The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Russia and the West Don't Mix

By Alexei Bayer

August 04, 2013




Alexei Bayer

Russia turned westward in the 18th century, but its relationship with the West has remained strained. The two civilizations were like oil and water: No matter how you stir the mixture, the substances stayed separate and Russia always shrugged off Western influences.

For 200 years, Russia was ruled from St. Petersburg, a city built by Western architects and planned under the spell of the French Enlightenment. However, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and other writers despised it, describing it as an alien sore on the body of Mother Russia.

After the 1848 revolution in Europe, ideas such secularism, individualism and universal education didn't take hold in Russia. Even the abolition of serfdom in 1861 was greeted skeptically by peasants, and it was restored anyway in the form of collective farms 70 years later. In the 19th century, narodniks — idealistic students who tried to educate and politically engage "ordinary folks" — rarely found a sympathetic ear in villages. Their failure to rally popular support radicalized narodniks as surely as repression and lack of reforms. As a result, Russia developed the nastiest left-wing terror network in Europe.

Discontent over the explosive growth of Western-style capitalism in the years before World War I and the collapse of feudal society on the countryside were instrumental in the 1917 Revolutions. When Nicholas II abdicated the throne, the Provisional Government tried to position itself as a Western democracy and promptly lost popular support. The Bolsheviks were more successful not because of their Communist ideology, but because they rejected capitalism and proclaimed themselves anti-Western.

Within 10 years of the Bolshevik takeover, Russia managed to flip Western Marxism on its head, transforming it into a neo-feudal ideology and adapting it to Russian realities. Then, Russia closed its borders and engaged in an open confrontation with the West.

When in 1991 Russia finally overthrew communism, it opened its borders and enshrined Western democratic principles in its Constitution. The Constitution remains largely intact, but the love affair with the West has been short-lived. The same oil-and-water principle kicked in, and Russia quickly remade its democracy into a very Russian autocracy, making President Vladimir Putin a de facto tsar.

Nevertheless, over the past two decades, Russia has been changing, albeit slowly and in fits and starts. Unprecedented openness allowed millions to travel, live and study abroad and learn more about the outside world. Every planeload heading westward is a step out of Russia's centuries-old isolation. Meanwhile, Russia has become irreversibly integrated into the world economy, exporting oil and other commodities and buying manufactured goods and food in global markets. Integration has greatly enriched Russian elites and created a modern middle class in the country's major cities. Finally, the development of the Internet with its ability to broadcast information, ideas and lifestyles has shaped a new global generation — young Russians who have more in common with their contemporaries around the world than with their own countrymen steeped in traditional national cultures.

In fact, it is now the nationalists and the traditionalists who have gone on the defensive, calling for violence and resorting to terrorism. In Russia, this produced a weird alliance between Orthodox Christianity, hardline nationalism and leftover Soviet communism. They applaud draconian laws passed by the State Duma, attack homosexuals and other minorities and demand harsh sentences for members of the Pussy Riot punk band. But they are fighting a hopeless rearguard battle. Their ferocity is the best proof that Russia is finally becoming a Western country.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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

Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/04/why-russia-and-the-west-dont-mix-a26424