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February and august: A view from 2002

Based upon recent historical interpretations, Wittenberg analyses the 1917 − and 1991 revolutions in Russia. He argues that they share remarkable structural similarities.

Igor Klyamkin begins his interesting article "Revolution or Thermidor?"[1] by noting a significant fact: the 10th anniversary of the events of August 1991 was not marked by any official celebration. "The new Russian authorities," he writes, "are almost demonstratively distancing themselves" from August. Klyamkin himself bases his reflections onIrina Starodubrovskaya's andVladimir Mau's fundamental study *Great Revolutions from Cromwell to Putin,* published just before the first great anniversary of the August events. He shares these authors' view of 1991 as a revolution, but refuses to follow them in classifying it as a "great" one.

Curiously, one of the arguments in favour of this point of view is that, ten years on, the August revolution lost its value as a "legitimising resource" . We may note, however, that just one and a half decades after the Great French Revolution, Napoleon became Emperor of the French and France became a *de facto* Empire; more than that, another ten years later, the old dynasty of the Bourbons was restored to power. No−one, nowadays, would see these subsequent events as sufficient grounds for downgrading that revolution from "Great" to "Ordinary". Just as a significant proportion of Napoleon I' s marshals and ministers were veterans of the revolution, it's easy to find active participants of the August events in today's Russian establishment − though it's true that they prefer not to remember their part now, and all the more so since some of their current colleagues were on the other side of the barricades then. What's more, hardly anyone would deny that the sources of the greatest Russian fortunes in capital and wealth are to be found in the post−August re−distribution of property, and in that sense their owners should have no less a stake in the "legitimacy" of August than, say, the multi−million strong legion of owners of privatised apartments.

Nor does it seem legitimate to limit the significance of August, as Klyamkin does, to "the mere scale of the history of Russia" . Where he perceives a mere "adaptation" of Russia to the "developed world" , I see a highly complex process of the country's return into the channel of world civilisation, the creation and strengthening of economic, political, scientific and cultural ties on all levels, from state institutions to the ordinary citizen − a process of great importance not only to Russia, but also to the "developed world" itself. We can't reduce the substance of the post−August decade almost exclusively to a "dissolution of the country that was traumatic for the imperial consciousness" .

This approach leaves out the most important content of the era in Russian history that was started by August − citizens' attainment of the political and economic freedom and civil rights that were fixed by the 1993 Constitution.

All shortcomings of the decade since August notwithstanding, it is beyond doubt that never in the history of Russia has freedom in the broadest sense of the word been achieved so fully and for such a long period.

Concerning the current extremely broad spectrum of retrospective evaluations of its significance, however (reaching as they do from categorical rejection to idealisation, via the authorities' marked indifference), August 1991 fully shares the fate of February 1917.

This similarity is not an accident. Both these events were important milestones on Russia's road to freedom. This is how Georgy Fedotov, one of the most profound of Russian thinkers, saw the significance of the February Revolution 20 years after the event, during the triumph of Hitler's and Stalin's monstrous regimes: "How could one forget that at the beginning of this new era of history, at the birth of the new 'totalitarian' despotism that now threatens the world, it was February that for the last time unfurled the banner of freedom?" , he exclaimed. More than that, as a political commentator, but also as a Christian philosopher, he predicted the inevitable failure of the Communist regime in Russia. "There will come a time − though we do not know how soon − when trampled−upon, humiliated Man (an immortal soul, after all, not a termite!) will rebel and demand that his rights be honoured: not his right to food, to sports, to games, but his right to think, to be free, to bear moral responsibility. This first awakening of Man will be February's resurrection − in Russia."[2]

Since the events of August 1991, when Fedotov's prophecy came true, August has often been compared to February. "Under these new conditions, we have as it were entered a post−February era,"[3] remarked, for example, the political scientist Andranik Migranyan, who was then already one of the leading ideologists of the movement of the country's political system towards authoritarianism.

