

January 27th, 2005

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# THE AMERICAN THINKER

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## ARTICLES...

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### Russia's revolution has begun

January 27th, 2005

*[Editor's note: Herbert E. Meyer was awarded National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, the intelligence community's highest honor, for his service at the CIA during the Reagan Administration, where he managed the production of National Intelligence Estimates and other top secret projections for the president. He is widely credited for being the first US government official to forecast the Soviet Union's collapse, a forecast originally greeted with considerable derision.]*

The second half of Russia's second revolution has begun.

It started in mid-January, when in cities throughout the country tens of thousands of mostly-older citizens took to the streets for days on end to protest President Vladimir Putin's welfare reform plan. Already hope is starting to rise, both inside the country and beyond, that "people power" will bring to Russia the kind of real democracy it is bringing right now to the neighboring countries of Ukraine and Georgia. But Russia is - well, Russia - which means that this revolution will go on longer, spill more blood, and could end less happily than the revolutions nearby. Which leads to one big question that the Bush Administration will need to answer sooner rather than later: whose side are we on?

Since keeping an eye on Russian revolutions can be a full-time job - during the Reagan Administration, come to think of it, this *was* my full-time job - a bit of history may be helpful: The first Russian revolution came in 1917. In February of that year the Social Democrats overthrew the Czar. Then, in November 1917, Lenin and his Bolsheviks overthrew the Social Democrats. The first half of this revolution brought a marked improvement over what had come before. Alas, the second half wiped out everything the first half had accomplished and brought 74 years of mass murder and misery within the Soviet Union, and a Cold War with the West that didn't end until the next revolution, in 1991, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and gave way to the current Russian state.

### Messy but Working

Led by the well-intentioned (and occasionally sober) Boris Yeltsin, the new Russia launched a series of economic and political reforms that would have been unthinkable under even the most benevolent communist leadership. Through the early 1990s a free and vibrant press emerged, and a chaotic sort of market economy started to develop. For the first time in Russia's blood-soaked history, elections were free and fair. It was all a mess, as such transitions often are, but it was working and Russia looked to be

on its way toward becoming a modern, free-market democracy. Indeed, so rapid was its progress that even some Cold Warriors began to think of the new Russia as a sort of Canada-squared - vast, snowy, a global repository of raw materials beneath a technically-skilled industrial base, always a bit prickly to deal with, to be sure, but on the whole a responsible member of the international community.

Russians and foreign governments alike were optimistic when Vladimir Putin, a former KGB colonel who became President Yeltsin's protégé and eventually his prime minister, culminated his meteoric rise to power on New Year's Eve, 1999, when Yeltsin astonished the world by announcing his resignation and Putin's appointment as his successor. Putin then went on to win the Presidency in his own right three months later, in the March 2000 election. He came across as a smart, tough technocrat who could take on the country's bureaucracy, clean up the wreckage left by decades of communism and get Russia on its way into the 21st century. And it's impossible to exaggerate the sheer joy and relief among Russians that they finally had someone in charge who was young, healthy and athletic - a good omen for the country's future.

Everyone tried hard not to notice that Putin had secured his election by, among other nasty stunts, a string of Moscow apartment-house bombings his law-and-order campaign blamed on Chechen terrorists, but which turned out to be organized by Putin's alma mater, the Russian intelligence service. And everyone kept trying not to notice that, once securely in office, Putin started to strangle Russia's fragile free-market democracy. Newspapers and television networks that opposed him were shut down, or forced to sell out to Putin supporters. A new law that Putin rammed through the Duma allowed him to appoint regional governors - who had been subject to election. The assassination of independent journalists and opposition politicians became commonplace. In October 2003 Putin arrested Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a major funder of opposition politicians and the founder of Yukos Oil, Russia's largest energy company, on trumped-up charges of tax evasion and fraud. By the time Putin ran for re-election in 2004, there really was no opposition.

