



Entrance to the Lenin Mausoleum

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The Politics of National History: Russia and the Centenary of Revolutions

James Ryan

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The Politics of National History: Russia and the Centenary of Revolutions

The focus of this article is the Russian state's attempts to prepare for the challenges of commemorating the centenary of the 1917 revolutions, at precisely a time when the state has been acting as a bulwark against revolution in Ukraine and Syria, and has been attempting to undercut the bases for upheaval at home. What can we learn about the mindset of Russia's ruling elite through examination of their approach to the centenary? How does the representation of their country's past reflect the concerns and policies of the state today? We will see that, though it is possible to identify a particular state approach to the centenary, this is not without logical tensions and even contradictions. We will also see that the state has thus far avoided attempts to silence more pluralistic voices, and indeed that it appears committed to respect the independence of the historical profession.

The centenary of the 1917 revolutions in Russia is upon us. One hundred years ago, under the enormous strains of a world war, the Russian empire experienced a process of state failure. The result was several years of instability, revolutionary upheaval, and wars of different sorts on the territory of the former empire, involving the intervention of several foreign powers. By the early 1920s, the Bolshevik party led by Vladimir Il'ich Lenin had managed to oversee the defeat of its enemies and the consolidation of 'Soviet power' across much of the former Russian empire. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had come into existence by 1923, and it would last until 1991.

The revolutions of 1917 in Russia, and indeed the revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of the USSR, were events of major global significance that have helped shape our world in myriad ways. The ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, and the more general geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe, graphically demonstrate that the consequences of the collapse of the USSR have not yet been resolved. Following decades of communist rule, societies in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia experienced abrupt, often traumatic transitions to post-communist polities and market economies. New national identities have been and are being forged, and the shadow of the twentieth century looms large in this regard.

Identity, whether individual or collective, is bound inextricably with memory.^[1] In national contexts, commemorations of significant events are often central to the affirmation of national identity and to claims of political legitimacy. Such commemorations offer us fascinating insights into the politics of public memory.

The Problem of a Centenary

Writing shortly after the collapse of the USSR, the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman warned against any simple conclusions or assumptions about what had been happening in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989, and the inevitability of straightforward transitions to liberal-democratic capitalist societies.^[2] Bauman's particular concern, that former communist societies might provide rich feeding grounds for populist politics based on scapegoating and intolerance, has now expanded to what feels like a general crisis of liberal democracy in Europe and the Atlantic world. The prospect of return to an era of extremist politics, economic crises, and major social discord and general upheaval – although perhaps still quite remote – seems significantly less remote at the beginning of 2017 than even a year ago.

A century ago, the spectre of socialist/communist revolutions, directed and supported by Soviet Russia,

haunted liberal democrats. Today, Western politicians and [media](#) point once again to Russia under President Vladimir Putin, as a nefarious influence helping to undermine liberal democracies. The reality, as now acknowledged even by some [mainstream liberal commentators](#), is that liberal capitalism has itself brought about this crisis in the liberal order through its own failures and injustices. The Putin administration is certainly no supporter of Western liberal democracy. However, unlike the Soviet leadership a century ago, fear of a wave of social discordance that could lead to the rise of real extremist movements and the unpredictability of extra-legal revolts is today probably greater amongst the Russian than the Western political elite. Russia's twentieth century was characterised by revolutions and the Nazi invasion, and few Russians desire to witness any repeats.

Russia's behaviour in Ukraine and Syria, then, should be understood not simply in terms of geopolitical confrontations with Western powers, but also through the lens of a deep-seated, one might say ideological, opposition to revolutionary or subversive forces fomented or at least supported by foreign powers. The opposition movement in Russia itself that arose earlier this decade has not managed to develop momentum, but it has surely served as a warning to the ruling elite. Significantly, the Stalinist term 'foreign agents' has recently entered into Russian law, with politically-engaged NGOs required to declare themselves as such if in receipt of foreign funds.

