

# Making Sense of a Revolution

By Leon Aron

The characters of nature are legible, it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run to read them. We must make use of a cautious, I had almost said a timorous, method of proceeding. We must not attempt to fly, when we can scarcely pretend to creep. In considering any complex matter, we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one.

—Edmund Burke, Preface, *On Taste*

This is the twentieth issue of the *Russian Outlook*. In the five years since the first quarterly essay, the winter 1998 issue, the series, including this essay, has recorded more than 110,000 words and more than 900 endnotes—a respectable book's worth. What have we learned?

Five years is a whisk in the history of a great nation in ordinary times, but in revolutionary times it is a giant stretch—sufficient to begin to distinguish the incidental and superficial from the innate and essential. It has become increasingly clear that many Western analysts and journalists had been mistaking the transitory for the fundamental. Those mistakes had several sources: failure to revise ideological categories and generalizations constructed during the Soviet era, failure to understand and account for the shadow of the Soviet era on the Russian present, neglect of the experiences of other post-Communist and postauthoritarian nations.

Whatever the source, the mistakes have led to systematic errors in interpretation and prediction. It seems appropriate to devote the *Outlook's* twentieth anniversary issue to describing and correcting the most common errors in an effort to equip ourselves better for the next five years of the Russian revolution.

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## A Country without a Past, or *Post Hoc, Ergo propter Hoc*

In many journalistic and even scholarly expositions, Russia does not have a past, only a present. Without checks of the pre-1991 records (amply supplied by glasnost), such reports often convey the impression that a particular phenomenon did not exist until their authors noticed it—not unlike the eighteenth-century British idealist philosopher George Berkeley, who believed that the “being of things is their perception” and reportedly claimed that the paintings in the National Gallery disappeared at night when he could not see them.

The ignorance of Soviet antecedents of post-Soviet phenomena leads to confusing chronology with causality: anything observed in a post-Communist Russia is traced to the demise of Communism—a fallacy long known to logicians as “after this, therefore because of this” (*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*).

Such learned myopia robs us of the perspective necessary to judge Russia's progress and distorts it by “presentism,” which historian James M. McPherson defined as “a tendency to read history backwards, measuring change over time from the point of arrival rather than the point of departure.” McPherson added: “But this is the wrong way to measure change. It is like looking through

the wrong end of a telescope—everything appears smaller than it really is.”<sup>1</sup>

The deep roots of the phenomena do not make them less pertinent—or absolve post-Soviet Russia and its leaders of responsibility or even complicity. But they belie simplistic explanations that lay all ills of today’s Russia at post-Communism’s door. Several developments, portrayed as out-of-the-blue catastrophes, are trends that had started long before the birth of post-Communist Russia, were rooted deeply in the country’s social and economic structures, and as such might take years or even decades to reverse.

**The GDP “Plunge” and Poverty.** After decades of Soviet censorship, propaganda lies, and severe restrictions on travel by foreigners, the unimpeded ability of both foreign and Russian reporters to cover whatever they wish made the “bad news” so much more vivid and dramatic. The prime example of such coverage, widespread and Third World–like poverty, has been widely attributed to a sharp (by some estimates as much as 40 percent) diminution of GDP after 1991. Yet neither the extent of the economic downturn nor its responsibility for poverty cannot be assessed correctly without a knowledge of the Soviet past.

Toward the end of Soviet rule, an estimated 30 percent of the inputs of labor and raw materials lost value during production because of waste and the substandard quality of finished products<sup>2</sup>—a situation later labeled a virtual economy. According to a secret study commissioned by Mikhail Gorbachev, the end of state subsidies for industry in 1989 would have resulted in 40 million unemployed, more than two-fifths of all Russian adults, within a year.<sup>3</sup> An authoritative foreign survey of the Russian economy concluded in 1999 that 50 percent of all Russian industrial enterprises, which employed 30 percent of the work force, were “not worth upgrading because they [are] either sub-scale or rely on obsolete technology.”<sup>4</sup>

Millions of ugly shoes, coats, and shirts piled up, unsold, in thousands of warehouses while Soviet Russia’s countryside was dotted with the remnants of giant, expensive Don harvesters, their skeletons picked clean by rural handymen. (Most combines fell apart in six months, but replacement, in effect free of charge, was cheaper than repair.)

