

Putin Flies!

by strannikov

Rumors stranger than usual were circulating in Moskva. Naturally, they could not be confirmed, but they were making the rounds so thickly that they began spilling out of the capital.

“Putin has become a superman!”

“He has?”

“Da! The brother-in-law of a cousin of mine works in the Kremlin, takes care of the plumbing—”

“Ehhh, wish we had plumbing . . .”

“I don't know who he heard it from, naturally, he won't say, but the word making the rounds is that Putin has become a superman, with superhuman powers. They're even saying he can fly!”

“On his own, you mean, without a plane?”

“Da, exactly! He doesn't even have to hop into the sky the way the American Superman does in the movies, he simply wills himself airborne, and right then, he's flying!”

“Has anyone seen him flying?”

“Well, of course not! Something like this, you know, state security and all, he has to be careful.”

“That would be the case if he could fly, da . . .”

It is not the case that Russians are so credulous that they are immune to skepticism and critical-rational effort, but within Russia itself, these rumors and their numerous variants began to make a lot of sense. Soon, it was acknowledged across the country (though never by official state media) that Putin had become so much a superman that he could handle lethal poisons and even ingest them and feel no ill effects whatsoever. Opposition politicians were among the first to acknowledge this and were vehement in their expressions of sincere belief that Putin was in no danger of succumbing to poisoning.

Soon, Putin's superhuman status was being acknowledged by former political prisoners, who conceded that Putin was incapable of being incarcerated somewhere in the Siberian guts of the gulag. (“It

wouldn't do any good to put him there anyway," the saying went, "he's so cold-blooded, he'd probably thrive there!")

Putin's practical omniscience, while it had long never seriously been doubted, inevitably had to be seen as yet a further expression of the superhuman powers he had somehow acquired. Apparently, he could read the minds of foreign leaders and ambassadors so well that meetings with them were superfluous, since, already knowing what they thought (and they already knowing how he was going to behave), face-to-face meetings could no longer be expected legitimately to be worth the scheduling and convening.

Just as natural as all of this had become and had begun to seem, da da da, the cynical doubters and native Russian skeptics were out there in very very small numbers, perhaps less than four.

Of this perhaps less than four, only one had had the unmitigated gall to speak publicly, but he enjoyed the distinct advantage of living in a deep forest where Putin's omniscience could not always reliably penetrate.

"Superman, pffft!" Mitya snarled. "Gossip and prattle! Tales told in and out of school! Outright lies, much more like it."

The only person in Mitya's vicinity to hear this defamatory and candid assessment, Yushka, whispered in reply. "Don't you think you're being a little bit rash?"

Mitya roared back. "What evidence? Where's any evidence? Who has seen Putin flying over Moskva? If he's a self-manufactured superman, he should be able to fly to Peterburg and back in a single day, hell, in a single hour! Who's seen Putin flying back and forth to Peterburg, if he has superhuman powers?"

Yushka had to concede he was stumped, since no one he'd heard the initial rumors from locally had actually provided any testimonial evidence of Putin's superhuman powers. "But no one could just make that kind of stuff up!" Yushka argued. "There has to be something to it!"

"If there's anything to it at all," Mitya concluded, "there has to be proof. There has to be evidence. It would be hugely embarrassing if these claims were being made about Putin without their being true.

If anyone in the world would have an interest in providing evidence of the truth of such claims, it would have to be Putin himself.”

This expression of Russian logic proved as sturdy as the vast forest that Mitya and Yushka resided in. Within a month of its verbal expression, the rigor of Mitya's logic began to reach the edges of the vast forest, and all the former talk of Putin's attaining superhuman status now met with silence wherever it encountered the logic of Mitya's argument.

In another month the silence began to eclipse all the former talk of Putin's attaining superhuman powers. Brothers-in-law of cousins working to keep the Kremlin plumbing operational were a bit distressed by the silence their claims were now met with: it seemed somehow that the social status of persisting with such claims now was distinctly lower, now that persistent demands from innate Russian logic began to insist of evidentiary verification of the earlier claims. (Some people even began to laugh at the claims themselves as if somehow, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the claims had been preposterous all along. Those who persisted with making the initial claims of Putin's having attained superhuman powers were soon being laughed to scorn whenever they had the temerity to broach the subject, in consequence of which their social status seemed all so much lower and all so much smaller.)

What to do?

The initial claims, people high up in government circles seemed still willing to concede in private, had attained a kind of foreign policy success. —but now that this rigorous Russian logic had emerged from God knows where (its Russian provenance was never seriously disputed by anyone), minds began to turn as to how to procure the necessary evidence for the initial claims and to figure out what kind of evidence might satisfactorily answer this stubborn expression of stern Russian logic. (By this we can understand that at the highest levels of the Russian government, the initial claims that Putin had attained superhuman powers was still believed fervently, though no one was saying so except in private, if at all.)

