

Putin and the Bolsheviks



By Dr. Jonathan Z. Ludwig Visiting Assistant Professor of Russian
Oklahoma State University
Member, Advisory Board, SAGE International Australia

Russian President Vladimir Putin is a product of the Soviet state. Or, rather, he's a product of the security apparatus of the Soviet state. Nevertheless, without the Soviet Union, it's unlikely that Putin would even be known today, much less be in power. Why, therefore, is Putin's Russia all but ignoring the 100th Anniversary of the Bolshevik action that brought Vladimir Lenin and his Communist Party to power? After all, London has been recognizing the event for over a year with museum exhibitions such as *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932* at the Royal Academy of Arts, *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths* at the British Library, and *Imagine Moscow: Architecture, Propaganda, Revolution* at the Design Museum, and *Smithsonian* magazine's October 2017 issue had a feature article devoted to the Russian Revolution and its place in Russian history. Several well-timed books, including Catherine Merridale's *Lenin on the Train* and Helen Rappaport's *Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd, Russia, 1917* have been published in the months leading up to November 2017, while political players such as UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn still sing paeans to Communism, while conveniently ignoring the history of its end game in places like North Korea and Venezuela still today. Communism, after all, was responsible for up to 100 million deaths, exclusively at the hands of the state, in places like the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, and Latin America in the 20th century alone. However, Russia has been largely silent, despite Putin calling the disintegration of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, and it has nothing to do with Communism's mass-murderous history.

Putin himself has certainly not been quiet about Lenin in the past. As far back as the 2011 elections for the Duma, a political commercial for *Edinaya Rossiya*, Putin's nominal political party, had the narrator saying "Могли победить, если бы не этот человек. / They could have won, if not for this man," over a picture of Lenin, placing the blame for Russia's loss in World War I, and, by extension, Russia's bloody and disastrous 20th Century squarely on his shoulders. Putin's 2014 speech dedicating a World War I monument on Moscow's *Poklonnaya Gora* likewise had nothing good to say about Lenin and his Bolsheviks, albeit it without naming them directly, when he noted:

But this victory [in World War I] was stolen from our country. It was stolen by those who called for the defeat of their homeland and army, who sowed division inside Russia and sought only power for themselves, betraying the national interests.

Unlike with Joseph Stalin and various Russian imperial strongmen, such as Ivan the Terrible, contemporary political discourse sees Lenin as the destroyer of Russia rather than as the creator of the Soviet Union. Much of this has to do with how Lenin came to power then and against what Putin is desperately trying to hold on to power today.

If the cover of the 26 October 2017 issue of *The Economist* is true in that Putin is increasingly seen, and, perhaps, sees himself as a new Tsar Vladimir, then the fear of winding up how Tsar Nicholas II ended up is very palpable. The nascent Russian post-imperial Republic was overthrown by a small group of coup plotters, who refused to work with Alexander Kerensky and his Provisional Government, which itself came to power after an actual revolution and abdication in February 1917. Later, as the Bolsheviks controlled the writing of history, they convinced the world that they were part of a grand revolution, something that some on the political far left still choose to believe despite all evidence to the contrary. It is an interesting side question to ask why the political left is unable to condemn Communism as it routinely does other political philosophies.

Recent history has not been kind to authoritarian leaders in Russia's near abroad. A series of Color Revolutions – Rose in Georgia (November 2003), Orange in Ukraine (November 2004), and Tulip in Kyrgyzstan (February 2005) – as well as the Arab Spring in 2010, all of which have now largely been relegated to history in much of the world, is still very real to Putin. A return to revolution in Ukraine in 2014, the Euromaidan Revolution, concerned Putin even more, as it toppled his duly-elected man in Kiev. The possible attempted coup in Turkey – and it will take some time for history to sort out exactly what happened there in July 2016 – reminded Putin what a military could do. A year later it has Erdogan fearful of being toppled, as he consolidates his power much as Putin has done during his reign, arresting his enemies and turning away from Europe and the United States. Putin certainly has this on his mind as well, as he

might lose his new-found friend and ally just as quickly as he found him. Much of Putin's actions in Syria that kept Bashar al-Assad from being toppled is out of similar concerns and fears.

