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Galina Starovoitova and the matrilineal history of Russia's lost democratic federalism

Galina Starovoitova played a key role in promoting democracy in Russia until her murder in 1998.

Dina Gusejnova asks how Russian politics might have developed if she had survived.

Galina Starovoitova (1946-1998) is best known for her work on federalism and self-determination, and her vision of democratic transitions in post-Soviet Russia. She was born in 1946 in Chelyabinsk, an industrial city in Siberia, where her father was working as a high-level engineer designing both T-64 tanks and "lunokhod" lunar vehicles. War and Space exploration, two sides of the Soviet dream.

Early on in her life she was surveilled by a local KGB unit, which luckily did not have any more serious consequences for her at that time. But the experience, and her position, is reminiscent of the way her near-contemporary, Angela Merkel, the former German chancellor, describes her youth and run-ins with the Stasi in the GDR.

Starovoitova went on to study in Leningrad and complete a PhD in Ethnology at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, working on minorities in the USSR, before making a career in the Perestroika era as an elected politician of the transitional **Congress of People's Deputies**, a democratic body which was handling the democratisation of the USSR. Initially she followed the physicist turned dissident Andrei Sakharov and, after Sakharov's sudden death in 1989, Boris Yeltsin.

The Democratic Coalition

By the early 1990s, she was a rising star of the new Democratic Coalition, an alliance that would be described as centre-left in western Europe, and which had frequent meetings in cities such as Kharkov (now Kharkiv), Moscow and others. In Russia, the movement grew deeply divided over

crucial questions of the day: whether to continue endorsing President Yeltsin, how to respond to the Chechen Wars which he started, and what sort of constitution to envision for Russia's future.

In this process, Starovoitova began to develop her own position by endorsing what turned out to be a minority view on all three counts: she criticised Yeltsin for what she saw as illegitimate authoritarianism, she took a stand against the new imperialist war that Yeltsin had authorised in Chechnya, and she promoted the cause of Russia's ethnic and national minorities.

When her political career in Russia stagnated, Starovoitova returned to academic work and while on research in the US, completed her study *Sovereignty after Empire: Self-Determination Movements in the Former Soviet Union*. It remains the most significant statement of a federal vision of post-Soviet Russia to date, complemented only by the emergent new movements for federalism in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the League of Free Nations.

Weimar Russia

In 1991 Starovoitova was associated with Yeltsin and simultaneously began promoting her initiative for a "lustration law", which would have banned anyone associated with the KGB or the party from holding public office for the first years of Russia's transition to democracy. By 1993, she had formulated her ideas at an address to the Fourth World Conference of the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C., on 27 April 1993, later published as "*Politics After Communism: Weimar Russia?*" As she put it:

"Since the demise of the Soviet Union, we in Russia have been trying to implement simultaneously three peaceful transitions from a command to a market economy; from Leninism to the institutions of democracy; and from imperial power to membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States."

It was the latter transition that was closest to her heart:

"Soon after the failed coup of August 1991, Russia voluntarily recognized the independence of the other former Soviet republics, and refused the role of a 'big brother.' Yet our neighbours still remain very suspicious about the intentions of the Russian state. Unfortunately, those who harbor suspicions have some reasons for doing so."

In 1994 she met with the Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev to initiate discussions about Chechnya's future. In addition to his support for Chechen independence, Dudayev had stood out as the Soviet general who in 1991 had refused to order his subordinates to shoot at protesters for Estonian independence in the Estonian Soviet republic.

There are now commemorative plaques and streets named after him in Estonia, as well as in Ukraine. In Chechnya, the lines of communication were quickly cut, Chechnya's capital Grozny razed

to the ground in Russian attacks and Dudayev himself killed by a Russian rocket during a telephone call with a member of the Russian Duma.

Starovoitova's own path into politics had been as a representative not of her native Russia but of another Soviet republic: Armenia, whose interests she had defended passionately in the Nagorno-Karabakh War until a heavy earthquake in Armenia had been used by the USSR's central powers to dissipate the movement.

She had ended up in this role of protector of Armenian interests by virtue of her involvement with regulating the conflict, an initiative associated with Andrei Sakharov. Starovoitova received the support of 75% of Yerevan's electorate when she was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, which was effectively post-Soviet Russia's first elected parliament. She later helped found the "interregional group of deputies".

Starovoitova's intellectual mentors and partners

Starovoitova's adviser at the Kunstkamera, Natalya Yukhneva, was a Professor of Ethnography working, unusually, not on exotic societies but on "current problems of intercultural relations in Leningrad". She became a co-founder of the society "Edinenie" (Unity). As her assistant, Starovoitova had supported [Yukhneva's research on Leningrad's Jewish heritage](#) and also began her own work on Karabakh.

As Yukhneva argued, there were about half a million people in Leningrad whose nationality was not Russian, but Jewish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Tatar, Polish, Armenian, Estonian, Finnish, Chuvash, Latvian, Georgian, Karelian and Azerbaijani (in descending order): "What is the purpose of the Unity Society? Of course, to work together to defend the rights of Leningrad's multi-ethnic citizens to create their own national-cultural associations. But also, to solve the second of these problems – to promote friendly, non-conflicting coexistence for Leningraders of different nationalities."

