

CHAPTER 1

Homo Sovieticus

Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin edged forward through the cratered battlefield beside the Neva River, roughly thirty miles from Leningrad. His orders seemed suicidal. He was to reconnoiter the German positions and, if possible, capture a “tongue,” slang for a soldier to interrogate. It was November 17, 1941,¹ already bitterly cold, and the Soviet Union’s humiliated army was now desperately fighting to avoid its complete destruction at the hands of Nazi Germany. The last tanks in reserve in the city had crossed the Neva a week before, and Putin’s commanders now had orders to break through heavily reinforced positions defended by 54,000 German infantrymen.² There was no choice but to obey. He and another soldier approached a foxhole along a dug-in front, carved with trenches, pocked with shell craters, stained with blood. A German suddenly rose, surprising all three of them. For a frozen moment, nothing happened. The German reacted first, unpinned a grenade and tossed it. It landed near Putin, killing his comrade and riddling his own legs with shrapnel. The German soldier escaped, leaving Putin for dead. “Life is such a simple thing, really,” a man who retold the story decades later would say, with a characteristic fatalism.³

Putin, then thirty years old, lay wounded on a bridgehead on the east bank of the Neva. The Red Army’s commanders had poured troops across the river in hopes of breaking the encirclement of Leningrad that had begun two months earlier when the Germans captured Shlisselburg, an ancient fortress at the mouth of the Neva, but the effort failed. The Germans laid a siege that would last 872 days and kill a million civilians by bombardment, starvation, or disease. “The Führer has decided to wipe the city of Petersburg from the face of the earth,” a secret German order declared on September 29. Surrender would not be accepted. Air and artillery bombardment would be the instrument of the city’s

destruction, and hunger would be its accomplice, since “feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us.”⁴ Never before had a modern city endured a siege like it.

“Is this the end of your losses?” Joseph Stalin furiously cabled the city’s defenders the day after the siege began. “Perhaps you have already decided to give up Leningrad?” The telegram was signed by the entire Soviet leadership, including Vyacheslav Molotov, who in 1939 had signed the notorious nonaggression pact with his Nazi counterpart, Joachim von Ribbentrop, which was now betrayed.⁵ It was by no means the end of the losses. The fall of Shlisselburg coincided with ferocious air raids in Leningrad itself, including one that ignited the city’s main food warehouse. The Soviet forces defending the city were in disarray, as they were everywhere in the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion that began on June 22, 1941, had crushed Soviet defenses along a thousand-mile front, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Even Moscow seemed in danger of falling.

Stalin never considered surrendering Leningrad, and he dispatched the chief of the general staff, Georgy Zhukov, to shore up the city’s defenses, which he did with great brutality. On the night of September 19, on Zhukov’s orders, Soviet forces mounted the first assault 600 meters across the Neva to break the siege, but it was repulsed by overwhelming German firepower. In October, they tried again, hurling forth the 86th Division, which included Putin’s unit, the 330th Rifle Regiment. The bridgehead those troops managed to create on the eastern bank of the Neva became known, because of its size, as the Nevsky Pyatachok, from the word for a five-kopek coin or a small patch. At its greatest expanse the battlefield was barely a mile wide, less than half a mile deep. For the soldiers fated to fight there, it was a brutal, senseless death trap.

Putin was an uneducated laborer, one of four sons of Spiridon Putin, a chef who once worked in the city’s famed pre-revolutionary Astoria Hotel. Spiridon, though a supporter of the Bolsheviks, fled the imperial capital during the civil war and famine that followed the October Revolution in 1917. He settled in his ancestral village, Pominovo, in the rolling hills west of Moscow, and later moved to the city itself, where he cooked for Vladimir Lenin’s widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, at her official Soviet dacha in the Gorky district on the edge of Moscow.⁶ After her death in 1939, he worked in the retreat of Moscow’s Communist Party Committee. He was said to have cooked once for Grigory Rasputin at the Astoria and on occasion for Stalin when he visited Lenin’s widow,

beginning a family tradition of servitude to the political elite. Proximity to power did nothing to protect his sons from the Nazis; the entire nation was fighting for survival.

