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CONTRIBUTORS

Opinion | We must learn from the women who fought for democracy in Russia

It is up to women, again, to stand up to the faces of evil in this world, all the so-called “strong men.”

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People climb aboard personnel carrier to try to block its advance in downtown Moscow in 1991 during an attempted coup. Women had a big role in convincing soldiers to stand down, Dianne Rinehart writes.

Boris Yurchenko Thwe Associated Press file photo

By Dianne Rinehart

Dianne Rinehart is a journalist who was a freelance writer in Moscow from 1988 to 1990.

On Aug. 19, 1991, a coup against the reform-minded, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev failed when women poured into the streets of Moscow and confronted the soldiers in their tanks by standing in front of them and refusing to budge.

The soldiers would have had to mow them down to continue.

It was heroic. And it worked.

Soldiers, shamed by their mothers and grandmothers for taking part in the coup, abandoned their tanks. And when Boris Yeltsin, the new president of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic, took in the scene, he went out onto the street to join them.

From atop one of the abandoned tanks, he gave a powerful speech declaring “all decisions and instructions of this committee (the ones who had ordered the coup) to be unlawful.”

The coup petered out days later.

The mothers had won — without guns, without armour. They had done it with love, for the soldiers who were their sons, the young men who had been used for public relations and power by the Soviet Union for so long in its ruthless battles.

And so it is up to women, again, to stand up to the faces of evil in this world, all the so-called “strong men,” leaders — the Donald Trumps and Vladimir Putins of the world who think they are kings and probably dream of the day they can call themselves “Paramount Leader,” like China’s Xi Jinping, or “Supreme Leader,” like North Korea’s Kim Jong Un and Iran’s Ali Khamenei, all men who are leading us down the path to war and hatred and hell.

Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher understood men like that. In 1982 when Argentina’s military junta invaded the Falkland Islands, a British colony, she sent a naval task force 13,000 kilometres into the South Atlantic to take them on.

Madness? Not to Thatcher.

“What was the alternative?” she asked in her 1993 memoir. “That a common or garden dictator should rule over the Queen’s subjects and prevail by fraud and violence? Not while I was prime minister.”

Indeed, what is the alternative to a madman who sees himself as a dictator — one like Trump, who refers to himself as a king and who released an Orwellian video of his dream for the Gaza Strip with a larger-than-life-sized golden statue of himself in

the main intersection as he rules the most powerful nation on Earth? Average women in Russia are doing their best, once again, to fight against the despotic rule of Vladimir Putin. Their stories are posted online by Amnesty International.

Women like Nina Slobodchikova, who transferred about \$65 to help humanitarian causes in Ukraine at the beginning of the Russian invasion and was charged with state treason and jailed for 12 years.

Or Maria Ponomarenko, a journalist who was detained for sharing a post about the bombing of the Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine, and jailed for six years and upon her release will be banned from working as a journalist for five more years.



Members of Pussy Riot perform at their concert against the war in Ukraine in Berlin on Feb. 22. Women in Russia are doing their best to fight against the despotic rule of Vladimir Putin.

Michael Ukas The Associated Press

Or Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, two members of the Russian punk rock band Pussy Riot, who were arrested and jailed for their performance in 2012 in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour to protest the Orthodox Church leaders' support for Putin during his election campaign.

They knew tyranny and terror well, and when they saw it coming to the United States, they later released a video called “Make America Great Again,” depicting a dystopian world led by a Trump who ruled through beatings, shaming and terror from storm troopers. That video was released two weeks before the outcome of the 2016 election, an election few thought he would even win.

They knew that madness can take men to the pinnacles of power. And they warned the west.

Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian journalist, did too.

She was shot dead in the elevator of her apartment block in Moscow on Oct. 7, 2006 (Putin’s birthday). She refused in the face of intimidation and violence, arrest and torture, and an attempted poisoning, to stop reporting on the Russian war in Chechnya, or to stop her critical reporting on Putin, including that in her book, “Putin’s Russia,” published in 2004.

Anna paid with her life for warning the West.



Larisa Baburova pays last respects to her daughter Anastasia Baburova, seen in framed photo, who was shot dead in 2009. She faced intimidation for writing about Vladimir Putin and the war in Chechnya.

The Associated Press file photo

If women with no power at all, like Anna, and women in the United States like former speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi — who faces death threats from Trump supporters and whose husband was attacked with a hammer by one of them — can stand up to Trump; if columnist E. Jean Carroll, who fought her way valiantly through the courts, defying Trump's power and abuse, to win a guilty plea against him for sexual abuse, can stand up to him; if porn star Stormy Daniels, a woman who grew up impoverished, can stand up to Trump, surely leaders of the free world can.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen understands that.

In her moving and bravely delivered speech to European nations at the “Support Ukraine” summit on Feb. 24, the third anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she urged the leaders present, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to remove “all self-imposed red lines” and scale up military and financial assistance to Ukraine.

“Conditions for peace are to be set through strength,” she urged, warning a ceasefire without lasting peace would only give Russia time to “rebuild, rearm and relaunch an attack.”

Frederiksen argued Ukraine must be part of NATO. That is “the strongest security guarantee,” she said, and it is “the easiest way forward, the cheapest way forward.”

We must learn from the lessons of the women jailed and murdered under Putin's reign and the mothers of soldiers who fought for democracy in Russia by throwing their bodies in front of tanks — women who have stood steely eyed before the bullies of this world.

They knew this, they felt this. It's up to the women now.

Opinion articles are based on the author's interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. More details

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