

Ukraine: Was What Happened a Revolution?

If so, then...

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I view the recent events in the Ukraine rather simply – everything hangs on the answer to a central question: Were the events in Ukraine a revolution? If one agrees, as I do, that the overthrow of Yanukovych was the product of a genuine, popular uprising against a corrupt and thuggish regime, then progressive people of all stripes should be supportive of the events in Ukraine – even with reservations. If, on the other hand, one believes that Yanukovych's ouster was masterminded in some Western capital, or manipulated by a shady cabal of neo-Nazis, then, for me, there is simply nothing more to say.

If a revolutionary event occurred in Ukraine, then any discussion of Yanukovych as the legitimate, democratically elected president is ridiculous, even absurd. The last Ukrainian election may have been judged fair from the perspective of Western poll watchers, but everyone, and I mean everyone, knows that when elections are stolen, they are stolen well *before* the balloting begins. It would be a stretch to equate the results of any Ukrainian election held since the fall of the Soviet Union with the genuine, popular will of the Ukrainian people. I dare say that the election victory of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood was carried out in far freer conditions than any electoral contest in which Yanukovych was a candidate. Ukraine, since independence, has been run by authoritarian kleptocrats who have enriched themselves grandly while the living standards of the average Ukrainian have deteriorated miserably.

The fact that the oligarchs of eastern Ukraine stepped away from Yanukovych at the moment of his greatest need does not mean the events on the Maidan were, effectively, a coup led by the oligarchs. The fact is that oligarchs held their cards tight, until almost the very end, switching allegiance at the last instant, after Klitchko and Tymoshenko failed to sell the deal they had brokered to the masses on the square. Oligarchs understand self-preservation, it is the reason they squirrel away their loot in foreign real estate and banks. Self-interest and oligarchy go together as naturally as cookies and milk.

Yanukovych fled when he finally understood that the military and the security forces were no longer willing to suffer the consequences of protecting a tottering, unpopular regime. When those forces left the scene – the revolution prevailed by default. Remember Teheran in 1978: there were months of street fighting, cycles of martyrdom, and then one day the army refused to leave their barracks, then the police refused, and by that afternoon, the Shah was on a helicopter out of Iran. The same thing happened in Bucharest—only there, the revolution put Mr. and Mrs. Ceausescu in front of a wall.

The fact that the Obama administration appears to be taking a hard, public position on Russian military action in Crimea, does not mean that the Ukrainians on the Maidan were agents of U.S. imperial expansion, as Putin, Lavrov and some commentators on the left would suggest. The U.S. was not interested in seeing a revolutionary situation unfold in the Ukraine any more than was Russia. The United States and its allies were willing and happy to see Yanukovych hold onto power until December.

Besides, does anyone believe that the US government is even capable of launching an operation like the Maidan. They've been fought to a draw by the Taliban, they still haven't been able to topple the Chavez/Maduro regime in Venezuela, and let's not even bring up Cuba. Gone are the days when they

could topple a Mossadegh, an Arbenz, or an Allende with a suitcase full of money and a coterie of ambitious generals and admirals, and Yanukovych was no Mossadegh or Allende. He was a thug and he remains a thug. Even Putin keeps him at arm's length, like spoiled meat.

Certainly, the big money in the West wants more effective economic penetration of the Ukraine, but not at the cost of jeopardizing economic relations with Russia. Business is business and revolutions are generally bad for business. In a similar vein, Putin understands that his Eurasian Economic zone is a joke. He also understands that Russia survives on the hard currency it earns selling energy to the West. The invasion of Crimea is nothing more than a crude negotiating ploy, Putin's oligarchs will not allow him to strain their purses for the sake of some Russian pensioners.

If we have witnessed a revolution in Kiev, then progressives should be generally supportive. The best thing progressive people could hope for would be a popular revolution in Russia. Outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg —where billionaires have the most fun — life is miserable. The rural economy has collapsed and the population is in a demographic death spin, appointed regional governors operate like feudal lords and in the countryside they are back to burning witches.

Will the Ukrainian revolution fail? Almost certainly yes. The forces on the Maidan have not coalesced around a genuine revolutionary group or movement and even if such a movement were to emerge what chances would it have in the current situation. There are new but familiar faces in power now, but let's not forget that these parliamentary revolutionaries recently installed local oligarchs in Donetsk and Dnepropetrovsk to keep order. What we don't know is whether the Ukrainian masses—both Russian and Ukrainian-speaking—can protect the political gains they have won against the restoration of oligarchy albeit with new faces.

The world today looks a lot like it did before the start of World War I. What seems to be happening around the world, with the Arab spring and now the Ukraine, is more evocative of the revolutions of 1848 than of 1917 and 1918. It almost feels as though the twentieth century was some kind of aberration. The Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, China, Vietnam—what lessons do they offer that can help us to understand the events of today? I'm afraid very few.

Today, people who side with the poor and weak against the rich and powerful would do well to unlearn what they were conditioned to see through the prism of the twentieth century. The alignment of power in the world today looks much more like 1890 than 1950. If you ignore the events of the century, can try reading Marx and Engels, Kropotkin and Bakunin and you will find that you can read them in a completely new way, in a way that makes a great deal of sense about the world we live in. The old left-right paradigm has been broken by history. The language that was once so effective no longer works and the people who continue to cling to it sound, increasingly, out of touch.

The events in the Ukraine are taking place in an entirely new context. Who is on the left and who is on the right—who is with the people, who is against them no longer fits into neat little boxes. Progressives need to go back and revisit the things we think we know. When the common people, working people are on the barricades, we don't need to over-think it—we need to relearn how to show them solidarity.