

# # 81 VALDAI PAPERS

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## THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917: HISTORY, MEMORY, AND POLITICS

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## About the Author

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The Revolution of October 1917 in Russia is considered to be a key moment of the 20th century. Now that events linked with the Revolution's 100th anniversary are coming to an end, we can analyse the experience of 1917 in the context of both historians' professional discussion and commemoration policy towards the Revolution.

## The Revolution and Russia's Commemoration Policy

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Russia's ruling elites began to distance themselves from the legacy of the Revolution as early as the 1990s, when Moscow's Red Square stopped hosting official parades. On 7 November 1996, October Revolution Day was renamed the Day of Accord and Reconciliation. This focused public attention on overcoming the consequences of discord and the Civil War. It should be noted that no attempts were made at that time to turn the February Revolution into a new 'foundation myth' to portray it as an entirely positive event and to link the genealogy of a post-Soviet and democratic Russia to it. In 2004, the 7 November holiday was abolished completely with top state officials virtually ignoring the Revolution in their public speeches.

In short, the official position on the Revolution's 100th anniversary implied that this event should be marked, but not celebrated. In December 2016, i.e. less than two months before the 100th anniversary of the February Revolution, President Vladimir Putin signed instructions on preparing for and holding events dedicated to the Revolution's 100th anniversary. These extremely brief instructions were purely technical. The state merely stipulated funding anniversary events, primarily academic conferences and museum exhibitions. Russian authorities decided not to organize commemorative events and delegated this role to the Russian Historical Society. This decision considerably downplayed the status of the Revolution's 100th anniversary. It should be noted that the executive order on preparations for the 70th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War was signed in 2013, and that President Vladimir Putin personally chaired meetings of the organizing committee to prepare for this anniversary. This exemplifies a substantial difference in the authorities' attitude towards both key commemorative dates.

The instructions mentioned the 'Revolution of 1917 in Russia' and used no epithets. President Vladimir Putin never used the phrase 'Great Russian Revolution', coined during discussions at the Russian Historical Society and within the academic establishment.

In an effort to find an acceptable formula for commemorating the Revolution's 100th anniversary, the authorities initially reinstated the Boris Yeltsin's 'reconciliation and accord' formula renounced by them in 2004. This exact formula was used in President Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal Assembly that noted the need to once again address the causes

of the revolutions in Russia and their very essence. It also stated that we need learn the lessons of history for the sake of reconciliation, for strengthening the public, political and civil accord that we have managed to achieve today. Apart from exhibitions, conferences, roundtable discussions, publishing and educational projects, the action plan called for installing and unveiling the Reconciliation Monument on 4 November 2017 in Kerch. The authorities essentially skirted around the issue of formulating an official position on the Revolution, and instead facilitated open public discussions dealing with the causes, consequences and the essence of the revolutionary events.

Apart from the authorities, Communist forces are an important player in the field of commemoration policy. They remain a ‘mnemonic actor’, to use the professional lingo of scholars, in the legacy of the Revolution. According to the logic of the Soviet historical narrative, October 1917 served as a fundamental myth for the state of workers and peasants. The Soviet government created and maintained a powerful infrastructure for upholding the collective memory of this myth. On the whole, modern communists carry on the Soviet tradition in their interpretation of the events of 1917. In their opinion, the February Bourgeois Democratic Revolution triggered the country’s disintegration, and the October Revolution saved the country and opened up prospects for a brighter Communist future of the Soviet people. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation became the country’s sole political force that intended to celebrate this date in line with the party narrative: ‘The October Revolution is a moment of national glory’. Today, the Communists are focusing on what they assert is the October Revolution’s key role in saving and strengthening the state, rather than on its class significance.

The legacy of the Soviet narrative of the October Revolution is much broader and persistent than one may think. The perception of pre-revolutionary Russia as a backward and illiterate country riddled by social contradictions is a part of this narrative. Hence, there is an idea that the October Revolution paved the way for national modernization. Even after denouncing methods and many of the results of Soviet-era modernization, our contemporaries often stick to the Soviet narrative while discussing the pre-revolution Russia. Opinion polls show that over 40 percent of respondents still view the October Revolution positively. While analysing these statistics, one should keep in mind that basically everyone in modern Russia owes their existence to some extent to the Revolution. Those who ‘deny’ the Revolution also deny themselves to a certain extent, and this presents a major psychological obstacle.

