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Russia Inspired Arab Protesters

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Several weeks ago, Russia celebrated the 150th anniversary of Tsar Alexander II's abolishment of serfdom, and historians are quick to mention that his reforms failed to create a full-fledged civil society. One thing that the 1860s reforms did accomplish, however, is the formation of an intelligentsia marked by political radicalism and anti-capitalist ideas.

This new intelligentsia were young people — "commoners" if you will — without ties to the traditional elite who felt strong enough to oppose the government and to offer what in modern language would be called "alternative strategies for modernization." There was no place for them in the stagnating Russian Empire, and they responded by creating Russia's first-ever political party, the moderate socialist Land and Freedom party. But when the authorities responded to peaceful protests with repressive measures, they formed Narodnaya Volya, or the People's Will, a left-wing terrorist party that killed both Tsar Alexander II and his era of reforms.

Today's intellectuals rarely refer to this heritage, although it was these common citizens who ultimately formed the identity and culture of the intelligentsia. But, as always happens,

history repeats itself, and not always in the form of a farce. Speaking at a round-table discussion on the recent revolutions in the Middle East, Arab expert Grigory Kosach noted that the key element of the movements that overthrew the leaders in Tunisia and Egypt was the "new commoners." These people are united in their opposition to the "old elite," to the traditional ruling groups — both those promoting Western values and those attempting to control the masses through fundamentalist Islamic ideology. They are patriots whose patriotism consists not in idolizing the ruling regime, but in protesting its backwardness and oppression.

The parallels between the earlier Russian commoners and new intelligentsia during the mid- and late 1800s and today's Arab protesters are striking. In the same way that Russian populists rejected disputes between pro-Western Russians and Slavophiles as meaningless, today's Arab protesting youth have turned the confrontation between Islamists and supporters of the Western course into an anachronism. Like the Slavophiles of the past, Islamists do not see democracy as reflecting their traditional values. In addition, pro-Westerners — both those of 19th-century Russia and the 21st-century Arab world — admire European freedoms but consider them dangerous and premature for their own countries. By contrast, the Russian populists and today's Arab protesters demand democracy here and now, linking it to specific social rights.

Russian populists were not far out of touch with the masses, who showed their capacity for political action during the two Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Elevating the masses of the largest country in the world understandably took a lot of time. The Arab protesters are more fortunate. They live in a society where a significant portion of the population moved to the cities a long time ago. They live in a world of the Internet and cell phones. They are able to gain political influence and success much faster than their Russian predecessors.

But the success of the new Arab commoners reminds us of Russia's history, of its meaning and value. Russia has a proud heritage and traditions, and its democratic tradition is one of its most important and heroic of them all.

Boris Kagarlitsky is director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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