

**POWER, BROKEN: HOW REVOLUTIONS HAPPEN**  
*A Political Economist's Perspective on Radical Change*

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## Chapter 1

### THE PERMANENCE OF REVOLUTIONS

The presidential palace that feels abandoned despite heavily armed guards in every corridor, cabinet members, who sit idly in their offices, heads of military and secret service, no longer picking up calls from the president, random opposition figures being interviewed by a CNN crew, cheerful crowds on the streets – this is what outside observers remember about a revolution. The day when the old regime fell. The day when the new calendar started.

Actually, a revolution is much more than a day when power changes hands. It is typically decades in the making, and decades until a new way of life becomes the norm. For the good or for the bad, a revolution tears the fabric of the nation.

Violent power changes happen around the globe with surprising regularity. Over the last two decades, mass protests brought down Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, Kurmanbek Bakiev of Kyrgyzstan, and Ben Ali of Tunisia. Presidents Evo Morales of Paraguay and Victor Yanukovych of Ukraine fell when their power grabs were met with fierce resistance. Mohammed Morsi of Egypt and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe were ousted in internal coups. In Burkina Faso and Mali, governments fell to coups as well. Only some irregular power transitions earn the name of *revolution*. It takes societal and institutional transformations for a coup to become a revolution.

On January 6, 2021, Americans got a glimpse of a picture more familiar to citizens of third-world nations: aggressive crowds gathering around the parliament, politicians demanding that protesters fight until their last breath, a military stuck in limbo as if waiting for the outcome of the fight. Was that a revolution? Two weeks later, the Russian police beat up hundreds and arrested five thousand peaceful marchers who protested the jailing of Alexey Navalny, the leader of the opposition. Was it a sign of a revolution brewing? In 2022, it took several months and hundreds of executions for the Iranian

Islamist regime to quell the protests after the security forces killed a young woman for not wearing a hijab. Was it a sign of mounting tensions that lead to a revolution?

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Recognizing a revolution is not just an academic matter. For American presidents, it has been a perennial challenge – is what happening in Country X a revolution? Is it a major disruption with significant long-term consequences driven by forces well beyond the government control? Or it just a replacement of one hapless leader by another? CIA, Foreign Service, public experts, and of podcast gurus stand ready with their assessments, but the expert assessments are often hedged and recommendations from different agencies conflict with each other. And the time is pressing and mistakes are costly.

In the recent decades, the US government has made it share of blunders with understanding what is transpiring in other countries. Sometimes it was supporting a misguided military coup. In other, sticking with an unpopular government for too long. Jimmy Carter, who later contributed mightily to peace efforts around the world, badly mishandled the Iranian Revolution when he was president in 1979. He made both classic mistakes at once: first, extended support for the archaic shah's regimes for far too long. Then, mistook the emerging militant dictatorship as representative of Iranian people as a whole.

On 1 August 1991, George H. W. Bush, the US president who just led a widely successful international effort in restoring peace in the Gulf, was making a speech in Kyiv, the ancient capital of Ukraine, a part of the Soviet Union at the time. In his speech, Bush warned Ukrainians against "suicidal nationalism". Not so subtly, he was informing the audience of American support of the reformist Soviet leadership.

In three weeks, the Soviet government will collapse. In a month, 92.3% of Ukrainians will vote for independence in a referendum, and Ukrainian national government will be in power. In four months, the Soviet Union will be officially disbanded. The Bush's Kyiv speech will live in infamy as "the Chicken Kyiv Speech", a wordplay on the chicken dish named after the Ukraine capital and, well, the substance of the Bush message.

Among American presidents, George H.W. Bush was perhaps the best-prepared one to deal with foreign affairs. Before becoming a trusted vice-president to President Reagan,

who presided over the tectonic shifts in international scene, Bush was a US Ambassador to the United Nations and a CIA director. As president, he has been uniquely successful in building international coalitions in times of troubles. His misguided Kyiv speech was not a result of simple negligence or a lack of attention to detail. It was a result of a deep misreading of what makes a modern revolution.

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In this book, I write about how revolutions happen – how political discontent and economic frustration lead to the downfall of governments, how attempts to quell the tide or pass cosmetic reform fail, and how new leaders, entrepreneurial and committed to their cause, emerge from a multitude of would-be leaders. I write about revolutions that succeeded to topple the old regime and then evolved into something that revolutionaries themselves would not like. I also write about the revolutions that do not happen – when discontent is resolved peacefully, the transition of power happens in an orderly fashion, and the desired change is implemented by the new reformist government.

A revolution, at its core, is an institutional change: the structures of the government, the relationship between the government and the people, the rules and norms of a nation change during a revolution. The nation's government changes profoundly – not just the individuals at the helm are replaced but the way the old government had performed its rule is undone. Often, it is more than the change in the government function. The social order is destroyed, and the new order emerges. Institutions that have structured peoples' relationships, property ownership, and everyday behavior become obsolete. The new institutions take their place. A revolution tears up the fabric of the nation and creates a new one.

Any revolution is years, if not decades, in the making. For a revolution to happen, it is not enough to have mere friction in institutions or personal conflicts at the top of the government. There must be a profound conflict between the ways society is organized and governed and how citizens think it should be organized and governed. Ideas that for a long time were discussed among scholars become, overnight, the topic of common discussion, and then get enshrined into laws and constitutions.

By itself, a revolution is neither a good, nor a bad thing. The word *revolution* is perceived differently in different parts of the world. For an American, a revolution is a preamble to the era of new development, the moment a country sets on a new path, deliberating and writing down a new constitution. It is something that people do when they want to live a better life. Not surprisingly, an American politician campaigns under the banner of revolution. From the right or from the left, an aspiring leader promises a revolution.

In other countries, the word *revolution* brings bad memories. For a Russian, a revolution is a painful reckoning with economic backwardness and archaic systems of government, a prelude to a bloody civil war that left scars for decades to come. It is not what people do by choice. A Russian politician does not promise a revolution. He promises to protect the country against any revolutions.

There are revolutions that cannot be labeled “good” or “bad” no matter how hard you try. The great French Revolution was a focal point of the intellectual development for the whole humankind, gave the world a new approach to civic rights and government organization, and set France, Europe, and the whole world on a new path. Yet it was accompanied by a destruction on a then-unprecedented scale, in which great philosophers and scientists were slaughtered alongside the stalwarts of the old regime and innocent bystanders. It failed, through numerous attempts, to establish a republican, democratic government. It paved the way to Napoleonic wars, the bloodiest conflict in centuries, which engulfed the whole continent.

As any system of government has winners and losers, any revolution produces new winners and new losers. Some losers are easy to identify: the former, pre-revolutionary elite. They are, in a revolution, removed from power, often exiled or executed. They lose access to rents that they were able to extract under the ancient regime.

It might be harder to define the winners of a revolution. Sometimes the ultimate winners are not those who started the revolution. Far from that. Early leaders often end up among the ultimate losers. Most of the early leaders of the French Revolution were dead – executed either by bloodthirsty Jacobines, or by those who stopped the reign of terror by executing Jacobines – long before the end of the revolution. The ultimate

winner, future Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, was just a second lieutenant in a provincial garrison in the year the revolution began.

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Functioning democracies do not fall by revolutions. When people have a chance to express their preference for change at the election booth, the change is gradual. The economic inefficiencies, unhappiness and frustrations do not have to accumulated over the decades only to burst in the open in one huge blast. The grievances can be addressed within a couple of election cycles.

This is why the 6 January 2021 riot in Washington, DC was such a surprise for many. Just two months before, an election took place, and a record number of voters took part in these elections. Those who were unhappy with President Trump's leadership in COVID times had their chance to express their displeasure – and they did. Trump became the first incumbent to lose re-election in the United States in nearly three decades. Those who were unpersuaded by Joe Biden's platform had their chance to vote for Republicans. And this is what many voters did, returning slim Democratic majorities in both chambers of Congress in November 2020. Many problems of the US political system notwithstanding, it is hard to argue that elections do not reflect peoples' preferences over the direction of the country. Then, what were the events of January 6?

May be January 6 should be properly classified as an attempted coup? Not every non-democratic power transition is a revolution. A palace coup might replace one general at the helm without changing much in peoples' lives and need not to be accompanied by any institutional change. In seven years of the Argentinian *Dirty War* waged by the military junta in 1976-1983, five generals replaced each other as the head of the government. Perhaps a big personal change for each general involved, but something barely noticeable for the people. I doubt that many Argentinians, even those who lived through the era, can easily name all generals who led the junta. And perhaps only professional historians would name them in the correct order.

A mass protest does not necessarily imply a revolution. Sometimes protests lead to the resignation of an entrenched incumbent, only to be replaced by a similar political figure. Sometimes, the new leader would be supported by the same old oligarchs and

advised by the same old viziers as the previous one. In 2011, the upheaval of Arab Spring ousted a few incumbents in the Middle East yet changed very little in peoples' lives. After a couple of years of turbulence, things ended up in about where they are before the upheaval. Families of former dictators suffered, but the new leaders do not look that different.

In a country with a flexible political system, the change comes through political channels. Campaigns are organized, local leaders emerge, political parties adjust their platforms, and, finally, voters elect new parliament members and presidents. Parliaments pass laws, presidents lead with executive actions, and change happens. It might be slow and painful, with those who are set to lose – oligarchic families who controlled the levers of power, monopolies that lose their market domination – fighting back or stonewalling the progress, but it gradually happens.

Compare the response of two political systems to similar shocks. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century rapid urbanization and technological development crash-tested existing systems of government. Courts, that were well equipped in dealing with local entities were unprepared for lawsuits involving big corporations, mighty railroad companies, or sprawling networks of oil refineries. Growing factories required workplace safety laws, work hours limitations – new forms of legislation that governments struggled to quickly write and enact. For a new reform that was needed, there were entrenched interest groups and powerful lobbies opposed to the much-needed reform.

In the United States, the challenge of technological advance and rapid industrialization in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century has resulted in the birth of the regulatory state and expansion of workers' rights. In Russia's absolutist monarchy, the rigid political system prevented any kind of gradual, sustainable reforms. After three decades of back and forth with no actual progress, the country plunged into a revolution and a bloody civil war. Millions died. In Russia, the decent work hours and workplace safety were won at a tremendous cost. In the United States, the same rights have been won through largely peaceful, piecemeal change.

A more recent example of a massive, yet peaceful change is the transformation of Chinese economy and society since the late 1970s. By the mid-1970s, the dying Chinese

dictator, Mao Zedong, has consolidated enormous power in his hands. He has subjugated his comrades-in-arms, with whom he took power three decades earlier, to his personal will. None of the Mao's countrymen would doubt the authority of the Chinese Communist Party and no member of the Communist Party would doubt the will of Chairman Mao. Yet, thirty years after communists took power, the country was not in a good shape. Peasants, forced into Soviet-style agricultural cooperatives, did not have any incentives to work. When the government tried to extract more than the maximum that was already extracted, people died in the Great Famine. Attempts to spearhead the industrial development led to even more disasters. And with Mao finally dead, the country found itself in the hands of his most sinister, least competent ideological heirs.

The fight at the top that followed Mao's death was limited in scope. Some, including Mme. Mao, the late dictator's last wife, and the Mao magnates closest to her, went to jail, yet the power transition was largely peaceful. It is the development of the next decades that was revolutionary. Widening peasants' rights over their product and transferring more authority to villages' local councils resulted in a surplus of agricultural product and freed hundreds of millions to migrate to cities. Opening the country to foreign investors brought in the capital and technology needed to supplement the abundant labor. In less than a half-century, China has become the largest industrial producer in the world, the research and technology giant, the second largest economy, with the leader, the US, in sight.

The transformation of the Chinese society was no less impressive, from a poor, rural, uneducated nation to a middle-income, urban one. Traveling abroad ceased to be a luxury available for the very few. Studying in the top universities in the United States or Great Britain became an aspiration for millions of high school students. One thing has been standing unchanged, though: the tight grip on power of the Chinese Communist Party. Whatever this four-decades process was, it was not a revolution. It was a radical economic and societal transformation accumulated over the years of peace with very little change in the political system.

The lesson of the Chinese economic transformation is that a non-democratic political system might still be sufficiently flexible to allow for drastic institutional changes. Revolutions happen when the political system is not responsive or flexible enough. A

functioning democracy is supposed to provide the very flexibility and responsiveness needed to make a revolution unnecessary. Yet a non-democratic system might provide the needed flexibility as well, as the China's transformation attests.

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Revolutions are events that are long in development and then happen unexpectedly. The triggers might be different. A defeat in a foreign war, a death at the top, a sudden economic shock. In August 1991, the top members of Russia's political leadership, including the vice president, prime minister, heads of military and internal security – everyone but President Gorbachev – anxious about their survival at the helm, launched a military coup.

In three days, the plotters were in jail, Gorbachev, formally reinstated by the rising opposition, was left with little political support, and the Soviet Union was firmly on the road to a full collapse in four months. The trigger came not from an action of some clandestine revolutionary organization, but from inside the ruling elites themselves. Moreover, the coup was aimed at preventing change, rather than facilitating it. Nevertheless, it was a trigger.

The mighty old regime collapsed in three days. Yet the Russian revolution of 1991, the Second Russian Revolution, was a result of decades-long developments. The Soviet socialist experiment failed long before August 1991. By the 1970s, the economy and living standards stagnated, and the government was asleep at the wheel. By the 1980s, people were spending hours in lines for basic foods, and the government started a series of half-baked, incomplete, frantic reforms that did not address the core economic problems. By August 1991, the country was both largely unreformed and exhausted from top-down reforms. The swift collapse of a giant state was sudden yet surprised no one. A Berkeley anthropologist, Alexei Yurchak, caught this in the title of his book on the last generation of Soviet people: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

The Second Russian Revolution, the revolution of 1991, ended the regime that was established 70 years earlier. For decades, it looked impregnable. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was considered one of the defining events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It transformed an entire huge country, wiped out the former elite and created a new one, unleashed an

enormous creative power in arts and science, killed millions, and inspired hundreds of millions around the world. Yet, Russia in 2017 looked in many respects like Russia in 1917, not like Russia in 1957 or 1987. The Second Russian Revolution has undone a lot of what was brought in by the first one.

Another big question about the Second Russian Revolution emerged in 2022, thirty years after the collapse of the socialist state. On 24 February 2022, the Russian army, hundreds of thousands of troops on thousands of tanks, planes, helicopters invaded the neighboring Ukraine with an apparent aim to bring back the glory and the lands of the old empire. For centuries, Ukraine was a de facto colony of the Russian Empire, and later – a part of the Soviet Union. How come the collapse of the USSR resulted in a total change of economic and political institutions, yet it altered neither the belligerent worldview of the Russian elites nor the imperial mentality of the Russian people? The persistence of ideas and worldviews in times of profound institutional changes is another feature of revolutions.

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When social scientists talk about revolutions, it is often all about regimes, classes, institutions, mass movements, and long-term trends, broad categories and concepts that are used to explain why regimes fall. When we talk about fundamental causes and consequences of revolutions in the grand scheme of history, they are all that matters. Individuals, even the most powerful ones such as kings and military dictators, are left with the role of actors whose every word onstage is written in the script. Yet they are not. In critical junctures of history, individual actions matter.

Revolutions occur at the moment when the old regime is fragile. It might survive a challenge, postponing a revolution for decades, or fall depending on what various actors – presidents, ministers, policemen, rebels, journalists, etc. – do. However, it is not something that happens by accident. A revolution is the result of a long process of increasing fragility of the old regime, and only then can a sudden change become possible. A big fire always needs a spark to start, but it is impossible to have a fire if there is not much flammable material to burn.

We will discuss the role that individuals play in the revolution. From kings whose stubbornness led them to the scaffold to selfless activists who were fighting the oppressive regimes only to find their revolutions hijacked by those who came later. Among others, we will talk about four women who played major roles in European revolutions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of them was killed by government agents on the brink of what she believed was the critical hour. Another, her mentor and comrade-in-arms, lived long enough to see everything she fought for destroyed in her own country. Still, she died quite comfortably in exile. The third woman, a leader who, in her political life, mixed the public and the private, joined the revolutionary government after the victory yet was lucky to avoid execution twenty years later. The fourth exchanged a life in prison for fighting against the old regime for a life in prison under the regime brought in by the successful revolution. She was executed and buried in a mass grave about the same time when the third woman died and was buried in the Pantheon in a city center. This is another general pattern in revolutions: the ultimate winners are not those who played the critical role early on. And if you want to get in power after the revolution, you better not be a woman.

Revolutionaries come from different walks of life. Some are born into privilege. They join the revolutionary cause because they feel trapped in the velvet cage. They come prepared – they are educated and well-equipped. Others are born into poverty and injustice. They come uneducated, but as hungry for change. In the book, we will see very different revolutionaries: a boy from a small dusty village in Benin, where people still practiced woodcraft in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; a son of a priest in Carpathian Mountains, in a land constantly changing hands between great empires of Europe; a math prodigy who joined a revolution because the laws of the land prohibited making money, and he just wanted a better life for himself; a son of a local nobility who joined a revolution because he wanted to end it.

Revolutions are not only made by those who want to change things. Those who are in power and want things to stay the same contribute as much. By not adjusting to changing circumstances, by doing nothing when something needs to be done, by not understanding that it is impossible not to let changes happen. Sometimes, the incumbent elites are very adept in protecting their rents. They employ all tools at their disposal; primarily, propaganda and violence. Dictators not only censor information and fool their citizens,

but they also jail, exile, and kill those who challenges them. In our days, it is not mass purges that Stalin, or Hitler, or Mao would employ. It is sometimes targeted assassinations which are difficult to trace back to the incumbent. We will talk about a recent assassination of an opposition leader in Russia that I knew – an investigation, both thorough and fascinating, linked it to the Russian strongman Vladimir Putin.

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In the next chapter, I will start with my personal experience of a revolution. I was just one person in a crowd of tens of thousands, a grain of sand on a beach, yet the moment was a critical juncture in the history of my country of birth, Russia. The Second Russian Revolution, which culminated in an ill-advised attempt of leaders of the old regime to interrupt the march of history in August 1991, was a great revolution unlike any other great revolution. It changed lives of hundreds of millions of people in the most dramatic fashion, destroying old and laying out new borders, institutions, and political systems. It has also produced a challenge to scholars of revolutions: the magnitude of changes dwarfed that of some great revolutions, yet many patterns were totally unfamiliar. There was no conflict over the land, no peasants to talk about, and no land-owning elites. There were no classes or even significant social groups that acted in any coordinated fashion. There was no revolutionary party working to tear down the regime. And yet it was a big revolution.

## Chapter 2

### THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

On August 18, 1991, I, a sophomore at the Moscow State University, was at the railroad station in Pskov, a provincial Russian city, famed for its military history. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the emerging Moscow kingdom stopped the expansion of Polish power here. Everything around the station was usual: hour-long ticket lines, dirty restrooms, angry people boxed in dark, polluted halls.

Unusual was the presence of military units in and around the station. We even joked about a possible military coup. It was just a joke: The last time the military moved in conjunction with a political upheaval was during the civil war in 1917, more than eighty years ago, which seemed ancient history for a 19-year-old. The Russian military did play a crucial role in coups and counter coups of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a military intervention seemed surreal. These things happen in distant countries that ordinary Soviet people never visited – Chile, Argentina, Venezuela.

And yet, this was exactly what we found next morning in Moscow: tanks at street intersections, military units scattered across the capital, and state TV channels alternating ballet classics with anchors reading official decrees of the newly formed State Committee on the State of Emergency. When looking through these decrees today, one can only wonder what was wrong with them – they mostly looked perfectly reasonable. But there was no room for a misunderstanding. What they really called for was the return of the past, the controlled, archaic, mundane Soviet life of the previous decades. As if their newly printed decrees were already covered with dust, and turned yellow with time as a grandfather's collection of old newspapers... It was exactly what had already failed and what the country was trying to escape in the years of half-baked reforms.

The next three days were like a single, uninterrupted dream – even more so, because I stayed awake for the next forty-eight hours. On TV, the new governing council that consisted of everyone but the USSR president spoke of a new order. They said that

President Gorbachev was “exhausted” and cannot be reached. In their words, they took power to immediately straighten things up in the country.

A friend and I walked through downtown Moscow, where Muscovites were gathering around tanks and military units, trying to talk to soldiers that were lined up across central streets. We ended up near the House of Government, a huge neo-Stalinist building at the bank of the Moskva River. Boris Yeltsin, the expelled member of the top Soviet leadership and the emerging leader of opposition, was gathering his supporters there. Later estimates claim that about a hundred thousand Muscovites gathered around the House of Government that night, but the surrounding space was so vast that it did not feel this way. In the dark, people were making live circles and improvised barricades around the building – to protect the opposition leaders from the military or the KGB coming to arrest them.

The next morning was brighter. Yeltsin, as the elected head of a subnational government, claimed full power at the national level and ordered all military and civilian state bodies to follow his orders. A few military units, including a tank brigade brought by the putschists to Moscow, pledged their allegiance to the opposition. In an iconic image, Yeltsin spoke from one of the tanks, with tricolor flags and bodyguards with Kalashnikovs in the background. Cities across Russia reported protests against the new rule, and about a million people were on the streets in Moscow and around the House of Government. The putschists vacillated for the whole day, and an elite KGB unit, as it turned out, refused to storm Yeltsin’s residence for fear of massive casualties among people who circled the building.

The day of 20 August was indeed brighter, but the next night was darker. Troops loyal to the Committee on the State of Emergency, including tank brigades, moved closer to the opposition headquarters. Three young men were killed when unarmed people tried to block tank movements through Moscow streets. Still, tens of thousands of people sat around street bonfires through the night, springing to their feet every time someone would cry that the putschists’ troops were coming. We would stay in lines, holding hands with friends who came with us and many young people we met for the first time that night near the House of Government. The feared assault never came and by the third day the coup d’etat was over. More troops announced their allegiance to the Yeltsin government.

The putschists were arrested, their emergency council disbanded, President Gorbachev freed and returned to the capital.

Gorbachev never reclaimed the presidential powers that Boris Yeltsin took during the three days of the putsch. National republics that constituted the Soviet Union announced their independence and took full control over government functions from the central government, including security and defense. They will never give these powers back.

In four months, the Soviet Union, once the world power second only to the U.S., was formally dissolved. Those three days in August of 1991 were the inflection point of the Second Russian Revolution that has affected dozens of nations that were a part of either the Soviet Union or the larger socialist camp. Between early 1989, when the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev uttered first words about democratization and late 1991, when the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the lives of hundreds of millions of people changed in the most dramatic fashion.

### *The Emergence of a New World*

The critical feature of any revolution is that the new order is different from the old one in numerous ways. It is not about replacing the leader at the top or reshuffling the cabinet ministers. It is about a new form of government. It is not about replacing the owners of large estates and managers of large enterprises. It is about new institutions of property rights. It is not about new people taking over the reins with the old system. It is about a new system and new roles.

In 1985, Soviet people did not possess any real estate, any stocks or bonds. They were not allowed to visit Western Europe as tourists or watch Star Wars or Disney cartoons in cinema or on TV. Media was heavily censored, and people went to jail for possession of books by certain authors. Many consumer goods were available only in very poor quality, and Soviet families spent long hours in line for the very basic ones. Consumer goods were not a priority for the ruling communist party: in the 1980s, the Soviet women would use home-made feminine hygiene products – they would not know what a tampon or a sanitary pad is. Washing machines, color TV sets, and modern fridges, widely available in the West for decades, were still a luxury available to a small fraction of population. Then,

things turned worse. By the late 1980s, after two decades of economic stagnation, sugar and tobacco were rationed, and even things such as condoms were in shortage.

In the Soviet Union, the political system was under full control of the Communist party. All other political organizations were banned. People went to jail for such an innocuous thing as forming a small discussion club or possessing a banned book at home. In any elections, there was a single candidate on the ballot, the one representing the party. Regardless of how people voted, the result of the vote was reported 99.9 percent in favor of the single candidate with 99.9 percent turnout. When I was a kid, my parents would take me to the polling place and give me a ballot so that I could draw a cross over the whole page, effectively spoiling it. It did not matter: the turnout was always reported as 99.9 percent, and the vote in favor of the party candidate was 99.9 as well.

Not only were the Soviet people subject to relentless propaganda about the West, but they were also kept in the dark about what was happening in their own country. It is hard to believe now, but when a nuclear accident happened at Chernobyl in April 1986, Soviet people were not immediately informed. It was the worst nuclear peace-time disaster ever! Two days later, when the raising radiation level set alarms in Sweden, six hundred miles away from the reactor, there was a brief announcement about the accident on the state TV. It did not mention any potential danger. For the communist regime, maintaining the perfect façade was more important than peoples' lives: five days after the accident, thousands of kids marched for the May 1 parade in Kyiv, sixty miles from the explosion site.

A decade later, by 1996, everything had changed. Most citizens became owners of the apartments they had lived in. Half of the formerly state-owned industry was in private hands. The stores were full of goods from all over the world and shortages were a thing of the past. The variety of items on the grocery shelves increased tenfold or more. Many people would not have money to buy most of what has become available, yet at least there was no need to spend hours in lines for basic food stuff and go to the black market for necessities.

Travel restrictions were gone, and censorship was banned. Independent newspapers made the state print media obsolete, and national TV channels were competing for

viewers by investing in quality news reporting and modern Western-style entertainment. Political parties and unaffiliated individuals were vigorously contesting offices in national and local elections. Institutional change was profound: In five years, many of the most important institutions of the countries were brand new or underwent dramatic changes.

Fast forward another decade and the country became even more conventionally capitalist. On many dimensions, it was not that different from other countries around the world that had a similar GDP per capita, the most ubiquitous measure of a country's well-being used by economists. At the time, it was about the 50<sup>th</sup> place in the world – that is, about where it was a century before that. Compared to its neighbors in the ranking in terms of literacy, life expectancy, governance, corruption, and other development measures, Russia was at about the same relative place.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after 70 years of communism and 20 years of post-communist transition, Russia seemed to be a continuation of the Imperial Russia that ceased to exist a hundred years ago, vanquished by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Back then, the new revolutionary government nationalized firms and property and abandoned markets. The media was censored much more heavily than under the tsars, and elections became noncompetitive. The structure of government itself, the way people's life was organized and controlled – everything was different in a socialist country for 70 years.

The revolution of 1917 smashed away the centuries-old Romanov monarchy, killed, and exiled entire elite classes of the ancient regime, and inspired revolutionary movements around the world. In hundreds of books and thousands of articles, it was a cataclysmic event, a change from a capitalist society to a totally different, new one. The one that was supposed to last forever. It was not.

Another feature of the Second Russian Revolution, the one that culminated in August 1991, was that it did not fit any classic scholarly theory. In many of them, revolutions were a path forward, the vehicle that moved from archaic institutions to more modern ones. In these theories, a change from capitalism to socialism was considered to be a step forward, a transition from an inferior form of societal organization to a more advanced one. Now, the country was back to the former organization.

Famous sociologist Charles Tilly defined a revolution as 'a forcible transfer of power in the course of a struggle that involves at least two distinct groups of contenders that make incompatible claims to control the state'. What were these blocs of contenders in 1991? There were none.

In another famed theory of revolutions, Karl Marx focused on social classes as their driving force. The theory worked well when used to explain the conflict between the owners of large estates and the needs of modernizing agriculture, but what were the social classes in the USSR in 1989?

Over the last two centuries, starting with Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the French and American Revolutions, social scientists have written a lot about revolutions. One might expect there to be a consensus about what drives radical change or at least a well-accepted theory. In fact, there is no such theory. The upheavals of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century do not fit patterns that were identified by students of the great revolutions of the past.

### ***The Failed Theories of Revolutions***

Historically, the first grand theory of revolutions was offered by the German philosopher/economist/historian Karl Marx and his followers. In his theory, every society was divided into classes: the peasants, the workers, the nobility, the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and so on. The classes are the actors of political process. Under feudalism, the nobility controls the peasants. The emerging bourgeoisie is unhappy with the institutions that the nobility and the clergy have built to expropriate the surplus produced by peasants, but the land-owning classes did not want the institutions dismantled. A revolution is the means by which the emerging class takes over the incumbent one.

The Marxist approach to revolutions failed long ago. In short, class theories worked well explaining the conflict between peasants and land-owning classes, yet they did not account for most of other conflicts in countries that have or have not experienced revolutions. Among other things, they did not account for the very different ways in which factory workers and state employees were involved in political battles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In many countries around the world, workers have won their rights without any revolutions.

Yet it was not the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutions that cannot be explained well in the Marxian paradigm. As we shall see, a detailed analysis of the French Revolution, the great revolution that Karl Marx himself studied, does not fit well with the class approach either. The real French kings were not the absolute monarchs working in the interest of the nobility, the nobility was more interested in reforming the existing order rather than defending it, and the emerging bourgeoisie did not play the role that Marx ascribed to it. Historians going through the ledger accounts and property titles have convincingly demonstrated that the distinction between the bourgeoisie and the nobility was far less pronounced in reality than in Marxist theories.

Old theories needed a concept of a class or a social group because the concept helps to resolve the “collective action” problem. Any revolution requires an action by a large group of people: a violent uprising, a campaign of civil disobedience, or at least a peaceful demonstration. If people who are not content with the current regime act against it individually, they are easy to defeat. Even in a weak regime, the police force would not have any trouble putting an individual protester in jail. Security services would be able to stop revolutionary agitators when the number of agitators or rebels is small. The government army would easily defeat rebels and confiscate their guns, if only a few people participated in the rebellion.

Things are very different when many individuals act in unison. When a million people march on the streets, a police force of any size would have problems dispersing it. If there are many revolutionary agitators, the efforts of security services are in vain. If rebels’ fighting groups have no shortage of volunteers, even a large government army might be in trouble. Overpowering an entrenched regime might require a lot of collective action: multiple mass demonstrations, strikes at factories over multiple months, armed rebellions, or even an all-out civil war. For all these actions, it is critical that many individuals move together.

Why would people act together? The class theory offered a simple answer: when people belong to the same class, they have the same attitudes. Their wishes and

aspirations are determined by the class to which they belong. They desire and expect the same from the new order, and, when necessary, they function as one.

For Marx, the class was determined by the role that members of the class played in the production process. Factory workers were a separate class, and so were peasants. Then, the theory went, those who belong to the same class have the same interests, the same understanding of these issues, and thus act according to these interests. Factory workers need better pay; peasants need to retain a higher share of surplus they produce. Thus, factory workers will benefit from getting rid of private owners of capital, while peasants will benefit from getting rid of landlords.

When Karl Marx was formulating his class theory of revolutions, he did not pay much attention to how the members of the same class coordinate on acting. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, added a concept of a *revolutionary vanguard*, a tightly knit group of people who lead the action with the class interest in mind. As we shall see later, this concept does not help much to understand the mechanics of the Russian revolution. The revolution was not driven by any vanguard; the unraveling of the Russian Empire was the result of action by multiple forces, which often had very different goals in mind.

The ultimate winners, the Bolsheviks, did not pursue the interests of the classes they supposedly represented. They were a tight knit group all right, but not someone else's vanguard. The largest pro-revolutionary class in the Russian revolution, the peasants, was ultimately destroyed by the revolution. The working class, the other pro-revolutionary class, was ultimately denied power by its supposed vanguard.

Another highly influential school of thought makes special interest groups the heart of the revolutionary mechanism. These groups form to advance their interests and fight each other for power. In normal times, they compete within the existing political system. In times of trouble, they might become strong enough to destroy the system itself. Among students of revolutions, Charles Tilly's name is associated the most with special-interest theories of revolutions.

Back in the 1970s, Harvard's sociologist Theda Skocpol synthesized, in her influential theory of social revolutions, the social groups approach and the class-based one. First, a

*revolutionary situation* develops, a crisis of the old regime. Then, a new dominant class emerges consolidating power after the old regime is overthrown. This approach worked well explaining how the three great revolutions that Skocpol analyzed – the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions – came about. It did not work that well explaining what happened after the old regime was destroyed. Furthermore, it did not work well explaining the revolutions of the modern era.

The conflict over land ownership was the driver of many historical revolutions, and class-based theories well-suited for their analysis. However, land ownership is no longer a source of conflict in most parts of the world. As a result of the dramatic increase in productivity, agriculture employs a very small share of the population today. With the conflict between the mass of peasants and the elites controlling the bulk of the land gone, so were the class-based theories of revolutions.

One common feature of revolution narratives is the wide-spread frustration with the old regime before the revolution and the dominance of highly agitated states of minds in the critical moments. Not surprisingly, there is a whole universe of theories that explain revolutions in terms of social psychology. People might be frustrated with the fast pace of modernization or the lack of social progress. With widespread frustration, the old regime loses the ability to govern. The frustration only grows when the regime turns nasty and cruel, trying to defend itself. This approach easily explains atrocities committed by all sides in the heat of the moment.

The problem with psychological explanations of revolutions is not that they are untrue. They are certainly relevant. The problem is that they seem to be derivative, rather than basic. Mass frustration follows events and decisions by key authors. As we will see in the next chapters, there are no revolutions in which psychology alone is in the driving seat. It is always a part of the story, but not the whole story. In every revolution, one can identify a prolonged period, in which there was a combination of growing economic tensions and political stagnation due to an inflexible political system. Naturally, frustration was increasing alongside the economic tensions that were not being resolved by reforms.

In a recent book, political scientist Jon Elster focused on the critical role of emotions during the French Revolution. One of his major examples is the Great Fear that spread throughout France in the summer of 1789. Observing bread shortages and rising prices, peasants believed that there was an aristocratic conspiracy to destroy the food supply. This must have been an emotional phenomenon as there has never been any hard evidence of such a conspiracy. In another episode, Elster interprets the events of August 4, 1789, when the National Assembly abolished feudalism in one sweeping flurry of voting, as a result of the delegates' exuberance. In the wee hours they swiftly moved from their initial support for partial reform to radical change.

Some theories of revolutions are very apt in explaining individual episodes. In the vast literature that discusses why some nations prosper and some fail, an oft-cited hypothesis relates economic development to geography and climate. If economic dynamics is related to geography, then so are the cycles of stagnation and revolutions. If geography and climate are destiny, and institutions and politics do not matter, then revolutions would and would not happen depending on geography. Which is not the case. As we will see, revolutions happen in all climate zones.

Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the great French philosopher Montesquieu tried to explain the correlation between hot climate and despotic governments. In the process, he launched the influential anthropological theory that posits that climate influences the nature of man, making them lazy in the hot climate and industrious when the climate is mild. Montesquieu's own theory was in fact far more nuanced than the simple "climate is destiny" theory that is often attributed to him. He did emphasize the role of laws and political institutions in determining what the country and society achieved. Among other things, he envisioned the concept of separation of powers, which, as we will see, greatly increases the flexibility of a political system.

Modern economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson demonstrated that geography is not destiny. The geography hypothesis fails to explain why some countries are poor and some are rich. It is economic and political institutions that matter. There are plenty of examples, when two territories sharing the same geography, climate, and ethnographic characteristics perform very differently if their institutions differ. The same can be said about revolutions. They happen under certain circumstances. If geography

and climate cannot explain economic and political dynamics, they cannot be root causes of revolutions.

Among other theories that do not help much to understand revolutions are theories that focus on the behavior of significant individuals. The simplest of those is the theory that it is revolutionaries who make revolutions. These theories are popular because they tell a story ready for a movie script. And, if you think that a revolution ends when the old regime falls, this movie has a ready happy ending. Unfortunately for these theories, this is not how history works.

Revolutions are made by active, busy people. At the same time, they are made by hesitant, passive people. Sometimes what is not done matters more than what is done. Kings are reluctant to grant even minor concessions. Dictators are unwilling to even listen to advisors telling them unpleasant truths about the state of the economy. Cabinet ministers oppose practical steps of reforms in their areas of responsibility even if they agree, hypothetically, that some reforms are needed. Reforms that are started left unfinished.

When reformers had their chance and lost, historians and TV series script writers focus on them. A revolution becomes not the protagonist's win, but, instead, a protagonist's loss. History sounds compelling when told as a sequence of mistakes made by those in power. And those mistakes are explained by their personal traits.

Yet focusing on the leaders of the ancient regime as protagonists is as misleading as focusing on individual revolutionaries. If only Charles I was not so stubborn... If only Louis XVI was not so ignorant... If only Nicholas II was not so weak-willed... If only Gorbachev was moving faster... There is an infinite number of accounts that use personal characteristics of individual leaders to explain their behavior at critical moments.

As we will see, stubbornness, ignorance, vacillation, and the inability to choose a course of reform and steadfastly follow the chosen course are not individual traits. In fact, they seem to pop up in every account of a revolution. And for a good reason. Any leader who is deciding whether or not to cede power, losing control over what was his for long years before, looks either stubborn, or weak to an outside observer. Any leader within a political system that resists changes finds himself in an informational vacuum and looks

uninformed. Any leader who lost power as a result of a revolution looks indecisive and unable to choose an optimal course. If he would, we would probably never study his episode in the history of revolutions.

### ***The Modern Theory of Revolutions***

Alexis de Tocqueville, the first influential student of revolutions, wrote in 1856 about the French Revolution: “Though it took the world by surprise, it was the inevitable outcome of a long period of gestation, the abrupt and violent conclusion of a process in which six generations had played an intermittent part. Even if it had not taken place, the old social structure would nonetheless have been shattered everywhere sooner or later. The only difference would have been that instead of collapsing with such brutal suddenness it would have crumbled bit by bit.” In a nutshell, a proper theory of revolutions explains both the long period of gestation and then the sudden collapse.

My theory of revolutions complements theories that economists use to explain nations’ prosperity and failures today. Economic development requires inclusive economic institutions, which in turn rely on inclusive political institutions. In contrast, whenever a nation fails, it is because it was stuck with the extractive political institutions that allowed the elites to maintain their unchallenged power over the extractive economic institutions. The extractive political institutions are a critical ingredient of a revolutionary brew. When the same narrow elites keep control over the rents and use these rents to protect the *status quo*, those who are interested in progress and change have no other means to effect this change but a revolution.

The theory of inclusive vs. extractive institutions was formulated by economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their *Why Nations Fail* magnum opus, in which they synthesize decades of economics research, their own and that of many other political economists. Extractive institutions impede development in various ways. Extractive economic institutions do not provide incentives to work and innovate. They are designed to provide the entrenched elites with a flow of rents. Extractive political institutions allow elites to resist changes that would jeopardize their monopoly over these rents.

Acemoglu and Robinson provide numerous examples of how the elites blocked creative destruction, the process that brings up innovation and development. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the archaic monarchy in the Russian Empire discouraged rail-road construction, as new transportation lines would help spreading the ideas of progress across the huge country. The economy was unable to benefit from the newly available inventions that spurred the industrial revolution in England and in the Western part of the European continent. The reason was that the government feared for its political stability. Not surprisingly, the emerging business community has eventually become as interested in political change as factory workers and idealistic intellectuals.

With a flexible political system, the demand for new rules or institutions results in a gradual change through a political process. To become widely used and constantly improved, technological innovation such as a steam engine or railroads requires, requires implementation of new laws and regulations. There might be political opposition to these laws. Railroads, in particular, faced numerous opposition from wagon drivers, turnpike operators, canal companies, and other interested parties that expected their business to suffer because of new railroads.

In the United States, opponents of rail transportation tried to block the issuance of new bonds to finance railroads and creating institutions that would make such financing cheaper. They fought against the land grants to railroad companies and right-of-the-way clauses that allowed the government to seize the land for construction. Building a railroad required political entrepreneurship. That is how railroad magnates became senators and state governors – they had to work through the political system to further their business interests. Technological progress worked through elections and coalition-building in state legislatures. This is how a flexible political system works. In a rigid political system, entrepreneurs had nowhere to go.

The theory of extractive economic and political institutions explains how an economic system that inhibits innovation and development comes together with a rigid political system. But the theory does not address what happens when years of stagnation come to a violent end. The archaic, obsolete institutions and an inflexible political system are fuel, but a revolution needs a spark. Even if the old regime has become so obsolete that it collapses under its own weight, there is an inflection point, in which a mass of actors

drastically changes their behavior. People no longer obey the old regime's command, whole garrisons switch allegiance, and generals and ministers follow orders of powers-to-be, not the order of the incumbent.

Modern theories of collective action do not require people who are acting in unison to belong to the same class or a social group. Yet, there should be a quantum of information about where an individual needs to come and what an individual needs to do participate in the revolution. For a revolution to succeed, many people should come to the same place at the same time. In a revolution after a revolution, critical action required coordination. This is why means of communication – pamphlets and proclamations in old times, social media posts and Tik-Tok reels nowadays – play such an important role. This is why the old regimes work so hard to block any communication channels that they do not control.

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Back in 2013, historian Mike Duncan started a popular podcast *Revolutions*. It took him a decade to tell, in a series of gripping and fascinating narratives, the stories of major revolutions as they are known to historians today. Even focusing on the big picture, simplifying timelines, omitting contested interpretations, and skipping over granular details, Duncan needed ten years to cover the essentials in his podcast.

This book is about all revolutions taken together. Volumes, beautiful and insightful, have been written about each of them. Thousands of pieces – on the great revolutions and their protagonists, dozens – on smaller ones. In the endnotes to this book, I provide references to hundreds of books and articles that I relied on while writing this one.

My focus on big theories of revolutions in this book does not mean that historical research of individual revolutions became irrelevant. It is exactly the opposite. I would not have been able to write this book without hundreds of monographs devoted to specific historical episodes, country-period studies, and biographies of people involved in revolutions. A political economist cannot claim any supremacy over historians or anthropologists: it is them who interrogate primary archival materials and interview witnesses. Historians do the primary work. Political economists like me focus on common

patterns, which is, by definition, secondary. These patterns cannot be discovered without the work that historians do.

So why do we need big theories at all? The modern historical work on the revolution is so grounded in archival work, so granular and detailed, that it makes each episode unique. As any person is different from any other person, and any country is different from other countries, revolutionary episodes are indeed unique. Still, there are common patterns. In medicine, same medications and procedures are used to treat different patients. This is possible because the same illness has the same mechanism in different patients. Similarly, same economic reforms are pursued by different governments because different countries encounter the same problems. We can see common patterns in revolutions as well: important details in each episode might be very different, but the same logic is often at work.

Focusing on general laws that govern nations' development and discovering the common patterns is not without its pitfalls. The 'big picture' is necessarily generic. Many details are sacrificed for the sake of establishing common patterns. A historian specializing in a particular revolution might be unhappy to see the painstakingly discovered details omitted in a narrative that makes the revolution comparable to another revolution. This is a risk I am willing to take in this book.

## Chapter 3

### MY TOOLS

A political economist who analyzes history is not just a historian. A historian dives deep into archives, investigate evidence, and organizes narratives. For each book, a historian chooses one country and one epoch. A political economist focusing on revolutions looks for common patterns. Whatever happened to one leader in one country does not make sense unless it is compared to what happened to another leader in another country in another epoch. The more episodes to compare, the better.

Political economists have many tools in their arsenal. They construct theoretical models and bring them to data. An economist does not listen to what people say, economists look at what people do. For a student of society, a sociologist or an anthropologist, people talking about their love of a certain product is already a phenomenon of its own. For an economist, people “love” the product if they are buying this product at bulk and often. It does not matter what they say about the product.

