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Nemtsov's Murder Is Nothing New in Russia

By Gleb Kuznetsov

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A bullet is a very ordinary and traditional element of Russian politics — like the Woolsack, the seat of the Lord Speaker in the House of Lords in the British Parliament. The use of bullets is not a "provocation" and does not "cross the line," but is simply part of political tradition.

The murder of Boris Nemtsov — the first deputy prime minister to former President Boris Yeltsin and once his possible successor, a former governor of one of Russia's largest regions and the former leader of the "liberal opposition" in parliament — has resonated widely within Russia.

The opposition blames the ruling regime, while the regime blames the United States and its "puppet," Ukraine. In short, it is a typical situation in Russia's sharply divided political landscape.

It is a mistake to consider the murder of anyone engaged in politics in Russia as something "unique," "unusual" or as having "crossed the line," as the opposition claims, or as

a "provocation," a "set-up," a "shot aimed at the authorities" or an attempt to turn the victim into a "sacred sacrifice," as the Kremlin claims.

In Russia, political murder is just part of standard political practice.

In fact, it is so common that it has even become part of this country's folklore. In a joke dating back to the 1930s, former Soviet leader Josef Stalin stands before the party Congress and announces news of the assassination of the one man who could have challenged his rule — Sergei Kirov.

However, one of the delegates present has trouble hearing the proceedings and repeatedly calls out, "Who was that? Who was killed?" Finally, an irritated Stalin snaps back, "Whoever had to be killed was killed."

And what was the political repression of Stalinism but the institutionalization of mass political assassination, the transformation of "political murder" into a systematic and legitimate practice?

The Bolsheviks were not the first in Russian history to come up with the idea of using political violence.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, anarchists and left-wing forces killed political figures around the world, from former U.S. President William McKinley to the King of Portugal.

However, only in Russia did the victims of political terror number in the hundreds. Even prior to the October Revolution, dozens of governors, ministers of the tsar's government, — including Pyotr Stolypin — members of the tsar's family and parliamentary deputies were murdered.

An earlier wave of political terror in Russia in the 1870s and1880s claimed the lives of many members of the Russian political establishment, including that of Tsar Alexander II.

An important feature of political terror in Russia is the close connection between terrorists and the very people charged with stopping them — the security forces.

As historians have pointed out, security forces did not just turn a blind eye to the killings of high-profile politicians like the reformer Stolypin in 1911, but took an active part in organizing those plots.

It is even possible to argue that political violence became so commonplace in Russia because it provided a means for intelligence agencies to participate in the larger political process.

After Peter the Great introduced reforms on succession to the throne, officers of the guards determined who would rule the country throughout the entire 18th century.

It was their will and the power of their swords that determined the legitimacy of the country's leadership.

Three Romanov emperors — Ivan VI, Peter III and Paul I — were all killed during the final 40

years of the 18th century.

We are accustomed to thinking of the Russian royal family as autocrats who held unlimited power, but they were literally terrorized individuals and feared for their lives. Throughout the 19th century, the great princes, heirs to the throne, and even the tsars, mentioned in their letters and diaries their constant fear of death from political assassination.

The situation resembled more the soldier emperors of Rome than the New Era of Europe.

Is it any wonder, then, that if the lives of the country's highest rulers had so little value, the lives of lower-ranking politicians and leaders was practically worthless? And now it is clear that this grim tradition has survived not only the end of the tsarist era, but also the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A number of State Duma deputies were murdered in post-Soviet Russia, including Galina Starovoitova in 1998, Vladimir Golovlev in 2002, Sergei Yushenkov in 2003 and Ruslan Yamadayev in 2008.

Journalists are also killed for political reasons. The murders of Yury Shchekochikhin in 2003, Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and dozens of others puts Russia on a par with such countries as Iraq, Algeria, Syria and Pakistan for the risk journalists face in doing their job.

Powerful military officials have been killed for voicing their own opinion. Opposition members and even government loyalists had also been murdered, along with the occasional person killed for no apparent reason.

It is extremely naive to imagine that the murder of Boris Nemtsov will lead to any new or significant results. His murder will become just one more death of a Russian politician. It will not lead to anything at all, just as the murder of other Russian politicians and journalists over the course of many, many years has not led to any changes, either.

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