With these interests, both Yukhneva and Starovoitova had also entered into the orbit of Helen Krag, an energetic researcher based in Denmark, who in the 1980s pioneered research into Soviet minorities at Copenhagen University. Krag had begun this work with a focus on Central Asia and then the Caucasus (South and North), before turning her attention especially on Chechnya. During this time, she also worked for the British NGO Minority Rights Group and the Danish Helsinki Committee, working with the Karabakh committee and drawing on Starovoitova's mediation skills.

Starovoitova eventually travelled to Copenhagen in 1990 and visited Krag in her home. Thus emerged the idea for a conference on minority rights, which eventually took place in Leningrad in 1991 with support from the Commission of the European Communities (the predecessor of the

European Commission). It was held in June 1991, when nobody could know that the Soviet Union would dissolve later that year.

Another Soviet participant at the conference – importantly, also a woman – was the Lithuanian Jūratė Laučiūtė. A linguist and ethnographer by training, she acted as a representative of the Lithuanian government in Leningrad/St Petersburg, appearing regularly on national radio stations. As she recalled in [an interview with Radio Free Europe in 2005](#): “If it wasn’t for the support of the Russian democrats at the time, our path towards independence would have been longer and harder.”

A little over a year before the Leningrad Conference, on 11 March 1990, the Lithuanian parliament, the Seim, had declared its national sovereignty from the USSR. Soviet (and Russian) human rights activists such as Sergei Kovalev had travelled there to congratulate the Lithuanians on their independence.

As two prominent figures in both the academic and political milieus [recalled in an interview](#): “At that time Lithuania was a bright spot on the map of the Soviet Union for us, it aroused respect by the firmness with which Lithuanians achieved their independence, with some amazing calm dignity and endurance. Of course, all sensible people in Russia will never forget Tbilisi in ‘89, Baku in ‘90, or Vilnius in ‘91, because history is a harsh mother.”

“City air makes you free” – or, if you are a promising Russian politician, dead

By 1996, in a direct challenge to Yeltsin, Starovoitova put forward her candidacy for post of President. By this point, Starovoitova’s younger German contemporary from the GDR, Angela Merkel, had become the leader of the Christian Democratic party in Germany – the first woman to lead the party. Less than a decade or so later, Merkel would become Germany’s first female Chancellor, as we can read, another twenty years later, in her memoir called [Freedom](#).

But what of Starovoitova? Why have we not heard from her or read any of her books? On 20 November 1998, Galina was returning to her St Petersburg home, accompanied by her assistant, Ruslan Linkov. Death was waiting in the guise of two men who shot them in cold blood right at the doorstep (Linkov survived). It was assumed that Starovoitova had been about to publish the results of an inquiry into corruption among St Petersburg officials – a city where Vladimir Putin was just rising through the ranks of the KGB.

One of the people jailed for the murder was Yuri Kolchin, a former military intelligence officer. Another suspect was the businessman and member of the Tambov organised crime group, [Vladimir Barsukov](#). The investigation was never formally completed, but the pattern of the murders is highly

reminiscent of the more recent murders masterminded by the GRU, the military department of Russia's intelligence services.

Starovoitova was killed in the city in which she first developed her intellectual passion for multi-ethnic relations in a complex society. Her murder, a decade prior to the age of social media, not only withheld her individual achievements as a politician from public memory but also obscured the extent to which she had been embedded in a broader intellectual community, in which, incidentally, a whole network of women played a central role.

At this time, Starovoitova was the only woman to be assassinated in this manner alongside other promising politicians of her generation, such as the general and Vice President Alexander Lebed, who was also a presidential candidate in 1996, and the colonel and member of the Duma Sergei Yushenkov.

Another engaged scholar who belonged to this network was **Nikolai Girenko**. He was an ethnographer, who, as a fluent Swahili speaker, had also worked for a while as a military translator in Zanzibar. Since 1970 he had worked at the Miklukho Maklai Institute for Ethnography (later renamed Kunstkamera again) in Leningrad, focusing on Africa.

From the Perestroika years, Girenko became involved in nationality rights issues and anti-racist activism. Tragically, this activity, which he continued in the post-Soviet years, also led to his death. Like Starovoitova, he was shot in his apartment in 2004, following his accusations against the Russian neo-Nazi association "Russian National Unity", probably by a neo-Nazi group in Leningrad. His murderers **have never been identified**.

According to Max Weber, the medieval saying "**city air makes you free**" describes how the peculiar social and economic structure of the occidental city dissolved and disrupted traditional authority. In this sense, in western Europe, the Italian city-states and the trade cities of the Hanseatic network, even reaching into Russia as far east as Novgorod, functioned as dynamic instruments of democratisation or at least "republicanism".

For Starovoitova, too, working in Leningrad entailed a more hopeful side of "Weimar", a model of cities as possible laboratories for progressive democratic constitutional reform. What if the GRU death squads had failed, and Starovoitova, the politician, had become Russia's President?

A woman who rose from an academic research project on diversity in late Soviet Leningrad to a constitutional theorist of a federal post-Soviet transition. A Russian whose road to politics was empowered by activists for decentralised paths to sovereignty for different former Soviet nationalities. What if?

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **Alexey Smyshlyaev** / **Shutterstock.com***

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