

“Ten Days That Shook the World”: 100 Years Later

Jeremy Kinsman

As events in Washington, online and elsewhere inform the increasingly inescapable conclusion that Western democracy has been under attack, Vladimir Putin seems secure in the certainty that democracy in Russia, at least, has had its day. Veteran diplomat and former Canadian ambassador to Russia Jeremy Kinsman traces the thread of Russia’s global influence from the 1917 Revolution through the end of the Soviet Union to today, as Putin deploys the mythology of Russian greatness to rationalize his grip on power.

Russia's 1917 Revolution overturned a 300-year old dynasty and a whole culture. It didn't overthrow the world order, as socialist revolutionaries wanted. But with Europe's massively destructive, essentially pointless, and ultimately unresolved Great War — without which the Revolution would not have happened — it helped shape the 20th Century.

Were the revolution, prolonged tumult, and its cruel aftermath due to something inherently “of” Russia that persists? What are their effects today on Russian psychology? Did the unspeakable crimes and stress over two or three generations and decades of forced conformism hobble the capacity of Russians to adapt later to opportunities for change, like a collective PTSD? Vladimir Putin is now reaching back in Russian history to validate the idea of Russian "greatness." Is this a salve for depleted national identity, or a populist device to legitimize his assertion of unbridled power?

In the last century, Winston Churchill famously described Russia as a “riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” Russians have been caricatured as backward, historically submissive to absolutist Tsars and a dark Church, untouched by the Reformation. But Russia’s history is as objectively understandable as anyone else's. A vast flat land with few natural borders straddling Asia and Europe, Russia drew horrendous invasions, from the Mongols in 1237 to Napoleon 1812 to Hitler in 1941, explaining both the perpetual quest of a strategic buffer zone and a mixed national identity. For Slavophiles, Russian essence is non-European, while modernizing Europhiles

pursued Peter the Great's westernization, making Russian literature and music prize ornaments of Western culture.

Russia's political evolution could have produced liberal democracy. Reformers struggled for a more liberal regime throughout the 19th century, only to see tentative gains curtailed by absolutist and repressive tsarist regimes.

In 1905, mass protests and “Bloody Sunday” wrested at last a forward-looking manifesto and an elected Parliament, the Duma, from the detached and unprepared Nicholas II, who had become Emperor at 26. But Nicholas backtracked, preferring to pursue great power ambitions. As Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires weakened, Germany flexed its growing muscles. Competitive militaristic nationalisms sleepwalked toward unlimited modern warfare.

The Great War devastated both Russia’s army of a million conscripts and the home front. In rapidly industrializing cities, severe food shortages radicalized workers, rural migrants and deserters. When Nicholas, now shakily commanding at the front, rejected Duma pleas for political reform and dispatched shock troops whose thousand victims were buried before 900,000 mourners, the Duma formed a provisional alternative government. Abandoned by all, Nicholas abdicated amid euphoria. This was the opportunity for parliamentary democracy.

As usual, getting rid of a despot was easier than forging a consensus to govern the day after. Revolutionary workers formed a rival power centre, the Petrograd “Soviet,” to challenge the in-fighting liberal government.

That the revolution was hijacked by the most hard-line of the revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, was due to luck, feckless liberal opponents, rigid and brittle state institutions, ruthless determination by a few people who knew what they wanted, an angry and exhausted population ready to believe whoever promised a new way of living, and clandestine support from Russia's enemy, Germany.

Germany feared defeat as the U.S. entered the war with fresh troops that could break the stalemate on the Western Front unless Russia ceased hostilities in the east.

The most radical of Russian anti-war revolutionaries, Lenin, was penned up in Zurich by British controls after 17 years away. In probably history’s greatest clandestine operation, German intelligence officers daringly offered to smuggle

Lenin home. Funded by the Kaiser, he crossed the border in a “sealed” train with 29 other exiled Russian revolutionaries in April, 1917.

Despite his eloquence, Lenin was initially marginal. But his campaign of class hatred and unambiguous goals — usurp the regime, install a workers’ socialist republic, and exit the now-unpopular war against Allied pressure to stay in — struck a chord until in July, 1917, his collusion with Germany came to light. Trotsky was arrested but Lenin escaped to Finland dressed as a woman. Had he been caught and convicted for treason, the 20th century would have gone differently.

Presuming the Bolsheviks’ eclipse meant he could manage the Petrograd Soviet, Premier Alexander Kerensky freed Trotsky. But chaos, hunger, exhaustion, and growing apathy over outcomes created a vacuum that enabled the well-organized Bolsheviks to take over the Petrograd Soviet. Lenin snuck back into Russia on October 10 and called for armed insurrection. Bolsheviks seized vital posts. When naval mutineers on the “Aurora” fired on Kerensky’s struggling cabinet in the Winter Palace, the state collapsed.

