

# Weimar Russia?

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**A**nyone considering Russian topics today would do well to decide where he or she stands regarding at least a small number of fundamental questions. Is Russia unique or distinctive in any way? Has it lost its former powerful place in world politics for good? Is it a democracy, only on the road to democracy, or is it still authoritarian? Can the Soviet Union be re-created? Can Russia's present political system be thrown into a cocked hat by Yeltsin's death or some other single event? Is there anything definite that can be stated about Russia, or is it instead indeterminate, ever-roiling turbulence, a maze of assertions linked to their negations? Certainly, "the news media provide shifting, sometimes contradictory impressions. . . . One month Russia is all mafia, the next month all emerging stock market, then all communism, then all entrepreneurial savvy."<sup>1</sup> Another problem with the media, and also with American visitors' observations, is that Moscow, the capital, is a most atypical, even "un-Russian," city now. It is an island of relative prosperity, privatization, and westernization. It somehow retains 80 percent of the country's foreign investment, is reasonably well run in an administrative sense (by a potential presidential candidate who operates like the "Mayor Daley" of Moscow), has a high percentage of residents with university degrees, and is even undergoing some attractive gentrification here and there.

Are we today in a situation analogous to that of the young Harvard professor who, during the late 1940s, was teaching a course on the British Empire? He soon realized that his professional future was in doubt. Every year one or more members of the empire would drop out. Accordingly, he looked around for a safer field in which to specialize and soon locked onto a new "growth industry"—the study of Russia, the Soviet Union, international communism, and the cold war. This lasted almost until he retired in the 1990s.

I for one think that Russia as an empire is definitely behind us. The Eurasian geopolitical situation has fundamentally changed against Russia. Whereas the periphery of Russia, except for Germany, was weak and getting weaker after the mid-seventeenth century, thus allowing Russian expansion, it is now getting

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stronger. Consider China, Iran, Turkey (an old foe of Russia), Poland (another old foe, and with the highest economic growth rate in Europe), and a reunited Germany moving its capital back to Berlin, where ironically the Prussian triumphal arch still stands, with the words "To the German People." In 1945, the Russians could congratulate themselves on having reversed 700 years of German history. But now Germany is reunited, the Soviet Union *ist kaput*, and Russia is weak and in disarray. German is returning as the lingua franca of East Central Europe. Some Russian generals have actually suggested selling Russia's part of Prussia, Kaliningrad, back to Germany. The reversal has been reversed. Not only is Russia in an inherently restricted situation, it is the only large country projected to decline in population in the early twenty-first century. Although it is now sixth in population, if present trends hold it will fall to ninth or tenth.<sup>2</sup> A smaller population is not necessarily a sign of weakness, but when it is caused by shorter life spans and increasing AIDS it is a serious problem.

Still, Russia has enormous potential for renewed power. It has, after all, held together after the disintegration of the USSR and possesses a great store of natural resources. It still exports oil, natural gas, armaments, and nuclear technology and does not need to import any natural resources. And if we look at its history, we note that Russia has always rebounded, strong and expansionist, from its national disasters. The Mongol invasion, Ivan the Terrible's reign of terror, the Polish and later the Napoleonic seizures of Moscow, Lenin's ignominious peace with imperial Germany, Hitler's destructive attack on the USSR, and even Stalin's inhuman rule did not seriously crimp Russian power. This time, however, the world around Russia is reviving, and Russia so far has been woefully unable to match it. It has even been called "Indonesia with 10,000 nuclear warheads."<sup>3</sup>

Studying today's Russia is also difficult; there is no precedent for the Russia of today in its history. We have little, if anything, to depend on in viewing Russia. The seven months of nonauthoritarian rule enjoyed by Russia during 1917 hardly constitute a precedent; it was at war, although then, too, the government was divided and threatened by antidemocratic forces.