Vladimir Putin was already a veteran when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. He had served as a submariner in the 1930s before settling down not far from Leningrad, in the village of Petrodvoretz, where Peter the Great had built his palace on the Gulf of Finland. In the chaotic days that followed the invasion, he, like many citizens, had rushed to volunteer to defend the nation and was initially assigned to a special demolitions detachment of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD, the dreaded secret police agency that would later become the KGB. The NKVD created 2,222 of these detachments to harass the Nazis behind the front, which was then rapidly advancing.⁷ One of Putin's first missions in the war was a disaster. He and twenty-seven other partisan fighters parachuted behind the Germans advancing on Leningrad, near the town of Kingisepp. It was close to the border with Estonia, which the Soviet Union had occupied the year before, along with Latvia and Lithuania, as part of the notorious pre-war pact with Hitler. Putin's detachment managed to blow up one arms depot, as the story went, but quickly ran out of ammunition and rations. Local residents, Estonians, brought them food but also betrayed them to the Germans, whom many in the Baltic nations welcomed, at least at first, as liberators from Soviet occupation. German troops closed in on the unit, firing on them as they raced along a road back to the Soviet lines. Putin split off, chased by Germans with dogs, and hid in a marsh, submerging himself and breathing through a reed until the patrol moved on.⁸ How exactly he made it back is lost to the fog of history, but only he and three others of the detachment survived the raid. The NKVD interrogated him after his escape, but he managed to avoid suspicion of desertion or cowardice and was soon sent back to the front.⁹ It might have been courage alone that drove Putin, or it might have been fear. Stalin's Order No. 270, issued on August 16, had threatened soldiers who deserted with execution and their family members with arrest.

Inside Leningrad conditions deteriorated rapidly, despite efforts by the authorities to maintain a sense of normality. Schools opened, as always, on September 1, but three days later the first German shells landed inside the city.¹⁰ With the blockade completed and the city now under regular assault from above, the authorities intensified the rationing of food.

Rations would gradually decline, leading to desperation, despair, and finally death. As Vladimir Putin fought outside the city, his wife, Maria, and their infant son were trapped inside. Vladimir and Maria, both born in 1911, were children of Russia's turbulent twentieth century, buffeted by World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, and the civil war that followed. They met in Pominovo, where his father had moved after the revolution, and married in 1928, when they were only seventeen. They moved back to Leningrad as newlyweds, settling back in Petrodvorets with her relatives in 1932. After Putin's conscription in the navy, they had a boy named Oleg, who died in infancy. A year before the war started, they had a second son, Viktor.

Maria and Viktor only narrowly avoided occupation in Nazi-held territories. She had refused at first to leave Petrodvorets, but as the Germans closed in, her brother, Ivan Shelomov, forced her to evacuate. He served as a first captain in the Baltic Fleet's headquarters and thus had military authority and what privileges still existed in a city under siege.¹¹ Captain Shelomov retrieved them "under gunfire and bombs" and settled them into a city whose fate was precarious.¹² Conditions became dire as the winter arrived, the cold that year even more bitter than usual. Maria and Viktor moved into one of dozens of shelters the authorities opened to house refugees pouring in from the occupied outskirts. Her brother helped her with his own rations, but her health faded nevertheless. One day—exactly when is unknown—she passed out and passersby laid her body out with the frozen corpses that had begun to pile up on the street for collection, left for dead, as her husband had been on the front. She was discovered, somehow, in this open-air morgue, her moans attracting attention.¹³

Vladimir's survival seemed no less improbable. He lay wounded beside the Neva for several hours before other Soviet troops found him and carried him back toward the regiment's redoubt on the bank. He might have died, one of more than 300,000 soldiers who lost their lives on the Pyatachok, except that an old neighbor found him on a litter at a primitive field hospital. He slung Putin over his shoulder and carried him across the frozen river to a hospital on the other side.