On October 26, Lenin declared: "The Provisional Government has been deposed. Authority has been passed into the hands of the Petrograd Soviet."

Its first decree confiscated private land for redistribution to peasants. Political meetings were outlawed. Two weeks later, election results for a Constituent Assembly showed Bolshevik support at only 24 per cent. The regime postponed the Assembly — for about 70 years.

The speedily concluded separate peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany died with Germany's military defeat a year later. But it meant that Russia, which had lost two million people in the war, played no role in the peace or indeed in post-war Europe, reversing centuries of European ambitions.

In the newly-named Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (including Ukraine) civil war, ineffectually supported by the Allies, raged for three years. By 1921, economic output had dropped to one-sixth of 1914's. Three million people emigrated.

Western governments viewed the regime with animosity while its utopian ambition stirred attraction on the left that would deepen as the Great Depression laid bare capitalism's failings, including for emerging anti-colonialists.

Immobilized by a brain tumour in 1922, Lenin tried in vain to block Stalin succeeding him. Stalin ruled by terror for 29 years, using the apparatus of a brutal security state to repress dissent and squelch artistic expression. He forced collectivization of agriculture that killed more than ten million in a man-made famine and liquidated a million citizens in mass purges.

"Can you describe this?" a ragged woman huddling in Leningrad's cold dawn outside a prison hoping for word on the fates of loved ones asked legendary dissident poet Anna Akhmatova. Akhmatova did, in forbidden poems read under risk of being termed an "enemy of the people": over 2,000 persons a day were executed in 1938-39. Every institution was overturned, every urge subordinated to survival.

In 1941, real German enemies replaced imaginary internal ones. "The Great Patriotic War" came as "a release, and a restoration of community", wrote Boris Pasternak. But the staggering costs of victory over Hitler fueled ambition.

America's atomic bombing of Japan shocked Stalin, presenting a new military balance. "The Americans and British are hoping that we won't be able to develop the bomb ourselves for some time," Stalin told a group of scientists on the day the second bomb was dropped, on Nagasaki. "They want us to accept their plan for Europe and elsewhere in the world. Well, that's not going to happen."

Washington pursued "containment" of the USSR, now a Cold War adversary apt to see everywhere the malign "hand of Washington."

Today, roses on Stalin's grave in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis memorialize him as Russia's protector from Hitler, and then from the West, even though successor Nikita Khrushchev exposed his vast crimes and introduced a limited political thaw that extended into the 18-year Brezhnev regime. National pride in the USSR bloomed over Sputnik, superpower status and global clout, universal literacy, and improved welfare.

But a dysfunctional economy sacrificed consumers, a stagnating state culture deformed factual truth and evaded accountability, and created what Solzhenitsyn famously christened a gulag archipelago. A losing war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 added to destructive centrifugal forces.

Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985 seemed at first miraculous. He aimed to palliate the legacy of cruelty by opening up the existential economic

and civic reforms of perestroika and glasnost. But a society traumatized by decades of terror with no habit of self-empowerment could hardly re-boot itself.

Economically, undoing old rigidities was easier than providing effective and fair substitutes. Well-meant but shallow western advice just to open markets to free competition ignored the scale of the unprecedented make-over involved. Shock therapy generated much more shock than therapy. Initial public euphoria over new freedoms and the dismantling of state security gave way to despair over the destruction of everyday life as the economy crashed.

Gorbachev ended the Cold War, changing our world as well as theirs. Abandoning corrupt eastern European communist regimes, he accepted German unification, not a given for a historically-minded Russian, withdrawing 1.3 million soldiers and personnel.

Russia's belief that the West had backtracked on undertakings not to expand NATO eastward grates still. Helmut Kohl compensated the USSR for the costs of military withdrawal and downsizing but the U.S. Congress, ever short-sighted, denied its appropriations.

Gorbachev faced a backlash for too much change and disruption with too few workable solutions. Weakened by an inept but pivotal coup attempt against him from hard-line security chiefs, he was challenged for power by his populist rival, Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin became the first elected president of the Russian Republic and, in a deal with party bosses in Ukraine and Belarus, dismantled the Soviet Union itself in December, 1991. When Gorbachev heard what they'd done, he said "They've begun carving this country like a pie."

The remarkably peaceful break-up left more than 20 million ethnic Russians outside Russia, and a legacy of loose threads, notably long-standing identity issues, especially over Ukraine/Crimea.

During Yeltsin's nine chaotic years, the Russian economy severely contracted, though insiders made fortunes. Nationalists pushed back against discredited democratic reformers.

Traumatic Chechen terrorist attacks reinforced desperation for effective leadership. Vladimir Putin's record of loyally getting things done elevated him as a younger, stronger, sober, successor to Yeltsin on January 1, 2000. It was in the finest Russian tradition of the heist: like Lenin, Stalin, and even Gorbachev, he had more in mind for the job than it appeared when he took it on.