Putin's second term has been an unmitigated disaster. His inept handling of the attack on a school in Beslan last September, which left more than 300 children dead and which he attributes - once again -- to Chechen terrorists, shattered his reputation for tough competence. In October, his clumsy intervention in Ukraine's presidential election on behalf of the corrupt incumbent backfired, and the pro-west Viktor Yushchenko is now that country's president. (There's no official verdict on who ordered Yushchenko's poisoning during his campaign, but the world's record for botched assassinations has long been held by the Soviet intelligence service - which these days reports to you-know-whom.) In January, while the Yukos Oil founder rotted in jail, Putin seized the company itself and shattered hopes that Russia will play by the rule of law. And now his welfare reform flop has brought tens of thousands of ordinary Russians - the very core of Putin's political base -- into the streets against him.

## **He Won't Give Up**

History doesn't repeat itself, and Vladimir Putin isn't Nicholas II. He's worse. Russia's last czar was a heartless fool who, when confronted in his private railway car by a delegation from the Duma and told that it was time to go, meekly signed his abdication papers and allowed himself and his family to be taken away. Russia's current president is a vicious thug with a vast stockpile of nuclear weapons, the means to threaten delivery anywhere on earth - and control of the world's [seventh largest](#) oil reserves.

He won't give up without a fight.

To his great credit, President Bush has gone out of his way to make friends with Mr. Putin, and to welcome him into the club of world leaders. But it's a safe bet that Putin didn't much like President Bush's second inaugural speech, in which Mr. Bush put the U.S. squarely on the side of people seeking freedom against their oppressors. Indeed, it's likely that Putin sees that speech as a gun pointed at his forehead. As Putin tightens his grip, the last thing he wants is any kind of American support - covert, open, financial, even rhetorical - for the growing number of Russians who want to emulate their neighbors in Ukraine and Georgia and throw him out of power.

Putin's strategy will be to make himself our ally in the war on terrorism, while making clear to President Bush that in return for Russia's help he expects the U.S. to keep its nose out of internal Russian politics. So the Bush Administration will need to decide whether Russia's help is worth the price of abandoning the President's policy - and being seen around the world as having abandoned it for the sake of expediency.

On the one hand, Putin really has been helpful, for instance by boosting oil production to help drive down the price of energy and by giving his support, or at least his acquiescence, to U.S. bases in neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. We need lower oil prices and we need those bases, so it's easy to make a case that you go to war with the Russian government you've got, not the one you wish you had. On the other hand, Putin's increasingly oppressive behavior has put him not only on the wrong side of the policy that President Bush outlined so eloquently in his inaugural speech, but on the wrong side of history. He is trying to take Russia into the 21st century by forcibly imposing on his country a political system that is halfway between the Romanov dynasty and the Bolsheviks. Oil revenues will keep the economy going for a while, but in the long run this system cannot be made to work.

### **Will the Army Shoot?**

It's impossible to know how long this second half of Russia's second revolution will last. More likely it will go on for years, rather than months. But at some point push will come to shove, and when it does the outcome will depend - as it always does in these situations - on what happens when Putin, or perhaps his hand-picked successor, gives the order to shoot into the crowds. If the army shoots, the regime survives, at least for a while. If the army ignores the order, it's over and the good guys win.

I don't know what will happen - and neither does Putin. He's been boosting military spending lately, not only to make Russia a bigger player in world politics, but to secure the army's loyalty. He may well have it when he needs it most. But in today's world of "people power" and mass communication, and with the examples set by Ukraine and Georgia, when the order comes to shoot - and, Putin being Putin, sooner or later it will -- the Russian army may well decide to stand down, and by doing so to stand with their neighbors and even their own children.

Nothing will do more to bring about this peaceful outcome than if the State Department, the Pentagon, and members of Congress from both parties stop nit-picking the President's speech and playing down his vision. Instead, they should start implementing it by doing everything they can to convince Russia's military leaders that President Bush meant precisely what he said, and that Russia's best hope for the

future lies in their help to assure that when the second half of this second revolution ends, Russia is truly, finally free.

*Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. His DVD on [The Siege of Western Civilization](#) has become an international best-seller.*

***Herbert E. Meyer***

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