



100 Years After the Russian Revolution, Russians Are Still Paying

How much more developed would Russia be if it didn't suffer from nearly a century of communism?

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On April 16, 1917, which is to say 100 years ago last Sunday, a train from Helsinki arrived at the Finland Station in Petrograd. The "[sealed train](#)" originated in Zürich, Switzerland. It carried on board 32 Russian revolutionaries, including Vladimir Lenin and his wife, as well as millions of German "[goldmarks](#)." Lenin, who desperately wanted to return home from his Swiss exile in order to take over the leadership of the Russian [Bolsheviks](#), needed German logistical help to cross the Eastern Front as well as financial help to foment a revolt against the sitting Russian government of Alexander Kerensky. Both were duly furnished by the German imperial high command.

As such, Russia experienced two revolutions in 1917. The February revolution deposed the Tsar, while the October revolution put the Bolsheviks in charge. Subsequent to the Bolshevik putsch, Russia withdrew from the Great War, thus allowing the Germans to move their divisions to the Western Front to face the combined might of the French, the British and the Americans. Once in charge, Lenin established one-party dictatorship and the first [gulags](#). The Soviet Union, with its accompanying horrors, was born.

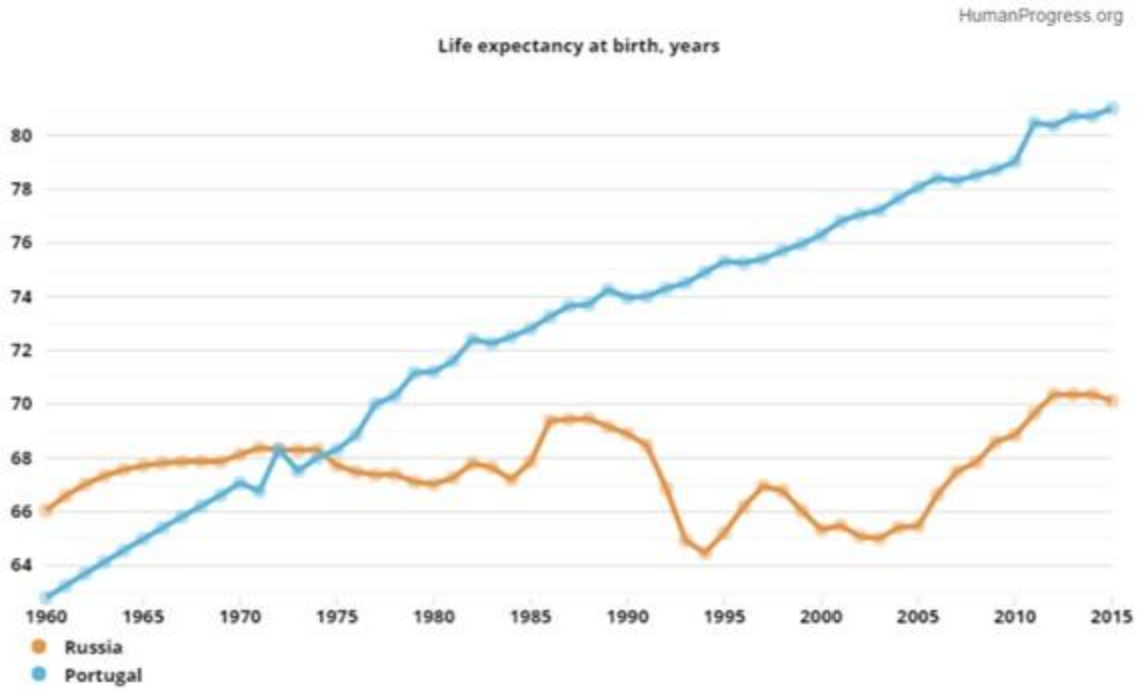
Communist apologists have often blamed Bolshevik crimes on Joseph Stalin, who took over the Russian government following Lenin's death in 1924. The Russian historian and politician Alexander Yakovlev, who headed the Presidential Commission for the Victims of Political Repression, however, [noted](#) that the "truth is that in punitive operations Stalin did not think up anything that was not there under Lenin: executions, hostage taking, concentration camps, and all the rest." Violence was inherent in the Bolshevik revolution. [Per Lenin](#): "If we are not ready to shoot a saboteur and White Guardist [i.e., anti-communist Russian soldiers], what sort of revolution is that?"