Within this context, as the newspaper columnist Fedor Krasheninnikov recently put it, for the ruling elite "[1917 is the most uncomfortable year of Russian history for discussion](#)." Krasheninnikov considers that memory of the February Revolution cuts particularly close to the bone, as it concerns the stability and adaptability of a political system wherein the leader enjoys effectively "unlimited power" and is surrounded by loyal acolytes, and especially if an economic crisis were to occur. However, it is the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks came to power, that will likely dominate public discussions of 1917 and its consequences. If commemoration is typically about "those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values," then the commemoration of October should have little or no place in Putin's Russia.^[3] Indeed, the day of the revolution was the foremost public holiday in Soviet times, but 7 November (25 October according to the calendar in use in Russia in 1917) has ceased to be a holiday under Putin's presidency. It is now overshadowed by the newly created Day of People's Unity on 4 November that commemorates the end of Russia's seventeenth-century 'Time of Troubles.' Revealingly, 7 November is still the occasion for commemorating the military parade of 1941 on Red Square, a show of defiance with the Nazis closing in on Moscow. In 2017, however, it will be impossible to ignore the Bolshevik revolution and avoid discussing its significance.

What was October actually for? The Crisis of 1917

Before examining elite representations of 1917 in Russia today, we should pause to consider what happened in Russia in 1917. A century ago, of course, Europe was experiencing a succession of crises of far greater proportion than it is now. The Russian revolutions were the most dramatic and consequential results of broader processes of decolonization and state failure in Central and Eastern Europe under the impact of the First World War, as four empires (Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman) collapsed into "shatter zones" of new national states.^[4] Decolonization was accompanied by state failure and breakdown in social order, and then soldiers brutalized by the experience of war and military defeat returned home. The war cleared the space, both literally and metaphorically, for atrocities in Europe over the next three decades. New postcolonial states came into existence that were imbued with various mixtures of revolutionary zeal, counter-revolutionary vengeance, ethnic nationalism and concerns for ethnic purity. Socialism/communism and nationalism were the powerful revolutionary ideologies to

which the means of war, of militarized politics, were harnessed in states such as Soviet Russia.^[5]

The Soviet state would prove to be the most violently destructive in modern peacetime European history. However, the Bolsheviks were inspired by the idea of the complete liberation of Russia, and humanity in general, from the sufferings of capitalism and imperialist warfare. Therein lies the great contradiction of the Russian Revolution, and indeed perhaps of the twentieth century. The First World War was fought on both sides for the sake of civilization, against the perceived barbarity either of the Russians or the Germans. For Lenin, the experience was similar, but the enemy was the imperialist system as a whole. The war had resulted from imperialism, he wrote in 1914, and this "sets at hazard the fate of European culture." He never wavered from his theoretical conviction that, resulting from the very basis of capitalism as a more aggressive form of imperialism, the war would "soon be followed by others, unless there are a series of successful [socialist] revolutions."^[6]

When we examine 1917, we can see that it was a time of crisis in Russia. Reinhart Koselleck, a pioneer of 'conceptual history,' has explained that the concept of crisis as it relates to historical time "can mean that chain of events leading to a culminating, decisive point at which action is required." It can also mean "a unique and final point, after which the quality of history will be changed forever."^[7] It is precisely in both these senses that Lenin interpreted the political situation having returned to Russia in 1917. The Provisional Government (after the tsar's abdication), he thought, would continue the imperialist war. In the course of the summer, as the authority of the government was eroding and that of the popular Soviet structure was growing, he believed that the decisive time to act had arrived. The second, socialist revolution would spark similar revolutions in other belligerent countries, and the promise of socialism and ultimately communism would come to be realised. Bolsheviks understood that the late autumn of 1917 was a decisive historical moment; as Lenin famously warned, "History will not forgive us if we do not seize power now."^[8]

Continuity, Consolidation, and Unity: The Politics of National History

The October Revolution, then, was fundamentally an ideological event. Today, the Russian political elite and some historians speak of 1917 as the singular "Great Russian Revolution", and indeed there are good scholarly reasons for this.^[9] For the political elite, however, use of that term is accompanied by a more general reluctance to engage meaningfully with revolutionary thought.

In Russia, public discussions about the centenary of 1917 have been ongoing for some time. It is possible to identify a state approach to the anniversary, based on several factors. These are recognition of the importance of national unity and historical reconciliation; stress on the importance of a strong state; emphasis on the overriding continuity in Russian history; acknowledgement of the terrible consequences of serious social divisions that lead to and result from revolution; neutralisation of ideological appraisals and avoidance of any real or sustained engagement with revolutionary ideology; and yet an ostensible commitment to free discussion and the independence of the historical profession. As President Putin has [put it](#), Russia's history is characterised by dogmatism and enforced worldviews, and there is no desire to return to that past.