Perhaps the greatest waste was the allocation of at least 30 percent of GDP to military production,<sup>5</sup> responsible, among other absurdities, for the Soviet Union’s annual manufacture of more tanks than the rest of the world

combined. The first months of post-Soviet Russia saw the military appropriation cut by 92 percent.

Though contributing to the decline of officially recorded GDP, the drastic cuts in military production, the closing of virtual plants and factories, the end of multiyear construction projects, and the replacement of shoddy goods by imports were hardly blows to the standard of living, as Anders Åslund has demonstrated in a superb pioneering study of post-Communist transitions.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas urban Russia is undergoing an unprecedented renaissance and a greater share of the population (especially younger, college-educated men and women in larger cities) has a wider access to more quality goods and services than at any time in almost a century, privatization and economic liberty have not bettered the lot of millions of Russia’s older, less-educated, rural (or small-town) residents or state sector employees. The latter, though shrunk from 100 percent to 30 percent of the national economy, still has millions, including teachers and most doctors, on its payroll.

The new prosperity has simply not been a match for the vast poverty inherited from the Soviet Union. In 1988, 43 million people, nearly one in six, lived in families with a per capita monthly income of no more than 75 rubles—5 rubles above the official “underprovisioning” line that separated those who had enough to eat from those who did not.<sup>7</sup> One-third of the Soviet Union’s pensioners in the city and eight of ten in the village received 60 rubles a month or less.<sup>8</sup> Russian villages were full of older women (mostly World War II widows) who received pensions of 10, 6, or even 4 rubles a month. A needy family with many children received assistance in the amount of 4 rubles a month for the fourth child and 6 rubles for the fifth.<sup>9</sup> In all, 80 million Soviet citizens (nearly one-third of the total) earned less than 100 rubles a month and, in the words of a Soviet journalist, “hardly made ends meet.”<sup>10</sup>

At the Nineteenth Party Conference a high-ranking official disclosed that half of all Soviet schools did not have central heating, running water, or indoor toilets.<sup>11</sup> One hundred million Soviet citizens (almost 40 percent of the population) had less “living space” than prescribed by the official “sanitary norm” of 9 square meters per person.<sup>12</sup>

**The Health Care Crisis.** The woeful state of Russian state-provided, free, and universal health care has often been explained by another post-Soviet phenomenon: the diminution of the budgetary allocation for medicine. Yet,

though far below that of Western nations in absolute terms, already post-Soviet Russia's health care spending as a percentage of the country's GDP went up sharply from 2.9 percent in 1990 to 5.7 percent in 1995.<sup>13</sup>

A great deal of explanation is again in the Soviet past. In 1988, 1.2 million beds (or 35 percent of the total) were in hospitals without hot water; every sixth bed was in a facility without running water. Thirty percent of all Soviet hospitals lacked indoor plumbing and toilets.<sup>14</sup> Two years later the State Statistical Committee painted a grimmer picture: 19 percent of hospitals had no central heating; 45 percent lacked bathrooms or showers, and 49 percent, hot water.<sup>15</sup>

A leading Soviet pediatrician lamented in 1987 that Soviet industry produced six of the sixty pieces of equipment that Soviet obstetricians and pediatricians considered absolutely necessary for adequate care.<sup>16</sup> "Not a single Soviet-made ultrasound machine. Not a single one in thirty years! This is the length of the entire Space Age!" he cried. Other items in short supply included wrapping cloths and bottle nipples for newborn babies.<sup>17</sup> The minister of health also disclosed that the Soviet Union's infant mortality<sup>†</sup> was higher than forty-nine other nations and lagged behind Barbados and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>18</sup> (Most likely as a result of the increase in the spending as percentage of the GDP, post-Soviet Russia's infant mortality registered a significant decline in 1998.)<sup>19</sup>

**AIDS.** Another subject of media attention, especially lately, has been the rapid spread of AIDS in Russia. Again, the phenomenon's roots extend deeply in the past and are likely to be extirpated only by the long-term growth of the Russian economy and a structural change in the health care system, including at least some privatization.