As it turned out, Putin's injury almost certainly saved his life. His unit, the 330th Rifle Regiment, fought on the bridgehead throughout the winter of 1941–1942. The battle, in scale and carnage, foreshadowed the terrible siege of Stalingrad the next year, a "monstrous meatgrinder,"

it was called.¹⁴ The forces there endured relentless shelling by the Germans. The forested riverbank became a churned, lifeless landscape where nothing would grow for years. New recruits crossed the Neva to replace those killed or wounded at a staggering rate of hundreds a day until the spring of 1942, when the bridgehead collapsed and the Germans regained the ground on April 27. The 330th Rifle Regiment was entirely destroyed except for a major from its command staff, Aleksandr Sokolov, who managed to swim to safety, despite serious wounds.¹⁵ It was one of the deadliest single battles of the entire war, and for the Soviet military command, a folly that squandered tens of thousands of soldiers and probably prolonged the siege instead of shortening it.¹⁶

Putin spent months in a military hospital, recovering in a city that was dying around him. By the time the last road out of the city was cut, three million civilians and soldiers remained besieged. Maria, who refused to be evacuated when it was still possible, ultimately found her husband in the hospital. Against the rules, he shared his own hospital rations with her, hiding food from the nurses until a doctor noticed and halted Maria's daily visits for a time.¹⁷ The city's initial resilience succumbed to devastation, starvation, and worse. Essential services deteriorated along with the food supply. Corpses lay uncollected in mounds on the streets. In January and February 1942, more than 100,000 people died each month.¹⁸ The only connection to unoccupied territory was the makeshift "Road of Life," a series of precarious routes over the frozen waters of Lake Ladoga. They provided minimal relief to the city, and the siege ground on until January 1943, when the Soviet army broke through the encirclement to the east. It took another year to fully free the city from the Nazi grip and begin the relentless, ruthless Soviet march to Berlin.

Vladimir and Maria somehow survived, though his injuries caused him to limp in pain for the rest of his life. In April 1942, he was released from the hospital and sent to work at a weapons factory that turned out artillery shells and antitank mines.¹⁹ Their son, Viktor, did not survive. He died of diphtheria in June 1942 and was buried in a mass grave at Piskaryovskoye Cemetery along with 470,000 other civilians and soldiers. Neither Vladimir nor Maria knew where exactly and evidently made little effort to learn. Nor did they ever talk about it in detail later.²⁰ The war's toll was devastatingly personal. Maria's mother, Elizabeta Shelomova, died on the front lines west of Moscow in October 1941, though it was never clear whether it was a Soviet or a German shell that killed her; Maria's brother Ivan survived, but another brother, Pyotr, was

condemned by a military tribunal at the front in the earliest days of the war, evidently for some dereliction of duty, and his ultimate fate was never known, and certainly not mentioned. Two of Vladimir's brothers also died during the war: Mikhail in July 1942, also in circumstances lost to history; and Aleksei on the Voronezh front in February 1943.²¹

These were the stories of the Great Patriotic War—tales of heroism and suffering—that Vladimir and Maria's third son would grow up hearing and that would leave an indelible impression on him throughout his life. From "some snatches, some fragments" of conversations overheard at the kitchen table in a crowded communal flat in a still-devastated Leningrad, he created his family narrative, one reshaped by time and memory, one that might have been apocryphal in places and was certainly far from complete. The Putins were simple people, unlikely to know much of the darker aspects of the war: Stalin's paranoid purges in the Great Terror that had decimated the army before the war; the connivance with Hitler's plans to conquer Europe; the partitioning of Poland in 1939; the forceful annexation of the Baltic nations; the chaotic defense once the Nazis invaded; the official malfeasance that contributed to the starvation in Leningrad; the vengeful atrocities committed by Soviet troops as they marched to Berlin. Even then, after Stalin's death in 1953, it remained dangerous to speak poorly of the state in anything above a whisper. The victory—and the Putins' small part in it—was an inexhaustible fountain of pride. What else could it be? One did not think of the mistakes that were made, the young boy would say later; one thought only of winning.

This third son, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin,²² was born on October 7, 1952, in a city still scarred by the siege, still suffering from deprivation, still consumed by fear. Stalin's megalomania, even in victory, had descended into paranoia and retribution. In the late 1940s, the city's wartime elite, both civilian and military, succumbed to a purge known as the Leningrad Affair. Dozens of party officials and their relatives were arrested, jailed, exiled, or shot.²³ Loyal citizens of the state refrained from speaking, out of either fear or complicity in the crimes that were committed, even descendants of a man trusted enough to cook on occasion for Stalin. Few people whose lives intersected with Stalin's, even briefly, "came through unscathed," Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin would later recall, "but my grandfather was one of them."²⁴ Not that he talked about it much. "My grandfather kept pretty quiet about his past life. My par-

ents didn't talk much about the past, either. People generally didn't, back then." Vladimir's father was taciturn and severe, frightening even to people who knew him well.²⁵ The father's wartime experience—the limp he carried through his life, which always seemed worse when the weather turned cold—clearly made a great impression on his son. After the war, the elder Vladimir continued to work at the Yegorov Factory on Moskovsky Prospekt, which built the passenger carriages for the country's railways and subways. A member of the Communist Party, he became the factory's party representative, a blue-collar apparatchik ensuring rigor, loyalty, discipline, and, most of all, caution.

