

The twelve-year-old boy digs through the rubble.

It is dusk, October 7, 1964, thirty years before the assassination of Vladimir Kholodov.

Young Vlad Putin sifts through the remnants of a bombed munitions factory in central Leningrad. The city, destroyed two decades earlier by the Nazis, remains in ruins. There is little electricity, running water, or food. Putin's primary school, Education Facility Number 193, is a Communist indoctrination camp, focusing on the exploits of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin.

The boy idolizes them all.

Now, Vlad forages for items to sell at the Vasileostrovsky Market: copper fittings, brass, steel, and, if he is lucky, gold jewelry or porcelain plates. Though the sale of private goods is illegal in Communist Russia, Leningrad's black market is thriving. For many poor households, it is a significant source of income.

After an hour, the boy is finished. He walks one mile to his family's small apartment at 12 Baskov Lane. Tonight, his mother, Maria, is baking a rarity—buttercream cake.

It is Vlad's birthday.

He is the family's only surviving child. His older brother Albert died in infancy; the other sibling, Viktor, perished during the Nazi siege of Leningrad in 1944 at the age of two.

Emotionally, the family has not recovered.

In line with Marxist policies, there is no private property in Leningrad. The Putin family is directed to live in this dingy apartment by the Communist Party. The weathered brick building has a large communal kitchen and bathroom. The Putins' dwelling is just one room, measuring two hundred square feet. The space is heated by a small wood-burning furnace.

Tonight, his mother is using the primitive stove as a makeshift oven. The sweet scents of cinnamon, butter, and raisins fill the tiny room. To celebrate the occasion, she has spent weeks bartering for luxury ingredients with other residents.

Caked in dirt, Vlad enters the apartment.

The boy's impoverished neighbors call him "Okhotnik na kryś"—the Rat Hunter. Because of his propensity for violence, residents reward young Vlad with candy and pocket change for exterminating vermin. He relishes the kill.*

Though it is early fall, evening temperatures plummet below freezing. Vlad and his mother savor the sweet birthday dessert in near darkness. The only source of light is a small candle and the furnace fire.

Putin's father, Spiridonovich, is not here for his son's celebration. The family's patriarch works the night shift at a nearby furniture factory. Like many other Soviet veterans of World War II, Spirodon is a violent man, prone to fits of rage. He often beats young Vladimir for what he calls a "lack of discipline." Putin endures the attacks in silence.†

Soon, it is time for bed.

* Vladimir Putin's childhood is documented in Russian historian Vazha Tavberidze's work "From Chasing Rats to Blood Baths: How Putin's Childhood Shaped His Leadership."

† Vladimir Putin's eighty-seven-year-old mother dies in 1998. His father passes one year later at the age of eighty-eight. Both publicly praised their son's leadership throughout their lives.



Sleep does not come easy.

Vlad lies down on a heap of rags, dirty clothing, and handmade woolen blankets. For warmth, he wears his outdoor winter coat and fur-lined hat.

The apartment has just one mattress. It is used by Spiridonovich Putin during the day after he returns from work. Silence is imposed in the small flat, so Vlad spends most of his time outside, even in freezing temperatures.

Through thin walls, hungry Russians can be heard fighting, laughing, and drinking to excess. Outside, men huddle around garbage cans filled with burning branches, smoking cigarettes. It is a hard life for all.

By his forty-seventh birthday, the boy sleeping on the wood floor will control an army of one million and the planet's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons: forty thousand warheads—enough to destroy the earth a hundred times over.



Violence is now a way of life for young Vladimir.

It is June 1, 1967. The now fifteen-year-old and his gang of teenage thugs control the streets surrounding his dilapidated apartment building. They protect the complex from thieves, rapists, drug dealers, and other so-called enemies.

Today, a rival crew has accidentally wandered into the neighborhood.

That is a mistake.

Under Putin's orders, his group corners the interlopers in a filthy courtyard. Garbage, vodka bottles, and cigarette butts litter the ground. Wild dogs roam free. At each end of the complex are rusting soccer goal posts, the nets stolen and converted to fishing lines by hungry residents.

Vlad Putin orders children as young as six to bring him weapons. They do. Chunks of cement appear. Soon, they are hurled at the "in-

vaders.” Rocks smash into eyes and noses; blood splatters onto the pavement.

Six teens are gravely injured and carried away by their comrades.

Laughing, Putin’s crew celebrates the victory with cigarettes and beer.