To understand the relationship between the banking community and the king, a historian would analyze bankers’ public pronouncements or their private letters. A diary entry might betray the banker’s frustration when the king asked for a new loan. An economist trying to answer the same questions would look at the numbers. If the interest rates that the bankers charged were low, they had high trust in the king. If the interest that the bankers charge started to rise, the trust is being lost.

Back half a century ago, Chicago economist Robert Fogel compared the price of buying a slave outright or renting a slave for a year on the eve of the American Civil war. If the price of ownership were up, this would mean that plantation owners did not expect war to come. If they were expecting a war, they would rent an asset, rather than buy it outright. This is a quintessential economic analysis: economists look at numbers and infer what people think. Of course, this approach would not work if we were trying to understand the plantation owner’s worldview or philosophy. But if the question is narrow enough, the economist’s approach works.

A political economist follows the same logic as any economist. An enthusiastic history writer might exult in how Maximillien Robespierre, a leader of the government in the heyday of the terror phase of the French Revolution, did not want to execute Camille Desmoulins, a popular pamphletist, a fellow hero of early revolutionary days, and a middle school friend. Did not want to have him executed, but... «To this dilemma, which thousands had faced during the Revolution, the Jacobin faith had an unswerving answer: the love between parent and child, man and woman, brother and brother, friend and friend must if necessary be foregone for love of country». And so, the historian's story goes, Robespierre had to execute Desmoulins.

A political economist would not try to infer Robespierre's motives from his words, only from his deeds. For a political economist, the fact that Robespierre cast the critical vote for the Desmoulins execution simply means that he wanted him executed.

### *The Causes and the Consequences*

In every single revolution, in many episodes small and big, the following situation happens. An outside group brings crowds to the streets or troops to the capital, and the incumbent government is under siege. And then, whenever the incumbent government falls, there appears always to be an insider in cahoots with the revolutionaries. A member of the royal family who denounced his king and declared himself to be a citizen like any other. A cabinet minister or two who secretly negotiated the transition. Police chiefs who allowed revolutionaries to slip through the net at a critical moment. Army generals whose troops stayed in their barracks despite the incumbent government's cries for help.

These examples are not just hypotheticals. Philippe, Duke of Orleans, a cousin of King Louis XVI, took the family name of Egalite – that is, Equality – in the third year of the French Revolution. He was taking the side of the revolution, not his cousin the King. Even before that, he used his family palace at Palais Royal in Paris to host revolutionary parties and presses. And this happened in every revolution. Grand Duke Vladimir, a first cousin of Tsar Nicholas II, marched with his naval unit on a royal palace, wearing a revolutionary ribbon, and publicly declared allegiance to the Provisional Government that just toppled the tsar.

It does not make sense to give examples of cabinet ministers, police chiefs, or army generals switching sides. They are too numerous. They are ever-present. In any revolution that toppled the old regime, there are people high in the government hierarchy switching sides at the decisive moment. In contrast, in many failed plots and uprisings, the coalition that was in power before stood firm, with truly few, if any, defections.

Does it mean that in order to be successful, revolutionaries need to have someone on the inside? Does it mean that without an insider ready to swing, a revolution does not stand a chance? No, it does not. The critical point is that politicians are strategic. Successful politicians, those who have already acceded to power, are doubly strategic. When a member of the dictator's inner circle decided to go over to join the insurgent forces might not be the cause of the insurgents' success. It might be a consequence of this success. Yes, the treason of the chief of palace guard might be the consequence of the uprising's success, not a cause of it.

How could a consequence precede the cause in time? In fact, this happens quite often. Most Christmas cards arrive before Christmas Day, yet they are not causing Christmas to happen. Instead, they arrive because of Christmas, even if they arrive before December 24. They are caused by the fact that people strategize so that their loved ones get the holiday cards before December 24. Some people even take into account that the post office might be overloaded in the holiday season; it's their cards we receive a week or two before Christmas Day.

The same way a strategic politician betrays not when everybody already knows that the incumbent's cause is doomed, but before that. A general orders his troops to return to barracks instead of guarding the palace because he thinks the effort is going to be futile. Or maybe he just calculated that he might get a promotion from those who are going to take power. What is a betrayal from the standpoint of an old regime is the first service to the new one.

The calculus of staying loyal or switching sides might be hard. The ultimate outcome is uncertain, and the stakes are extremely high. Betray too early, and the old regime that survives will be merciless. Betray too late, and the new powers will not be grateful. A lot of powerful actors keep their cards close to the chest, maintaining good relationships with

both the ancient regime and potential insurgents. If the regime withstands the assault, they have always been loyal. If the regime falls, this is thanks to their timely move.

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Alexis de Tocqueville, the first great scholar of revolutions, wrote: “Experiences teaches us that the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways.” This has become a popular take: it is not the bad regime that results in a revolution. It is the bad regime’s efforts to do reforms.

This logic even led, in modern times, to some bad regimes delaying reforms so that they would not cause an upheaval. It is better, the argument goes, to stick to a bad policy rather than change the course. In this logic, reforms become the cause of the revolutions, not the underlying causes that called for reforms in the first place.

This logic is false. De Tocqueville, a genius political economist he was, mistook correlation for causation. In every revolution, there is an extractive regime and a rigid political system that prevents changes. Substantive reforms would have helped, but the rigid political system prevents any substantive reforms. Those half-baked measures that always happen in the run up to revolution are not the cause. They are a result of the same causes that result in the revolution. Just as the Christmas postcards that arrive before Christmas Day, they do not cause Christmas. They arrive because of it.

### ***The Limits to Strategy***

In their search for causal links, political economists use sophisticated techniques to analyze data. They cannot set experiments as biologists could, but they can collect, structure, and analyze a lot of data. In addition to this, they construct theoretical models. The reality is complex. In each historic episode, the sheer number of details is overwhelming. Comparing a few revolutionary episodes across different countries and times is very difficult when every detail is taken into an account. Analyzing dozens of revolutions in a single article is outright impossible.

The answer to that is a theoretical model. A description that strips the real story of all irrelevant details, leaving only the bare bones. When two revolutions are compared, what is common is left in the model. What is different is thrown away.

The advantage of having a model is that a model is easy to analyze. It is easier to calculate consequence to every move if, instead of dozens – or maybe hundreds or thousands – actors that participate in a real revolution, the model has two actors. Say, the dictator and the citizen. The dictator decides whether or not to grant concessions to the citizen. Then, the citizen decides whether or not to mount a revolt. Like a game of chess, in which each player has only one piece to move, there are only two possible moves, and the game ends after each player made a move.

In such a game, it is straightforward to calculate responses of one player to another player's moves. If the dictator knows that the citizen is going to stay quiet if concessions are granted and revolt otherwise, the dictator will choose to make concessions. If the dictator knows that the citizen will revolt no matter what, then perhaps it does not make sense to offer concessions. Better to stock the resources for the day when the revolution inevitably comes.

The disadvantage of a theoretical model is that it is always utterly unrealistic. Always too simple. No real historical episode involves two actors with just two moves to make. No real episode ends after each player acted just once.

This does not mean making models does not help. It helps the same way as physics or engineering models help to simplify analysis. Assuming that the Earth is flat helps when an architect needs to build a house, a bridge, or even a skyscraper. It does not matter that the Earth is not, actually, flat.

The model works well when it fits the task at hand. It does not help if it does not. Assuming that the Earth is flat might be very misleading if you try to calculate the flight time between, say, Tokyo and Chicago. (The shortest route on the flat map is vastly different from the shortest route which goes over the North Pole. The real planes do take the shortest route.)

The same is true in political analysis. Analyzing a simple model of a revolution instead of complex reality might produce profound insights about the common patterns in different historical episodes. Political economists do this all the time. Still, it is worth keeping in mind that a model which is easy enough to analyze is always reliant on gross simplifications. In short, a model is not the real world, but it helps to understand it.

## *The Phantom of Conspiracy*

Every popular history of a revolution is a story of many conspiracies. Cabinet ministers conspire to set up policies, which make the incumbent president look cruel or detached. Exiled revolutionaries communicate with the court insiders. Generals exchange messages to make sure that they are going to switch sides at the exact same moment. Such stories always make a fascinating read.

Conspiracies, even the real ones, are not a big deal. A revolution does not need conspiracies along the way. More importantly, when there is a conspiracy, it always leaves a trace of evidence for historians to investigate: letters that the conspirators sent to each other, draft orders that they prepared, messages that they exchanged to coordinate their actions, etc. The big problem is that in the absence of a conspiracy – and in the absence of evidence, it is so easy to make one up. Every collective action looks, in the hindsight, like a conspiracy.

Nothing illustrates the phantom of conspiracy better than the so-called Thermidorian plot against the Maximilien Robespierre during the French Revolution. We will talk about the greatest revolution of all time in Chapter 4, but this episode is interesting on its own.

What historians know is that Robespierre and his friends and colleagues in the Committee of Public Safety, which was the ruling body of the revolutionary France at the moment, were hackled down at a meeting of the governing assembly, the Convention, on 27 July 1794. Unable to calm the Convention, they fled the meeting, were declared outlaws, caught, and after some commotion executed by guillotine next day, on 28 July 1794.

Those who organized the hackling, the rounding up of the ministers, the overwhelming of guards, who sent the carriages that brought the Robespierrites to scaffold, and who oversaw the execution – these people formed the new government. They followed with a couple of more executions in the upcoming weeks, though never on a scale that Robespierre himself used to, and they were able to defeat the threats to their rule coming from all sides. Yet were they, a truly diverse group politically, a serious, deep conspiracy against Robespierre?

Most likely, not at all. The July days of 1794 are studied as much as any historical episode. Despite all efforts, there is no conclusive evidence that there was a serious plot against the Jacobin dictatorship. What forced all these politicians to act in unison, to have each other back in the critical days, and to set aside political differences for a moment was fear for their own lives. If Robespierre ruled for one more day, some of them were likely to have followed numerous others to the guillotine. Or so they thought.

On the critical day of 26 July, the 9th of Thermidor Year 2 of the Revolution in the then-official calendar, Robespierre made yet another fiery speech filled with broadsides against participants of foreign conspiracies. Perhaps the blood-thirsty demagogue was a bit maniac by the time. Anyways, the master manipulator of the assembly made a rookie mistake. He promised to execute more traitors among the Convention members, but did not name them. Instead of attacking a specific faction as he has successfully done on several occasions, he threatened them all. R. R. Palmer, the preeminent chronologist of the Jacobin dictatorship, wrote: “He threatened right and left, indulgents and exaggerated terrorists, as in the past; but when asked point blank to name he accused, he evaded the question”. The immediate fear, not the long-term planning, made his potential targets swiftly coordinate their action.

The Thermidor plot story illustrates an important pattern that emerges in many revolutionary episodes. Sometimes, there are conspiracies and there are plots. They never have the significance of a bifurcation point in which history could set on entirely different paths. Revolutions are many things, but they are always a product of a long process, in which tectonics shifts of what people want clash with a monumentally rigid political system. The problem is, as with the fall of the Robespierre, that a lot of non-conspiracies look like one.

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The public obsession with conspiracies exhibits itself not only in pop history books. Granted, books in which the march of history is explained by a treasonous plot sell better than careful academic accounts. Mounting economic losses, slowly brewing grudges, and the regime’s increasing inability to listen to them do not make a fascinating story. A story

of conspiracy does. And this is what smart politicians are eager to explore. The threat of a wide conspiracy makes an excellent fodder for propaganda.

Take one example from the dictator's playbook. Stalin was a master of the game. When it was time for the Russian Revolution to 'devour its own children', hundreds of revolutionaries, including top leaders and members of the first revolutionary cabinet of ministers, were tried and executed for participating in vast conspiracies. That is what the Stalin's propaganda machine accused them of. That is what the investigators forced them to confess. That is what many of them confessed under torture and psychological pressure.

Yet they did not participate in any conspiracies. Prosecution has never produced any serious evidence against the accused. Everything that could have been fact checked – in the Western press, for example – was fact-checked and was debunked. Years later, archives were open – there has never been any evidence of these conspiracies. In fact, the accusation of conspiracy has never made any sense. If these conspiracies were real, with the accused controlling the government, the police, the army, and the security services, how could they have failed to achieve anything?

There has never been any evidence of a serious anti-Stalin conspiracy. Yet a conspiracy was what foreign correspondents working in Moscow reported back. That was what many readers in the West believed. More critically, that was what Soviet citizens believed. They were scared of prosecution and under constant barrage of propaganda, so believing in this conspiracy offered a refuge of sorts. Conspiracy theories are believable. Conspiracies might not drive history, but the phantom of conspiracy is very real.

### *Compromised Narratives*

One problem with analyzing history is well understood in academia. "History is written by the winners," the saying goes. Many post-revolutionary regimes were authoritarian. Some were outright totalitarian, with heavy censorship of each printed word and strict punishment for not towing the party line. Quite literally, the academic works of Soviet and Chinese scholars were checked against the officially approved versions of historical events. Some historical facts were dangerous to even mention. For

example, biographies of leaders like Stalin or Mao were heavily edited, and sometimes outright falsified, to make their early writings, their takes on contemporary events, the political alliances they had back then consistent with their new images as the great leaders.

Some characters who died early in a revolution were made martyrs by the new regime, even when their connection to the new regime was tenuous. We will discuss some examples in the chapter on the revolutionary leaders. Some, who played an outsized role early and lost a post-revolution power struggle, were vilified, or simply erased from the history textbook.

Leon Trotsky was perhaps the most important individual actor at the critical days of the Russian Revolution. He was Lenin's most recognizable lieutenant in the newly formed government and the military supremo in the civil war that followed. In 1927, ten years after the communists seized power, Trotsky was firmly out of the leadership thanks to Stalin's behind-the-back machinations. At the time he was still treated as an old comrade who went the wrong way. His major contribution to the revolution was not in doubt.

Fast forward to 1937, ten years later. Trotsky is in Mexican exile and even associating with him in the past is deadly to anyone in Stalin's Russia. On newspaper pages he is the devil incarnate, a subject of denunciation sessions at factories and universities. He is held responsible for everything wrong that was happening in Soviet people's lives. George Orwell, writing his *1984* dystopian novel, used Trotsky as a prototype for Goldstein, the archenemy of the totalitarian regime of Oceania. (The disguise was not that subtle: many details, including physical description and authorship of books, are taken from Trotsky biography with little change; the name of Big Brother's sworn enemy is an allusion to Bronstein, the Trotsky's birth name.)

By 1957, forty years after the revolution and Trotsky long dead (he was killed in 1940 by a Soviet agent in Mexico), his name was erased from history textbooks as if it had never been there. When I took my first history classes in middle school, there were no foreign minister in the first Lenin's cabinet. Really, a cabinet without a foreign minister? The Red Army did not have anyone at the helm in the critical battles of the Civil War. Really, a

victorious army with nobody at the top? The strategy of forced industrialization was first offered by someone else. Trotsky's name was simply absent.

No doubt, the portrait of historians, even those working under draconian and oppressive regimes, as just pliable translators of whatever the current ideology dictates is deeply misleading. Excellent work has still been done, critical archival evidence discovered, and big new ideas developed and discussed even under invasive totalitarian censorship. Still, the direct pressure of those in power, the limitations imposed by the dominant ideology, and the restriction on open debate oftentimes results in a biased body of work.

Even without direct interference by those currently in power, history books are written after the events give every narrative a sense of inevitability. Revolutionaries always seem to be more organized than they actually are. This led many students of revolutions to conclude that this ideological cohesiveness and iron discipline of the revolutionaries was a secret to their successes. On the other hand, the discord and chaos in the ranks of their antagonists helped their opponents.

As if French royalists and Russian White Guards, the defenders of the ancient regime, did not know that! But of course, they knew. They knew that working in sync, focusing on the same priorities, and proclaiming the same goals would make them stronger. The problem was that many counter-revolutionary movements inherited the same genetic traits of the ancient regime that made the ancient regime incapable of surviving. It is an artifact of history written by winners that losers look pathetic and weak.

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The history of many post-revolutionary regimes involves creating new, revolutionary narratives of the past. Some put in a lot of effort erasing alternative narratives. In other cases, narratives survive not because those in power benefit from these particular narratives. Certain narratives live long after the protagonists are gone and do not have power control over the writers of history.

When I was a kid – in the Soviet Union, in late 1970s-early 1980s – Jean-Paul Marat, a publicist whose daily diatribes fueled the Jacobin terror during the French Revolution, was a hero. His judgement was sound – the enemies of the revolution had to be destroyed.

His carnivorous lust for more blood was justified – the enemies of the revolution were evil. Killing them was the only way for the revolution to defend itself.

In this narrative, Charlotte Corday, a young woman who travelled to Paris to assassinate Marat, dreaming to stop the terror, was a killer, a criminal, an enemy of the revolution. Her execution four days later was just.

The story of a revolutionary hero and his killer outlived the Jacobin government that exploited this story to speed up the elimination of their political foes. Marat is a hero for anyone whose lust for radical change makes it possible, or even desirable, to physically eliminate their political enemies. For revolutionary regimes that preached the destruction of the old world, Marat is hero and Corday is a counterrevolutionary criminal. These regimes glorify the instigator of the terror.

In his book *The Revolution Betrayed*, Leon Trotsky, a leader of the Russian Revolution, called the ascent of Joseph Stalin, his fellow revolutionary, to the supreme power in the USSR “a Soviet Thermidor.” For Trotsky, “Thermidor”, the month when a loose coalition of survivors of the Jacobin terror stopped the guillotine, was a bad thing, the epitome of the revolution betrayed.

The term went well beyond Trotskyist thinkers. Whoever thinks that a socialist, progressive revolution is good, uses “Thermidor” as a reference to a reactionary, counterrevolutionary forces. It is useless to point out that Thermidorians have as much claim on being the true revolutionaries as those who they disposed of. The narrative of the true revolutionaries and those who terminated them lives on.

## Chapter 4

### THE GREAT REVOLUTIONS

What makes a great revolution? Political sociologist Charles Tilly, focusing exclusively on political authority, counted more than 700 instances of disruptive political events in Europe alone between 1492 and 1992. Very few of them could be called great.

The importance of great revolutions does not need to follow the chronological order. The historic role of the American Revolution has become clear two hundred years later, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of the United States to its current preeminent position in the world. It has become perhaps the most important of all revolutions by now. The reason is that the revolution-born system of government in the U.S. survived and prospered, while nearly all other systems that were present in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century have failed.

With the French Revolution, the historical contemporary of the American Revolution, it was almost the exact opposite. It became the great revolution immediately after the start, and its greatness survived the defeat of the revolution itself. Revolutionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were inspired by the French example, not the American one. You need to be a devoted historian to know that it was the American revolutionaries who helped the French ones to organize the fight against the old regime, draft new constitutions and bills of rights, not vice versa.

The great Chinese Revolution started six years before the Russian, in 1911, yet the dust settled only in 1949, after four long decades of a civil war, a foreign occupation, World War II, and yet another civil war. The Russian Revolution started in 1917, and the civil war that followed was incredibly bloody, with mass executions of civilians, slaughter of women and kids, and other atrocities. But in five years, by 1922, the new regime was firmly in control. The one-sided civil war, that is, the eradication of the losing side, continued for almost two decades, until the beginning of World War II, but the revolutionary phase was over. So, it was the Chinese Revolution that started earlier, but the Russian Revolution was the one that was over first. It was the Russian revolutionaries

inspiring would be leaders around the world, not the Chinese ones. Ultimately, the revolution in China took so long that it was the military and financial help from the Soviets that helped Chinese communists to defeat their enemies and establish the new order in their country.

The American Revolution's claim to greatness is that it resulted in a durable set of institutions that survived, without a major disruption, for more than two centuries. The great, and rather unusual thing about the French Revolution was that it destroyed the extractive political institutions of the past without resulting in a new set of institutions just as extractive. When things settled decades after the revolution, the country had new, different, modern institutions. The old institutions that protected the historic elites, the nobility and clergy, were gone. Furthermore, the revolution spread new institutions across France's immediate neighbors on the European continent.

In contrast, in the Chinese and Russian Revolutions, the set of extractive political institutions has been replaced by equally extractive institutions of a very different sort. One entrenched, progress-blocking elite was ultimately replaced by another.

### *The Good Revolution*

Unlike other revolutions, the main action in the American Revolution was far from the central square. More accurately, the central square was an ocean away from the scene of action. Forces of change did not seek to overthrow the powers of the British Empire. They merely wanted to make their part of the empire different. In the process, they made their part independent.

In any revolution, there are changes that people increasingly desire to have and a rigid political system that prevents these changes from happening without major disruption. The American Revolution was no exception. These tensions were gradually accumulating and the political system was unable to produce the desired change. They were small relative to the tensions that led to the French, Russian, or Chinese Revolution. In fact, they were tensions on a different scale. The life of Americans after the revolution has changed far less than the life of ordinary French, Russians, or Chinese following their respective revolutions. Someone would call the tensions "policy differences," and there is

a lot of truth to it. The main reason why American Revolution is on the list of the great revolutions is not the scale of transformation. The main reason is the durability of the new set of institutions that the American Revolution created.

Each state of the future United States started as a colony, a settlement. The settlers came from various parts of Europe and for varied reasons. Their background, religion, workplace, and cultural traditions were vastly different. What was common for many, though not all, companies of settlers were that they came to the New World being prosecuted in the Old one.

The American colonies were different from colonies that were established in the Caribbean earlier, and quite dissimilar among themselves. The New England colonies were not able to rely on the land to produce tradeable goods. Their trade with the metropole was fish, lumber, and fur. As the main hub of the transatlantic trade, Boston was the largest city in this part of the continent. In the South, colonies developed large crop plantations. Tobacco, rice, indigo, and of course King Cotton were the main crops.

The middle colonies had a combination of both farms, smaller than southern plantations, and trade. New York City emerged as a major trade hub for this part of the country. Philadelphia, though not a seaport by location, became another large trade hub. The 330-miles long Delaware River was the artery that connected it to the Atlantic Ocean.

Different colonies were formed under different conditions, and lived, initially, by very different rules. One reason why the enormous diversity in government institutions was supported on the American continent was the vast Western frontier of colonies. On the eve of the American Revolution, Pennsylvania was a Western frontier state. Many local conflicts were prevented because the losing side would simply move further West. In many other countries, those who were unsatisfied with the status quo, did not have anywhere to move. In America, they had.

As different as the colonies themselves were the relationships of colonists with the native Americans. American Indians were far more diverse among themselves than the settlers that were united by a smaller number of common languages. The Iroquois, Hurons, Cherokee and others were major nations with long histories, distinct traditions, and different forms of state organization.

The mother country, the mighty British Empire, played a number of roles for the colonies. It was the main counterparty for American trade, the main market for American produce and goods. It was also the main provider of commercial credit. Not only trade, but nearly all southern agriculture existed on the credit of British banks. It was also the ultimate political authority: it was in London where the taxes were set. In London, the king and the parliament decided how to use the proceeds.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century some common patterns were emerging. In northern and middle colonies, the settlers had no mass of the local population to exploit as Spanish conquistadors exploited in their Latin American colonies. Nor it made sense, economically, to bring slaves to work on the land – the land was not sufficiently fertile. With skilled workers in constant shortage, the colonies had to grant settlers representation. Local assemblies emerged even where the colony started under strict conditions of the royal license. These assemblies had significant power over local matters. Public administration and justice were local and accountable to the inhabitants of the settlements; taxation was local as well.

The presence of local assemblies does not mean that these were not colonies. They were. The king of England had royal governors in each of the colonies. At the same time, the initial approach of the Britain to North American colonies was not that extractive. It was not the colonial yoke of the later centuries like that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India under the British rule or in Congo under the Belgian. There, it was as close to pure exploitation as it gets. North American colonies, at the time of their founding, were receiving a lot of support from the metropole. With colonies getting richer, the mother country started to benefit from the trade with them – they demanded more and more goods produced in Britain. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this was about to change – and the tensions, a necessary ingredient in any revolution, started to rise.

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In any revolution, there are tensions between the existing institutions and the institutions that people want to have. These tensions must be increasing. Otherwise, even a very unfair and inefficient order might survive, virtually unchanged, for decades if not for centuries.

The first event on the road to the American Revolution was the Sugar Act passed by the British parliament in 1764. In an attempt to raise the tax revenue, the royal ministry cut the tax rate on foreign molasses yet sought to make the collection effort more efficient. (The molasses was used to make rum, which was in turn sold overseas.) That was followed by the Currency Act of 1764 that basically prohibited colonies from using their own paper money. Then the Stamp Act of 1765 introduced a new tax on paper used for contracts, custom receipts, official paperwork, etc. The reaction to these acts, in the form of a petition to the parliament, was the first instance in which it was pointed out that as the colonies are not represented in the parliament, the parliament has no right to set their taxes. No taxation without representation was said for the first time.

The Sugar Act and the Stamp Act were not merely another ask to increase the revenue from colonies. They represented a dramatic shift in His Majesty government's policy for overseas territories. A century before, the Glorious Revolution paved the way for growth and development in Britain. The parliaments were all set on creating the best conditions for the British industrialists and merchants. The industrial revolution, in turn, resulted in the increase of the Britain's military might. In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain emerged victorious in major conflicts on the European continent. France and Spain, the great continental powers at the time, looked up to Great Britain.

Military victories resulted in British domination of European politics. They also resulted in a massive debt for the crown. The fork on the road for Britain looked as follows. One option was to tighten the belts at home and collect more revenue from the colonies. Before, the government had often subsidized colonies rather than vice versa – they did not have to pay for the opportunity to expand. Now, the time was to for the metropole to benefit from the relationship. The alternative option was to further invest in colonies, make them richer, and get more profits from the new demand that colonial expansion would generate. A richer colony will result in colonists buying more of the goods produced in Britain. This will in turn benefit the metropole's industry.

George III and his government set on the former path. They chose budget austerity, in modern terms. They put emphasis on revenue collection, rather than on growing the tax base. By choosing austerity over economic growth, the British government set itself on collision course with their colony. For leaders of the American Revolution, the choice

was simple. They did not want to tighten their belts to pay of the Empire's debt. What they wanted was an expansion of the markets. They wanted to expand trade. They wanted to be more prosperous customers for the British product. This was the opposite to austerity. In modern terms, they wanted an activist, pro-growth government.

Among other things, the supporters of the activist government wanted wide prosperity, not a rich oligarchy. In fact, abolitionists of the time, concerned about the moral indignity of slavery, found allies in the industry quarters. Many businessmen were opposed to slavery not on moral grounds, but because slavery benefited the rich few. It has not helped in increasing middle class with purchasing power to buy more and more of their product. Abolishing slavery, in the industry titans thinking, might have lifted more boats than keeping it. A larger middle class promised more sales and thus higher profits.

As many times before and many times after, the issue of taxation was closely intertwined with the issue of political liberty. Arbitrary taxation by a king is a violation of private property rights. Being unjustly taxed was the definition of a tyranny. A king is not a tyrant, if those who pay taxes have their say over how much they pay or what the money is used for. If you are taxed without your consent, you live under tyranny. Having political rights meant giving this consent.

Today, we see a contradiction between market freedom and an active role that the government plays in the economy. American revolutionaries wanted freedom and a government that is conducive to economic prosperity. On both counts, they opposed George III policies. Political institutions of the British Empire did not allow them to have a say over the Empire's policy. They wanted to change institutions – economic institutions, as the ultimate goal. And they needed to change political institutions, to be able to reach this ultimate goal.

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John Adams, one of the original American revolutionaries, observed “The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution”.

With the benefit of hindsight, the main achievement of the American Revolution is the durability of institutions that it established. Back then, it seemed that the main thing is the progressive Declaration of Independence. It articulated, for the first time, what we now take for granted. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The idea that “we”, the people, could simply declare something “self-evident” was revolutionary. The idea that “all men are created equal” is the first of the self-evident things was revolutionary. The “pursuit of happiness” in the same category as life and liberty was revolutionary.

A couple of years later, the French revolution doubled down on proclaiming rights. It was all about the top-down approach. Start with proclaiming basic principles, then derive pragmatics from these basic principles. On this, the French revolutionaries followed the American ones.

At the time, not everyone was persuaded that making abstract proclamations is the way to go. Edmund Burke, the most influential contemporary critic of the French Revolution, wrote in 1790, its second year: “What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In this deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.” Burke, a member of the British parliament himself, was no fan of absolute monarchs. He understood that there is a need for change, and that the absolute monarchy is not well-suited for this. He wished that there were ways to avoid revolutions. That there were ways to reform the system peacefully and gradually. That big words harm the ultimate goal.

Fast forward two hundred and fifty years. We know that there is nothing unique about grand proclamation at an early stage of a revolution. When the old regime collapses, the newly installed government issues a grand proclamation. This is how revolutionaries start a new regime, by promising freedoms and rights. What makes the American revolution exception is not what was declared. Independence, freedom, liberty, rights were promised in every revolution’s declaration. The exception was that these promises were held.

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Some institutions that proved durable and resilient came from utterly opportunistic motives. In case of the American Revolution, some of these motives were not just self-interested, but simply bad. The flexibility of the American political system, the protections guaranteeing rights of minorities, the decentralization of power were there by design. Yet if there was a single reason why all of these protections were put in place, pragmatically, it was the preservation of slavery, a despicable goal. The union was designed in a way that the elites of slave states were not forced to abandon their way of living.

Slaves were the most important silent actor of the American Revolution. Although they were mostly blocked from participating in debates and drafting on the Constitution, the conflict over the issue of slavery was perhaps the most important single determinant of how the post-revolution United States were organized.

For one example, the way the Senate was organized, with two members representing each state regardless of its size, gave disproportional weight in the decision-making to smaller states. Similarly, the electoral college, a uniquely American way to conduct presidential elections, also gave disproportional weight to smaller states. Those who controlled power in these smaller states were receiving additional protection. Preserving the institutions of slavery, the condition on which the southern states would join the union, was the underlying reason for many constitutional provisions. The unheard-of, for a large modern state, degree of decentralization in the newly formed United States was set to guarantee the persistence and expansion of slavery. Many decades later, it would require a long and bloody civil war to break the guarantee.

Most leaders of the American revolution, Washington, Jefferson, Madison among them, were large slave owners. At the same time, they were the authors of great proclamations on freedom and equality. They enshrined in the constitution and implemented a new democratic system of government. Yet they did not extend the rights of men to hundreds of thousands of American slaves. They wanted to have united states. For that purpose, they were ready to compromise on even deeply held beliefs. The compromise was as despicable as compromises go. On the bright side, the compromise made the American constitution one of the most resilient and adaptable political system in human history.

## *The Revolution of Many Firsts*

The French Revolution is often said to be driven by ideas, yet ideas played the minimal role in bringing down the old regime. Its collapse was a result of decades of growing tensions between the obsolete institutions and people's willingness to engage in activities that these institutions blocked. The French state was not brought down by lawyers publishing their pamphlets or intellectual abbots advocating for a direct democracy. The French state was brought down by the kings and nobility unwilling to make change.

The Marxist theory of revolutions has long been rejected by scholars, but there is a certain beauty in its simplicity. In the run up to the French revolution, the ancient regime was an archaic feudal system that protected the rents of the absolute monarch and the tiny noble elite from the new emerging capitalist class, the bourgeoisie. The capitalists needed new laws and institutions that would protect their commercial property, not the property of the old nobility. The capitalists needed government attuned to their concerns, not of the princes and knights. The capitalists needed labor freed from feudal obligations. The emerging dominant class tried to wrestle control from the hands of the old one.

The reality, as often happens, was far more nuanced. Many members of the old nobility were, in fact, exactly those aspiring new capitalists. They sought reforms that would allow them to invest more capital and in a wider range of activities. In contrast, those who are counted in the bourgeois class were the opponents of reform. They have already paid their way into venal offices, the government positions that were sold, resold, and bequeathed. They resisted reforms as they have already been benefiting from the feudal seignorial dues and privileges that they have acquired from the old nobility.

In the exchange of ideas on the eve of the revolution, the leading role was played by the members of nobility and the educated class. Still, the overwhelming majority of the French population on the eve of the revolution were peasants. Of the 27 million French people, about 80 percent were peasants; another 15 percent were workmen of the towns and cities. These 95 percent of the population – or maybe even a higher percentage – constituted *the Third Estate*, “those who work”. The rest was nobility, *the Second Estate*, “those who fought”, and clergy, *the First Estate*, “those who prayed.”

Landless peasants were of course the poorest of all. The peasants that worked on their own land suffered from many feudal duties. They had to pay their seigniors, the relict of the old times, and to pay taxes to the king. With agriculture increasingly more and more productive, the gains of eliminating obsolete institutions were significant. Peasants were not simply unhappy with the institutions that governed their life and workplace. They were more and more unhappy.

The skilled workers in cities were restricted by the guild system. After a long apprenticeship, the aspiring members had to spend years on the road, often fighting the local competitors. Only then were they getting a chance to buy their membership in the guild. To maintain rents for their members, the guilds were very restrictive. The rules protected guild members from competition. With technology improving, the guild system was another source of increasing tensions. In each trade, the next generation wanted to short cut the path to full membership.

The most dissatisfied social group of all was the bourgeoisie, the emerging middle class that included merchants and bankers, but also lawyers, doctors, and writers. The latter group will be the main source of revolutionary politicians in the early days of the revolution. The former sought political changes to grow their trade and industry. Without these opportunities, they invested their newly acquired wealth into the main revenue-generating machines of the ancient regime, that is, venal offices and land. Both the land and the venal offices came with many privileges; not the least ones were tax privileges. These privileges came in various forms, yet the general rule in France in centuries before the revolution was that the larger is your wealth, the less taxes you pay.

The nobility, the Second Estate, less than 2 percent of the French population at the time, owned about 25-35 percent of land. These same people held feudal rights over the rest of the land. Those who owned or worked on this land had to pay their seigneurs in one form or another. For example, a feudal right might be forcing local peasants to use their seigneur's facilities to mill their flour. In other circumstances, it was just direct payments to the nobility that held the feudal rights. The nobles were prohibited from being directly engaged in trade, though they could be doing this indirectly. Other commercial pursuits like mining were open to them. But they would massively benefit from having more freedom of choosing where to invest.

Inside the Second Estate, there were, non-surprisingly, tensions between the sword nobility, those who kept their titles from ancient times, and the robe nobility, those who purchased it by acquiring a venal office or by doing some favors to the crown. The most successful of the two groups – the sword nobility that kept and increased their ancient fortunes by venturing into commerce and the “new riches” who were able to penetrate the ranks of high aristocracy – dominated the king’s court. They were conservative as any elite of the old regime would be. They were the main beneficiaries of the existing institutions. Yet at the same time they were the drivers of early change, because it was them who would benefit a lot from even modest reforms.

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To understand the French Revolution dynamics in its early days, it is important to make a distinction. The top clergymen were typically extraordinarily rich and often came from the most noble families of France. The mass of the French clergymen were parish priests. This majority of clergymen was not vastly different, socially, from the Third Estate; it was they who provided crucial support to the revolution early on.

The First Estate, the clergy, had about 130,000 members, a mere half of a percent of the total French population. The members of the clergy owned about 10 percent of all French land, a non-negligible amount. This land will be a major prize. Nationalizing it would unite the most zealous revolutionaries with pragmatic handlers of state finance.

Any revolution brings together, for a fleeting period, an alliance of vastly distinct groups. They are united only by the desire to topple the incumbent regime, and nothing else. Their ways will diverge immediately after the ancient regimes fall. We will see, down the road, how the Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought together the polar opposites, progressive technocrats and religious zealots. In the French Revolution, grabbing the church-owned land brought together court technocrats, anti-religious intellectuals, and champions of the poor. Indeed, a revolution makes strange bed fellows.

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The king of France, Louis XVI, was a successor and a grandson to Louis XV, who ruled for 60 years. He, in turn, was a successor to his grand-grand-father Louis XIV, the Sun King, who ruled for 72 years. During the Sun King’s rule, France has become the dominant

force in Europe. The reign of the next monarch, Louis XV, was a time of French Enlightenment, the epoch of literature and science. It was also a prolonged period of raising tensions.

Ideas of the Enlightenment were often responding to these tensions. Reforms were proposed, tried, and then abandoned. The political system resisted reforms and resisted political change. The Enlightenment's men of letters watching over the rising tensions and hapless reforms that fail to address them only added to the tensions. Maybe the French Revolution was a revolution of ideas after all.

Much is written about personal characteristics of Louis XVI, the last absolute monarch of France, who ascended to the throne in 1774 at the age of 19. Like any monarch who lost his crown and then his head, he is portrayed as moderately intelligent, weak-willed, distrustful, and prone to manipulation by others. He would not be able to chart a course of action by himself but would not trust appointed ministers to make choices of their own. He would offer a concession only to withdraw it the next day. He would strike a compromise but would not feel bound by its terms. What matters is that the French state was already a humongous machine too large to be dependent on the individual in the driving seat. There was a serious mismatch between what the state was set to do and the archaic structure, in which everything required a decision from the man at the top.

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One of the most archaic elements of the state on the eve of the revolution was the administrative division. After almost a constant expansion for 150 years, France was a patchwork of territories, acquired through wars, diplomatic treaties, and nobility marriages. The country was divided into 39 provinces, the largest of which were former independent kingdoms such as Navarre or major Dukedoms such as Normandy or Burgundy. Feudal privileges and responsibilities varied widely between provinces.

The patchwork of provinces operating under different systems of government was archaic long before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. 150 years before Louis XVI, Cardinal Richelieu, the reforming prime-minister under Louis XIII, created another division, far more equitable in size, into generalates. In 1789, each of the 36 generalates were governed by intendants, some of which were appointed by the king and some of which were in part responsible to

a locally elected body. Even the presence of king-appointed intendants did not result in any kind of a unified approach to taxation. Every township or municipality had their privileges and exemptions over which they bargained with the king, his representatives, provincial administrators, and nobles who held old feudal rights over them. To make things even more complicated, the Church operated a different administrative division that did not line up with either provinces or generalates.

Atop of the complex web of administrative divisions, there was an even more complex division into areas of court districts. The system was so complex that even figuring out what court has a jurisdiction over a specific complaint by a person of a specific social status in a specific geographical area was a long, frustrating, and costly process. The courts were populated by people who bought their offices. The offices of a judge, a court clerk, or a prosecutor were typically venal offices – that is, they were sold to the highest bidder.

In brief, the legal system heavily favored those who were able to pay their way through the entire process. Those who were favored had no intention of letting any reforms go through. It is a general phenomenon: for any inefficient procedure, there is someone who benefits from this inefficiency. And they are not interested in straightening things up.

The archaic government and legal divisions became an acute problem when the government entered, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the period of fiscal crises. The government needed more money to spend, it has exhausted its credit, and it desperately needed additional tax revenue. This is a prime example of a political system which is not designed to respond to calls for change in real time. Instead, it is irresponsible for decades. Then, it cracks under duress. The severe fiscal crisis is one possible cause of duress.

The main tax of the time was the land tax. The problem was that a half of the land was held by either nobility or clergy, and both groups were largely exempted from the land taxes. In other words, most of the taxable land was in the hands of those who held disproportional political power under the ancient regime. Not surprisingly, they resisted attempts to eliminate their exemptions. They strategically resisted reforms that would strip them of their vast political power. If they would cede power, they would eventually

have their land income taxed. As in any revolution, there are archaic institutions in place and those who benefit from these institutions are resisting reforms.

The First and Second Estates did pay some taxes, though a patchwork of exemptions would emerge with every new tax. Yet again, the system was tilted towards the nobility and the clergy; they paid far less taxes than ordinary members of the Third Estate, the overwhelming majority of the French.

Excise taxes on all kinds of products such as soup or liquor hit disproportionately the poorer part of the bourgeoisie and wealthier peasants. Even worse, most of the traded commodities were subject to internal custom duties, and borders at which these duties were levied were numerous. That is, both production and trade of these commodities was heavily taxed, creating all kinds of incentives to smuggle and disincentives to produce and trade. The poorest members of the society paid taxes in labor; absent money to pay, they had an obligation to work for the government.

In addition to wrong incentives, the taxes were making the situation even more inequitable. For example, the Gabelle, the salt tax, was particularly despised as different administrative units paid the tax at a different rate, and the rates varied widely. The nobility and the clergy were exempted. Take any economic institution – it is heavily tilted to benefit those who have political power.

The tax collection was done by tax farmers who paid the government lump sum for the right to collect taxes and then relied on brute force to collect the taxes. Such a system tends to benefit those with wealth and influence, as they have the resources to ensure that tax collectors respect their claimed privileges and exemptions.

In sum, the French administrative and tax system on the eve of revolution is a prime example of archaic, obsolete system that disincentivized development and created a deep sense of inequity. It was not that its inefficiency and backwardness were not understood at the time. On the contrary, the Enlightenment intellectuals were very much aware of malaise and the acute need for reforms. They believed in the scientific method and were eager to apply to practice. The fact that reforms were not happening was not for the lack of understanding that they were needed. It was for the political strength of those who

benefited from the archaic and inefficient system. Except for a revolution, there was no way to change that.

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Voltaire is perhaps the most famous name of the French Enlightenment, but his primary foil was the Catholic Church. In matters of administrative reform and government, the lasting contribution was made by Montesquieu. He was a conservative in terms of political philosophy. By the third year of the revolution his ideas of separation of powers and a model of a constitutional monarchy were considered reactionary. At the time, revolutionaries thought that the sky was the limit. Yet in the decades preceding the revolution, his books and pamphlets were read by every future revolutionary.

Another celebrated figure of the Enlightenment was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his most famous book, *The Social Contract*, he described a utopian political system built with the primary goal to implement the “will of the people”. The political system that Rousseau proposed is forgotten, yet the concept of the “will of the people” was appropriated by many dictators around the world. We will see it in the darkest days of the French Revolution, when the “will of the people” will be used to justify mass slaughter of people deemed unworthy by those who held power at the time. Then, time and time again, in various authoritarian regimes, it will be the “will of the people” that sends opponents of the dictator to a scaffold without a trial.

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The French Revolution produced many firsts. It was the first scene that featured “professional revolutionaries”, folks in their 20s and 30s whose only job was tearing down the old regime. They were spending time in clubs and cafeteria, arguing about the new ways with fellow revolutionaries, and rushing to publish pamphlets that will be read widely and forgotten the next day. In a short while, it was them who would be sitting in national assemblies and their regional and local branches.

Before that, people advocating for change were those whose life experiences made them champions for reforms. Merchants forced to deal with internal customs wanted the barriers to be torn down. Townsfolks who dealt with judges that bought their offices and

now wanted to make profit out of them championed judicial reforms. Bankers who feared that the king's treasury defaults on its debt requested transparency in the king's books.

The professional revolutionaries were different. Their job was to make revolution. Sometimes they would not have any work experience prior to their rise to fame as agents of change. Some of them had the interests of the people in mind. Some of them simply exploited the moment.