Apart from the Communists, non-systemic political forces, including the Other Russia, a descendant of the National Bolshevik Party, are claiming the October Revolution’s legacy for themselves. It should be noted that some leftist forces do not associate themselves with the October Revolution, and dwell on ‘missed opportunities’ instead. In their opinion, a government consisting of non-Bolshevik leftists, primarily Socialist Revolutionaries, which became the most popular party in Russia on the eve of elections to the Constituent Assembly (1917), could have taken better advantage of opportunities offered by the Revolution .

The Russian Orthodox Church, which is another important mnemonic actor in this context, perceives 1917 as a year that triggered a national tragedy, when the people’s sufferings merged with the disintegration of the state and the persecution of the clergy. At the same

time, the year 1917 witnessed the first Local Council since the 17th century, in addition to the reinstatement of the patriarchy.

The Russian Orthodox Church ranks among the most influential actors in the sphere of commemoration and memory, as highlighted by the scale of the ‘Russia – My History’ historical parks that have been established under its auspices. The Russian Orthodox Church has its own stance on critical assessments of lessons of the past and does not deny the need for such assessments. But its framework for assessing the past differs considerably from that of the liberal opposition, and the Memorial society (Russian NGO focusing on human rights. – *Ed.*) in particular. We can assume that the voice of the Russian Orthodox Church on these issues will become more influential in the near future. The liberal framework for assessing the past is built primarily around the crimes of the Communist regime and the issue of the Russian government’s ‘despotic nature’ in the pre-revolutionary past. The Russian Orthodox Church’s framework for assessing the past includes the crimes of the Bolsheviks, as well as the Russian Empire’s revolutionary and liberal traditions that, according to this interpretation, undermined the state and paved the way for a destructive revolutionary crisis.

The public positions of liberal commentators, who consider the February Revolution as a missed opportunity for the country’s democratic development, are less influential, but are quite prominent. Another public stance that has been expressed on the occasion of the Revolution’s anniversary is to predict another, inevitable revolution in Russia, instead of interpreting the Revolution per se.

On the whole, Russia has taken a **fragmented, conflicted approach to commemorating** the October 1917 Revolution. As such, the decision of the government to refrain from formulating an official position on the Revolution seems to be the most constructive and pragmatic policy, especially given the importance of retaining broad public support ahead of the presidential election.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, President Putin speaking in less official settings has repeatedly expressed his views on the legitimacy of revolution as a tool for resolving social and political problems; this legitimacy is the focal point of an ideological conflict around the events of 1917. Giving a speech at the Valdai Discussion Club annual meeting, he said,

Revolution is always the result of an accountability deficit in both those who would like to conserve, to freeze in place the outdated order of things that clearly needs to be changed, and those who aspire to speed the changes up, resorting to civil conflict and destructive resistance.

Today, as we turn to the lessons of a century ago, namely, the Russian Revolution of 1917, we see how ambiguous its results were, how closely the negative and, we must acknowledge, the positive consequences of those events are intertwined. Let us ask ourselves: was it not possible to follow an evolutionary path rather than go through a revolution? Could we not have evolved by way of gradual

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<sup>1</sup> While analysing the commemoration policy as regards the Revolution’s anniversary, the author used materials of seminars held under RFN Project No. 17-18-01589 at the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

and consistent forward movement rather than at a cost of destroying our statehood and the ruthless fracturing of millions of human lives.

However, the largely utopian social model and ideology, which the newly formed state tried to implement initially following the 1917 revolution, was a powerful driver of transformations across the globe (this is quite clear and must also be acknowledged), caused a major reevaluation of development models, and gave rise to rivalry and competition, the benefits of which, I would say, were mostly reaped by the West.

I am referring not only to the geopolitical victories following the Cold War. Many Western achievements of the 20th century were in answer to the challenge posed by the Soviet Union. I am talking about raising living standards, forming a strong middle class, reforming the labour market and the social sphere, promoting education, guaranteeing human rights, including the rights of minorities and women, overcoming racial segregation, which, as you may recall, was a shameful practice in many countries, including the United States, a few short decades ago.

Putin perceives the Revolution as a ‘destructive conflict’ that led to the ‘ruthless fracturing of millions of human lives’, and he believes there was an evolutionary alternative. He sees the Revolution’s positive effects in the West, where states have learned the Revolution’s lessons and managed to avoid the destructive consequences that befell Russia.

