

Russia Needs Dissidents Like Novodvorskaya

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Valeria Novodvorskaya is dead. Novodvorskaya was not only an opposition politician, human rights activist and Soviet dissident who endured prison and Soviet punitive psychiatry, but also was a talented writer and publicist.

"Putin," she once said, "is a Chekist to his bones, a political incompetent and a follower of Stalin. He is vindictive and cruel and a creation of the shadowy Soviet system from which he emerged."

And that was far from the harshest criticism that Novodvorskaya ever leveled at Putin.

Despite being labeled criminals and maniacs, President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expressed their condolences to her family. Medvedev issued a statement praising her contributions to Russia and her personal qualities. "She did a great deal for democracy in our country, was actively engaged in human rights work and was never afraid to defend her point of view. This earned her the respect of her supporters

and opponents."

The tormentors she battled her whole life now publicly mourn her, however insincerely, after her death. Novodvorskaya's life, death and the Kremlin's condolences capture the very essence of Russian history, society and statehood.

The loner-critic-writer is an exceptionally important factor in Russia's public and political life. Such individuals are persecuted and repressed during their lifetimes, but immortalized after their deaths, their lonely voices thundering out across the country even after their corporeal presence has ended. These writers often de facto become the most important thinkers and politicians of their day, forming or heavily influencing state policy and the country's political agenda for many decades into the future.

Novodvorskaya fits a classic character type in Russian history. In his article about social critic Alexander Radishchev, Alexander Pushkin defined the type as "political fanatics." Writers, literary critics, journalists and publishers were the main opposition types of Russian history in both the 19th century and the Soviet period. Valeria Novodvorskaya is a direct successor to Radishchev, the Decembrists, Pyotr Chaadayevev, Vissarion Belinsky, Alexander Herzen, Nikolai Ogarev, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Georgy Plekhanov, Vladimir Lenin, who at times listed his occupation as "writer," Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Except for only rare and brief periods in the early and late 20th century, the Russian authorities never permitted the appearance of a Western-style politician with the attendant parties, elections and free press. Therefore, those individuals turned to literary expression as their only option and thus the main form of their oppositional activity. Even then they were often persecuted.

Under the "enlightened" Catherine the Great, Alexander Radishchev published the revelatory book "Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow." The authorities immediately banned it and later sentenced Radishchev to a six-year stint in a remote Siberian jail. Forty years later, Pyotr Chaadayevev published his "Philosophical Letters," for which Tsar Nicholas I declared him insane and had him placed under both house arrest and police surveillance. The journal that published his "Letters" was closed, its editor exiled and its censor fired.

Chernyshevsky wrote his famous "What Is to Be Done?" while already in solitary confinement in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Rakhmetov, a character in the novel, later became a role model for many generations of professional revolutionaries.

In "What Is to Be Done?" the character Rakhmetov denies himself the most basic necessities, lives the life of an ascetic and performs hard physical labor with the common people. He strengthens his body by bathing in cold water and sleeps on a mattress of sharp nails to increase his resistance to suffering. He refuses a rich and beautiful bride in order to devote himself completely to his main goal: the Revolution. "Pavka" Korchagin, the main character in the novel "How the Steel was Tempered" by Nikolai Ostrovsky, was a communist version of Rakhmetov.

Paradoxically, Novodvorskaya, who hated everything Soviet and communist, was a real-life version of Rakhmetov and Pavka Korchagin. In 1969, at the age of 19, she deliberately prepared and carried out a public anti-Soviet campaign, knowing that she would be arrested

and imprisoned. Of her own free will, she denied herself a personal life, family and children.

Like one of Pushkin's "political fanatics," Novodvorskaya devoted her entire life to the struggle against communism and the Soviet authorities and, in her final years, against the Putin regime that she considered a revival of the former Soviet one. And she did so knowing that she would be subjected to repression and humiliation.

Russian writers, recluses, victims of official injustice and revolutionaries have always distanced themselves as much as possible from the authorities. However, it was the writers who often set the tone and agenda for the vast empire.

The authorities frequently changed or shaped their policies based on the mood of the imperial elites — that is, what they called "public opinion" — that was itself formed by what Chernyshevsky referred to as those "special people," that "rare breed of people." Thus, Russian authorities often set their policies in reaction to literature and the social movements and opinions it generated.

This trend continued even into the Soviet era. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov had more influence in the Soviet Union than many opposition parties held in the Western world.

To publicly speak the truth in Russia requires absolute fearlessness, artistic and literary talent, sincerity and the ability to call things exactly as they are. Novodvorskaya possessed all of those outstanding qualities. The best way to understand the last 30 years of Russian history is to read her books, articles and literary reviews.

The reality of Russian life calls not for a moderate and nuanced policy, but bold literary talent and courageous heroism. The lone, talented hero stands on one side of the barricade, facing off against the reactionary guardians of the ruling regime on the other. These are the main character types driving Russian history, and the world looks on with bated breath to see which will prevail.

In Russian history, the hero as the recluse, ascetic, visionary and poet — Novodvorskaya liked to compare herself to Joan of Arc — never wins. But in a sense, those heroes never lose, either.

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