

## **What ever happened to the Russian revolution?**

### **World**

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### **We journey through Vladimir Putin's Russia to measure the aftershocks of the political explosion that rocked the world a century ago**

BY IAN FRAZIER for the Smithsonian.com: Russia is both a great, glorious country and an ongoing disaster. Just when you decide it is the one, it turns around and discloses the other. For a hundred years before 1917, it experienced wild disorders and political violence interspersed with periods of unquiet calm, meanwhile producing some of the world's greatest literature and booming in population and helping to feed Europe. Then it leapt into a revolution unlike any the world had ever seen. Today, a hundred years afterward, we still don't know quite what to make of that huge event. The Russians themselves aren't too sure about its significance. I used to tell people that I loved Russia, because I do. I think everybody has a country not their own that they're powerfully drawn to; Russia is mine. I can't explain the attraction, only observe its symptoms going back to childhood, such as listening over and over to Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," narrated by Peter Ustinov, when I was 6, or standing in the front yard at night as my father pointed out Sputnik crossing the sky. Now I've traveled enough in Russia that my affections are more complicated. I know that almost no conclusion I ever draw about it is likely to be right. The way to think about Russia is without thinking about it. I just try to love it and yield to it and go with it, while also paying vigilant attention—if that makes sense. I first began traveling to Russia more than 24 years ago, and in 2010 I published *Travels in Siberia*, a book about trips I'd made to that far-flung region. With the fall of the Soviet Union, areas previously closed to travelers had opened up. During the 1990s and after, the pace of change in Russia cascaded. A harsh kind of capitalism grew; democracy came and mostly went. Then, two years ago, my son moved to the city of Yekaterinburg, in the Ural Mountains, on the edge of Siberia, and he lives there now. I see I will never stop thinking about this country. As the 1917 centennial approached, I wondered about the revolution and tangled with its force field of complexity. For example, a question as straightforward as what to call certain Russian cities reveals, on examination, various options, asterisks, clarifications. Take St. Petersburg, whose name was changed in 1914 to Petrograd so as not to sound too German (at the time, Russia was fighting the Kaiser in the First World War). In 1924 Petrograd became Leningrad, which then went back to being St. Petersburg again in 1991. Today many of the city's inhabitants simply call it "Peter." Or consider the name of the revolution itself. Though it's called the Great October Revolution, from our point of view it happened in November. In 1917, Russia still followed the Julian calendar, which lagged 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used elsewhere in the world. The Bolshevik government changed the country to the Gregorian calendar in early 1918, soon after taking control. (All this information will be useful later on.) In February and March I went to Russia to see what it was like in the centennial year. My way to travel is to go to a specific place and try to absorb what it is now and look closer, for what it was. Things that happen in a place change it and never leave it. I visited my son in Yekaterinburg, I rambled around Moscow, and I gave the most attention to St. Petersburg, where traces of the revolution are everywhere. The weather stayed cold. In each of the cities, ice topped with perfectly white snow locked the rivers. Here and there, rogue footprints crossed the ice

expanses with their brave or heedless dotted lines. In St. Petersburg, I often passed Senate Square, in the middle of the city, with Étienne Falconet's black statue of Peter the Great on his rearing horse atop a massive rock. Sometimes I saw newlyweds by the statue popping corks as an icy wind blew in across the Neva River and made the champagne foam fly. They were standing at a former pivot point of empire. [⋮] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history ...ian-revolution-180964768/>