

Why Occupy Wall Street Hasn't Hit Russia

By [Richard Lourie](#)

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A few years ago, a Russian friend visited me in New York and expressed a desire to see Wall Street. But when I took her there, she exclaimed with almost angry disappointment, “That’s Wall Street?!”

Years of Soviet propaganda had led her to expect a vast avenue bristling with monstrous skyscrapers, and here was some small twisty street out of Dickens.

Wall Street proves that to be powerful you don’t have to look powerful. But can the same be said of the Occupy Wall Street movement?

At first glance, the protesters seem to be a rag-tag bunch of pierced and fresh-faced youth, earnest and well-organized. The actual spot they’ve commandeered, Zuccotti Square, has been transformed into a small, makeshift village with areas for free food, clothing, medical care, information and sleeping.

The atmosphere is amiable, anarchic and with a few touches of suspicion in the air of those who would corrupt or co-opt their movement. Several speeches are given every day, and meetings are held at the same time in different parts of the square.

The anti-hierarchical spirit is prevalent. It seems that the protesters are less concerned with any specific aim but are more focused on one overarching goal: that power structures do not emerge.

The movement has lasted and spread. Which 20th-century uprising will it end up resembling?

Soviet tanks rolled over the Prague Spring of 1968 resulting in the tart quip: "What is the most neutral country in the world? Czechoslovakia, it doesn't interfere even in its own internal affairs." Riot police can do the same job in the United States.

The Polish Solidarity movement of 1980-81 was also crushed, but it led to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc by 1989. I was with Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk and saw a similar makeshift-village setup that I've observed in New York. The Polish revolt, however, was made by middle-aged shipyard workers who had already seen their colleagues gunned down from helicopters in a previous uprising.

Still, age and experience are not always reliable guides either. In hushed conversation in Vilnius, Lithuania, in March 1988, the elder statesmen of the local intelligentsia strenuously assured me that Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost wouldn't reach them before their grandchildren were in university. A few years later, it was tiny Lithuania that led the exodus from the Soviet Union.

Can any sort of spontaneous revolt happen any time soon in Russia? The obvious answer is "no." Putin is still genuinely popular, and Russians have had enough of tumult and chaos. Besides, Russians, despite the large gap between the rich and poor in the country, have not caught on to the acrid hatred for the wealthy, suddenly so prevalent in the Occupy Wall Street movement. After all, jailed billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky has become a martyr and a hero to many, including those who originally supported his arrest in 2003.

Having been swindled too many times, Russians have no belief in the efficacy of revolutions to improve lives. In fact, with the inevitable decline in oil revenues and the seemingly unstoppable decline in the birth rate, many Russians don't see their country having much of a future at all past mid-century.

For the time being, all seems swampishly calm in the motherland. But, no doubt, the same could have been said of Tunisia on any day before Dec. 17, 2010, when one young man reached his wit's end, lit himself on fire and changed the world.

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