



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Russia's Quiet Riot

Learning to Outlast Putin's Autocracy

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In late September, shortly after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his “partial mobilization,” the Russian bards Aleksei Ivashchenko and Georgy Vasilyev performed in Moscow. Ivashchenko and Vasilyev, who belong to the once popular late-Soviet genre of singing

with guitar, enjoyed a wide following in Moscow's university community of the 1970s and 1980s, and the 1,500 spectators included many who came of age during those years. On YouTube, the concert received an enthusiastic response, garnering more than a million views. For Moscow's liberal elite, the event amounted to a kind of antiwar rally: in the songs and remarks of the bards there were many direct hints at the current situation. It was a rare moment when pent-up feelings against the regime could be expressed, if only obliquely.

Nine months into a war that shows little sign of ending, the mood among the pro-Western intelligentsia in Russia is dark. Russians with liberal views—those who have stayed in the country or found it impossible to leave—feel trapped. They face increasingly brutal repression

at home but also the sense that they, along with the regime, are being shunned by the West. They have become double outcasts. Of course, things were even more hopeless in the Soviet Union, but comparisons with life back then have become inevitable, just as some of the rhymes of history are inevitable.

After all, it was in 1976 that two Leningrad artists, Oleg Volkov and Yuli Rybakov, famously painted a protest slogan on the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, once the main political prison of tsarist Russia: “You may crucify freedom, but the human soul knows no shackles,” they wrote. The words were quickly sandblasted away by the authorities, and the artists were ultimately sentenced to long prison terms. (Rybakov later became a well-known human

rights activist and even a member of the post-Soviet parliament.)

Among the minor officials assigned to investigate the incident, as it turns out, was a very young KGB lieutenant named Vladimir Putin. His work on the case was not very important, but—given the current circumstances—it is highly symbolic. In fact, exactly 40 years later, in 2016, the same inscription appeared again on a St. Petersburg waterfront, thus connecting Putin's rise from humble KGB officer to full autocrat, from a functionary in a local struggle against dissent to a dictator enforcing the total suppression of rights and freedoms throughout the country and even beyond its borders. After a brief period of democracy, freedom in Russia has once again been crucified.

MAKE RUSSIA BACKWARD AGAIN

There is nothing new about Putin. The Russian philosopher Vladimir Kantor, for example, has described a model of government that “tries to turn the whole people into an army and the country into a barracks,” all the while relying on “an extreme nationalist ideology of ‘orthodoxy-autocracy-nationality.’” Kantor was referring to the era of Tsar Nicholas I, who ruled from 1825 to 1855. In fact, Nicholas’s reign is but one example of many counterreform eras in Russian history, periods that have been accompanied, as the Russian economist Alexander Auzan has observed, by “economic and technological backwardness and rising costs of suppressing the discontented.” In past such eras, the pendulum would eventually swing the other way, and a period of reform would follow, but the cycle could never be broken: soon, the country was back to the same thing again.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, philosophers, particularly those of the Slavophile school, scoured the depths of the Russian psyche in search of some mysterious, unseen force that would provide a moral example to the rest of the world. But all they could find was an inferiority complex—Russia eternally lagging behind the West—bizarrely mixed with a sense of spiritual superiority. Russian messianism, after another cycle of reform, military defeat, popular revolt, turmoil, and revolution, gave rise to depression followed by mass resentment, and the population slumbered on until the next leader arrived on the scene with an appeal to restore the country's greatness.

In what has become almost a parody of earlier Russian eras, this gloomy pattern has returned with a vengeance in the months since Putin

invaded Ukraine. A state that deliberately embraces depression and regression, fetishizes self-sufficiency and autarky, and nakedly boasts of its cruelty and supremacy is a state of the sixteenth century, not the twenty-first.

