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THE WIZARD OF THE KREMLIN

GIULIANO DA EMPOLI

Translated from the French by Willard Wood

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I

FOR A LONG TIME, the most disparate reports had been circulating about him. Some said he'd retired to a monastery on Mount Athos to pray among the rocks and lizards, others swore they'd seen him partying at a villa in Sotogrande with a cast of coked-up supermodels. Still others said he'd been spotted on a runway at the Sharjah airport, at the militia headquarters in the Donbas, or wandering the ruins of Mogadishu.

Since Vadim Baranov quit his post as advisor to the tsar, stories about him had been multiplying rather than fading away. This happens sometimes. For the most part, men in power derive their aura from the position they hold. When they lose it, it's as if a plug had been pulled. They deflate like one of those giant puppets at the entrance to amusement parks, and if you see these men in the street you wonder how they ever stirred such passions.

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Baranov was of a different order. What order that might be, though, I'd be hard-pressed to say. In photographs, he seemed sturdily built but not athletic, always dressed in dark, slightly overlarge suits. His face was ordinary, somewhat boyish, with a pale complexion, and his straight black hair was cut like a schoolboy's. A video taken on the fringes of an official meeting showed him laughing, a rare sight in Russia, where even a smile is considered a sign of idiocy. In fact, he seemed to pay no attention whatever to his appearance—surprising, considering that his stock-in-trade was exactly that, setting mirrors in a circle so that a spark could become a wildfire.

Baranov went through life surrounded by mysteries. The one thing about him that was more or less certain was his influence over the tsar. In his fifteen years of service to him, he'd helped build up the man's power considerably.

He was called the "Wizard of the Kremlin," and the "new Rasputin." At the time, his role was not clearly defined. He would show up in the president's office when the business of the day was done. It wasn't the secretaries who'd called him. Maybe the tsar himself had summoned him on his direct line. Or he'd guessed the right time on his own, thanks to his extraordinary talents, which everyone acknowledged without being able to say exactly what they were. Sometimes a third person would join them, a minister enjoying a moment in the limelight or the boss of a state company.

But given that no one ever says anything in Moscow as a matter of principle, and this goes back centuries, even the presence of these occasional witnesses failed to shed light on the nocturnal activities of the tsar and his advisor. Yet the consequences sometimes stood out clearly. One morning, all Russia awoke to learn that the richest and best-known businessman in the country, the symbol of the new capitalism, had been arrested. Another time, all the presidents of the federal republics, duly elected by the people, had been dismissed, and the morning newscasts informed their still-drowsy audience that from now on the tsar would appoint the presidents himself. In most cases, though, these late-night sessions produced no visible effect. Only years later would changes occur, as though naturally, but in fact as the result of meticulous planning.

At that time, Baranov lived very privately. You never saw him anywhere, and an interview was out of the question. He did have one quirk, though. From time to time he would publish something, either a brief essay in an obscure independent journal, or a research article on military strategy aimed at the highest echelons of the army, or even a piece of fiction that showed off his talent for paradox, in the best Russian tradition. He never wrote under his own name, but he interspersed his texts with allusions that offered clues about the new world that was taking shape in the late-night Kremlin sessions. That, at any rate, was what the court followers in Moscow and in foreign ministries abroad

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believed, racing to be the first to decipher Baranov's hidden meaning.

The pseudonym he used for these pronouncements, Nikolai Brandeis, added a further element of confusion. Adepts quickly recognized it as the name of a minor character in a seldom-read novel by Joseph Roth. Brandeis, a Tatar, plays the part of deus ex machina, appearing at crucial moments in the story only to disappear immediately after. "It doesn't require strength to conquer something," he says. "Everything yields to you, everything's rotten and surrenders. Knowing how to give things up, that's what counts." Just as the other characters in Roth's novel track Nikolai Brandeis's actions obsessively, since his extraordinary indifference is the only guarantor of success, so the high-ranking officeholders in the Kremlin and their satellites would pounce on the slightest indication of Baranov's thinking, in the hope of learning the tsar's intentions. What made the whole exercise precarious was that the Wizard of the Kremlin believed that plagiarism was the foundation of all progress. You could therefore never truly tell whether he was expressing his own ideas or playing with someone else's.

This game of cat and mouse reached its high point one winter night, when a dense pack of luxury cars, with their escort of sirens and bodyguards, converged on a small avant-garde theater in Moscow where a one-act play by a certain Nikolai Brandeis was being performed. Queueing at the door were bankers, oil magnates,

ministers, and FSB generals. "In a civilized country," says the play's central character, "civil war would erupt, but as we don't have citizens here, we'll have a war between lackeys. It's no worse than a civil war, just a bit more distasteful, more sordid." To all appearances, Baranov wasn't in the crowd that night, but to be safe the bankers and ministers still applauded wildly. Some claimed that Baranov was watching the audience through a tiny peephole to the right of the balcony.

Yet even these somewhat childish games hadn't cured Baranov of his disaffection. At a certain point, the few people who actually met with him began to notice that his moods were growing darker. He was reported to be anxious, tired. Thinking of other things. He'd climbed the ranks too soon, and now he was bored, with himself most of all. And with the tsar, who for his part was never bored. And who was starting to hate Baranov. What? I brought you all this way and you have the gall to be bored? One should never underestimate the sentimental side of political relationships.