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Another first of the French Revolution will be the Constitution of 1793, the one that granted universal franchise and other constitutional protections – yet has never been the law of the land. In many revolutions to follow, the new power would promise or even approve a new constitution granting universal rights and freedom only to backtrack later. The first post-revolutionary constitution is typically far more democratic and inclusive than the actual regime after someone consolidates power.

In France in 1793, the National Convention approved a constitution that stipulated elections with the universal franchise to ensure that the government is accountable to the people. Immediately after that, the Convention prorogued itself and made the select and secretive Committee of Public Safety the ultimate authority. The Committee was accountable to, basically, no one.

The Constitution of 1793 guaranteed, on paper, absolute freedom of the press. In practice, it was heavy censorship and outright terror against any dissenting views. On paper, the Constitution guaranteed representation to all French people. In reality, delegates of the National Convention that did not abide by the orders of “the twelve”, the Committee of Public Safety, were denounced, ejected from the convention, and quickly dispatched to the guillotine.

This feature – laws and constitutions aspiring to higher ideals, immediately suspended, or outright ignored by the actual revolutionary governments – will be present in many future revolutions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost every authoritarian government would have a paper constitution filled with words about equal rights, liberty, press freedom, and protection of private property. In reality, it was the same useless document as the French constitution of 1793. The new revolutionary government often has more

immediate tasks at hand than to follow all legal niceties dreamed about by philosophers of freedom. The enemies of revolution should be crushed momentarily without going through the legal process guaranteed by the idealistic constitutionalists. In the United States, the revolutionary constitution survived, but in other revolutions, it most often failed.

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There are many days that can be singled out as the most important days of the French Revolution. In every individual episode, the pattern was the same. First, an upheaval, with events happening at such a pace that observers are not able to keep track. Concessions that were fought for decades are obtained right on the spot. Laws that were in books for centuries are scrapped in a single vote. Reforms that were discussed for years passed in a matter of hours. Political careers built over a lifetime ruined over a wrong word. Politicians going from a ministry right to the jail or scaffold.

Then, after an upheaval, a pause. Dead bodies removed from streets, barricades disassembled, street militias disarmed, committees elected, deals made, and, voila, a new order is in place. The new order might be short-lived, as it was with many governments during the French revolution, or surprisingly durable after they have survived the first few years. Remarkably, those institutions that survived were sometimes very different from those that were attempted at first.

In May 1789, the king called the Estates General, an elected body of representatives of all people. Initially, it was a concession to nobles, the First Estate, and clergy, “the Second Estate”, which combined comprised about than five percent of the French population. Everyone else was “the Third Estate”. In the Estates General, the Third Estate had as many delegates as the other two combined, but this did not result in the equal representation. Initially, each estate had one vote! A great example of a political institution protecting the interests of a small minority. It was the first baby step of the revolution when on June 17, the delegates reconstituted themselves as the National Assembly, in which each member had one vote. Still, no power came with representation.

On 14 July 1789, a mob stormed the Bastille, a fortress in Paris that has served as a royal prison for centuries. It stopped being a royal prison long before 1789, and there were

no political prisoners at the time, but it was a symbolic disruption of the royal authority. In revolutions, symbols matter.

The next milestone was August 4. There was perhaps no real shortage of food in France at the time, but the Great Fear gripped the country. Abandoning the feudal dues was the rallying cry of peasants. The king's government, shattered by the storming of the Bastille, was not able to protect noble estates from vandalism. The pace with which the National Assembly passed the new, increasingly sweeping laws surprised even its most radical members. In a frenzied session that ended in the wee hours of August 5, the Assembly abolished the feudal order altogether. The sweeping reforms that intellectuals were discussing for decades were adopted in a matter of hours. Very few of many reforms of the French Revolution survived the next couple of years, but this one did. Once demolished, the feudal order has never been re-established.

Three weeks later, the National Assembly adopted *the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, perhaps the most important political proclamation in human history. It was drafted by three people, coming, characteristically for the initial stage of the revolution, from either nobility or clergy, the old dominant classes. Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette, an enlightened noble and a young hero of the American revolution, was the most popular man in Paris at the moment. Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès was a clergyman whose pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* published half a year ago has become a manifesto of the revolution. Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau, was considered the most eloquent speaker on behalf of the revolution.

On 5 October 1789, there was a new upheaval. What started as a peaceful demonstration of Paris women resulted in Louis XVI and his family transferred to Paris from Versailles. The king still controlled the levers of government yet has become a de facto prisoner of Parisians. The first constitution was in the works. Louis XVI seemed to be content with significant constitutional bounds on his power. For now, his power is checked by the fact that many institutions of the old regime simply ceased to exist.

In May 1790, the National Assembly abolished nobility. This decision was made easier by the fact that peasants were no longer bound by their feudal dues abolished a year ago.

Unlike some laws rushed in during a frenetic session of the National Convention a year before, abolishing feudal dues was working. Peasants who were told that they no longer needed to pay the dues were eager to comply. It also helped that more and more nobles fled the country fearing violence. Month after month, there were literally less and less delegates from the nobility in the National Assembly.

Abolishing nobility was opposed by the nobility itself, but everyone else cheered. The revolutionary reform of the church has proved far more controversial. It was a matter of considerable intellectual debate, with opinions ranging from abolishing religion altogether to establishing a totally new religion. The ultimate decision was no compromise at all: the Catholic church's property in France was nationalized. Priests had to swear their allegiance to the country; in the new order, they will receive salary from the state.

In return, the state got Church's vast land possessions. For the finance department, this was a sweet deal: state coffers got a large influx of money. Once again, a revolution makes strange bedfellows: the coalition of responsible state financiers and anti-religious zealots pushed through the nationalization of the church's land.

The overwhelming majority of clergymen were naturally opposed to the reform. Yet the main opposition came not from the clergy itself, who were just not numerous enough to be a problem. In many regions of France, peasants were not enamored with the church reform at all. The officers of Church were often younger sons of rich noble families living indulgent lives, but the clergy that peasants knew were poor local priests who were the pillars of their communities. In July 1790, the church reform did not produce an immediate violent uprising, yet the conflict over faith will eventually result in massive violence. The clergy were counter-revolutionary until, in a wave of denouncement and terror after a wave, it was virtually eliminated as a cohesive social group.

The next milestone was 20 June 1791, when the king and his family tried – and nearly succeed – to escape France and join the royalist emigree circles abroad. They were captured at Varennes, a small town near the border, and escorted back to Paris. The episode dealt a final blow to the king's authority. In public imagination, this was conclusive proof that all of his compromises were not sincere and that he was conspiring with the hated emigres. This authority has never recovered. When the first constitution

of France was adopted in September 1791, it delegated vast powers to the monarch, yet Louis had never had a chance to use them.

Again, months passed in which the progress was too slow for radicals. The abolished feudal dues, venal offices, nobility and clergy privileges, church lands nationalized, the constitutional monarchy with rights of a citizen and a man enshrined in the Constitution's text – all of this would be beyond the feverish dreams of those who stormed the Bastille and marched on the king's palace two years ago. Now, it was not nearly enough. Still, between the king's flight to Varennes in June 1791 and August of 1792 things developed slowly. The main news was the war that neighbors, Austria and Prussia, declared on France.

On August 10, 1792, the mob stormed the Tuileries palace, the king's residence in Paris. Dozens of guards were killed during the assault; hundreds were massacred after the fight. The king's power was finally and ultimately over – between the storming of the Tuileries and his execution six months later, he was Citizen Capet kept in a prison cell.

On September 2, another mob gathered in the capital and went through the Paris killing the prisoners with axes, spikes, or swords. The victims were simply those who were imprisoned at the moment: a variety of random royalists and royalist sympathizers, royal governess and maids together with the queen's ladies-in-waiting, priests who opposed taking oath to the nation, Swiss guards arrested in August, some former royal ministers, etc. As it often happens with mob justice, the majority of those killed were non-political. The exact number of people who were executed is between 1,200 and 1,450, about half of all Parisian prisoners at the time.

The September 1792 massacres were the end of the revolutionary phase that dealt with the monarchy. It was formally abolished on September 21. As it turned out, it was also the beginning of a new, far bloodier phase of the revolution. As in many other revolutionary episodes, it is not easy to say who were the drivers of these events. On one hand, the mob gathered spontaneously, and prominent historians ascribed the responsibility to the "collective mentality." The specific trigger was the advance of the Prussian army in late August that threatened Paris. On the other hand, bloodthirsty tribunes such as the author of popular pamphlets Jean-Paul Marat were preaching the

violence non-stop. The newly appointed Minister of Justice, the champion of Paris' poor Georges Danton, has done nothing to stop the violence. By some accounts, he actually encouraged the mob. Eliminating political opponents and their supporters is what revolutionaries do.

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In the first two years of the French Revolution, the change was profound and fast. There was no broad public support for equality for Protestants, civil divorce, abandonment of black slavery. All these were aspirations of Enlightenment made into law of the land in the revolutionary excitement. These laws eventually did not last – many newfound freedoms were abandoned by 1793, with the rise of the Jacobin dictatorship. The rest had to go by 1804, with the ascent of Emperor Napoleon. A stark difference with the American experience, where the painfully deliberated compromises enshrined in the new constitution looked less progressive yet proved to be far more durable.

In Chapter 6, we will talk about the gradual evolution of British institutions that ultimately led to the history's most famous revolution-in-the-name-only, the Industrial Revolution. The contrast with the French Revolution, a real revolution, is clear: the developments that took two centuries in Britain, took a couple of decades across the British channel, in France.

In Britain, the political institutions were flexible enough to provide for gradual progress. Even the disruptions of civil wars and execution of the king have not been sufficiently significant to alter the overall pace of the process. In France, the political system resisted changes for centuries and then everything – the civil war, the execution of the king, the terror, the expropriation of former landowners, the abandonment of guilds, the sidelining of the church – happened at once. In Britain, it was not a real revolution. In France, it was.

### *When the Revolution Wins*

What makes the Russian Revolution different from other great revolutions was the totality of the wipe-out of the ancient regime. In France, the Jacobin terror was brutal by the standards of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was only few dozen thousand death sentences.

The trials were short, and the “revolutionary justice” was, as it is always the case in a revolution, a mockery of what was considered due process of law at the time. Still, people were eliminated on a name-by-name basis, not because they belonged to a certain class or a social group. In the Russian revolution and subsequent terror people were arrested, deported, or executed on the basis of their social characteristics. Whole social classes or entire ethnicities were subjected to annihilation or forced relocation.

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire stretched from the Baltic Sea on the West to the Pacific Ocean in the East, from the Southern mountains of Caucasus on the Black Sea and foothills of Hindu Kush in Central Asia to Northern seas. Protecting such an empire required maintaining a huge military force. From time to time, the Russian army had as many soldiers under arms in Europe as all major European powers combined.

The army was not the only instrument that projected the Empire’s power well beyond its borders. The Empire was radiating strength by all means possible. The biggest Russian writers of the time, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky have been acquiring the world fame. Russian universities employed some leading scientists of the time, paying premium salaries to foreigners. Russian engineers’ exhibits featured in the World Fairs in Chicago and Paris.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Empire was undergoing a dramatic economic change at a neck-breaking pace. Buoyed by foreign credits and supportive government policy, Russian businessmen heavily invested in industrial production, borrowing technology from the advanced capitalist economies. Half a century later, Harvard historian Alexander Gershenkron coined the term “the advantage of backwardness” describing the speedy industrialization of the Russian economy in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Millions of people were leaving the countryside to make their living as factory workers. Even with punishing work conditions, the fast-growing cities lured more and more people.

Yet something was deeply wrong with the ways in which the Empire was governed. Russia was like a massive herbivorous dinosaur of the Jurassic era, an Apatosaurus or a Diplodocus, with its body of enormous size, a small head, and an even smaller brain

within. Far larger than any European rival, be it the rising Germany or Austro-Hungarian empire, already on decline at the time, Russia had a much smaller number of bureaucrats per head of the population. Even when revolutionaries called the Empire “the prison of nations”, it has still less policemen, on per capita basis, than many European nations. The gap between what the country had, as a system of government, and what it needed, was widening rapidly.

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In 1905, Russia lost a war to Japan. The war started with the expectations that the mighty Empire, with the experience of many successful military campaigns over centuries, will easily deal with rising peripheral power. The more humiliating was the outcome. The territorial loss was negligible, but the impact on society’s morale was huge. In a few months of war with what was supposed to be a backwater Asiatic nation, the Russian Empire lost most of its fleet. First, the Far East fleet was lost in a succession of small battles. Then, the entire Baltic fleet, the main force of the Imperial Navy, was destroyed, after a seven-month voyage around Africa, in a mother of all defeats at the Battle of Tsushima. In less than 24 hours, the Russian navy lost all of its modern battleships, either drowned or captured by the Japanese. After a valiant struggle marred by generals’ incompetence, the sea stronghold of Port Arthur surrendered shortly afterwards.

Thousands of miles away, in St. Petersburg and Moscow, the tensions between industrial workers and the imperial government spilled into the open. A war lost thousands of miles away worked as a perfect trigger. The disabled veterans coming back from the Far East frontiers added to the discontent. Yet the events of 1905 would not have been a precursor to the Russian Revolution, if the peasants, 80 percent of the country’s population, were not getting involved.

Peasant participation in politics was the issue that haunted the emperors. This was the issue that will be haunting Stalin thirty years later, with then royal family long dead. His final solution will be liquidating peasants as a social class. In 1905, it was just the beginning.

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Economic historian Sheila Fitzpatrick wisely argued that the Russian Revolution should be bookended by the early 1930s. For people in the cities, intellectuals, poets, factory workers, army officers, soldiers, merchants – everyone but peasants – the revolution changed everything in 1917. For them, the upheaval that started in 1905 culminated that year. For peasants, the overwhelming majority of the population, the cataclysmic change came home in the late 1920s. Their lives were less upended by the dramatic changes in state institutions in 1917-1922 than by Stalin's reforms of agriculture of 1929. Hundreds of thousands were arrested, stripped of property, and sent to concentration camps in Siberia. Millions perished in the great famine caused by the ill-conceived reform. Tens of millions relocated to cities to feed the insatiable demand of industrialization for labor. That was their revolution.

As in the French Revolution, it was all about who owns the land and who works it. For decades before the Russian Revolution, the system of landownership and taxation had been highly inefficient. Everyone knew that. It did not provide peasants and landowners with incentives to operate the land efficiently and bring in new investment and technological innovations. Other countries – Britain, France, Germany – snatched enormous economic benefits when the improvement of productivity in agriculture freed millions of peasants to join the working class. The industry needed labor, but labor would not be available until the land could produce the same harvest with fewer hands.

Substantive reforms were eluding the tsars. Moreover, the land ownership issue haunted political reforms. In a country where more than 80 percent of the population were peasants, any electoral system that would have given them real political representation would have led to land redistribution from the tiny minority of owners to the peasant majority.

Starting in 1905 and up until his last day as the sovereign of Russia in March 1917, Emperor Nicholas II went through rounds of reforms, which were pushed forward, then abandoned, then resuscitated or attempted anew. Just as Louis XVI in the early days of the French Revolution, Nicholas II shared power only to take it back, demonstrating that the power sharing was not power sharing at all.

After the upheaval of 1905, the tsar twice announced elections and twice had to dissolve the elected parliament. The first lasted for only 73 days, the second – for 103. It was the third attempt that created a parliament that lasted, as planned, for the full term of five years. But it required a special voting system that restricted voting rights of peasants, the overwhelming majority, and gave a lot of say to the tiny minority of landowners. Preserving concentrated land ownership made a representative parliament impossible.

We see the same pattern as in other revolutions. Years passed with the tsar trying to share power with a larger electoral franchise and then taking it back. This was in stark contrast to the gradual extension of the electoral franchise in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In England, the change came via a sequence of reform acts. In institutional terms, it was a way for the elite to peacefully devolve power. It was possible exactly because the British elite, by this time, was not powerful enough to keep power without hurting the economic development. And the elite was massively vested on economic development. Russian tsars had enough police to survive the popular discontent for a while. And the political elite – under the absolutist monarchy it was people with close personal ties to the royal family – were not that interested in the development of industry.

The fall of the Romanovs monarchy in March 1917 brought in a provisional government, which was fast to recognize many changes that were already underway. Alas, it was incapable and unwilling to address the land issue. The new government announced full amnesty on all political issues, freedom of the press, unions, and assemblies. It abolished all hereditary, religious, or ethnic class restrictions. Larger reforms were left until after the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the first-ever elections on the basis of a universal, equal, secret, and direct vote.

Meanwhile, peasants were not waiting for reforms to be approved by any government. They started to expropriate and redistribute among themselves the land from the tsar, the state, the church, the nobility, and other major landlords. Those who opposed expropriation were killed by the mob.

The provisional government did not oppose these developments. Its policies towards establishing rural self-government and replacement of the police with a public militia were providing legal cover to spontaneous expropriations.

When they took power in October 1917, social revolutionaries and communists made it even further: they put “Land to Peasants” on their banner. They desperately needed support from the mass of demobilized soldiers – that is, former peasants whose main demand was to end the war so that they could return back to their cows and ploughs. Promising peace and land were by far the best strategy to get their support. Fighting against the White Guard, volunteer troops of former imperial officers, the peasant soldiers of the Soviet government fought for the land their families worked on – against those whose families owned this land.

Victors of the civil war got the land they craved for a truly fleeting time. With peasants being the majority of the population, Lenin and Stalin faced the exact same problem as the tsar before the Revolution. If peasants had the right to vote, they would vote for private ownership of the land they were working on. With the majority of the population being peasants, democratic elections would have given them the political power to get what they wanted. Even without perfect democratic institutions, the sheer size of the peasant mass would make them a dominant political power – if the system was set to take their interests into account. Stalin’s system was not going to let them have voice: it was set to extract as much of the peasant surplus as possible. If peasantry ceases to exist as a result, so be it.

The process of surplus extraction was brutal. The officials, local activists and armed workers were sent from cities to the countryside to assist with collectivization. The task was to single out those who did not want to join a collective farm. Naturally, the rich peasants – more skillful, productive, and entrepreneurial than the average villager – were the core of the opposition. Hundreds of thousands of peasant families had to be arrested and deported to Siberia and Northern Russia, where scores of them died because of the harsh conditions.

In the vast agricultural lands of what is now Ukraine, collectivization caused a famine, the worst-ever in the European continent, in which about seven million Ukrainians and Russians perished in 1932-33. In many respects, Soviet agriculture has never recovered.

Six decades later, some pre-collectivization production numbers in agriculture were yet to be reached. If he lived in 1934, Karl Marx would say that Russian peasants ceased to exist as a class. At an enormous cost, Stalin set up the new extractive institutions. The revolution was over.

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As an exercise in building inclusive institutions, the “Bolshevik Experiment” turned out to be a catastrophic failure with an enormous economic and human toll. The country ended up with a set of institutions vastly different, but even more extractive.

The old elite was gone, and the new elite has truly little to do with the old elite. Literally, these were quite different people. Sons of peasants and cobblers, teachers and small tradesmen became cabinet ministers and party secretaries. Corporals and sergeants of the imperial army became generals and marshals. There was the new academic elite and the new cultural elite. Yet the power, once consolidated under the new regime, served the elite and some privileged social groups, not the people.

Political participation, limited under tsars, become even more limited under Stalin and his successors. But between the collapse of the Romanov empire and the consolidation of the Stalin dictatorship, there was a decade when revolution unleashed powerful forces.

This was the time when Westerners visiting Russia came back with the eyes wide-open. “I have seen the future, and it works”, – wrote Lincoln Steffens, an American journalist, a prominent muckraker whose reporting exposed government corruption in the United States. He visited Soviet Russia in 1919, the third year of the revolution.

Taking power, Bolsheviks quickly nationalized big business. First, as a matter of a military necessity. Owners of factories did not support the revolution, and the new state needed to ramp up production fast. It looked like a temporary measure, a war-time patch. Then, it became a first step towards a socialist utopia, in which the workers themselves own means of production. Of course, as managers of the factories that on paper belonged to them, workers needed to be represented by their vanguard, professional revolutionaries.

In normal circumstances, nationalizing business does not help to spur economic growth. In the unique circumstances of the Russian revolution, it helped. The collapse of production during the world war and then the civil war resulted in a low starting point. It is easy to grow fast when the capital stock is destroyed, but the labor is abundant. After a lost decade of misery and devastation, industry was ready to grow. Peasants escaping the rural areas made an eager workforce. Later, in the 1930s, peasants will be driven to the cities by Stalin troops sent to collectivize their farms and the great famine, a result of the collectivization. Stalin's urbanization was an escape from the death trap. But in the 1920s, this was an allure of the big city – as much as it was happening in any country.

The revolution destroyed a lot of productive capital. The government was ready to invest at a scale that was impossible for private investors at the time. Russia was not exactly an industrial backwater under tsars. For decades before the revolution, it was rapidly catching up. Even in the years of turmoil, with universities besieged by politicized protesters and suffering from the government crackdowns, they kept producing first-rate engineers. The educated class perished during the revolution; the lucky ones emigrated. Yet there were millions of young people who had no chance to get an education in the Empire; the revolution gave them the chance they had never had before.

To compensate for the lack of human capital and technological backwardness, the government lured engineers and managers from abroad. Best foreign technology and expertise requested pay in hard currency. The Bolsheviks were ready to pay – even if it needed to sell paintings from the nationalized art collections and state museums. Ford Motor Company, the pioneering American car maker, built an automobile factory in Nizhny Novgorod. Albert Kahn, a leading American industrial architect of the time, helped design and build hundreds of Soviet factories. General Electric and a group of renowned American dam engineers built Dneproges, one of the largest hydroelectric projects ever, a centerpiece of the giant Soviet electrification project. Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works, based on the design of U.S. Steel's plant in Gary, Indiana, employed dozens of American engineers at the launch.

These were the years when the Russian Revolution fascinated economists around the world. They were ready to overlook evidence of repression making the life of Soviet citizens a living nightmare. They would not notice reports – scarce, but not non-existent

– about the terrible famine in Soviet Ukraine and Kazakhstan that claimed millions of lives. The growth of Soviet industrial production was too impressive to pay attention to anything else. For those who believed in the power of the state to lead economic development, these numbers validated everything.

As it turned out many years later, the numbers were not actually that impressive. The rapid expansion of industry was merely a result of an exceptionally low starting point, the post-revolution slump. Averaged across the decades, the Stalin's growth rates were on par with the long-run trend from the times of the tsars. The quality of living has never caught up with Europe, even if the risk of violent death, abnormally high by the standards of the tumultuous era, is taken out of the equation. Rapid urbanization under Stalin has not contributed as much to productivity and growth as it did in Britain a century before or will do in Japan decades later. The new set of extractive institutions was built at an enormous cost.

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American philosopher and educator John Dewey, visiting the USSR in 1928, reported in his travel diary, published a year later, that the Russian revolution involves “a release of human powers on such an unprecedented scale that it is of incalculable significance not only for this country, but for the world”.

Dewey came to Moscow on the invitation of the new government. His educational philosophy appealed to the revolutionary reformers. They wanted a new curriculum that would comply with the new ideology. But they also needed far more than that. They faced the necessity to educate tens of millions of people more than before the revolution. Revolution removed the many barriers that blocked access to education for the overwhelming majority of the population. Now, this education has to be provided.

The old regime had some mass educational programs, but the increase of mass education under the revolutionary regime was profound. The grand idea was to transform education into a tool for socialist construction. Ideologically, it was fueled by the revolutionary desire to change the world, a great animating force. The reforms were as much about political indoctrination and social engineering as they were about literacy and knowledge. A revolutionary dictatorship was a potent tool to execute such reforms.

For all its grandiose ideological fervor, the reforms in education were real. In 1919, with the civil war still raging, the Bolsheviks launched the campaign for “elimination of illiteracy”. The declared goal was that all citizens aged 8 to 50 must learn to read and write. It was a catch-up goal – leaders of the economic development in the West have already achieved the targeted levels of literacy decades before. Mass mobilization followed: literacy centers, mobile reading rooms, and volunteer instructors spread across cities and villages. Before the revolution, the Empire’s education was world-class, but for a tiny slice of the population. Now former students and blue-collar workers volunteered to liquidate mass illiteracy.

The old tsarist system of elite schools and church-run charities was replaced by a polytechnic model, in which academic classes were intertwined with manual labor and vocational training. The emphasis was on collectivist values, practical skills, and equal access. The curriculum at these schools was heavily influenced by progressive pedagogical theories, particularly those of John Dewey, whom early Soviet reformers admired.

A special effort was to improve literacy in formerly marginalized groups, especially women, non-Russian ethnic minorities, and peasants. In total, these groups comprised more than 90 percent of the population. For women, it was a part of a tidal wave of changes brought by the Russian Revolution. In the chapter on leaders, we will talk about Aleksandra Kollontai, the minister of social welfare in the first revolutionary cabinet, the first female cabinet member in history. Efforts to engage women in education would not be possible without drastic changes in the institutions governing workplace, household, and family life. The revolution changed those.

Eventually, a lot of freedoms that women got after the revolution will be taken back. A lot of legislation providing equal rights will be scaled down or abandoned altogether. But for now, the new government has moved full steam ahead. Fueled by the utopian hopes of creating new citizens for the new world, the push for mass literacy and universal education succeeded. It has become one of the Russian Revolution’s lasting achievements.

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In the country’s top universities, the revolutionary changes cut both ways. Universities lost their self-governing powers. The faculty ranks were purged to eliminate

professors who belong to nobility, by service or by pedigree. Famed researchers and teachers lost their jobs because of their wrong social origins. Many eventually emigrated or were forced into exile. Of those who remained many were arrested and perished in times of repression. Social sciences were hit so hard that they never recovered in the Soviet time. Seventy years later, after the collapse of the USSR, they had to be built anew.

Again and again, the fate of education and science is similar in different revolutions. During the French Revolution, the greatest scientific minds of the time, such as preeminent chemist Lavoisier, were dispatched to guillotine for merely saying something wrong in the past or just being a member of a wrong group at a wrong time. Marquise de Condorcet, whose mathematical work paved way for the modern analysis of how parliaments and committees vote, died in prison expecting an imminent execution in the heydays of terror.

And at the same time, it was a time of bold experimentation. They changed the calendar – both in the French Revolution and the Russian one. They changed metric systems. The Committee for Public Safety, the bloody executioners in France, were simultaneously attempting to use scientists systematically and on a scale as never before. During its rule that lasted less than a year, the Committee tried to promote potato cropping and advocated turning vineyards into wheat fields. It taught workers new methods to process steel and encouraged replacing wood with coal.

This was not an ideological choice, to value the men of science. The reason why new people were called by a new government was that the old state hierarchy has collapsed. Those who advised the ancient regime were killed, exiled, or forced into hiding.

In the Soviet Union, instead of purged professionals, administrative positions were increasingly filled by communist party appointees. In teaching positions, people with a working-class pedigree were preferred, even if their academic resume was slim.

The new curriculum was updated according to the new ideological priorities. Classical disciplines such as law, theology, and philosophy, were deemphasized or eliminated. In their place came Marxist-Leninist political theory and economics from a socialist perspective. The overarching goal was to replace “bourgeois” knowledge with proletarian science.

The traditional university structure was broken up. Some universities were split into smaller, specialized institutes. This allowed the state to directly control curriculum and admissions and align higher education with the needs of the nationalized industry. There appeared separate institutes for medicine, engineering, teacher training, etc. The country needed far more doctors, engineers, and teachers, and it needed them fast. With the authoritarian government operating on an emergency basis, it has always taken the most direct route. If a person, an institute, or a tradition stood in its way, it had to be swiftly and ruthlessly removed.

On the other hand, access to top universities increased dramatically. First, the Bolsheviks abolished entrance exams and degree prerequisites in order to allow workers and peasants access to higher education. Class origin, not academic merit, was prioritized in admissions policy. This was not sufficient: to really improve access, potential students have to get additional years of schooling. The government created special evening faculties for workers, preparatory institutions that helped the working-class youth to enter universities.

As with elimination of illiteracy, centralized, determined, and ruthless policy bore fruit. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people from the working class and peasant families entered reformed universities and newly created specialized institutes. All four of my grandparents came to Moscow, the university capital of the Soviet Union, to become the first post-revolutionary generation to get higher education. Three of them entered a newly created college that prepared economists to work for the government: a daughter of a soldier-turned-train conductor and an illiterate peasant from a small village in central Russia, a son of two Jewish peasants from what is now Belarus, and a son of a former sailor from a small town in Siberia. The fourth, a daughter of a lay medical practitioner, entered medical school.

Their life stories were typical. The Russian Revolution, the civil war, and the political repression wiped out the old academia. The scientific world lost many brilliant minds. At the same time, the Revolution resulted in a gigantic influx of students from families that would never have had a chance to send their kids to college under the old regime. In a decade, this tidal wave will produce new stars in many academic fields, the golden generation of Soviet science.

Revolutions open doors. Their impact is profound because they force open doors that had long been sealed. The more tightly the doors were shut, the more transformative the outcome.

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The Russian Revolution transformed not only technology and business. It unleashed one of the most dramatic cultural upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It upended the cultural order, challenging centuries of imperial tradition and giving rise to radical artistic, intellectual, and ideological experimentation.

The early years of revolution saw a flourishing of experimental art. The new regime, seeking to break with the past, was tolerant or even supportive. It has already helped by destroying the old hierarchy. Constructivism, suprematism, and futurism flourished. To promote revolutionary causes, artists created bold, abstract works emphasizing geometry, materiality, and utopia. Art was seen as a tool for revolution, meant to serve the people and promote collective ideals, not individual expression. “Art must not be a mirror held up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it,” – said the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

There was more than just letting all flowers bloom. The new government aimed to create a new, independent proletarian culture, untainted by bourgeois traditions. The idea was to empower workers and peasants as creators, not just consumers, of culture.

The new theater became a vehicle for political education and agitation. It experimented with biomechanics, non-realistic staging, and the rejection of the proscenium arch. The emphasis on collective action over individual psychology helped redefine ensemble performance and the role of the actor in modern drama. A performance was meant to be an exercise in social engineering, not just entertainment. It paved the way for politically engaged theater and the agitprop movements worldwide.

The 1920s launched the golden age of Soviet cinema. Movies were seen as an important vehicle of promoting the new ideology as they were easily accessible to the largely illiterate population. Film directors like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov developed revolutionary montage techniques that profoundly influenced the movie industry around the world.

The impact of the Russian Revolution in arts was global. Movements like Constructivism and Suprematism redefined form, space, and function in art. Their emphasis on abstraction and industrial materials laid the foundations for Bauhaus in Germany, De Stijl in the Netherlands, and much of modernist architecture and graphic design in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Soviet propaganda posters, with their bold colors, diagonal lines, and dynamic typography, became templates for political art everywhere—from anti-fascist designs in Europe to revolutionary posters in Cuba and China.

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The cultural upheaval was not caused by the revolution. In fact, it might have preceded it. Kazimir Malevich launched the Suprematism movement, exhibiting his celebrated *Black Square* painting at *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10* in Petrograd, in December 1915, two years before the revolution. In the Suprematist Manifesto, Malevich said the painter must focus only on form in a “desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world”. An eager follower of Fauvism and Cubism, the newly fashionable art movements in Europe, the objective world that surrounded Malevich – the one that he was trying to escape – was the Empire in pre-revolutionary upheaval. Perhaps the artist felt the urgent need for drastic changes earlier than the tsar and his court ministers.

Artists in the Russian Empire were making the world revolution before the political revolutionaries. Natalia Goncharova and her life-long partner Mikhail Larionov, influenced by Cubo-Futurism, invented Rayonism, the first abstract art in Russia. Larionov was the founder of two important artistic groups *Jack of Diamonds* and the more radical *Donkey's Tail*. The names of groups speak for themselves. In the Empire that prided itself on pompous officialdom and orthodox, traditional culture, Goncharova and Larionov worked hard to be different. They painted hieroglyphics and flowers on their faces and walked through the streets. Goncharova appeared topless in public with symbols on her chest as part of her manifesto “Why We Paint Our Faces”. It was as much a challenge to the state censorship as to the artistic tradition of the day. It was a revolution in the making.

The Revolution fascinated artists when it was coming, excited when it came, and then scared them. Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneer of abstract art, was briefly enchanted with the revolution. Already an artist of considerable international fame, he came to Moscow from abroad to set up institutes for aspiring painters and art museums. He was even involved in administration, becoming the first director of the newly created Institute of Artistic Culture. However, his mystical and spiritual approach to abstraction clashed with the Bolshevik demand for materialist, utilitarian art. By 1921, disillusioned, he left for Germany and for even larger world fame.

Another giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marc Chagall, also born on the periphery of the Russian Empire, returned to the country after the Revolution as well. He even became Commissar of Art in his native town of Vitebsk. He thought he was participating in the revolution, because initially everyone was welcome to participate. As with Kandinsky, his folkloric style, deeply rooted in Jewish traditions, was soon out of step with the political vision that dominated the Moscow scene. He emigrated in 1922, leaving behind revolutionary Russia and its already narrowing cultural space.

The spur of creative energy unleashed by the Russian Revolution is a typical feature of revolutions. The Mexican Revolution, concurrent with the Russian Revolution – the violent upheaval took a decade, 1910–1920 – similarly reshaped the nation’s art and culture. As the impact of the Russian Revolution, the impact of the Mexican revolution in arts was global as well.

At the forefront was the Mexican muralist movement, led by artists such as Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros, who painted vast public murals celebrating indigenous heritage, peasant struggle, and revolutionary ideals. Focusing on smaller, more private, formats, Frida Kahlo mixed the revolutionary motives – anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal – with traditional folk motives to create visions of new magic reality.

The work of muralist movement transformed the walls of public buildings into instruments of social education and political messaging. It got a lot of attention because of its artistic success in the United States, but it started in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. In the arts, revolutions in other countries followed the same cycle: an

outburst of creative activity when the old institutions fall, a slowdown when the new power consolidates.

In the USSR, as Stalin consolidated power by the end of 1920s, cultural freedom narrowed sharply. All attempts to make masses the creators of culture rather than passive consumers were ultimately curtailed. Masses were to be led, not lead themselves. Avant-garde experimentation was suppressed; many artists, writers, and intellectuals were silenced, imprisoned, or executed. The many “-isms” of the revolution were replaced by one, the socialist realism. Art had to be optimistic, heroic, and ideologically pure. With the new set of oppressive, extractive state institutions, the culture had to play the same role as it had under the old regime. Serve the ruling elite. As in any other walks of life, the Russian Revolution was now over.

### *The Life of Pu Yi*

On October 17, 1967, an old man died in a Beijing hospital, being treated for complications arising from kidney cancer. For the last four years, he has been working as an editor in the literary department of the government agency charged with producing political advice and expertise. Slight and sad-eyed, Pu Yi was described as humble and kind, yet clumsy and having troubles with performing even the basic tasks. He would always be the last person to board a bus on his way to work. He was survived by his wife of four years, but no kids. Nevertheless, Pu Yi got his obituary published in the *New York Times* two days later.

Pu Yi was, as the *New York Times* obituary had it, “as colorless as unfortunate”, a historical leftover, yet his life story could be used to tell the tumultuous story of the Chinese Revolution. Dying as an ordinary citizen of communist China, sixty years before that Pu Yi was born as the China’s last emperor. He ascended to the Dragon Throne at the age of two in 1908, and was forced to abdicate, ending the 300-hundred-year reign of the Qing dynasty, at the age of five in 1911.

The new socialist government treated the imperial family well: the former emperor was allowed to live in the Imperial Palace with his tutors. When he was eleven, a local warlord who got temporarily the upper hand in the civil war that broke out in China,

restored him to the imperial throne, but the restoration did not last two weeks. In 1924, at the age of eighteen, Pu Yi was expelled from the Forbidden City and spent the next eight years trading support of one warlord for another. Each of them promised to restore him on the Dragon Throne, and each was happy to use the former emperor's money and connections for their own goals. Finally, he became a prisoner of the Japanese who, along with other world powers, took active part in the Chinese civil war.

The Japanese made Pu Yi the emperor of the newly established state of Manchukuo. He believed he will be back on the Dragon Throne once China is united again under the Japanese control.

Manchukuo was a puppet state, and the emperor of Manchukuo was an emperor in the name only, yet at least he had now an imperial court to run. Wives and concubines, intrigues and gossip, all this stuff. He did not care that each year about a million Chinese were taken to work as slaves in Manchukuo mines and factories. He did not pay much attention to nationalists' fight with communists for the parts of China that were not controlled by Japan. When the communist defeated nationalists in the last round of the civil war, Pu Yi was first a prisoner of the Soviets, spending several years in Siberia. At the war crimes trial in Tokyo in 1946 he testified that, as the emperor of Manchukuo, he has never been more than a puppet of his Japanese masters.

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It is not a thankful task – to sum up the history of China, which spans thousands of years, into a couple of pages. Yet if it is done, it is necessarily a history of the imperial state. And for most of its state history, China's emperors were too strong. The Qing dynasty, like those before it, ruled with absolute authority. There was a bureaucracy selected by merit from the ranks of educated gentry. The task of the bureaucracy was to extract grain and ensure loyalty, not to spur innovation or encourage citizens' participation in the government. Everything about the imperial court was about exclusion. For centuries, it was one of the most centralized states in the world. But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that strength became fragility.

As Europe innovated, industrialized, and expanded, China stagnated. The stagnation was not merely the absence of technological progress in production. It was permeating all

spheres of life. Living conditions were not improving, land was bringing the same amount of grain a year after a year, schools and colleges taught the same classes again and again. There was nothing in the structure of the government that might have resulted in much-needed reforms. Internal rebellions—like the catastrophic Taiping Rebellion in the mid-1800s—exposed deep rot in the Qing institutions. The dynasty responded not with reform but repression. It did not consider significant reforms until it was too late. Even then, in the last days of the empire, the court functioned as if there were another thousand years ahead.

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The adventures of the last emperor of China tell the basic timeline of the Chinese revolution. In 1911, the hundred-year-old Qing dynasty fell. The alliance of socialist intellectuals and educated military that toppled the dynasty was unable to establish control over the country. For the next two decades the country has been divided into the domains of local warlords. Foreign powers had their own zones of control. By mid-1930s, one of the foreign powers, Japan, has emerged as a dominant force, with warlords, both big and small, side-lined. That was the time when the former Qing emperor and the future citizen Pu Yi was called the emperor of Manchukuo. After Japan's defeat in World War II, there was a new civil war until 1949, in which the communists, the late comers to the revolution, forced the formerly national government out of mainland China.

The civil wars, warlords' domination, and Japan's control over the heartland in mid-1930s are the reason to treat the Chinese revolution, which took nearly half a century, as a single event. Some scholars argue that the Chinese revolution should be considered as two different revolutions. The one that started in 1911 destroyed the old imperial regime. The second one, 1945-49, established communist supremacy in the mainland.

The “two revolutions” approach is attractive since the individuals making the two revolutions were different. Very few of the protagonists of the 1911 upheaval were playing a crucial role thirty years later. Those who were at the top in the initial stages were the losers of the last civil war. In contrast, the leaders of communist China in 1949, the ultimate winners, were minors back in 1911. Not only were the leaders different, the social

and economic forces that drove the fall of the monarchy in 1911 and helped communists to consolidate power in 1949 were different.

Still, it makes sense to consider the Chinese revolution as a single, though long, historical event. The reason is that any revolution should be bookended by two periods of social and political stability. In China, there have been no such period between 1911 and 1949. And the fact that the ultimate winners were not among those who started revolutions should surprise no one. We already saw, discussing other revolutions, that the early revolutionary leaders could be hugely different from those who emerge as the ultimate victors. In the chapter on revolutionary leaders, we will see more examples of this.

In three great revolutions, French, Chinese, and Russian, the conflict over the land ownership was a major catalyst. In France, the land that belonged to clergy before the revolution was confiscated and sold at public auctions. This was the last forced land expropriation in the country's history. In Russia, peasants got the land from large landowners immediately after the revolution. In a few years, they faced draconian taxes levied by the emerging communist state. In a decade, they were stripped of the land, which became the property of the state.

The China's land ownership history was only slightly different from Russian. In 1950-52, a year after the communists took control, there was a massive land reform. Owners of large estates were publicly humiliated, then executed. Peasants, the majority of the Chinese population at the time, received their land, but were, almost immediately, forced into large "people's communes".

Both in Russia and in China the collective farms provided the worst kind of incentives for peasants. Not able to provide peasants with incentives to produce more, the authorities focused on extracting the product. The peasants were supposed to be left with a bare minimum of their own product, just sufficient for their survival. Those responsible for extraction cared more about getting more than guaranteeing that peasants are left with enough food to feed their families. Not surprisingly, both countries experienced devastating famines under the communist rule.

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A non-standard feature of the Chinese Revolution is that it was genuinely a war of independence. The name, War of Independence, is well-associated with the American Revolution. The Chinese one has never been trumpeted as such. Although actually it was. Over the long four decades of the revolution, independence from foreign countries has been a major goal for those who competed for power. In the later stages, during the Second World War, it was, literally, a fight against Japanese occupiers who controlled a large part of mainland China.

The desire to be independent was even more important fifty years before that, at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The country was entering the new century bound by so many treaties with foreign powers that China was not a colony in the name only. The government did not control most important ports or set import tariffs and duties – foreign governments did. The Chinese law did not apply to foreigners and their businesses – they were protected by extra-territoriality clauses. The Chinese government was forced to grant concessions, direct rule over colonial settlements, and rights to operate railroads, to Germany, Russia, France, and Britain, all major imperial powers of the day.

Unlike the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution was, among other things, a war of national liberation. Like the Russian Revolution, it ended up replacing one set of extractive institutions by another one. The communist regime set up under Mao had a very different elite – though China has never had targeted elite purges on the Stalin's scale, the Mao's elite was totally new.

As new were political institutions. Instead of pre-revolutionary imperial court, the chaos of civil war warlordism, and Japanese occupation administration, the iron fist of the Communist Party of China was the central element of the political system. The new institutions were exclusionary: they protected power, and with power, the rents of the new elite. Surprisingly, this set of institutions will prove both durable and adaptable. As long as Mao Zedong, the charismatic leader of the Chinese Revolution, was alive, real reforms were impossible. But when he died, the situation changed.

## Chapter 5

### THE ETERNAL DESIRE TO BE FREE & INDEPENDENT

The French Revolution captured the public imagination for centuries. When Alexis de Tocqueville published his history of the French Revolution in 1856, the title of his book was “The Old Regime and the Revolution”. The word “revolution” did not require a country name. The French Revolution was simply “the revolution.” In the United States, the word “revolution” was used for the American one as well, yet it was not in the same league as a historical event. The Russian Revolution was perhaps the first revolution that would compete with the French one on the world scale. Neither the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century upheavals in central Europe, nor the independence wars in Latin America that toppled pretty archaic regimes had had such an impact.

By the time the Russian imperial regime has fallen, the Chinese Revolution was well underway, but for the Eurocentric historiography that was a peripheral development. Eventually, it ended with the Mao’s communists taking over in 1949. The end of the Chinese Revolution coincided – in fact, was a part to – the end of the largest upheaval of the modern era, the decades that spanned two world wars, an influenza pandemic, and the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe. In Europe, the next half a century was a period that witnessed some disturbances, but no major regime changes. Yet around the world – in the Middle East, in Africa, in Asia – the time of revolutions has just started.

