

The Russian Revolution of 2017

In my passport, in the “place of “birth” section, it says USSR, a non-existent country, little more than the shattered dream of various intellectuals of the 20th century. Now 2017 is arriving and with it, 100 years on from the upheaval that gave rise to my country of birth, come questions about revolution.

“Revolution” is talked about as a project, but it’s not a project which one can start and finish, framing it with dates as if in a history textbook. Revolution is life, in which one always faces a choice: to act or to stand aside.

In any protest there will be a moment of despair. Everyone who engages in a fight against the injustice imposed by a regime comes to see that its overthrow will not happen at once. So, on the one hand, I often hear the question, “when can we expect the next revolution?”; yet I also hear the opposite sentiment: “you will not achieve anything, you can’t change the world.”

Many of those who took to the streets to protest against the regime in Russia in 2012 have by now left the country. Hundreds of people are behind bars. Political assassinations are still not a thing of the past. Vladimir Putin’s bombastic rule in 2017 is, to quote Pushkin, “a feast in a time of plague”. People I meet abroad see my country as a killing machine, with President Putin at the controls.

I watched the Soviet film “To Kill the Dragon” many times as a child. And whenever talk touched upon someone who considered himself a leader of some sort, I would think back to this film. It’s not enough to cut off the dragon’s head. Other heads will remain. But how do you cut them all off?

The answer lies in my belief that revolution is a political process within each one of us: the choice to act and overcome your fear, which appears each time you start to act. The experience of the 20th century has taught us not to wait for a Lenin, as then it will become Lenin’s revolution, a switch from a monarch’s will to that of a single leader.

Our enemies are fear and indifference. These are what allow the security services to hold sway over a giant country such as Russia, putting a small, grey and faceless spy, Mr. Putin, in power.

How is it possible that within just a couple of years my country has become associated only with Mr. Putin? The answer is simple and cynical. This is the image that Russia creates for itself. The common denominator for artists, activists and independent media could therefore be: “building an alternative world to the one formed by official policy”.

From this perspective, the “Iron Curtain” is not a political term from the 20th century, but a wall of mistrust which is built by each one of us when we refuse to take responsibility and to participate in politics. This is the wall of separation between “Us” and “them”.

The new Iron Curtain can be broken only by active people and associations. First of all it means that we should stop fearing to look at one another and to get to know one another. We shouldn’t be afraid to trust each other, as only trust can become the core that will help us to overcome political hypocrisy.

What do you think we who aren't in agreement with Putin's government are called by the national propaganda? We are called the "fifth column"—a military term from the 1930s. This means there is a war. But this way is invisible, and that is why it is so dangerous. "Enemies among us" is exactly what was written under our photographs on one of the posters that the government put in occupied Crimea in the spring of 2014.

But we are not "others" or enemies of the state. Despite the rhetoric of some, Russia is not the enemy of Europe. And just as any European country can declare war against those it labels as dangerous and alien, war was declared on us—by jailing us in order to protect society from our supposed danger.

In other words, Europe's migration crisis is about the same fear, mistrust and indifference towards others. How can you consider as "others" those who cross borders and risk their lives in order to live by the same values that you live by? The idea of the superiority of one group of people over the rest is closely related to the regime's sense of power and its creation of a "norm".

From Bolshevism to bolshyism¹

"You won't achieve anything anyway, you're crazy": so says anyone who gets into a position of power over us. Maybe we are. But fighting against the "norm"—which a Russian writer, Vladimir Sorokin, cleverly compares to the shit that the state feeds the obedient masses very morning—is one of the driving forces of my life.

If you think about it, much of what was considered the norm a century ago is now called racism. What was considered the norm half a century ago is now called totalitarianism. It's up to us how our actions will later be described in the history book.

How many of our children, in the place-of-birth section of their passport, will have a non-existent country?

Maria Alyokhina

Political activist and member of Pussy Riot, reflecting on what revolution means today
From: The Economist, "The World in 2017" issue, December 2016

Note:

¹bolshyism: "bolshy—to be argumentative, bad-tempered, spoiling for a fight, a pain in the ass"

I believe this heading was written by the editor, not the author