Let's look at some more of the fundamental features of today's Russia. First, the central government is extraordinarily weak. This is decidedly "un-Russian," as both the communists and the nationalists, often the same people, remind us. The Communist Party, which was once an "iron net over society," making things work, after a fashion, is no longer part of the government—but nothing has replaced it as an administration or directing force. Russia sorely needs an honest and efficient national civil service or bureaucracy that can make good things happen and bad things not happen. The central government is able to collect only about half of the taxes it levies. Much of the civil service, including the police, seems to be corrupt or at least self-serving. As one Russian commentator puts it, "In the absence of real government, state power now is in the hands of a narrow circle of the President's aides which cannot control the economic situation."<sup>4</sup> The once-feared army cannot fight its way out of the proverbial paper bag. Chechnya is now independent *de facto*. The navy is a rust heap, and the air force is flying way too little to be able to fight a war. Supposedly, the strategic rocket forces are

still functioning adequately and the nukes are safely under control, according to the commander of U.S. nuclear forces.<sup>5</sup> In 1998, a Russian general and two colonels were killed in a Muslim part of Russia.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Russian army is killing *itself* off. There are some 40 suicides per month in the army, and in the past sixteen months there were about 900 noncombat deaths in the military, not counting suicides.<sup>7</sup> However, and this is important, Russia is still able to influence events in the former Soviet Union, what Washington calls the NIS (newly independent states) and what Moscow calls the “near abroad,” partly because no other power has fully replaced her there—yet. This is most evident in Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan. Part of Russia’s elite has not emotionally given up the rest of the former Soviet Union. Still, any imperial comeback would be most difficult this time.

Regionalism is rampant in the strongest sense. The country’s remaining eighty-eight regions are not under the control of the central government. President Yeltsin even has to make special power-sharing deals with the mayor of his capital city. Russia is a confederation, not a federation as claimed in its constitution. In many regions, the Soviet system survives in at least the sense that they are run by people with the same attitudes as those who ran the USSR. Those people are against change in general and particularly against private ownership of land. To them, the stagnation, as Gorbachev called it, of Sovietism is normal and desirable. A British magazine, *The Economist*, has aptly referred to the region’s leaders as “naughty little tsars.” A British newspaper, *The Guardian*, has labeled them “local tyrants.” The leadership of Tatarstan, although surrounded by the rest of Russia, aids the breakaway Chechnya and gets away with it. In another area, aides to the local “tsar” were involved in the actual murder of an opposition journalist. One foreign commentator even sees a sad analogy to Spain and Latin America in the nineteenth century and says that Russia is “enfeebled from top to bottom.” Other foreign analysts say that “warlordism” is possible.<sup>8</sup>

Societal continuity with the Soviet communist situation is visible everywhere. All of the top people, of all ideologies, including the new bankers and businessmen and leaders of so-called parties, were either Soviet government officials or members of the Communist Party or its youth organization. (I remember a young Russian entrepreneur giving me his card—his card as a Communist youth leader.) There has been no “passing of the torch” to a postcommunist generation. That grand moment is yet to come. Even the new prime minister, Kiriyenko, only thirty-five years old, is not postcommunist in terms of his life experience. Imagine if post-Hitler Germany had been run by the lower-ranking Nazis. How much would Germany have changed? (This suggests that the USSR was brought to an end before it was ready by an anti-Gorbachev conspiracy led by a Yeltsin allied with regional leaders who wanted to keep their power and not endure the full effects of glasnost and perestroika.)

Russia is most probably not yet a democracy, even though it has democratic freedoms such as freedom of speech, assembly, and so forth. General Lebed recently has said, “There is no democracy in Russia.”<sup>9</sup> Many attributes of democracy either are still lacking or are very weak or in danger of being limited—free-

dom of religion, for example. There is little respect for law in Russian culture; Russian law has tended to be authoritarian and unjust. Likewise, there is little respect for politicians—much less than there is in the United States. And the present legal system is incapable of checking government.<sup>10</sup> (Mercifully, government is checked by its own incompetence.) Several observers have said that both Russian government and its democratization lack popular legitimacy. Indeed, much of the population is antidemocratic and certainly illiberal. (For example, a very high percentage of Russians would like to have homosexuals “eliminated,” although only about 6 percent would like to have alcoholics “eliminated.”) There are few democrats among the politicians. Even reformers such as Yeltsin are not democrats. And the democrats who do exist are unwilling to cooperate with one another or with Yeltsin. The president has received more support from the Communists and from Zhirinovskiy’s oddball authoritarians than he has from Yavlinsky, the darling of some Westerners who see him as the chief Russian democrat. Russian politicians are too “macho” to cooperate. Crucially lacking is a clear governmental role for the parliament, either the Duma or the Federation Council. The parliament is a powerless true “talking shop.” Although Yeltsin has sometimes been willing to compromise with the Duma, it has never been able to stop him from doing something or having an ongoing, definite political role, partly because of the “presidential” or “super-Gaullist” constitution that Yeltsin was able to introduce with apparent popular support in 1993. Of course, the Duma is dominated by Communists and other authoritarians and might well be even harder on democracy than Yeltsin has been—a real dilemma for the prospect for democracy in Russia. Clearly, and perhaps uniquely, the idea of democracy has arrived in Russia before a definite basis for it firmly exists. As the historian of Russia James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, says, “The sad fact is that Russia’s ambitious project of democratization still lacks popular legitimacy.”<sup>11</sup>