The first outbreak of AIDS occurred in 1989 in children's hospitals in Elista and Volgograd. Two dozen children were contaminated because of "gross violation in the rules for the use of syringes" and of "blood transfusion systems." Underpaid and harried nurses in catastrophically understaffed hospitals did not have sterilized needles and "combined in a single syringe drugs that were then consecutively injected into different patients."<sup>20</sup>

Disposable syringes (as well as disposable dental instruments, particularly drills) were rare. At the time the Soviet Union needed at least 3 billion disposable syringes

annually, industry "promised" to produce only 150 million (or one-twentieth of that number) in 1989.<sup>21</sup> (As a result of embarrassing publicity, the government rushed 250,000 disposable syringes to Volgograd, together with 10,000 pairs of surgical gloves.)

According to the "chief sanitary engineer" and deputy minister of health of the USSR, along with the lack of disposable syringes and dental drill nozzles, "the reuse of 'dirty' blood transfusion systems . . . guarantees 100 percent contamination." With "thousands" "doomed to become contaminated in hospitals and clinics," in 1989 a Soviet journalist forecast 600,000 HIV virus carriers, and 6,000 sick or dead from AIDS by 1991 and 15 million infected and 200,000 sick by 2000.<sup>22</sup>

**Alcoholism and Male Mortality.** Like the Russian health care crisis in general, the sharp decline in the male life expectancy in the early to mid-1990s was generally attributed to the state's penury. Yet here too the explanation extends well beyond the lack of funds.

The production of cheap vodka doubled between 1958 and 1984.<sup>23</sup> The sale of alcohol became one of the largest domestic sources of income for the Soviet state, 14 percent of revenues.<sup>24</sup> As Nikolai Ryzhkov, Mikhail Gorbachev's first prime minister, wrote in his memoirs: "The country was drinking itself into the ground. [People] drank everywhere. Before work. After work. In *obkoms* [regional party committees] and in *raykoms* [district party committees]. At construction sites and on the shop floor."<sup>25</sup> Fifteen million drunks a year were arrested. Premature deaths caused by alcohol accounted for one-fifth of all deaths.

Combined with the impact of alcohol, the effects of an unhealthy fat-, sugar-, and carbohydrate-saturated diet and a lack of exercise made heart disease the leading cause of death among Soviet males older than fifty. Whereas in the West tens of thousands of heart patients are saved by bypass surgery, no more than a few dozen such operations had been done in Russia. (When in the fall of 1996 Boris Yeltsin insisted on his quintuple bypass being performed in Russia and by Russian surgeons, he showed a great deal of his customary physical courage.)

The decline in male life expectancy began before the end of Communism: between 1964 and 1980 it plunged from sixty-seven years to sixty-two.<sup>26</sup> The trend was

† Between 1989 and 1998 infant mortality in Russia decreased 7 percent. The most likely explanation is the near doubling of Russia's spending on health care as a share of GDP: from 2.9

percent in 1990–1991 to 5.7 percent in 1997. See Anders Åslund, *Building Capitalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), tables 8.8 and 8.9, pp. 320–21.

briefly arrested between 1986 and 1988, when the sale of vodka was restricted, prices were raised, and the number of alcohol-related fatalities decreased. But in 1989 expectancy registered a decline of more than one year. Between 1990 and 1993, coinciding with the stresses of revolutionary change, the ghastly bill came due: the thoroughly poisoned generation born between 1930 and 1940 and addicted during the two and a half decades of a state-sponsored national alcoholic binge, 1960–1985, began to reach their mid-fifties and sixties. (Kazakhstan and Ukraine, with the largest share of ethnic Russians in the population, experienced a similar decline in life expectancy.)<sup>27</sup>

The subsequent dynamic exposed the deeper, primarily generational, causes of the phenomenon: the shock of a new economic and political reality and the habitual heavy consumption of vodka. As the stress from adjustment to wrenching revolutionary changes began to lessen and the market share of alternatives to vodka—good, affordable wines and beer, which for the first time surpassed vodka in per capital consumption—grew rapidly, life expectancy began to recover.