What to do?

Well, what to do?

Two months later, on a short cruise aboard a Russian fishing craft going out from and returning to Sochi one day, two Russian military officers of reasonably high rank—both of them deeply devoted to belief in the claims of Putin's superhuman powers, yet rankled somehow uncomfortably by the stern challenge posed by the demands of faultless, native Russian logic—came up with an idea that they thought might help resolve this impasse. They took the same cruise again on the same boat the next day to spend another day fishing on the Black Sea to argue about whether their conjecture was as sound as it had seemed the day before: they managed to convince themselves that they, too, were as deft at applying the stern rigor of native Russian logic as the next man, and so they persuaded themselves and each other that they had a solution.

Within a week, by slightly separate routes and according to different timetables, they each had returned to Moskva.

Upon his return, the slightly senior of the two military officers got in touch (more or less privately) with a cousin of one of his brothers-in-law who worked somewhere within the state security apparatus, and he, too—utterly convinced of the accuracy and the legitimacy of the stories of Putin's having attained superhuman powers—thought that the two military men's plan seemed sound, since its entire motive was to resolve the dispute that had dissolved much unofficial Russian public discourse into an uneasy blend of raucous laughter and embarrassed silence.

The trio's plan, in fact, would help save Putin from acute public embarrassment and restore public confidence in the belief they themselves had come to accept of Putin's acquisition of superhuman powers.

As it happened, yet another cousin of one of the trio's brothers-in-law was chosen as the test pilot for the prototype of a new attack helicopter that had been under design review and manufacture for a few years. Putin, his superhuman powers notwithstanding, wanted to be photographed in a flight suit with the pilot and the chosen

crew on one of its early test flights, and a date in mid-March was chosen.

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As events transpired, word soon got out that Putin had been a victim of a rude accident or exercise of defenestration, since he was captured on camera flying out of his seat in the helicopter, not equipped with a working parachute (while the video quality is grainy and blurred, some analysts have commented that while Putin's seatbelt was buckled into his flight suit, it was not dependably buckled into his seat in the helicopter). Had Putin in fact possessed superhuman powers, naturally, he would have had utterly no need for a parachute, since according to the earlier reports he was able to fly unassisted.

The two military men and the intelligence officer and the test pilot, aghast and uncomprehending as they witnessed Putin's unassisted and unobstructed descent, all pleaded their innocence for a few minutes on camera, too, with earnest tears of disappointment on their faces—"As God is my witness, I thought Putin could fly!"—before being whisked away never to be seen or heard from again.

Putin, if he had ever possessed superhuman powers at all, seems to have outgrown them or to have relinquished them at some point previously, since upon exiting the helicopter cockpit he simply plummeted (some ground observers never would stop reporting that they had seen him flapping his arms wildly to no avail) in a freefall of over one thousand meters. Below and directly beneath him may have been an impenetrable Russian forest or a hard-frozen Russian lake not yet under any threat of a spring thaw. Was his body impaled on the sturdy shaft of some tall birch or conifer? Was his body shattered upon contact with unrelenting, thick ice harder than frozen concrete? Could his body have crashed through a pocket of partially melted ice? Could he have drowned like (gasp!) Rasputin? As the search was commenced for recovery of his earthly remains, it was clear that, for whatever reason, Putin had not exercised any superhuman powers that day.

With no evidence to the contrary, Russian citizens far and wide were obliged to concede, by the subterranean force of the rigors of stern Russian logic, that if all claims of Putin's superhuman prowess had not been groundless and bogus to begin with, it was now much more difficult to credit them with any credence whatsoever.

In a very short while (six or eight hours, by some estimates), Putin's earthly remains still neither discovered nor recovered, it quickly began to seem as if, in the fleeting moments as he was dropping down into the wide gaping mouth of the Russian topography, Russians had ceased to care about the mortal fate of Putin. This view only accelerated in its bland acceptance as it became clear by day's end that no one was hearing another word from the man who seemed after all never to have possessed superhuman powers, as search and recovery activities ended without fanfare.

Now, an entire century later, few Russians even remember those heady days when their ancestors spoke of Putin's acquisition and possession of superhuman powers, if in fact bringing the subject up does not elicit the typical response of a typical Russian folklorist or grammarian: "'Putin'? Who? What? A 'putin' is some ill-tempered fog sprite or water goblin or a malignant forest ogre. 'Putin'. . . 'Putin'. —You sure you don't mean 'Rasputin'?"

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