It could even be argued with justification that the national unity required for democracy is still lacking. And also missing is the good economy that a democracy needs to survive. No wonder there is so much writing about “Weimar Russia.” Property rights are weak. There is very little private property in land even now. It has been introduced in only a few provinces and may not “take” there. Political parties in the organized sense do not exist, except for the main Communist Party. The Communist Party, however, may soon split into “diehards” and social democrats. It is even claimed by some that Russia has only a facade of democracy, behind which “corrupt chieftains—a clique of clever and ruthless bankers . . . distribute patronage, fix elections and kill off their challengers while paying lip service to law and progress.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, Russian big business gives nothing back to society, not even investment. A Russian is more likely to invest in Cyprus or South Africa or, of course, the United States than in his own country, and with good reason. Taxes are high, the bureaucracy is corrupt and overbearing as always in Russia, and the political future is uncertain. Without democracy, the future is most unclear for people of property and commerce. No wonder billions of dollars have left Russia. Because of low investment there is little renovation and modernization of industry and little maintenance of a welfare safety

net. Most of the economy “remains not just outside the real market, but largely insulated against it.” The agricultural and industrial sectors still exist in a Soviet-type, “nearly self-contained system that operates without market prices and almost without money.”<sup>13</sup> This seems to be somewhat similar to the American economy of the 1790s. Given such major limitations and restrictions, Russian democracy is still stuck in the formative stage. It is “frozen” or “unconsolidated” or “limited” democracy. It has even been labeled “neo-communism.”<sup>14</sup> The best term for it has not yet been invented.

Given the situation as outlined above, it would be difficult to deny that Russia is still a unique place—neither European nor Asian, neither democracy nor dictatorship, neither success nor failure. What keeps Russia going despite this difficult situation, an intolerable one to many Americans or West Europeans? First, it may not be intolerable to Russians. Life has never been easy or even “normal” for many there. I remember the film director in Moscow, a friend of a friend of a friend, who in 1991 was using a vacation to chip his way by hand through the concrete floor of his first-floor apartment—so he could get to use a space under the building to store potatoes and thus survive. We ate almost nothing but peppers, prepared several different ways, during the three days I stayed there. Every square centimeter of land around Russians’ dachas is used for growing food, and there is no grass or weeds. Every garden has its little plastic-covered hothouse—absolutely necessary to make tomatoes ripen in Russia. This is an impressive but necessary attention to detail. Clearly Russians can make do, and effectively, when they have to work for themselves. Other factors that make life livable are the continuing low level of rent and the near inability of the government to collect taxes. Life is still semi-subsidized for many. And people insist on working, or pretending to work, as they did before—even without being paid on time. If one person in the family is working, that may be enough to feed the rest of the family. Half the economy is off the books—the “shadow economy”—and the adroitness and cleverness force-learned under communism can be applied to material advantage. It could be that the situation of many people has actually improved.<sup>15</sup> A recent Russian visitor showed me photos of himself and his wife on vacation in several countries, including England. In other words, as often happens in Russia, many just get by somehow, accept it philosophically, and survive. Expectations in Russia have never been high. Of course, some unfortunate few do not survive.