Male life expectancy increased by two years by 1998 and came within a year and seven months of the prerevolutionary 1983–1985 estimate of 62.8 years. A steady growth in male life expectancy is projected, with a seventy-year life span by 2025: seven years above the pre-Gorbachev Soviet level and five years over the apogee reached during Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign.<sup>28</sup>

**Lawlessness, Thievery, Corruption.** “The legal insecurity that has hung over our people from time immemorial has been a kind of school for them. The scandalous injustice of one half of the law has taught them to hate the other half; they submit only for force. Complete inequality before the law has killed any respect they may have had for legality. Whatever his station, the Russian evades or violates the law wherever he can do so with impunity; the government does exactly the same thing.”<sup>29</sup> Alexander Herzen, one of Russia’s greatest liberal thinkers, wrote that in the early 1850s.

Beyond the legacy of authoritarianism, post-Soviet Russia’s ethos carries severe genetic maladies of seven decades and four generations in a system that deployed mass murder, fear, and lies to extirpate the very concepts of private morality, truth, charity, honesty, and justice. In the words of a Politburo member and the godfather of glasnost, Alexander Yakovlev, “History has

not known such a concentrated hatred toward the human being.”<sup>30</sup>

In 1989 two of glasnost’s leading essayists sketched a composite portrait of the product of the hellish experiment: Homo Sovieticus, as the type was referred to in the Soviet press. He had been

raised in an atmosphere of lies, treachery, servile loyalty to the leader, brought up in a society in which the meaning of many concepts was shifted and took an opposite meaning (white became black, honor and nobility were faults, and informing on neighbors a civic duty). . . .

Fear was instilled in our brains forever, and so was treachery in our blood and mistrust in our eyes.<sup>31</sup>

The habits that Homo Sovieticus brought to post-Communism included stealing on the job anything that could be stolen, accepting bribes, and “using, systematically or on a one-time basis, unfair opportunities for personal enrichment.” Such conduct was not “an annoying anomaly,” but “the daily behavior of pilferers and grabbers, bribe-takers and thieves of all ranks.”<sup>32</sup>

An eminent legal scholar, Konstantin Simis, called the Soviet Union “a land of kleptocracy.”<sup>33</sup> In his memoirs Ryzhkov recalled, “[We] stole from ourselves, took and gave bribes.”<sup>34</sup> Stanislav Govorukhan, a renowned Soviet film director, testified in 1989:

We have turned into a country of universal thievery. Virtually all of us steal.

We steal sugar, coffee, tea, candy, nuts, planks, transistors, or paper from plants and factories. We steal time from enterprises where we work by going to work late, leaving earlier, and pursuing personal projects during working time.<sup>35</sup>

Along with privileges of the *nomenklatura*, corruption became one of the most powerful mobilizing themes of perestroika. Ilya Mil’shtein, a journalist, described his country in the fall of 1991 as “a country depraved to the core, a state rotten from top to bottom, a great power of fast thieves and bribe-takers.”<sup>36</sup>

There are no quick fixes for so deeply ingrained a culture of corruption. The only lasting cures are systemic ones that will delivery, incrementally and over a long stretch, freedom of speech and the press, greater

transparency of government, opposition to criticize and investigate fully, impartial and qualified courts, the curtailment of the state's bureaucratic control of the economy, and the ability of voters to turn out venal officials both at the local and the national level. In today's Russia all those remedies are decades behind what is required for a liberal capitalism—yet far and away ahead of those obtained in the Soviet Union.

**Organized Crime.** During the 1960s and 1970s the ubiquitous Soviet *defitsit* (shortage of the most elementary goods) engendered a vast black market and inevitably criminal gangs as protectors and enforcers. A spate of kidnappings of underground entrepreneurs in the 1970s prompted a national meeting between the sides: the businessmen agreed to pay gangsters a monthly protection tax, 10 percent of their profits.<sup>37</sup>

Driven underground and ruthlessly suppressed by the regime, the private economy continued to grow. By the late 1980s, through what a Soviet newspaper called “a network of speculation,” organized crime expanded into the production and delivery of everything from soap and medicines to auto parts, computers, furniture, and gasoline.<sup>38</sup> By that time Soviet investigators had identified at least 200 criminal “families.” At least one in three of those groups had contacts with “corrupt members of the administrative apparatus” and spent two-third of their income in bribing officials.<sup>39</sup>