In October, at this year's edition of the Valdai forum in Moscow, Putin's highly staged annual meeting with foreign political analysts, the writer and ultranationalist Alexander Prokhanov defended Russia against its critics. Addressing the president, he said, "Very often foreigners ask us, 'What can you, Russians, offer to the modern world? Where are your Nobel Prize winners? Where are your great discoveries, industrial and scientific achievements?'" To that, Prokhanov offered his own answer: "Russia can offer a religion of justice, because this religion, this

feeling is at the heart of all Russian culture and Russian self-sacrifice.”

His statement fits well with the messianic tone into which Moscow's propagandists, ideologues, and officials have fallen, claiming that Russia is in an existential battle with the West—or what they deride as the embodiment of global Satanism, in this sense, unwittingly imitating the Iranian clerics who have long denounced the United States as “the Great Satan.” (Perhaps in a nod to Russia's multiconfessionalism, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has extended the line of Russia's spiritual enemies to Satan, Lucifer, and Eblis.)

In fact, all that Putin's Russia now “offers” to the world is violence and the imperial idea. And the symbol of the Russian soldier today is not the heroic savior of Europe, as commemorated in

Treptower Park in Berlin, where 80,000 Soviet soldiers were killed in the final battle against Hitler. Rather, it is a thug dragging a stolen toilet bowl or washing machine (revealing the profound poverty of the areas deep inside Russia from which Putin's soldiers are mostly recruited).

MOTHERS AT WAR

Another archaic *mise en scène* was Putin's late November meeting with a group of mothers—either of Russian soldiers in general or of the recently mobilized—at his residence on the outskirts of Moscow. Amid growing public anxiety about the mobilization, he could thus demonstrate his humanity and closeness to the people. (Later, it turned out that several of these handpicked “mothers” were members of pro-Kremlin organizations.) Death in the trenches is better than death from vodka, Putin told their approving faces, and a soldier who makes such a

sacrifice has not died in vain. Sacrifice for whom and for what? For the destruction of a foreign country? For killing people on the other side of the border, people who have the same way of life and often speak the same language?

This meeting was not attended by the real war mothers, angry and aggrieved, who just before the meeting had created an informal “Council of Mothers and Wives.” Although the council is not part of an organized antiwar movement, its director was promptly put under surveillance and was even once detained by the police for a short period of time, and mention of the council disappeared from Russian information sources. It is symptomatic that gender protests are gradually maturing in Russia.

Indifference has always provided the social foundations of the Putin regime: a state

indifferent to its citizens and separate from them, a society indifferent to the state and separate from it. Underlying this shared indifference was the abstract idea of a great country following a special path—the idea that united the state with what was known as “Putin’s majority.” During the first six months of the war, these foundations were also maintained by an implicit social contract: in exchange for supporting the massacre and the commander in chief, ordinary Russians did not have to be involved in the fighting.

Now, however, indifference is no longer possible: everyday citizens have to go to war themselves.

The “special operation” has become a “people’s war,” as a top Putin adviser has labeled it.

(Though it is important to note that what is happening is still not officially considered a “war,” and administrative and even criminal penalties

remain in effect for using the word.) But the true “people’s war” is on the Ukrainian side; for Russians, the war is total. In a total war, all shame is discarded, and the need for maximum casualties and destruction is openly acknowledged. Such a war can end only with the capitulation of the enemy and the “return” of Russia’s ancestral lands.

The Putin regime is not only merciless toward the inhabitants of Ukraine. It also has no pity for its own citizens, to whom it can promise nothing but financial or material compensation for their heroic deaths. It is hardly willing even to spare itself, having ravaged its own labor market to fight the war. Russians in their prime working years have been leaving the country in droves: hundreds of thousands have been drafted into the army, and perhaps as many others have escaped the mobilization by fleeing abroad. Some conscripts

have come back from the battlefield in coffins; others have been severely injured and are unable to work. When men are at war, their families' standard of living drops, psychological problems arise at home, and fewer children are born.

In 2020, the Russian economist Vladimir Gimpelson predicted that by 2030, the number of working Russians in the 20- to 40-year-old age group would decline by about 25 percent primarily because of fewer births. But since then, there has been a pandemic and a war and an exodus, and the hole in the workforce will soon become gaping. The demographer Mikhail Denisenko has estimated that if those mobilized this fall serve in the military for one year, Russia's population will experience 25,000 fewer births.

