

'I was both a choir boy and . . . a punk rocker'

Unredacted:

Russia, Trump and the Fight for Democracy

Christopher Steele

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In his very readable memoir Christopher Steele goes out of his way to try to establish himself as both for and against the Establishment. He tells us that his grandfather had been a South Wales miner who, at the end of the Second World War, had walked to London to find work. Even though his father was to work as a senior meteorologist and climatologist for the British military, nevertheless he insists that 'conversation around the dinner table routinely focussed on the rights and wrongs of society, and on injustices playing out in the country and around the world'. The family's brand of politics was definitely 'left-of-centre' although 'not revolutionary'. And his father, he tells us, always carried with him 'a trace of fear from the mining life' and 'was always looking over his shoulder', fearful of a 'return to the sort of poverty trap he had escaped from'. Nevertheless, he was a patriot who 'believed that for all its faults the United Kingdom was a force for good' in the world. (pp. 17-18)

What of himself? He describes the young Christopher Steele as being 'a choir boy and a bellringer' and, at the same time, 'a punk rocker and a troublemaker'. This is how he wants us to see him: as both a supporter of the Establishment and at the same time as a rebel against it. He did well enough at school to get into Cambridge, but once there was inevitably put out by all the 'Old Etonians and Old Harrovians'. The place was 'flooded with the sons of lords, earls and magnates . . . the posh boys who had it easy'. He threw himself into the Cambridge Union and succeeded in overthrowing 'the wealthy, landed, and titled establishment figures who . . . considered themselves as having a God-given right to control the Union', becoming its President. He was to actually invite the London representative of the Palestine Liberation Organisation to speak. Some of his Jewish friends 'never spoke to me again'. (pp. 20, 22, 25).

At the time, he was thinking of a career in journalism, but instead, after Cambridge, he eventually ended up in MI6, as one does. He was sent to Russia in April 1990 and ended up head of the Russia Desk.

How convincing is this self-portrayal? Obviously one cannot take anything a former member of the security services says at face value, but regardless of that, Steele still has much of interest to say and one cannot help feeling a certain sympathy for him as his tale unfolds.

Steele observed the collapse of Soviet Communism firsthand. He describes one particularly telling incident he witnessed in Moscow in 1991 that very much sticks in the mind, both his and mine. He saw a car crashed into a lamp-post with a dead driver at the wheel on his way home one Friday night and the car with its dead driver was still there on Monday morning. This effectively summed up the state of the country as far as he was concerned:

We were living in a country that was almost the opposite of everything it claimed to be, the communist system promised equality, justice, and security. Instead the Soviet state offered no effective safety net; its officials were mostly corrupt and barely competent; it was lacking in empathy and humanity. And it left its dead on the street. (p. 50)

What replaced the decayed ruins of Stalinism, however, was not liberal capitalist democracy, but the authoritarian rule of a class of wholly corrupt super rich oligarchs. One interesting point he makes is that even after the collapse of Communism, 'the level of surveillance in Russia had not eased'. (pp. 69-70) And, of course, Vladimir Putin was to take control of the country by the end of the century. This triumph of authoritarianism in Russia has had an impact throughout the world and Steele makes an interesting point in this regard about the rise of the Front National in France and its transnational connections: 'it was caught accepting clandestine, illegal loans from Putin's Russia prior to the 2017 presidential election'. (p. 76) Closer to home, of course, the leader of the Reform Party in Wales, Nathan Gill, has been recently convicted of accepting bribes to advance the interests of the Kremlin. Steele emphasises the Putin regime's commitment to supporting authoritarianism and encouraging division throughout the West. As for his own political trajectory, he had supported Blair and New Labour, voting for them in 1997 and 2001, but was opposed to the Iraq War. Indeed, the invasion was one of the factors that pushed 'me away from government service' (p. 91). After more than twenty years in MI6, Steele retired and set up a private intelligence agency, Orbis.