As in the United States sixty years earlier, the Soviet *mafyya* (applied to the Soviet reality, the term first appeared in print during glasnost) became nationally organized and reached an unprecedented level of violence as a result of Gorbachev's “prohibition” (1986–1991), when severe restrictions on the sale of vodka created enormous bootleg operations, including all-night stores patrolled by armed thugs.<sup>40</sup>

## An Incomparable Country?

Ignorance (or deliberate neglect) of the new Russia's Soviet past distorts the picture of today by downplaying the enormity of structural obstacles impeding the country's progress toward liberal democratic capitalism. But implying an absolute uniqueness of the Russian experience is just as erroneous.

As always in social sciences, juxtaposition greatly enhances both understanding and the ability to predict. In Russia's case three obvious loci yield candidates for

comparison: states in the aftermath of great revolutions, contemporary post-etatist countries, and, of course, other post-Communist states.

### Temporary Chaos from Great Revolutions.

Throughout the 1990s, inflation, huge budget deficits, and eventually a financial crisis and devaluation of the ruble were cited as proof of Russia's failure and led many in the media and academia to debate quite seriously “who lost Russia.” Yet as Vladimir Mau, a leading Russian free market economist and a key adviser to the government, has demonstrated in articles and his magisterial book on “contemporary Russia in historical perspective,”<sup>41</sup> in the short run

a revolutionary state always finds itself incapable to collect taxes and, as a result, to fulfill its financial obligations. A financial crisis grows quickly, manifested, first and foremost, in a budget crisis (the impossibility of paying government's bills) and a monetary crisis (the drop in the confidence in the national currency).<sup>42</sup>

In addition to a state's bankruptcy (or near-bankruptcy), national economic depressions almost always attend revolutionary transformations, from seventeenth-century England and late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France to the United States after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Moreover, in antitotalitarian revolutions like that in Russia, the abrupt collapse of the *ancien régime*, in which a state owned everything and directed everyone, can result only in a dislocation of catastrophic proportions.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, “most practical men of affairs” (including many who had helped engineer the ascendancy of William III and the constitutional monarchy) looked wistfully over the English Channel to the seemingly “stable” and “efficient” absolutism of Louis XIV and Colbert. As described by the great English historian Jack Plumb, even some leading Whigs “hankered after the Stuarts” because of their “strong government” and “efficiency,” which seemed irretrievably lost in “the chaos that followed the Revolution.”<sup>43</sup> That sentiment echoes the admiration of many Western observers for China's alleged order and prosperity. But—undermined by a wide and growing abyss between its economic and political systems, corrupt to the core, teeming with millions of impoverished and dispossessed peasants, and spending itself into eventual bankruptcy



though ever-increasing military appropriations and support for thousands of failed state-owned enterprises—China’s “stability” is but a lull before a storm that will make Russia’s 1990s seem a minor disturbance.

**The Post-Etatist and Postauthoritarian Paradigm.** In many key instances Russia’s past and present economic and political travails strongly resemble a paradigm that *mutatis mutandis* unfolds in virtually every post-etatist and formerly protectionist country (the parallels with Argentina and Brazil are especially vivid).

The pattern’s major features are an overvalued currency propped up by the government to conquer hyperinflation; the resultant growth of imports and depression of domestic industries; a narrow tax base and universal tax evasion; inflated populist budgets forced by the Left plurality (or majority) in parliament; severe and chronic budget deficits financed by borrowing from international lending institutions and the selling of government debt at increasingly exorbitant interest rates; the obstructionist and short-sighted Left opposition, opposed to budget reduction; increasingly skittish (and increasingly short-term) investors demanding still higher interest rates as risk premiums; enormous political obstacles to overhauling the expensive and wasteful welfare state and the enormous industrial subsidies to failing enterprises; mountains of bad loans to cronies of high-level bureaucrats; and the inevitable denouement of the capital flight, currency devaluation, and economic depression.

**Post-Communist States and Population Decline.** Many processes unfolding in Russia are part and parcel of the trends common to most post-Communist societies. One development often portrayed as exclusively Russian—and therefore alarming—is a projected population decline of 18 percent by 2050.