As much as Putin does not like democracy, he does not like revolution even more. Former leaders in much of the world end up rather well in a democracy with book contracts and time spent on the lecture circuit. However, former leaders deposed in a revolution do not have as happy of an ever after. At best, they end up in exile. Putin understands that he would not end up well; he would almost certainly end up dead and, unlike Nicholas II, he would probably not be canonized by the Orthodox Church. More to the point, he understands that the Bolshevik coup was completed by a small group of people, not by the masses. Putin, who was put into power by a small cabal, has much more to fear from a small group than from the masses, who are not able in modern Russia to organize themselves into anything resembling a revolution, at least not yet. Russian and Soviet history has seen to this. A small group, however, could remove Putin tomorrow. Recognizing the Bolsheviks of 100 years ago for doing exactly this, could encourage such a group today.

All of this is somewhat ironic, of course, as Putin is very much a Leninist himself. Lenin stated that he was seeking to destroy the state and the existing world order. This is what Putin has been doing since he attained power, despite his constant assertions that he is providing stability. Beginning with a 2007 cyberattack on Estonia, an event that foreshadowed contemporary Russian actions, and the 2008 invasion of Georgia, Putin was testing how far he could push before the West pushed back. NATO did not respond to the attack on Estonia, and the West did not respond to the invasion of Georgia. This lack of action led Putin to become more emboldened in the years ahead. After then-President Obama ignored his own "red line" in Syria in 2013, Russia increased its presence there, and, in 2014, Putin invaded Ukraine, occupying and seizing Crimea. While this invasion finally got the attention of the West, which imposed sanctions, the damage was done; no one was sure whether the West would come to its aid if challenged by Russia. Putin was liberated to act largely as he saw fit, especially as a sower of discord in peaceful border regions as well as in such potentially dangerous areas as Iran and North Korea. His most recent attempt to overturn the established order is seen through Russian cyber-interference in the 2016 American election and various European elections through 2017. He is doing his utmost to destroy confidence in Western democracy. Putin doesn't have to offer a viable alternative to traditional Western liberalism to win; he just needs to muddy the waters so others can't see their way to clarity. In fact, Putin today has nothing positive he could offer the world, even if he wanted to. Neither did Lenin.

If Lenin is accused of destroying the Russian state in 1917, Putin continues to do the same in 2017. Even nominal democracy is gone; only *faux* elections remain. Institutions cannot be counted on to protect the Russian people, as courts are not independent

arbiters of justice. Putin has openly encouraged talented people to leave if they don't like the way he's running Russia, just as Lenin did by exiling over 200 intellectuals on the Philosophers' Ship in 1922. Meanwhile, the Russian economy continues to suffer under the sanctions much of the world has imposed on it. The one positive, a small uptick in Russian demographics, is at risk the longer the Russian economy remains damaged; people don't want to have children when the future is so uncertain, despite financial incentives the Russian state is offering to those starting families. The money is likely to dry up as energy prices remain low and sanctions tighten. This is all despite the Trump administration's failure to follow through on imposing the more severe sanctions that Congress passed and Trump signed; it will just take a while longer.

Much as with Lenin and his Russia a century ago, it is increasingly likely that Putin and his Russia can only end in tragedy, largely a result of his Leninist actions. It will be up to everyone to keep the aftermath of a post-Putin Russia from being as disastrous as the Bolshevik coup was to both Russia and the world in the 20th century.

Internet links:

- Revolution exhibit: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/revolution-russian-art>
- Russian Revolution (British Library): <https://www.bl.uk/events/russian-revolution-hope-tragedy-myths>
- Imagine Moscow exhibit: <https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/imagine-moscow>
- Smithsonian article: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-ever-happened-to-russian-revolution-180964768/>
- Putin 2011 commercial: <http://rutube.ru/video/59633e449bdde95e83560b1372b01030/>

Putin 2014 speech: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46385>

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