But as time went on, as the USSR dissolved and as a significant part of post−Soviet society became disappointed about August, disillusionment about February progressed even faster. It is fair to say that in the years subsequent upon the event, a significant part of the Russian public almost precisely (but much more quickly) repeated the evolution of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's philosophy of history: from the ideals of October, which the future author of the "GULAG Archipelago" shared in his youth, to the idea that the February Revolution was fatal for Russia because, he thinks, it made the victory of Bolshevism inevitable − the idea that this author stated so impressively and with such detail in his multi−volume epic "Red Wheel".[4]

If the "dethronement" of February in the consciousness of democratic and liberal circles in the Russian public took place with such ease, that was also because already from 1992−1993 Boris Yeltsin and his entourage began using the experience of pre−revolutionary Russian statehood alongside Western models in their state−building measures. In the end, many features of the pre−revolutionary model were reproduced in the Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, where it is easy even to find passages directly repeating the Basic State Laws of the Russian Empire of 1906.

As to the February revolution, its analogues are now being sought not in August 1991, but in upheavals of a much more distant past. Thus, Mark Masarsky, the philosopher and businessman, qualifies February as a "time of troubles" : "The democratic revolution of 1917 gave birth to a time of troubles for the state, rather than the Duma−based parliamentary−democratic system envisaged." The author juxtaposes the "time of troubles" and an "order" embodied, of course, by state power, an order he calls a "firm vertical hierarchy of power" − as if in 1996 he had had a glimpse of today[5]. The noted historian Vladimir Buldakov, who uses the same metaphor of "troubles" in the name of his study of violence in 1917, tends to liken the February Revolution to the *pugachevshchina*[6] and doesn't spare his colours in describing the excesses of February.[7]

Since there has simultaneously been a revision of Russian history in the spirit of pre−revolutionary official monarchist historiography, we shouldn't be surprised that philippics such as the following have become commonplace even in reputable liberal journalism: "First came disgusting, petty Kerenskys and Rodzyankos, then monstrous Lenins and Sverdlovs, then others still."[8] Solzhenitsyn himself could not, I think, have predicted such a complete muddle of the minds, such utter confusion of the incompatible. In his "Red Wheel" he managed to show, not without compassion, the human drama of many of the protagonists of February, even those he did not personally sympathise with.

Meanwhile the historical experience of February and August gives us sufficient grounds, I believe, to shed our habitual perception of the accidental and unnatural nature of both these revolutions.

In both cases we are faced with the end of the historical path of political regimes that have outlived themselves. Both Empires − the Russian and the Soviet one − collapsed so unexpectedly and so swiftly that this in itself caused the appearance − not immediately, but a few years after the event − of the infamous theories of a world conspiracy of Jews, Freemasons or the global bourgeoisie, or all of them at once, having brought down the respective Empire. But the very swiftness of the collapse and dissolution bears witness to the force of the internal contradictions that could not be solved in the framework of the existing regimes.

These very contradictions, the very problems that the two political regimes encountered, are also surprisingly similar to each other. More than that, some of them have lost none of their weight. The St Petersburg−based historian Yury Soloviev was right to have remarked, in 1993: "We're forced to regard our history as a single drama with a first, a second, a third, and now a fourth act. They're 70, 100, 150 years apart. The actors are the same, only the costumes and hairstyles are different. The problem of land and more specifically land ownership, has not left the stage since 1861. More likely than not, it will continue to shake our country with its muscular hand long after we are gone."[9] In essence, both regimes, the Russian and the Soviet one, followed a historical path that was similar in many ways. What was common to them throughout the greater part of their existence were the enormous role of the demiurge−state; the use of non−economic coercion (serfdom in pre−revolutionary Russia; the *de facto* slavery of the working classes in Stalin's USSR, in some ways continuing for the peasants up into the Brezhnev years); the "vertical hierarchy of power" that is once again so popular today (though so far it mainly exists on paper), extending from the emperor to the land captain or from the General Secretary to the instructor of the party's district committee; a total absence of political and civil rights for the population, who are subject to an unfettered dependency on the bureaucracy; firm state control over culture, education, literature, and art. The list could be continued. The concluding stages of their existence were very similar, too − both in the Russian Empire after 1906 and in the USSR in 1985−1991 were there attempts to reorganise the political system following a Western model. But both attempts demonstrated the utter unreformability of both these political regimes, their incompatibility with the principles of representative democracy and political freedom.