But fertility rates have diminished dramatically in every post-Communist country. Causes include the diminution of enterprise-based child care services (especially kindergartens) and declining state subsidies for such services; new career opportunities and long-term career planning for young women; reliable contraceptives (replacing abortion as the primary source of birth control); and later marriages and later births. For both the former Soviet Union and east-central European nations, fertility rates dropped an average of 37 percent.<sup>44</sup> Some of the sharpest reductions in fertility have occurred among the leaders of the post-Communist transition: Poland (39 percent), Estonia (40 percent), the Czech

Republic (43), Slovenia (43), and Latvia (45). Since German unification, the birthrate in the former GDR has fallen 50 percent.<sup>45</sup>

By 2050 the populations of such leading industrial nations of the former USSR as Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Lithuania are projected to decline by 35 percent, 33 percent, 23 percent, and 20 percent, respectively. In east-central Europe the former GDR will have 35 percent fewer people, Romania 27 percent, Hungary and Slovenia 26 percent, and the Czech Republic 24 percent.<sup>46</sup>

The changes, moreover, appear to link post-Communist societies with those of Western Europe. By 2025 the population of France is projected to contract by 18 percent, Germany by 30 percent, and Italy by 32 percent.<sup>47</sup>

**The Common Thread of Corruption.** Corruption is the central political and public opinion issue in every post-Communist country and every country undergoing post-etatist or postauthoritarian economic transition. It is especially salient in countries with a scale of change approaching Russia’s: Argentina, Brazil, India, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Africa. In absolute terms of money changing hands, China seems to be the unchallenged world champion.

While Russian corruption rightly seems astounding to Western democracies, it is both well within the norm of Russia’s historic and geographic neighborhood (Rumania, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, and Mongolia) and less pervasive than in every other former Soviet republic, save Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Since 1999, Russia’s level of “state capture and administrative corruption” (that is, bribery as a percentage of a firm’s revenues) was comparable to that of Latvia and Lithuania, which until now have been considered among the front-runners of post-Communist nations.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Inertia of Old Methods, Colorblindness, and Ideology**

A few factors of distortion cannot be traced to a single source. Instead they bespeak the inability of many in the media and among experts to adjust their methods to a radically altered reality, the haste of unwarranted generalizations, and the power of ideology.

**Kremlinology.** A useful method of analysis when there was little reliable information about Soviet Russia’s

politics, economy, or society and when all power was concentrated in the hands of a few Politburo oligarchs, Kremlinology is badly outdated. Power has devolved to dozens of geographically and politically dispersed centers; the opposition influences government policies, mass media are no longer censored, and public opinion is freely registered and guides politicians on many key issues.

Yet many reports continue to be Moscow-centric and obsessed with personalities. In such media coverage (or expert analysis) the latest twist in Kremlin intrigue, the fate of a Kremlin faction, or the sack of a minister (forever forgotten a week later) is more important than a recent election in which 60 million Russians voted. Policies are traced solely to a handful of political actors for whom there is no policy, only politics; no agenda, but seizing and holding power; no ideology, but greed and the lust for power. Public opinion matters little, if at all, and in any case is easily manipulated by the elite.

No structure, causality, or continuity exists. Politics is permanently severed from politics. The Russian people are portrayed as an infinitely malleable, daily refashioned clay. A magnificent epic with a cast of millions is reduced to a third-rate melodrama.

Yet throughout the past decade the Russian people themselves have made all crucial choices peacefully and freely. Russia placed no restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, on nonviolent political opposition, on political parties and movements and their ability to organize, campaign, and disseminate their views.

In the 1990s, whenever it mustered a majority, the Duma successfully sank laws pushed by the Kremlin and even overrode presidential vetoes. Until expelled by their peers, Duma deputies are shielded by immunity from prosecution of any kind—and as with any parliament, the Duma has been extremely reluctant and slow to do so. Today, with complete impunity, Deputy Sergei Yushenkov hands out videocassettes to anyone interested in a documentary accusing the Russian secret service of setting off blasts that killed more than 300 civilians in apartment houses in Moscow and Volgograd in September 1999. As the former head of the Federal Security Service and the prime minister at the time, President Vladimir Putin is effectively charged with planning, or at the least condoning and concealing, the heinous crime.

