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Soviet History

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Eternal Progress or Eternal Recurrence?¹

History has a way of repeating itself.² Even if we reject the mechanistic cycles envisioned by Nietzsche, we can still discern general repetitive patterns in the historical progression. We may begin to wonder if people ever learn from their past mistakes. This sense of cyclical historical development is particularly striking when we look at Russia and the most recent decade of events that transpired there. The years 1989-1994 seem almost a repeat of the immortal years 1917-1924. The resemblance is so close, it is almost ghostly eerie. Despite the fact that the October 1917 revolution was Marxist in theme, the best interpretation to understand the cyclical appearance of Russian politics is not Marxist, but Weberian³. We can best understand the ambiguous periods 1917-1924 and 1989-1994 -- not through Karl Marx's class struggle -- but through Max Weber's theoretical insight into social motivation and political legitimacy.

Of course, we must not fall into the trap of seeing patterns where there are only resemblances. This would be a great sin of generalization. We should only claim a pattern if there is clear evidence in favor of such an interpretation. But the evidence will not be unequivocal and unambiguous, because in the science of social observation, there are no obvious axioms or clear rules of deduction. Given this caveat, we are still able to discern some general trends and patterns that correspond nicely to Weber's 'ideal types' of legitimacy.

In his writings, Max Weber classified three distinct 'ideal types'⁴ of authority based on their source of legitimacy: (1) traditional, (2) rational-legal, and (3) charismatic. Traditional authority was characteristic of pre-modern societies, where power was generally passed down hereditary lines, and the regime's legitimacy generally derived from a transcendental mandate from the Heavens. Progress in science and the greater education of the masses has in recent centuries contributed to a great decline in the legitimacy of these traditional powers. The traditional sources of authority were slowly and systematically replaced by rational-legal authority. Most modern Western regimes derive their legitimacy from claims to rational and legal organization of society and government. Each successive regime derives its authority from a well laid-out legal procedure. In democracies, this may be either direct election by the masses or else appointment by another person or group that was directly elected. In a totalitarian regime, this may be selection and appointment by the current dictator or past administration. The replacement of traditional by rational-legal authority coincides, according to Weber, to the general rationalization of society, and the transition in social motivation from traditional to zweckrational ("technocratic, goal-oriented"). The third and last source of legitimacy -- charismatic leadership -- has always swayed power throughout history, and continued to be very important in the 20th century. Like the other two motivations of social action -- affective and wertrational ("value-oriented") -- charismatic leadership may be present in conjunction with both rational-legal and traditional authority (Elwell 1996). Weber recognized that no authority in the real world fit his ideal types, and that every real authority was a complex mixture of his ideals. Nevertheless, Weber's ideal types of authority provide us with a language in which we can discuss the transition of legitimate authority from the Tzarist Russia of Nicholas II to the Communist Russia of Lenin and Stalin and finally to the Democratic Russia of Yeltsin and Putin.

Understandably, after a revolution, the regime that comes to power always suffers from a crisis of legitimacy. The charismatic authority that carried the revolutionaries through the revolution undoubtedly dies down, and the leaders are forced to appeal to some other source of legitimacy if they wish to consolidate their rule. For obvious reasons, the traditional appeal to authority is usually unavailable to the revolutionaries, and they must continue to rely on charismatic legitimacy until they are able to firmly establish a rational-legal system. This is precisely the situation that the Bolsheviks under Lenin were in after the success of the October 1917 Revolution, and the exact position the Democrats under Yeltsin were thrust after the failure of the August 1991 coup.

The Bolsheviks fought against the traditional established authority of the Tzar, when the political authority of that office rested in Nicholas II. Through Lenin's charismatic leadership, the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in October 1917 from the Provisional Government in the name of the working class. Once they seized power, the Bolsheviks had to find a way to retain it. It was clear that in addition to the traditional monarchists who supported the restoration of the monarchy, many of the other leftist groups -- such as the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries -- did not support the Bolshevik 'coup'. A bloody Civil War ensued -- and only after the decisive Red Bolshevik victory could Lenin and his entourage claim rational-legal authority, and begin to create on the ruins of the old monarchy their new state machinery. With the death of Lenin, and the ascent of Stalin to the head of the newly emerging Soviet state, rational-legal authority was largely established.

