscure anglicisms to suggest it was either ghost-written or penned in collaboration with a Brit. Either way, a hat-tip is due for his oblique reference to Viktor Chernomyrdin's famous aphorism, 'We wanted to do it better, but it turned out as always!' In due course, however, hopefully another of those closely linked to Putin's rule will write a better, more informative, account of this period.

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## Reviews: Books

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