Moreover, it is remarkable that the Reconciliation Monument, later renamed the Unity Monument, was never unveiled in Kerch last year in the run-up to the Revolution’s 100th anniversary. The monument was never completed, because of the protests of local residents as the authorities had failed to consult them on the monument’s construction. However, in 2017, President Putin took part in unveiling the monument to victims of political repressions in Moscow’s Sakharov Prospekt, and the monument to Emperor Alexander III in Crimea.

## The Revolution and Historians

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The revolution is likewise a controversial issue among professional historians. Their debates reveal several key interconnected themes: First, the roots of the Revolution. A related issue is the status of Russia in the early 20th century and trends in its development. Third, breaks and continuities between the pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. Fourth, the meaning of the February Revolution and viability of the ‘democratic scenario’. Fifth, the revolution’s timeframe. Finally, historians, like politicians, debate whether a revolution is an efficient tool of modernization.

As far as causes of a revolution are concerned, there are ‘monocausal’ interpretations, which state that a single factor is deemed principal and decisive. These include conspiracy theories that are popular among radical nationalists and socioeconomic determinism theories inherited from the Soviet tradition. Both varieties are considered to be marginal at present.

Historians are increasingly focusing on subjective factors such as public sentiments and perceptions that screen reality and, in a sense, become more real than reality itself, as well as mechanisms that are used to manipulate these sentiments and perceptions. More and more often, historians are attempting to construct concepts that cover the multiplicity of factors conducive to revolution. In this case, the subjective factors and the behaviour of mobilized elite groups are sometimes taken as the decisive factor, and sometimes as a peculiar addendum to the old socioeconomic determinism concept.

Thus, professional historical knowledge tends to complicate the understanding of the causes of the Revolution, and decisive factors at its different stages. Moreover, the number of specialists who prioritize subjective factors, particularly at the Revolution’s early stage, is growing.

Indicatively, Russian historians pay scant attention to the empire’s ethnic problems as a revolutionary factor, while historical narratives in the former republics attach much, if not decisive, importance to this factor.

*Comrade Kerensky*, a 2017 book by Boris Kolonitsky, is an important scholarly effort to elucidate the revolution. It describes how Kerensky’s personality cult as the leader of the Revolution began taking shape immediately in the wake of the February events. This is a very important thesis indeed as it points to the fact that the leader’s personality cult was planned and consciously launched as the monarchy was falling to pieces and the ‘liberal democratic’ February stage was ushering in. Hence, it was not Stalin, nor even Lenin, who invented the personality cult. It is important to aware that Kerensky and his underlings used this technique to fill the post-monarchy vacuum in the political consciousness of the masses. Even at that stage, it was naive to hope for Russia’s smooth democratic development.

Research into the contemporaneous socioeconomic situation is of importance to understand the role of the February events. Particularly the writings by Leonid Borodkin show that the collapse began at the turn of 1917 and assumed catastrophic proportions after February. Before 1917, wage growth followed price growth and offset it for the most part. The revolution triggered a politically motivated surge in wages and, as a consequence, runaway inflation. If we take 100 for the price index in 1913, it was 294 in January 1917 and 1,545 in December of the same year. The scale of the disaster is clearly revealed by the following figures: Given the rising cost of living, average real income was 278 rubles in 1916, 220 rubles in 1917, and 27 rubles in 1918. However, there were no food coupons until the end of 1916, while all other European belligerents began rationing food back in 1915. The collapse of the government structures was partly compensated by the strength and stability of municipalities in major cities, which had been growing stronger after the 1870 reforms. The wiping out of the municipalities by the Soviets and deserters in the autumn 1917 plunged the country into socioeconomic disaster.

**The Revolution, while opening the doors to a corridor with some fundamentally new opportunities and circumstances, simultaneously shut the doors to other corridors** that the country could have entered if there were no revolution, or if the revolution were less destructive. In the early 20th century, Russia had a chance to become a leading world power on a firm basis. It was in the early 1900s that Russia built up capacity in all areas, making it possible to hope for development to accelerate rapidly within the next few decades, or what we now call an *economic miracle*. This implies industrial growth, transformation of agriculture, infrastructure development, and innovative science and engineering. In the education area, one is impressed by the sheer numbers of universities and university students, while the strides made in primary education support the contention that shortly before the World War I the country was close to introducing universal primary education. Moreover, this was not the outcome of an endless cycle of attempts and failures, as the imperial period in the Russian history is often depicted, but resulted from accumulated qualitative changes induced by gradual transformations carried out over a long period, transformations that culminated in the Stolypin reforms. It is worth mentioning that their potential was far from exhausted after the assassination of Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. Full coverage of these processes can be found in the book *Twenty Years before the Great War: Russian Modernization under Witte and Stolypin* by Mikhail Davydov. It is a matter of fact that there were certain crises, but these were pains of progress.

