

The First Post-Soviet Revolution

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November 25, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

On July 14, 1789, as the Paris mob stormed the Bastille, King Louis XVI wrote "rien" in his diary, meaning that nothing of note had happened on that day.

Historic events often become historic only in retrospect. Their significance is all too frequently determined not by what they achieve but by what kind of forces they unleash. Disturbances in major Russian cities in 1905, which followed Russia's naval defeat in the Far East, are now known as the First Russian Revolution. But the riots were relatively minor events, never seriously threatening the monarchy. They were important only because of what followed. On the one hand, the tsar's government cracked down on socialist parties, marginalizing various leftist movements and pushing most revolutionaries out of the country. Even more important, it implemented limited liberalization and economic reforms, laying the foundation for rapid economic development. To gauge Russia's progress in the decade prior to World War I, it is enough to take a walk in the center of Moscow and see the huge number of extremely elegant, modernist apartment buildings constructed for Russia's expanding middle class.

The government's two-pronged response was so successful that a few months before the monarchy fell, Lenin declared that his generation of revolutionaries would not live to see their cause triumph. What he and most others didn't realize was that rapidly advancing capitalism had disoriented millions of Russian peasants, who were willing to lend their support to a party that promised to smash capitalism and bring back what they thought would be a version of a traditional village commune.

At a distance of one year removed, the protest movement that spontaneously arose in Russia in late 2011 looks like a failure. It never managed to bring out the promised hundreds of thousands of protesters, and it petered out without achieving even a relatively free, clean election. It didn't force greater openness and accountability on the government, it failed to combat blatant corruption by the entrenched bureaucracy, and it did nothing to promote democracy and respect for human rights. Its most heroic act of civil disobedience occurred when a handful of protesters sat down on a bridge near Bolotnaya Ploshchad during the May 6 rally, and its most colorful symbol was a prank by an all-female punk group in Christ the Savior Cathedral. The repressive apparatus of the government arrested leaders and random activists involved in these protests, many of whom are facing serious prison terms.

But to think that the protests were fruitless is a mistake. We have observed a genuine revolution. If judged by the response of the authorities, it was a major event. The Russian government has unleashed everything at its disposal against the liberal opposition: police, courts, mass media and even the Russian Orthodox Church. Protesters are being thrown in jail on trumped-up charges, while the secret police are fabricating nasty or humiliating scandals involving members of the opposition. State-run television shows slanderous pseudodocumentaries about the movement and its supposed foreign backers, and religious goons and ultranationalists pretending to be Cossacks attack cultural events.

It's very depressing, but it is also good because it is a classic reaction that every doomed repressive regime always unleashes when it feels seriously threatened. The 2011-12 revolution may yet prove no less meaningful for Russia than President Boris Yeltsin's stand during the abortive 1991 hard-line coup. The men and women who sat near Bolotnaya Ploshchad braving the OMON riot police may one day be cast in bronze as harbingers of Russia's liberation.

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