The job entitled him to a single room—180 square feet—in a decrepit communal apartment on the fifth floor of what had once been an elegant nineteenth-century apartment building at 12 Baskov Lane, not far from Leningrad's central avenue, Nevsky Prospekt, and the Griboyedov Canal. The Putins moved in in 1944 and after the war had to share the confined space with two other families. They would live there for more than two decades. The apartment had no hot water, no bathtub. A windowless hallway served as a communal kitchen, with a single gas burner opposite a sink. The toilet was in a closet jammed against a stairwell. The apartment was heated with a wood-burning stove.

Maria, like her husband, had limited education. She was ten days shy of forty-one when Vladimir was born. After so much suffering and loss, she treated her son like the miracle he seemed to be.²⁶ She toiled in various menial jobs, cleaning buildings, washing test tubes in a laboratory, and delivering bread, all jobs that left her more time to tend to him. An elderly couple shared one room in the apartment; an observant Jewish family, with an older daughter, Hava, shared the other. The younger Vladimir, the only child in the communal home, remembered the elderly couple fondly, and spent as much time with them as with his parents. They became surrogate grandparents, and he knew her as Baba Anya. She, like his mother, possessed deep religious faith. The Russian Orthodox Church, repressed by the Soviet regime, was allowed to function openly during the war to help rally the nation, though it would be severely repressed again when the guns fell silent. As Vladimir would later tell the story, on November 21, when he was seven weeks old, Baba Anya and Maria walked three blocks through the winter chill to the Transfiguration Cathedral, a yellow, eighteenth-century monument built in the neoclassical style of many of the city's churches, and there they secretly baptized the boy.²⁷

Whether she kept the baptism secret out of fear of her stern husband or fear of official censure is not clear, though her son later suggested it might not have been as secret as she hoped. Little was ever secret in the Soviet Union. She took the boy with her to services occasionally but kept the apartment, with its lack of privacy, free of icons or other outward signs of practice.²⁸ Nor did she evidently discuss her beliefs with him then, certainly not in depth. It was only forty years later that Maria gave him his baptismal cross and asked him to bless it at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem when he visited Israel for the first time. Faith nonetheless hovered in the background of the boy's life, along with his father's commitment to Communism's secular orthodoxy. He evinced little preference for either, though some who knew him would assert years later that his relationship with the Jewish neighbors instilled an unusual ecumenical tolerance and a disdain for the anti-Semitism that has long afflicted Russian culture.²⁹

The building on Baskov Lane was Vladimir Putin's youthful universe. The gilded landmarks of tsarist Russia—the Hermitage, the Admiralty, the Peter and Paul Cathedral—were nearby but little more than distant monuments in the cityscape. He was a scion of the proletariat, not the Soviet intelligentsia or the political elite; only later, in hindsight, would he become conscious of the deprivation of his childhood. The stairs to the fifth floor were pocked with holes, fetid, and dimly lit; they smelled of sweat and boiling cabbage. The building was infested with rats, which he and his friends would chase with sticks. It was what passed for a game—until the time he cornered one at the end of a hallway. “Suddenly it lashed around and threw itself at me,” he recalled. “I was surprised and frightened.”³⁰

He was always a slight boy. One of his earliest memories of venturing out of this cloistered childhood occurred on May Day in 1959, perhaps, or 1960. He found himself terrified of the bustle on “the big corner” at Mayakovskaya Street. A few years later, he and friends rode a commuter train to an unknown part of the city in search of adventure. It was cold and they had nothing to eat, and though they built a fire to warm themselves, they returned dejected, whereupon the elder Putin beat him with a belt as punishment.

