

## Book Review: Best books about Russia of the past 25 years

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A great many books about Russia are published each year. Most are entertaining and informative in some respect. Far too many simply offer the perspective, and the bias, of the author rather than presenting a balanced view of the subject, be it historic or current. I get asked quite often to recommend some books which somebody unfamiliar with but curious about Russia should read to get an understanding of where the country is today in terms of economy and politics... and how it got there.

I am excluding all the works of Russia's literary giants that one should read to get an understanding of what makes people tick and of the fabled "Russia soul". I also avoid all the books covering the Tzarist and Soviet eras, but instead cover the period since 1991. Instead, I am focused on books that cover the economic and political developments of the past 25 years. Detailed here are the top six – in my opinion – on that list.

The first book on the list is David Remnick's "**Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire**" (1993). Even though I avoid books about the Soviet-era, it is important to understand how and why it ended. The author lived in the country during the transition and offers first-hand impartial observation. Not only was this one of the defining global events of the past 100 years, but many of the players involved in the process are still very influential today. It is important to understand their background and ideology.

While Remnick's book covers the political transition, the second book on my list covers the economic changes and the still highly controversial shock-therapy strategy. The recommended book covering this subject has only just been published. It is "**Gaidar's Revolution: The inside account of the economic transformation of Russia**"(2015). It is not so much a book as a series of transcripts of interviews carried by Petr Aven and Alfred Kokh with ten people who were at the core of government in the early 1990s. Each of the interviewees explains how decisions were arrived at why the actions taken were necessary, ie. albeit more often the lesser of two evils. The interviews also cover the privatization process of the 1990s and why it was deemed the correct path to follow. There are plenty of books covering the intrigues of the process, ie. who got what, for how much and how they did it etc., which make for interesting beach reading. But "Gaidar's Revolution" covers the subject more from an ideological perspective and helps explain why the privatization process clearly grates on the current administration and why it is still far from a *fait accompli*.

The third book on the list is "**Strongman: The struggle for Russia**" (2012) written by Angus Roxburgh. As the title suggests this book is focused on Vladimir Putin; his background, how he came to power, what drives him, his view of the world and how he views Russia in a global context. There are actually quite a few good books in this category that have been written by journalists living in Russia through at least some of the Putin period, eg. Andrew Jack's "Inside Putin's Russia" (2005) and Anna Politkovskaya's "Putin's Russia" (2004), but the advantage that Roxburgh's book has over the others is it covers a much longer period and also the author worked for a time on the "inside" as part of the Kremlin's PR team (2006-09) and later scripted the BBC series "Putin, Russia and the West" (2012).

The best book to explain how modern Russia has been shaped and, especially, how it is controlled today is **“The New Nobility: The restoration of Russia’s security state”** (2010). Authored by Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, this book is informative and depressing in equal measure. Essentially it explains how the security services, having been marginalized during the Yeltsin presidency, have now returned to be the core of the power structure in the country. The title is derived from the author’s description of Vladimir Putin as a latter-day Tzar and, therefore, the security forces are his noblemen who owe their loyalty solely to their Tzar.

Moving on from the control aspect of government, the book which best, by far, explains how and why decisions are made at the top of government is Alena Ledeneva’s **“Can Russia Modernise?: Sistema, power networks and Informal Governance”** (2013). It has to be said that this is hardly beach reading – it has been written in a very academic style. This work explains how all the complex parts of government work, the relationships between all the major players and what sustains them. She focuses on four categories of informal networks which both sustain Putin’s power and the current system of government: the inner circle, useful friends, core contacts, and the more informal ties and connections. Reading this book will help you better understand why events happen the way they do and why some actions are taken, or not taken.

The sixth book on the recommended list has just been published and, in my opinion, best explains the political backdrop in Russia today. Vladimir Gel’Man’s **“Authoritarian Russia: Analysing post-soviet regime changes”**(2015). The author looks at the actions taken by Mikhail Gorbachev, which led to the Yeltsin regime and, in turn, the actions taken by Yeltsin that inevitably led to the Putin regime. He then identifies actions and changes made by Putin aimed at extending his position of power at least through another term. He looks at how the trappings of democratic institutions (such as elections and a legislature) have been used, especially by Yeltsin, to create the system of power the country has today. The book is also one of the very few which leaves emotion and bias out of the analysis, and looks pragmatically at what may happen next and what factors, over what period, may lead to changes.

As stated, these are the top half-dozen books I believe best explain the political and economic transition of the past 25 years and, therefore, what are the most important factors to pay attention to today. There are many other books which flesh out some specific aspect of the transition or explain some topic in greater detail and which are very interesting to read. The list includes Yeltsin’s **“Midnight Diaries”** (2001 – essentially his autobiography in which he explains why he took certain actions and also what led to his resignation on New Year’s Eve 1999 and the ushering in of the Putin regime. Martin Sixsmith’s **“Putin’s Oil: The Yukos affair”**(2010) is the best narrative about one of the most notorious events in modern Russia and which is very far from over. David Hoffman’s **“The Oligarchs: Wealth and power in the new Russia”** (2002) reads like a movie script only it is very real. Who are the oligarchs and how they became so wealthy, albeit the power side of the equation started to evaporate with the arrival of Putin. The book was updated in 2013 and remains a very entertaining read. **“Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who owns Russia”** (2014) by Karen Dawisha (one IntelliNews reviewed [here](#)) covers the broader topic of how wealth in Russia has been stolen or redistributed over the past 20 years, by whom and how. It also fills in the backdrop to modern Russia.