By 1989-1991, the authority of Gorbachev was clearly rational-legal. He had been elected by the Politburo to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, made

Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and elected President of the USSR by the newly-established Congress of People's Deputies. He held the same powerful post previously occupied by Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev. His power derived from the historical legal authority of the power of his office and the men who previously occupied it. Like Lenin before him, Yeltsin had to use his charisma and the power of his personality to oppose Gorbachev, since at that time it was the only source of legitimacy available to him. In 1987, Yeltsin had been dismissed from the Politburo and demoted from his position at the head of the Moscow Party Organization for his criticism of the path of Gorbachev's *perestroika*. The Russian Republic which he claimed to represent had no real legal authority, and the Russian Parliament of which he was elected Speaker was both officially and practically subordinate to the USSR's Congress of Deputies. His charisma and heroism in the fateful years of 1989-1991 allowed him to defeat the rational-legal authority of Gorbachev. His persistent and determined position, his appeal to the Western leaders, and his heroic action during the August 1991 coup attempt all increased his appeal and influence over the Russian masses. When pictures and videos of his heroic opposition to a huge Soviet tank on August 19, 1991 streamed across Russia and the world, Yeltsin immediately acquired international reputation and acclaim -- and hence legitimacy -- in his leadership position over Russia (Yeltsin 1994).

There was another fundamental way in which the events that transpired around Lenin in 1917 were similar to those around Yeltsin in 1991 -- both men's success was made possible by the development of *objective* conditions in the historical process. For Lenin, it was the First World War -- and the political and economic crisis that was the aftermath -- that gave credence to his ideology. For Yeltsin it was the attempted right-wing coup and the economic instability wrought by Gorbachev's *perestroika* as it threatened long-established economic institutions. Yeltsin was

able to use the objective political situation to his advantage, and in fact to steer the course of historical events in his direction. Just like Lenin used back-room negotiations to steer the soviets to majority support of the Bolsheviks, so Yeltsin used similar behind-the-scene tactics to steer the Parliament to his majority (Yeltsin 1994). But the eerie similarities do not stop there. Lenin's charisma alone was not sufficient to keep Russia together in 1917, and the Bolsheviks had to resort to bloody civil war in order to exert their control over the entire country. Yeltsin found himself in a similar situation in October 1993. In the roughly two years since becoming head of the newly independent Russian state, Yeltsin had, with the direction of economist Gaidar, put into effect severe price liberalization and privatization schemes that shocked the country (Yeltsin 1994). In fact, his highly unpopular reforms were called "shock therapy" both by supporters and opponents. The reforms were so unpopular and so disastrous that barely a year into their implementation, Yeltsin had to relieve Gaidar of his post and to temporarily pause some of the fast-paced reform (Yeltsin 1994). This was exactly keeping in style with the sharp collectivization practice that the Bolsheviks attempted in despair in 1917, but which they were quickly forced to abandon in 1921 after the Civil War. The Bolsheviks retracted many of their earlier policies characterized as War Communism, and instituted a neo-capitalist system termed the "New Economic Policy" in order to stave off protest and achieve stability. Civil war was exactly what Yeltsin feared, but by September 1993, it was already too late. Though civil war did not transpire (fortunately, for with Russia's nuclear stockpile, the consequences would have been far more serious than in 1917), the country came quite close to it. A reactionary, anti-democratic, right-wing coup was organized by Speaker of the Parliament Khasbulatov and Vice President Rutskoi. On September 22, 1993, they seized the White House (the Russian parliament building, and the site of the August 1991 coup). Whereas Yeltsin The Opposition Leader had much

success earlier defeating bloodlessly the 1991 coup, Yeltsin The President was forced to resort to a violent military confrontation to disperse the Parliament. On October 4, 1993, he ordered tanks on the White House, and over 100 people were killed in the operation (Yeltsin 1994).