The apartment building wrapped around an inner courtyard that linked with the neighboring building's courtyard to form an unkempt, treeless space, little better than the bottom of an airshaft. The courtyard attracted drunks and thugs, smoking, drinking, and otherwise whiling

away their lives. By his own accounts and those of his friends, life in the courtyard and later in school made him rough, a brawler quick to defend against slights and threats, but it is more likely, given his size, that he was bullied. His parents doted on him, and when he was young, they refused to let him leave the courtyard without permission. He grew up in the overly protective, if not outwardly loving, embrace of parents who had miraculously survived and would do everything to ensure that their son did too. "There were no kisses," Vera Gurevich, a schoolteacher who became close to the family, remembered. "There was none of that love-dovey stuff in their house."³¹

On September 1, 1960, Vladimir began attending School No. 193, located a short walk away on the same street where he lived. He was nearly eight, Maria having kept him out of kindergarten, perhaps out of an overabundance of caution. He lacked the social adeptness he might have developed had he grown up around more children. He showed up on the first day carrying not flowers for his teacher, as tradition dictated, but a potted plant.³² In school, he was an indifferent student, petulant and impulsive, probably a little bit spoiled. Vera Gurevich called him a whirligig because he would walk into class and spin in circles. He was highly disruptive in and out of class,³³ more inclined to hang out with boys she considered a bad influence, including two older brothers named Kovshov. He was caught in school carrying a knife, and was once rebuked for delinquency by a neighborhood party committee, which threatened to send him to an orphanage.³⁴ His behavior initially kept him out of the Pioneers, the Communist Party youth organization whose membership was a rite of passage; by the third grade, he was one of only a few among his forty-five classmates who had not joined. His father, as a party steward, could only have been dismayed at so conspicuous a failure, one that Vladimir later described as a rebellion against his father and the system around him. "I was a hooligan, not a Pioneer," he said.³⁵ Vera Gurevich, who met him in the fourth grade, eventually complained to his father that the boy was intelligent, but disorganized and uninterested.

"He's not working to his full potential," she told the senior Vladimir at the apartment on Baskov Lane, which she described as horrid, "so cold, just awful."

"Well, what can I do?" Vladimir Spiridonovich replied. "Kill him or what?"³⁶

Vladimir and Maria nevertheless promised Gurevich that they would

rein their son in. The father pressed him to take up boxing, though the slight boy quickly gave it up when, he said, a punch broke his nose. Instead, he turned to martial arts, apparently against the wishes of his parents, practicing sambo, a Soviet style that mixed judo and wrestling and was more suited to his diminutive stature and “pugnacious nature.”³⁷ One of his coaches became a decisive influence in his life. Anatoly Rakhlin worked at the Trud (or Labor) Club, not far from Baskov Lane, and in 1965 Putin, now in the fifth grade, joined it. Rakhlin had to reassure Vladimir’s parents that “we do not teach anything bad to the kids.”³⁸ The discipline and rigor of sambo, and later judo, intrigued the boy in a way nothing else had. The martial arts transformed his life, giving him the means of asserting himself against larger, tougher boys. “It was a tool to assert myself in the pack,” he would say.³⁹ It also brought him a new circle of friends, especially two brothers, Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, who would stick by him throughout his life. The martial arts gave him an orthodoxy he found neither in religion nor in politics. It was more than mere sport, he believed; it was a philosophy. “It was sports that dragged me off the streets,” he once recalled. “To be honest, the courtyard wasn’t a very good environment for a kid.”⁴⁰

This made perhaps too much of his transformation. His claims to have lived the life of the jungle sounded more like bravado. The courtyard’s squalor and abased occupants might have once intrigued him, but they also instilled a disdain for drinking and smoking, for sloth and disorder. Nevertheless, once he found his passion for the martial arts, he exhibited a steely determination to succeed. Since Trud required decent grades for membership, he made more effort in school, and by the sixth grade, his grades had improved. Vera Gurevich and his classmates resolved to get him into the Pioneers, belatedly appealing to the school’s representative to make an exception for his previous lapses. His induction ceremony was held at Ulyanovka, a rustic village formerly known as Sablino, where Lenin’s sister once lived.⁴¹ Within weeks, he became the leader of his school’s Pioneer branch, his first leadership position. By the eighth grade, he was among the first chosen to join the Komsomol, the Communist Party’s youth organization. It was a necessary stepping stone to what he soon discovered was his life’s calling.