On the other hand, in the sphere of economics too, as Irina Starodubrovskaya and Vladimir Mau note in their book, pre−revolutionary Russia "remained in the risk 'zone', and there was no guarantee that it would be able to make the necessary long−term, strategic changes in an evolutionary manner." The beginning of the First World War made the situation deteriorate, and in the expression of the US scholar Alexander Gerschenkron, cited by the two authors, it "cut off the long−term perspective."

In the USSR of the perestroika years, there turned out to be limited scope for economic reform, since this would have conflicted with the leadership's policy of democratising the country; "the strengthening of democracy [...] turned out to be incompatible with a responsible macro−economic policy" . It was in order to carry out such a policy that the last Soviet ministerial cabinet, led by Valentin Pavlov, steered the course of consolidating state power, which ultimately led to an attempt, on the 19th of August 1991, "at political consolidation through a coup d'Etat" and, as a result of its failure, to the collapse of the Soviet regime.[10]

Let me add that in their very downfall, both regimes displayed astonishing weaknesses of their respective machineries of repression. It is no accident that both February and August gave birth to legends about, respectively, a single "disciplined army division from the front" , in the former case, and a paratrooper division in the latter instance, sufficing to restore order. Arguing with the Russian *émigré* historian Georgy Katkov, who, in his well−known book about the February Revolution[11]accused the Tsarist authorities of Petrograd of a criminal indecisiveness and slowness in crushing the rebellion, the US historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa quite reasonably remarks that this "incompetence" , as he says, on the part of the capital's administration, including the military authorities, "was not accidental but, on the contrary, was rooted in the structural weakness of the whole regime. The very fact that one of the most important tasks − ensuring the security of the capital − was entrusted to such incompetent military and civil leaders, demonstrates the whole depth of the decay of the Tsarist system."[12] 74 years later, similarly, the weakness of the Soviet system, which was in complete decline due to the pressure of democratic change, became obvious on the squares and in the streets of the capital (Moscow, this time, not Petrograd) in the days of the conflict between the Kremlin and the White House.[13]

In 1917 as in 1991, the collapse of the political regime − the autocracy or Soviet socialism − inevitably led to the break−up of the multi−national state− characteristically the people it included mostly lived in compact, unmixed areas. As the well−known Soviet historian Valentin Dyakin noted, "once the ethnic groups making up a multi−national empire have reached a certain level of maturity, they can only be kept together in one state by the use of force. Thus as soon as the empire demonstrates a lack of such force, it breaks apart."[14] The empire restored by the Bolsheviks under the banners of internationalism and friendship between peoples, collapsed, as we see, for almost the same reasons as the Russian Empire.

Another extremely important peculiarity of Russian and Soviet history, which is often bracketed out, is that both the Russian Empire and its heir, the Soviet Union, were (albeit to different degrees) *ideological states*, where both domestic and foreign policy were often − and sometimes, especially during the Soviet era, mostly − determined not by economic and political expediency, but by whether or not they would fit in with the foundations of official ideology.

In the 18th century, during the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire and its consolidation as a great power on the world stage, the main task of state ideology was to justify this expansion, including shady foreign policy ventures − as shown in Andrei Zorin's study of the curious evolution of state thought in the late 18th and early 19th century.[15] In the era of Nikolai I, the centre of gravity of official state ideology moves into the sphere of domestic policy. As Zorin stresses, the intensification of the search for an ideology was a direct result of Nikolai I's refusal of the plans for serious reforms that had been worked out in the first years of his reign.[16] This led to the emergence of Uvarov's triad of *Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality* which, as we know, played the role of a foundation for state ideology until the very collapse of the monarchy.

Like Marxism in Soviet times, this triad was more than just a dogma for the Russian authorities on all levels of the state apparatus for over 80 years following its enunciation. With a charming simplicity, it dictated the necessity of very concrete administrative actions towards the Emperor's subjects, according to their religion or declared level of loyalty to the authorities. As Zorin notes, according the logic of the triad, which he defines as a "vicious circle" , "the basis of Nationality is constituted by convictions. To put it simply, a Russian is anyone who believes in his church and his sovereign." As a result, "Old Believers and members of sects, in the lower strata of society, and converted Catholics, Deists and sceptics in the higher layers, are excluded. Likewise, if nationality necessarily presupposes loyalty to the autocracy, all constitutionalists or, worse, republicans, are automatically denied the right to be Russians."[17] Thus from the moment when the state adopted the triad as an ideological weapon, the official ideology of the Russian Empire and the domestic policy carried out by its government also became a "vicious circle" almost impossible to leave.

