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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Russian Revolution Failed. Long Live the Revolution!

Where did Russia go wrong? The trouble began before Russia did.

By Victor Davidoff

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A rally in support of democracy on Palace Square in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on August 20, 1991.
Yuri Belinsky, Nikolai Berketov / TASS

In 2022 the anniversary of the victorious "August Revolution of 1991" in Russia brings only bitter disappointment that descends into depression. In 31 years, the country has taken the unimaginable trajectory from young democracy to full-blown fascism.

All the mechanisms of representative government have been destroyed. The results of elections are written by a computer according to a preset algorithm. The independent judiciary has been destroyed. The independent press has been destroyed. Opposition members are being arrested and poisoned with chemical weapons. A reign of terror is functioning all over the country. People are put on trial for slogans like "Peace!" or "No to War." They are arrested on the street for wearing blue and yellow sneakers (the national colors of Ukraine) or

for quotation marks in the "wrong" place in a social media post. Neither the Gestapo nor the Stalinist executioners of the NKVD — as repressive as you could imagine — could have dreamed of anything like this. You can't even call it Orwellian. Orwell never wrote anything as horrifying as this.

The story of the sickness and death of Russian democracy is well known. The sickness began long before KGB colonel Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, in fact, even before the Russian Federation emerged on the scene. On December 1, 1991, the Council of People's Deputies of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic adopted a two-year moratorium on elections. In this way the parliament of one state (part of the Soviet Union) became the parliament of an entirely different country (the Russian Federation).

Towards the end of the moratorium the parliament did not want to surrender its powers, and in October 1993 it impeached President Yeltsin. Boris Yeltsin, a former Communist Party functionary, understood politics only as "a question of power" (Lenin), and sent tanks to fire on Parliament.

At the same time, centrifugal forces threatened to pull apart the state. The Republic of Chechnya slipped free of the federal center and established its own armed forces. The oil-rich republic of Tatarstan imposed a "sovereignty treaty" on Moscow. In April 1993, residents of the huge, largely ethnic Russian, Sverdlovsk region voted for the establishment of the "Ural Republic," adopted a "charter" (constitution), and even issued their own currency, "Ural francs." A little bit later, four other neighboring regions expressed their desire to join the "Ural Republic."

At this point Yeltsin probably realized that the country was on the verge of collapse. This was not part of his plans or political ideology. After firing on the parliament, he called Eduard Rossel, head of the "Ural Republic" — Yeltsin knew him well because he had been Communist Party head in Sverdlovsk Oblast before moving to Moscow — and promised that the next day he would send tanks to fire on him, too.

Rossel understood the threat and complied. The president of Chechnya, the former Soviet general Dzhokhar Dudayev, did not understand the threat. Or perhaps, unlike Rossel, who only had badly armed policemen, Dudayev had thousands of well-armed and well-trained men under his command. The Russian army realized this very quickly when it tried to take the Chechen capital of Grozny in December 1994.

"*The bloody Chechen war of 1994-95 was the burial of Russian democracy, because no democracy can exist if it demolishes entire cities, as the Russian army is doing today in Ukraine.*"

After that Yeltsin had no popular support left, and he was forced to seek it from what are called the "siloviki" — the army and what was left of the Soviet KGB. By the time the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the KGB was not just a secret police force. It was a powerful political force. Beginning in 1967, KGB chief Yuri Andropov had been steadily sending his men and women to infiltrate all the government agencies, where they worked as agents of influence within their

own state. As a result, by 1991 all ministries, large corporations and monopolies were infiltrated by KGB employees who had only one loyalty: to their agency.

In state organizations, KGB officers set the policies; in private ones, they siphoned off money. The press frequently reported on the so-called 18% tax — a tax that all corporations in the 1990s had to pay into secret KGB accounts. The KGB became something like the Sicilian Mafia — but on the scale of 1/7th of the earth's land mass. Those who refused to pay, paid with their lives. A series of murders and mysterious deaths began in the mid-1990s. The first one proven to be a murder from a chemical warfare agent and not an accident was the death of banker Ivan Kivelidi, who had been financing democratic political parties (1995).

The genie was out of the bottle. Yeltsin's announcement on December 31, 1999, that he was choosing Vladimir Putin as his successor was the final nail in the coffin of democracy. It marked a change of system of governance. Republics don't have "successors." If there is a "successor," it's a monarchy.

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And then Putin acted according to the book. First, he destroyed the independent judiciary — not a single judge in Russia today is elected. Then he destroyed the independent press, then he destroyed elections, then he destroyed non-governmental organizations. After that it was all inevitable, including war. As Andrei Sakharov proved long ago, human rights and security are inseparable, and if you don't have one, you can't have the other.

Does this mean that the "Overton window" — the range of acceptable policies — has closed forever over Russia? Of course not. Even under constant oppression a powerful, freedom-loving culture has emerged in Russia, with a strong intelligentsia and middle class that does not want to live by the rules of the U.S.S.R. or the Putin regime. In just the first two weeks of mass protests against the war in Russia, tens of thousands of people marched and about 17,000 people were detained.

The cycles of Russian history run from a ruler's accession to the throne until his death. Putin is sick, he looks terrible, and he is not going to live forever. With the exception of the 1980s in the Soviet Union when gerontocrats were dragged half-dead to the throne, in virtually every other historical case, the death of the ruler means a change of political course. The new course was a round of liberalization followed by political change and reforms.

As the famous Russian literary scholar Dmitry Likhachev used to say, "In Russia one must live long." Likhachev knew what he was talking about. He was a prisoner of Stalin's camps in the 1920s, but he saw democracy in Russia in the 1990s. So, if a revolution fails, you simply must try to live longer to see it succeed again.

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