

Encountering a Sophisticated Putin

Pretty much all that Americans and much of the West get to hear about Russian President Putin is heavy-handed propaganda often read over images of him riding shirtless on a horse. He's either a bully or a buffoon. But editors of a popular German newspaper encountered a much more sophisticated figure, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

I was hesitant to write about Vladimir Putin's recent interview in Germany's mass-circulation *Bild* newspaper because I have published many analytical essays of Putin's speeches and public appearances over the past couple of years and do not wish to provide further justification for those who would view me as a composer for one string violin, an inveterate apologist for the Russian president.

Moreover, when a fellow member of the anti-war movement, Alexander Mercouris, published an appreciation of the interview in *Russia Insider* under the heading "Congrats Germans! This Is How You Do a Putin Interview," it seemed churlish to go against his take on the subject.

However, a couple of additional articles on the *Bild* interview subsequently published in *Russia Insider* have challenged Mercouris's kindly view of the German journalists as being "well-informed and intelligent."

"Putin Schools Top German Journalist Who Smeared Him" makes it clear that *Bild's* chief political editor Nikolaus Blome, formerly with *Der Spiegel*, would never have consciously done Putin a favor. And the latest *RI* article, a translation from *Sputnik Deutschland* entitled "How Putin Turned the Tables on German Magazine 'Bild'" delivers what I had from the beginning considered to be the reality of this interview: that Putin's impressive showing came in spite of and not because of the journalists' predisposition to him and Russia generally.

The Russia expert Alexander Rahr explains here the logic of Putin agreeing to enter the lion's den for the sake of reaching the tabloid's multi-million readership who, by their demographics, are not easily accessible via the internet and electronic media.

To this I would add something that Rahr seems to have overlooked: the German press is incestuous and newspapers regularly give space to articles coming from their "competitors." Thus, the saucier chunks of the Putin interview also appeared on the front page of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and other leading newspapers read by the German elites.

In particular, none could ignore the tantalizing message from Putin that Russia was ready to give asylum to Bashar Assad, if necessary, and that it would be less disruptive of relations with the U.S. and other powers than the asylum it had granted to Edward Snowden.

By the same token, excerpts from the televised segments of interview shown on Russian state television also appeared on *Euronews* in Germany and across the Continent, so that the audience that Putin reached with his calm and well-considered statements on the thinking guiding Russian foreign policy was still greater.

Now that I have been drawn into the discussion of the *Bild* interview, I propose to reconsider it using a research tool that no one so far seems to have used: textual analysis. I have compared the transcript published in the German daily with the transcript published by the Russians on kremlin.ru. There were cuts in the German publication as one might well expect given that it is a tabloid with racy photos and a readership having limited patience for serious material.

Insofar as I could tell, the cuts were fairly administered and did not affect the quality of Putin's responses to questions. That, all by itself, is quite extraordinary in our age of dirty tricks. I contrast this upright behavior of the *Bild* editors with *Foreign Affairs* magazine's gutting an article offered in spring 2007 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in response to the article by Yulia Tymoshenko "Containing Russia," cuts explained at the time with reference to limited space in the journal.

What one might not have expected from *Bild* was the publishers' addition to the transcript of explanatory remarks (not carried in kremlin.ru) which reveal something important about the personal dynamics between interviewee and interviewers, and in passing illustrate why Vladimir Putin is where he is, at the apex of international politics.

Namely, the editors note repeatedly where Putin slipped into German. This made the strongest impression on them when, towards the end of the interview, the interpreter could not keep up and was given some moments to rest. In that pause, we are told: "Putin begins to spontaneously recite in German the beginning of Heinrich Heine's 'Lorelei,' written in 1824, a German classic. Then Putin abruptly and impassively continues in Russian."

Coincidentally, in an article entitled "This is What Impressed Bild During Its Interview With Putin" published by Sputnik International we find *Bild's* chief political editor Blome acknowledging: "Although I was aware of that, I was still surprised by how well [Putin] speaks German and understands the subtleties of the language." Here, too, Blome mentioned the recitation from "Lorelei."

As Alexander Mercouris observed, Vladimir Putin came to the interview with fresh archival material relating to the meetings that senior SPD politician, and author of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* policy Egon Bahr had in Moscow in 1990, when the two countries were still feeling their way towards a post-Cold War security architecture for Europe.

He also came to the meeting fully briefed on a wide range of other important issues including details of the Minsk II accords and the obligations of all parties. From the transcript, it is clear that in question after question Putin was better prepared than the journalists and dealt calmly and authoritatively with each in succession.

But cold intellectual superiority would not have had the effect on his interlocutors that his going the extra mile and reaching out to them in German did, all the more so in an area of high culture that revealed his respect. This was in counterpoint to his critical words at the start of the interview about the unconstructive role played by *Bild* and the German media generally in the conduct of bilateral relations. With Heine, he touched them in a human way and won them over, despite themselves.

It is precisely this combination of intellectual rigor and ability to adapt his message to the mentality of his interlocutors that sets Putin apart as a consummate politician.

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