The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Is Repeating Old Mistakes

By Ivan Sukhov

December 03, 2014



Every evening, Russians watch their television weather forecaster report the temperature in the Crimean cities of Simferopol and Yalta. Those words come like a healing balm to the souls of people who experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union as a personal tragedy and who take heart in seeing the old empire collecting the territory that rightfully belongs to it.

Crimea symbolizes revenge — in the Soviet, political and negative sense of the word. A more accurate word is "restoration" — a restoration of the state and its rights that were allegedly violated.

The word "restoration" has remained a staple of the Russian political thesaurus since the early 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union. By restoring the Kremlin staterooms, restoring the coat of arms and flag, and canceling the Soviet anthem, Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, symbolically restored the Russian Empire.

And by reinstating the Soviet anthem, imposing a power vertical, giving greater social and political importance to siloviki structures — particularly the secret police —

and reintroducing Crimea into the country's daily weather forecasts, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, has symbolically restored the Soviet Union.

However, advocates of restoration tend to miss one important point: both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union ended in failure and collapse — the former in 1917, the latter less than a century later in 1991.

One might think that those failures would inspire the search for a fundamentally new doctrine that could take Russia into the future without repeating its past mistakes and collapses. After all, even the seemingly robust social structures that formed the bases of the Russian Empire and, later, the communal barracks known as the Soviet Union, turned out to have limited lifespans. If reconstructed, those structures will only once again end in collapse.

But the search for a new doctrine did not end unsuccessfully because it never really began. It is taboo to examine, much less criticize, the reasons for both collapses, and the government embraces and protects the country's past as one of its most vital resources.

To appreciate that this process did not begin with the absurd ban on the "falsification of history" or the "new historiography" trumpeted by Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, just peruse the preamble of the Russian Constitution, written by a commission under Yeltsin and adopted by popular vote on Dec. 12, 1993.

It speaks of "historically established state unity," "revering the memory of ancestors who have passed on to us their love for the fatherland" and "reviving the sovereign statehood of Russia."

Now forget that excessive pathos for a moment. On Nov. 19, an Investigative Committee task force teamed up with riot police in an attempt to detain a citizen allegedly involved in the criminal withdrawal of a huge sum of money. The person's name is not as important as the fact that the police staged the operation in the center of Moscow in broad daylight against the backdrop of an unprecedented level of excitement over the revival of the Russian state.

The police operation was a complete failure. Several dozen individuals carrying guns but no badges or formal authority prevented the officers from carrying out their mission. The main suspect eluded the police and is now hiding in another region of Russia, occasionally sending messages through his lawyer to taunt the Investigate Committee. The chief investigator was removed from the case and consequently resigned.

To better understand the circumstances, note that the figure sought by police is Ramzan Tsitsulayev, whom Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov named one year ago as that republic's envoy to Ukraine. The men who managed to thwart the sting operation were Chechens, and the region where Tsitsulayev is hiding out — and from where he mocks the Moscow police — is, of course, Chechnya.

That is the same republic where Moscow began operations 20 years ago to "restore constitutional order." That resulted in a protracted and bloody war in which some of the riot police attempting to arrest Tsitsulayev, as well as some of the men blocking their efforts, in all likelihood took part.

The police proved completely dysfunctional in this case, suggesting that Russia — like Somalia or some other "exotic" country — is showing signs of a failed state.

Another incident two weeks ago generated a great deal of activity on social networks in Moscow and the North Caucasus. Right on the street on Nov. 21, Moscow police detained and drove off with Magomed Aliyev, a young native of Dagestan who had come to visit his sister.

The sister was also hurt in the incident and appealed to the Moscow police, but they could do nothing regarding the men in plain clothes who raided the young woman's apartment without producing any identification or warrant.

On Nov. 24, Aliyev resurfaced at a detention center in Stavropol, a regional center and a sort of outpost of the federal authorities in the North Caucasus. Aliyev was urgently hospitalized on Nov. 26 after he was repeatedly beaten and someone jabbed a pen in his eye, his lawyer said. Doctors are uncertain whether Aliyev will survive.

Regardless of any crime the young man might have committed, the actions of the siloviki far overstep the bounds of legal procedure. Had anyone but the siloviki been involved, Aliyev would never have turned up in a detention center. Such actions resemble the revolutionary methods of the Bolshevik terror. When such things happened in the North Caucasus, nobody but lawyers and human rights activists took notice, but exporting such practices beyond that region is increasingly reminiscent of the worst of Stalinist times.

It might seem that Stalinist terror and a failed state are at opposite ends of the spectrum. But terror, by definition, is an act that bypasses the rule of law and so indicates the failure of the state — no matter how imposing that state's totalitarian facade.

In one way or another, former Soviet leader Josef Stalin is the focus of many current leaders' ideas concerning "restoration." They love referring to a quote erroneously attributed to Winston Churchill — namely, that "Stalin came to power when Russia had only a wooden plow, and left it in possession of atomic weapons."

It so happens that the world has never had to cope with a failed state holding a nuclear arsenal large enough to destroy all of humanity several times over. The world barely managed to avoid such a threat in 1991, but only with some intense diplomacy, significant financial outlays and a whole lot of nail-biting.

Now it seems that Russian fans of "reconstruction" would like a replay of those times. And despite blithe assurances from the Defense Ministry that the command and control structure of the country's nuclear arsenal has been fully modernized, there is no guarantee that the final act in this dark drama will end as peacefully as it did the first time.

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

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/03/russia-is-repeating-old-mistakes-a41954