In 1965, the twentieth anniversary of the victory over the Nazis arrived on a new wave of nostalgia and official celebration. One of the most popular novels of the decade was an espionage tale, *The Shield and the*

Sword. It first appeared as a serial in the literary magazine *Znamya*, or *Banner*, the organ of the Union of Writers. Its author, Vadim Kozhevnikov, served as a war correspondent for *Pravda*, and his experience gave the story a realistic skein, though it conformed dutifully to the narrative of Soviet propaganda. (Kozhevnikov, as head of the writers' union, was involved in the banning of a far more realistic account of the war, Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*.) The novel's hero, Major Aleksandr Belov, was a Soviet secret agent passing as a German in Nazi Germany just before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War. Using the alias Johann Weiss, he rises through the ranks of the Abwehr, the Nazi military intelligence organization, and later the Schutzstaffel, or SS. Weiss is courageous in battle, stoic and unyielding, even when tortured. He is disgusted by the Nazis he has to outwardly serve, disgusted by the Nazi he has to appear to become, but obliged to endure the experience in order to sabotage the German war effort. "He had never supposed that the most difficult and torturing part of his chosen mission would be in this splitting of his own conscious self," Kozhevnikov wrote. "To begin with he had even been attracted by this game of putting on somebody else's skin and creating his thoughts and being glad when these coincided with what other people expected of this created personality."⁴²

It was not Tolstoy, certainly. It was, to an impressionable teenage boy, much, much better. Three years after its publication, the book became a five-plus-hour film, with Kozhevnikov credited for the screenplay. It was the most popular movie in the Soviet Union in 1968, a black-and-white homage to the secret service—to what had by then become the KGB. Vladimir Putin, then almost sixteen, was enchanted. He and his friends watched the movie repeatedly. More than four decades later he could still remember the lyrics to the film's sentimental theme song, "Whence Does the Motherland Begin," redolent of birds and birches in the Russian heartland.⁴³ Vladimir promptly gave up his childhood dreams to become a sailor, as his father had, or maybe a pilot. He would become a spy, imagining himself as a future Major Belov cum Johann Weiss: handsome, fit, and empowered single-handedly to change history. "What amazed me most of all was how one man's efforts could achieve what whole armies could not," he recalled years later with the same romantic appreciation he had had in his youth. "One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people."⁴⁴

He knew little about the KGB then or its inner workings. The father of one of his classmates had served in intelligence, but had already retired.

The film's release was part of the modernizing efforts of the KGB's new director, Yuri Andropov, who took over in 1967. Andropov intended to remake the agency's image, casting it not as a dreaded secret police force responsible for repression and terror, but rather as the defender of the great Soviet nation. In Vladimir's case at least, the propaganda accomplished its aims; sports may have dragged him off the streets, but the movie inspired his career. The day after he saw the first episode he told a classmate he would be a spy,⁴⁵ and soon after that, as he recounted the tale, he did an audacious and naïve thing. He walked unannounced into the office of the local KGB headquarters on Liteiny Prospekt, not far from his apartment, and volunteered his service.

The KGB's headquarters in Leningrad was known as the Big House, not merely because of its size. A sardonic joke circulated about its enormity, one told in variations in many Soviet cities: From St. Isaac's Cathedral, you can see all of Leningrad. From the Big House, you can see all the way to the Solovetsky Islands—the archipelago in the White Sea hundreds of miles to the north that included a notorious precursor of the Gulag's labor camps. Vladimir had to try three times before he found the right entrance at the Big House and an officer who would meet him. The officer indulged the boy, but told him flatly that the KGB did not accept volunteers. Instead, it sought out those considered worthy, those already in the army or at the university. Vladimir pressed. He wanted to know what course of study would best serve this new ambition of his. The officer, seemingly eager to get rid of him, suggested law school, and that decided the matter. He would go to university and study law, against the wishes of his parents, who thought his grades and temperament better suited him for a technical school, like the Academy of Civil Aviation, which he initially aspired to attend. Vladimir could be impulsive and unbending, though. His parents and his coaches were puzzled by his new purpose, as he had not told them of his journey to the Big House and thus the real motive for attending law school. One coach at Trud berated him when he learned his choice, presuming it would make him a prosecutor or police officer. A furious Vladimir exhorted, "I'm not going to be a cop!"⁴⁶

