

Choose Freedom

In this year marking the centenary of the Russian revolution, we recall that in 1917 there were two Russian revolutions. The February Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a provisional government that promised to organize elections to a constituent assembly. The constituent assembly then would write a constitution, presumably establishing European-style liberal democratic government. Before that task could be completed, however—and because of ongoing war, political polarization, social conflict, economic hardship, and ineffective administration—a second revolution, the October Revolution, brought the socialist Bolsheviks to power. Although historians debate the intentions of the Bolsheviks in 1917, within a decade their radicalism, authoritarianism, and anti-capitalism became clear. Single-party rule, the elimination of private property, the imposition of a command economy, and the suppression of free expression and dissent, including by the most violent and arbitrary means, remained characteristic features of the Soviet system until its demise in 1991.

Today in American classrooms and media, the repressive outcomes of the world's first communist revolution are all but forgotten. Politicians and journalists deploy terms such as tyranny, fascism, and socialism with cavalier indifference, thereby separating these concepts from the brutal realities of twentieth-century history. While key words inevitably change over time, there is a danger that as Cold War memories of communism recede, awareness of the preciousness and fragility of liberty also will fade.

Three times in Russia's history the country has experimented with democracy. Three times these efforts have failed. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, it even seems fair to say that the people have rejected Western models of representative government and guarantees of civil rights. Although for most of my adult life I believed that if given the chance, all people would choose freedom and democracy, Russian history has taught me otherwise. Too easily we forget that freedom is a tangible, not just an abstract principle.

So now when I teach the history of modern Russia, I feel obliged to make sure that students hear concrete stories about what it means to live under a repressive government without liberty, civil rights, or the rule of law. I also feel inclined to express my gratitude for the privilege of being a citizen of a free country. But in the classroom and in professional settings, I try to hold my tongue, not wanting to appear condescending or give away my politics. Maybe now, however, the time has come always to say, "Choose freedom."