The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Martin Luther King's Russia

By Alexei Bayer

February 10, 2013



Russian nationalism is on the rise. It comes in a number of mind-boggling, and often mutually exclusive, varieties. There is state-supported nationalism, which extols President Vladimir Putin for standing up to Russia's enemies abroad and pro-Western liberals at home. There is also the unofficial nationalism that claims that his regime oppresses the Russian people. Within these broad categories, smaller groupings abound, embracing Russian Orthodoxy and pre-Christian paganism, Soviet-era imperialism and Aryan supremacy, anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism.

Some groups are dangerous. The first mass protest against the Putin regime was not the peaceful march of pro-democracy activists in December 2011 but the nationalist riot of soccer fans a year earlier. The Kremlin has often used the threat of a nationalist takeover to justify its hold on power since "benevolent authoritarianism" is clearly the lesser of the two evils.

Yet radical Russian nationalism has no real future in a multiethnic country, just as Adolf Hitler's German nationalism could never fly in Austria-Hungary, with its dozen nationalities,

and was implemented only in the more homogeneous Germany.

Nationalism did play a key part in Russian history in the 20th century, but it wasn't Russian nationalism. It was the growing nationalist sentiment in the Western parts of the Russian Empire and the aspirations of the Jewish people in the Pale of Settlement that the tsarist government was never able to channel productively. While the February and October revolutions occurred because Russians were weary of World War I, Poles, Latvians, Ukrainians and Armenians — not to mention Jews and Georgians — were instrumental in organizing the Bolshevik coup, defending the soviets in the Civil War and building the communist state.

Similarly, the Soviet regime was undermined by the rising nationalism in Soviet republics and by the struggle of Jews to emigrate to Israel. It was no accident that the end of communism in Russia coincided with the Soviet collapse.

Just as in 1917 and 1991, the national factors are likely to come into play today, but not the grievances of Russian nationalists, who always seem to blame foreigners and ethnic minorities for their country's woes. Instead, it will be the claims of migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, who have moved into Russia during the past 15 years of petrodollar prosperity and who have gradually become important players in the Russian economy.

Whatever the official figures on immigration, a simple trip on the metro suggests that such migrants constitute if not an outright majority then at least close to half of Moscow's population. Personal observations may be useless as statistics — especially since many native Muscovites commute by car — but friends with preschool children report that child care centers are dominated by the children of mostly Muslim migrants.

Russia's guest workers are in a very similar position to African-Americans in the U.S. in the late 1950s. Just like black families that had moved to industrial cities in the North in the previous generation, migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus have settled in the Russian parts of the country and have no desire to return home, or even the possibility of doing so. Their children are growing up Russian, but the locals don't consider them such. They are discriminated against and abused. They are often defrauded by unscrupulous employers and shaken down by the police.

Historically, the U.S. has fairly successfully assimilated the Irish, Jews and other white immigrants. But not African-Americans. Problems of poverty and discrimination persisted until they finally blew up in the 1960s. Just as in today's Russia, the racial explosion in the U.S. occurred during a period of broader social turmoil. There were student protests, the anti-war movement and a general disaffection with the U.S. social and economic model that shook the country during that turbulent decade.

But in the U.S., such protests didn't lead to revolution or civil war. On the contrary, society was liberalized and modernized, and a more open and tolerant system emerged, allowing the United States to reclaim the global economic, political and moral leadership it nearly lost in the aftermath of the Vietnam war.

Whether such a positive outcome is possible in Russia is unclear. Yet in the context of broadly based changes looming in Russia after 13 years of Putin's rule, these downtrodden new Russians are likely to play a crucial role.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/02/10/martin-luther-kings-russia-a21394