

The Tragic Fate of Russian Reformers

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Sept. 18 marks 100 years since Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister of imperial Russia from 1906 to 1911, was assassinated in Kiev. Stolypin was one of Russia's foremost statesmen and one of the country's most controversial as well.

Stolypin does not fit into any of the standard categories that characterize most Russian politicians: reactionary or reformer, conservative or liberal, Slavophile or Westerner, pro-autocracy or pro-democracy. But one thing is certain: Stolypin was able to set his sights on higher goals and lead the people toward them without catering to the instincts of the crowd or the influential majority.

Were Stolypin's efforts successful? That is the eternal question that reformers, historians and economists struggle with — one that has no definitive answer. Each generation must formulate its own answer to whether people like Stolypin or Yegor Gaidar, the early 1990s economic reformer, achieved their goals.

Stolypin was the longest-serving prime minister in Russian history. He put down a revolution

and initiated deep reforms. One hundred years after his death, he remains one of the most popular figures in Russian history. At the same time, he fell victim to an assassin's bullet that prevented him from completing his reforms and achieving his ultimate goal: achieving 20 years of peace to help transform Russia into a great power.

Stolypin's legacy contains important lessons on how a government should respond to a serious political and economic crisis.

First, a leader should be willing to assume full responsibility — especially for unpopular measures. Stolypin was forced to quell revolutionary terror in the early 1900s, and at times he was ruthless in doing so. And although there were fewer casualties from Stolypin's harsh policies than during future revolutions or during Stalin's repression, his reputation has been saddled with the label of henchman — for which the term “Stolypin's necktie” figures prominently in most descriptions of him. Stolypin did not try to deny or justify his actions, but he once remarked to the State Duma that it is necessary to distinguish between blood on the hands of a criminal and blood on the hands of a surgeon.

Second, any political reformer needs a strong finance minister behind him. Stolypin had this support from Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Vladimir Kokovtsov. Against opposition from all other government agencies, the Finance Ministry under Stolypin established the conditions needed for macroeconomic stability. It strengthened gold reserves and made the Russian currency one of the most stable and attractive in the prewar world.

Finally, a reformer cannot be held hostage to party interests or special interest groups. He should pursue long-term strategic goals, even if this entails short-term difficulties.

Stolypin's tragic fate was typical for Russian reformers. About 10 years ago, a Russian politician said he wished that modern Russian reformers would be more like Mikhail Speransky, the “father of Russian liberalism” under Tsars Alexander I and Nicholas I; Sergei Witte, first prime minister of imperial Russia from 1905 to 1906; and Stolypin.

But perhaps the politician spoke too soon. Speransky was charged with treason and exiled, Witte was fired after implementing one of world history's best monetary reforms, and Stolypin was shot dead at the height of his reform efforts.

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