

# HISTORY DOOMED US TO LIVING TOGETHER

Dimitry Volkogonov

Novosti parliamentary correspondent Felix Alexeyv interviews Colonel General Dimitry Volkogonov, a people's deputy of Russian and the author of the book 'The triumph and tragedy'.

After being elected a People's Deputy, Volkogonov, who headed the Institute of War History for many years, retired and is currently serving as Defence and Security Adviser to Boris Yeltsin, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation.

**Novosti:** The country is seeking answers to some painful questions where we are, where we are going. What has the future in store for us?

**Volkogonov:** I think that the Soviet Union has entered a very difficult period of transition from the totalitarian bureaucratic regime to a civilised and democratic society. The period will last 10-15 years.

Neither Mikhail Gorbachev nor Boris Yeltsin can change the situation overnight with the help of some magic wand. The country is still not past the lowest point of the crisis that has gripped it. We will evidently go through it, unless some destructive excesses take place in 1992. But we will stand firm on the road of civilised development by the beginning of the next century – at best.

**Novosti:** Will the future society still be guided by socialist ideas?

**Volkogonov:** About the only topics discussed these days are socialism and capitalism. Where are we going? All this reminds me of medieval scholastic debates. Such as can the truth be put on the point of a needle? I regard the talk about the capitalist and socialist systems as fruitless. These days the image of a society and the road of its development are determined by the level of its civilization, the efficiency of its economy and the reliability of socialist safety nets.

**Novosti:** Do you hope to see a civilised society in the Soviet Union?

**Volkogonov:** The hope is always the last thing to go. I do hope that such universal human values as the truth, kindness and beauty will become accepted and will triumph in our country.

**Novosti:** These days, the discussion seems to focus on the two leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Will new political figures appear on the Soviet political scene?

**Volkogonov:** You are right, two major leaders, Gorbachev and Yeltsin stand out on our political scene. Both of them however, emerged from the old party system and seem to be transitional figures. Time will come and they will be replaced by people free from the fetters of old dogmas. The real future leaders are still in university audiences.

Every current leader has his own strong points and weak points. What attracts me in Yeltsin is his character and such excellent qualities as the striving to go on without stopping, to go on learning. His weak point is a certain spontaneity, and ill-considered character of decisions. Unfortunately, you can observe a lack of firmness in President Gorbachev's character and absence of a clear-cut strategy. He comes up with good ideas, but he does not know what should be done to implement them. I would say that Gorbachev will go down in history as a great reformer who failed to overcome many negative things. It would be wrong to assert that he destroyed the totalitarian system of management. He did not prevent it from destroying itself, and in doing so he made a notable contribution to the perestroika effort.

**Novosti:** Do you see any link between the current processes in the Soviet Union and the Logic of world history?

**Volkogonov:** I do. In a sense, all the empires and there were quite a few of them in history – disintegrated in the end. The Russian empire was one of them. The same fate is in store for the Soviet empire, which is in the period of disintegration. The special thing is that a Union of free nations may take shape in its place.

The changes are now being spurred on by centrifugal tendencies. But I am confident that powerful centripetal forces will go into operation in five years time or may be even earlier. Even those Soviet Republics, probably with the exception of the Baltic ones which are now striving for independence, will make a step towards rapprochement with the union. The faster we conclude a treaty of union and

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demonstrate the potential of our federative state, the sooner the influence of the centrifugal forces will begin to wane.

Integration processes are intensifying the world over. What we are seeing here is the striving for the opposite process of civilisation and the definition of borders as if we were trying to turn back into the 19th century. This is fraught with great danger. There is no doubt that it is essential to develop one's language and culture, to preserve one's national self-awareness. But one cannot cross a certain boundary whereby national values are placed above the universal human values. Here lies a threat not only to one's own people but to other peoples too.

The Soviet Union resembles a pot – 30 million families uniting people of diverse nationalities. Sixty million people live on the territory of other ethnic formations. It may well be said that history doomed us to living together.

**Novosti** on June 22 fifty years ago, Nazi German forces streamed into the Soviet Union. How do you appraise fifty years later, the results of the victory over fascism, a victory for

which millions of lives were paid?

**Volkogonov:** The main result is simpler. People fighting for a just cause, for freedom and independence are bound to encounter serious trials. But they always win in the end.

The second result. Totalitarian regimes – no matter in what form – are inevitably defeated. There is no future for such regimes.

Five decades ago we scored a just victory over Hitler's totalitarian. That regime was destroyed, but the world saw the consolidation of another totalitarian regime – that of Stalin, but the totalitarian regime created by Stalin could not be preserved in full. It is now slowly leaving the historical scene amidst great difficulties.

There is one more result. In the face of a mortal danger, the most diverse forces find a road to concord. Churchill and Stalin, Western democracies and the Soviet Union were irreconcilable rivals. The imminent threat, however, made them pool their efforts.

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Lessons of history should not be forgotten. Today when our society is seeking a way out of the crisis with so much pain, it is essential to strive for compromise and concored between diverse groups. Many people in the Soviet Union are criticising the nine plus one + agreement reached not so long ago and signed by the leaders of nine republics and President Gorbachev. However, future historians may well say that it was one of the crucial moments when the country was coming out of the crisis. The first to breach the agreement will be the first to lose. But, in the end all will stand to lose too.