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Book Review

Heidi Blake, *From Russia with Blood: The Kremlin's Ruthless Assassination Program and Vladimir Putin's Secret War on the West*. New York: Mulholland Books, 2019.

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In the years following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western leaders and political scientists lauded the turning point in history as a momentous triumph of democracy and economic liberalism over communism and the doomed command economic model. Western nations and the United Kingdom in particular, saw the period immediately after the Soviet collapse as an opportunity for political and economic cooperation not seen in more than a half century. Lavish public relations events including state dinners, meetings with the Queen of England and inclusion on the G-8 Economic Council were all extended to and accepted by Russia's president in the years following what many in the West considered a victory for global democracies everywhere. Yet in Heidi Blake's book, *From Russia with Blood: The Kremlin's Ruthless Assassination Program and Vladimir Putin's Secret War on the West*, what becomes vividly clear is that to Putin, this event marked the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" (p.12), and he laid the blame squarely on the West.

Blake's book, as its bold title suggest, minces no words in casting Vladimir Putin as the mastermind behind a grand state-sponsored program of targeted assassinations of Russian exiles, defectors, and political dissidents all over the world though with special emphasis on a large enclave of Russian exiles living with political asylum in the United Kingdom. Chief among these exiles, and their de facto leader, was the multibillionaire and former Russian oligarch and power broker Boris Berezovsky. It is Berezovsky's story that takes center stage throughout *From Russia with Blood*, as the book progresses chronologically starting in the 1990s when Berezovsky and his

fellow oligarchs plundered Russia during the tumultuous years of early democracy under the Russian President Boris Yeltsin's administration. Self-credited with turning a previously little-known Putin into a new ruler, Blake claims in her work that it was Berezovsky who set events in motion that elevated the career of FSB (successor agency to the KGB) officer Vladimir Putin to power. *From Russia with Blood* then goes on to relay that it was only after Putin's elevation to power that his penchant for authoritarianism was finally realized, and by then Berezovsky had found himself locked out of his base of power within the Kremlin. Forced to flee to the United Kingdom or be permanently silenced, it was there that Berezovsky established a foreign opposition campaign that sought to topple his former hand-picked associate from power and led him to quickly become public enemy number one of the new autocratic Russian state. Launching attack after blistering attack on Putin by utilizing the press, judicial court system, and every investigative tool available to him, Berezovsky and his inner circle ultimately led a doomed fight against Putin's government that persisted for more than a decade. It was during these years that Berezovsky's circle of friends, although on foreign soil and believed to have been safe, continually met their demise by a wide array of violently suspicious and finally blatantly targeted assassinations.

Charging Vladimir Putin with a sweeping list of state-sponsored murders, mass bombings, and humanitarian crimes in the war plagued region of Chechnya, Blake weaves an incredibly vivid and well written story of deadly political assassinations, espionage, and political intrigue that quite honestly rivals the best of any spy thriller novels imaginable. On the surface, the work appears to be very well researched as the dizzying array of characters in this story of defiance, murder, and betrayal are all very well expanded upon, and provided context for their decision making and actions either for or against the authoritarian activities of Moscow. However, it is also in this area that some of the most glaring issues with Blake's work arise.

Heidi Blake is an accomplished investigative journalist for BuzzFeed News and the chief investigations editor for its London offices. Her approach to this topic and work is tenacious and praise-worthy for its insights and readability but lacking in what seasoned historians would be accustomed to in terms of historiography and sourcing. *From Russia with Blood's* bibliography contains fewer than a dozen secondary sources, and while the book is obviously well researched, it is apparent that journalists really are wary to reveal all their sources. While this level of research is adequate for a story or news report, academia is another issue entirely. Furthermore, the overall thesis of *From Russia with Blood* is that while Vladimir Putin used state sponsored acts of murder to accomplish political ends and retribution on foreign soil, Western nations and the United Kingdom in particular, lacked the political will to oppose him. This claim that this weakness—attributed in the book to England's economic reliance on expanding oil and natural gas interests in Russia as well as the influx of funds from the recently exiled oligarchs, was sufficient enough to influence England to such a degree as to blatantly disregard over a dozen murders on its own soil—really stretches the limits of plausibility. In fact, Blake makes it a point to repeatedly insinuate in her book that due to either gross negligence or complicity, the UK government had to have deliberately looked the other way for so many deaths of Russian exiles to have taken place within their borders. This charge, as plausible as it may be, exists in the book akin to those leveled at Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin. In short, just because the book claims global conspiracy and agenda,

does not necessarily make it true. The book is written from the point of view of the dissidents, such as Berezovsky and his associates, and as such needs to be understood that it is a decidedly one-sided version of events.

Overall, the short comings of the book do not take away from the fact that it is a superbly written work that if viewed objectively, casts a very bright light on some of the inner workings between organized crime and the Russian state under Vladimir Putin. An incredibly gripping read with a multitude of extensive background anecdotes and visual inserts of photographs relating to the murders, this book should be viewed as an instant tool for both students and laymen of modern Russia to better understand the complicated inner workings of the Russian state. Furthermore, the context provided throughout *From Russia with Blood* for so many of the players in the post-Cold War statecraft of both Russia and the West, elevates it to the point that even with its sourcing issues, it is still a valuable source of information for anyone seeking further knowledge about Vladimir Putin's rise to power or his potential use of targeted political statecraft to accomplish his goals.