Until one day Baranov disappeared. A terse note from the Kremlin announced that the political advisor to the president of the Russian Federation had resigned. And then all trace of him disappeared, except for occasional sightings of him around the globe, though none were ever confirmed.

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When I arrived in Moscow a few years later, Baranov's memory hovered in the air like an amorphous shadow. No longer tied to his quite-substantial physical body, it was free to appear in one place or another, wherever it could be used to explain a particularly obscure action on the part of the Kremlin. And given that Moscow—inscrutable capital of a new era whose contours none could define—had come unexpectedly into the forefront once again, obsessive interpreters of the former magus of the Kremlin had cropped up even among those of us in the foreign community. A BBC journalist had made a documentary arguing that Baranov was the man responsible for bringing the techniques of avant-garde theater into politics. Another journalist described him in a book as a kind of magician who made people and political parties appear and disappear at the snap of his fingers. A professor had devoted a scholarly monograph to him: *Vadim Baranov and the Invention of Fake Democracy*. Everyone wanted to know what he had been up to recently. Did he still have influence over the tsar? What role had he played in the war in Ukraine? And what was his contribution to the propaganda strategy that had worked such profound changes on the planet's geopolitical equilibrium?

I personally followed these lines of inquiry with a certain detachment. The living have never interested me as much as the dead. I'd felt unmoored in the world until I realized that I could spend the better part of my time with the dead. Which is why my stay in Moscow

was mostly spent visiting libraries and archives, along with a few restaurants, and a café where the waiters gradually became accustomed to my solitary presence. I pored over old books, took walks in the pale winter light, and in the late afternoons went to the steam baths on Seleznevskaya Street to be restored. At night, a small bar in Kitay-gorod warmly enclosed me behind its doors of rest and forgetfulness. And at almost every point, there walked at my side a marvelous phantom, a potential ally.

To all intents and purposes, Yevgeny Zamyatin appears to be an early twentieth-century writer, born in a village of Romani and horse thieves, who was arrested and sent into exile by the tsarist authorities for taking part in the 1905 revolution. Admired early on for his fiction, he worked as a naval engineer in England, where he manufactured icebreakers. He then returned to Russia in 1917 to join the Bolshevik Revolution, but quickly realized that building a paradise for the working class was not on the agenda. And so Zamyatin began to write a novel, *We*. And at that point, something happened that helps us understand what physicists mean when they talk of parallel universes.

In 1922, Zamyatin stopped being just a writer and became a time machine. He thought he was writing a biting criticism of the Soviet system as it was then being built. That's certainly how the censors read *We*, and it's on that basis that they stopped its publication. But the truth is that Zamyatin was not addressing

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them. Without realizing it, he had stepped into the next century and was speaking directly to our era. *We* depicts a society governed by logic, where everything has a number, and where each person's life is regulated down to the tiniest detail for maximum efficiency. The result is a rigid but comfortable dictatorship, one in which anyone can compose three sonatas in an hour by pushing a button, and where relations between the sexes are automatically regulated through a mechanism that selects the most-compatible partners and allows copulation with each of them. Everything is transparent in Zamyatin's world, down to a membrane in the street, decorated as a work of art, that records the conversation of passersby. Clearly, this is a place where voting also has to be public. "The ancients are said to have voted secretly, furtively, like thieves," says the main character, named D-503. "What was the point of all this mystery? It's never been fully determined... We don't hide anything, we aren't ashamed of anything. We celebrate our elections openly, loyally, and in the full light of day. I watch everyone else vote for the Benefactor, and everyone else watches me vote for the Benefactor."

I'd been obsessed with Zamyatin ever since discovering him. His work seemed to concentrate all the questions of our times. *We* didn't describe the Soviet Union. It was about our own smooth, seamless, algorithm-driven world, the global matrix presently under construction, and the total inadequacy

of our primitive brains to deal with it. Zamyatin was an oracle. He was not just speaking to Stalin, he was targeting all the dictators waiting in the wings, the oligarchs of Silicon Valley as well as the mandarins of China's single political party. His book was the last weapon against the digital beehive that was starting to enmesh the planet. My task was to dig it up again and point it in the right direction. The problem was that I didn't exactly have the means at hand to make Mark Zuckerberg or Xi Jinping tremble, but I did manage to talk my university into financing my research into Zamyatin's life, by pointing to the fact that he had spent his last years in Paris after escaping Stalin. A French publisher had expressed a vague interest in reissuing *We*, and a friend who produced documentaries had been willing to consider the possibility of a project involving Zamyatin. "Try to find some material while you're in Moscow," he'd said, sipping a negroni at a ninth-arrondissement bar.

But I'd no sooner arrived in Moscow than I was distracted from my task, discovering that this pitiless city held its share of enchantments, tempting me to venture out every day into the narrow, frozen streets of Petrova and the Arbat. The moroseness of the blank Stalinist facades was tempered by the pale reflections of the old boyar residences, and even the snow, pounded to mud by the constant passing of black town cars, became pure again in the courtyards and small hidden gardens, which murmured their tales of times past.