

The uses of paranoia



Putin's palace on the Black Sea promontory at Cape Idokopas

by Ralph Berry

For an enlightening insight into Vladimir Putin, and the paranoia to which he is expected to succumb, look no further than the *Telegraph*.

James Kilner's headline PRESIDENT'S 'SHOW OF STRENGTH' MAY BE PARANOIA THAT COULD BE HIS UNDOING. Here's the triple thesis: paranoia is bad, Putin shows it, Putin is doomed. Well, perhaps not quite yet but his end is certain, or, as we like to say, inevitable. The thing about 'inevitable' is that it comes without a date-stamp. This enables the columnists do a neat job on the threats that allegedly cluster around Putin but have yet to do him in. A little history might help.

Hitler survived 30-odd assassination attempts, with some luck but with his own infernal instinct guiding him at key moments. We do not know the threats to Stalin, but his devout paranoia always guarded him.

The final stage of his life is definitive, as chronicled by Simon Sebag Montefiore: STALIN:THE COURT OF THE RED TSAR. Stalin liked to carouse with a small group of high-level associates, all of whom were required to get heavily drunk. These intimate gatherings took place in Stalin's dacha in Kuntsevo. On the last such occasion he was joined by Malenkov, Beria, Krushchev and Molotov. The party went well, and broke up around 3 am. All were happy.

Stalin could only be roused by his trusted manservant, who had strict orders not to open the bedroom door until they heard from him. But there was no response to his repeated knocking and calls, and nothing was done. Hours passed, and very senior people were brought over.

Eventually Beria and Kruschev made the big decision together: the door was opened and they found Stalin on the floor. He had had a stroke at around 4 am or so and was senseless. He lingered for days without recovering consciousness, before being declared dead, while the world was told nothing, until the public announcement: Comrade Stalin died on 5 March 1953.

The paranoia that featured his life lived on after his death. Sergei Prokoviev, the greatest Russian composer of his era, had the misfortune to die on the same day as Stalin. Very few people went to his funeral. They were terrified at being thought disrespectful to the memory of the departed giant.

Paranoia did well by its adherents. Hitler survived until the near miss of the Operation Valkyrie bomb plot. Stalin was perfectly safe until he hit the floor of the Kuntseva dacha, after which nothing could be done for him. As for Putin, only a fool would make predictions, and I am not in the business of astrology (though I regard it as at least as accurate as some more fancied speculations).

But I noted that on the May 5th celebrations he looked to be in prime shape as he stepped out with his associates and

guards. The Prigozhin threat has come and gone, leaving Putin to enjoy his palace on the Black Sea promontory at Cape Idokopas. It is not a bad life at the top, say what you will.

I need say no more on the rehabilitation of paranoia. Suffice it that paranoia works. As does the system of the nineteenth century Spanish general, who was asked on his deathbed if he forgave his enemies:

‘What enemies? I have no enemies. I have had them all executed.’