His decision to join the KGB came amid the international tumult of 1968. Only days before he began secondary school in Leningrad, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the reforms of the Prague Spring. Vladimir seemed untroubled by the crackdown on dissent,

either at home or abroad. Like many, he flirted with the forbidden culture of the West, listening to the Beatles on recordings passed between friends like contraband. "The music was like a breath of fresh air," he would say later, "like a window on the outside world."⁴⁷ Vladimir played the accordion for a while, and later, on a guitar his father gave him, he learned the folk songs of Vladimir Vysotsky and other bards of the era. Although the late 1960s in the Soviet Union were viewed as an era of repression and then stagnation, his teenage years were far more carefree than anything his parents' generation had experienced. The Putins were not part of the cosseted elite, but standards of living had risen after the war, and the family, too, became more comfortable. Vladimir and Maria even had a large black telephone at the apartment, which was still a rarity, and Vladimir and his friends would make calls from it.⁴⁸ By then, they were affluent enough to buy a three-room dacha in Tosno, a small village outside Leningrad, where he spent many of his teenage years with a core group of friends, outside the claustrophobic environment of the communal apartment. On the wall above a table in the dacha hung a printed portrait that one friend, Viktor Borisenko, did not recognize. When he asked about it, Vladimir explained that it was Jan Karlovich Berzin, a founder of the Bolsheviks' military intelligence branch. He was arrested in the Great Terror in 1937 and executed a year later, but he had been rehabilitated posthumously.⁴⁹

Vladimir attended secondary school at School No. 281, a selective, specialized scientific academy intended to prepare students for university. He was not an overly popular student, but rather a brash one, obsessed with sports and almost militantly studious.⁵⁰ Although studying sciences might have guaranteed him a spot at a prestigious technical university, he pursued the humanities, literature, and history. He also continued lessons in German, which he began studying in the fourth grade with the encouragement of Vera Gurevich. This time his teacher was Mina Yuditskaya, who would describe him as a modest, though serious student. She would have a deep influence on him, and he would remember her decades later with a sentimental fondness.⁵¹ School No. 281 tolerated, within limits, intellectual openness and debate. A popular teacher, Mikhail Demenkov, distributed samizdat, the banned literature circulated in carbon copies. A history teacher, Tamara Stelmakhova, held discussions on whether Nikita Khrushchev might ultimately have fulfilled his promise to build a truly communist state within twenty years.⁵²

Although he joined the Komsomol in 1967, he rarely participated

in its activities, devoting himself instead to sports and schoolwork to the exclusion of other teenage preoccupations. Vera Brileva, a girl two years younger, recalled him hunched over his desk, which stood in the communal living room next to a sofa and a buffet. She met him at the dacha in Tosno in 1969 and was smitten. She recalled a brief kiss during a game of “spin the bottle”—“I felt so hot all of a sudden”—but she soon found he had little time for girls, something even his teacher noticed.⁵³ Their youthful courtship ended one day when she interrupted his studies at the apartment by asking whether he remembered something or another. She had not finished the sentence when he cut her off. “I only remember things I need to remember,” he snapped at her.⁵⁴ Interviewed many years later, she remembered his “small, strong hands” and sounded wistful about the rebuff.

Such assiduousness paid off. In his last two years of secondary school—Soviet education consisted of only ten years—he earned good, though not particularly impressive, grades. He did well in history and German, less so in math and science. In his last year, he devoted himself less to classwork than to cramming for the entrance exams that could earn him a coveted spot at Leningrad State University, one of the most prestigious in the Soviet Union. Vera Gurevich expressed doubts that he could get in and never knew the real reason he wanted to. “I’ll solve that problem myself,” he told her.⁵⁵ The chances of getting into Leningrad State were so low, with roughly one in forty applicants being accepted, that there has been speculation that he was accepted either because of his working-class roots or even, improbably, because of the silent hand of the KGB stealthily guiding his career without even his knowledge.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, he scored well enough on his exams and was accepted into the university’s law department in the fall of 1970, just as the KGB officer had suggested two years before.

