The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Protest March Headed for Russia's Borders

By Ivan Sukhov

September 24, 2014

The anti-war demonstrations held in Moscow and several other Russian cities on Sept. 21 once again helped many people who strongly disagree with government policies feel that they are not alone.

But the carnival feeling that marked many previous mass rallies has gradually disappeared, along with any hopes for instituting the changes that protesters have been demanding. The situation has deteriorated to such a degree that for many it now makes more sense to leave the country than to try to improve it.

Probably few professional historians derive pleasure in seeing how closely history is repeating itself as Russian society slides downward into authoritarianism, war looms and an inevitable hour of reckoning approaches.

Even the provocateurs who brought up the rear of Moscow's Sept. 21 march could have walked straight out of an Erich Maria Remarque novel set during Germany's turbulent interwar

period.

The main characters of those novels also take part in street rallies, until they are killed by stray bullets from a street battle between the "reds" and "browns" — as occurs to the "last romantic," Gottfried Lenz, in the book "Three Comrades."

Remarque's cycle of novels — which Russians simply reveled in during the perestroika period and the early 1990s — begins with "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "The Road Back," both hyper-realistic depictions of battle infused with anti-war fervor.

Russia had just lost its empire, and Russian readers probably felt a close connection to Remarque's descriptions of events following the collapse of the Hohenzollern monarchy, Germany's defeat in the war, famine, devastation, and social and economic crises.

"The Black Obelisk" and "Three Comrades," books that captured the tender and nostalgic yet hopeless atmosphere of the interwar years, resonated with the mood in Russia during the controversial 1990s. The cycle ends with books about exile: "The Night in Lisbon," "The Promised Land" and "Shadows in Paradise."

It seems the time has come for Russians to re-read these books about the broken lives of people who feel out of place in their own country.

Somewhere between 30,000 to 50,000 people probably took part in the Moscow peace march on Sept. 21. That is relatively few, but it was enough to assuage the sinking feeling caused by the vortex of bad news that threatens to pull each of us separately into its maw. It is also enough to show our Ukrainian brothers that not every Russian believes the official propaganda. Russia will have to somehow restore relations with its neighbors after the war, and the recollection of these peace marches will undoubtedly aid in that process.

The only question is: What chain of events will lead to that "after the war" period?

Remarque's cycle of novels — and, in fact, the whole history of Europe in the 20th century — shows that Russia will have difficulty extricating itself from the consequences of annexing Crimea and escalating the conflict in Ukraine's southern and eastern regions. To turn around this situation, very serious changes are needed both for society and the country as a whole — a task requiring the efforts of more than just 30,000 people.

Of course, far more people sympathized with the marchers than actually joined them. It is equally clear that about 500,000 Russians not only share these protesters' demands, but are waiting for the right moment to leave Russia completely.

For some, that turning point might come when the authorities make good on threats to wall off Russia from the World Wide Web. For others, it might be the notification that an 18-year-old son must sign up for obligatory military service. And for still others, the death of an aging relative who had relied on their care might be the event that finally severs all ties to their homeland.

Each person has his or her own "boiling point," but my understanding of Russia's sociology suggests that about half a million people are already emotionally, if not actually, packing their bags.

If Russia accelerates its movement toward becoming another North Korea, that number is likely to reach 4 million — roughly the same number of politically active Muscovites. An exodus of that proportion could create backlogs at the borders and create problems for the various countries that will ultimately receive them.

But if those 4 million people headed for Moscow's Prospekt Akademika Sakharova and not for Sheremetyevo Airport, they could achieve major changes in the political landscape, even if the overwhelming majority of Russians remained on the opposite side of the dividing line.

That majority squeals in excitement over the annexation of Crimea and constitutes President Vladimir Putin's electorate of blindly loyal, largely working-class people. But it is a passive, fragmented mass that generally lacks the inclination or the ability to think critically on the issues.

It is a classic Goliath just waiting to be beaten by David — that is, if David were not so intent on choosing between a window and an aisle seat. Those potentially active citizens are obediently following the advice that the beloved national leader gave to all opponents on the eve of his third presidential inauguration: They are "hightailing it" overseas.

And despite the collapse of Russia's foreign policy, the growing anti-Russian consensus and the general tension between Russia and the outside world, it is still easier to leave the country than to stay and join the fight for a better future.

I cannot blame those who have chosen to leave Russia. And if you happen to be sitting in Moscow and reading these lines in English, please take my friendly advice — and their example — and leave while the going is good. Russia is changing very rapidly and unpredictably — and not in the direction of the democratic society so many had envisioned back in the early 1990s. Do not dawdle: The situation is heating up quickly, and many people are liable to get burned.

People want to leave not only because of Putin or the war in Ukraine, but because of the growing uncertainty. This is not the general uncertainty about the future that people now feel everywhere in the world, but the more immediate uncertainty of not even knowing whether you'll get home unscathed when you step out onto Moscow's streets.

Even if you need to call the police for help, you cannot be certain they will come in time to help you, or that they will come at all. It is much simpler to move to a country where the police force does its job than to remain here and try to improve Russia's.

As long as it is easier to leave Russia than to stay and fight, there is no chance that the situation will change. Russia's political elite understands this also. Half hope that Russia's dissenters will jump ship and either swim away or drown, but the other half would also love to climb into the next lifeboat and abandon this sinking ship.

That is why it is pointless to anticipate any rapid changes for the better in Russia: It makes more sense to expect an increase in the number of Russians moving abroad. After all, Russia has its own "Night in Lisbon" ahead — Remarque's novel about the life of two German refugees.

Ivan Sukhov is a journalist who has covered conflicts in Russia and the CIS for the past 15 years.

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/24/a-protest-march-headed-for-russias-borders-a39742