

Lectures on Russian History – Post-Soviet Russia
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The "Chaos" of the '90s

- After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin became President of the Russian Federation
- President Putin and his supporters now refer to this era as "the chaos of the '90s," and Putin recently listed this period, along with the Great Patriotic War, as the two chief reasons for the low population of Russia
- He cited it again during his annual call-in show on June 20, 2019, as the major cause of the country's current problems – notwithstanding the fact that he has now been in charge for 20 years
- The republics then formed the Commonwealth of Independent States, a non-binding military and economic partnership
- Some regions within the Russian Federation, such as Chechnya, were not granted independence
- Among the first developments were immediate moves to privatize the economy, large infusions of western aid, and the removal of censorship and publishing restrictions
- The economic reforms, understandably, did not bring about an immediate sharp rise in the standard of living
- Economic development was uneven
- Some were able to prosper, while others did not
- The Soviet-era parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies, remained in force and came to oppose some of Yeltsin's policies
- In 1993 the Congress passed a resolution limiting Yeltsin's powers to enact reforms
- Nationwide referendums suggested that Yeltsin still had the support of most Russians
- In September Yeltsin called for elections to a new assembly, to be named the Duma as in pre-revolutionary times, and he disbanded the Soviet-era Congress
- Members of the Congress refused to leave the parliament building, the very same "White House" that they had defended with Yeltsin's help in August, 1991
- Supporters of the Parliament, who represented a minority, stormed Ostankino, the national television center
- Yeltsin's supporters in turn took to the streets to defend other government buildings
- Yeltsin sent government forces to storm the White House
- Some of the occupants of the building were armed with rifles and anti-tank guns
- Ultimately the Russian military secured the building, which was largely destroyed in the process
- As these events were taking place, onlookers came from around the city
- Some participants and some onlookers were killed
- The official death toll stood at 146 although some claim that it was higher
- Yeltsin's reputation suffered considerable damage in the west at this time
- The new government's prestige suffered further as a result of the two-year war in

Chechnya during 1994-1996, which resulted in the withdrawal of Russian troops and the granting of more autonomy for the Chechens.

- Yeltsin, however, still enjoyed the support of many Russians (though fewer than before) and he was re-elected in 1996
- There are claims now that these elections were not free and fair, but they seemed so at the time
- In 1998 Russia experienced a severe economic turn-down
- Russia defaulted on loans to international creditors
- After 1999, however, the Russian economy recovered, mainly on the basis of the energy sector
- In that year a former KGB official named Vladimir Putin was appointed Prime Minister
- On Dec. 31, 1999 Yeltsin resigned and appointed Putin Acting President

The Putin Era

- In March 2000 Putin was elected President
- In 2003, his supporters gained a substantial majority of seats in the Duma, which they have increased in subsequent parliamentary elections
- In 2004 Putin won re-election
- The November, 2007 Duma elections were widely perceived as fraudulent.
- For example, in the Caucasus Mountain regions of Chechnya and Ingushetia, where there is substantial opposition to Russian rule, turnout was reported at around 100% and the ruling United Russia Party received about 100% of the votes cast
- The numbers were clearly fictional, and prompted the creation of a protest organization in the region called "I Didn't Vote."
- In at least one subsequent election in the Caucasus, turnout actually exceeded the number of eligible voters
- Actual ballot-box stuffing and similar measures, however, were and are relatively rare
- More often, the authorities who oversee elections find ways to forestall the campaigns of candidates who posed a challenge to the party in power
- For example, signatures on a candidate's petition might be questioned, or the hall where he or she was planning to hold a meeting of at least 1000 people (as required by law) might be closed for repairs at the last moment.
- Election laws and procedures have been changed. For example, gubernatorial races in Russian regions were sometimes hotly contested, so the president announced that henceforth governors would be appointed, not elected
- That rule drew criticism both in Russia and abroad, and was subsequently changed; governors are now elected, but from a list of candidates that must be approved by the president's office – a perfect example what some commentators have called "democratatorship"
- More recently, laws have been changed to make it much easier for parties to place candidates on ballots, in the hope that parties would remain small and not form coalitions
- In 2008, the term-limited Putin was succeeded by the Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitrii Medvedev
- Putin had appointed Medvedev and publicly supported him in his run for the presidency
- Several legitimate opposition candidates were prevented from running in the election,

while three nominal opposition parties approved by the Kremlin offered token resistance