Until the autumn of 1916, the country coped well with the challenges presented by the war. The early war years, for all their problems and setbacks, particularly the retreat in 1915, confirmed the high capacity of the Russian economy. By 1916, the country managed to dramatically increase ammunition production and practically reached parity with Germany on this score. As for arms production and food supplies, Russia's wartime economy was demonstrating a considerable safety margin and growth potential. It was the Revolution that doomed Russia to defeat in the war, and stripped it of a unique chance to join the club of leading world economies in terms of both its weight and innovative potential.

It is of no difficulty to find certain elements of continuity between the Russian Empire and the USSR. And this is not surprising because the new state sprung up in the same geographic space and used economic, intellectual and demographic resources inherited from the Russian Empire. But it is hard to imagine a more enormous disruption of continuity than the one brought about by the October Revolution. It changed the entire system of legal and economic relations by destroying private ownership, pulling down the existing mechanisms of industrial development, and ultimately subjecting the peasantry back to serfdom. The October events and the Civil War exterminated or expelled the educated strata and the national intellectual elite. The Soviet Union pursued a fundamentally different nationalities policy than the Russian Empire. For a long time, the Bolsheviks saw the bearers of the pre-revolutionary Russian nationalism as their main enemy, and not without reason. The Soviet nation-building policy was based on rejecting the former triune Russian nation project and on institutionalizing and localizing ethnicity. This created an immense pyramid of more than 10,000 ethnic entities from ethnic *kolkhozes* to the supposedly sovereign Soviet republics.

To understand the dynamics of these truly revolutionary processes, it would be logical to consider the Revolution as including the Soviet localization policy, collectivization,

industrialization, and the political terror in the 1930s, rather than cramming it into the 1917–1922 timeframe, as suggested by the Russian Historical Society.

If we accept the proposed assessment of Russia's pre-war socioeconomic development potential as offering a chance for stable innovative growth at rates exceeding world indices, we will be justified in evaluating revolutionary modernization as a very costly mobilization effort with patently more limited and unstable results.

It is also essential to remember that the Civil War undermined the demographic model that made it possible to predict that Russia's population would exceed 300 million in the early 20th century, with the subsequent collectivization and industrialization dealing it the final blow. Obviously, this model would change anyway following urbanization process, but this would have happened much later and 'smoother'.

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To sum up, it would be true to say the Revolution's anniversary was fruitful. There was a free and lively public discussion of events that happened one hundred years ago. We failed to reach a consensus, but this was not to be hoped for from the very beginning. The important point is that the debates did not cause additional tension or alienation within the society. Professional historians have made much headway in studying the Revolution, and we can only hope that their output will not wane after the anniversary. There are reasons to believe that this will not happen as we have seen the start of several lively discussions on newly formulated research issues. For example, active debates are certain to be sparked of by Yuri Slezkine's book *The Government Building*, which he described at the Valdai Discussion Club annual meeting. It looks at the Bolsheviks as a millenarian sect that sought a radical transformation of the world. There is an active debate on *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*, a recent book by Dominic Lieven, who also took part in the Club's annual meeting.

In 2016, Leonid Yuzefovich was awarded the Grand Book prize for his documentary novel *The Winter Road*, the story of one of the last episodes of the Civil War in Yakutia between 1922 and 1923, White General Pepelyaev and Red anarchist Commander Strode. They deserve this account because both behaved decently amid the savageness reigning in the society and the army, refusing to kill prisoners and wounded combatants, refraining from torture, etc. We know of people who were unwilling to take side in the Civil War, withdrew from the struggle, and helped the Reds before the Whites, and vice versa. One of these people was poet Maximilian Voloshin. But the Yuzefovich's book is about the active participants in the fray. And they are worthy of this account because they stick to the moral norms and conventional restrictions, which the majority casts off in a civil war. This seems to be the first book of its kind in Russian literature, a book that shows the path to reconciliation, which we will have to tread for a long time to come. The point is not that we need to find out, which side was right or wrong in the revolutionary conflict. Rather, we must accept that remaining humane is much more important than being red or white.

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