A revolution in a small country is very much like a revolution in a big one. There is an old regime with institutions that extract rents from the many to benefit the few. There is a growing need for change as more and more people are less and less satisfied with the ways things go. There are more and more foregone opportunities for producers and traders, more and more profits are unmade. For the elite, it is more and more difficult to keep extracting the surplus produced in old ways. And then there are political institutions that prevent the required changes. For every reform, there is an entrenched special interest that blocks it. For every proposed change, the opponents are organized faster and better than the proponents. The status quo is protected. So, the tensions keep growing until the system breaks down and a revolution starts.

## *Revolutions Spread Like Fire*

Revolutions come in waves. Sometimes, these waves have a common origin. This is, in effect, the same tidal wave, coming from the same source, which drowns old regimes across a continent. World War II was won by the Allies, and Great Britain played a critical role in fighting Nazis. It stood alone against Hitler in 1940; its troops reached Berlin in 1945 alongside with the Americans and the Soviets. At the same time, it was not the same country that was there in 1939, when the great war started.

Back then, it was the British Empire, the vast collection of dominions, protectorates, and territories on which the sun never set. The war changed that. By its conclusion in 1945, the British still ruled over 700 million people outside of the British Islands, yet the Empire was unraveling. In 1947, Indian colonies, the crown jewels of the empire, became independent. In twenty years, only 5 million British imperial subjects lived outside the United Kingdom, with 3 million of them living in Hong Kong.

If the empire that was on the winning side of the world war started its sharp decline, it should be no surprise that the Axes who lost the war lost their colonies as well. Japan lost its vast colonies in mainland Asia. Italy lost its African colonies. Germany of course had nothing to lose after World War II. Its colonies were lost back in 1914, after World War I.

The old empires were not the main drivers of their own demise. It was the people of imperial colonies that were no longer content with living under a colonial yoke. It was, in the words of Jack Kennedy, a young American senator at the time, their “eternal desire to be free and independent”. World War II unmade empires and synchronized revolutions of independence.

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The velvet revolutions of 1989-1991 were similar. After World War II ended, the triumphant Soviet Union took control of Eastern Europe. Though some border adjustments were made via negotiations with the United States and Great Britain, the sphere of the Soviet influence was basically defined by where Stalin’s tanks stopped in 1945. In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, the governments were formed of the local communists. These countries have not become USSR’s colonies, yet in each of them,

the government would not survive without the presence of the Soviet regular army and political police.

Time and again, whenever people in these countries tried to alter the course chosen by their communist government, the USSR had to use force to keep the government in line. In Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, it meant literally to send Soviet tanks and soldiers into their territories. In Poland in 1981, it was the threat to use the Soviet force that made the national government crack down on dissent and impose military rule. In any case, each of the countries dominated by the Soviet Union had a political regime that was not chosen by its people. The reliance on Soviet military support made each of these regimes resistant to changes. Then, suddenly, the military support was withdrawn.

To peacefully withdraw the Soviet military, the foundation on which the communist regimes across Eastern Europe stood, was a conscious decision by the USSR leadership. Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist Soviet leader, saw it as a just thing to do – to let the nations determine their own fate. Also, it was his bargaining chip in the big geopolitical game. Withdrawing Soviet troops from East Germany and elsewhere opened up the possibilities of international cooperation with the West. The move was vastly popular around the world. At home, it left the sour taste in those who believed in Russia's imperial glory.

The domestic opposition was a problem for Gorbachev as he really needed to withdraw troops from abroad. The basic, real cause of withdrawal was the economic catastrophe the Soviet Union was facing. It was no longer affordable to maintain occupation forces in Eastern Europe and subsidize the pliable regimes with cheap energy. It was no longer affordable to spend so much on military production and keep such a share of the population in the army. Maybe the Soviet people still wanted to keep their empire, yet they could no longer afford it.

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The fact that revolutions spread like fire does not necessarily mean that a revolution in one country literally causes a revolution in another. It most probably does not.

The Arab Spring, a series of popular uprisings in 2011-12 toppled the leaders in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, caused civil wars in Libya and Syria, and shook governments in other Arab countries. The chain of events started on December 17, 2010, with a self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, who set himself on fire protesting against harassment by the local officials. By mid-January, the Tunisian government has fallen after weeks of uninterrupted protests. In two months, Hosni Mubarak stepped down as the president of Egypt after three decades of uncontested rule.

### *The Failed Revolution*

When great empires collapse, it is revolution time in both the metropole and colonies. Sometimes a revolution in the periphery does not shatter the order in the metropole. The American Revolution is an example. A whole new order was set in the former colony, while the British Empire itself proceeded unchanged. Sometimes a falling regime in the metropole loosens the grip on the territories that the regime controlled, and former vassals use the opportune moment to set themselves free. When the Soviet communist regime began to collapse in the late 1980s, countries in Eastern Europe toppled their own authoritarian regimes. Without Big Brother's support, the local communist regimes never had a chance to keep people under control. When the support ended, people took the destiny of their nations in their hands and never looked back.

Not every new beginning results in a success. An empire collapses, and a former colony sees an opportunity to become independent, sovereign, and strong. Free people set up new institutions – a constitution, a parliament, a government – and start building their own national state. It is not their fault that the revolution in the former metropole replaces the ancient regime with a very different one, but equally imperial. The new empire is set to restore the former one by force. And, if the revolution made the former metropole stronger, the re-conquest succeeds.

Sometimes people of the former colony fail to launch a new state for no fault of their own. No country exemplifies this tragic story better than Ukraine after the collapse of the Russian Empire. And nobody's story is more telling than that of Stepan Bandera, a leader of a national revolution that did not succeed.

Stepan Bandera was born in 1909 in a land that has been constantly contested by the great European empires. His home village, Staryi Uhryniv, nestled in the rolling hills of Galicia, had recently passed from the Russian Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As borders shifted and great powers clashed, Bandera learned early what it meant to belong to a nation that existed more in the hearts of its people than on state maps.

Bandera's father was a Greek Catholic priest. His mother was busy at home raising Stepan and his seven siblings, three sisters and four brothers. In their modest home, the Bible lay beside books of Ukrainian poetry and stories of national heroes lost to history. For young Stepan, patriotism was personal, as intimate as prayer and as urgent as hunger.

Poland regained its independent after the collapse of the continental empires. The Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, the Austro-Hungarian – a year later, in October 1918. The German Empire followed a month later. Poland, an arena of violent clashes, became independent. It brushed off the Soviet Russia's effort to reconquer it in 1920, and absorbed Western Ukraine, Bandera's home. In independent Poland, just as in the Russian Empire before, Ukrainians were treated as outsiders in their own land.

The injustice stung. Eventually, it fermented into resolve. By his early twenties, Bandera was no longer just reading about revolutionaries. He was set to become one. In the tightly surveilled world of interwar Poland, Ukrainian language and identity were often repressed. Poland regained its independence after two hundred years of brutal suppression and valiant struggle for freedom. It did not want its own national minorities to bid for their independence. Bandera threw himself into the underground movement.

Ukrainian nationalists were not content with slogans. They relentlessly organized, ran underground networks, orchestrated acts of sabotage, and made plans most would never dare speak aloud. They have already witnessed the collapse of mighty empires and rise of smaller nation states across Europe. Why would not their beloved Ukraine, a nation with a thousand-year history, not be among them?

Some fifteen years before there was a chance of a new beginning. In 1917, with all three big Empires of Europe – German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian – collapsing, Ukrainians sought to restore the old state of Kyivan Kings. To become again a sovereign

nation; to regain its historic place, as Harvard historian Serhii Plokhy put it, of “the gates of Europe”.

Ukraine had everything to make a great state. In 1918, Odesa, Kyiv, and Kharkiv, the three largest cities of the new country, were all among the top ten cities of the Russian Empire by the size of the population. They were even more eminent in arts, culture, science, and education. Gathering in Kyiv, the ancient capital, the nation’s leading intellectuals adopted a progressive constitution. The new government moved forward establishing national institutions.

Any state, even a newly born, needs a police force to keep public order and a national army to defend against external enemies. The Ukrainian government – a succession of different cabinets – was doing all that, but not fast enough. Besieged by local warlords, they made deals with neighboring powers, but that was no help. By 1921, the newly emerged imperial power, communists in Moscow, took over entire Ukraine. Poland carved a small bit with Bandera’s ancestral home.

Knowing that their dream could be fulfilled, Ukrainian nationalists fought against the governments that controlled their divided lands. Committed enemies of the Russian communists, they followed in the Russian revolutionaries’ footsteps, adopting terror as a tactic. In 1934, Bandera was arrested and sentenced to death for organizing the assassination of the Polish interior minister.

His sentence was commuted to life in prison. Poland, even besieged by growing menace of the neighboring Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, did not want to do to its own revolutionaries what the Russian Empire did to theirs.

Behind bars, Bandera was even more dangerous. To his captors, he was an ideologist whose writings furthered the cause of independent Ukraine and outlined the organizational strategy for his followers. To his followers, he was a martyr in waiting.

Bandera’s actions were not born of cold ideology alone. They came from a place of deep personal conviction. To him, Ukrainian liberation was not just a political goal—it was a birthright denied. At the same time, he saw the connection between the poor economic condition of Ukrainian peasants and them being denied political rights. In the neighboring Soviet Union, millions of Ukrainians died in a terrible famine, which was a

result of the Stalin's policy towards the peasants. The peasants did not have a political voice, sure. Yet even their desperate cries for help were not heard by the government. For Stalin, it was more important that the world does not know that people are dying of hunger in the center of Europe. For Bandera, a sovereign Ukrainian state was also means to take Ukrainians out of poverty. Setting them on the path to prosperity would be next.

World War II cracked the region wide open. Not for nothing, Yale historian Timothy Snyder named his history of this time and place *The Bloodlands*. As Hitler and Stalin carved up Eastern Europe, those who were dreaming of a sovereign Ukrainian state saw an opportunity. Bandera and his comrades-in-arms declared an independent Ukraine in Lviv in 1941, hoping to ride the German invasion of the Soviet Union into sovereignty.

But the Nazis treated inhabitants of Eastern Europe – Czechs, Poles, Russians, Slovaks, Ukrainians – as an inferior race. Nazis did not try to exterminate Slavs in the way they were massacring Jews and Roma on the occupied territories, but they did not consider them able to run their own states either. Nazis arrested Bandera and imprisoned him in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

The lesson was clear: Ukrainians are on their own. Bandera emerged from the concentration camp with his vision intact, even harder than before. While he was incarcerated, his supporters formed the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), fighting both Nazis and the Soviets in what they believed was a war for national salvation.

The struggle was brutal. Under the unrelenting assault of the Red Army, the withdrawing Germans left vast territories unprotected. The advancing Soviets had not established control yet. Until today, ethnic cleansing campaigns, especially against Poles in Volhynia, cast a long shadow over the UPA's legacy. Dozens of thousands of ethnic Poles, most of them women and children, were slaughtered by UPA commandos.

It is here that Bandera becomes the most controversial. A hero to some, he is a war criminal to others. He was not a direct participant in the atrocities: he was still in the German concentration camp at the time. Yet the atrocities were committed by the militants who considered Bandera one of their most important leaders. Himself, he has never faced these contradictions in full.

After the war, Bandera lived a restless exile in Southern Germany, always looking over his shoulder. He has been writing extensively on current developments and on perspective of a future Ukrainian national revolution. This a trait of revolutionaries and freedom fighters: they remember the past, but they always look forward. “Do not shed your tears for yesterday do not fear what comes tomorrow, just in a steadfast, measured way plough your furrow - straight and narrow,” wrote Knuts Skujenieks, a national poet of Latvia, another nation tormented by the neighboring empires. Bandera ploughed his furrow.

The Soviet government never forgot him. To stop the underground resistance in Ukraine, a part of the Soviet Union, they needed to exterminate those who fought for Ukraine’s independence, including exiles. In 1959, a Soviet agent poisoned Bandera with cyanide in Munich.

Bandera’s death did not end his influence. If anything, it magnified it. He became a martyr for those who were dreaming about sovereign and independent Ukrainian nation. Ukraine ultimately regained its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet another failed empire. In independent Ukraine, statues were raised in Bandera’s honor. Today, Stepan Bandera Avenue is a large street in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, stretching from a posh neighborhood of Obolon to simpler quarters of Kurenivka.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the neighboring Russia, filled, under Putin, with grievances about the loss of the empire, Bandera was made into a demonic figure of mythical proportion, the central character in the feverish anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

Bandera was a patriot, a fanatic, a freedom fighter, and an ideologist of nationalist terror. As with many revolutionaries, he was all of these things at once. He belonged to a generation that lived between collapsed empires and rising superpowers, who learned that history rewards the ruthless and forgets the peaceful. He wanted a big change for a small nation. His legacy is not easily reconciled. Now, in the world where many still fight to be heard, Bandera’s life reminds us of what happens when people are silent too long—and how explosive their voices can become when finally unleashed. As a revolutionary, he

lost, but he kept the flame of the Ukrainian national movement, which eventually succeeded.

### *The Old Ways of the New Elites*

In their magnum opus *Why Nations Fail*, economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson examined the post-colonial world decades after the independence revolutions kicked away the colonial masters. What they found in country after country, it was not paradise that the revolutionaries promised. New elites rebuilding the extractive institutions of the old elites are a rule, rather than an exception.

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The Haitian Revolution, which began in 1791 and culminated in the declaration of independence in 1804, was amongst the most radical and complete revolutions of its time. However, it was not recognized as such then. In the year 1791, the action was in Paris. It is not surprising that less attention was paid to what was happening in distant colonies. Yet even decades later, when the dust settled in the metropole, the Haitian revolution was not on the intellectuals' radar. Unlike the American and French Revolutions, which were hailed as Enlightenment triumphs, Haiti's uprising was largely ignored, suppressed, or dismissed as a violent slave revolt.

Haitian-born anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot investigated how the unfolding events in the Caribbean colony were interpreted elsewhere. Even for the open-minded prophets of freedom in Europe, events in colonies have always been a colorful collection of individual anecdotes. "Slave A ran away because he was particularly mistreated by his master. Slave B was missing because he was not properly fed. Slave X killed herself in a fatal tantrum..." The leaders of the revolution were denied recognition as such by contemporaries because the people they represented were considered unable of political action. When news of the uprising reached the revolutionary Paris, even the anti-slavery intellectuals did not believe it: the blacks would not be able to get together en masse and organize as a revolutionary force.

The Haitian Revolution was, in fact, a major revolution. Its leaders, former slaves, and free Black generals—challenged not only colonial domination but the very

foundations of the global racial and economic order. It was not recognized as a major revolution not because it did not change much. It did. Its protagonists went directly from plantation slaves to generals, cabinet ministers, and new royalty – a feat impossible in Europe. To acknowledge the Haitian Revolution as legitimate would have required recognizing the political agency of people of color. Haiti was diplomatically isolated for decades. The United States recognized Haitian independence in 1862, almost sixty years after the fact.

What was denied in politics found refuge in art. Over time, the characters of the Haitian Revolution—Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe—have become enduring figures in the fiction, drama, and poetry. From C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins*, which cast Louverture as a revolutionary equal to Robespierre or Washington, to plays by Aimé Césaire and Derek Walcott, these stories have been reimagined not just as historical narratives but as epic meditations on freedom, power, and betrayal. Poets have invoked Dessalines’s fiery proclamations, novelists have traced Christophe’s tragic reign, and dramatists have explored the moral dilemmas of post-revolutionary rule.

In 1936, the innovative director Orson Welles staged the now-legendary all-Black production of *Macbeth* for the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem. Though the play retained Shakespeare’s language, the setting was relocated from medieval Scotland to a mythical, voodoo-inflected Haiti. The “Voodoo Macbeth,” as it came to be known, casted Macbeth as a Haitian general-turned-tyrant, clearly echoing the trajectory of Henry Christophe.

Welles later explained his decision: he saw in Christophe’s story the raw material of a Shakespearean tragedy, a hero of rebellion destroyed by his own will to power. Haiti provided more than an exotic setting. It put a proper historical weight on what unfolded two centuries ago. Christophe’s transformation from slave to soldier to king paralleled Macbeth’s arc in Shakespeare’s play, the journey from a noble warrior to tyrant. And just as Macbeth’s Scotland was steeped in prophecy and fate, so too was Christophe’s Haiti shaped by superstition and war.

The real story of Henry Christophe, a leader of the Haitian Revolution, is no less fascinating than the fictional story of Macbeth. It is a story of a man who rose from enslavement to kingship—only to become a tragic emblem of the trap that haunt countries for centuries. Christophe’s rise and fall reveal a broader truth: failing to build inclusive institutions, revolutions that destroy the old order result in different but equally oppressive hierarchies.

When the Haitian Revolution began in 1791, it was not merely a slave rebellion. It was the collapse of one of the most extractive colonial regimes the world had ever known. Saint-Domingue, the French colony that would become Haiti after the revolution, was built on the backs of African slaves, producing immense wealth for a tiny European elite. The social order was brutally simple: plantation owners extracted sugar, coffee, and indigo from slave labor. They relied on tight control, constant surveillance, and outright terror to make slaves work for them.

Christophe entered this world as property. In the colony, he started to work when he was a child, first as a cabin boy, then as a soldier. Plantations required a lot of soldiers: without brute force, the owners would not be able to force slaves to work. Military experience helped Christophe. He eventually joined the revolutionary forces under Toussaint Louverture, the military genius who outmaneuvered both French and British troops and abolished slavery on the island. Christophe was a quick study: he swiftly rose through the ranks of the revolutionary army.

The question that haunted Haiti’s revolutionaries was not just how to end slavery, but how to replace it. Could the economy, and with it, the society, be rebuilt on institutional foundations where all citizens shared prosperity and political voice? After Louverture was kidnapped by the French, former colonial masters, and died in prison, and after Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another revolutionary leader, declared Haitian independence in 1804, the new nation quickly fractured. Dessalines was assassinated in 1806. The country split into two rival states: in the south, a republic under Alexandre Pétion; in the north, a monarchy under Henry Christophe.

At first, Christophe took the title of President. Five years later, in 1811, he crowned himself *Henri I, the King of Haiti*. In doing so, he created what he believed was a

meritocratic monarchy—modeled loosely on European traditions but built with Caribbean realities in mind. Perhaps Christophe took some inspiration from France, where the ultimate winner of the French Revolution, General Napoleon Bonaparte just crowned himself the Emperor of the French.

The King of Haiti erected palaces like Sans-Souci and the Citadel, established schools, hospitals, and administrative systems, and tried to industrialize the country's north. He wanted to move his nation forward. He also created an elaborate nobility with dukes and counts and even wrote a constitution. For all its naivete, it was a deliberate exercise in institution-building.

The problem was that the economic foundation of Christophe's newly independent state was still forced labor. To keep the plantations running, Christophe effectively reinstated a system of compulsory agricultural work. Although slavery was formally abolished, former slaves were assigned to large plantations and could not freely leave. The military enforced production quotas. The logic was, in Christophe's mind, economic: Haiti needed exports to survive. But this institutional logic was demonstrably extractive. As in colonial times, the tiny elite (now Black instead of White) lived off the sweat of the mass of rural laborers (still Black).

On the surface, Christophe's regime looked like a miracle. While the south under Pétion embraced land redistribution and subsistence agriculture, the north boasted paved roads, a standing army, and tax revenues from exports. Christophe attracted European engineers and physicians. He built the famed Citadel Laferriere, one of the largest fortresses in the Americas, as a deterrent against a feared French invasion. In 1816, he even offered refuge to free African Americans from the United States, anticipating movements like Back-to-Africa by decades.

Beneath the grandeur was everlasting tension. Christophe's meritocracy was riddled with contradictions. Advancement was possible, but only for those loyal to the King. Workers had legal protection, but they could not leave their assigned posts. Those who worked on large plantations were not slaves, but they were not free not to work there. Christophe himself had emerged from the revolutionary army, yet he ruled as an absolute monarch. The king's court was modeled after the French revolutionary model, but the

people no voice. To be fair to Haiti, by that time the French revolutionary model has failed in France as well. It was Emperor Napoleon I's France now.

The contradiction between attempts to institutionalize inclusion and demonstrably exclusionary policy eventually led to Christophe's downfall. His vision of "order and progress" through paternalistic control alienated many and did not last long. In 1820, as the self-proclaimed king became increasingly ill and paranoid, a rebellion broke out among his officers. Realizing that his regime was crumbling and unwilling to be captured or humiliated, Henry Christophe committed suicide. His son and heir were executed by rebels the next day.

The failure of Christophe's kingdom was not inevitable. He was a capable, even visionary leader. He understood that postcolonial nations needed strong institutions to survive in a hostile world. But like many who emerged from revolutionary struggle, he saw discipline, hierarchy, and personal loyalty as the only path to building a strong state. Instead of dismantling extractive institutions, he swiftly rebuilt them in a new form. The plantations survived; only the names of their masters changed.

In the decades to follow, Haiti would continue to struggle with the ghosts of this institutional legacy. Land ownership remained concentrated, governments remained unstable, and elites—whether mulatto, Black, or foreign—dominated the masses. The dream of an inclusive society, born in fire and blood of the revolutionary era, has remained elusive for a very long time.

Henry Christophe's legacy did not die with the bullet he fired into his own head in 1820. Long after the Citadel that he built crumbled into disrepair and his kingdom was absorbed into a reunited Haiti, Christophe remained a haunting figure in global imagination. He was not just another rebel-turned-king. He has become a symbol of tragic ambition, a Black leader whose brilliance has not resulted in what he dreamt for his nation and himself. For artists, playwrights, and filmmakers, Henri Christophe became a mirror through which to explore the paradoxes of power, race, and freedom. For the students of revolutions, it is an example of how great a revolution might be, and yet how unfinished.

## *History Marches Backwards*

On January 16, 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, boarded a plane into exile. Jubilant crowds filled the streets of Tehran. For the outside world, it might look like Iran was undergoing one of the great transformations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a revolution of immense popular participation, a national uprising against autocracy, corruption, and foreign domination. It was a revolution that was hailed as progress by many observers around the world. It was a revolution that was promising to move forward a country which was held back by archaic institutions, corruption, and misgovernance.

Like so many revolutions before and after, the Iranian Revolution ultimately replaced one system of extractive institutions with another. The monarchy fell. The robes of the Shah gave way to the cloaks of the mullahs. The underlying structure of power—centralized, unaccountable, and extractive—remained. In many respects, the ultimate result was a more archaic, primitive, and uncivilized society and a more archaic, more repressive, and less efficient government. The Iranian Revolution, instead of ushering in a new era of inclusive political and economic institutions, entrenched a new form of authoritarianism cloaked in revolutionary language. It has never led to economic prosperity. In fact, the country moved backwards.

We already saw this phenomenon with the Russian Revolution, which replaced one set of extractive institutions with another one, just as extractive. The brief period when the revolution unleashed a mass of creative energy, which took a decade after the collapse of the Russian Empire, was fleetingly brief in Iran. In the Soviet Union, even when Stalin's totalitarian regime had ultimately consolidated, some of the progressive revolutionary reforms survived. In Iran, they have not.

To understand why the 1979 revolution failed to produce inclusive institutions, one must begin with the regime it overthrew. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi ruled over a state that had centralized enormous power in the monarchy through the military, intelligence services, and patronage networks. His large-scale reforms, launched in the 1960s, promised modernization: land reform and industrial development, women's rights and greater citizens' participation in the government. On paper, it resembled the developmental agenda of many nations trying to catch up. Using a similar approach,

countries such as Japan and South Korea have successfully caught up with the West in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in Iran, the reforms were, ultimately, top-down, coercive, and designed to consolidate state power, not to distribute it more widely. They failed to prevent a revolution.

The shah's reforms were real. For the most part of the two decades between 1960 and 1979, the year of the shah's ouster, the Iranian economy was growing fast. Infant mortality went lower, and life expectancy went up. Roads were built all across the country, and the number of cars on the roads more than doubled. The growth was everywhere: electric grid, railroads, water purification plants, irrigation channels, and all kinds of domestic industry were expanding. Growth created more well-paying jobs, increasing living standards in cities, and attracting rural migrants to them.

In the early 1970s, in addition to growing domestic production, the price of oil, the main export, went up. Iranians of all social stripes enjoyed goods imported from the United States, Europe, and Japan. The oil exports benefited primarily the rich elite, but for the time being the poor masses were contented with it – as long as their own prosperity was growing.

As real as Shah's reforms was the American support to Iranian development. Missionaries, schools, and colleges built and run by Americans helped generations of Iranians, especially women, to get education. A publishing house run by a New York non-profit translated English-language authors into Persian and helped the government to produce high-school and college textbooks. After World War II, the USA development programs assisted in building dams, irrigational channels, and water distribution networks in the cities. American engineers were critical in building oil pipelines, telecommunications towers, and other technological projects. American instructors trained and supervised Iranian military and security forces. It is sadly ironic that when the revolution day came, the work of American educators and engineers was forgotten, but the America's involvement with the hated police force was not.

Not for the first time, the American foreign policy helped the ruling elite to prolong its stay in power. Successive US presidents considered the shah a dependable partner. American press and activists increasingly worried about the regime's violations of human

rights, censorship of media, and allegations of torture and secret executions. To no avail. American political leaders were willing to turn a blind eye. They viewed the shah's regime as a bulwark against the coming of another populist regime adopting Marxist ideology and raising anti-American banners. The archaic old regime, corrupt, vainglorious, and inefficient, was familiar and predictable. As late as in 1978, on the verge of the revolution that blew away the shah and his regime, President Carter hosted the Iranian monarch in the White House. Inside Iran, the alliance with the United States bred perception of "foreign domination" and "American imperialism."

In 1973, a war between Egypt and Israel led to the oil producers' embargo. Major Arab oil producers declined to sell oil to the Western countries. The result was a massive increase in world oil prices. Iran benefited from this rise as no other country. It was not a participant of the embargo as the shah government was closely aligned with the US. At the same time, Iran has already become a major oil producer and exporter. And become an exhibit #1 in what was going to be called later "the resource curse". As it turned out, the regime got too much money to survive.

As with many countries plagued with the resource curse, with government coffers filled with windfall oil revenues, the shah did not have to worry about serious reforms. Cabinet positions were filled with technocrats as the government policies grew more sophisticated. But the new elite was as dependent on the autocrat whim as the nobility of the old. Bureaucrats educated in Oxford and Sorbonne were as subservient and pliant as bureaucrats of the previous generations who got their positions because of the blood connection to the royal family. Iran was entering the era of technological progress with an archaic and rigid system of government.

As real as the rise in quality of living was the rise in popular discontent. As with any major revolution, the coalition of those unhappy with the incumbent regime was far broader than those who ultimately took power after the old regime was toppled. In shah's Iran, minorities – national minorities such as Kurds or religious minorities such as Bahai – wanted the end of oppression. Tehran's intellectuals and liberal technocrats wanted protections offered by constitutional democracy. The growing urban middle class wanted a say in determining economic policy. Factory workers and student agitators worshiped a Marxist future, a true socialist state like the USSR or China. On the other side of the

political spectrum, Islamists were as frustrated as socialists with the plight of the poor, still the vast majority of the population. They were as unhappy as liberals with the shah's absolute monarchy. Where liberals wanted elections, Islamic conservatives sought government based on strict religious principles.

In other countries, such a blend of religious zealotry and social progressivism would be impossible. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, they were inseparable. Forugh Farrokhzad, an icon of modernist Iranian poetry, wrote in her famous poem, just a year before her death at the age of 32: "Someone is coming, someone is coming, someone who in his heart is with us, in his breathing is with us, in his voice is with us, someone whose coming can't be stopped and handcuffed and thrown in jail, [...] someone is coming from the sky at Tupkhaneh Square on the night of the fireworks to spread out the table cloth and divide up the bread and pass out the Pepsi and divide up Melli Park and pass out the whooping cough syrup and pass out the slips on registration day and give everybody hospital waiting room numbers and distribute the rubber boots and pass out Fardin movie tickets and give away Sayyed Javad's daughter's dresses and give away whatever doesn't sell and even give us our share."

Delving back into the past, a temporary alliance between religious and secular in a mass movement was not unheard of. In 1688, the Glorious Revolution was driven by emerging industry and trade demanding more inclusive economic institutions and by Protestants fearing an establishment of a strong Catholic monarchy. A century before that the Catholic League of France was simultaneously a vehicle for Catholic domination and a grass-roots movement seeking a more representative government. A Paris merchant or a tavern-keeper in Angers wanted the king to drop his tolerance of protestants and, at the same time, to resort less frequently to arbitrary taxation.

In Iran, the shah's modernization reforms disrupted traditional elites, but instead of creating new inclusive coalitions, they deepened dependency on the monarch. Land reform alienated the clergy and bazaar merchants, while the new state-backed capitalists remained tightly tied to court patronage. Oil wealth has amplified the central state's autonomy. As the oil revenues surged in the 1970s, the state no longer needed to tax its citizens. Therefore, there was no need to be accountable to them. The autocrats of the past, when they needed to tax, granted the right to assembly to citizens so that the elected

parliament could approve new taxes. An autocrat with ample oil reserves did not need to do that.

The government, modernized by shah was, in fact, institutionalizing exclusion. The dissent was silenced through Savak, the feared secret police. On paper, it was tasked to fight Marxist guerillas, which were set to overthrow the government by force. In practice, Savak targeted any dissent against the shah. Political parties were neutered or banned. Elections, where they existed, were farcical. When the regime declared itself on the path to "Great Civilization," it offered no space for ordinary citizens to shape that path. This is why, despite development gains, the shah state was losing legitimacy: it was delivering material progress without increasing participation. Even worse, the regime was becoming more exclusionary.

By the late 1970s, protests erupted not just from the poor but across all sectors of society. Students, clerics, factory workers, and the urban middle class—each with different grievances—coalesced against the Pahlavi regime. Liberals wanted constitutional democracy, Islamists sought religious governance, Marxists envisioned a socialist republic, and nationalists decried imperialism. The ideological heterogeneity made the revolution so powerful. Eventually, it will make it easy to be hijacked by just one militant faction, the hard-core Islamists.

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The revolution succeeded in bringing down the shah, the colorful coalition that overthrew the monarchy failed to transform into a force that would create inclusive institutions. In the critical juncture that followed the shah's departure, institutional paths diverged. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a charismatic cleric, seized the moment. With a disciplined clerical network and a powerful narrative of anti-imperialism, he ultimately outmaneuvered both the secular and the leftist factions.

The 1979 constitution, approved in a national referendum, enshrined elements of republicanism: elections, a parliament, and a president. But layered above these was the office of the Supreme Leader, and a powerful Guardian Council that could veto legislation, disqualify candidates, and interpret Islamic law. In effect, an unelected clerical elite sat

atop the state, able to override decisions of democratic institutions at will. The system was institutionalized autocracy, disguised this time as theocratic democracy.

Once in power, the Islamic Republic quickly dismantled the pluralistic foundations of the revolutionary coalition. Leftist parties were banned, and independent newspapers shut down. The army which stayed neutral during the transition of power was purged. Commanders were replaced by Khomeini loyalists. Secular technocrats who acquired the top government positions in the wake of the revolution were first sidelined, then imprisoned or forced into exile.

Revolutionary courts, lacking any due process, executed thousands accused of opposing the new regime – people from left and right, young and old, women and men, straight and gay, religious and secular, military and civilian. The offense was the disagreement with the regime, whatever the point of disagreement was. The state created a vast parallel structure of power through the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij volunteer militia, and religious foundations that controlled major sectors of the economy.

In the moment of post-revolutionary vulnerability, the neighboring Iraq launched an invasion. Iraq's motives were multiple. On the one hand, it wanted to seize the oilfields in Khuzestan, which would make the already oil-rich Iraq a dominant player on the world scene. On the other hand, the Iraqi leadership saw the Islamic regime in Tehran as a threat to their socialist pan-Arabic ideology. It was a replay of the same story as in other revolutions: neighboring countries attack at the moment when the revolution makes a country vulnerable.

A revolution makes a country's state weaker, but it also makes its army stronger. The French revolutionary army defeated the invading neighbors. The Russian revolutionary army reconquered most of the empire territories lost when the Romanov's monarchy collapsed. The new Iranian government withstood the foreign invasion. If anything, war gave it a chance to consolidate power even faster.

New economic institutions set up by the Islamist regime were extractive. Nationalization of industries aligned well with the revolutionary rhetoric, but control of production and wealth remained highly concentrated in the hands of the new elite. The state-established trusts, ostensibly charitable, functioned as opaque economic

conglomerates answerable only to the Supreme Leader. Political loyalty, not market performance or entrepreneurship, became the key to economic success. Just as under the shah, wealth and power were fused. The only difference was that it was not royal, but religious authority.

This new institutional arrangement proved resilient. The Islamic Republic retained some democratic institutions, but any real opposition has been brutally suppressed. Dissent was redefined as heresy or treason. The state selectively distributed subsidies and jobs to make sure that citizens are dependent on their place in the patronage hierarchy. The Revolutionary Guards, the internal security service, grew into a political-economic powerhouse. The aggressive foreign policy, which proclaimed eradication of Israel an important goal, helped the military to control a lion's share of state expenditures.

The result was a new equilibrium of extractive institutions. The revolution did not open up the political or economic arena to broad participation. It merely transferred control from one elite to another. The ideology changed—from secular modernization to Islamic populism, but the institutional logic remained: centralization of power, restriction of dissent, and monopolization of the economy.

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In many ways, the new regime was more archaic than the old one. Under the modernizing monarchy, Iranian women did not have rights that they already had in developed world. They were not able to vote, for example – no one was. They faced significant discrimination in the workplace. Yet a woman had a right to go shopping, watch a movie, or read poetry in a coffee shop – without asking permission from a man. More fundamental rights were there as well – getting an education, possessing a property, having a job, or being a primary custodian of kids.

The post-revolutionary constitution liberated the woman from these liberties. The preamble of the constitution explicitly said, “women no longer be objects or tools disseminating consumerism and exploitation.” That is, women no longer had freedom to choose what to wear, where to go, or what to watch. The constitution defined a woman's “function” as simply a reproductive unit.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution reveals a painful truth: revolutions do not always lead to inclusive institutions. The mere act of overthrowing a regime does not guarantee a better social contract. In Iran, the opportunity to create an open, pluralistic political system was lost in the early years of the Islamic Republic when power became concentrated in the hands of a single ideological faction. The revolution's popular energy was immense—but energy without institutional design can quickly be redirected or suppressed.

Iran's revolutionaries fought against autocracy, yet many supported the centralization of power once it was framed in religious or anti-Western terms. This opened the door to new forms of domination. Instead of building checks and balances, they constructed a system in which power was sacred and dissent sacrilege even more than under the hated old regime. A revolution took the country backwards.

## Chapter 6

### THE CATASTROPHES THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

June 10 in the year 1688 was otherwise a quiet day in London. There was a commotion at St. James's Palace, the king's residence. James II, the King of Britain, Scotland, and Ireland and his wife Mary, born a princess in the Duchy of Modena in northern Italy, welcomed their baby. None of Queen Mary previous nine pregnancies in five years of her marriage to James resulted in a baby that survived more than few days. Perhaps this one was not supposed to survive as well. Also, it was not what mattered the most.

The newborn baby was a boy, and this made all the difference. If the baby were a girl, the heir to the throne of the British Empire would be the baby's older half-sister, Mary. As the wife of the ruler of the Dutch Republic Wilhelm of Orange, she was Protestant. Now, the newborn James Frances became, automatically, the heir. In due course, he will be named the Duke of Wales, the official title for the crown prince. This will be about one thing about him going as planned. He will live a long life – he died at the age of 78 in the middle of the next century– but he will never get the crown. His birth triggered a chain of events that will result in a change of royal dynasty and, in a far more profound way, change of Britain's political and economic institutions.

In short, the birth of a male heir to a Catholic king meant the perpetuation of the Catholic rule for the foreseeable future. In the predominantly Protestant country, this perspective caused an elite coup that replaced the Catholic king with his Protestant daughter and her husband. In the process, the elites made a deal with the new rulers, effectively moving towards a constitutional monarchy. The enhanced role of the parliament led to establishing the institutional foundations of the Industrial Revolution. In a matter of decades, the revolution made Britain the preeminent force in the world.

As a historical drama, the Glorious Revolution was a minor event. The characters involved, the events that unfolded would not meet a threshold for a BBC television series, not to say for a Shakespearean drama. However, it is considered the prime example of a revolutionary, yet peaceful change with profoundly important long-term consequences.

Historians that pay attention to details would not say that the Glorious Revolution was, in fact, entirely peaceful. Dozens of Englishmen on both sides of the political divide were killed in the skirmishes across the country. Shops that belong to Catholics, the losing side, were looted, and houses of King James' supporters were burnt. The revolution is called Glorious mostly because no royal blood was spilled. It was not accompanied by mass execution of government officials or slaughter of civilians on scale that marked the French and the Russian revolution.

James II, the deposed king, was not a weakling. In fact, it might be that he was too energetic and skillful for his own good. In his four years in power, he has moved fast to stuff the government with his Catholic acolytes and reformed the army to make it a better instrument of royal control.

Steven Pincus, a preeminent scholar of British history at the University of Chicago, calls the 1688 events "the first modern revolution" because it stopped a major reform program that had a chance to put England onto a different path. James' ideal model was the French monarchy, which became absolute under the Sun King Louis XIV. The trigger for the Glorious Revolution might have been the birth of a male heir. But what actually caused it was the king's attempts to choose a different institutional path.

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In the short term, the Glorious Revolution altered the power dynamics between the parliament and the king. In the long run, it changed history. The result of the Glorious Revolution was improved credit for the Crown and inclusive institutions for the markets.

Perhaps the most important result was the end of arbitrary taxation. This was no small feat. Many kings promised not to levy new taxes upon taking the throne. Only a few fulfilled this promise. The Glorious Revolution resulted in making the parliament both influential and inclusive. The king no longer has an army to impose his will on the parliament or ignore it altogether. Regular elections guaranteed that those who were sitting in parliament represented the will of the people. The laws of the land were now applied to all citizens. Anyone could now petition the parliament and the parliament would listen.

Parliament abolished monopolies which were choking development in many industries. Before, the monopoly licenses were issued by the king. They massively benefited the owners (and the crown) at the expense of consumers. The worst thing about monopolies was that they stifled innovation. Inclusive economic institutions facilitate the process of creative destruction: firms that do not innovate are driven out of business by the newcomers that do. A monopoly license granted to a specific firm kills creative destruction. Market entry becomes impossible. By eliminating monopolies, the Glorious Revolution made innovation a profitable business.

The Glorious Revolution led to a massive improvement in the protection of property rights. First and foremost, it restricted the ability of the crown to levy new taxes and change the terms of loans that it obtained. Previous kings were a major risk for property rights. They introduced new taxes without parliament consent and unilaterally changed the terms of loans they took from private banks. Now every investor was reassured that their investment is not going to be expropriated. Capitalists feared less extending credit to the crown as they knew that the crown does not have military force that would protect it from the seizure of the collateral. Financial markets and the banking sector started to expand.

Before 1688, the parliament opposed expenses that would increase the capacity of the state. Afterwards, they no longer feared that the army financed by their taxes would be used against them. The English navy, the most powerful in the world, was now protecting commercial shipment. It had money to build new ships and pay recruits because the parliament easily voted in new expenses – they knew that the money was spent on protecting their interests.

The government protected property rights of inventors by granting patents, that is, property rights for ideas. In other words, it created incentives to innovate. The invention of the steam engine, which eventually transformed transportation, and the spinning frame, a revolution in the textile industry, followed a few decades later. Critically, each of these inventions was, in fact, a multitude of competing inventions by many innovators.

Responding to the citizens' demand, the parliament made an overhaul of archaic laws that governed land ownership and usage. It was now possible to consolidate land, which

in turn resulted in increased productivity in agriculture. The combination of the labor force freed from working in agriculture, improved financial markets and transportation technology, and modernized patent laws provided fertile ground for innovation and growth. All these institutional changes happened peacefully across several decades. The Glorious Revolution created inclusive political institutions that, in turn, made all the needed changes possible without a real revolution.

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As is always the case with revolutions, there is a question: when this revolution started and when was it over? The political upheaval that started in England in the late 1630s continued, with various interludes, until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. By then, the institutional foundations of the industrial revolution had already been laid down, but the economic changes were only picking up their pace. Technological innovations such as steam engines of increasing efficiency, an engine for spinning wool or cotton, even more important at the time, a water-powered cotton spinning mill, the “first modern factory” brought in over the 18<sup>th</sup> century were followed by the locomotive, telegraph, and photography a century later.

That the Glorious Revolution started a peaceful gradual transformation does not mean that there were no conflicts along the way. In fact, the battles over the form of government have been fought for almost a century before 1688.

The two-century timeline started in 1603. Upon her death, the childless Queen Elizabeth passed the crown to her distant relation, the King James VI of Scotland who became James I of England. The first of the Stuart royal dynasty, the new king inherited a number of brewing conflicts.

The crown was in dire need of revenue. Elizabeth’s domestic taxes were low. She was not exactly spendthrift yet has not made collecting domestic taxes a top priority. Most of Elizabeth’s revenues came from the British control over high seas. Introducing new taxes required a parliamentary consent. To agree to new taxes, the parliament would ask for more control over the king’s finances. This is what the king wanted to avoid.

Another conflict was about religion. Elizabeth’s father, King Henry VIII, broke ties with the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, and appointed himself as the head of the

new Church of England. The issue at hand was rather trivial by today's standards. The Pope would not consent to Henry's desire to divorce his wife and marry a lover.

The consequences were profound. Under Henry VIII kids by different wives, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, the pendulum swung back and forth between Mary's attempts to re-impose Catholicism, which earned her infamy under the name of the Bloody Mary, and the great Queen Elizabeth's religious tolerance. James I, the Elizabeth's heir, was son of a Catholic mother and Protestant father, and was raised as a Protestant. His son Charles, the future Charles I of England, married a Catholic and was regarded by Protestants with suspicion.

Finally, there was the third major conflict, that of between the two kingdoms united with the accession of James, King of Scotland, to the English throne. Though the king and his heirs were sovereigns of both countries, that did not bring the countries together. The church reformation that divided Catholics and protestants was happening in both countries but have taken distinctly different shapes. And the differences were not exclusively religious. When James' son Charles I started his disastrous Bishops' War with Scotland in 1639, the issue was not whether England or Scotland should be Catholic or Protestant. The issue was the king's desire to have the same organization of religion in both countries.

Eventually, the three conflicts led to a civil war. Charles' desire to have his two kingdoms united under the tenets of the same religion forced him to summon the English parliament as wars were financed by taxes, which needed the parliament consent. In other times, Charles would ignore the parliament but he has already extracted as much in taxes as he could. His heavy-handed ways with the increasingly assertive parliament resulted, first, in a gridlock, then, in rushed concessions, and, ultimately, the civil war, the so-called the First English Civil War in 1642-1646. As often happens in civil wars, participants were switching sides, making new alliances, and constantly changing their priorities and demands.