Some commentators in Russian-language media have labelled this approach to the centenary of October as "[undefined and schizophrenic](#)," or at least "[incoherent](#)." They point to the state's selective approach to the Soviet past. The foundation of the Soviet system presents difficulties, but the state has in recent years taken full advantage of certain aspects of Soviet history, principally the triumph over Nazi Germany

in the Great Patriotic War, for purposes of fostering popular patriotism. This has been accompanied by attempts firmly to police discussion of the Great Patriotic War. Hence, some Russian journalists have questioned the commitment to pluralist discussion of 1917, considering that the political elite is not averse to declaring national history [a matter of national security](#). It is interesting that in October 2016, members of the scientific council of President Putin's Security Council proposed establishing something akin to the notorious commission to prevent the falsification of history, which was abolished in 2012, in order to combat deliberate distortions of the 1917 revolutions. This proposal, however, was [rejected](#) both by the Presidential Administration and by the influential Russian Historical Society.

There has been frequent discussion in Russia and elsewhere of Stalin's apparent popularity in Russia today. It does not appear that there is any official backing for this, but it is clear that the Russian state has more to work with when it comes to the Stalin era – the era of military glory and superpower status – than with the early years of the revolution. In early 2016, President Putin caused controversy when [he criticised Lenin](#) for placing "an atomic bomb" under the edifice of the Russian state by supporting a policy of national autonomy with right of secession within the structure of the USSR. Historian Ol'ga Vasil'eva, the recently appointed Education Minister, perhaps succinctly summed up in an [interview](#) how the state views the differences between the Lenin and the Stalin periods. With the revolution, the Bolsheviks as revolutionary iconoclasts "broke off continuity with pre-revolutionary history." From the 1930s, however, Stalin restored this sense of historical continuity, tapping into Russian patriotism as a tool for popular mobilization.

Despite what I have written above, there is [state recognition](#) that the revolutions of 1917 were motivated by ideals of justice. President Putin, who served in the KGB, [remarked in 2016](#) that he did not join the Communist Party out of necessity, and that he continues to see the attraction in the almost biblical ideals of socialism and communism. Furthermore, there is state recognition that the centenary deserves deep thought. In his [annual address](#) to the houses of parliament in December 2016, Putin stated that "Russian society needs objective, honest, deep analysis' of the events of 1917."

Beyond this, however, the politics of commemoration are readily apparent in elite political discourse. Central to this has been the motif of an essential continuity in Russian history that was not much changed by the Soviet experience. This is accompanied by attempts to foster a unified collective memory, indicating a certain tension with the ostensible commitment to respect for differences of historical opinion. Sergei Naryshkin, newly appointed foreign intelligence chief and chair of the Russian Historical Society, has described Russia's history as ["integral and continuous."](#) The fullest and most interesting discussion of this theme that I have seen is a [lecture on the Russian Civil War \(1918–20\)](#) delivered in late 2015 by Vladimir Medinskii, the Minister of Culture. His central argument is that neither the Reds nor the Whites won the civil war; rather, the victor was "historical Russia", that is, a strong, integral Russian state that triumphed through Russia's revolutionary troubles. Medinskii's logic is that the historical role of the Bolsheviks was to give effect to the essential continuity of Russian history, to restore the authority and the integrity of a strong Russian state after the imperial collapse, encompassing much of the former empire. Medinskii pointedly avoids examining the ideological nature of October, in part because he does not consider this to contain the "lesson" of 1917.

In May 2015, Medinskii's Ministry, along with some prominent historians (though with some [dissenting voices](#)), approved an [appeal to Russian society](#) in advance of the centenary. The appeal suggests that public, including academic, discussion of the revolutions should be "directed at the consolidation of Russian society, the creation of a single civic position on the basic stages of Russia's development." This single position would be formed of "recognition of the unity of historical development" from the

Russian empire through the USSR to the present Russian state, and realisation of the "tragedy of social schism called forth by the events of 1917 and the civil war." More significantly still, the appeal calls for understanding of the importance for Russia of a "strong state power, supported by all strata of the population," and the mistake of counting on foreign powers for help in internal political struggles.