Estimating the cost of the Bolshevik rule is not easy, although Yakovlev argues that 20 million lives were lost to state-sponsored violence, malnutrition, man-made famine, slave labor, etc. That seems like a very conservative estimate. Looking at other consequences of Russian communism, the story is similarly depressing. Comparing Russia with any other country is difficult. Russia's geography and history are unique. That said, I went back to Maddison's [data](#) in search of a European country that was, roughly speaking, at Russia's level of economic development in 1917. With average annual per capita income of \$1,212 (in 1990 dollars), Portugal was closest to Russia's \$1,085. Where would Russia be, had it matched the economic performance of Portugal—a country that is even today considered as something of a European basket case? Let data tell the story.

1. GDP per capita, per person, per year, 1990 Geary-Khamis dollars (1917-2010)

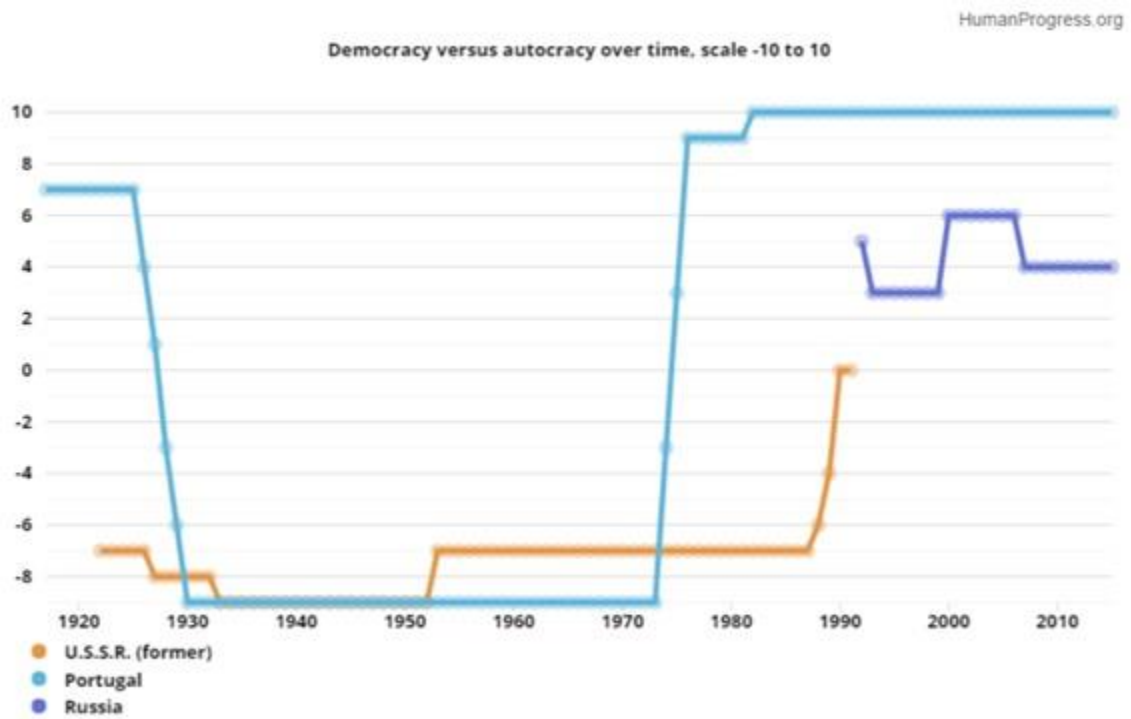


2. Life expectancy, years, 1960-2015



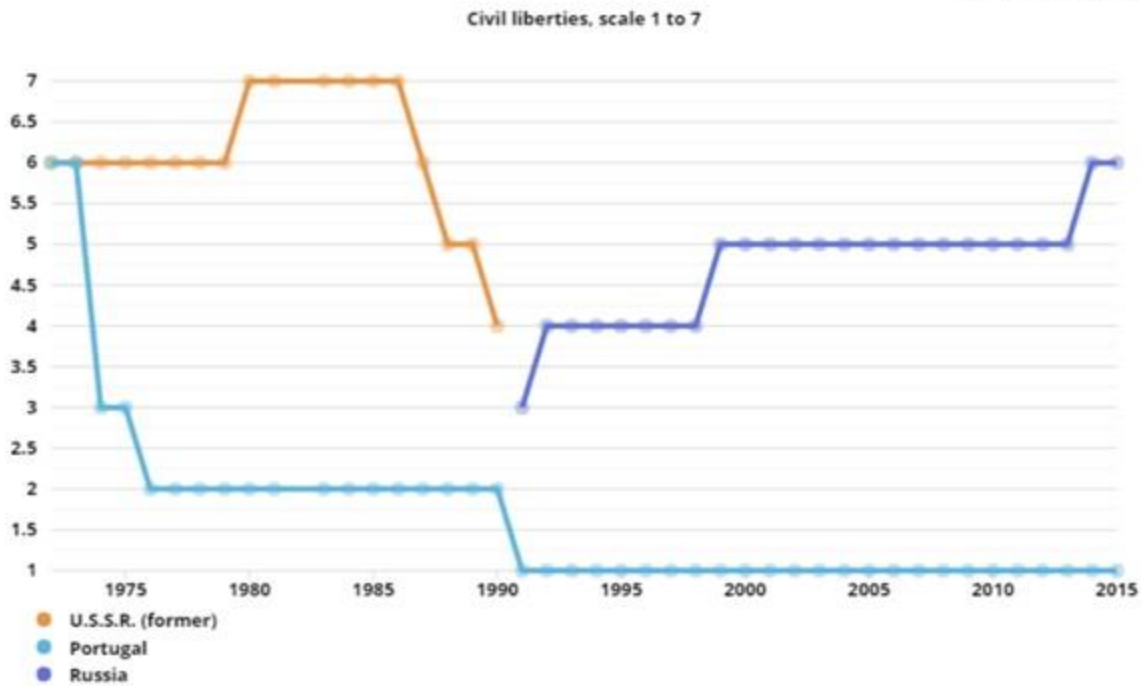
Source: World Bank

3. Democracy vs. autocracy, scale -10 (worst) to 10 (best), 1917-2015



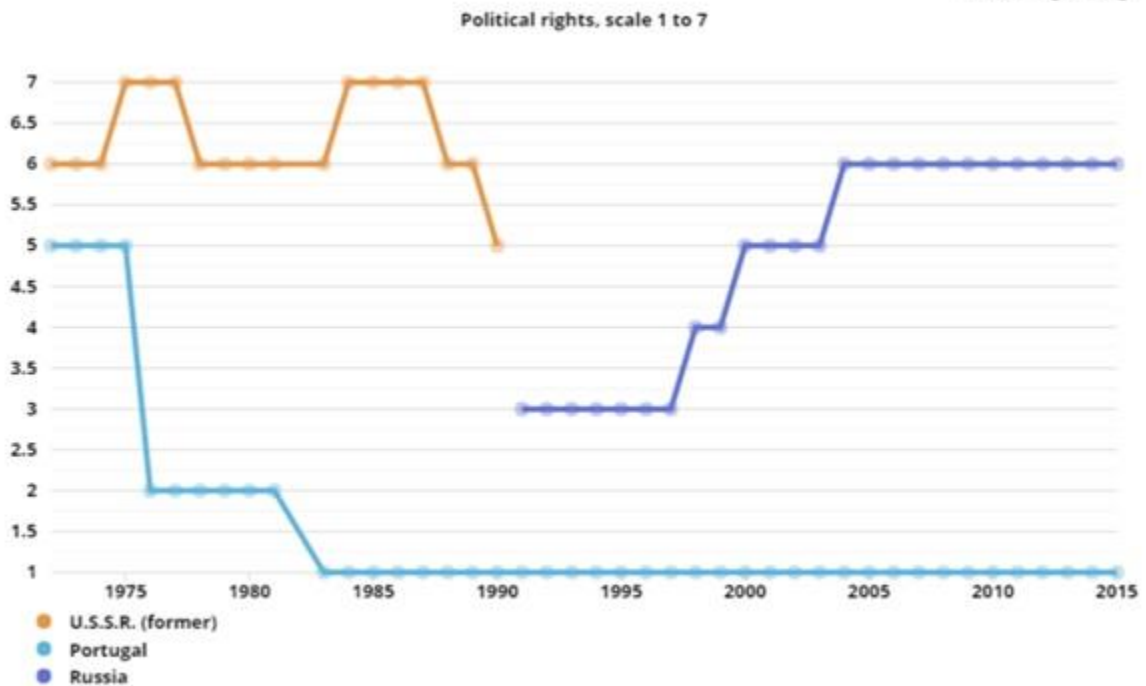
Source: Center for Systemic Peace

4. Civil liberties, scale 1 (best) to 7 (worst), 1972-2015



Source: Freedom House, Freedom in the World Country Ratings

5. Political rights, scale 1(best) to 7 (worst), 1972-2015



Source: Freedom House, Freedom in the World Country Ratings

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