Therefore it is no accident that state ideology became a constant brake on change, and especially on Russia's transformation into a law−governed state, which was initiated by Alexander II's reform of the judiciary and remained unfinished. "Russian subjects have obligations, and that counts for more than any rights" , proclaimed in 1882 one of the leaders of Russian conservatism, Mikhail Katkov, who considered that for a similar reason, Russia needed no constitution.[18]

Very significantly, Andrei Zorin points out the "kinship" between the approaches flowing from Uvarov's formula and "the model of 'Soviet man' worked out by the Communist regime, who was instructed to hold a strictly pre−defined set of views and convictions. In this system, a 'non−Soviet person' could not possibly be part of the people and was declared a 'renegade'. In the early 19th century, the expression 'monstrous outcast' was used for the same phenomenon."[19]

As we can see, the ideological character of both states − the Russian and the Soviet one − dictated almost identical methods of "sorting out folks" (or, translated into Soviet newspeak, "selecting cadres") according to whether they fit the official ideological standards.

It is another matter that Soviet bureaucratic ideology followed quite a tortuous path: from orthodox Marxism−Leninism to dogmatic Stalinism, which from the late 1930s turned to the heritage of autocracy and assimilated the imperial and nationalist components of the latter. As we know, this symbiosis between Communist and imperial ideology continued to exist, albeit in a somewhat modified and softened form, up until the collapse of real socialism in the USSR.

In general, hardly anyone would want to deny the effect, observable throughout Russian history, of permanently recurrent returns to the past in its most varied and sometimes unexpected aspects. The events after the February Revolution, which, in Yakov Gordin's precise definition, "ended with a restoration of the autocratic system in its Petrine variant" , are the most striking confirmation of this.[20]

If we look at the realities and perspectives of today's Russia from this point of view, we can already perceive some of the marks of such a backward movement fully in tune with our historical tradition. I mean the n−th construction of a "firm vertical hierarchy of power" ; the reinforcement of authoritarian tendencies in the country's government; its leadership's thoughtless attitude to the process of liquidating the division of powers, which is basically due to short−termist political opportunism; and the establishment of state control over all nation−wide TV channels. The opinion of Alexander Yakovlev, one of the fathers of Perestroika, quoted by Irina Starodubrovskaya and Vladimir Mau, is instructive: "There is a restoration going on, a restoration of certain aspects of the previous, Soviet regime." We can even perceive the spectre of an ideological state on the horizon: where if not to such a state can the state−declared search for a national idea (i.e. a new state myth) lead, or the *de facto* pronouncement of Orthodoxy if not as a state religion, at least as a faith specially protected by the authorities?

However, the "crossroads" that would determine Russia's further historical path have not yet been reached. The improvement of relations with the West after the 11th of September, the rejection of the recent aggressive anti−Western rhetoric, the liberalisation of the economy and first and foremost of fiscal policy, show that there is a simultaneous movement in a direction that is the opposite of restoration.

But these steps are not enough. In order to become efficient and enjoy the support of the population, the Russian state should, according to the universal recipe cited by Starodubrovskaya and Mau, "become inexpensive, non−bureaucratic, and efficiently carry out a number of necessary tasks."

If, over the coming years, nothing is done to build such a state, then we can already name the slogans that will become fashionable − most probably, during the presidential elections of 2008. These will include demands for "cheap government" ; for a return from the "military" (or, if you prefer, "semi−military") manner of government that has, de facto, already taken shape, to a civil one; for the nationalisation of big bureaucratic capital and its subsequent privatisation; for an end to hidden censorship in the mass media, etc.

It is by evaluating to what extent the current government of post−Soviet Russia will be able to realise such a programme, objectively necessary as it is for the country's further development, that we will be able to judge whether the authorities' ignorance towards the tenth anniversary of August was a simple display of indifference and, consequently, of an absence of historical flair, or the result of a short−term tactical calculation dictated by the specific political situation of the hot summer of 2001.

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[1] *NZ* No. 5 (19)/2001, p. 41−45; all unmarked quotations in what follows are from that article.