### **Politics Itself**

There are two fundamental points I want to make here. One, the Soviet Union cannot be re-created. It is dead and gone, although certain aftereffects of its once powerful existence survive and will live on for some time, even decades, but at an ever-diminishing intensity. Second, although all of the polls show a great nostalgia for the Soviet past and significant electoral support for the Communists and other authoritarian parties, when the chips were down in the past several years, as in October 1993, December 1993, and July 1996, the public supported Yeltsin and further change. As in the United States, people are often for two different parties and candidates at the same time—until forced to choose. So far, Russians have chosen,

when they had to, to go forward through more painful change and toward democracy. This type of reform has some features of a reform from below, a new thing in Russia's history.<sup>16</sup> A culture of complaint may exist, but the few and small demonstrations suggest that the present situation is not actually intolerable.<sup>17</sup>

As for the political process itself, the fundamental fact is that a sort of semi-stalemate exists. The executive branch pushes for westernization, but from a weak position and with a chief executive, Yeltsin, who may not understand what is required and tends to act only in crises, impeded always by most of the members of the Duma and perhaps even by his appointees. Neither the president nor the Duma can prevail. The French call this *immobilisme*. Accordingly, reform and democratization come very slowly. Russia is a huge vessel without an adequate steering mechanism—and many fear that any steering machine that would work would create a new authoritarianism. The prime minister who can make Russia steer a new democratic course has probably not yet been found. Hence there is great fascination with General Lebed, “the man who looks like his own bodyguard” and who talks in the tones of a mafia hit-man. Politics in today's Russia is more antagonism and recrimination than it is cooperation and consequential action.

Elections are free, but they do not clear the path for democracy. Public opinion is angry, nostalgic, divided, and illiberal, supporting democracy only on particular occasions. The constitution is on the side of the executive, but the people's newfound freedoms will not give way to its logic. No outstanding effective leader seems to exist, at least not where he can do any good—a national tragedy. General Lebed has yet to show that he can actually govern even a province.

The legal system is not yet fully active, partly because Russians do not yet think in terms of legality, but instead in terms of fairness and fate. And foreigners cannot yet win a case against Russians. Except for the Communist Party, political parties are still personal creations of particular politicians, as in France a few decades ago, and lack mass followings, except again for the Communist Party. But even that party is losing its base at the rate of several hundred thousand people per year. The nationality question still troubles the country. About one in five in the population is non-Russian and approximately twenty million Russians still live outside the present, downsized Russia, all this being fodder for the “patriots” of the right wing. Civil society—that network of freely formed associations and clubs absolutely necessary for democracy—does not yet exist. And what substituted for it, the scientific and professional class that pushed strongly for democracy in the 1980s, is much weaker than it was then because of unemployment resulting from big cuts in government spending. Many old elites, such as the scientists and the military, are in a bad way, while the new elites are too busy “making it” to contribute either charity to the needy or time to politics. The ground has shifted and it is not yet clear what the new foundations of society are or how society can be worked for the general good. The new private enterprise and capitalism is ruthless and completely lacks civic consciousness and a sense of limits or charity. It is a supreme irony that Russia's capitalism is that which Karl Marx denounced in the *Manifesto* 150 years ago—“all old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed . . . uninterrupted distur-

bance of social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation.”<sup>18</sup> This “clan-corporate capitalism” is more like Marx’s capitalism than like our “semi-tamed” variety.<sup>19</sup> Why? Communism, particularly Stalin, destroyed those people, institutions, and practices that limit capitalism’s excesses and produced a class of self-serving bureaucrats who are now “businessmen,” free to do almost whatever they want. Their chiefs have more political clout than American “robber barons” ever had and are widely known as the “oligarchs.” In time, they will be restrained, but not soon. The new “teenage” prime minister, Kiriienko, was heading for a confrontation with them, but Yeltsin did not back him to the hilt, a necessity for success, and discarded him as he has others.

### Conclusion

Russia’s future is not for us to know. We can only predict that it will be a difficult one—and for some time. The present political arrangement may “unwind” or even go “backward” for a time. In democracy’s progress, it is not unusual for authoritarianism to return for a rerun—look at French history, or at modern Greece. This is not unlikely, given that there is in Russia today such a great demand for law and order and so little demand for democracy, an idea that the breakdown of the old economy and the resultant hard times may have discredited in the eyes of many in Russia. And certainly, as in Weimar Germany, organized forces stand ready to provide a system that is supposedly more “Russian,” and one that would deal harshly with those who have profited in recent years. The present government is too weak to put down a large sociopolitical explosion. But—and this is crucial—Russia is not Serbia or Albania! Russia’s society is too developed in terms of education, professional people, experience of being a great power, natural resources, and complexity of society to go backward for long. And its very size and ethnic and regional diversity, as well as its present freedoms, would make it almost impossible to produce for long “one ring to bind them all.” Much more likely is temporary authoritarianism in several regions. Still, whatever the future brings, the ride will be bumpy and possibly violent.