As a college student, he continued to study rigorously and devote much of his time to judo competitions, forswearing smoking and drinking in order to stay fit. He refused offers to join the Leningrad University judo team, remaining loyal to his coaches at Trud. He became a master in the sport in 1973 and competed in several city and regional championships. He still lived in the communal apartment, but he traveled more widely inside the Soviet Union. He attended judo competitions as far away as Moldova, cut timber one summer in Komi in the north, and spent two weeks in a student construction camp in Abkhazia, then a region of the Soviet republic of Georgia. He earned 800 rubles, or nearly

\$600 at the time, buying a coat that he would wear for the next fifteen years and squandering the rest in Gagra, a resort on the lushly wooded coast of the Black Sea.⁵⁷ He and his friends managed to sneak onto a ferry headed to Odessa, with little money and only tinned meat to eat. For two nights he slept in a lifeboat, envying the passengers with cabins but also captivated by the night sky. “The stars seemed to just hang there,” he recalled. “Sailors might be used to that, but for me it was a wondrous discovery.”⁵⁸

In 1972, his mother won a car after buying a thirty-kopek lottery ticket. She could have sold the car for 3,500 rubles, but indulgently gave it to her son. It only was a small, boxy Zaporozhets, but relatively few adults, let alone college students, had their own cars in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. For Vladimir, it was a status symbol, and a new diversion. He drove everywhere, going to his matches and giving friends lifts just for the sake of driving. He was also a wild and reckless driver. Once he hit a man who lurched into the road, though he claimed the man was trying to commit suicide. In some accounts, he chased the man as he stumbled away, but Vladimir denied it. “I’m not a beast,” he insisted.⁵⁹

He spent four years at the university before he was approached by a mysterious man, who, he later learned, served in the KGB division that oversaw universities. By then, he had all but given up on his teenage ambitions. He interned one summer with the criminal division of the local Transportation Ministry, taking part in the investigation of an airplane crash, and seemed destined to become an officer with the local prosecutor, as his coach had warned him would happen. The law appealed to Vladimir as martial arts did. It imposed rules and order, which he came to respect more than any ideology. He claimed he never worked for—or even heard from—the KGB as a student, though collaboration with the secret services was common among university students. Thus when the recruitment he had long coveted finally came in 1974, during his fourth year, it came, he would say, as a surprise. The man never really introduced himself. “I need to talk to you about your career assignment,” he told Vladimir on the telephone, refusing to speak in detail. Vladimir sensed the significance of the encounter though and agreed to meet later in the university’s faculty lounge. After arriving on time, he waited twenty minutes, angrily assuming he might be the victim of a prank. The man showed up and, breathlessly, apologized, something that impressed the young man deeply.⁶⁰

Vladimir underwent a thorough background check. A last step in-

volved an interview with his father, and in January 1975, a middle-aged officer named Dmitri Gantserov visited Vladimir Spiridonovich. The senior Putin was not very tall, Gantserov thought, a simple, honest, hardworking man who was proud that his son had gone to university and was now being considered for the security services. He understood the responsibility and difficulty of the tasks ahead of his son. He then spoke earnestly, almost pleadingly, to this stranger. “Volodya is everything for us,” he told him, using the diminutive form of his son’s name. “And all our hopes are tied only to him. After all, you know, two sons of ours died. After the war we decided to have a child. Now we live only Volodya’s life. We already lived ours.”⁶¹

Although his Volodya must have been aware of what the KGB did, the young man was untroubled by its history, by its role policing the enemies of the state, whether at home or abroad. On the contrary, he considered it the duty of a proper Soviet citizen to cooperate with the KGB—not for money, but for the security of the state. “The cooperation of normal citizens was an important tool for the state’s viable activity,” he said.⁶² There might have been excesses, he understood, but the cult of personality around Stalin had been dismantled shortly after his birth, the victims of his terror gradually released from the Gulag. He did not give it much thought otherwise. As far as he was concerned, the crimes of the past that killed or ruined millions were old history, and he was not unusual in that. For many Russians, even those who suffered under his tyranny, Stalin remained the revered father of the nation who led the country to victory over the Nazis; the darker recesses of his rule were suppressed, either by fear, complicity, or guilt, leaving a conflicted legacy that would dominate Soviet society for decades. As he later recalled, he himself was “an utterly successful product of the patriotic education of a Soviet man.”⁶³