

Prigozhin's March on Moscow

So much of military history is flawed because it deals with international conflict. And yet, major developments frequently arise from the use or non-use of the military in domestic affairs. Many states experience coups or disorder or rebellions, but not external conflict. A failed military coup can be a transformative occasion, as with Turkey in 2016, and, to a degree, in the lurch toward further fanaticism, Germany in 1944. The use of the military to suppress pressure for reform was decisive in China in 1989 while the need not to turn to the army was potentially important in the shambles of a would-be coup in America in 2021.

And so to Russia. This was not the essentially unopposed return of Napoleon in 1815 (nor his initial coup of 1799), but, as with so many military disturbances, a reminder that armed forces are a coalition and that this poses issues for all states. It can be an issue for democracies as well as autocracies: the former, whether limited or extensive, are scarcely free from the challenge of military disaffection. Moreover, the latter, as with Spain in 1936, opens up divisions within the military as well as between military and civilian authorities.

That the Russian system has only limited control over its military is scarcely news. Doubtless about this, however, unrealistic and/or manipulated by foreign powers, affected Stalin in 1937. Moreover, the very structure of force in the Soviet system and in its Russian successor was in part intended to maintain control over the military. This was the logic of espionage oversight of the military, of political commissars, and of the patronage politics that were followed.

There has not been so long a war for the Soviet Union/Russia since the Afghan commitment of 1979-89 and the failure in Ukraine has put major pressures on the Russian military. The march itself, an indicator of broader tensions, is a reminder of the problems involved in deploying a coalition of forces as part of a conflict. Putin is weakened. In analytical terms, the failure in most studies of war to devote due attention to civil conflict is very striking.

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