Aiming to end “the decade of humiliation,” Putin (and the rising price of oil) delivered a modernizing economy and dramatic gains in incomes (140 per cent from 2000-09), a strengthened state, better services, and political stability.

But there would be no celebration of the 1917 Revolution. No communist, Putin abhors revolutions, having been shocked by East German riots in 1989 in his KGB post in Dresden.

After asking for a period of “quietening down,” his authoritarian instincts emerged. He narrowed democratic space, shut down NGOs as “tools of the West” and re-established the primacy of security agencies. He scorned liberal values, initiating laws against "gay propaganda." His response to peaceful protests by middle-class and professional Russians fed-up with corruption and enforced “political infancy” was that “Russians don’t need upheavals. They need a great Russia.”

Putin’s concept of a “great Russia” is mainstream belief in its insistence on respect for Russian interests. Nothing he does is more popular in Russia than standing up to America.

Putin had initially welcomed newly-deepened links with the U.S. until he concluded the Americans took Russian views for granted. He recoiled from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and resented the push to expand NATO to republics of the ex-USSR. He blamed anti-Russian “colour revolutions” on western-influenced activists. But he also feared their anti-corruption motif could infect oligarchic Moscow, where activists like Alexei Navalny has agitated against his party of “crooks and thieves,” increasingly effectively. The call for "fairness" is an old Russian one, and Navalny packages it with his own brand of nationalism, avoiding the opprobrium still hanging over pro-democracy activists.

The covert and other support for the armed insurgency in Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine and the blunt land grab of Crimea were improvised responses by Putin.

The effort to channel Russo-centric "greatness" is both an identity-booster and a political device to legitimize Putin's power. Like all authoritarians, he conflates the national interest with himself.

Gorbachev had laid bare the system’s dismally flawed ideological foundation, but failed to provide alternative reasons to believe in the state. Putin re-asserted a strong state to anchor national identity, but linked it to roots in pre-Bolshevik

Russia to fill the void left by the evacuation of communism, airbrushing the traumatic decades that followed.

His nativist theme aims to, as Putin said in a speech in Novgorod in 2013, channel “the Russian people, language, culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church...intellectual, spiritual, and moral strength, grounded in its history, values, and traditions.”

If he mimics Lenin's rejection of a western orientation for Russia, his reasoning — Europe's abandonment of “Christian values, that constitute the basis of western civilization” — rejects Lenin's hatred of the Orthodox Church and "its icons."

Do these historic allusions mean that Russia seeks its old empire? Is "greater" Russia a threat? Putin's ambitions are not territorial, though he wants that customary buffer. He is a populist nationalist throwing the red meat of patriotic Russian interest to his supporters. No wonder he and Trump are a fit. Putin and Trump (“America first, always America first”) both vaunt militarized and economic nationalisms of a kind that led to the 20th century's wars.

His interference in the U.S. 1916 election was pay-back for US “provocation” of “the coup” in Kiev and 2011 “Russia without Putin” protests in Moscow and aimed at Hillary Clinton. Like the tsars and Soviet leaders, Putin inhabits a bubble that produces the sort of hubris that, in this instance, caused him to over-reach, using an old playbook of "active measures," and "*kompromat*" we thought had been shelved a quarter-century ago.

History survives in collective memory, circling back as a remembered cause or as a curse, often misrepresented and even manipulated, recalling the Soviet joke that it's not the future "that's unpredictable, but the past.”

Dissident Czech playwright-turned-president Vaclav Havel told me in 1995 that Russia would need 25 to 50 years to achieve democracy. I thought, at that heady time, he was being cynical. He may have been optimistic. Putin certainly does not correlate greatness with under-performing democracies. But Russian reformers and their successors will have their say.

Whatever happens, the celebration of Russian nationalist "greatness" is embraced by Russians who a short time ago were on the ropes, after their liberation from a grotesque history of terror. The gift now of alternative state belief is an intoxicating, if illusory, antidotal therapy for relatively passive citizens.

That the narrative is manipulated doesn't weaken the reality that Russia's impact since 1917 has been "great," if adversarial and disruptive. It continues. Putin is the product of Russian history. He is challenging, deliberately. But he is not the worst version of a right-wing nationalist that could have come to power after Gorbachev's probably inevitable crash.

Canadian influence in and on Russia, at times significant, has withered in the wake of Russian action vis-s-vis Ukraine and the exigencies of our politics. We can sustain a diplomatic discourse that has two tracks: we always have. Instead, we have bought politically into the emotional American embrace of a new Cold War, that has as much anti-Russian animus as U.S. attitudes after 1917.

It is in our own interest for Russia to be objectively engaged — especially by the country with which it shares most of the northern hemisphere and is increasingly and rightly viewed as the "other North America."

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