Charles I will eventually lose the civil war, his crown, and his head. He will be replaced by a parliamentary republic, but a republic in the name only. For all practical purposes, Oliver Cromwell's dictatorship was as extractive as the monarchy that it replaced for a

decade. In ten years, the monarchy returned under Charles II, Charles I's elder son, who spent years in exile. The rising tensions that led to the civil war were not resolved. It will need the peaceful events of 1688 for revolutionary changes to start for real.

### *Democracy is a Flexible Political System*

A functioning electoral democracy is a political system that responds to the demand for change. The change might come because a new breed of politicians is elected to office. Aspiring newcomers listen to people who are unhappy with the status quo and persuade voters to vote the incumbents out and them, the newcomers, in. The change might come through a different channel as well. Changing the guard is not needed; the policy might respond to voters' new demand even if politicians are the same. What is critical is that voters have an alternative. An incumbent running for re-election and seeing the angry voters might adjust their own political platform. Under democracy, the mere threat of competition might result in a change.

The rise of the regulatory state in the United States is an excellent example. Profound institutional changes happened through peaceful evolution. Presidential candidates had to adjust their platforms to cater to voters' needs. The demand for change resulted in the election of new congressmen. They passed new laws that dramatically altered relationship between the big businesses, the state, and the people. It required time, determination, and perseverance—and the path was often uneven. But it was peaceful. It happened within the existing institutional framework.

Surveying the state of American democracy in 1841, the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized that the equality of men also means, in the United States, the equality before the law. Legal institutions serve the poor as well as the rich. For European scholars, this was an unfamiliar type of politics. They have been used to the oligarchic rule, in which wealth played an enormous role in politics.

The end of the Civil War in 1865 became a watershed. Emancipation of slaves increased the labor force in the North and created opportunities for new development in the South. The expansion of the economy was both in terms of market size and geography.

The industrial revolution made the American economy far more productive, yet also dramatically increased wealth inequality.

The increased inequality stressed the legal system. The courts that served an aggrieved customer well against a tavern owner were unable to protect the customer against a mighty railroad. Before, a person who got wronged by a partner in a business had a fair chance in court. Now, a minor investor, a junior partner, or a small supplier was powerless against those who controlled a large corporation. Even a community bank or a local monopolist was not able to defend their rights against corporations that operated on a large scale. Millionaire businessmen, Commodore Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, Jim Fisk and other, less famous “robber barons”, bribed their ways through courts to stifle market competitors or small investors. The epic stories of their court battles included both sides 'acquiring' judges and legislators.

Bribing judges and jurors were, of course, illegal, but it was just an extreme manifestation of inequality. Even a judge with clean hands or an unbiased jury were partial to the arguments of well-paid lawyers defending large corporations. Today, trial lawyers jump to the cases of customer abuse because laws allow class-action suits, and precedents promise lavish compensation for the lawyers when the lawsuit is won. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were no such laws and precedents. A person suing a mighty corporation was typically on their own.

The corrupting effect of inequality spread beyond courts. Ultimately, the American political system is about elections, and it has never before been tested by the influence of vast sums of money. De Tocqueville wrote in his 1841 volume on American democracy: “In the United States, I never heard anyone accused of spending his wealth buying votes”. By the turn of the century, the role of the very wealthy in the electoral process has become a major concern. In case after case, courts favored enterprises over workers, firms over their customers, and big operators over their smaller market rivals. Congress and state legislatures were reluctant to pass laws that would curb the power of monopolies. Now big bosses have started to buy politicians as well.

The relationship worked in both directions. To operate at scale, businesses sought influence in politics. Railroad corporations needed political decisions to acquire land for

their rails. Leland Stanford, a railroad magnate in the West, was elected governor and then senator. On the other hand, having political influence allowed them to make business even larger. John Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil, lent support to politicians in several Eastern states. The power of the oil company was greatly enhanced by its monopolistic control over logistic networks. In the Senate, the Republican leader Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island pushed for high and pervasive tariffs making the business of domestic giants even more profitable.

The growth of powerful monopolies that combined political clout with market dominance left a lot of people hurt. The Gilded Age is often trumpeted as a time of a remarkable expansion of the American economy. In reality, the growth rates in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were lower than they will be between 1910 and the Great Depression, and the expansion of industrial production has often come at the cost of deteriorating working conditions. In the countryside, it was often even worse. The Gilded Age tide was not lifting all boats.

What we see here is classic breeding ground for a revolution. Archaic institutions that serve the tiny elite. The mass of people who are aware of the injustice and are deeply unhappy about it. The societal tensions that are not only high but growing with each decade. Yet there was a critical ingredient missing. Because of this missing ingredient, a violent revolution did not happen. The United States political system was flexible enough to allow the necessary changes to occur peacefully.

Institutional change in response to the growing tensions of the Gilded Age took decades. First, it was a sporadic movement at the local level. Then, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it came to the national level as the Progressive Era. Eventually, the transformation took decades. Many changes did not happen until the New Deal reforms of the 1930s.

Economists Andrei Shleifer and Ed Glaeser traced the dramatic institutional change between 1900 and 1917, when the United States entered World War I. Before 1900, common law courts were the main institution that resolved conflicts between business partners, market competitors, or between firms and customers. A safety incident, a medical malpractice, a food poisoning in a restaurant – the main remedy was a lawsuit.

In an unequal society, bringing lawsuits was no longer effective. Thus, the idea of modern regulatory state was born. Legislatures needed to pass laws that establish standards in food safety, clients' rights, medical practice, etc. Moving from one set of institutions, courts in this example, to another, the regulatory state required a political process.

It was not just one vote. Back in 1905, the US Supreme Court ruled that legislation limiting the maximum hours of work is unconstitutional. The "right of free contract", in this case between an enterprise owner and a worker, was sacred. Changing institutions requires many elections at all levels, numerous pieces of legislation, and many personal appointments. In the United States, an incoming president might replace numerous bureaucrats at will but replacing appointees that require Senate approval takes longer time. Senators serve for six years, so even getting a critical mass of progressive senators took a couple of decades.

However, the change was happening. At the state level, the creation of the Massachusetts Railroad Commission in 1869 showed the way. The commissioners tried to arbitrate labor disagreements and investigate railroad accidents, though its enforcement powers were limited. In 1887, the Congress passed the Interstate Commerce Act that gave the government first strong regulatory power. It was followed by the Sherman Act of 1890, an instrument of anti-monopoly regulation, the Pure Foods and Drugs Act of 1906, and the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 that introduced banking regulation. Now, a restaurant client was to expect that the food they are served satisfies certain standards. An entity taking clients' deposits had to satisfy certain requirements. The revolutionary change has happened without a revolution.

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Another example of a peaceful yet revolutionary change that happened through the existing political institutions has nothing to do with the economy. Over the two and a half decades in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the LGBT people in America have gone a long way from a group marginalized in many ways to a group whose rights are codified in a number of laws and court decisions. The recognition of the same-sex marriage as a constitutional right in the United States was a revolutionary reform made possible within the existing political system.

The LGBT rights is a recurring issue in the context of revolutions. It is an issue which has been historically used by the autocrats as a wedge and a propaganda cudgel. It has been used by wannabe dictators and populists of all stripes. Even democracies have not been entirely safe from populists' exploitation of stereotypes and prejudices. In extractive, archaic regimes the situation has been typically far worse.

By itself, a revolution is always on the side of freedom. When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, male homosexual relationships, a crime in the Russian Empire, were swiftly decriminalized without much fuss. It was very much unlike the women rights, which were a subject of heated public discussions. (We will talk about the champion of these rights, the first female cabinet minister in history, in the chapter on leaders who lost the fights of their lives.) Decriminalizing the same-sex relationship between men was simply done as a part of a total overhaul of the imperial criminal code. In twenty years, when the revolution was over, they were criminalized back.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States, the legal status of LGBT people has undergone a profound transformation through the regular political process. At the turn of the century, acceptance has not yet become mainstream, and many forms of discrimination were fully legal.

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, progress has been neither linear nor uncontested. It required activists' efforts, tactical compromises, and humiliating retreats in multiple arenas – courts, legislatures, cultural sphere, and public opinion. And yet it makes a good example of revolutionary changes through regular political channels.

Of course, the activists of the 2000s stood on the shoulder of giants, activists of the previous generations. For almost a century, the fight for LGBT rights has been heroic and dangerous – as for the women rights and for the civil rights, but more lonely and more dangerous. Still, there was a long way to go.

At the start of the 2000s, LGBT rights were still in a precarious position. Same-sex sexual activity had only recently been decriminalized in some states. Anti-gay discrimination remained widespread and largely unchallenged in federal law. A landmark moment came in 2003, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Lawrence v. Texas* that laws criminalizing same-sex sexual conduct were unconstitutional. This decision struck down

remaining sodomy laws that remained on the books in 13 states and established a constitutional foundation for future LGBT legal victories.

The critical decision of the Supreme Court was a result of a long-term political process. There were decades of elections, congressional and presidential, with candidates increasingly more open-minded on decriminalizing homosexuality. Outcomes of these campaigns were decided by other, more salient issues – the economy, inflation, unemployment, Cold War, abortion, etc. Oftentimes, the LGBT rights issue was not even mentioned. Also, it was always back and forth as more progressive candidates sometimes lost. And yet, on average, the subsequent Congresses were more and more open to change.

Open? Not to the extent that a Congress would pass a law decriminalizing homosexuality and allowing same-sex marriage. Far from that, there has never been a Congress majority strong enough to pass such a bill. Even when the majority of Americans expressed strong support for such measures, they would not pass. The minority of citizens that was against legalizing same-sex marriage was able to block any legislative change.

Back two centuries ago, the American political institutions stood firm protecting the rights of the slave-holding minority. That is, the rights of an elite minority within a minority of states. As recently as eighty years ago, the minority of senators from Southern states was able to block any meaningful progress on civil rights. This is a general rule: strong political institutions are typically good in protecting the rights of entrenched minority – the same minority that constructed these institutions in the first place.

Thankfully, a political system is not just an electoral system. If the parliament would not pass a law, a flexible political system might still produce an important change. The conservative congressional minority held firm against the LGBT rights. What was changing was the composition of the Supreme Court, an outcome of a long political process. By 2000s, the composition was such that on the issues of LGBT rights the judges, who are not subject to immediate electoral pressure, were ready to act. The increased public tolerance, though not directly affecting the Supreme Court decisions, played a role as well.

The 2003 Supreme Court decision decriminalizing same-gender relationships was an important milestone, but the road ahead was still long. The next big fight was for marriage

equality. It was a smart political strategy. The activists were able to shift focus from abstract, easy-to-make-a-wedge question of what the marriage is to a question of legal recognition of same-sex partners' rights to visit hospitals and jointly file taxes. What helped was that with same-sex relationship decriminalized and more and more LGBT people coming out of the closet, more and more people have become exposed to them. For many, it was a surprising discovery that gay classmates, neighbors, or colleagues were not at all different.

The same process played in the public sphere. Representation in media, politics, and sports has grown significantly, helping to normalize queer identities and amplify the voices of LGBT individuals from diverse backgrounds. More letters were added to the LGBT abbreviation to signify the inclusion of other previously marginalized groups. Pride parades have evolved from protest marches to mainstream civic celebrations, even as activists warned against the commercialization of pride and the depoliticization of its roots.

In 2004, Massachusetts, a cradle of modern progressivism, became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. But the backlash was swift and widespread. Numerous states passed constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage. In 2004 alone, 11 states approved such measures by popular vote. The anti-LGBT wave not confined to deeply red states – amongst these 11 states were Ohio, Michigan, and Georgia, battlefield states in presidential elections.

Another turning point arrived ten years later, in 2013, with the Supreme Court's decision in *United States v. Windsor*. It mandated federal recognition of same-sex marriages performed in states where it was legal. Two years later, in 2015, in another landmark decision, the Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that same-sex marriage was a constitutional right. State laws banishing the same sex marriage were nullified. This ruling marked the culmination of decades of activism and represented a seismic shift in both law and public opinion.

Beyond marriage, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century LGBT movement expanded to address discrimination in housing, healthcare, employment, and education. In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled in *Bostock v. Clayton County* that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects

employees against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Judge Neil Gorsuch, a constitutional conservative, argued for the majority of the court that it is impossible to discriminate against transgender Americans without discriminating them based on gender, which was long outlawed. This decision extended federal anti-discrimination protections to millions of LGBT Americans in the workplace. At the same time, numerous local and state governments introduced or strengthened protections in areas such as adoption rights, hate crimes legislation, and transgender healthcare access.

There is no question that the progress has remained uneven, and backlash has been persistent—particularly in regard to transgender rights. State legislatures have recently introduced a wave of laws restricting access to gender-affirming care for minors, limiting transgender athletes' participation in school sports, and policing restroom access.

At the federal level, protections have fluctuated from one presidential administration to another. The Obama administration expanded protections for transgender students and military personnel; the first Trump administration reversed several of these policies. The Biden administration reinstated many of the protections and sought to expand inclusion through executive orders and regulatory changes. The second Trump administration has been set to reverse these measures from day one.

The fight for LGBT rights in the 21st-century United States is best understood not as a completed project but as an ongoing struggle. We see it again and again in the history of revolutions. Rights are given and then taken back. What a violent revolution gives is often taken back when the revolution is over. But what is achieved via a long, painful, institutionalized process seems to be less reversible.

### ***Flexible Does Not Mean Democratic***

It might seem, based on the experience of the progressive reforms in the United States, that a flexible political system is simply a democracy. Accounting for changing preferences and circumstances demands that the ruling elite has means to listen to popular demands and has incentives to correct the course when needed. Competitive elections do this just fine, but it appears that a country can do without elections as well. The economic transformation of China after 1976, the year of the Chairman Mao's death,

is such a story. The revolutionary economic transformation happened under the non-democratic political system that remained largely unchanged.

Up until this day, the giant portrait of Chairman Mao hangs over the Tiananmen square, the heart of Beijing and the site of the main political events in China. Half a century after his death, he is still considered the greatest statesman in China's long history and the founder of the modern Chinese state. Every new generation of Chinese political leaders pay tribute to Mao; criticizing him is a state crime. One can only imagine what was questioning his judgement when he was alive. Hundreds of party officials and thousands of ordinary citizens paid with their lives for disagreeing with the dictator. Yet at the moment Mao was dead in 1976, the new leadership knew from day one: they have to do something about the economy. Decades of revolution, civil wars, and foreign interventions have devastated the Chinese economy, but the decades under Mao have been nearly as bad.

The economic changes brought about by Deng Xiaoping, another revolutionary who has been in and out of Chairman Mao's favors over the years, were slow. At every moment, there was a conservative opposition. Conservatives opposed reforms in councils and committees, watered down the decisions that were made, and sabotaged them at the implementation stage. The opposition was not, of course, against growth and prosperity in principle. As always, the opposition wanted to protect their position in power.

After Mao's death, there was a moment of open political warfare. Army battalions moved in conjunction with the interests of conflicting factions in the late dictator's court. Deng, a prominent member of an old generation of party stalwarts, was able to outmaneuver younger radicals led by the widow of the former leader. With government under control by the late 1970s, Deng launched a sweeping program of economic reforms, which dismantled central planning, allowed private enterprise, and attracted foreign investment. Eventually, it transformed China into a global economic powerhouse.

The internal affairs of the Communist Party of China are notoriously secret. It is not only strict confidentiality of the proceedings; it is a centuries-long tradition not to discuss disagreements in the open. Still, we know a lot about what was happening inside China's governing councils at the critical junctions of history. Not who said what and who

supported whom, but, more importantly, that the ruling bodies have always maintained a balance between different factions. In contrast with the Stalin's USSR, there never been a moment when one faction not only defeated but ultimately exterminated their competitors.

Even Chairman Mao himself has never been an absolute monarch. At the zenith of his power, he needed to work relentlessly to achieve his goals – set some of his lieutenants against others, cajole his associates, compromise with generals, persuade general masses, etc. None of his successors – even the great Deng Xiaoping – has come close to having as much power as Mao. They had less. Deng was able to persuade the army to put Madame Mao, the Chairman's widow, and her coterie of radical would-be successors, in jail. But the party leadership retained a variety of conservatives and hard-liners. At each step, they needed to be taken into account.

The historians of the Chinese economic miracle hail Deng as a visionary who steered China towards economic prosperity. He has never consolidated as much control as Stalin or Hitler in 1930s. He was a true leader for the upper echelons of the communist party hierarchy, but never of the masses. He let others to hold the main offices of the state – or maybe the party oligarchs weary of letting another Mao to wield too much power, did not let Deng to be all-powerful.

Deng Xiaoping was as ruthless as a political operator as he was progressive as a visionary leader. His military background dated back to the civil war, his connections in the army were deep. Yet he has never been a sultanistic dictator. Likely, this was what made the difference.

In 1989, Deng suffered a major setback. After a decade of economic and social opening, the economy was steaming ahead. Looking back, it was just the first decade of the Chinese economic miracle, one of the most spectacular episodes of economic advancement in human history. By the end of its first decade, it was not a full miracle yet, but the country was moving forward fast. Peasants were given more economic freedom. They were allowed to sell their surplus at market prices – they became interested in producing more, for the first time in years. Even more dramatic was letting foreign investors come to specially designated economic zones. After a century of civil war and

communist isolationism under Mao, new products and modern technologies were coming to China.

The opening of the economy was accompanied by the general opening of the country to the world. Instead of the constant drumbeat of confrontational rhetoric under Mao, Deng worked hard to soften China's image on the world stage. There was little change in the way political institutions operated – the Communist Party was firmly in power – but there was a general sense of increased freedom. At least, people were no longer publicly humiliated and sent to concentration camps for dissenting political views. Some censorship was lifted, some more books were allowed to print, some more professors were allowed to teach in universities. For some, this was not enough. For them, the reforms were too slow. They wanted even more openness to the world, real media freedom, and democratic elections.

In June 1989, the party leadership was split about what to do with a peaceful student demonstration at the Tiananmen Square, the central square of the country's capital. The one with the giant portrait of Chairman Mao overseeing it. Students, professors, intellectuals, educated workers gathered there to demand civil rights, freedom of the press, and the end to government corruption. For the conservatives in the party leadership, it was way too much.

Ultimately, the decision was to use regular army against peaceful protesters. Hundreds, and possibly thousands of unarmed people died at the Tiananmen Square on that date. Reformist leaders of the party lost their jobs. Zhao Ziyang, the party chief and the head of the Chinese government, Deng Xiaoping's hand-picked successor, spent the rest of his life, more than fifteen years, under house arrest.

In the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre Deng retired from his government position, but this was not the end of his story. In Mao years, he was demoted and disgraced twice and both times he climbed back to the highest ladders of power. The ultimate comeback kid had it in him to come back again.

In 1992, Deng, aged 88, launched his "southern tour" through Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai provinces. He was talking to ordinary people as if he were a Western politician running for re-election. He was talking to party bureaucrats as the

consummate apparatchik who has spent half a century in their ranks. He persuaded those who listened that the country needed further economic reforms, more economic freedom, and more involvement with the outside world.

At the age of 88, Deng made his most important contribution to the China's economic miracle. As in many episodes through history, the conservatives were able to block reforms that were desperately needed. Thanks to Deng's relentless efforts, this time the block was temporary. The 1989 crackdown did not stop the wide-ranging reforms. It did not return China onto the Maoist isolationist path. The revolutionary change happened without a breakdown of the political system.

## Chapter 7

### THE MECHANICS OF REVOLUTION

Vladimir Lenin, one of the protagonists of the Russian Revolution and the prime minister of the first revolutionary cabinet, was a prolific author. His volumes of political writing ranged from deep theorizing to daily political commentary. In a 1913 article, four years before taking power, he wrote: “For a revolution, it is not sufficient that those who are governed did not want to live as before. It is necessary that those in power were unable to govern as before.”

Lenin succinctly identified two critical ingredients of a revolution. First, there should be a gradual change in economic conditions that makes the previous ways of living impossible. Too many people need to want to live differently. Second, there should be a political system that is incapable of producing the necessary change. Incumbent elites try to protect their rent, that is, they try to prevent revolutions. They use whatever means available to keep the status quo intact. A revolution occurs when, in addition to the brewing long-term tensions, the incumbent is unable to prevent an uprising.

#### *The Excluded*

Every revolution is a story of people who were no longer able to live with the status quo. For someone, it is about the impossibility of speaking their own language. Remember Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist leader? For someone, it is about designing the state for themselves, rather than letting the king make these choices for them. Maximilian Robespierre, the French dictator, was such a person. For someone, it is about the fate of their fellow citizens living in poverty and desolation. Remember Forugh Farrokhzad, an Iranian poet? And yet for someone, it is simply about making money. Under the old regime this is impossible. So, down with the old regime!

This boy was born in the Soviet Union around 1955, a couple of years after Stalin died and millions of people returned home from a labor camp or exile in some faraway Siberian city. In high school, he was marked for his proficiency in mathematics. He was not able

to go to the Moscow State University, the most prestigious university in the country as he was Jewish. Otherwise, there were no problems – he got admitted to a decent technical university. After graduation, he found a job in an academic institute in Moscow, where his job was to do research in applied mathematics. There was an option to do similar research in a military institute, but higher pay was associated with more restrictions, so he opted not to go there.

The boy, now the young man, was good at math. In the country where Marxism was the dogma, it was impossible to study modern economic science. But it was possible to do mathematical economics as “applied math”. Eventually, he even got a PhD. But he was not a star. What was worse, he was not that interested in doing academic research. What he was interested in was making money. And what he was good at, in addition to his math acumen, was talking to people. Persuading a reluctant partner, finding a mutually acceptable solution for a team, adjusting to the principal’s wishes has never been a problem.

Quick-witted, technically skilled, personable, charming and even charismatic, diligent and focused, he would be an ideal entrepreneur in the United States. In our times, he would eventually end up in the top management of Tesla, PayPal, or Nvidia. In his time, the early 1980s, it would probably have been Microsoft or IBM. The problem was that in the Soviet Union there was no legal way to make big money. People who tried were going to jail. There was nowhere to use the entrepreneurial talent. The system needed foot soldiers, not entrepreneurs.

The young person tried to do something creative – like helping a car-producing factory to use mathematical models to optimize production – but this was not much. In fact, the factory management was not very interested. They cared much more about what their party bosses would say, not about profits.

By the mid-1980s, there was an acute sense of economic crisis in the country. It was not merely a stagnation of the past decade. The supply of food in the grocery stores was visibly down. Every day necessities were disappearing from the shelves. Hour-long queues for basic food such as sugar became routine. The Communist Party finally elected a new, energetic leader who promised reform. Our young man was ready to work for a

reformist government. But the Soviet government relied on the experts that it had trusted for decades, the pillars of the academic establishment. Exactly those people whose expertise was useless. The young reformers will be put in charge only when it was too late.

In a group of like-minded people – they were about thirty years of age at the time – our young man read Western publications about the Soviet economy and was trying to imagine a path to market reforms. At some point, in 1990, when the planned economy was already collapsing, they organized a seminar in Austria, in which prominent scholars from Harvard and Yale helped them to strategize about hypothetical policy changes.

The circle of young economists did not produce any groundbreaking intellectual work. There were no modern-day Madisons or Hamiltons among them. Their understanding of how market economy works was cursory at best. Still, their discussions were not in vain. When they end up in the cabinet of ministers being responsible for sweeping economic reforms, the white papers from the seminar in an Austrian resort will be the only blueprint they have.

By the autumn of 1991, the economy was in free fall. The Soviet government, mortally wounded by the failed military coup launched by the conservatives in August, was losing authority by the day. In each of the 15 republics that constituted the USSR, the national governments were now in charge. In 14 of them, these governments were looking away from Moscow, the Russia's capital.

The group of young economists was invited to write a plan for economic reforms. They had a couple of weeks to plan a radical overhaul of the economic system that failed in a spectacular fashion. They ganged together in a summer house reserved for government officials not far from Moscow. Every day someone would drive to Moscow to hand in what was written today to the newly installed republican administration. Another team of economists was doing the same in a summer house nearby. Apparently, the presidential administration has not yet decided on whose plan of reforms is going to be used.

On November 11, 1991, Russia got its reform cabinet. The young economists did not have their plans used as a blueprint for reforms. Instead, they were appointed ministers in charge of implementing these reforms. Some members of the new cabinet were

politicians, but finance, economy, trade, social policy – everything that really counted at the moment – went to the reformers.

From this day on, the inexperienced reformers worked tirelessly amid the collapsing economy. Some of their most consequential reforms were not by design. They shrunk the colossal military budget they inherited from the Soviet times not because they had votes in the parliament to do this, but because there was no money in state coffers. They dramatically opened foreign trade, ending the decades of Soviet isolationism not because the free-market philosophy prevailed, but because the shortages of basic food were so severe that there was an acute fear of impending famine.

They did a lot of things as reformers in a very short time. In a year, their cabinet has collapsed. Some left, some stayed for a while, some – for longer. The story of the economic reforms that followed the Second Russian Revolution is a very different story, and perhaps for another book. The story of a young man who was excluded under the old regime and participated in the revolution to fight his exclusion ends here.

The boy in my story is not entirely made up. It is a composite based on biographies of several Russian businessmen who played critical roles in the critical days of the Second Russian Revolution. The boy story has everything to know about a revolutionary. A talented misfit under the old regime. A person with a burning ambition ready to work 24/7 to make a change when the old regime shatters. A professional who is not needed by the reformers within the old regime, because they are not capable of recognizing what they need. An inexperienced reformer in the driving seat when the old regime collapses. A retired minister before 40.

The person who is closest to this description among the people that I know is Petr Aven. He was the minister of foreign trade in the first reform cabinet. Among other things, he was responsible for the unification of exchange rates and liberalization of foreign trade, two major economic reforms that were needed immediately. In one year in the cabinet, he accomplished more than most ministers – perhaps because the circumstances were more dire in his area of responsibility.

Aven retired from the cabinet after one year, a casualty of political compromises that reformers had to make. He became a banker, a telecom and oil investor, and a billionaire,

one of the richest people in Russia. Unlike many Russian oligarchs of 1990s, he survived and prospered in the Putin's era. He wrote several books defending liberal principles in times when they were becoming more and more unpopular. He wrote a non-fiction book about one of his friends, a notoriously dynamic oligarch, who had also contributed to my composite reformer' portrait.

Of course, very few people unhappy with the Soviet regime were economists. Even fewer became cabinet ministers and then multimillionaires. More people were unhappy about other things than the impossibility of earning big money. Thousands wanted to read James Joyce and Tolkien, who were not published, among many great authors, in the USSR. Millions wanted to watch Star Wars and Indiana Jones movies, which were not shown in Soviet theaters. And perhaps a hundred million Soviet women wanted to get access to personal hygiene items, which the mighty industrial empire has never been able to produce. The demand for change was a sum of these small individual demands. The mass of people who wanted change was accumulating gradually. What mattered was not the ultimate destination, but the feeling that you can no longer live with the status quo.

### ***The Rigid Political System***

Every revolution is a story about the need for change accumulating over time and the political system unable to accommodate these needs. A rigid political system is a necessary ingredient in any revolution. Otherwise, the country transitions to the next era without a violent disruption. Revolutions happen when the incumbent government resists change. It becomes bloody and violent when the old regime relies on violence to defend itself.

Rigid political systems come in many forms. What unites them all is that their purpose is exclusion. They are there to protect the elite from changes. Over time, the elites shape the economic institutions in a way so that they help them to extract rents from the rest of the population. For these institutions to stay intact, the political institutions should be captured by the elite as well. If the rest of the population is not excluded from the political process, they will use it to dismantle extractive economic institutions. That is why the elite goes at such lengths to prevent access.

The simplest possible way to exclude people from the political process is to restrict the electoral franchise. A minimum wealth requirement, a literacy requirement, and a language requirement are the most obvious (and odious) examples. Each of these and other similar requirements serves a political purpose. It tilts the electoral outcome in the direction of the elite. All these requirements result in the exclusion of the poor, of minorities, and of the most vulnerable.

Authoritarian regimes further exclude citizens from participating in the political process. In old times, it was the king, the court, and nobility who had any say in political matters. To play a role, an individual should have had a royal blood in their veins.

Not surprisingly, the economic institutions that are created and maintained via political process favored the tiny elite at the expense of the excluded majority. Nowadays, it might be a ruling party that comprises a small fraction of the population yet is excludes everyone else from participating in the government. Authoritarian regimes with ruling parties are not the worst. In fact, we saw in Chapter 6 how the Chinese Communist Party made the political system flexible enough to let revolutionary economic changes to happen without disruptions. In other words, there is something else about political system inflexible beyond being non-democratic. If it is non-democratic yet is somehow capable of constantly renewing itself – as CCP had been during the decades of the China’s economic miracle – it might withstand the challenge of revolution.

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There are many elements that make a political system inflexible and irresponsible. One element lies in the ways the system selects people into positions of power. Hereditary nobility was the backbone of the ancient regimes in France and Russia. To hold any position of authority, noble birth was a prerequisite. To serve as an officer in the army, one had to come from an aristocratic lineage. And most commanders were not merely noble—they came from the highest-ranking families in the realm.

There were, of course, prominent exceptions. There have been great leaders, political or military, with a very humble background. In all times, there were talented individuals who worked their way up from the bottom of the social ladder to the top. Still, these were

rare exceptions. Extraordinary skills were required to make it to the top. And, in addition to extraordinary skills, there should be a lot of luck involved.

A revolution changes that. A revolution removes not a couple of ministers or generals, but whole social groups. It also removes barriers. Government office is no longer a matter of birthright. Now it is the skills and talent that matter, not the provenance. People of any background have a chance to come to the top. Sometimes – as it was in the French and Russian Revolutions – special efforts are made to promote those who were excluded under the old regime.

As a result, revolutions bring up a lot of random people. Revolutionary armies burned through many generals before selecting a few of great skill. Yet, for the selection mechanism to work, there should be an unobscured entry of new talent. There should be ways to distinguish yourself and be immediately promoted up. Revolutions give that.

On the eve of the French revolution, the French army was more ancient than the regime itself. When the old regime collapsed, many officers retired or defected, joining royalist emigres abroad. Others were under constant suspicion. For a general of a royal pedigree a revolutionary tribunal at home posed more danger than an enemy at the frontlines. A defeat at the battlefield might easily result in court martial and guillotine.

The flip side was that there were no more barriers for those who exhibited talent and skill. Napoleon Bonaparte, the ultimate winner of the French Revolution, came from a small provincial nobility. His rise through the ranks was spectacular, thanks to the revolution, as we will see in Chapter 9. It would have been simply impossible under the old regime.

Napoleon's generals were no different. At the age of seventeen, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte joined the French army as a private in 1780. It took him five years to become a sergeant. Despite his reputation as a brilliant officer, it took another five years to become a captain, the highest rank for a non-commissioned officer, in 1790. The Revolution changed everything. His military talent, already obvious, was now rewarded. He was voted for lieutenant colonel and then colonel by his soldiers, a revolutionary innovation, and swiftly rose through the ranks during the revolutionary war.

Short-tempered, brave, and charismatic, Bernadotte was looked upon with suspicion by Napoleon; some considered him as a plausible alternative to the Corsican. (In another improbable twist, he was married to Napoleon's former fiancée who was also Emperor's sister-in-law.) Still, the Emperor valued Bernadotte's talent as an army commander and a civilian administrator. Bernadotte never responded to calls from those who wanted him to challenge Napoleon. Napoleon hesitated each time before promoting Bernadotte to a higher rank and always promoted him in the end.

Eventually, history offered an unexpected off rump to the would-be rival. In 1810, Bernadotte was offered to become the heir-presumptive to the childless King Charles XIII of Sweden. As the Crown Prince, he commanded the Swedish army in the Battle of Leipzig, where it joined forces with Russia, Prussia, and Austria against his former Emperor. In 1818, he became the King of Sweden under the name of Charles XIV John, founding the House of Bernadotte, the royal house of Sweden until this day. From a lieutenant to a king, the French Revolution made him.

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Can a political system be democratic – that is, make it possible that the opposition defeats the incumbent at the election booth – and still be rigid? Is it possible to have a revolution in a functioning democracy?

There is no question that a democracy can end as a result of a military coup. Many democracies ended when the military took to the streets, arrested the elected government, and put itself at the helm. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, armed forces removed the elected governments in Argentina, Brazil, Thailand, Peru, Niger, South Korea – to take the most famous episodes. In 1953, the shah of Iran, with tacit backing from the CIA, deployed the military to depose the elected prime minister and establish absolutist rule. In 1973, the military junta deposed and killed Salvador Allende, the democratically elected president of Chile. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century military overthrew democracy in Thailand in 2006 and 2014, in Honduras in 2009, in Egypt in 2013, and in Myanmar in 2021.

In each of these episodes, the coup was preceded by years of upheaval. Democratically elected governments were unable to bring together the clashing interests. Elections, even if competitive and fair, did not result in a cohesive and strong government. Even if a

cabinet was formed, it lacked control over police and military to the extent sufficient to keep power. In some cases – a lot of examples come from Latin America – the military was acting in the interest of the rich, capitalists and landowners. Unable to defeat champions of the poor majority at the election booth, the rich elite relied on the military to grab power.

In most cases, a coup against a democratically elected government resulted in a little, if any, social and economic change. Some of the democracies replaced by the military regime were young and weak to begin with. The removal of the Mossadegh government of Iran in 1953 is a traumatic episode not because it drastically changed the situation in the country. In contrast, it brought the country back to where it was just a couple of years before. The coup stopped the reforms that promised to change the inefficient status quo. Instead of a chance to get inclusive institutions, the coup gave the country a couple of decades of relative tranquility under the absolutist monarchy. And, by blocking the democratic path to reform in 1953, made the violent revolution of 1979 all but inevitable.

Some coups result in little change exactly because the newly installed military government faces the same country and the same problems as the democratically elected government before that. On the plus side, the armed forces have guns to impose their will. They have no need to engage in messy parliamentary compromises to conduct the necessary reforms. On the other hand, they lack popular support, which makes reforms harder to implement. In one country after another, the military handed the power back to people after years of frustrating and fruitless efforts to solve the country's problems.

In some respects, the Chilean coup of 1973 stands as an exception. The military did hand back power to the elected government in 1990. The human toll of repression, an inevitable element in these circumstances, was in tens of thousands lives, a staggering cost in modern times. The extreme leftist opposition was suppressed with uncommon brutality. The unusual feature of this military dictatorship was that it made consequential economic reforms. The military junta did solve the economic problems that President Allende, elected with 36 percent of the popular vote, was unable to solve. The liberal reforms helped to spur economic growth, especially under democratic governments which succeeded the junta.

So, is it possible to have a revolution under democracy? There is one more historical episode of profound significance that complicates the answer. The Weimar Republic in Germany, established in 1919, was a democracy. In the short span of 14 years, citizens went to polls to choose their government eight times. In 1932-33 alone, three times.

The resulting parliaments were dysfunctional. Communists, Social Democrats, Hitler's National Socialists – no one was able to get a majority and was not willing to let others rule. Exacerbated by the years of rising tensions – and possibly senile – President Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party, as the Chancellor (prime-minister). Then the President issued a decree that suspended most civil liberties, including the right to assemble, protest, and to due process. The Hitler's cabinet swiftly used the decree to declare the state of emergency and arrest a broad swath of Nazi's political opponents, including dozens of Communist members of the parliament. Contrary to a wide-spread myth, Hitler and his party has never got a majority in democratic elections. Removing the opponents by military force did the trick.

In the final count, it was a military coup, not a revolution. A revolution assumes a change in the way people live and the government is organized both profound and enduring. A change in political institutions might be dramatic and yet short-lived. The fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Adolf Hitler brought in a regime that was the most murderous regime in human history. It was revolutionary new, a system of government radically different from any other government in German history. Since ancient times, political power has never been vested to such an extent in a single individual. Citizens have never been asked to abide by such a radical ideology. However, between Nazi power consolidation in 1933-34 and Hitler's suicide in a Berlin bunker surrounded by Russian troops in April 1945, the regime lasted only 12 years. It was an upheaval, a major disruption, a regime responsible for an enormous human toll, but not a revolution.

In theory, it might be possible that a revolution overthrows a democracy. A democracy might be dysfunctional and, as a result, irresponsive to changing needs of citizens. In practice, it has never happened.

## *Reforms that Cannot Help*

We already saw that a dictator cannot make reforms that threaten the entrenched elites whose support he relies on. In the run up to a revolution, this is a common pattern. Serious reforms that need to be done are not happening. Instead, there is a hurricane of activity that look like changes but actually just scrap the surface. The new privileges are granted to be withdrawn next day. New guarantees are extended to be withdrawn a week later. Reformist ministers are appointed to be dismissed at the first attempt to alter the course.

Some historians explain the monarchs' inability to make the necessary concessions by their personal stubbornness or privileged upbringing. 'If they say that I have to do something, it means that I am no longer the king?' – asks the seven-year-old Louis XIV in a dramatic scene in an Alexandre Dumas' novel. In fact, it was not due to the personal traits of the monarchs or their lack of effort. Every great revolution was preceded by a series of unsuccessful reforms, most of which were concerned with concessions to the demand of people or the sharing of power. The elites would attempt to share power and then take it back. Rinse, repeat.

The last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II, attempted to create a functioning parliament many times. To quell the upheaval that followed the loss in the 1904 Russo-Japanese war, he granted a manifesto of rights, which stipulated elections with a broad franchise. Then, once the parliament was elected, he took the power back. Then again. When the second parliament failed, he got his third, elected under a more favorable electoral system. This was just another kind of failure to share power: the parliament was too pliable to become an independent institution. We saw in Chapter 4 how Louis XVI of France called for the Estates General and then tried to balance transferring power and keeping it at the same time, unsuccessfully.

A fundamental explanation of why monarchs were not able to make partial concessions is the problem of commitment. This is the economics jargon for a complex phenomenon. In the context of a revolution, the actor who is vying for power will not be bound by any prior obligations once he gets there. Taking a step back, the actor who is in power right now is reluctant to transfer it as, in the absence of strong institutions

independent of the executive, the guarantees that he might have received will become obsolete once he is out of power. This is the essence of the commitment problem.

This logic provides a fundamental answer to the following question: why, instead of going into a revolution with typically dire consequences, the lead actors of the ancient regime would not gradually release power? Why did all these monarchs go to the scaffold rather than cede their authority peacefully, step-by-step? This is a core question for any theory of revolutions – as a revolution, by definition, is a disruptive, discontinuous change. The commitment approach explains the disruption.

In each of the episodes that we discussed, the leaders of the ancient regime were willing to do reform. They were willing to make concessions to satisfy the demands of the people. Sometimes, they went at great length. What they would not concede was their power to roll any concessions back. And this was what doomed their efforts.

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Every dictator needs a strong police force that he can use against his subjects. Many had more than one security service watching the population and each other. Every regime had its propaganda machine persuading citizens to abide by existing order. However, this is rarely enough. No regime can stay in power by force and propaganda only. There is always the need to provide something that people want – security, food, sense of national pride, entertainment, etc. Every successful authoritarian regime is good at this, in addition to the smart and ruthless use of force. Those regimes that fail to satisfy the people's needs fall.

The problem for authoritarian regimes is that it is not that simple to gather and process information. It is not easy to stay informed about the ever-changing needs of their subjects. In a democracy, there are usual channels that make the government informed about everything that is going on. Competition in the media sphere results in every point of view being expressed. If the population is frustrated with the workings of some institutions or the way some policy is implemented, it will be discussed in the media over and over again. News media will report relevant data and cover opinion polls showing people's frustration. Columnists will compete in finding new words to express their outrage.

This is not what happens in an authoritarian regime. The media is censored, so the polls showing that a policy is deeply unpopular are not going to be published. Instead of expressing outrage, columnists and media anchors compete in praising the regime, because this is where the rewards come from. An opponent of reforms is not elected because opposition is not allowed to run. How would the dictator know that the policy he pursues is misguided? How would he know that some bureaucrat is corrupt, disloyal, or simply incompetent?

One solution for the problem of gathering information in the absence of media and elections is to task secret service or government agents to collect the information. An opinion poll might be run by the administration's employees; it does not need to be made public. A secret service might keep an eye on bureaucrats, informing the top leadership of their loyalty and integrity.

The problem with such solutions is that they work but create new problems as well. A secret service that collects a large amount of information poses a threat to the dictator. What if they keep him in the dark, while preparing a coup? Certainly, knowing a lot about the dictator's popularity makes it easier to switch allegiance at the right moment. Most dictatorships end up in internal coups and every dictator knows that. They do not want to make it easier to launch a coup – that is why most of them have multiple secret services, each of which is not at all all-powerful.

The same problem haunts personalistic dictators when they are choosing administrators responsible for specific policies, cabinet ministers, provincial governors etc. Appoint a competent person, and they will likely be good at their job. At the same time, a competent minister might not be loyal if (when) there is a challenge to the dictator's power. The minister is competent, which means that they easily find a job under the new leadership. In contrast, an incompetent minister will stay loyal no matter what. No chance of retaining their job if the incumbent falls. Such a minister might be bad at making a policy, but they will be loyal.

This is how personalistic dictators end up in an informational vacuum, surrounded by loyal but incompetent subordinates. This is why authoritarian regimes built around a party, rather than an individual, are better informed and more attuned to the changing

needs of the people they govern. We saw in Chapter 6 how the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping was able to accommodate revolutionary economic changes without a political revolution. The key was that Deng has never been an absolute monarch.

### *The Foreign Pressure*

Revolutions are always an internal affair. And yet foreign affairs often play an outside role - in public imagination, both during events and long after. Sociologist Theda Skocpol in her magisterial *States and Social Revolutions* attributed a key role to the foreign affairs arena. In this theory, revolutions are influenced by what happens outside the country.

The problem with this argument is that the foreign pressure itself depends on what is going on inside the country. A country with archaic institutions in conflict with emerging forces is already an attractive target for foreign competitors. A weakened government is an invitation for neighbors to meddle. A country in which the conflict has become violent is doubly attractive. Countries are invaded when the power of their leaders weakens.

In Chapter 6, we discussed how the Iranian Revolution resulted an invasion of a neighbor, Iraq. It tried to use the opportunity to carve out an oil-rich piece of land. Iraq would not attack a larger neighbor if not for its perceived weakness at the moment when the Iranian monarchy collapsed.

During the first years of the French Revolutions, the main European powers, the Great Britain, Prussia, and Austria, were not interested in attacking France. In fact, they did like the emerging status quo. First, when the monarchy was weakened by the rising tensions. Then, when the successive revolutionary governments were not able to fully consolidate control, neighbors invaded.

Until 1792, none of the great powers has actively moved against France. Yet, for the people of France, the outside world looked different. Leaders from all stripes warned about the danger of an imminent invasion. The drumbeat has not stopped for a minute. Eventually, it led to the worst revolutionary government of all, the Jacobin dictatorship.

The foreign pressure in a revolutionary situation aids revolution, not the incumbent regime. When the old king summons his subjects to fight a foreign invasion, they just hate him even more. When a new government calls citizens to arms, the result is often

different. 180,000 Frenchmen volunteered in 1792 to defend their country and their new-born revolution against Austrians and Prussians.