- One of the legitimate candidates who was not permitted to run was a man named Boris Nemtsov, who under Yeltsin had held several important positions including governor of a large region and Deputy Prime Minister [His fate will be discussed later]
- Nemtsov was later murdered near the Kremlin
- Medvedev, having won, in turn appointed Putin Prime Minister
- Putin ran for president in 2012 and won, at which time he appointed Medvedev as Prime Minister
- Term limit laws were changed so that there are now two six-year terms
- For most of Putin's tenure opinion polls have suggested that he and (to some extent) Medvedev have been popular in the country
- Public protests initially were few in number and sparsely attended
- There then occurred a growth in the protest movement
- Most major cities saw protests, some of them attracting thousands of people
- The causes were varied. For example, drivers in many cities protested the right of government officials to place flashing blue lights on their cars and speed through traffic, resulting in traffic tie-ups at best and horrific accidents at worst
- There has been an effort in the past few years to unite various small parties and movements in opposition to the government, and the post-2008 economic downturn led to some dissatisfaction
- Ultimately some protests were held on a larger scale
- For example, in May, 2012 protests were held on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow immediately prior to Putin's inauguration with the theme "For Fair Elections"
- Many people were arrested in conjunction with these protests and some cases are still ongoing
- In general the authorities became less tolerant of protests
- Major protests in cities throughout Russia on March 26 and July 12 2017, organized by an opposition blogger named Aleksei Navalny, have focused on the corruption of high government officials as detailed on Navalny's Wikileaks-style web sites
- Navalny in turn has been charged and convicted on several charges involving tax evasion and financial misconduct
- He has spent time in prison, and his brother, Oleg, is still in prison on the same charges, which are widely considered illegitimate and politically motivated
- In 2018 Navalny announced that he would run for president of the Russian Federation.
- He was not allowed to run because of his felony convictions
- His current (Fall 2020) strategy is to support a variety of candidates throughout Russia that have a chance to defeat the United Russia candidate
- He was on a trip for that purpose recently in Siberia and was poisoned – he is now rehabilitating in Germany
- Putin won the election by a margin of around 80/20 against a slate of politically acceptable candidates
- Once again the turnout in the Caucasus was impossibly high and there were widespread reports of ballot fixing that went uninvestigated
- Putin re-appointed Medvedev as Prime Minister, although he was recently moved to another government position, and a man named Mikhail Mishustin was made Prime

Minister

- Recent changes to the constitution now make it possible for Putin may serve another 12 years

Separatist Regions

Ukraine and Crimea

- In late 2013 a dispute arose involving CIS member and former Soviet Republic Ukraine
- The elected president of the country, Viktor Yanukovich, announced that he was cancelling plans for greater collaboration with the European Union in favor of closer ties to Russia
- He was opposed by a large number of people who occupied the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* or Independence Square, generally referred to in both Russian and English as "[the] Maidan," in Kiev
- Yanukovich was replaced in a coup d'état in February, 2014
- Russia supported Yanukovich, while the United States supported the coup
- In March of 2014 residents of Crimea, a historically Russian region, voted to join the Russian Federation
- At the same time, separatists in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Eastern Ukraine (also a historically Russian, or mostly Russian, region) sought autonomy, alleging rights violations and atrocities on the part of Ukrainian authorities after the fall of the legitimate government
- Some of the separatists formed military units and commenced a war against Ukrainian authorities with Russian encouragement and (purportedly) military support.
- The separatists have gained substantial territories and proclaimed the two regions to be the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics.
- During the fighting, on July 17, 2014, a Malaysia Airlines passenger jet with 298 people aboard was shot down over the region, either by Ukrainian air-to-air missiles or by separatist surface-to-air missiles.
- Ukrainian jets were carrying out bombing raids at the time so either story is plausible
- Entities in the West, including the European Union and NATO and the United States, have supported Ukraine. They have imposed economic sanctions against Russia and provided Ukraine with non-lethal aid.
- There were two ceasefire agreements, both signed in the capital of Belarus, Minsk
- The first, signed in September 2014, was not successful. The second, signed on February 12, 2015, was initially more successful, but fighting resumed
- Other agreements have been brokered more recently and for a time there were fewer reports of violations on both sides
- The status of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions has not been resolved, however, and there has been continued fighting. The United Nations estimates that the death toll is now about 13,000

Transdniester,

- Transdniestr [aka Transnistria] is a region in Moldova with a large Russian population

that gained de facto independence after heavy fighting by Russian-backed paramilitary forces in 1992

- Residents of the region have formed the Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika [Moldovan Republic of Transdniestria] which is unrecognized internationally but supported by the Russians
- On June 14, 2015, a member of the parliament of this Republic, Andrei Sipchenko, appeared on the Russian talk show "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev," whose moderator, and for the most part guests, express the views of the Russian government
- Recently a member of the Russian Duma, Viacheslav Nikonov (who is the grandson of Stalin's foreign minister Viacheslav Molotov), to proclaim that a siege of Transdniestria would also constitute a siege of Russian peacekeeping forces, which would be an act of war
- He accused the United States of orchestrating events in Transdniestria to draw Russia into a wider conflict, and ended by vowing that Russia would never abandon its friends there, who have expressed overwhelmingly in a referendum their desire to become a part of Russia

Nagorno Karabakh

- Nagorno-Karabakh is a predominantly Armenian region within Azerbaijan that gained de facto independence in the 1980s in fighting against the Azeri government. Russia has been involved with both sides in the dispute and has tried to negotiate a settlement
- Fighting was renewed in the fall of 2020
- A cease-fire brokered by Russia is currently in place

Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

- Georgia (along with Ossetia and Abkhazia) was annexed into the Russian empire in the early 19th century.
- Along with other regions in the Caucasus it was briefly independent during the Russian civil war but was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922.
- In Soviet times it was a vacation destination, a wine producer and a relatively affluent region.
- After the dissolution of the USSR, however, it has experienced a series of internal and external conflicts.
- Two of the conflicts entailed South Ossetia and Abkhazia, regions in Georgia which sought independence
- These conflicts ended in ceasefires whose enforcement was entrusted by the United Nations to Russian troops. The two regions thus gained de facto independence from Georgia, which still claimed them as its territories.
- The Russians supported South Ossetia and Abkhazia but did not recognize them formally as independent countries.
- The situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not change until 2004.
- Beginning in that year there was increased tension and repeated conflicts between South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists supported by the Russians, and the Georgians.
- In 2008 the frequency and intensity of these conflicts escalated. Each side accused the other provoking conflict.

- Open hostilities began on August 7 and proceeded for several days until both sides signed a cease fire agreement brokered by the French.