The political agenda behind the government's approach to the centenary is more apparent in Putin's comments in 2016, published in [Kommersant](#), that the lessons of the revolution and civil war should be warnings of the fatal dangers to Russia of serious societal division and dissent. It is only through "social consensus," he suggests, and increased government attention to the importance of patriotic upbringing of citizens, that the independence and security of the state can be guaranteed. The "independence" of the state is undoubtedly a reference not just to the absence of foreign meddling in Russia's affairs, but also to Russia's strength on the world stage. This, presumably, is partly what Putin had in mind in 2005 when he described the collapse of the USSR as a "[geopolitical catastrophe](#)," resulting in several years of 'disintegration' at home and loss of Great Power status abroad.

Putin's December [2016 speech to the houses of parliament](#) raises another significant dimension to the politics of memory in Russia today: what to do about the legacy and memory of enormous political repression in the USSR, and those individuals and organizations that try to keep that aspect of the Soviet past at the forefront of public memory? The lessons of national history, Putin states plainly, are needed "for reconciliation, for strengthening the social, political, civic consensus that we have today achieved." "We are one people," he notes, "and we have one Russia." Hence, it is "impermissible to drag along the splits, rancour, resentments and obduracy of the past in our present-day lives," and "to speculate" for particular political or other interests "on the tragedies that affected practically every family in Russia." The implication seems to be that it is time to draw a line under the trauma of the past and to move on. Indeed, that appears to be the meaning of "reconciliation" in elite discussions of the centenary. It is worth pointing out that the [Memorial society](#), which for decades has been at the forefront of attempts to memorialise victims and investigate political repressions, is currently [fighting in the courts against charges](#) of having violated the law on foreign agents.

In conclusion, the message, as developed most clearly by Medinskii, is that the current Russian state administration is the legitimate heir to and guarantor of the historical role and even destiny of Russia as an integral political power, which appears almost supra-human. The Bolsheviks, despite their ideology, ended up unwittingly serving the strength of Russia's historical logic. However, its continued security is not guaranteed. Forces from without or within must be prevented from undermining the state and its security.

The importance of unity between the state and the people has a long pedigree in Russian political thought, despite the considerable ideological differences between the various state systems since the early twentieth century. Leninist ideology posited that, for communism to be realised, the state would eventually wither away as the people would learn to live harmoniously without it. The state, then, should not stand above and apart from the people, but should be united organically with the people, serving it and drawing its ranks from it. The tragic irony is that the Soviet state was, in reality, a political dictatorship. In Russia today, there is also clear recognition that the state should serve its people. Of greater importance, though, is the patriotic duty of citizens to serve their homeland and their state. What we might see as an authoritarian political system is presented in terms of another long tradition in Russian political thought to highlight the importance of a strong state. Whatever the extent to which Russia's political elite truly believes its message of patriotic unity, it certainly helps serve as a powerful mobilizing force and as a bulwark against the rise of widespread political opposition, at least for now. It

appears that Russia's rulers have learned some lessons from 1917.

Footnotes

1. See John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 3ff.
2. Zygmunt Bauman, *A Revolution in the Theory of Revolutions?*, *International Political Science Review* 15, no. 1 (1994): 15-24.
3. Barry Schwartz, *The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory*, *Social Forces* 61, no. 2 (1982): 377.
4. For a thesis that the First World War should be understood as one of decolonization, see Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
5. See here Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923*, London: Allen Lane, 2016, and Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
6. Vladimir I. Lenin, *The Position and Tasks of the Socialist International*, *Sotsial-Demokrat* 33 (1914), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/oct/x01.htm>.
7. Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela W. Richter, *Crisis*, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 2 (2006): 372.
8. Vladimir I. Lenin, *The Bolsheviks Must Assume Power. A Letter to the Central Committee and the Petrograd And Moscow Committees Of The R.S.D.L.P.(B.)*, *Proetarskyaya Revolutsia* 2 (1921), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/14.htm#1>.
9. See, for example, Aleksandr Shubin, *Velikaia rossiiskaia revoliutsiia: Ot fevralia k oktiabriu*, Moscow: Rodina Media, 2014.



Lenin 1920

Author: Grigori Petrowitsch Goldstein; URL:

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Minister of Education Ol'ga Vasil'eva

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Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii

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