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Robespierre, the French revolutionary leader at the time of the Jacobin terror, was the first major revolutionary who made external threats an instrument for keeping power. He was brought to power at the moment when France faced a genuine threat of foreign invasion. Not without caveats, a major part of the decision of the neighbors to go to war was the increasing belligerence of Republican France. However, the military threat was over in a few months and Robespierre's search for foreign scapegoats was only beginning. Throughout his short rule, Robespierre was relentlessly seeking foreign plots.

Strategically, this is smart politics. "They," a politician says, are the cause of troubles. "We" are defending our virtues and freedoms and principles. They are the cause why people have no bread and workers cannot earn living wages. I, the leader, am the one whose policies fail because of 'them'. Every politician does this to some degree. Robespierre has not done anything but this. And every time he made accusations, someone was drawn to the scaffold and killed.

Politicians seek scapegoats all the time. "They" do not need to be foreigners. Jews have been a useful scapegoat for many dictators. Philosopher Hanna Arendt in her groundbreaking *The Origins of Totalitarianism* argued that there cannot be a totalitarian dictatorship without antisemitism. LGBT people and ethnic minorities have been a fodder for autocrats in the need of a mobilization. Not coincidentally, gay people were targets of vicious state propaganda in such different dictatorships as Hitler's Germany, Khomeini's Iran, and Putin's Russia. Still, nothing compares with using foreign enemies, real or imagined, as "they".

A century and twenty years after Robespierre, Stalin would use the same tactics to exterminate his domestic rivals. Every major decision was wrapped up as something being done in response to foreign affairs. Criticism of the leadership should be banned when the country is in danger. Discussions, even among the elite, are not allowed when the foreign threat is looming. Arbitrary arrests and summary executions are put in place because the country is at war. Needless to say, the drumbeat of "enemy at the gates" never

stopped, even when there was no foreign threat whatsoever. As a means of mobilizing support, foreign threats have always been a useful tool in a dictator's arsenal.

## Chapter 8

### PROTECTING THEIR POWER

Alexander Lukashenka has never been under such a threat as in the last days of August 2020. He has ruled Belarus, a country of ten million in eastern Europe, with a firm hand since 1994. He never allowed a credible opponent to appear in the presidential ballot. The electoral commission never gave him less than 80 percent of the vote. Not surprisingly, as he always appointed the commission members himself. Over the years, he fired scores of ministers, intimidated and jailed journalists, exiled, and, allegedly, killed opposition leaders. However, now he was in real danger.

A couple of months before, in May, it looked rather usual. A couple of businessmen who have fallen out of Lukashenka's favor announced that they will participate in the presidential elections scheduled for August. He put some opponents in jail. Others ran out of the country. A popular blogger announced a presidential campaign and was dispatched to jail as well. Lukashenka just did not want to run alone: he needed to make elections look democratic. Of course, he had the luxury that democratically elected leaders never enjoy – he could pick his opponent himself. And this is what he did: he chose an ideal opponent to run against, a person for whom his people would never vote.

Who would think Belarussians might vote for a woman? An English teacher with no political experience at all?! For 25 years, they were marching under the portraits of Lukashenka, who modeled himself after the macho military men of Hollywood movies. Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya was not even interested in politics until the day her husband, a blogger who planned to run for president, was put in jail. Now, her name was put on the ballot – exactly because the dictator did not believe that the people would support her.

Suddenly, Tsikhanouskaya was drawing huge crowds all over the small country. She would appear with two other women, the would-be managers of the campaigns of jailed candidates, and she would not even need to make a polished speech. The crowds got wild whenever she appeared.

Tsikhanouskaya's crowds were large, but the dictator kept the electoral commission, the people who count votes, in his fist. Multiple violations were reported throughout the country. Independent estimates of the actual outcome were all in Tsikhanouskaya favor, but the electoral commission announced that Lukashenka won with more than 80% of the vote, as always. Immediately after the announcement, the commission proceeded to destroy the ballots so that even a partial recount would be impossible.

Then it got worse for Lukashenka. Cheated of their vote, hundreds of thousands marched through the streets of Minsk, demanding change. A hundred thousand in a country of ten million is equivalent to three million in the United States; there has never been a march like this. Lukashenka tried to gather a crowd of his own, coming to a factory with workers who were shepherded to greet him. He was yelled out of the meeting.

Just 30 years before, a dictator would not survive such an upheaval. In the Philippines in 1986, the long-term incumbent Ferdinand Marcos was declared the winner of elections but did not survive the mass protests that followed. In Chile in 1988, the military dictatorship of General Pinochet ended when the dictator was forced to admit that the majority voted against him at a referendum. In the late 1980s, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed after days of people's demonstrations similar to Minsk protests in 2020. Their internal support waned when the police and security services saw how unpopular the regime has become.

Dictators learn from the experience of the past. Lukashenka has survived an apparent loss of elections and mass protests after he was declared, against the existing evidence, the winner of the August 2020 elections.

A story of how Lukashenka, a dictator in a tiny country, defeated a revolution might not merit inclusion in a book on its own. Yet his story was typical. It showcased everything dictators do to stay in power. People want change; they are no longer content with the elite by extracting the surplus of their labor and efforts. They want their taxes to be spent not on luxury cars and yachts for the dictator's family and his sons, but on health care and education. They do not want businesses to be expropriated or closed because the dictator's bureaucrats now want competition for the businesses they protect. And people

understand what they need to get access to better health care and higher standards of living: they need political representation. People want to have a say in how things are run.

Yet authoritarian leaders have a whole arsenal of instruments to deny citizens the opportunity to replace them. Dictators use state funds to pay their supporters, purge their would-be opponents, falsify election results, repress the populace, censor information, etc. When all of these methods are exhausted, they intimidate, terrorize, and kill not only the opponents, but also their would-be supporters.

In this chapter, I describe the methods that authoritarian regimes employ to maintain power. The essence of a rigid political system is that it resists change. The elites would not want to get rid of the system, which makes them rich and allows them to stay in power indefinitely.

In part, this rigidity is intellectual: those in power cannot comprehend a world in which it is not them who direct how the country lives. In a country after a country, even enlightened nobles would resist sharing power with the people. Then, with the franchise already extended to include millions, they would resist including women, poor, ethnic minorities, etc. The opposition was not necessarily ideological. Allowing for changes will force the current elites to share their rent. Anticipating that, they resist.

Fighting against people demanding change comes at a cost. The suppression of information and the restriction of media freedom result in suboptimal policy decisions and inefficient implementation. Expropriating, in the absence of rule of law, businesses that support political rivals disincentivizes innovation. Executing or jailing opposition figures raises stakes when the regime is eventually overthrown. Yet, these are the costs that authoritarian leaders choose to impose on the countries they run.

### *The Spin Dictators*

Economist Sergei Guriev and political scientist Dan Triesman have a special name for modern authoritarian leaders, the *spin dictators*. Back in old days of totalitarian dictatorships, leaders like Stalin, Hitler, or Mao ruled by terror, killing, arresting, torturing, or exiling their political opponents. They targeted primarily intellectuals and people with military backgrounds. The former were dangerous because they spread ideas.

From their newspaper articles, pamphlets, or public speeches people learned that another way is possible. That being constantly exploited is not the only existing option.

The people with military background were dangerous for the regime because they played a critical role in spearheading people into action. To ensure regime safety, they should be physically eliminated. Even more critically, their voices must not be heard. Direct censorship and harsh punishment for spreading information were ubiquitous.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, authoritarian leaders manipulate information by controlling the state media, pressuring independent media outlets into self-censorship, and flooding social media with government-friendly content. They no longer arrest millions and send them to concentration camps as Stalin, Hitler, or Mao. They do not carry out public executions as Pol Pot, Hussein, or Nguema. Instead, they rely on selective censorship, digital surveillance, and sophisticated propaganda. They are, as Guriev and Treisman call them, *informational autocrats*.

It did not start in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Propaganda was a cornerstone of totalitarian rule in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Mao's China. Propaganda was everywhere. Newspapers and radio waves were filled with reports on successes, real or imaginary. People were hearing about new factories producing record-breaking amount of steel and concrete, giant electric power stations, hundreds of miles of new autobahns... – without getting any idea about the costs, material and human.

Propaganda made the country leaders look larger than life. It asserted their moral infallibility and hinted at their superhuman abilities. They were “The Incorruptible” (Robespierre), “The Great Helmsman” (Stalin), “Red Sun in Our Hearts” (Mao), “Fatherly Leader” (Kim Il-sung), or simply “Führer” (Hitler). “Führer” is literally just a “leader”, but the meaning was to be the infallible embodiment of the German people’s will. The image was built to instill reverence, loyalty, fear – and adoration.

The positive propaganda emphasized the regime’s achievement and leader’s personal qualities. It was always paired with negative propaganda about foreign enemies. In a tightly controlled authoritarian regime, each citizen needed to be aware of how bad things are in other countries and how corrupt, gullible, and stupid the foreign leaders were. For

a person living in the West, it is impossible to imagine what percentage was foreign news in USSR or China's information diet.

Information autocrats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are different. The purpose of propaganda is no longer to make the leader look like a father of the nation or a protector of the realm. Instead, the purpose is to maintain the leader's reputation as a strong and competent hand. They are smart managers, not wise helmsmen. They are no longer shepherds of the herd – they are the articulators of the herd's needs.

Information manipulation becomes more and more sophisticated over time. In his book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, political scientist Peter Pomerantsev brings up an unsettling portrait of a country in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here reality is shaped by television studios, public life is staged like performance art, and truth is subordinate to spectacle. State-controlled media manufactures political narratives, promotes conspiracy theories, and recycles ideologies. The power of this propaganda lies in bringing confusion rather than coercion. Pomerantsev writes about Putin's Russia, but it just the place that he knows best. It is a new kind of authoritarianism—one that thrives on cynicism, disinformation, and the collapse of shared reality.

In a democracy, it is supposedly harder to manipulate information. Fake news is being fact checked, ungrounded allegations can be rebutted, and a suspicious information can be cross-checked using alternative source of information. But look around – Does anyone pay attention to fact-checking? How many people search for info to verify that a news bit is true? A lot of people are massively misinformed even when information is readily available. It is ten-fold more problematic in authoritarian regimes, where the government blocks alternative sources of information.

From the regime standpoint, limiting people's access to alternative sources of information is critical. Without it, propaganda becomes far less potent. The people will not be fed state propaganda, if they can receive information elsewhere. In the dystopian world of George Orwell's novel *1984*, citizens cannot, physically, switch off the radio which spits propaganda. At the minimum volume, they have to constantly hear the information that the government wants them to hear. In the real world, the same goal is

achieved by blocking access to alternative sources. And what is left to consume is filled with manipulated information.

The tools of information manipulation might be new, but the purpose is the same. In institutional terms, propaganda is always a part of political institutions of exclusion. It preserves the elite rents by limiting people's participation in the government. Through love or through fear, propaganda makes people less interested in demanding change or participating in the political process.

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One thing that authoritarian regimes love to lie about is that they are democratic. They copy constitutions and electoral systems of the United State, Britain, or France, and add the word "Democratic" to the name of their country. They give their leaders titles of a president or a prime minister. Sometimes, they go at big lengths to pretend that they are accountable for people in the same way as leaders in democracies are. Almost in every country on Earth, regardless of how non-democratic it actually is, has regular elections. Or, more precisely, they have regularly scheduled procedures that are called "elections".

Autocrats give their regimes every appearance of a democracy, but the critical difference is always on full display. The prime goal of any extractive regime is to keep the power in the hands of the incumbents. The political system is designed to deny the change at the top, rather than to facilitate it.

Political scientist Adam Przeworski offered a brilliantly simple definition of a democratic country. It is where incumbent leaders lose elections. If a country calls itself a democracy and conducts regular elections, but the president stays the same, it is not a democracy.

In fact, the word "lose" might be more important than the word "elections". The flexibility of a political system is in that there are institutions that force constant replacement of the incumbents. The selection of new leaders does not need to involve every citizen. The political system might be flexible even if not every adult citizen has a vote.

When we discussed flexible political systems, there was an important exception. It does not need to be a democracy. In the decades that followed 1976, the year when Chairman Mao died, China has undergone a profound economic transformation. It was not short of a revolution in the economic sphere. The political system, deeply undemocratic, remained virtually unchanged. The Communist Party has been the sole decision-maker.

The critical element that made this political system flexible was its commitment to constant renewal. The China's leader, the man at the top, wielded enormous power. And still, he had to step down after his term in power was over.

China was not the only country with a non-democratic, yet flexible political system. For sixty years since the end of the Mexican revolution and up until mid-1990s, Mexico was a one-party state. The Institutional Revolutionary Party was, in a sense, the state. One of the founding principles of the party and the state during this period was that each president has a term of six years. A president had a lot of power while in office and the possibility to influence the choice of a successor from within the party ranks, but no way to extend the tenure beyond the limit. No exceptions.

The system served Mexico well. It delivered decades of growing prosperity without major crises. It helped to transition to a competitive democracy, in which the opposition regularly wins, by the end of the 20th century. One-party systems delivered for other countries as well. The Japan's economic miracle after the painful defeat in World War II has happened largely under the one-party rule. It was not an ideal democracy, as citizens had little to say over which party was in power. Still, it worked because within the single party, the process was highly institutionalized and fiercely competitive. There has never been a serious danger that a leader will stay in power too long.

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Every autocrat tries to get rid of any institution that helps citizens to replace them. If they were able to make elections a complete farce, they certainly would. If they cannot, they try to steal as many votes as possible. Many countries end up in a situation in which elections regularly happen and votes are counted, but the incumbent does have a significant advantage. If there is a tidal wave of discontent – say, 80 percent of voters

want the incumbent out, then the opposition wins. But if it is only, say, 55 percent in favor of the opposition, then the official count shows the incumbent winning.

Political economists have been putting a lot of effort to develop statistical methods that make it possible to detect electoral fraud. Nowadays, it is relatively straightforward to check if the election authorities simply added some votes to the final tally. To make sure that the massive fraud is going unnoticed, modern autocrats resort to sophisticated techniques of fraud. If this fails, they have to rely on brute force.

Sometimes, it is a question why authoritarian regimes have elections at all. In a democracy, electoral fraud might tip the outcome of a close election. If citizens are unaware of the fraud or consider its extent negligible, they may perceive the outcome as legitimate. So, if fraud remains undetected, it can influence the outcome. In non-democracies, electoral fraud is often so extensive, and violations of due procedure are so numerous and transparent that it begs a question: why is it rational to hold fraudulent elections that citizens easily identify as such? Why organize such elections at all?

Political scientists offer a number of explanations why authoritarian regimes organize elections. Some argue that these are not elections, but rather a projection of strength. The regime demonstrates its ability to “force people to appear in a particular place on a particular day and perform the act of throwing a piece of paper into a designated box.” Others argue that by announcing fraudulent results, the regime tries to prevent an uprising. Though citizens know that election results are manipulated by the incumbent and realize that the reported outcome exaggerates the incumbent's true popularity, they still interpret the announced results as a sign of genuine support.

Fraudulent elections are far worse than elections free of fraud. Yet in some circumstances they might be better than no elections at all. Even if the dictator controls the voting process and has means to manipulate the announced final tally, they might be able to gauge the extent of citizens' dissatisfaction or to learn about their specific concerns. In China, there are no elections to province- or national-wide office, but there were some competitive elections at the village level. It might be that elections, even if manipulated ones, were the regime's tool for collecting information about peasants' concerns.

## *The Executioners*

In a good history book on Stalin, one would read “Malenkov purged Rostov” describing a career step of one of the Stalin’s top lieutenants. The *purge* is a relatively neutral word. “I need to purge some old video clips from my iPhone to free up space.” Yet when a dictator acts to protect his power, it is not innocuous. In “Malenkov purged Rostov,” the word hides is a train full of police operatives, interrogators, and guards traveling to the provincial city with Malenkov. It is them who would catch those unfortunates who were denounced at the party meeting, search their apartments, steal what was valuable in the process, interrogate them the say day, beating until the arrested confessed whatever the interrogators told them to confess to, and then repeat day after day, bringing more and more people in. In a few weeks’ time, a person, not fully comprehending what is going on because of torture, malnutrition, and sleep deprivation, will be drugged out the overcrowded camera, brought to another one, and killed by a shot in the head. A person after a person, a night after a night.

This was the treatment Stalin reserved for his enemies. The word *purge* covers it all: arrests, beatings, twenty-minute trials, and executions. Spouses and older kids will be disposed of as well; small kids will end up in an orphanage.

Suppressing political dissent is very often brutal. Stalin and Hitler were perhaps exceptions. They built killing machines in big countries (most of millions of Hitler’s innocent victims came from occupied territories of other countries). The number of victims was so large that it is difficult for us to adequately comprehend the scale; equally difficult is to see the faces of individuals behind the statistics. Yet Stalin and Hitler were exceptionally brutal because of the scale; they were not exceptional in what they were doing. Brutality is a fairly standard tactic of authoritarian regimes. There have been some regimes that rely primarily on propaganda and resource-sharing, yet violence is the most common tool of any extractive regime.

With Hitler’s end in 1945 and Stalin’s death in 1953, the era when Europe was dominated by totalitarian dictators was over. In the next decades, some of the bloodiest dictators emerged from revolutionary or nationalist movements that were building extractive regimes of their own. In Cambodia, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge sought to create an

agrarian utopia by forcibly depopulating cities, abolishing money, and eliminating perceived enemies of the revolution. Between 1975 and 1979, nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population—an estimated 1.5 to 2 million people—were killed through executions, forced labor, and starvation.

Elsewhere, military and personalist regimes produced their own brands of bloodshed. Saddam Hussein in Iraq used chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians, suppressed Shiite uprisings, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands. In Uganda, Idi Amin's brutal reign (1971–1979) was marked by ethnic purges, political killings, and widespread terror that claimed the lives of at least 100,000 to 300,000 people. Meanwhile, North Korea's Kim dynasty built a closed, totalitarian state through a system of political prisons, mass starvation, and relentless purges—policies that have killed hundreds of thousands, if not more, under Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un, a grandfather, a father, and a son. These regimes, often cloaked in revolutionary and nationalistic rhetoric, would not be viable without mass repression.

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Ethnic cleansing is another instrument in an extractive regime's toolkit. For Stalin, it was a tool that he used frequently. After the Soviet Union occupied the Eastern part of Poland in 1939, over the 140,000 ethnic Poles were arrested. More than a hundred thousand were executed, and tens of thousands more were deported to labor camps. The goal of the operation was to quell possible rebellion in occupied territories. The executioners specifically targeted intellectuals, government officials, and military officers. If there were a revolt against the occupiers, they would be the backbone of the movement.

In February 1944, Stalin launched the Operation Lentil, in which the entire Chechen and Ingush populations—about half a million people—were deported to the steppe areas of Central Asia. Thousands died during transport or from starvation and disease in exile. In May 1944, the entire population of Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority is what nowadays is Crimea—about 200,000 people— was forcibly deported to Central Asia. As with Chechen and Ingush, thousands died from hunger, disease, or exposure. The Soviet regime attempted to erase traces of Tatar heritage in Crimea, renaming towns and destroying cemeteries.

Since the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic regime in Iran has used executions as a critical tool of political repression and social control. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, thousands of officials, soldiers, and perceived supporters of the Shah were executed in summary trials. The most infamous episode came in 1988, when the regime secretly executed an estimated 4,000–5,000 political prisoners, primarily leftists and Marxist Islamists. Executions in Iran have continued at one of the highest rates in the world, targeting political dissidents, ethnic and religious minorities, and participants in mass protests. Public hangings, often conducted without fair trials, serve both as punishment and as a spectacle of deterrence.

In recent years, the regime has increasingly turned to capital punishment in response to domestic unrest. As always, the increasing reliance on executions of political opponents and their supporters is simultaneously a sign of growing public discontent and the ability of the inhumane regime to retain power.

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In an inclusive political regime, laws protect citizens' rights to have their day in court, and courts are not dependent on the executive to pronounce judgements. The police follow laws, not the whims of the president. Those who are unhappy with the laws on the books or the government actions can launch an advocacy campaign without fear of retribution. They can run for office – in democracies, the opposition regularly win elections, taking over the government. This is what makes a regime inclusive.

It is all hugely different in extractive regimes. Institutions, laws, courts, police – they all function to protect the elite's hold on power. Elections, if there are elections, are organized in a way that makes it extremely difficult for the opposition to win. Ideally, the opposition does not have any chance at all. Laws are written to stiffen dissent, not to encourage it. The dissent itself might be criminalized; in other cases, it is any real form of protest – demonstrations, posters, free speech – that is restricted and criminalized. Even if laws on books protect people's rights, judges interpret them in the elite's favor. Police and intelligence services target not common criminals, but ordinary people whose main "crime" is political dissent.

Punishing dissent includes hefty fines, arrests, jailing, or exiles. Not surprisingly, when the revolution wins, the defenders of the old regime are often treated harshly.

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The regime's brutality is a breeding ground for violence during the revolution. When the new regime executes former state officials, government bureaucrats, judges, generals, and police officers, there is always a revenge component.

Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution, has ample political reasons to execute the former tsar Nicholas II and his family, including women and kids. With a tsar or any of his close relatives alive, they could be a banner for any counterrevolutionary movement if they fall into the wrong hands. Executing young princesses and a gravely ill 10-year-old heir to the throne would mark the point of no return for the revolutionary leadership, a commitment that Lenin might have wanted to make. In cold political calculus, the benefits might have outweighed the costs of committing an atrocity. Yet Lenin's decision was perhaps easier to make as his beloved older brother was hanged on the orders of Nicholas II's father back when Lenin was a teenager. Letting former tsar to be executed was, among other things, personal revenge.

What causes violence in revolutions is the classic "What comes first – the chicken or the egg?" question. Chickens hatch from eggs, but eggs are laid by chickens. The guardians of the old regime executed revolutionaries fearing that if the revolutionaries took power, they would commit unimaginable atrocities against the guardians of the old regime. Once in power, revolutionaries execute the guardians of the old regime because they were responsible for execution of their comrades-in-arms back under the old regime.

That does not need to be revenge, though. Joseph Stalin waged his ultimate campaign to consolidate power twenty years after the Russian Revolution. In 1937-39, years of the Great Terror, 700,000 people were executed, and almost 2 million went to concentration camps and prisons. Some high profile individuals who led the revolution two decades earlier went to the staged public trials. These were former comrades, not former enemies.

Most of these hundreds of thousands were eliminated for mere belonging to a certain group, be it former nobles, civil servants under the monarchy, or members of intra-party opposition in 1920s. The explicit orders from the very top made social groups, rather than

individuals, targets for the terror. This made it very effective as a tool of making sure that the power of the new tsar is unchallenged.

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Revolutionaries are often bloodthirsty. Historians are sometimes more bloodthirsty than revolutionaries. R.R. Palmer, the author of *The Twelfth Who Ruled*, a gripping account of the Jacobin Terror, calculated that Robespierre and the Committee for Public Safety executed *too little* upon taking power. Forty thousand people, in this historian's count, is nothing to compare what the real revolutionary terror does. Maybe the unfolding tragedy in Europe – the book was published in 1941 – altered the author's perspective. Maybe the revolutionary civil wars of in Russia and China in the previous decades, in which millions were killed, increased the author's bar for terror. Maybe, an unforgettable sin for a historian, the author fell in love with the historic figure that he studied. Or maybe it is the ever-present allure of being present, virtually, at the physical elimination of the old world.

Million young people world-wide wear T-shirts with the portrait of Che Guevarra, a leader of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. The popular T-shirt displays *Guerrillero Heroico* the iconic image taken by photographer Alberto Korda in 1960. Che is in a beret, gazing sternly into the distance—rendered in bold, high-contrast black and red. The image has become a global fashion statement, often stripped of its political context and worn as a generic emblem of rebellion, counterculture, or cool defiance.

As a story of a revolutionary hero, the Che's story is rather mundane. The old regime, a populist military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, was archetypical for the region and for the time. It was repressive and thoroughly corrupt. The elite benefited from doing business with American mafia controlling drug trade, gambling, and prostitution – illegal in the United States, but legal just a couple of hours away from the American shores. The majority of Cubans have a choice – stay in your village or come to cities to work entertaining American tourists – but not much beyond that.

By the late 1950-s, the old regime had well outlived its purpose. The “world's casino” generated enormous profits for the elites. The average income was among the highest in Latin America, but that was only because it averaged out luxurious life of a narrow elite

and subsistence for the majority of the population. A guerilla movement led by a young charismatic lawyer Fidel Castro and an Argentinian-born nurse Che Guevarra had become a formidable force that hold its ground against Batista forces. It defeated the Cuban regular military in a number of engagements and terrorized the government in the cities. On the eve of the new 1959 year, Batista fled the country when the fall of Havana to rebels became imminent.

In the post-revolutionary government, Che was responsible for the revolutionary justice. His cosmopolitan background, extensive travel across Latin America, and wide literary interests have not impaired his revolutionary zeal. As a guerilla commander, he was known as a ruthless disciplinarian, often carrying summary executions of the comrades that have fallen below the high standards of a revolutionary. Now, hundreds of the old regime's officials were dispatched to firing squads after kangaroo trials by "revolutionary tribunals". Eight days into the new era, Che Guevarra ordered an execution of a local police chief to be filmed. Then the footage was released to TV stations world-wide.

The Che's projects in the revolutionary government were as ambitious as they were short-lived. The new leadership tried to do all good things at once: they wanted to dramatically reduce the social inequality, make the agriculture more efficient, and spearhead Cuba's industrial development. They nationalized factories, banks, and businesses, closing down the casinos and brothels. Advisers from the Soviet Union were invited to help charting the new course.

In three years, the reforms, carried out with revolutionary zeal and little economic analysis, failed miserably. In 1962, the government had to implement food rationing, a previously unthinkable measure in a predominantly agricultural country. Unthinkable – if the history lessons are ignored. In most countries that collectivized agriculture, it led to dramatic losses; the pre-reform production would normally be restored when the reforms are abandoned or relaxed.

Che did not simply ignore the failure of the economic policies he was responsible for. He moved on. As a representative of the Cuban government in the United Nations, he made stirring speeches on the necessity of the world revolution. Not only the capitalist

society was an enemy. Che was no longer content with the socialist approach of the Soviet Union. Countries as different as Algeria, India, and Congo, all of them needed a revolution. Che briefly traveled to Congo to fight with the guerillas there but found their revolutionary spirit wanting.

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution travelled a typical path. Fidel Castro swiftly pushed out his former comrades-in-arms and consolidated the regime under his personal rule. The institutions of government were new, and the communist rhetoric innovative, but in practice it was a new set of extractive institutions. Instead of corrupt plutocrats exploiting the Cubans, there were corrupt communist leaders exploiting the majority of Cubans as harshly. After fifty years under the Castro regime, Cubans' standards of living were roughly the same as under the Batista's regime on the eve of the revolution.

The fate of Che, a revolutionary leader, a failed reformer, and a stirring speaker, was as typical as the fate of the Cuban Revolution. Fidel Castro did not want to share power with his old comrades-in-arms – just as Joseph Stalin did not want to share power with his old comrades in the Soviet Union. Castro encouraged Che's engagements in guerilla struggles elsewhere. In 1967, Che, who was fighting with the Bolivian rebels against the national government, was caught by a unit of Bolivian special forces. On a phone order by the Bolivian president, he was executed without a trial.

### *Violence in the Dark*

Courts and police are not always enough for dictators willing to stay in power. Political assassinations are another tool in the hands of a dictator. Back centuries ago, killing a political opponent meant just killing a person. French king Henry III ordered his bodyguards to assassinate Henry, Duke of Guise, his boyhood friend, and a dynastic rival, in the hope to end the bloody civil war. Even an autocrat as powerful as the French king in 16<sup>th</sup> century, Henry III was not able to count on laws and courts to have his way with Duke of Guise. The duke was too popular to have him arrested and tried secretly. His following was too strong to keep him in jail indefinitely. An assassination, in Henry III's thinking, was to resolve these issues.

In the modern history, opposition politicians are killed when those in power feel threatened. I personally knew two politicians who were assassinated because they challenge the autocrat clinging to power in my home country, Russia. Their names are Boris Nemtsov and Alexey Navalny and the autocrat they challenged was Vladimir Putin.

By 2025, Vladimir Putin has been at the helm of Russia uninterrupted for 25 years. A quarter of century in power made him one of the longest-serving leaders in Russian history. What makes Putin's political longevity puzzling is the absence of any distinguishing characteristics, personal or political, that would single him out. He has not possessed any qualities that would distinguish him from others, other than the office he holds. He has been an uninspiring speaker, his expressions formulaic, if not outright primitive. He has been often slow to absorb new information and struggled to remember names and numbers. He has never been good in establishing rapport with the audience, and has had a mediocre, thuggish sense of humor at best. Not surprisingly, he had never made much of an impression until he was appointed acting president. Once he did, his apparent charm was the product of the respect commanded by his office, not his personality.

By contrast, Boris Nemtsov, an opposition leader, made an impression wherever he went whether among seasoned diplomats at an embassy reception or inmates in a prison colony. If Putin were to enter a room unannounced, no one would notice him. Nemtsov commanded attention wherever he went.

In democratic politics, it is necessary to find a common language with the average voter, and a high IQ is not always an asset. Nemtsov had a remarkably high IQ: before going into politics, he defended a PhD in radio physics and published well in academic journals. And yet he excelled in establishing rapport with voters. He was a popular governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region during the most difficult crisis years in the 1990s. Running against local machine politicians, he received tens of thousands of votes in mayoral elections in Sochi and local elections in Yaroslavl.

In times when corruption was pervasive, Nemtsov personified honesty in politics. Many government officials enriched themselves in the 1990s, but not Nemtsov, who spent half of those years in the highest echelons of power. Under Putin, the secret service and

police were more bent on digging up dirt on Nemtsov than on anyone else. And despite all of their efforts, they failed to discredit Putin's most relentless and outspoken opponent.

The rise of Putin drove politicians of the 1990s into the wilderness. Nemtsov, who was a governor and a deputy prime minister long before – when Putin was a local nobody, demonstrated incredible strength of character by restarting his political career from scratch in the mid-2000s. He devoted himself to improving conditions for his fellow citizens, working at the grassroots. And he remained one of the most morally consistent politicians. In the 1990s, he led the campaign to collect a million signatures in opposition to the imperial Chechen War. In 2014, he organized rules to oppose Putin's annexation of Ukrainian Crimea.

And if that were not enough, Nemtsov was tall, strong, and full of personal charm. Perhaps he was an ideal candidate for president, but by the time of his death Russia did not have any meaningful elections where he would have been able to run. Putin was afraid to run against any serious politicians, and the election official stood ready to throw away any votes that would put Putin's predetermined victory in doubt.

On 27 February 2015 Nemtsov was assassinated while walking across the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge in Moscow, just 200 meters away from the Kremlin wall. A brave man, he did not use bodyguards. He was shot multiple times in the back and died on the spot. At the midnight hour, there were only a few witnesses, but there were numerous security cameras, including cameras managed by the Kremlin security. This footage has never been made available to the investigators.

The Nemtsov murder illustrates a common feature of political assassination. It is easy to say who benefited from the murder and it is easy to see the ways it could have been organized by the beneficiary. Putin was the main beneficiary, and perhaps the only one who benefited from the murder. The low-level militants who were caught, tried, and sentenced for the Nemtsov's murder worked for Putin's close associates. The investigators were banned from investigating their superiors, and the extensive security camera footage made by the state security services was not made available to the police investigators.

Whom would the state security services protect, going at such lengths to limit the police investigation?

This double feature – the beneficiary is clear, yet the actual evidence is not available – is common in political assassinations. Many dictators are not powerful enough to have an opposition leader tried, sentenced, and executed, yet are powerful enough to block an investigation made by someone on their behest.

Benigno Aquino, an eloquent and charismatic leader of Philippines opposition, a former governor, senator, and a political prisoner, was assassinated on Sunday, August 21, 1983, on the apron of Manila International. He returned to Philippines after three years of self-exile in the United States, and was greeted by thousands, including hundreds of secret service and police officers who were supposed to take him into custody. His return was a major threat to the increasingly authoritarian ways of President Ferdinand Marcos. Prior to his exile, Aquino was kept in prison. Now, with the country in turmoil, he was ready to seize the day.

In fifty seconds after leaving his seat in the airplane, Aquino was dead, shot in the head. The murder was investigated as perhaps no other political assassination save for the JFK assassination in Dallas. It was first investigated by the Marcos-controlled investigators; then, with Marcos government overthrown, by other investigating teams. Dozens of low-level operatives went to prison, some were pardoned, some were sentenced again, etc. Forty years later, it is still unknown who pulled the trigger and who ordered the assassination. And yet the primary beneficiary, the incumbent president, was known on day one.

It is hard to believe but sometimes the story is different. Another political assassination in Putin's Russia, an attempt on the life of Alexei Navalny, the next-generation leader of the opposition, was investigated so thoroughly that there is no room for doubt. Putin did order the assassination.

The motive was always there. Putin hated Navalny so much that he has never been able to utter his name in public, always referring to the opposition leader as “that person” or something similar. Perhaps he feared Navalny as well. When the assassination attempt

failed, Putin's people worked hard to cover the tracks. Eventually, they put Navalny in jail and killed him there in February 2024. In 2020, Alexey survived.

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“And you were right [in your social media post],” wrote Alexey to me in a message when he was recovering in Germany, “It’s like watching how a sausage is made.” He referred to my blog post sharing the story of the assassination attempt on his life four months before that. The story was a joint publication by Cristo Grozev, a star of European investigative journalism from the Bellingcat group, CNN, and Navalny’s own team. The details were so granular and so greasy that I compared it with proverbial sausage-making in a blog post. A lot of people love sausages but would never want to see how they were made. It was good to have a solid confirmation that it was the Russian secret police that tried to assassinate Alexey, but the details were really unpleasant to read.

On 20 August 2020, Alexey Navalny felt unwell on the return flight to Moscow from the city of Tomsk, the university capital of Siberia, where he came to address local activists. He rose from his seat to go to a restroom but collapsed between the aisles and lost consciousness. The flight made an emergency landing in Omsk, one of the largest cities in Siberia. The first medic that came onboard made the right decision that saved Navalny’s life. Without any tests, but perhaps assuming the worst, he gave him a shot of atropine, which is used to counteract certain nerve agents and pesticide poisoning.

The atropine shot was the last thing that was done right in the next 24 hours. Doctors in the local hospital seemed to be concerned far more about concealing what happened to Navalny, rather than working to save him. The director of the Omsk clinic insisted that this cannot be poisoning, and that the patient should be treated for something else. He was trying hard to prevent Navalny’s wife Yulia, his colleagues, and doctors that they brought to Moscow to get access to him. At the same time, unknown people in civilian clothes – most likely, security service – were, apparently, welcome in the hospital.

What the Navalny’s team was able to do was to draw immediate attention to what was happening. International media reported the news. Politicians and media figures around the world express concerns. A German charity paid for a charter plane that was sent to evacuate Navalny for treatment at the Charité Clinic in Berlin, the prime hospital in

Europe specializing in poisoning treatment. This plane was idling on the tarmac at the Omsk airport for another 24 hours – the local doctors that “treated” Navalny declared he was too sick to be transported.

Ultimately, a German doctor was granted access – he found Navalny in a critical condition, but not receiving any treatment. If not for the world-wide media outcry and relentless persistence of Yulia and Navalny’s team, they security services that controlled everything in the hospital would not let him go. Eventually, they relented and he arrived in Berlin on August 22, more than 48 hours after his fall.

In Berlin clinic, his life was saved. He was discharged from the hospital a month later. Laboratory tests, later supported by test results in Sweden and France, confirmed the presence of Novichok—a banned military-grade chemical weapon—on Navalny’s body and personal items, including his underwear. Traces of Novichok were found in Navalny’s blood, urine, skin samples and personal items that the team picked up in his Tomsk hotel room after the poisoning and smuggled to Germany.

The attack was widely condemned. World leaders like German Chancellor Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson denounced the assassination attempt and demanded accountability from the Russian government

But the fascinating part of the story was only beginning. The Russian government did not open a criminal investigation – why would it, if the doctors on the ground determined that there was no poisoning? And yet the attempt on Navalny’s life was thoroughly investigated. Bellingcat, an international investigative group, and its partners uncovered evidence implicating FSB, the Russian main secret service, the heir of the dreaded KGB of Soviet times, in the assassination attempt. Telecom and travel data revealed a secretive sub-unit within FSB, an institute specializing in chemical weapons. Officers working in this institute had been shadowing Navalny on multiple trips. The investigators got their names, military ranks, career descriptions, home addresses, and other personal details. High-ranked security agents specializing in chemical warfare were tailing Alexey for several months, including the fateful trip to Tomsk.

At this point, there was very little doubt that this is a state-sponsored assassination attempt. Operation on such a scale and involving that many officers, a whole unit, high ranks, would not be possible until sanctioned at the very top. The use of the military-grade chemical weapon, confirmed by independent laboratories, tied the story together. And yet it was not the most fascinating part.

Alexey Navalny was a brilliant politician, not only brave and clear-headed, but also possessing a unique ability to connect with people. Wherever he went – to an embassy reception or to campaign on a street – he has always talked to strangers as if he knew them for a lifetime. He was even able to bond with police officers who were arresting him – he was detained many times.

This time, after his team learned all the relevant details, he impersonated Putin's administration official. He called an FSB officer, the operative that actually poisoned Navalny's underwear in the Tomsk hotel, and the officer apparently believed that he was talking to a superior. Being recorded, he confirmed the whole story and filled in missing details!

Listening to the recorded confession was chilling and hilarious at the same time. The state-sponsored assassination attempt was investigated, by private entities, to the extent that political assassinations are never investigated. The only detail missing was the personal order from Putin to the director of FSB and then to the operatives, but such orders never exist in written anyway.

The end of the story was tragic. Alexey returned to Russia in January 2021, half a year after the Tomsk assassination attempt, two months after they published the results of their investigation. Putin considered the opposition leader a mortal danger. His plane, a regular commercial flight, was diverted to another airport to make it impossible for his supporters to greet him. He was arrested at the passport control, thrown in jail, and sentenced, in a process that mocked the very idea of a fair trial, to years in jail.

From jail, he continued to rally his supporters. Through his lawyers and relatives, he kept in contact with comrades and friends. The last time we exchanged messages with him was when he was already in jail. Alexey asked a question about my argument in a radio interview – I do not know if he had a chance to listen, or saw the transcript printed

for him. I did not persuade him on the point we disagreed then, and I will never have a chance to do that.

When Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was a point of no return. From prison, Navalny used every opportunity to speak against the war. The war was a crime against Ukrainians. The war was against the Russia's interests. Probably then Putin decided to have him killed. In time, when the regime was stable, it was enough to silence the opposition leader. In time, when the regime had to jail thousands and force tens of thousands into exile, they needed the opposition leader dead.

Navalny was denied a means of communication with the outside world. His lawyers were arrested and jailed as well. He was put into increasingly inhumane conditions, humiliated and tortured by his handlers. Eventually, he was transferred to a faraway prison in a small village in Russian Far North, where he was out of reach for media, lawyers, or family members. He was pronounced dead on 16 February 2024.

In the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone*, mad King Creon refuses to let relatives to bury the body of Polynices, his enemy. It is meant as a cruel message to the public: the rebel's dead body is not to be sanctified by holy rites and will lie unburied. In a grim and grotesque replay of the ancient tragedy, Putin agents did not release Navalny's body to his mother for more than a week. Most likely, there was no symbolism in that for Putin. His agents needed time to make sure that the real cause of death cannot be establish. This is what dictators do in their lust for power. They kill those who challenge them.

## Chapter 9

### LEADERS

In iconic images, revolutionary leaders stand tall on critical days. Polish trade union leader Lech Walesa, his fist high in the air, talking to Gdansk shipyard workers in the high days of 1980 labor strike. Iran's ayatollah Khomeini stepping out of the airplane that brought him to Tehran after many years of exile. Russia's Boris Yeltsin speaking from a tank to the crowd of supporters on the second day of the military putsch in August 1991. These are the leaders of revolutions that succeeded.

There are other revolutionary leaders – those who did not succeed. In Chapter 5, we followed the life of Stepan Bandera, a leader of a revolution that has never happened in his lifetime. In Chapter 7, we saw leaders who were killed never having a chance to finish their revolution. In this Chapter, we will go through more history. A story of a person who was a young revolutionary, but then his life took a very different path. A fulfilling path, but very different.

In this chapter, there are stories of four women who played important roles in revolutions. One of them died old, in a safe place, but with the battle of her life lost. Another was killed by the enemies of the revolution – because being a revolutionary is dangerous. Yet another did contribute mightily to the success of her revolution but was killed by the revolution. Not by the counterrevolutionaries, but by those who consolidated power as a result of the revolution.

The last of the four female leaders was on the winning side both in and after the revolution, a no small feat on its own, but had to abandon the causes she fought for. It is not a coincidence. A woman might have a chance to play a major role in a revolution. After the revolution is over, she better goes back to the kitchen.

The gallery of revolutionary portraits would not be full if there were no ultimate winners. Those who are at the helm when the revolution is over. In that, there are certain laws of nature as well. The general rule is that the ultimate winners are typically the late

comers. When the revolution begins, they are busy elsewhere. Coming late has its own advantages.

### *Becoming a Revolutionary*

Many years later, Leo wrote in his memoir that he thought that his long adventure came to a sudden and unhappy end in the small town of Idiroko, Benin, a few hundred meters from the Benin border with Nigeria at 9:23 am on December 12, 1986. He thought that the security guard recognized him, a fugitive with a national profile, and he is going to be arrested and brought back to the torture chambers. However, it was not it. The security officer waived his hand, and the road to Lagos, Nigeria's capital, a major crossroad of the African continent, was free. After five years in a clandestine revolutionary organization, three months underground running from the security police, six months in the torture chamber known as 'the White House' in Guezo Barrack in Cotonou, and one year in the inferno of Segbana Jail in northern Benin, Leonard was finally free.

Back ten years before that, at the start of the typical revolutionary career, young Leo was a typical revolutionary material. A talented kid who was at the same time deeply concerned about the problems that plagued his country, Leo was a brilliant student in the country's most selective school and a top performer in national mathematical exams. He knew how much his father had to work in the field miles away from the village, where Leo and his siblings grew up, sleeping for weeks in a cave, and then getting his entire harvest taken away by the government's tax collector. The government of General Kerekou was preaching a Marxist-style socialist approach to the economy, yet it had the same tax, in absolute terms, for all the citizens. Obviously, this was very much benefiting mostly the wealthy. And the agents Kerekou sent to tax the peasants behaved exactly the same way as the bandits that the government has presumably defeated.

Economic injustice was not the only concern. Young Leo saw members of the Jehovah witnesses, a Christian sect, publicly tortured, because their faith did not allow them to praise the regime as was required. People were arbitrarily designated as witches – ironically, by communist government agents! – and buried alive. Leo, a graduate of a prestigious high school which he attended after a brilliant performance at the national exam, has not of course believed in witchcraft. He was different from his childhood friends

who had never left their village. He just did not want his mother to be accused of witchcraft at the whim of government agents.