Since the August 1991 revolution, Russia has held seven national referendums and Duma or presidential elections and at least three rounds of gubernatorial and legislative polls in each of the eight-nine regions. Only in one national poll, the constitutional referendum and

parliamentary election in December 1993, following the armed confrontation of the previous October, did the turnout fall below 61 percent of eligible voters. In the two presidential elections 69 percent came to the polls. (In the last three U.S. off-year congressional elections, the average turnout was 37 percent, and in the last three presidential elections, 52 percent.)

The Russian people made fateful decisions in the April 1993 referendum with a vote of confidence in Yeltsin and support of economic reforms; in the 1996 presidential election, when voters preferred Yeltsin to the Communist Party's chairman, Gennady Zyuganov; and in the December 19, 1999, parliamentary election, which shifted (most likely permanently) the Duma plurality from the Communists and their allies to the pro-reform Center-Right.

Seriously flawed analysis and policy recommendations result from a disdain for (or ignorance of) the free and sustained participation of the Russian people in deciding their country's fate and for the wide range of imperfectly and inconsistently implemented but real and wide-ranging political, economic, and civil rights accorded to them. Freedom House, in its most recent Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, ranked Russia with Egypt. Russia scored only one point higher on political liberties and was just as low on civil liberties<sup>49</sup> as the twenty-one-year personal and corrupt dictatorship, under which neither opposition nor freedom of speech or the press even remotely exists (except for anti-Semitic and anti-American ravings) and the Coptic Christian minority is oppressed with medieval savagery. This year Eddin Ibrahim, an ailing 63-year-old Egyptian-American academic and sociology professor at the American University in Cairo, attempted to organize teams of election monitors and to teach his countrymen how to register, read, and count ballots; he was sentenced to seven years in prison for "receiving foreign funds without authorization" and "tarnishing Egypt's image."

Just as inexplicably Russia scored lower than Ukraine, where government corruption is rampant and where a leading opposition journalist, Heorhiy Gongadze, was killed and beheaded for his probe of government malfeasance. Stranger still, Freedom House rates civil rights in Russia on a par with Zimbabwe, where the government harasses, tortures, and kills opposition leaders and white farmers, whom it shamelessly robs of land.

Similarly, in expounding his foreign policy credo at the Reagan Library in November 1999, the Republican Presidential front-runner George W. Bush made no distinction

between Russia and China as far as people's participation in the countries' political process. "Real change in Russia, *as in China*," Bush said, "will come not from above but from below" (emphasis added). At the time (and today) China had not held a single even partially free national election; had brutally repressed public dissent of any kind; had censored every public outlet, including the Internet; had jailed and tortured nonviolent Falun Gong followers; and had continued repression of Catholics. In 1999 Russia's defense budget was at least six times smaller than ten years before; over the same period China's military appropriations had been growing 8–10 percent annually.

***Pars pro Toto, or Unless Everything Is Right, Nothing Is.*** For Western observers of Russia, this logical error—by which the part is extrapolated to the whole—manifests itself in an impression that if not everything is progressing, nothing is.

Thus a case of one corrupt or incompetent local court or judge becomes synonymous with the entire judicial system. The demise (with the help of the authorities' heavy-handed pressure) of a television network built with never repaid loans from the state and shamelessly deployed by the owner for his business and political interests is presented as the end of freedom of speech in the entire country. The rigged auctions, venality, and insider shenanigans that attended the privatization of the industrial and energy giants deny the hard-won success and courage of the owners of almost 1 million small and mid-sized businesses that give customers attention and quality. The persistence of poverty somehow belies the cornucopia of food, goods, and services that has allowed millions to regain the dignity lost in the queues, shortages, and rationing of Soviet days. Public acts of anti-Semitism (well within the sad norm of Eastern Europe and far below the number in France or Belgium) negate the end of the 200 years of state anti-Semitism, the sudden prominence of Jews in politics and economy, and the renaissance of Jewish culture, religion, and ethnic pride.

By refusing to admit halftones or a range of hues, the practitioners of such Manichaeism render themselves (and their readers and students) colorblind: a coat of many colors, which is today's Russia, is reduced to depressingly dull dark gray.

