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When Regime Change Came With a Whimper

On the evening of Christmas Day 20 years ago, my wife and kids went to Moscow's Red Square to round out a day of holiday cheer. I had to stay in The Times's office because Mikhail Gorbachev had resigned that morning and was making a televised address in the evening.

It was not Christmas in Moscow — the holiday takes place on Jan. 7 there — and the weather was bleak, so the great square was pretty much empty. Or so my wife, Mary, told me when she came rushing into the office. As they watched, she said, the red flag with the hammer-and-sickle of the Soviet Union was lowered over the Kremlin, and in its stead, after an absence of 74 years, rose the white, blue and red flag of Russia. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was no more.

It was indisputably a defining moment in the 20th century, the end of a utopian experiment of mind-boggling ambition that, in the name of creating a perfect society, ended up butchering 10 million people and repressing the rest, along with half of Europe.

Yet there were no celebrations on that day, nor on the next. The moment had been so long in coming, so filled with ups and downs, that it seemed almost anticlimactic. Nearly seven years had passed since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and began loosening the Soviet bonds. By now the economy was a shambles, the shops were empty, the streets were unsafe, and, after a long chain of reforms, political struggles, demonstrations and clashes, people were exhausted.

The constituent republics had all but broken away, and the East European satellites had all shed their Kremlin-imposed regimes at least two years earlier.

So what was surprising on that Christmas night was not that the Soviet Union was dead, but that it had lasted so long.

I have often thought of the contrast between the grand symbolism and the pedestrian reality of that moment, especially during the current wave of "color" revolutions, "springs" and other upheavals. The excitement of such events, especially when viewed from afar, favors romantic reports. They are hard to resist, of course; anyone who's been there knows the thrill of witnessing the triumph of a longing for freedom over long-held fear. We were all reminded of that last week with the death of Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright whose courageous refusal to bow before Communist power catapulted him, reluctantly, to the leadership of a free Czech Republic.

Yet a revolution, or the collapse of a government, really should not be cause for celebration. It represents a failure of governance, and the failure of the governed to change it by democratic means. Mr. Havel should have spent his best years writing plays, not sitting in prison and fighting an oppressive system. And as we have seen in too many of the former Soviet republics — and in many other places — "regime change" does not necessarily lead to a better regime. Tens of thousands of people have been turning out in Moscow and other Russian cities this month to protest rigged parliamentary elections. Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan are certified tyrants; five years after Ukraine's Orange Revolution overturned the rigged election of Viktor Yanukovich, Ukrainians elected him anyway.

What struck me during the protracted death of the Soviet Union were the mixed feelings of so many people I met. They were gaining freedoms, yes, but they were plunging into a dangerous unknown. Most of Mr. Gorbachev's economic reforms, as well as Boris Yeltsin's after the Soviet Union fell apart, seemed initially only to make life harder and more perilous. The loss of even a modicum of security for people who had known so much horror and dislocation was wrenching and frightening. However monstrous Stalin was, people wept when he died out of fear of what might come next. North Koreans have also been shown in reports breaking into tears over the death of Kim Jong-il, perhaps for the same reason.

Today there is a lot of soul-searching in the United States and Europe about why our democratic governments “supported” this or that fallen, or still active, dictator. It is a false argument, because it presumes that outside forces are somehow responsible for keeping a tyrant in power or removing him. Ultimately it is only the ruled who can know when they have had enough, and when they are ready to risk their lives and security to throw off a tyranny. The Declaration of Independence, in setting out its great justification for rebellion, also warned against doing so lightly: “Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes.”

In the end, because ousting destructive governments is so traumatic, and so fateful, that evening 20 years ago deserves to be commemorated as a triumph for human dignity. In my report that night, I took a quote from Komsomolskaya Pravda that was specifically about Mr. Gorbachev, but seemed to capture the prevailing mood: “He didn’t know how to make sausage, but he did know how to give freedom. And if someone believes that the former is more important than the latter, he is likely never to have either.”

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