As any revolutionary, a crucial realization for Leo was that the economic and social injustice his parents faced was not his parents' unique problem. The majority of Benin citizens had to deal with the same injustice. This is the critical step that every revolutionary has to take: Any person wants a better life for themselves and their relatives. A revolutionary wants to make life better for people.

Leo went through all the classic stages of a typical revolutionary. From a talented kid with a knack for hard sciences to an active participant in off-class discussion of events far away. In Leo's case, it was the Vietnam War, and the communist transformation of East European countries after World War II. Next, he joined the ranks of revolutionary practitioners. It went even further. Leo has become a student organizer with a nationally recognized name. He was threatened with arrest and spent five years underground, moving from one house to another to sleep another night, wearing disguise, and strictly limiting any new acquaintances.

Like many revolutionaries before and after him, Leo was betrayed by secret police agent and arrested. Held without a trial under horrible conditions, he was tortured and beaten for many weeks. Unbroken, he was trying to talk reason with his torturers and guards, and of course with the secret police officers who came to interrogate him.

At some point, the political winds changed direction. The dictator decided to negotiate with some of the revolutionary representatives. For Leo, prison conditions became less harsh. Beating, sleep deprivation, and other forms of torture that he was subject to almost daily, stopped. He was allowed medical leave, under guard supervision, to treat his arthritis. During the leave, he escaped and made his way to neighboring Nigeria, where he was eventually picked up by an international aid organization.

The story of Leonard Wantchekon has been a lucky one. Immediately after escaping Benin in December 1986, his dreams did not extend much beyond reaching Lagos in Nigeria. He wanted to tell the story of his brief stint as a young leftist agitator and two years in the torture chambers and on the run. As it turned out, the journey took him far further than this. He went on to study in Canada and then in the United States, where he

got a Ph.D. degree in Economics at Northwestern University. He became a professor first at Yale and then in Princeton and, as a professor, studied the political economy of dictatorships. When I first met him, we discussed not only our research, but the two passions we had in common. First, soccer. Second, the theory of groups, a field in abstract mathematics, which was a favorite subject of my undergraduate studies and helped Leonard not to grow mad during his long imprisonment.

Leonard's story is a lucky story of not only himself who made a splendid academic career in the United States. The fall of communist dictatorships in Europe shattered Marxist-Leninist regimes around the world as well. Facing the popular discontent, Mathieu Kérékou, the Beninese dictator since 1972, had to drop the Marxist-Leninist ideology and embrace democracy, allowing for political opposition and then competitive elections. The citizens of Benin had a firm grasp of electoral institutions as means of disciplining politicians. They voted the former leader out of power in 1991, and returned him back to the office in 1996, unsatisfied with his successor's performance. Since then, power has changed hands twice, in full accordance with the democratic constitution.

Now a Princeton professor, Leonard Wantchekon not only got his chance to return to his native Benin but also made a difference, founding the African School of Economics, a small private university headquartered in Abomey-Calavi. Back in 2004, it started with visiting professors from the West teaching local students. Now, with graduates in high demand throughout the region, it has become a key center for research and study of economics, finance and management in Africa.

Not all young revolutionaries were lucky. A young, idealistic, enthusiastic person joining a revolutionary movement faces many risks along the way. Some are arrested and tortured and then decide that the sacrifice is too much for them. Some stay tall and are executed, massacred, or crippled by protectors of the regime. Some become disillusioned and abandon their ideals and hopes. Some succeed in overthrowing the old regime, yet then found that a position of power is too attractive in itself to fixate on those old hopes and ideals. What the story of Leonard Wantchekon shows is that one can actually succeed.

## *The Forgotten Heroines*

Every revolution has its martyrs. There are people who were in from the very beginning and lost their lives in battle. Assassinated by the agents of the old regime even before the revolution started. Executed after first, early, unsuccessful attacks on the regime. Slaughtered in skirmishes over a critical stronghold. Killed when the new, their regime was establishing control and order after the victory of the revolution.

Yet there is also another category, and it is often more important than martyrs. In every revolution, there are people who started the revolution, fought the first battles, risked their lives, witnessed the destruction of the old regime and coming of the new order, and then... faded into obscurity. Some losing a power struggle among the winners. Some sidelined by their more ambitious partners in the revolution. Some are simply exhausted by the intensity of the revolutionary days.

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Herman Göring, a World War I combat pilot, Hitler's right-hand man, the leader of the National Social Democrats on the newly elected Reichstag, and, as such, the designated president of the body, had to wait. In due course, he will be elected to the post. He will hold it for thirteen long years, until April 1945, when the Führer, surrounded in his bunker by the Soviet troops, would expel Göring from the party, relieve of all posts, and accuse of treason. Göring would survive the last-minute execution by Hitler's loyalists, surrender to the US, stand the Nuremberg trial of major war criminals, and commit suicide hours before scheduled hanging. But this will be 13 long years later.

Today, in August 1932, it was Göring's hour of triumph. For the first time, the Nazi party became the largest party in the parliament. Next year, they will strike a deal with the shortsighted oligarchs of the Weimar republic. Hitler, the Nazi leader, will become the head of the government. Göring will be a cabinet minister. Using the new levers of power, Nazis will seize ultimate power by force. Right now, Göring just had to wait an hour. By the long-held tradition, the first session of the newly elected Reichstag was to be open by the eldest member. This time, by the mortal enemy of Nazis, seventy-five-year-old communist Clara Zetkin.

Born in the middle of the nineteenth century, Clara Josephine Eissner's revolutionary path was perhaps typical. She was born the eldest of three children in Wiederau, a peasant village in Saxony. Her father was a schoolmaster and a devout Protestant. Her mother moved to the countryside from the neighboring industrial city of Leipzig. She was a committed advocate for women's education—an uncommon belief in a time when women were expected to remain silent in public and obedient at home.

Clara's home was different. She read Goethe's poetry and Marx' radical political philosophy side by side. In her parents' house, rebellion wasn't a threat. It was a calling. She came of age not just amid books, but amid change. Industrialization was transforming Germany, sharpening social divisions, and fermenting political consciousness. When Clara turned 15, the family moved to Leipzig, where she had the opportunity to finish the teacher's college for women and become acquainted with modern revolutionary literature.

Clara Eissner did not inherit privilege. Instead, she inherited conviction. By the time she joined the German Social Democratic Party in her twenties, she had already internalized a lesson that many women were only beginning to realize. The fight for women's emancipation could not be separated from the fight for workers' rights. The social institutions of her day—parliaments, factories, schools—were designed to keep both groups in their place. That is what the exclusionary institutions do: they keep people in their place. Clara intended to break all of them open. Like many revolutionaries, she has spent far less time thinking about what happens after the old institutions are destroyed, then trying to demolish the institutions that were currently in place.

In 1882, she fled to Zurich and then to Paris, escaping Germany's government crackdown on socialist agitators. Exile, rather than softening her, deepened her resolve. For revolutionaries, exile is always a fork on the road. It is an opportunity to leave the old country behind. The other option is to wait for the chance to return. In Paris, Clara met Ossip Zetkin, a Russian Marxist exile, and together they raised two sons amid poverty, shared politics, and unwavering commitment to revolution.

For posterity, her name will be Clara Zetkin. At the same time, marriage was, to her, an institution that reinforced women's subordination. Her feminism was revolutionary—

not of the salon variety, which became a fashion at the time, but of the factory floor kind. In smoky meeting halls and rickety typewriter-filled offices, she argued passionately that working-class women would never be liberated by bourgeois feminism alone. The right to vote? Important, yes. But meaningless without bread, work, and control over their own labor. Deep down, she did not believe that electoral institutions could result in the needed policy change.

When Clara Zetkin organized the first International Women's Day in 1910, she was not just calling for mere recognition of women's rights. She was calling for revolt. And she was doing it in the face of institutions built explicitly to silence her: patriarchal law, exploitative capitalism, and even conservative factions within socialist movement. She understood what most ruling elites could not—or would not admit: that exclusion breeds the demand for change. For any revolution to happen, there should be a mass of people unhappy with the status quo. And they should feel unable to change this status quo.

Revolutions do not happen if the political system is flexible enough to accommodate the needed change. For a while, it seemed that Germany might follow the path of the American peaceful transformation. In the United States, the same challenge of industrialization resulted in a piece-meal overhaul of the government institutions. At first, it seemed that the German political system, which combined elements of a democracy and an imperial monarchy, is capable of producing reforms without a major disruption as well. The World War shattered the illusion that Europe's democracies had matured. Zetkin watched with horror as the Social Democrats—the party she had helped to build—voted to support war credits for Germany's imperial machine. To her, it was a betrayal, plain and simple.

While millions of men marched to trenches, Zetkin organized anti-war conferences and denounced the nationalist hysteria that gripped the continent. In a Europe dominated by men who demanded loyalty to fatherlands and flags, Clara and her comrades offered an alternative loyalty: to justice, to peace, and to the international working class.

The hysteria won. It was more powerful than Zetkin and her comrades. Zetkin was threatened, branded a traitor, and finally arrested. But she refused to be silent. With

young revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, she founded the Spartacus League, which later became the German Communist Party.

Fast forward twenty years – over a world war, a humiliating defeat of imperial Germany, a global pandemic at the end of World War, the great Russian Revolution and failed smaller revolutions across the continent, wars of independence in Eastern Europe, the Weimar Republic, the Great Depression, and the rise of Nazis... Some comrades have fallen. Some have switched sides. Zetkin remained convicted: capitalism, war, and patriarchy were all different faces of the same exclusionary system. If you wanted liberation, you had to tear down the house. Not just rearrange the furniture.

In 1932, at the age of 75, Clara Zetkin stood before the Reichstag—Germany’s parliament—as its oldest elected member. Frail but unbowed, Zetkin issued a warning that history would later echo with terrifying clarity: “The fascist offensive is not merely a question of terror. It is a symptom of a deeply diseased capitalist order that cannot solve its own crisis.” In hindsight, the danger of fascism seems obvious. At the time, it took an old revolutionary to tell the truth.

Less than a year later, Hitler took power. Zetkin fled to the Soviet Union. There, isolated and sidelined from any actual activity, she died in 1933. Her body was honored with a state funeral service, but her revolution was left unfinished. “Lost the fight, but survived” is one variant of a typical revolutionary story.

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Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin’s young acolyte, was born in 1871 in Zamość, a dusty corner of the Russian Empire’s Polish territories. At birth, she was a Russian Empire subject. She was also Jewish, Polish, German, female, and, before long, a revolutionary. In the eyes of the imperial bureaucracy, she was a problem from the moment she learned to speak.

But Rosa was not easily silenced. A childhood illness left her with a limp, but it never slowed her down. Perhaps it made her fight harder. Her mind moved faster than her body ever could. By the time she was a teenager, she was reading Karl Marx under the covers and distributing underground newspapers by hand. She learned that laws, schools, and courts did not serve the people—they served the state. So, she needed to fight not for place

within the system, but for a system that would no longer divide people by class, nation, or gender.

When the authorities cracked down, she fled to Zurich, earning a doctorate in economics—one of the first women in Europe to do so. But she thought that her real education came in the cafés and workers' halls. She joined the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) not as a foot soldier, but as a strategist. She was young, foreign, and female in the most powerful socialist party in Europe. Still, she left an imprint. She realized early something few socialists of her time dared to say out loud: revolutions do not happen by themselves. If working through electoral politics does not work, there should be another way.

Her writing was electric. Her oratory cut through dogma. She challenged not just capitalism, but the complacency of her comrades. “The masses,” she insisted, “are not a blank slate to be written upon by leaders. They are the makers of history.” The history of the Russian upheaval of 1905, the early success and ultimate failure of the working-class revolution made a lasting impression. Masses did not need a vanguard; they might revolutionize spontaneously.

On that point, Luxemburg was standing against Lenin. Not yet Lenin the leader of the greatest social revolution ever, yet Lenin a leader of a small but active faction of Russian exiled revolutionaries. For Lenin, masses did need a vanguard, a group of committed professional history-makers, to lead the masses to the socialist future. He himself was one. Lenin will win the argument, but his win was not in a theoretical debate. Lenin won the argument when his own vanguard seized and consolidated power in Moscow. The masses have never got any say when Russian communists were in power – the vanguard decided it all. What would Luxemburg say then?

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, history, in Germany, was being made in boardrooms and parliaments. As Europe drifted toward World War I, Luxemburg sounded the alarm. Nationalism, she warned, would be the ruin of the working class. But the Social Democrats refused to listen. Against the urgings of Zetkin and Luxemburg and other left intellectuals, the party's parliamentary representatives voted to fund the war in 1914. Rosa was devastated. The party that claimed to speak for the workers had voted to send

them to their deaths. In any revolutionary biography, there is a moment when they realize that the old institutions cannot be changed from within.

It was the moment she became truly alone. Her famous take on party discipline was “Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks differently.” She helped Clara Zetkin to form the Spartacus League, a breakaway revolutionary group, and spent years in prison for her anti-war stance. There, in her cramped cell, she wrote letters filled with birds, wildflowers, and Marxist theory. Even behind bars, she never abandoned hope in human agency.

When the German Empire finally collapsed in 1918, Rosa Luxemburg emerged from prison into a nation on the brink. Millions of soldiers were returning home from the frontlines. The streets were alive with strikes, mutinies, and barricades. For the first time, power was up for grabs. The workers and soldiers’ councils were forming a new kind of politics from the bottom up.

Rosa Luxemburg did not want the chance to make a revolution slip away. Yet she wanted a revolution made by and for the people—not imposed upon them. Her Spartacus League became the heart of the newly founded Communist Party of Germany. But even within this new movement, she warned of authoritarian tendencies. Her socialism was deeply democratic. And for that, she was considered dangerous by all sides. The government hated her as a revolutionary. Her comrade-in-arms thought that her concern for democracy within the movement will doom it in the moment of the ultimate confrontation.

On January 15, 1919, Rosa Luxemburg was arrested, with a group of close associates, by right-wing paramilitaries supported—quietly—by the SPD-led government, her former allies. The unproven, but plausible allegation was that they were betrayed by competing leaders of the communist movement. She was beaten, shot, and dumped in a Berlin canal. Her body was found months later. She was 47.

Today, a small memorial marks the spot where Rosa Luxemburg’s body was thrown into the water of the Landwehr Canal. The tragic and violent death made her a revolutionary symbol in the Soviet Russia, even if her revolutionary ideas have not been

appreciated. “Killed by the counterrevolutionaries” is another standard end of a life in revolution. “Killed when the comrades-in-arms stay aside” is not unusual either.

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Maria Spiridonova was only 21 when she shot a man in broad daylight. In January 1906, in a provincial Russian town of Borisoglebsk, she walked up to a local landowner and killed him with a small pistol. A year earlier, as a local security chief, he made headlines with his cruelty suppressing a peasant uprising.

For Maria, this was not terrorism for its own sake. In her eyes, it was retribution for the crimes of an empire that ruled through violence and humiliation. In the absence of elections, Russian social democrats went to factories to teach Marxism to workers. Under heavy censorship, they have been using their underground press to spread Marxist ideas. The Romanov state has been responding with bullets and gallows. Spiridonova responded with one shot that echoed across the nation.

She was not alone. Terrorism was a popular method of revolutionary struggle in this decade. Across Europe, individual activists and members of revolutionary groups hunted down monarchs, cabinet ministers, party functionaries and opinion leaders. In America, an anarchist assassinated President McKinley whom he considered a symbol of oppression. Yet nowhere in the world the terrorist wave was as large and brutal as in Russia: revolutionaries of all stripes killed royal family members, cabinet ministers, governors, police chiefs, and local officials. Prime minister Stolypin fought back, hanging more than 1,000 revolutionaries over a few years, until he himself was shot and killed by assassin in 1911.

The demand for change was so ingrained in the Russian society that revolutionary terror was looked upon with a degree of understanding. During her arrest and transfer from a local police station, Spiridonova was brutally beaten and harassed by the security officers. Her ordeal drew much sympathy with the Russian public. Writing from prison, calmly, but eloquently, about her motives, Spiridonova transformed her image from assassin to icon. The press, even conservative outlets, could not look away from a beautiful young woman fighting for everyone’s freedom.

After a death sentence commuted to life in prison, Spiridonova became more than just a symbol. She found her own voice. In the Siberian prison, she organized, theorized, and held fast to her beliefs. She was not a communist, though she worked beside Bolsheviks, the future communists. Nor was she a liberal, despite her strong defense of civil rights. She belonged to the Socialist Revolutionaries, the party of the peasantry, of rural justice, of land and bread. The party that will win the first free elections in Russia – and will be stripped of power by their minority comrade-in-arms in revolutionary struggle.

In 1917, as the Romanov Empire fell, Spiridonova returned to the capital. For the younger generation, she was a legend. Crowds gathered to see her speak. She supported the demise of the monarchy in February 1917. But when the Bolsheviks led by Lenin and Trotsky seized power in October that year, she hesitated. She recognized their discipline but feared their methods. Democracy was fragile. And she believed that any revolution that destroy it would become a new form of tyranny.

Perhaps being free was not for Spiridonova. After their seizure of power, she entered a brief and tragic partnership with the Bolsheviks. She helped organize the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, who allied with Lenin's government—at first.

But very soon, in a matter of months, cracks became chasms. Spiridonova disagreed with Lenin on foreign policy. She watched with a growing alarm as Bolsheviks centralized power, crushed dissent, and turned revolutionary ideals into a bureaucratic machine. Was it the freedom that she dreamt about in her prison years?

In July 1918, the Left Social Revolutionaries spurred to action. They assassinated the German ambassador in Moscow, hoping to reignite the revolutionary war. But Lenin responded with fury: Germans were the most important friends of the new government at the time. If former war allies were supporting the counterrevolution, the revolutionary government has to rely on former enemies. Even more importantly, this was Lenin's chance to get rid of dangerous coalition partners. The uprising was crushed within days. In a surprising turn of events, the mighty Left SR's who terrorized the imperial police under the old regime, yielded to the Bolsheviks without a fight. Spiridonova was arrested. Though she hadn't ordered the ambassador's killing, she was made a scapegoat.

This time, there were no crowds to defend her. There was also no court, in which a defense had a chance to persuade the jury. There was no free press to report on the trial. The Bolsheviks, once her comrades, now painted her as a counterrevolutionary. What followed were more years of imprisonment, exile, and surveillance. In her prison notebooks, Spiridonova never renounced her core beliefs: that revolution without mercy becomes tyranny, and that power without accountability becomes death.

In Stalin's USSR, there was no place for her. Stalin crashed his former comrades. Even more so, he had no love for people like Maria Spiridonova. She was too well-known to be returned to public activity, too independent to be trusted, and too principled to be silenced. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, she lived under arrest or surveillance, moving from one Siberian prison to another. Each new wave of purges swept away those who once stood beside her. By the end, she was one of the last living links to the first revolution—now a ghost in the house built over its ruins.

In 1941, as Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, Stalin ordered the execution of "dangerous" political prisoners. Maria Spiridonova, nearly blind, aged, and broken by decades spent in captivity, was among them. She, who spent only one year of her adult life free, was still considered a danger. As was not uncommon in Stalin's country, Spiridonova was shot without trial. Her name was buried. With the revolution over, there was no place for real revolutionaries.

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The Russian Revolution made Alexandra Kollontai. Revolution made her the first in history women a cabinet minister, a minister of welfare in the Lenin's revolutionary government. Revolution made her the first female ambassador in history.

Alexandra was born in 1872 in imperial Russia, into privilege. Her father was a general in the Tsar's army; her mother was a cultured woman of Finnish nobility. Her childhood was happy. "I was the youngest, the most spoiled, and the most coddled member of the family," she said in her autobiography.

She married young, for love. But also, she was making a point. After being offered a number of suitable matches by her caring parents, she chose someone they would not

approve of. To add to the point, she took her husband's name – eventually it was she who made it famous.

Alexandra quickly realized that even love—especially love—was shaped by property, duty, and submission. She left her husband, whom she still professed to love, and son, and went to Switzerland to study economics. Perhaps she could not bear a life where the personal was dictated by the political – by marriage contracts, by gender roles, by social expectations.

She began to read Marx, then write about him. Darkly beautiful, self-confident, and energetic, Kollontai was in high demand as a public speaker. She was an elected member of the working council but bitterly complained about having a hard time there. The main problem was to persuade her comrades that what she was talking about mattered. Unlike the preeminent theorists of her day, she focused not just on capital and labor, but on women, family, and emotion. She asked a question that still unsettles societies today: What happens when revolution enters the bedroom? Even cloaked into Marxist phraseology, the “woman question” was facing deep hostility from the majority of revolutionary activists.

Marx himself was not much of help here. A forward-looking revolutionary in terms of social organization, his views were simultaneously progressive and archaic on the subject of women. Written half a century before the Kollontai's time, the Communist Manifesto promised abandoning bourgeois exploitation of women and yet distinctively treated women as a passive subject. As the members of the working class for Marxists, women had to be liberated by the revolutionaries, not to be liberators themselves.

Kollontai was different. As a political emigree, she lived in Europe and the United States. She studied the textile mills, where women and girls worked 14-hour days and then went home to unpaid labor. She believed socialism would mean nothing if it simply freed men and left women in chains. In Germany, she learned a lot from Clara Zetkin, an established authority on the “woman question” in social-democratic circles.

Zetkin was what she was, a skilled Marxist theorist and a professional politician, even if bent on overthrowing the existing order. For Kollontai, “the woman question” was never just a question of abstract rights. Of course, it mattered as a question of power and

political institutions: of who controls the family, who defines morality, and who decides whether love is private or political. But it was the question of passion and love.

A gifted and charismatic speaker, she became prominent on the European scene. Her pamphlet *Who Profits from the War?* sold millions of copies in many languages when World War started. Socialist parties all across the continent would invite her to deliver lectures to activists and the general public. When she toured the United States in 1915, she publicly spoke in eighty cities in five months – in German, French, and Russian.

When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, Kollontai was ready. She was the only woman in Lenin's first cabinet, appointed the minister for social welfare on day one. It was a real revolution: the first female cabinet minister. In a matter of weeks, her ministry started launching maternity care centers, communal kitchens, nurseries, and laundries – these were the institutions designed to liberate women from domestic drudgery. She believed the state should absorb the burdens of reproduction, not just production.

She also pushed through the world's most progressive laws on divorce, abortion, and sexual freedom. Women could now divorce without shame. Same-sex relationships were decriminalized. Abortion in Soviet Russia was legalized in 1920—the first country in the world to do so. By this time, Kollontai has already left the cabinet – male colleagues preferred to focus on entirely different issues. In the coming years, as the communist dictatorship matures, most of these freedoms will be taken back, a typical story for a revolution.

After Kollontai resigned from the cabinet, she joined the Red Army at the decisive period of the civil war. When the war was won, she was back to the government and to the lecture circuit.

Her battle for women's rights was personal. There is a revealing passage in her autobiography, written in 1926, when she was 54. "The question arises whether in the middle of all these manifold, exciting labors and Party-assignments I could still find rime for intimate experiences, for the pangs and joys of love. Unfortunately, yes! I say unfortunately because ordinarily these experiences entailed all too many cares, disappointments, and pain, and because all too many energies were pointlessly consumed through them. Yet the longing to be understood by a man down to the deepest, most secret

recesses of one's soul, to be recognized by him as a striving human being, repeatedly decided matters. And repeatedly disappointment ensued all too swiftly, since the friend saw in me only the feminine element which he tried to mold into a willing sounding board to his own ego. So repeatedly the moment inevitably arrived in which I had to shake off the chains of community with an aching heart but with a sovereign, uninfluenced will. Then I was again alone.” This paragraph did not appear in the published version of her autobiography but was preserved in an archived copy.

Kollontai believed the family as it existed had to be dismantled. Here she agreed with Karl Marx. The old family should be replaced by new forms of connection rooted in solidarity, not subjugation. She called for “comradely love” — a utopian vision where relationships were free, egalitarian, and socially supported. She conveyed this vision in a brochure addressing the Soviet youth.

Not everyone in the Party agreed. Lenin reportedly told her that love politics were a distraction. Others mocked her as a “Red Nun,” obsessed with emotion while the revolution bled on the battlefield. Deep beneath, her male fellow revolutionaries thought that progressive feminists were good comrades when they were dismantling the old regime. Once in power, they know longer needed progressives. And as the Bolsheviks consolidated power, her ideas became liabilities. In 1920, Kollontai committed the unforgivable sin in a one-party state: she publicly disagreed with the top leadership.

She supported an ultra-left faction of the Communist Party that called for trade union control of the economy and warned against rising authoritarianism. They feared that revolutionary institutions were becoming extractive, replicating the same top-down logic of the old regime. Kollontai did not call for insurrection. She called for internal democracy. But in the system that dying Lenin and ascending Stalin were building, even dissent from the inside was treasonous. The liberating part of the revolution was over. It was time to build the state.

By 1921, three years after taking power, the Party banned factions — that is, internal discussions. Kollontai was exiled—softly, at first. She was made a diplomat, sent abroad as a representative of Soviet power. Her punishment was gilded but unmistakable. In that, she was lucky — most of her revolutionary comrades were over time exterminated by

Stalin. Some – after public trials and humiliating confessions, many more – just disappearing from the public view. For the next two decades, she served as a diplomat in Norway, then Mexico, then back in Norway and, finally, in Sweden—the first female ambassador in history. But she was also watched, isolated, and forced to remain silent as Stalin rose and erased the very freedoms she had fought to create.

By the 1930s, most of her comrades from the time of the revolution were dead. Almost every member of the first Lenin cabinet was dead. The other surviving member was Stalin himself. The sexual freedoms she had won were rolled back. Abortion was banned in 1936. As any dictator, Stalin needed women to be busy with work and raising kids. The “new Soviet woman” became a mother and laborer again. Idealized, but confined. The state, once a tool for liberation, had become a patriarch of its own.

In 1946, Kollontai penned an article for a magazine: “The Soviet woman is a full and equal citizen of her country. In opening up to women access to every sphere of creative activity, our state has simultaneously ensured all the conditions necessary for her to fulfil her natural obligation – that of being a mother bringing up her children and mistress of her home.” The story came in full circle.

At the time of the Russian Revolution, Alexandra Kollontai’s ideas—about sex, freedom, the emotional life of socialism—were too radical for the Bolsheviks, too Marxist for the feminists, and too feminist for the Marxists. For a brief shining moment, the revolution gave her a chance to implement her vision in practice. Then she had lived long enough to see the revolutionary institutions she championed scaled back or dismantled, often by the very system she helped build. Alexandra Kollontai died in 1952 in Moscow, nearly forgotten. A woman had her part in the revolution. Now that the revolution was over, she was no longer needed.

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Rosa Luxemburg was murdered by the regime’s paramilitaries when the fate of the government in Berlin hanged in balance. Maria Spiridonova who did some much to inspire a generation of Russian revolutionaries has spent two decades in prisons and concentration camps after the revolution won. She was executed in 1941. Clara Zetkin, after opening the Bundestag dominated by Nazis, died a quite death of a respected icon

of the communist movement in a sanatorium near Moscow in 1933. Alexandra Kollontai, a student of Zetkin and a colleague of Luxemburg, survived them all. By the time of her death, only two members of the first communist government of Soviet Russia were alive, Stalin himself being the other one. Yet long before she was gone, the epoch of revolutionary women was over. Men led the regimes that consolidated power after revolutions.

### *The Winners*

By 1795, its sixth year, the French Revolution has destroyed the ancien régime, executed the king, and decimated the former elite. It introduced a number of wide-ranging reforms, but the most ambitious of them have been already abandoned. The new republic has been able to put off a coalition of emigres, longing for the restoration of the monarchy, and hostile European powers, eager to exploit the moment. But internally the republic was a mess. Attempts to put in a workable constitution and new election rules failed. No government was able to survive long enough to stabilize the situation.

Nobody wanted the old order back, but everybody wanted any order that would allow to enjoy their new rights. Peasants who got the land and freedom from feudal duties needed secure ways to bring their product to cities. Merchants freed from onerous regulations and taxes needed functioning markets. Bankers were no longer threatened by the competitors of royal blood who used their access to get favors from the king, but they needed courts and police to secure their investments. For an economy to grow and thrive, it needed some order. And that what revolutionary governments were incapable of producing.

Into this vacuum stepped a Corsican artillery officer whose rise was as swift as it was improbable. Napoleon Bonaparte would become emperor, warlord, and state administrator. He would command armies from Cairo to Moscow, redraw the map of Europe, and export both the territorial conquest and civil code. He would bring eternal glory to the French military power and leave France with male population so scarce that new recruitment was impossible. His story is not just the tale of personal ambition. It is the story of how new institutions are made and transformed, and how they sometimes fail.

Napoleon Bonaparte was born in 1769 on the Mediterranean island of Corsica, just months after it was annexed by France. His family were minor nobles—impoverished but socially ambitious. In normal times, Napoleon’s Corsican identity would mark him as an outsider in French elite circles. It will be different in the revolutionary era when the very notion of the elite was temporarily lost. Still, he won a scholarship to a military academy, where he stood out for his mathematical brilliance, his interest in history, and his brooding intensity. He was promoted rapidly in the artillery, a branch of the military that demanded calculation over pedigree.

The Revolution that broke when he was twenty created the vacuum that allowed men like Napoleon to rise. In a short while, France found itself at war with nearly every major European power in addition to the civil war against the royalists. Napoleon, a young general with a knack for innovation both on the battlefield and in the matters of civil administration, became the man of the hour. It required a certain degree of luck, but his natural political cunning, hard work, and endless ambition helped as well.

In fact, Napoleon’s early biography is rich with episodes, in which he was lucky – and yet each time it was a random chance made possible by the revolution. In 1793, he was an artillery officer in the revolutionary army that sieged Toulon, a local royalist stronghold. The city walls look impregnable, and a number of attacks had already failed. Napoleon persuaded someone in the high command to let him organize the artillery and the attacking troops according to his plan. His plan worked, and he himself was lucky to survive when he personally led his own command into the assault.

Even more lucky was that the political commissar of the army besieging Toulon was a person whose only claim to fame was that he was a younger brother of Maximillian Robespierre, the powerful leader of the Jacobin dictatorship. He advised Paris on the role that the young artillery officer played in the capture of Toulon. Napoleon was promoted to brigadier general.

A year later, luck was needed again. In August 1794, after the fall of the Robespierre, Napoleon was arrested. He spent two weeks in jail – until authorities figured out that he has no connections among the disgraced Jacobins. The luck was that someone did pay attention to facts instead of sending the young general to guillotine first. The

revolutionary justice has not always been that just. In many instances, the timeline was execution first, figuring out the guilt later. Napoleon's luck held.

In one more year, luck struck again. The weak government was besieged from all quarters, but the immediate danger was royalists. They were more experienced and better organized than other counterrevolutionary groups. Those who survived the Jacobin terror regrouped and were able to find new allies. This time not only Paris bourgeoisie, but some of the revolutionary generals were sympathetic. Maybe not the restoration of House of Bourbon, but some sort of order would be welcome.

Someone in the government remembered an artillery general who was spending time in Paris in wait for an appointment in one of the fighting armies. Napoleon was called to advise on how to deal with an imminent royalist uprising. As it turned out, the best way was to delegate command to him.

Napoleon sent trusted subordinates to seize cannons, strategically placed them on streets surrounding the government buildings, and did not hesitate to open fire when the royalist crowd approached. Hundreds of people died on the spot. What impressed the government officials the most was the cold-blooded decisiveness of the young general. Afterwards, Napoleon supposedly cracked that if the other side would have asked him to command the artillery on that day, he would have been equally successful. He was wrong about this. His genius was to be on the right side on history. On that day in 1795, the right side of history was with the revolution.

As a result of his success on Paris streets, he received what he craved, an army command. The troops that the young general got was the weakest army of the revolutionary France, dismally supplied and poorly trained. Napoleon swiftly consolidated control over every aspect of soldiers' lives, turned a ragged army into a well-organized force, defeated whoever the Austrian Empire sent against him, and never looked back. The next twenty years will be for him a never-ending military campaign for European domination.

Politicians of the moment thought themselves to be the makers of history. For them, a military genius popular with people was just a tool. They regretted their mistake when the ambitious young man drove them out of the political scene. In 1799, Napoleon staged

a coup and installed himself with title of the First Consul, an ancient Roman republican title. Ten years since the breakdown of the old order, the revolutionary names still had a ring. By 1804, he crowned himself Emperor. The era of republic was over, and the era when revolutionary names were fashionable was over as well.

The Napoleone's Empire was no return to monarchy—it was a new form of rule, justified not by divine right but by efficiency, order, and public acclaim. He built a state centered on military meritocracy and bureaucratic control. The Napoleonic Code, enacted in 1804, became the legal foundation for much of Europe, conquered by French troops. The Code abolished feudal privileges, redefined property rights, and codified legal equality for citizens.

The administrative and legal system established by Napoleon in France and on the occupied territories of Europe has proved durable. It was a vast improvement over the ancient institutions. It was also a vast improvement over the colorful patchwork of revolutionary reforms. These institutions would have not come from a standard electoral and legislative process. Because they were imposed by a dictator, they did not entail many inefficient compromises.

What the dictator wanted was efficiency of the state: to wage his wars, he needed money. From his first big campaign against Austrian Empire, Napoleon cared about his soldiers being well fed, his army well supplied, and his generals well-rewarded for their service. He never hesitated to expropriate the property and treasure of the occupied countries. The same logic led him further: to feed his army and to buy French goods, the defeated countries should be prosperous themselves. Eliminate the feudal legacy, install what is needed for markets to operate – laws that regulate trade and finance, the court system, the administrative code, and the enhanced bureaucratic capacity of the state. It was the progressive colonization at its best.

But Napoleon's genius was also his trap. He believed in state institutions—so long as he could design and control them. He built efficient bureaucracies but appointed the bureaucrats himself. He believed in meritocracy but demanded absolute loyalty. His empire was modern in form, but extractive in function. French soldiers died in the hundreds of thousands across Europe. Conquered states paid tribute, but frustration was

growing. There was a deep contradiction between the very institutions that he was promoting—legal equality, national identity, centralized administration—and the absolute power that he needed to conquer the entire world.

Napoleon reshaped the continent in a far more fundamental way than his revolutionary predecessors. In the territories that later become Germany, Italy, and Poland, he dismantled the old feudal orders and forced the pace of modernization. Serfs were freed. Trade barriers were broken. Jewish emancipation was decreed. These were not acts of benevolence—they were strategic, meant to sap the strength of the old elites and mobilize society more effectively for war. But they had lasting consequences. Even after Napoleon's fall, the old aristocracies could never fully turn back the clock. The institutional toothpaste was out of the tube. It was nearly impossible to put it back.

By 1812, Napoleon controlled most of continental Europe. But he had overreached. His invasion of Russia was a catastrophe. The Russian army skillfully retreated to avoid battles, stood its ground when a major battle became inevitable, scorched the land, and let winter do the rest. Napoleon's Grand Army, once numbering over 600,000, returned from the snows as a shattered ghost. From there, his perennial enemies, Britain and Russia, closed in. Prussia and Austria, which he defeated at the battlefield more than once, joined the anti-French coalition.

In 1814, Paris was taken by the Russian army. In a symbolic gesture, Russian Emperor Alexander I dined with Joséphine, Napoleon's divorced wife, former Empress, and his only true love. It was ironic. After twenty years of wars, the most modern army of the era was ultimately defeated by the army that was led by the hereditary monarch, appointed colonels and generals by their nobility ranks, and relied on serfs for recruitment. It is as ironic that Russia, the military victor of Napoleonic wars, was left with archaic, obsolete, inefficient institutions at home as a result. Britain, another victor, did not change much as well. It was the defeated France and former parts of the short-lived Napoleon Empire that had their feudal institutions cleaned away, their laws straightened and modernized, and their administrative bodies re-assembled.

With France taken over by the coalition forces, the emperor abdicated and was exiled to Elba, a small Mediterranean island. He escaped, returned to power for a dramatic

“Hundred Days,” and was finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815. He died six years later, in lonely exile on the island of Saint Helena in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. On the death bed, his last words were "France, the Army, Joséphine."

But institutions outlive those who built them. The conference of victors in Vienna, dominated by big powers – England, Russia, Austria, Prussia – tried to restore the old order, but Europe had been transformed. The Napoleonic Code remained in place across much of the continent. Prussia’s military and educational reforms, adopted in fear of victorious France, became the foundation of the new German state. Nationalist movements, sparked by French occupation and rhetoric, would later topple empires. The legal, administrative, and military systems he built became templates for modern statehood. In France, Bourbons returned as constitutional monarchs, but aristocratic privileges and property never did.

Napoleon was the late comer to the French revolution. His rise was made possible precisely because the old order had already crumbled. He built institutions whenever they enhanced his power and made sure that none of these institutions constrain his will. He eventually fell because, in the absence of these constraints, nobody was able to stop him when he tried to achieve, inevitably, the impossible. A true vehicle of revolutionary change, the country that Napoleon left behind was not the one he had inherited.

## Chapter 10

### THE REVOLUTION DAY

When we look back, every revolution has an inflection point. Convening the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia on 5 September 1774, in the American Revolution, storming the Bastille on 14 July 1789 in the French, the tsar's abdication on 2 March 1917 in the Russian Revolution, and the military coup on 19 August 1991 in the Second Russian Revolution. Each of these days saw a dramatic change in power relationships in society.

In fact, any revolution has many inflection points. The old regime might be holding well until the moment it suddenly crumbles. It might be triggered by a foreign invasion, usually itself a result of perceived vulnerability. It might be a sudden death of the leader. Extractive, authoritarian regimes rarely have a settled succession mechanism in place. Good for the regime, if there is a designated successor able to pick up the reins at one moment notice. Usually, it is not the case. The irreplaceability of the man at the top is a hallmark of rigid political systems. If the leader were replaceable, reforms would be easier to carry.

In some revolutions, the trigger for the old regime ultimate collapse was a foreign invasion. In some, an assassination of the king or an accidental death of a military dictator. But sometimes, it is the old regime itself that pulls the trigger.

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The attempted military coup on August 19, 1991, which I described in the opening chapters, was the inflection point of the Second Russian Revolution that brought down the Soviet regime. Up until that day, there was a continuous political turmoil, accompanied by the slow moving, haphazard, and incomplete economic reforms. Still, the communist party was firmly in control. Every single cabinet minister, all officials responsible for security, defense, internal security (the dreaded KGB), police, all the leadership of the Soviet parliament were high-ranking members of the Communist Party. Every one of them were appointed by President Gorbachev, the first secretary of the party, the reformist. No doubt, Gorbachev had to compromise, making these appointments. He

needed to strike the right balance between different factions in his party. Still, the party controlled everything.

In less than a week, there will be a dramatic change. The Communist Party was banned and its offices across the country closed. The Vice President, the Prime Minister, Secretaries of Defense and Security, the Speaker of the Parliament, and the top army brass were in jail. Gorbachev remained president, but it was presidency in the name only. In Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, the power was now in the hands of those who before the coup headed Russian Federation, a subnational unit of the USSR. In 14 capitals of other subnational units, “the Soviet republics”, the power was now in the hands of local authorities. Though the formal dissolution of the USSR, one of the largest countries on Earth, will take a couple of months, it ended on these August days. The coup launched by those who wanted to stop the revolution was its trigger.

The lesson here is that a revolution requires coordinated action by those who want to topple the old regime. However, this coordinated action by the revolutionaries might be a result of the incumbent government's action. The August 1991 military coup, the inflection point of the Second Russian Revolution, was launched by the defenders of the old regime.

### ***Collective Action Needs Coordination***

Initially, the defenders of the old regime always have an upper hand. The army is still loyal, the police still follow the orders, and the insurgents do not have access to guns yet. To overwhelm the defenders, the insurgents have to come in mass. The gathering might be peaceful, but the number of participants must be such that no police force is enough to disperse it. For many people to come to the same place, they must know where to come. They should be informed where to gather.

The critical role that collective action plays in any revolution explains why all authoritarian regimes are obsessed with information control. When we talked about dictators protecting their power, we discussed the lengths to which they go to censor media and guarantee that every citizen gets a big dose of state propaganda. They need to

keep people indoctrinated. On the day of the revolution, indoctrination is not sufficient. People need to be kept in the dark about where to come.

Even more critically in the critical moment of any revolution, the incumbent regime needs to keep people afraid. During the fast-moving days of the revolution, the information control becomes less sophisticated. In old days, the government would send police to raid publishing houses that print opposition newspapers. Making posters or speaking publicly becomes a state crime. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the governments switch off social media and, if this does not work, the internet itself. Whatever it takes, but those who are unhappy with regime shall not be able to coordinate. They should not know whether other people gather.

The four days in August 1991 were the inflection point in the Second Russian Revolution. Inside these fast-moving four days were the inflexion points of their own. One of them is a perfect illustration how important is timely information in organizing collection action.

The day of 19 August 1991 began slowly. The coup organizers blocked President Gorbachev in a distant Southern resort where he was spending a vacation, moved tanks to Moscow streets to intimidate potential protesters, and sent soldiers to seize the TV tower and publishing houses that printed newspapers. All big newspapers published the official documents of the State Committee for Emergency Situations, the name the coup organizers chosen for their executive body. Throughout the day the TV channels alternated anchors reading these documents with old recordings of the famed Soviet ballet *The Swan Lake*. Then, the leaders of the coup, the Vice President, Deputy Prime Minister, the Secretaries for Defense and Internal Security, and the KGB Chief did a televised press-conference. After that, there was an evening news report.

The first news report of the day, shown on all national TV channels at 9pm, was done under full control of the emergency censors sent by the coup organizers. The anchors read the official documents, which announced the curfew. Then they reported on what was happening in Moscow: Boris Yeltsin and other leaders of the republican government arrived at a government building on the bank of Moscow River, and asked Muscovites to come there to defend them and support the opposition to the State Committee. – *This call*

*to arms is illegal, – the anchor intoned, – The curfew is enacted. It is illegal to protest against emergency measures. Do not come!*

The newsreel was recorded, and was apparently ok-ed by censors, but of course the journalist who made the newsreel understood what is critical. What mattered was not the reminder that the protest was illegal, but the exact location of where it was happening. In a sprawling city of Moscow, people who opposed the coup would not know where to come. After the evening news, they knew. In an hour, dozens of thousands of citizens showed up. In a couple of hours, the giant building was surrounded by barricades and chains of unarmed people holding hands.

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The events of 19 August 1991 in Moscow were not the only moment when the old regime triggered its own unraveling. The events of 21 December 1989 in Bucharest, the capital of Romania, were even more striking. Today, everyone can see the inflection point, the moment when the old regime collapsed, on YouTube. The reel to watch last about two minutes.

By December 1989, the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, who ruled Romania with iron fist for more than two decades, was already in trouble. The Soviet economic support ceased – the Soviet Union had its own mounting troubles. The West was not in a hurry to embrace an old communist dictator. His economic policies failed. All the general ailments of planned economy were exacerbated by volatile and arbitrary policy changes. Many dictators are corrupt and nepotistic, but the Ceausescu regime stood out. The dear leader's wife was the First Deputy Prime-Minister and a member of the top party leadership; the propaganda called her “the mother of the nation”.