**Ideology.** Unsurprisingly, Leftist scholars and journalists, who do not like capitalism in the United States or anywhere else, are less enthused about the Russian experiment with free markets. To them, Gorbachev's

regime was the bluebird of one-party "socialism with a human face" (a species not known in political zoology), and they will never forgive Yeltsin and post-Soviet Russia in general for superseding their dream.

The motives of some of the post-Soviet Russia's relentless detractors on the Right are much harder to gauge. Post-Communist Russia has surely gone beyond the wildest dreams of American conservatives by ending Communism and the Soviet empire, radically demilitarizing and disarming, ending global competition with the United States, and introducing political, civil, and economic liberties, private property, and the free market.

For a precedent, if not explanation, of such seemingly irrational and intense dislike, one must resort to what might be called the Nixonian paradox. President Richard Nixon implemented much of a liberal domestic agenda and certainly exceeded such an agenda in foreign policy by pulling out of Vietnam, opening China, and engineering détente with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, he was, and continues after his death to be, hated by the Left.

In the disgraceful "who lost Russia?" hullabaloo of the fall of 1999, the *New York Times Magazine*, which featured an eponymous story on its cover, was joined by the Republican majority leader, Dick Armey, who called Russia "a looted and bankrupt zone of nuclearized anarchy." In similarly bizarre political unanimity, post-Soviet Russia must be the only issue uniting the *Nation* and the *National Review*—a coincidence that should concern to editors of both magazines.

The *Nation's* tenor is illustrated by the title of the collection of the essays published by the magazine's Russian affairs columnist, Stephen F. Cohen: *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Soviet Russia*.<sup>50</sup> In "Chaos Management: The State Has Failed," Stephen Cohen's *National Review* counterpart, David Pryce-Jones, saw "elements of catastrophe . . . gathering" over Russia in the summer of 1999.<sup>51</sup> He predicted "chaos and civil strife" unless Russia's 1993 Constitution (a cornerstone of Russia's civil and political liberties, as well as private property rights) was revised.<sup>52</sup> Nothing has changed in Russia since 1991: "The Communist structure was co-opted rather than destroyed;" it was "a perpetuation of the system, not a revolution," and had "nothing to do with democracy."<sup>53</sup> According to a *National Review* editorial, Yeltsin's years in power (during which Russia radically de-militarized, privatized, and de-Bolshevized) were but a "tragic" and "deadly drift of thoughtlessness."<sup>54</sup>



**A Great Privilege.** The first postrevolutionary decade in Russia has given scholars and journalists alike a great deal with which to test and adjust their forecasts and methods. Among the sobering lessons is the realization that overcoming the legacy of seven decades of totalitarian Communism will take much longer and be more painful than originally hoped. Whether in economy or demography, health care or criminality, living standards or mores—untangling the causes of the present-day phenomena and charting the future require being mindful of the country's Soviet past.

At the same time the *sui generis* nature of Russia's post-Soviet development must not be exaggerated. Unique as its past may be, Russia is by no means original in several fundamental economic, social, and demographic aspects of post-Communism or post-etatism: vicious cycles of fiscal and monetary crises, corruption, and changes in fertility and reproduction. Other great revolutions resulted in much chaos but in the end proved necessary and beneficial.

A still more important lesson from great revolutions is the necessity of perspective, of a longer view. Taking stock of great events unfolding over years and decades is not unlike separating wheat from chaff in making a long-term business investment. Paraphrasing his mentor, Benjamin Graham, one of America's most successful investors, Warren Buffett, said: "In the short run, the market's a voting machine. . . . In the long run, it is a weighing machine, and the weight of business and how it does is what affects values over time."<sup>55</sup> In the study of post-Soviet Russia, as in that of post-Communism in general, one ought to weigh rather than rush and vote.

Even scrupulous attention to the lessons of the first decade cannot guarantee getting it right all the time. But the most satisfying part of being a student of Russia today is watching a great nation in a great revolution, seeing, in Byron's words, "the Fates change horses, making history change its tune." To be able to revel in the spectacle and, if only occasionally, succeed in imparting the complexity and the many colors of the unfolding epic drama is an opportunity for which one must be grateful.

## Notes

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