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WHAT THE MARTIAL ARTS TAUGHT PUTIN

BY LYNNLEY BROWNING ON 6/5/14



Forget chess. The key to Putin's Ukraine strategy is his love of judo

Russian President Vladimir Putin is often cast as a shadowy chess master making crafty moves on the global stage, a former KGB spy who treats Asia, Europe, the Middle East and former Soviet republics as pawns on a geopolitical chessboard. But another emerging metaphor for Putin's political style comes from a different contest that happens to be his favorite sport: JUDO.

A black belt in JUDO whose sparring partners from his working-class childhood in Leningrad now hold high-level government posts, Putin has never made secret the significance to him of the martial art. "JUDO teaches self-control, the ability to feel the moment, to see the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, to strive for the best RESULTS," he says on his personal website. "I am sure you will agree that these are essential abilities and skills for any politician."

As Washington struggles to read the Kremlin strongman's thinking amid escalating uncertainty in Ukraine four months after Russia's annexation of Crimea, some policy experts and academics are probing the so-called gentle martial art as a metaphor for clues to Putin's mindset.

"Putin is a JUDO master by training, not a chess master, and that's how he looks at gaining advantage for Russia," Kimberly Marten, a Russia expert and professor of political science at Barnard College and Columbia University, tells Newsweek. "He sizes up an opponent's weakness, throws him off balance and then makes his opponent fall from his own weight."

The theory is echoed in some top Moscow corridors as well. "When analyzing the events around Ukraine, we CAN say that for Vladimir Putin, the contemporary world is not a chessboard but a mat for JUDO grabs," Sergei Aleksashenko, who was Russia's deputy finance minister from 1993 through early 1995 and the first

deputy chairman of Russia's Central Bank from mid-1995 to 1998, tells Newsweek from Moscow. "He used the weakness and indecisiveness of his opponent"—in this case, a chaotic Ukraine— "to achieve his prize [Crimea]."

Chess is played on quiet, peaceful, orderly terms, with one player making a move and the opponent following. By contrast, JUDO consists of explosive, sudden strikes in which a judoka, or JUDO master, aims to turn an opponent's size and weight against him.

So with the Kremlin smarting from Russia's loss of power and prestige after the Cold War, is JUDO more than just a metaphor for what Putin has orchestrated in Crimea?

"JUDO is a political philosophy for him," asserts Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst in Moscow. Referring to the JUDO principle of using an opponent's force against him or her, he adds that Putin is likely to view recent sanctions against top Russian officials, businessmen and companies as something that CAN be turned to his advantage. Sanctions "allow him to consolidate power, to build a fence, which is what he wants," Petrov says.

The notion that the principles of JUDO might underpin, at least in part, Putin's foreign policy is largely scoffed at in official Washington. "We're not going to be guided in our thinking by sports habits or personal proclivities," Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon's press secretary, tells Newsweek. "We're less concerned with what's motivating his actions than with what his actions really are."

Kirby says that an obscure pocket of social scientific research on so-called movement-based analysis, used mostly by dance-trained researchers to analyze athletes and animals, hasn't shaped how American defense officials understand Putin. A 2008 report by U.S. Naval War College professor Brenda Connors for the Pentagon's internal think tank, the Office of Net Assessment, is titled "Movement, the Brain and Decision-making, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin," but it did not reach the upper levels of the Pentagon, Kirby says. The report, described by USA Today in March, and similar studies (including one in 2012 by another Naval War College researcher, Mary Raum) "haven't had an impact on the Defense Department's decisions," Kirby says.

The unpublished studies focused not on Putin's practice of JUDO but instead on his facial expressions, gestures and gait. Connors told The Atlantic in 2005 that Putin's lack of contralateral movements, possibly due to a stroke in utero or a difficult birth, made him resemble a fish or reptile, with head-to-tail, not side-to-side, movements. Connors did not respond to requests for comment.

Putin's inner circle, sometimes called Russia's "judocracy," includes many JUDO aficionados. Gennady Timchenko, a billionaire oil trader, co-founded the elite St. Petersburg JUDO club, Yavara-Neva, in 1998. Arkady Rotenberg, another billionaire businessman, is the club's general director. Both men are on a U.S. blacklist of persons sanctioned in recent months. Other Putin JUDO friends occupy senior positions in the Interior and other ministries.

Mark Galeotti, a Russia specialist at New York University and visiting professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, an elite foreign affairs university, says that Washington is ignoring Putin's love of JUDO at its peril. "Putin finds himself in a position in which he needs to have the tactics to take on much stronger enemies," like the United States, China and Europe, Galeotti tells Newsweek. "Clearly, how he does

that is by forcing them, in JUDO form, to either waste their energies or put them in a position where he CAN pin them without having to face their main strength. He's certainly using JUDO tactics."

Marten argues that that is what has played out in recent months in Ukraine. When escalating protests in Kiev led former president Viktor Yanukovich to flee last February and spawned tensions between the country's pro-Russian East and pro-European West, Putin "saw the weakness of Ukraine's lack of state control over its own security forces and borders, and used that situation against them" by invading Crimea.

In early May, Valeriy Konovalyuk, a black belt in jiu-jitsu and a candidate for president of Ukraine, which held elections on May 25, challenged Putin, who also holds a black belt in karate, to a sparring match, telling Fox News, "Let me meet him on the mat, and we'll see how it turns out."

Putin once offered to do a JUDO demonstration at New York's Madison Square Garden, according to a passage in an obscure book, [JUDO: History, Theory, Practice](#), whose 2004 English translation from the 2000 original is now out in print. Putin co-authored the book with Vasily Shestakov, a former JUDO trainer and sparring partner who is now a State Duma parliamentarian and a member of the federal Committee on Sports, and with Alexei Levitsky, another JUDO trainer.

The book, published by Blue Snake Press of Berkeley, California, part of North Atlantic Books, offers a history of the sport and detailed chapters, with drawings, on such moves as the harai goshi hip throw, one of Putin's signature moves. It also includes a section on sambo, a weaponless self-defense technique, akin to the Israeli krav maga, that was invented by the Red Army in the 1920s.

Julia Kent, a North Atlantic Books publicist, declined to disclose the print run. Copies of the out-of-print translation sell on Amazon and eBay for as much as \$407.39.

"Insofar as JUDO is at his core, [Putin] brings a warrior's presence to the international stage," wrote George F. Russell Jr., the former chairman of Russell Investment Group and former co-chairman of the East West Institute, in a preface to the English translation. A companion training video featuring Putin executing JUDO moves came out in 2008 and, according to Russian government archives, features the Kremlin strongman saying things like "You CAN make concessions only if they pave the way to victory."

When Anatoly Rakhlin, Putin's childhood JUDO trainer, died last August, Putin attended the funeral and wrote on his website of "a great and irreplaceable loss to us all." Rakhlin, who once likened himself to Putin's "second father," and said that Putin "likes offense and not defense," according to Russian government archives. Putin, Rakhlin told Pravda.ru, a successor to the old Communist Pravda, in 2007, "was pretty unpredictable when fighting. He'd win a fight by using some sudden throw against his opponent."

Galeotti argues that Washington is remiss to ignore Putin's passion for JUDO. "For the Defense Department and Pentagon, the question is, how well does the U.S. security apparatus understand Putin? It's easy to dismiss things like JUDO, or choice of reading material or childhood, but they provide an unparalleled insight into what a person is."

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