For a while, the dreaded Securitate, the secret police, protected the communist regime amid the growing discontent. In mid-December 1989, local ethnic tensions in the provincial city of Timisoara resulted in security forces killing a number of peaceful demonstrators. With no information from the official media, people around the country assumed the worst. For the first time, there were signs of possible disloyalty from the military.

The regime needed to reassert itself. On 21 December, Ceaușescu asked his subordinates to organize a mass meeting on the Bucharest central square. As was always the case with dictators, the meeting was hailed as a spontaneous show of support but was supposed in fact to be carefully staged. Enterprise managers were responsible for their employees' presence, their signs and banners vetted, their chants tightly choreographed. The leader would make a speech. Such meetings worked so well for him in the past!

Watch the Ceausescu critical moment on YouTube is a real experience. The reel lasts no longer than two minutes and is unforgettable. It shows the inflection point of the Romanian revolution. Back then, people could not believe what they were seeing on their TV screens. It was the regime collapsing live.

About eight minutes of the speech, everything went as usual. Ceausescu lauded “the achievements of the socialist revolution” and condemned “fascist agitators set to destroy socialism”. Then, something starts to change on the square. In the clip, we see Ceausescu face when the people in the crowd start to jeer and boo, and the chant “Timisoara!” The expression on the dictator's face is priceless – apparently, he cannot believe what he hears. He raised his hand, and tried to proceed with his speech, but he could not.

The live transmission was interrupted, Ceausescu and his wife disappeared inside the building, the Communist Party headquarters, and security was able to restore order on the square. But there was no return. Next day, when a larger and far more hostile crowd was gathering on the same square, the couple fled the palace by helicopter. They were on the run for a couple of days, changing cars, but there was no escape. On 25 December, three days after the fateful speech, they were caught and executed after a two-hour “trial”. The revolutionary justice was swift. Whatever the dictator's crimes were, he did not have a chance to defend himself.

In every single revolution, a moment comes when the collective action requires coordination. Many people need to know the time and the place where they will gather. It might be a square in front of the presidential palace. It might be an infamous prison, in which the regime keeps the opponents. It might be large streets that can be used by the regime to move loyal troops to the center of action. The point is that a mass gathering is

impossible, if people do not know where and when to come. Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, did it himself, asking his subordinates to bring people to the central square.

### *The Psychology of Masses*

There is no doubt that mass psychology plays a critical role in many episodes of revolutions. People who in normal times are not prone to violence, small merchants, domestic servants, manual workers, become bloody murderers in the excitement of the moment.

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Analyzing the velvet revolutions that brought down socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, political scientist Timur Kuran coined the term 'preference falsification'. The concept helped Kuran explain how it happens that people's attitudes toward the old regime change overnight. Or at least how their answers change when they say when asked about their opinion. Before the day of the inflection point, the overwhelming majority supports the current leadership. The next day, not only the support evaporates. Now, the overwhelming majority records their hatred towards the dismissed leader. Could preferences change overnight? The 'preference falsification' theory suggests that preferences do not change. It is that citizens fake, before the old regime fell apart, their support to that regime.

There is no question that people living under an oppressive regime might not be forthcoming when asked by a researcher about their true attitude towards the regime. Under many regimes, it is dangerous to express a negative attitude towards the powers to be. Sometimes, it is simply illegal, and the punishment might be cruel. Yet, if we were able to look at what people think in their hearts, would we? What would they say if they were safe to speak freely?

The critical element of the mass action mechanism is that actions of an individual depend not only on what this person thinks of the regime, but also on what she thinks of the prospects of protesting against the regime. Put simply, some people participate in a revolution because they see the power collapse. They might have hated the old regime before, yet they would not protest until they knew that there were many others protesting.

This is why it is difficult to forecast the timing of collective actions in a revolution. What needs to be predicted is not an event, a change in some fundamental conditions, but rather a mass of decisions of many individuals, which in turn depend on what other individuals do. The logic is similar to that of financial crises, which are notoriously hard to time. In the case of a bank run, if depositors understand that the bank run is imminent at some future point, the bank run occurs immediately. In the case of a revolution, if at some point it becomes clear that the incumbent will lose power at a certain moment in the future, the power collapses immediately.

That is why authoritarian regimes stay stronger when they control an atomized society with a low level of trust among citizens. In such a society, everyone knows that life is not good. Perhaps she also knows that life is not good for everyone else. What she does not know is to what extent others are ready to participate in a mass action and what signal could trigger people to gather on the central square. No surprise, the totalitarian, most oppressive regimes did focus on eliminating an attempt by citizens to build and maintain social networks, even if completely apolitical. In the Soviet Union, they would prosecute high school students forming a poetry club, unless the activity was explicitly sanctioned by the administration.

### ***Taking Power and Keeping It***

As we saw in a revolution after a revolution, one does not need a strong party to cause a revolution. However, having a strong party helps tremendously when the winners try to consolidate the regime. In a recent book, political scientists Steve Levitsky and Lucan Way demonstrated that if a new revolutionary regime survives the critical first years, then it becomes remarkable durable.

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For a new regime, it is important to move fast. Also, it is critical to be decisive. The following episode is a disturbing illustration of how decisive action works. It also illustrates how strategic analysis helps to understand decisions that the main actors make.

After his resignation in the early days of the revolution, Nicholas II, the last Russian emperor, has been rejecting overtures from any would-be restorers of his monarchy.

Unlike Louis XVI of France, he did not plot a restoration. In fact, he did not even plot an escape from the arrest. He did not try to keep contacts with generals whose armies were trying to stop the revolution and restore monarchy. In captivity, his entourage consisted of his immediate family: the wife, four young princesses, and a ten-year old son who had little chance to reach adulthood anyway – his severe blood illness was incurable at the time. Former emperor and his family did not do anything to make themselves a threat to the new regime. Yet they were the threat regardless of what they were doing.

In a span of several weeks in 1918 Bolsheviks executed nearly all members of the imperial family that they were able to lay their hands on. They executed the tsar's brother, cousins, second and more distant cousins, his uncles and distant uncles, grand uncles, and great-grand uncles. Some of the executed were former military or naval commanders, yet some have never worn a uniform. The royal family was large – it included some prominent scientists and artists. Revolutionaries did not make exceptions.

One thing that Bolsheviks did was a veil of secrecy over the executions. A few shootings of royal family members were announced by officials, but most, dozens of them, were done in secret. The execution of Mikhail, Nicholas II's younger brother, was made look like a kidnapping by some local vigilantes. The massacre of several members of the royal family in Alapaevsk on 17 July 1918 was disguised as a successful escape. We know the grisly details of the killing of the former emperor himself, his wife, and kids only because the city of Ekaterinburg, where they were executed on 18 July 1918, was swiftly taken by the monarchist forces and the crime was thoroughly investigated.

Decades later, after the fall of the communist regime, Romanovs relatives asked for a legal rehabilitation, a procedure when the charges are dropped, or the sentence is made void posthumously. This was what was done for the Stalin's victims: from the legal standpoint, they have never been indicted or sentenced. With Romanovs, it turned out that the procedure was impossible. Most of them were not tried in any way. They were killed in the dark of the night on secret orders from the party revolutionary leadership. Then their bodies were disposed of, as secretly. One cannot rehabilitate a person who was never accused of a crime.

Lenin's willingness to have the tsar family executed was not only the revenge for his older brother, hanged on the tsar father's order. It was not just a "revolutionary justice" as some sympathetic historians would have it. If it were, revolutionaries would not work that hard to make it secret at the time. It was a cold political calculus. A living relative of the former emperor would not be able to commit "not to be a contender for the throne". Regardless of their willingness to lead a counterrevolution, they would be a banner for it. Killing them all was the Lenin's way to resolve this problem. The counter-revolution would not have its banner.

## Chapter 11 ALL TOMORROW'S REVOLUTIONS

Which country is the next? Venezuela? Belarus? Russia? Iran? China? The theory of revolutions helps identify countries in which a revolution might be brewing. First, it should be a society with growing tensions between institutions and relationships that people want and institutions and relationships that they currently have. It is not sufficient to have a wealth disparity or an unjust social hierarchy. There should be a growing wealth disparity or a social hierarchy that stifles progress more and more each year. To develop a revolutionary situation, it is not enough to have something intolerable. It should be something that becomes more and more intolerable year after year.

The second ingredient of any revolution is a rigid political system, not capable of properly accommodating the required change. That is why a properly functioning democracy is unlikely to face a revolution. If people have a change to adjust institutions at the ballot box, they do not need to participate in an uprising.

In the previous chapters, we saw how modern authoritarian regimes adjust. We also saw how they fail to adjust. Despite many warning signs, the elite have been shortsightedly focused on continuing to do what has worked so very well in the past. The newly acquired weapons of control made them feel that this time they will be able to withstand the revolutionary fever.

So, what do modern theory of revolutions tell us about perspectives of revolutions around the world? Let us look at countries that are likely to have revolutions within the next decade – Iran and Venezuela, at countries that are not likely – United States and China, among many others, and at countries, in which the jury on the possibility of a revolution is still out – Russia.

### *Iran: Waiting for an Ignition*

Iran can explode at any moment. All ingredients of a revolution are in place. A foreign intervention, such as a joint military operation of Israel and the United States in June 2025, might ignite an uprising against the ayatollah's regime. But this is not necessary.

With a regime that inefficient, archaic, and outright inhumane, anything can be an ignition.

It is not only that the status quo is bad. The discontent has been growing for a while. The world moves forward, economically, while the Iranian economy stagnates, now, for five decades. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the economy was lagging behind the world averages and nearly all neighbors.

On the issue of women rights, Iran has moved backwards since the pre-revolution time. Now, an Iranian woman has less control over her body and life choices than she had under the monarchy back half a century ago. The gap between the Iranian reality and their rights outside Iran is every-growing. Even those countries that have never been on the forefront of the feminist movement, look like a women-rights paradise compared to Iran of today.

LGBTQ+ people are another segment of the population that would massively benefit from the fall of the ayatollahs' regime. It is difficult to imagine a more archaic and inhumane political regime in the world today. Every year, people are hanged for the crime of being in love with people of the same sex. The blend of religious fanaticism and reliance on brute force for maintaining grip on power made medieval atrocities possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The regime is highly repressive towards many groups of people. It has stifled business and artistic expression. It executed women as young as seventeen for being adherent of Bahai religion. It executed people for minor disagreements with the regime's ideology. Every year they have to arrest, kidnap, torture, and execute protesters against the regime. The very fact that young people are protesting in the face of a mortal danger is a telling sign of how unhappy people are.

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 17-year-old student, was beaten to death in the police custody for not wearing the mandatory hijab on a Tehran street. Though the story was witnessed by relatives and independent observers, the authorities denied their responsibility, claiming that the young girl had "suffered a sudden heart failure". Her death caused massive protests; in two weeks, the hashtag #Mahsa\_Amini, in English and in Persian, broke the Twitter then-record with more than 80 million tweets.

The regime has assembled a remarkably strong security apparatus. The Guards of the Islamic Revolution cleverly use the oil revenues and profits from enterprises they control to maintain a large police force and engage in sophisticated surveillance.

The stability of the oppressive regime is maintained not only by the sheer size of the police force. A unique blend of nationalistic anti-Americanism, archaic patriarchy, and religious zealotry glues different elements of the regime together. Not only the clerical elite and security services benefit from the status quo. Men bound on keeping women under control might be not numerous enough to win, on a patriarchy-first platform, in a competitive election if it was held. Still, they are numerous enough to be a solid block of the support for the regime. Put simply, patriarchy is quite popular in some quarters.

Other things help the regime stability is well. Back in the Soviet Union, people were not able to leave the country as the Soviet authorities feared to lose most talented people to emigration. Modern authoritarians, including Belarus and Iran, do not fear that. Gates are open. Talented people can emigrate. And so can those who are unhappy with the regime. Open exit allows to get rid of those who otherwise would find other means to express their discontent.

Still, there is a case to expect a revolution. If foreign affairs might have an effect on the domestic stability, then, in the case of Iran in 2025, they should. For decades, the Iranian foreign policy involves heavy meddling in other countries' affairs. The antisemitism ideology of the ayatollah's regime forces it to meddle in Syria and Lebanon, maintain ties with terrorist anti-Israel groups, etc. In a search for strategic partner, the Iranian government has been supplying weapons to Putin's Russia, another dangerous and toxic ally.

All ingredients are there. The Iranian revolution needs a spark.

### ***Venezuela: The Basket Case***

The main reason to expect a revolution in Venezuela is economic. It is unbelievable how bad the Venezuelan economy performs under the Maduro dictatorship. This is the country that has much oil as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait (roughly, the same as United State and Russia). That is, so much that it could have simultaneously make the elite superrich

and the rest of the population decently middle-income. Venezuela under Maduro did neither. It has not been a textbook case of the resource curse. It is much worse.

In the 21st century, Venezuela has been a perfect illustration for the wrong institutional dynamics. Inclusive institutions have been collapsing. Extractive institutions have been consolidating. Once one of the wealthiest countries in Latin America due to its vast oil reserves, Venezuela deteriorated into economic chaos and political repression not because of external shocks, but because of bad policy choices. These policy choices that made ordinary Venezuelans poorer made the elites richer. Not coincidentally, they made the elite far more entrenched than before.

The Venezuelan democracy, a flawed but competitive system that served the country well for many decades, was broken not by the current incumbent, Nicolas Maduro, but by his charismatic predecessor Hugo Chavez. Chavez was a typical Latin American populist who genuinely tried to use the country's enormous oil resources to fight poverty. Buoyed by rising oil prices at the dawn of the century, he succeeded to raise the standards of living to the Venezuelan's poor. Even more, he succeeded to reduce the wealth inequality, a nearly impossible task in a highly unequal society.

The early success of the Chavez' populism did not last. His program of wealth redistribution worked well while the oil prices were raising, but they eventually plateaued, then fell. To fight accelerating inflation, Chavez tried to control prices. Price controls is almost invariably a bad idea – they discourage production and trade, while creating profit opportunities in the black market. Price controls led to shortages. To deal with shortages, the government attempted to impose direct control over some enterprises. If the history of planned economies in the Soviet Union and its satellites was any guide, this was a bad idea as well.

Increasing control over the purely economic matters required re-shaping of political institutions. In 2012, Chavez, still popular as a champion of the poor, run for his fourth presidential term. For that, he needed to change the term limits, restricting the number of terms a president is allowed to serve – this institution fell in 2009. Chavez needed to rush – the deteriorating economy started to erode his popularity. He won elections in 2012 but died of cancer two months later. For the military elite, a dying populist running

for re-election was just a vehicle to bring up their preferred candidate, vice-president Nicolas Maduro.

After Chavez death, Maduro swiftly consolidated power. He barely won the special presidential elections of 2013 that were marred by irregularities. If not for the election fraud, he probably lost it. Since then, every election was massively affected by the incumbent's manipulations. In fact, Venezuelans no longer have a chance to replace Maduro at the election booth. Opposition has won a number of local races and for a while held a majority in the parliament. This did not help – Maduro and his supporters simply ignored laws and institutions whenever they challenged their grip on power. Effectively, they themselves created a necessary ingredient of a revolution – a political system, in which a change in power is impossible without a major disruption.

Naturally, dismantling of electoral system was accompanied by increased suppression of independent media and politicization of the judiciary. This logic is ever-present: if the incumbent manipulates elections, then the thing that he needs next is to curb media freedom. Then, it gets worse. Dismantling the institutions that make the leaders accountable, they also dismantled the institutions that fight corruption. That is how a political system that is hostile to political innovation and pluralism results in an economic system which is hostile to technological innovation and competition.

In 2014, Maduro expanded strict price control initiated under Chávez. The new regulations heavily penalized private firms that did not conform to government-set prices, effectively stifling domestic production and exacerbating shortages. Key sectors like agriculture and manufacturing collapsed under rigid controls and expropriations. Raising inflation and shortages in the price-controlled markets led to a fall in living standards. The resulting mass emigration further decimated the social fabric.

Maduro accelerated nationalization across various sectors: food distribution, retail, housing, agriculture, finance, steel, and cement. Popular supermarket chains such as Dia a Dia, along with foreign-owned PepsiCo and Nestlé warehouses, were forcibly taken over. As it happened many times in the previous century, these nationalizations discouraged foreign investment and eroded business confidence. They immediately contributed to GDP contraction and lowered the quality of living for ordinary Venezuelans. At the same

time, the increased the state control over the economy and made the incumbent government more entrenched.

When defenders of a regime like Maduro's look for excuses, sanctions imposed by the United States pop up frequently as if it was an all-encompassing explanation. This explanation is problematic on many levels. Most critically, sanctions is a result of the country's leadership choices. The Maduro government violently cracked down on protests after they stole elections from the opposition – if Maduro stepped down, instead of falsifying the election results, he would not need this violent crackdown that led to sanctions.

Not pursuing policies that would limit narcotics traffic is also the Maduro's government choice. Venezuela has all resources to crack down on cartels, but the Maduro government would not. It is far more important to cling to power, even if the country ends up under US sanctions.

I am not saying that the US (or any other country) always has the high moral ground. Far from that. Still, policy that leads to sanctions is a choice that the country leaders make. Again and again, country leaders choose anti-Americanism as a deliberate strategy to entrench themselves in power. "Our country is under attack" is always a good strategy to mobilize support when there is nothing else to show.

US oil sanctions were biting. The policy failures of Maduro's governments were exacerbated by declining oil revenues from 2014 onward. To finance growing fiscal deficits, the government resorted to massive money printing. This triggered Venezuela's world-record hyperinflation, with the annual rate exceeding 130,000 percent in 2018. Despite currency redenomination and new laws, inflation remained extremely high, destroying savings and living standards.

In October 2024, the government abandoned efforts to support the exchange rate of bolivar, the national currency. In a couple of months, it lost two thirds of its value. The Maduro's government response was typical for autocrats. The regime has cracked down

on uncensored publication of economic data. Former officials and economists were arrested and charged with terrorism for reporting black-market exchange rates.<sup>1</sup>

Again and again, Venezuela illustrates the feedback loop between political and economic extractive institutions. As the economy contracted, the regime responded not with reform, but with greater repression—stacking courts, dissolving the opposition-led legislature, and using the military and security services to suppress protest.

Over the years, the Maduro government has been shaping the economic institutions to maximize rent collection. Far more systematically, it has been focusing on dismantling inclusive political institutions. The government extractive economic policies resulted in human suffering and mass emigration. The destruction of electoral institutions made Venezuelans unable to change the course through political means.

The Maduro regime has enormous resources to spend on protecting its power. It is the widening gap between how Venezuelans live and how they should have been living is what makes a revolution not only possible, but perhaps probable.

### ***United States in the Era of Trump***

An impressionable political commentator might call what is happening in the United States in the era of Donald Trump “a revolution.” Indeed, Trump has led a major political realignment in American politics. Voters who have been a part of the Democratic party for decades have become committed supporters of the MAGA movement, the core of the Trump’s political coalition. Ohio and Florida, states that were up for grabs in every presidential election for half a century, moved decisively into the Republican column.

For his supporters, Donald Trump is a revolution. He certainly transformed the ways how modern politicians communicate. He bypassed traditional media to speak directly to the public through social media. It allowed him to dominate the news cycle and maintain constant visibility, often with just a few inflammatory words or a late-night post. Traditionally, politicians relied on carefully crafted speeches and mediated coverage. Trump embraced an unfiltered, confrontational style that blurred the line between

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<sup>1</sup> [“Venezuela arrests dozens in crackdown on black market dollars”](#), *Financial Times*, 22 June 2025.

personal opinion, policy announcement, and political provocation. Trump's model of communication has already influenced how politicians communicate in the US and around the world.

Yet what has happened in ten years since Donald Trump entered the 2016 presidential campaign is not what we call "a revolution" in this book. There has been extraordinarily little change in political or economic institutions.

The institutional changes were minuscule not for the lack of trying. Trump's 2016 election victory brought in a Republican majority in the Congress. This was an opportunity to implement major reforms that were promised on the campaign trail. The net outcome was not negligible, yet did not go far beyond mere policy changes. The Congress passed a tax cut and failed to pass any other major reforms. It was close to rescind Obamacare, a major health reform passed in 2010, but the Republican majority was not big enough to make the change.

In 2025, in the first year of the Trump's second presidency, the Republican majority passed another major reform, the so-called *One Big Beautiful Bill*. For the first time in history, it included major cuts to the social security net, including Medicaid, which helps the poorest Americans to get health insurance. Social benefits have never been reduced at such a dramatic scale. Still, these are policy changes, not institutional changes.

Another lasting legacy of the President Trump's first term was the strong conservative majority in the Supreme Court. In 2022, under the Democratic administration, this majority delivered a long-sought victory for conservatives, repealing the landmark 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* and eliminating the constitutional protection for the right to abortion.

There was a potentially more consequential attempt to change political institutions. In late 2020, Donald Trump, the then-outgoing president who lost his bid for re-election, made an extraordinary attempt to subvert the outcome of the election and remain president. For two months, he refused to concede the loss. He tried to persuade government officials, including his vice-president Mike Pence and cabinet ministers to participate in his election subversion shenanigans. On January 6, 2021, the day when the

Congress was set to count the electoral votes, an unruly mob of Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol and disrupted the procedure.

The American institutions withstood the assault. Dozens of judges across the country shut cold the lawsuits brought by the Trump campaign; they did not find any evidence of the alleged electoral fraud. The vice-president, members of the cabinet, and other state officials did not go along with the president's suggestion. After the brief disruption, the Congress reconvened and proceeded with the regular process of counting electoral votes. The electoral institutions, which in the United States are defined, primarily, at the state level, stayed intact.

This is why a real revolution is highly unlikely. Americans always have a chance to change the course, voting another party in congressional elections. Every four years, they have a chance to replace the president by a candidate from another party. In fact, they did just that three times in a row – in 2016, 2020, and 2024 – they voted for the challenger against the candidate of the incumbent party.

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And still, "What if?" What if President Trump tries to stay in the White House when his term is over on January 20, 2028? What if the Commander-in-Chief uses the armed forces to subvert the ballot process? A president who tried once, unsuccessfully, to bend electoral institutions to his will, might try it as well again.

This is unlikely. It is even more unlikely that another attempt will be more successful than the first one. Finally, even an attempt is made, it will not be a revolution. It will be a coup if it is successful. It will be a failed coup, if not.

On the other hand, there are gathering clouds. One worrying symptom of American politics today is its extreme polarization. In the Congress and legislative assemblies across the country, politicians vote with their parties far more often than decades or just years ago. Once in power, Presidents move fast to focus on their base' priorities rather than on what the dwindling center wants. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States have become a more diverse country, but the American politics did not.

In a polarized polity, reforms become more difficult. Policies popular with large swaths of the population are not implemented because the political logic dictates one or another party to oppose them. Opinion polls show that the same reform might be popular when “our” president is in the White House and unpopular if it is the “other’s”. The results is a legislative stalemate, even for reforms that would benefit a strong bipartisan majority. This is an ingredient for the revolution: a political system that does not allow the popular demand for change to translate into an actual reform.

As we saw in a few revolutionary episodes, the technological progress is not necessarily a stabilizing force. The AI revolution threatens the middle class more than the very rich or poor. If it does lead to the erosion of white-collar jobs the same way the globalization hurt the blue-collar jobs, the net result will be further political polarization. Reforms will become even harder, while the demand for reforms will only rise.

### *China With a Leader Above the Party*

China is unlikely to face a revolution. The Chinese Communist Party has a whole variety of tools to stay in power – police, courts, institutions of state, military censored media, etc. Yet this is not what prevents China from a revolution. Not the naked power of CCP, but the power combined with flexibility and adaptability.

Following the 1989 Tiananmen square episode, when hundreds of students were killed in the government crackdown of a peaceful protest, the critical element of the system’s response was not the weight of the crackdown. Many authoritarian regimes were able to be cruel and decisive. This is rarely enough. What is needed is a combination of a crackdown with a reflection on the root causes of the protest. In three years, Deng Xiaoping who compromised with the short-sighted hardliners in 1989, brought China back on the path of the radical economic reforms. Eventually, this path led to the openings far more radical than what was demanded by the student protesters.

For more than four decades, the Chinese political institutions accommodated fundamental economic changes. The people at the top knew very well that the party will keep them at the top only if they deliver on economic reforms. And even then, their time

at the top was limited regardless of their performance. Strict limits on the leader's tenure are a guarantee of change even in the absence of democratic elections.

At the same time, there is no guarantee that this flexibility will always remain a feature of the Chinese version of the communist dictatorship. Xi Jinping, the China's leader since 2012, has been able to consolidate so much power in his allotted decade at the top that the rotation system broke down. For the first time in half a century, the party was not able to oust the leader as scheduled. The political system that served the country so well during the China's economic miracle years is under severe stress.

The evolution of the political system into a rigid one comes at an inopportune time. After half a century of rapid expansion, the economy cools down. The Chinese government mishandled the pandemic response and was not able to return to the pre-pandemic growth rates. The humongous investment in manufacturing equipment and AI-enhanced technologies might not pay as much in the increasingly protectionist world. The economy no longer creates as many blue-collar jobs as the education system produces college graduates. Complaints about connections and patronage being critical to finding a good job are becoming louder and louder. In institutional terms, people are increasingly frustrated with the status quo.

On previous occasions, the Chinese political system, non-democratic as it is, was able to respond to the popular demands. As recently as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government subtly adjusted policy when harsh lockdown measures resulted in popular protests.

Adjusting the institutions in response to the most recent demands might be trickier. The epoch of the Chinese economic miracle is probably over. A richer, more advanced, slow-growing economy needs a different set of institutions. Whether or not the increasingly rigid political system will be able to facilitate transition to this new set of institutions is to be seen. Of course, it is certainly too early to write it off.

### ***Russia at Crossroads, As Usual***

Both China and Russia's political systems are authoritarian. The big difference is that in the former the autocracy is institutionalized, while in the latter it is personalistic.

By 2025, Vladimir Putin has been the Russia's leader for a quarter of century. At some point, he had a placeholder nominally heading the state for four years, yet he has never let the steering wheel to slip from his hands. Twenty-five years at the helm made him one of the longest-serving leaders in Russian history. As president of Russia, he has vast constitutional powers. In addition to these vast powers, he has informal control over most of the government, even if the constitution envisioned checks and balances. In addition to this, his personal friends of many years control the most profitable oil and gas companies. Generals tremble in his presence. Until an attempted coup of a rogue paramilitary group in June 2023, he has never seen a serious challenge to his power.

What is striking is how decidedly mediocre Putin is as a person. He has never been a stirring public speaker like revolutionary leaders Lenin or Trotsky. (Each of them authored influential books and hundreds of articles and led administrative affairs of the state at its most perilous moments.) He has never been able to remember thousands of local politician names or personally manage complex bureaucracies as Stalin did. He has never been building personal rapport with local party functionaries like Khrushchev, the Stalin's eventual successor. (Both Stalin and Khrushchev were effective public speakers, albeit each in a style of his own.) Unlike Brezhnev, the next long-term leader, who took part in some of the most dangerous combat operations of World War II, Putin is physical coward. During the war in Ukraine, he was unable to visit the frontlines even once.

Putin is not the first mediocre person to have led Russia – remember Nicholas II, the last emperor, a person of a mediocre intellect and temperament? The tsar got his supreme authority by the virtue of his birth. Putin's story was quite different. In 1999, the power obtained through appointment as prime minister had to be earned and defended, not merely inherited.

The mediocrity might have contributed to making Putin president. Unlike his predecessor, he was perceived as a man of the people. Because that is what he was, an average man. After ten crisis-ridden years, when the elite invariably occupied the top positions, someone who resembled the views, approaches, and mannerisms of the majority appeared attractive.

After a quarter of a century in power, Putin no longer resembles the average Russian. In 2025, his views on most issues align with those of a small minority. The combination of his advanced age (in a country with a relatively low life expectancy) and mental inflexibility which prevents him from adapting to a changing world (he does not use internet or social media), led to Putin's views becoming distant from those of the majority of Russians.

The sharp increase in censorship and repression of people who stray from the official lines about war and peace, authority, gender relations, etc. is a direct result of this divergence. Putin lost connection with the average Russian because an average Russian has changed over the quarter of century. Russia's citizens changed, but he did not – because he has not had to. The Russian political system serves one purpose: to preserve the power of those who already have it. It is the textbook example of the extractive political institutions.

The forensic analysis after the March 2024 presidential elections showed that the government had to add tens of millions of votes to Putin's final tally to make his victory look decisive. Putin had no chance of winning a competitive election. He arrested, forced into exile, and killed his political opponents. He closed down newspapers and chased high-quality journalists out of the country. He prohibited civic organizations and made sure that his only opponents on the ballot were puppet candidates. And yet – with no opponent on the ballot, no advertising against the incumbent on airwaves or on streets, and all the money of the state working to promote the only candidate – Putin had to rely on fraudulent votes to report a win.

As unimpressive as Putin is as a person, he is equally devoid of individuality as a politician. Across his quarter of a century in power, he appointed people to key positions based on personal relationships. Their professional qualities clearly played a secondary role. Putin's inability to work with strong and independent-minded individuals was evident from the very beginning of his rule. By now, such people are practically nonexistent amongst the ranks of Russia's leadership.

In theory, the inability to select and promote technocrats, even in his own political interests, should have caused Putin to lose power at an early stage. But it did not. The

system operated on the premise that the most competent individuals had the opportunity to become incredibly wealthy if their activities also ensured the prosperity of Putin's inner circle. There were some competent hands – for example, Igor Shuvalov who steered the government's response to the 2008-2009 world financial crisis, which hit Russia hard. He made a staggering billions of dollars in the process.

Under Putin's cronies, the behemoth state firms such as the natural gas monopolist Gazprom, did not do well. They made losses, while their top executives raked in incredible salaries without doing much of anything.

This system, in which the state functions by allowing the most professional individuals to become extraordinarily wealthy compared to others in different countries, may seem like a complex, intricately designed scheme. However, it is not the result of any deliberate plans. Rather, the system gravitated naturally towards that state in the absence of real leadership. The obscene level of enrichment of Putin's cronies is not the result of a sophisticated organization; it is a failure of basic state functions under Putin.

The outcome of Russia sliding into this natural state has been so dismal that it was only natural for commentators to assume it was intentional. It is so convenient to believe that the trillions of rubles spent on the military and national security are the result of a cunning, villainous, plan. It is a challenge – and an unpleasant one at that – to understand that military spending is always profitable for the elites, and that theft is easiest to justify under the guise of security concerns.

The militarization and corruption of the Putin-led state not only complemented each other but also depended on each other's existence. They are the default towards which the system gravitates in the absence of conscious, deliberate, costly efforts aimed at preventing them.

The triumph of archaic, statist ideology in the late Putin years was not an extension of his personality. It is the extractive institutions that do not require a charismatic leader at the helm. The internal war against modernity, reforms, and contemporary social relations, is not simply the result of Putin's many years in power and his inability to keep pace with a changing world. Following an archaic ideology demands minimal effort and

helps justify the repression necessary to maintain power. Archaic ideology is both a symptom of a rigid political system and its tool of control.

The war against the LGBTQ+ people, a hallmark campaign of the late Putin years, came, of course, from backwardness and ignorance. But it is also a war against a younger, growing majority in defense of one's own power. Likewise, the war against abortion rights and women's autonomy is classic ideological conservatism. But it is also a political strategy aimed at preserving the status quo. A pregnant woman is less likely to join a protest, and a man tied to a single job to support his large family is more likely to remain loyal. Though Putinism seems unique, turns out to be just the most primitive ideology that ensures the continuation of his power. Again, conservatism at the top is both a symptom of an inflexible political system and means of ideological domination.

In short, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian state is a highly personalized regime, built around a mediocre personality. The result could never be effective and turned out to be tragic. A decade and a half of stagnation, during which the country fell further behind the world each year, culminated in a war against Ukraine, which has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, a wave of repression that led to hundreds of thousands of refugees, the destruction of science and education, and the creation of a new economic model that sets the stage for a crisis after the war ends.

Is that a revolution in the making? A personalized, archaic system with a mediocrity at the helm is certainly a breeding ground. Not necessarily. Enormous resources, the windfall profits from oil and gas exports, are being spent on the regime's security. Alexey Navalny, the leader of the Russian opposition, was killed in jail on Putin's orders. Under tremendous pressure, most of opposition activists have left the country. The exit doors stay open – that's how hundreds of thousands of Russians went into exile after Putin started the Russia-Ukraine war.

And yet the main reason why it might not be a revolution in the making is different. We saw in the book that no amount of resources poured into state security can save the regime, if it cannot adopt changes that people demand. The powerful Soviet communist regime collapsed because it was so rigid that it was not able to allow necessary changes even in dire circumstances. Putin's regime is not as powerful, pervasive, and entrenched

as the Soviet one. What protects Putin – and perhaps any extractive regime in Russia – is the experience of past revolutions.

Two major revolutions in the span of one century – as often as nowhere else – have resulted in one set of extractive institutions being replaced by another one, even worse, in many respects. Romanovs were bad, but they did not kill people by tens of thousands as Stalin did. Seventy years later, in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet regime was bad, and tens of millions desperately wanted change. Yet the late Soviet regime, for all its ills, has not started a war of conquest that killed hundreds of thousands. Another revolution might not happen precisely because of the past experience of revolutions.

*Chicago – Moscow – Kyiv - Riga*

# CHAPTER SOURCES

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### ***Compromised Narratives***

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## **Chapter 4 THE GREAT REVOLUTIONS**

All revolutions catalogized, Tilly (2004).

### ***The Good Revolution***

The argument that the American Revolution was in a part a response on the shifting British colonial policy, Pincus (2016).

Burke's original book on the French Revolution, Burke (1790). Burke's political biography, Bourke (2015).

Stability of the US institutions and the role of slavery, Weingast (1999).

### ***The Revolution of Many Firsts***

Palmer (1941) is a classic account of the Jacobin dictatorship. Lefebvre (1947) is a classic Marxist analysis of the root causes of the French Revolution. Schama (2004) and Popkin (2019) are modern coverage.

Lafayette's biography, Duncan (2021).

### ***When the Revolution Wins***

Causes of the Russian revolution: Lieven (2015), Trotsky (2008 [1932]). Economic development before the revolution: Gershenkron (1962).

Politics immediately after the revolution: Pipes (2011), Kotkin (2014).

Stalin's elimination of political opponents and competitors, Montefiore (2003), Conquest (2008), Kotkin (2017), Slezkine (2017).

Why tsar's extensions of the electoral franchise failed: peaceful extension in the West, Acemoglu and Robinson (2000), Lizzeri and Persico (2004); structural obstacles, Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin (2012).

Famine due to collectivization in Ukraine (Holodomor): Conquest (1986), Applebaum (2017), Naumenko (2021), Markevich, Naumenko, and Qian (2025).

John Dewey visit to the USSR, Dewey (1929). Education reforms, Kuzminov and Yudkevich (2022).

Cinema under Stalin: Belodubrovskaya (2017).

Growth rates of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union economy: Markevich and Harrison (2011).

### ***The Life of Pu Yi***

Chinese revolution, 1911-1949: Suyin (1972), Zarrow (2006), Halliday and Chang (2012), Javed (2022).  
“Cultural revolution”: MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006).

## **Chapter 5 THE ETERNAL DESIRE TO BE FREE & INDEPENDENT**

Quote from JFK, context: Matthews (1997).

### ***Revolutions Spread Like Fire***

Mann (2012)

### ***The Failed Revolution***

Bandera on revolution, Bandera (2021).

Bandera as national hero, Marples (2006). Bander's fight and Soviet repression against Ukrainian nationalists, Finkel (2024).

### ***The Old Ways of the New Elites***

Troillot (1995) reflects on the interpretation of the Haiti Revolution in the Western scholarship. Daut (2025) is a modern biography of Henri Christophe.

### ***History Marches Backwards***

General history of Iran from Amanat (2017). Shadmehr (2017) compares ideological shifts of the Iranian revolutionaries with that during the American and Russian Revolutions.

Forugh Farrokhzad's poem is quoted from Hillmann (1987).

## **Chapter 6 THE CATASTROPHES THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN**

### ***Democracy is a Flexible Political System***

Pincus (2009) is a definitive historical account of the Glorious Revolution.

How the Glorious Revolution laid foundations to the Industrial Revolution, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012).

Connection between the banker's risk of expropriation under the Stuart and Hannover dynasties and the 1688 revolution, North and Weingast (1987).

Democracy as a political system in which incumbents lose elections, Przeworski (1991).

Formal models of democracy, Persson and Tabellini (2002), Boix (2003), Acemoglu and Robinson (2006).

Structural explanations why democracy is more flexible than autocracy: Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin (2010, 2018). Stability of democracy, Persson and Tabellini (2009) and Fearon (2011). Reliance on economic success, Lipset (1959).

The rise of the regulatory state in the United States, Glaeser, Scheinkman, and Shleifer (2003), Glaeser and Shleifer (2003). History of robber barons, Josephson (1962).

LGBT+ rights movement in the US: historical, Ball (2010), Faderman (2015); legal aspects of transgender rights litigation, Pierceson (2022).

### ***Flexible Does Not Mean Democratic***

Chinese politics: early account, Suyin (1972); factions, Francois, Trebbi, and Xiao (2016).

Loyalty vs. competence: Egorov and Sonin (2011), Zakharov (2016). Loyalty vs. competence in Mao's China: Bai and Zhou (2019), Shih (2022).

Promotion in Chinese government: Shih, Adolph, and Min (2012), Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim (2015).

Experimental evidence on China's system responsiveness: Chen, Pan, and Xu (2016).

Politics of Tiananmen massacre, Su (2023).

Mexican politics, Krauze (1997).

## **Chapter 7 THE MECHANICS OF REVOLUTION**

### ***The Excluded***

Aven (2017).

### ***The Rigid Political System***

Protests as political signals, Cantoni, Yang, Yuchtman, and Zhang (2019).

Economic theory of loyalty vs. competence: Egorov and Sonin (2011), Zakharov (2016).

Moral hazard at the helm, Myerson (2015).

### ***The Reforms that Cannot Help***

The commitment problem: North and Weingast (1989), Acemoglu and Robinson (2005), Myerson (2008), Egorov and Sonin (2025). Commitment and slippery slope, Schwarz and Sonin (2008).

Obstacles to extending electoral franchise, Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin (2012). Reasons for extending franchise that did not work in the Romanovs' monarchy case, Acemoglu and Robinson (2000), Lizzeri and Persico (2004).

### ***The Foreign Pressure***

Importance of foreign affairs in a revolution, Skocpol (1979). In French Revolution, Palmer (1941), Popkin (2019). In Russian Revolution, Lieven (2015). In Chinese Revolution, Suyin (1972), Halliday and Chung (2012).

Robespierre's conspiracy propaganda, Palmer (1941).

## **Chapter 8 PROTECTING THEIR POWER**

Means of authoritarian survival: Wintrobe (1998), B.Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Silverson, and Smith (2003), Gandhi and Przeworski (2007), B.Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2011), Svoboda (2012), Egorov and Sonin (2024).

Divide and rule, Padro i Miguel (2007), Paine (2021).

Systematic evidence that dictators underperform in terms of economic growth: Jones and Olken (2005).

Modern autocracies, Applebaum (2024).

### ***The Spin Dictators***

The concept of informational autocrats is from Guriev and Treisman (2022). Confusion as the goal of propaganda, Pomerantsev (2017).

Information manipulation by autocrats: censorship and propaganda, Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin (2009), Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), Rozenas and Stukal (2019); coups and revolution prevention and information manipulation, Edmond (2013), Casper and Tyson (2014), Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland (2018), Boleslavsky, Shadmehr, and Sonin (2021).

The propaganda effect of target project, Voigtlaender and Voth (2025) on Hitler's highway.

Propaganda in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes (USSR, China), Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), Dimitrov (2023).

Sophisticated censorship in modern China: King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, 2014), Lorentzen (2014). Digital surveillance, Xu (2021).

Propaganda in authoritarian regimes: Venezuela, Knight and Tribin (2018).

Authoritarian elections: Gandhi and Lust-Okkar (2015). Electoral fraud, Little (2012), Simpser (2013), Enikolopov, Korovkin, Petrova, Sonin, and Zakharov (2013).

### ***The Executioners***

Use of secret services in the USSR, Harrison (2023).

On national operations, see, e.g., Gregory, Sneider, and Sonin (2011). Snyder (2010) is a historical narrative on bloody operations of the Hitler and Stalin's regimes in modern day Poland, Baltic countries, and Ukraine.

On Henry, Duke of Guise, murder, Carrol (2011).

Theories of authoritarian repression: Egorov and Sonin (2015), Bove, Platteau, and Sekeris (2017), Tyson (2018) Dragu and Przeworski (2019), Rozenas (2020). Political rationale for mass purges, Montagnes and Wolton (2019).

Systematic evidence on Army repression in Stalin's Big Terror, Zakharov and Sonin (2025).

Strategic repressions: Esteban, Morelli, and Rohner (2015).

Execution of the tsar's family as a commitment problem: Egorov and Sonin (2015).

Navalny's social media impact, Enikolopov, Petrova, and Sonin (2018).

Navalny (2025).

Che Guevarra's executions, Feldman (2019).

## **Chapter 9 LEADERS**

### ***A Typical Revolutionary***

Wanchekon (2012); unpublished English-language manuscript; private communication.

### ***The Forgotten Heroines***

On Spiridonova: Boniece (2010), Geifman (1993), Rabinowitch (2008). On elimination of SRs in 1918: Kotkin (2014).

On Kollontai: Kollontai (1971 [1926]), Clements (1979). On Marx on woman: Engels and Marx (2015 [1848]).

### ***The Ultimate Winners***

Tarle (2021 [1937])

## **Chapter 10 THE REVOLUTION DAY**

### ***The Old Regime Pulls the Trigger***

Events of 19-22 August 1991, Treisman (2012), Taubman (2017).

Succession problem in authoritarian regimes: Herz (1952), Konrad and Skaperdas (2007), Egorov and Sonin (2011).

Succession rules, empirical evidence: Kokkonen and Sundell (2014),

### ***Collective Action Needs Coordination***

Information-based theoretical models of collective action in revolutions: Kuran (1989), Lohmann (1993), Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2011), B.Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2017), Shadmehr (2019) Barbera and Jackson (2022).

### ***The Psychology of Masses***

Kuran (1989)

### ***Taking Power and Keeping It***

Levitsky and Way (2022)

## **Chapter 11 ALL TOMORROW'S REVOLUTIONS**

### ***Iran: Waiting for an Ignition***

### ***Venezuela: The Basket Case***

### ***United States in the Era of Trump***

### ***China With a Leader Above the Party***

### ***Russia at Crossroads, As Usual***

On Putin, Gessen (2012), McFaul (2018), Weiss (2022), Frye (2022). Cleptocracy, Dawisha (2015), Aslund (2019). Origins of the war with Ukraine, Egorov and Sonin (2025).

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