In foreign policy and in its relations with the United States, Russia may well be unwilling to be an ordinary European country. And its democracy may be special—“national” but not “local.” In foreign policy, Russia may tend to be like France, another former great power with a special sense of itself, and demand equal billing from the United States, and get in its way and in its face now and then. Russia’s geopolitical situation alone—both European and Asian and in contact with a great many countries and regions—will give it many entrees into world politics. And the habits of empire will die slowly with its foreign policy and military elites. We must not take Russian opposition to American foreign policy and demands for a distinctive role as serious threats. But the United States as lone surviving superpower will not enjoy the deference it received during the cold war, when it was really needed as a brake on the USSR. We are now in a multipolar world with several important players, with Russia still trying to be one of them. Yet, because Russia is really weak now, its bluster and obstreperousness are not a serious problem. The big question is: How can we (and will we) assist in the

cooling down and ultimately the solution of the Russian economic crisis to allow Russia to solve its political problems in some fashion on its own?

#### NOTES

1. Joseph R. Blasi, et al., *Kremlin Capitalism: Privatizing the Russian Economy* (Ithaca and London: ILR Press of Cornell University Press, 1997), 2.
2. An Associated Press report cited in *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Northampton, MA, 12 May 1998, 15. This trend has been reported in a number of sources. Pakistan, now clearly a nuclear power, will soon pass Russia in population.
3. *The Economist*, quoting "an American official," 6 June 1998, 20.
4. V. Nikonov in *Izvestiya*, 63 (25163); East View Press Service, 7 April 1998.
5. General Eugene Habiger, head of the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), visited Russian strategic weapons sites in June 1998 and says that Russia controls its nuclear weapons well, in some ways more stringently than does the United States, and that an unauthorized launch is extremely remote. From an Associated Press report quoted in *Johnson's Russia List*, an e-mail service, 7 June 1998; hereafter cited as *JRL*.
6. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Prague), Newsline e-mail service, 16 April 1998. Hereafter cited as RFE/RL.
7. RFE/RL, *Newsline*, 1 June 1998.
8. RFE/RL, *Newsline*, 17 June 1998; Bill Keller, "The Caucasian War," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 June 1998, 5 (Keller is quoting Anatol Lieven in his book, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998]); *JRL*, 22 June 1998, quoting *The Economist*, 20 June 1998; and various issues of *JRL* of June 1998 quoting a lecture at the Royal Institute of International Affairs and a Japanese military analyst. A recent book on Russian regionalism is Peter J. Stavrakis, et al., *The Emergence of Regionalism in Post-Soviet Russia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
9. Quoted in *JRL*, 25 June 1998.
10. Although Russian courts have found the old Soviet system of residence control unconstitutional, Moscow's mayor enforces it anyway, particularly against minorities. See "Moscow Jobs Beckon, But Let the Migrant Beware," *New York Times*, 13 June 1998, A3; hereafter cited as *NYT*.
11. James H. Billington, "Russia, Between a Dream and a Nightmare," *NYT*, 17 June 1998, p. A35.
12. Anatol Lieven quoted by Bill Keller, "The Caucasian War," 6.
13. John Steinbruner and Clifford Gaddy, "The Bear Has Lost its Roar," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 1998.
14. Robert D. Kaplan, "Sometimes, Autocracy Breeds Freedom: Isn't China's System Better Than Russia's?" *NYT*, 28 June 1998, WK (weekend) 17.
15. The letter from John Varoli, an American journalist resident in Russia since 1992. *JRL*, 24 June 1998.
16. An analyst of the Japanese National Institute of Defense Studies, *Tokyo Asagamo*, 23 April 1998, reported in *JRL*, 26 May 1998.
17. *Ibid.*
18. A point made in Paul Lewis, "Marx's Stock Resurges on a 150-Year Tip," *NYT*, 27 June 1998, 17, 19.
19. The term is Alexander Buzgalin's. See Jamestown Foundation, *Prism*, 9 January 1998; quoted in *JRL*, 11 January 1998.