

From Washington Post
and New York Times Dispatches

LONDON — Russian president-elect Vladimir Putin defended his country's war with Chechnya during a trip to London yesterday and excoriated other nations for not joining in on Russia's side.

With his new western "best friend," Prime Minister Tony Blair, looking rather uncomfortable at his side, Putin said "the actions of Russia are a struggle against extremism, which is a threat to the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the whole world. . . . It is a struggle against elements of global terrorism. Russia here is alone in its fighting, and that is wrong."

He went on at length until Blair managed to get a word in at their joint press conference. "You will have all heard the passion with which President Putin has defended the Russian role in Chechnya," Blair said.

Blair has been criticized somewhat in Britain for inviting Putin to London while the war in Chechnya continues. But Blair said yesterday that the strong feeling in Moscow against the Chechen separatists proves it is better to "engage with" the Russians than to "isolate" them.

Since Blair's surprise visit to Putin in St. Petersburg last month — when Putin was still a candidate — the two men have worked at developing a personal relationship. Yesterday's 24-hour trip to London was Putin's first western visit since he was elected. He won't meet President Clinton until June.

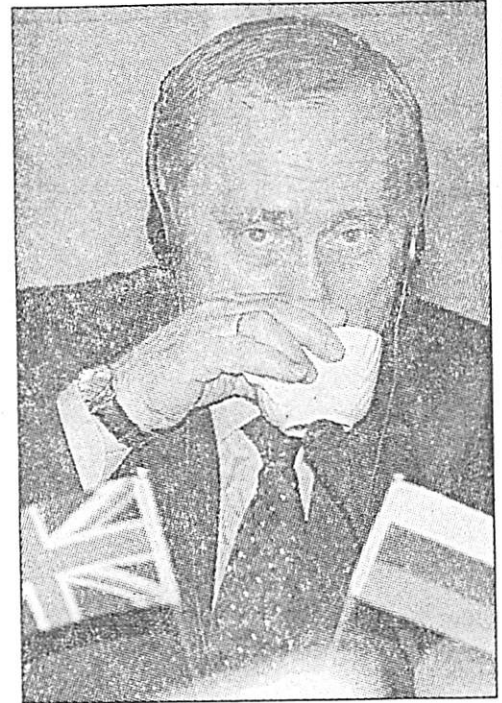
Yesterday the former Communist Party member and KGB spy had breakfast with businessmen, lunch at the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street and tea with Queen Elizabeth at Windsor Castle.

For the most part, Putin received a warm reception. A couple of dozen Muslims demonstrated outside the gates of Downing Street against the war in Chechnya, but Putin's motorcade swept past them in seconds.

In Washington yesterday, the White House announced that Clinton will meet with Putin in Moscow on June 4 and 5 as part of a trip that will take the president to Portugal, Germany, Russia and Ukraine from May 30 through June 6.

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Russian leader Vladimir Putin sipped tea with British industrialists in London yesterday.

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