What Steele wants us to believe is that somehow Orbis was a force for good. In fact, the outfit seems to have started out to provide intelligence for big companies interested in investing in Russia and elsewhere. He describes in

some detail a dinner at the private members club Annabel's in London in 2007, 'hosted by investor Nat Rothschild' when the project was still taking shape. Among the guests was a certain David Cameron along with various billionaires, and 'a twenty-five year old Ivanka Trump' who he was sat next to. She talked to him about business opportunities in Russia and they 'exchanged business cards and kept in touch via email'. (p. 97) Nothing ever came of this, but Steele wants to establish that he had nothing against the Trumps at this time. (Annabel's, it is worth remembering, was at this time paying its staff less than the minimum wage!) As for Orbis, it was set up in 2009, a good business opportunity, a chance to make some money, servicing big business; and as he confesses, he enjoyed 'being an entrepreneur'. (p. 117) In its first nine years of operating it grossed something like \$20 million. Among his first clients was the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska (of Peter Mandelson and George Osborne fame).¹ What we are left wondering, of course, is was all this choir boy or punk behaviour – or something else altogether? In fact, it looks very much as if Orbis was set up to service big business, with Steele and co. determined to make as much money as possible. What happened, though, was that in the process they stumbled across evidence of Russian interference in the West, Russian attempts to undermine liberal democracy and bolster authoritarianism, which demanded a response.

The first step seems to have been when Orbis was hired by the accounting firm KPMG to advise on the English bid to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup and successfully uncovered Russian bribery in what he describes as 'an international conspiracy at the heart of one of the most high-profile, feel-good sectors of the economy'. (p. 111) This can perhaps be considered as choir boy activity. And moving on from this, Orbis began working for the FBI, first with regard to FIFA corruption, but soon investigating many other matters, including Russian interference in European elections. What was to make Steele headline news, however, was Russian interference in US elections, in particular their support for Donald Trump. With regard to the question of whether or not the Russians actually have 'kompromat' involving Trump: first of all, given the man's character and stupidity it is really impossible to believe that they don't; and secondly, given that he is a 'genius' with ratings like no one else has ever had, he must surely believe that he could ride out any controversy caused by any such fake news. After all, he was one of Jeffrey Epstein's best friends!

Steele's key Russian source was Igor Danchenko to whom he was

¹ On the Mandelson link see, for example, <<https://shorturl.at/VNhVr>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jul/11/the-moscow-moves-how-peter-mandelson-firm-helped-uber-reach-russian-elite>>.

introduced by Fiona Hill.² What he uncovered seriously alarmed Steele who was left 'afraid – for democracy, for the United States and for the world at large'. (p. 175) And all this was shared with the FBI. In fact, he soon fell out with the FBI, who still have not paid Orbis an outstanding bill of \$60,000! He was so determined that the American people needed to know what was going on that he was party to leaking the story to 'the left-leaning Mother Jones magazine'. (p. 173) The British government was also provided with the intelligence, but Prime Minister May decided not to respond even though Trump was a real danger to Western security. According to Steele, 'among the classified documents which Trump apparently unauthorizedly took with him to Mar-a-Lago at the end of his presidency were British naval secrets, some of the most sensitive ones in our governmental system'. (p. 177) For Steele personally, the situation became critical when his involvement in investigating the Trump-Russia connection was made public. His account of all this (pp. 186-189) is interesting, but the lesson we come away with is something we already knew: never trust the FBI! In the end, he was named in the *Wall Street Journal* and 'the backlash from Trump and his supporters began immediately. It was vicious and continues to this day'. (p. 190) One of the weapons used against him by both Trump and Putin supporters was inevitably 'Lawfare', the use of lawsuits to hinder and/or intimidate opponents. And his wife, Katherine's, career was collateral damage. There was also the fear of more dangerous Russian reprisals. Steele's account of the Russian threat in Chapter 20, 'The Long Arm Of The Kremlin', is well worth reading.

Steele is absolutely clear regarding the threat that the rising tide of authoritarianism poses, a threat seriously increased since Trump's re-election. As far as Britain is concerned a big danger is 'the insidious corruption from abroad which started in the permissive, so-called light touch regulation of the 2000s'. He is particularly put out by Boris Johnson's relationship with Yevgeniy Lebedev, including his installation in the House of Lords, 'reportedly . . . against the advice of the UK Security Service, a truly shocking turn of events'. According to Steele they had also advised against Lebedev's father Alexander, a former KGB officer and one time billionaire, being allowed to take over the *Evening Standard* newspaper; but to no avail. Britain has the dubious honour of being the only Western country where a former KGB officer owned the capital city's only daily paper. Still the situation in Britain is not too bad 'now the execrable Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Jeremy Corbyn have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Each in their own way a gift for Putin'. (p. 301) Leaving aside his appalling bracketing of Corbyn with Johnson and Truss, this conclusion

² For a review of her memoir see *Lobster* 83 at
<<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/83/inside-the-trump-administration/>>.

already seems completely out of date. Since he wrote the book, Trump and his supporters, among them the likes of Elon Musk, have emerged as the biggest threat to liberal democracy both in the USA and throughout the West, needing no help from Vladimir Putin. And as for the Starmer government, well . . .

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His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>