Afterwards, Yeltsin's team was forced to roll-back many of Gaidar's most ambitious and radical reforms. As before, radical reforms once again failed to work for Russia.

A final comparison between Russia under early Bolshevik rule and Russia today can be made, also on the basis of a crisis of legitimacy. With Lenin's declining health, a mini-crisis emerged for the Bolsheviks -- Who would succeed Lenin as Leader and First-Among-Equals as Vanguard of the Proletariat? No clear legal-rational mechanism was in place for such a transition, precisely because Lenin and the Bolsheviks had gained power through charisma. There at first emerged a Triumvirate -- consisting of Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev -- that claimed collective leadership of Russia. However, Stalin was quickly able to use his powers of appointment to establish his personal dictatorship, and to begin on the tragic course of the next 25 years. Stalin had been virtually unknown in Russian politics until Lenin designated him as his heir, and encouraged his election to the post of General Secretary of the CPSU. Yeltsin and the Democratic Russian government was in a similar dilemma in 1999 when Yeltsin's health was declining (he had already suffered a heart attack, a plane crash, and chronic fatigue). It was not clear who would be strong-willed enough to take over Yeltsin's self-made post, and to lead Russia into the new Millennium. In 1999, Yeltsin appointed a virtually unknown former KGB agent, Vladimir Putin, to the post of Prime Minister (Yeltsin 2000, Putin 2000). Why Yeltsin made that choice is still not entirely clear. On December 31, 1999, when Yeltsin resigned from the office of President, he named Putin Acting President, and in his resignation address urged the Russian electorate to give their full confidence in Putin and the new government⁵. The Russian masses did exactly what

they were told. On March 26, 2000, they confirmed Putin to the post of President, thereby solidifying his rational-legal authority. It is unclear where Putin will lead Russia, and whether the eerie similarities with Stalin's rise to power are indicative of greater trends, or merely superficialities. For the sake of Russia and the world, let us hope it is the later.

Whereas Americans can point to over 200 years of continued social, political, and economic progress, Russians do not have the advantage of such a heritage. Instead, when Russians look back at their history, all they can see is 70 years of corrupt officials, promises broken, cynical propaganda, and economic crisis. And the last decade of failed reforms, more promises broken, and more corrupt officials has only reinforced their social cynicism and political alienation. It is not surprising, then, that recent Russian polls indicate a population largely skeptical of democracy, cynical of any idealism, and highly distrustful of public officials. They have heard all of this lofty talk and have seen all of this idealistic campaigning before. Russia today is caught in a viscous cycle - their political culture, destroyed after so many years in poor economic condition, can not be used to restore economic health and growth - and the continuing poor economic predictions for the near future keep the political morale low. If there is anything we outside observers - both in space (political scientists) and in time (historians) - can see, it is that there are no easy answers and no simple solutions. Paradoxically, it may be this very realization that is required for Russia's enlightenment and salvation.

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1The title of this paper is taken from the concept of eternal recurrence (ie: a repetition of all possible events, infinitely many times) from the German philosopher Fredrick Nietzche.

2This paper analyzes the series of momentous events from 1989-1994 that shook the world, as described in pages 3-293 of Boris Yeltsin's *The Struggle for Russia* (1994), and other sources.

3Max Weber (1864-1920), German sociologist; considered father of the field of sociology.

4An 'ideal type' is a mental construct -- much like a Platonic ideal -- that does not necessarily correspond to any real-world object. Ideal types are useful in the organization of thought in historico-comparative contexts. They serve as measuring rods against which different sociopolitical systems can be measured and compared (Elwell 1996).

5A new presidential election was scheduled for three months later.