David Satter, a journalist who has covered Russia for more than 30 years, opens his new book *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep Under Yeltsin and Putin* in Kiev in December 2013, where he was covering the Maidan Revolution and waiting to receive a renewal of his Russian visa from the Russian Embassy. His application was rejected and he became a persona non grata. This was the first time a professional journalist had been denied entry to Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. From later conversations with officials, Satter found out that operatives of Russia’s Federal Security Service, the FSB, had obstructed his visa renewal.

The book, *The Less You Know*, while providing comparatively few new insights, ties together anecdotes and themes from Satter’s previous books and years of reporting. These revelations shatter any lingering perceptions that Russia is a state with Western standards of human rights.

Satter criticizes many Western analysts and politicians that have chosen to treat Russia pragmatically. These observers view Russia as a state with which the West has many ideological, cultural, and philosophical disagreements, but one that can be generally treated like a normal liberal democracy.

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Communism’s Ghost Lingers on in Russia, Charges of Terror and Dictatorship
Book Review by Julia Sinitsky
*The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep Under Yeltsin and Putin*

In the first part of the book, Satter revisits the apartment bombings that occurred across Russia in 1999. The bombings happened in three cities including Moscow, killing around 300 people and injuring about 1,000. These bombings were the catalyst for the Second Chechen War and then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s successful ascension to the presidency. Satter’s earlier book, *Darkness at Dawn*, also investigated the bombings. Satter implicates the FSB in staging the attacks and gives evidence that the publicly-blamed Chechen terrorists were not involved. He also shows that many officials and journalists who have attempted to impartially investigate the bombings have either died, suspiciously disappeared, or been imprisoned. Satter believes that Russia’s ruling class has built its entire legitimacy on the 1999 apartment bombings and the Chechnya campaign that followed.

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Importantly, Satter notes that the criminality and corruption did not start with Vladimir Putin, but with his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. While Many Western journalists portray Yeltsin in a more sympathetic manner than Putin, Satter does not. He shows criminal gang, tolerating liberal values like free speech only as long as they do not interfere with the goals of the ruling elite in any way. In some respect, Satter’s impression of the Russian State is quite Orwellian. Through his works, he shows that the Russian government creates terror (or in some cases fails to prevent it), then pretends to fight it by various actions such as the invasion of Chechnya. The atmosphere created in the country as a consequence of this sophisticated political game is one of fear, blame, and paranoia. This keeps the public subdued and reliant on the government. However, despite his overwhelming disdain for Russia’s officials, especially the FSB, Satter’s attitude towards ordinary Russians is very sympathetic. He views them as victims in a grand criminal machine that no one can control any longer.

For the reader unacquainted with Russia, the book can seem conspiratorial. Many of Satter’s claims on the criminality of Russian officials and their utter disregard for the humanity and dignity of Russian citizens may seem unbelievable at first glance. But Satter’s examples and sources are well-documented; they include interviews with former government officials and regular citizens. Other works, such as those of Karen Dawisha, confirm his reporting, and it becomes clear that his findings are based on years of research and fact-checking, and are very real indeed.

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that corruption and undemocratic rule started with Yeltsin as early as 1993, when Yeltsin disbanded and bombed the Russian parliament and implemented a new constitution while trying to battle communist and conservative opposition to his neoliberal, free-market, and privatization reforms. Satter ends *The Less You Know* with Ukraine, where he was living when he was denied his Russian visa. At the time, Ukraine was on the brink of revolution that would oust then-President Viktor Yanukovych. While Satter’s coverage of the revolution, the events leading up to it, and the following war is altogether too brief and perfunctory, his connection of the crisis to larger post-Soviet issues is insightful. He sees the end of the Yanukovich regime, the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, and the War in Donbas as a continuation of a power game played by former communist apparatchiks. These players have a blatant disregard for human lives and do anything to reach their political and financial objectives. For readers unfamiliar with Satter’s previous work, *The Less You Know* provides a chilling overview of the crimes of the Russian state as seen through the eyes of an experienced journalist. If anything, this work should

For the reader unacquainted with Russia, the book can seem conspiratorial. Supreme Soviet and the creation of a super-presidential system destroyed any chance for a separation of powers. This culture of corruption beginning in the early 1990s led to the mass impoverishment of ordinary Russian people, who soon craved Soviet-like stability. “The criminality of the Yeltsin period engendered a hunger for order, which, in the absence of moral content, led to instability in the guise of a state,” says Satter (79). Vladimir Putin rose to power at this moment. He stabilized the economy and raised real incomes for almost all sectors of the Russian population, including the working class. However, this was done at the price of liberty, human dignity, and long-term prosperity. Remembering the difficulty of life in the 1990s, many Russians were nevertheless grateful. In *The Less You Know*, Satter implicates Putin’s regime in many other crimes against ordinary citizens—some deliberate, others the results of utter incompetence on the part of the government. He returns to disasters he previously covered, each resulting in mass casualties. He writes about the sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk in 2000 (118 dead), the Nord-Ost Theater Hostage Crisis in 2002 (at least 170 dead, and many others injured), and the 2004 hostage crisis in a school in Beslan (at least 395 dead with many injured). According to Satter, these horrific events show that terrorism is a weapon that Putin’s regime uses to leverage public opinion in its favor.

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be an invitation to explore Satter’s older, yet still relevant, original works. While this book is concise and well-structured, it lacks the emotion, depth of narrative, and originality that Satter’s other works possess. This limitation is a minor one, and is probably due to Satter’s limited access to new material inside Russia. However, whereas his previous books made one’s hair stand on end, this work feels more like a summation of Satter’s many journalistic endeavors.

The Less You Know can be seen as a final verdict of a country that Satter had been covering for decades, and Satter’s message about Russia hits the mark. “Russia must take an honest look at its past. Because it has failed to face truth about the crimes of the communist regime, it did not purify the moral and political atmosphere after seventy-four years of communism” (171). Satter seems to believe that the truth about the past will set Russia free and put it on a real path to freedom and democracy. Whether or not he is right, the chances for a reckoning with the past are, at the present moment, remote.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Sinitsky recently graduated from Yale University with a Masters degree in European and Russian Studies. Her interests are Eastern European history, Russian politics, and Russia-U.S. relations. She holds a B.A. in International Relations from Boston University. She currently translates for Russia-Direct.

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