But Putin is not interested in labor-market economics. He is busy with Ukraine. In his

bubble bunker, the autocrat is cut off from information and infection alike—the distance between him and the four-times-COVID-tested public during meetings is enormous. (Although such is the importance of showing he is close to ordinary people that he made an exception for his chosen war mothers.) He hears only what he wants to hear and says only what corresponds to his specific picture of the world, which he then imposes on the population.

TELEVISION AND TRENCHES

Putin's mobilization has brought the violence closer to Russia, and not only through the legions of new conscripts who are being sent to slaughter. On the first day of the draft, many young people in Moscow and St. Petersburg protested, and over the following weeks, other signs of general unease emerged, including the mothers' council, which demanded better provisions for soldiers, a

rejection of nuclear war, and the beginning of peace negotiations. Yet no general antiwar movement has emerged, and many average citizens have not protested: unable to escape the draft, many have simply adjusted to the new rules of the game, digging in only on matters such as getting proper uniforms—now in shockingly short supply—and money in exchange for risking their lives. Like the heroine in “Lili Marlene,” the great antiwar ballad that became ubiquitous in World War II, Russian society has been reduced to waiting under a lamppost for its soldiers to return home.

Meanwhile, Putin’s propaganda has redrawn the boundaries of acceptable speech: on state television, talk-show hosts now freely discuss the possibility of nuclear war and glorify the savage rocket attacks on cities and civilian infrastructure

in Ukraine. Violence has begun to be imposed as a social norm, and for some of Putin's core supporters, it has already become one. A growing part of Russian society has found itself in the trenches—real and imagined—and the brutality of the trenches is increasingly seeping into public discourse and public opinion.

Nevertheless, many are weary of the violence. Since August, support for peace negotiations has steadily grown, according to the Levada Center, the independent Moscow polling group. Already more than 50 percent of Russians support a path to peace talks, whereas only a quarter are “definitely” in favor of continuing the war and another 15 percent “rather” in favor of continuing it. At least some of those “definites,” moreover, may support an even more brutal war, if only to

bring the nightmare to an end one way or another.

KITCHEN DEMOCRATS

In today's antimodern Russia, it is primarily the liberal classes who are depressed: both those who have left the country and those who have remained. Relations between the two groups are fraught. Those in exile accuse those who have stayed of conformism; those who have stayed say that the regime cannot be changed from abroad. Evidently, it is crucial to maintain some quality human capital inside the country, which Russia will sorely need when it has to be rebuilt from scratch. Of course, the exiles form another reservoir of human capital, and when the time comes, both groups, belonging to Russia's counterelite, will be able to nominate leaders from their midst. But they will have to compete or engage in a civil war with the human anticapital

that has taken over during the conflict: the supporters of empire, ultranationalists, fundamentalists, and militarists.

For the moment, there is little that those who remain can do. Just as in Soviet times, political discussions have moved from clubs and restaurants to the safety of private kitchens. And it is there that it is now common to hear things like, “Even in the late Soviet years it was better!” (Then, at least, people were not arbitrarily labeled as “foreign agents,” and the rules and redlines that could not be crossed were generally clear.) Or, “It’s good that mom (or dad, or brother, or grandma, or grandpa) did not live to see this horror.” Or, “We have lived normally, but this is sad for the kids.” (Said with the dawning recognition that Putin has deprived people of their own history, biography, reputations, and life

achievements and that his authoritarianism will last and deprive the next generation of its own prospects.)

It is important for these people to understand that they are not alone—that their views and feelings are shared by many others like them. That is why they pay so much attention to exiled Russian journalists on YouTube. That is why the Ivashchenko-Vasilyev concert was so fervently watched. After all, to go back to those original treasonous lines that Putin and his colleagues investigated in the 1970s, “You may crucify freedom, but the human soul knows no shackles.”

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