[2] Georgy Fedotov, "Fevral' i Oktyabr' " [February and October], in: Georgy Fedotov, *Sud'ba i grekhi Rossii (izbrannye stat'i po filosofii russkoj istorii i kul'tury)* [Russia's Fate and Sins (Selected Articles on the Philosophy of Russian History and Culture)], vol. 2, St Petersburg, 1992, p. 135.

[3] Andranik Migranyan, "Perspektivy russkogo nacional'nogo dvizheniya. Byvshaya imperiya v posleputchevoj situacii" [The Perspectives of the Russian National Movement. The Former Empire in the Post−Putsch Situation], in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta,* 14/11/1991.

[4] For more detail see: Yakov Lur'e, "Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn − evolyuciya ego istoricheskikh vzglyadov" [Alexander Solzhenitsyn − The Evolution of His Historical Views], in: *Zvezda* No. 6/1994, p. 117−125.

[5] Mark Masarsky, *Poryadok i smuta* [Order and Troubles], in: *Znamya* No. 5/1996, p. 191−202. This formula is used by Putin's administration for the highly centralised political system that has been created by the current president. [translator's note]

[6] A derogaotry name for the 18th century peasant rebellion led by Yemelyan Pugachev. [translator's note]

[7] See Vladimir Buldakov, *Krasnaya smuta* [The Red Troubles], Moscow, 1997. I have already had occasion to write about this study in my survey of books about the February Revolution (See: *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* No. 6(52)/2001, p. 338−340).

[8] Yury Gladil'shchikov, "Imperator i ubijcy" [The Emperor and the Murderers], in: *Itogi* No. 30(216)/2000, p. 62.

[9] *Anatomiya revolyucii. 1917 god v Rossii: massy, partii, vlast'* [Anatomy of the Revolution. The Year 1917 in Russia: The Masses, the Authorities and the Parties], St Petersburg, 1994, p. 68

[10] Irina Starodubrovskaya, Vladimir Mau, *Velikie revolyucii ot Kromvelya do Putina* [Great Revolutions from Cromwell to Putin], Moscow, 2001, p. 259−264

[11] First published in English in 1967:(Georgy Katkov, *Russia, 1917. The February Revolution.* London, 1967), then twice re−issued in Russian translation: in Paris in 1984 and in Russia in 1997 (see Georgy Katkov, *Fevral'skaya revolyuciya* [The February Revolution], Moscow, 1997).

[12] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, "Fevral'skaya revolyuciya: konsensus issledovatelej?" [The February Revolution: A Scholarly Consensus?], in: *1917 god v sud'bah Rossii i mira. Fevral'skaya revolyuciya: ot novyh istochnikov k novomu osmysleniyu* [The Year 1917 in the Fate of Russia and the World. The February Revolution: From New Sources to a New Understanding], Moscow, 1997, p. 100.

[13] which, until October 1993, housed the Supreme Soviet (parliament) of the Russian Federation. [translator's note]

[14] Valentin Dyakin, *Nacional'nyj vopros vo vnutrennej politike carizma* (XIX − nachalo XX v.) [The National Question in Tsarism's Domestic Policy (19th − Early 20th Century)], St Petersburg, 1998, p. 61

[15] See Andrei Zorin, *Kormya dvuglavogo orla... Russkaya literatura i gosudarstvennaya ideologiya v poslednej treti XVIII − pervoj treti XIX veka* [Feeding the Two−Headed Eagle...Russian Literature and State Ideology in the Final Third of the 18th and the First Third of the 19th Century], Moscow, 2001.

[16] ibidem, p. 340

[17] ibidem, p. 365−366

[18] See Valentina Tvardovskaya, *Ideologiya poreformennogo samoderzhaviya (M. N. Katkov i ego izdaniya*) [The Ideology of Post−Reform Autocracy (Mikhail Katkov and His Publications)].

[19] Andrei Zorin, op. cit.

[20] Yakov Gordin, *Mezh rabstvom i svobodoj: 19 yanvarya − 25 fevralya 1730 goda* [Between Slavery and Freedom: From the 19th of January to the 25th of February 1730], St Petersburg, 1994, p. 328

Published 2002−08−07
Original in Russian
Translation by Mischa Gabowitsch
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