

CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER

No. 17/02

April 2017

HOW WILL RUSSIA COMMEMORATE THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION?

THE KREMLIN AND THE FIRST 'COLOUR' REVOLUTION

MATTHEW RENDLE

*University of Exeter
UK*

Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 17/02
© Matthew Rendle, 2017

All rights reserved

The Cicero Foundation is an independent pro-Atlantic and pro-EU think tank.

www.cicerofoundation.org

The views expressed in Cicero Foundation Great Debate Papers do not necessarily express the opinion of the Cicero Foundation, but they are considered interesting and thought-provoking enough to be published. Permission to make digital or hard copies of any information contained in these web publications is granted for personal use, without fee and without formal request. Full citation and copyright notice must appear on the first page. Copies may not be made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage.

HOW WILL RUSSIA COMMEMORATE THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION?

THE KREMLIN AND THE FIRST 'COLOUR' REVOLUTION

Matthew Rendle

Matthew Rendle is Guest Editor of the Special Issue "The Centenary of the Russian Revolution – New Directions in Research," *Historical Research*, Volume 90, Issue 247, February 2017.

The spectre of a 'colour' revolution has been stalking Russia for well over a decade now. Ever since the 'Rose' and 'Orange' revolutions unseated former Soviet elites in Georgia and Ukraine in late 2003 and early 2004 respectively, followed by other revolutions in Central Asia and further unrest in Ukraine, the Kremlin has been worried about the spread of civil unrest and revolution to Russia itself. In response, as one scholar has noted, the government has been engaged in a prolonged programme of 'preventative counter-revolution', clamping down on organised protests, targeting independent and foreign-funded bodies, and mobilising its own supporters to guard against Western-inspired 'colour' revolutions.¹ Broadly speaking, this has been successful, leaving opposition groups disunited and weak, and there is little evidence of widespread popular opposition to Putin who enjoys high approval ratings. Nevertheless, when civil unrest does emerge, such as the recent protests against corruption initiated by Aleksei Naval'nyi, most commentators, from Putin to online bloggers, persist in analysing events as a potential colour revolution, reflecting the ongoing fear of revolution as the next presidential election approaches in 2018.²

THE 'RED' OCTOBER REVOLUTION: THE FIRST 'COLOUR' REVOLUTION?

The expansion of revolution to the Middle East during the Arab Spring only exacerbated these fears. In his speeches, Putin has repeatedly accepted that many countries, from

¹ R. Horvath, *Putin's Preventative Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution* (Abingdon, 2013), pp. 6-7.

² For e.g., <http://www.intellinews.com/moscow-blog-is-russia-seeing-the-start-of-a-colour-revolution-118327/> and <https://www.rt.com/politics/384451-putin-vows-to-prevent-color/>. All sites last accessed on 18 April 2017.

Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan to Libya and Syria, needed change to deal with ineffective governments and economies, but he argues consistently that evolution is the best solution, not revolution – peaceful reform rather than violent revolution. And he makes this argument for Russia itself; Russia, he believes, has had enough periods of upheaval and revolution in its history.³ Furthermore, he draws strong links between revolution and instability – an argument fuelled, of course, by current events in the Middle East – arguing that revolution is inseparable from instability and weakness at best, and extremism and terrorism at worst.⁴ Yet, arguably, the first ‘colour’ revolution appeared in Russia. The ‘red’ October Revolution of 1917 marked a significant shift in the revolutionary tradition of the ‘long’ 19th century, moving revolutions away from the liberal, democratic ideals that had initiated and driven revolutions in 1789, 1830 and 1848, to instead frame revolution as a fundamental process of political, social, economic and cultural change, and placing socialism and particularly Marxism to the fore. These ideals were to dominate revolutions across the globe in the 20th century, from China and Cuba to Venezuela and Vietnam.

THE KREMLIN’S MIXED FEELINGS

One hundred years have now passed since this first ‘colour’ revolution and, given what has been noted above, it is hardly surprising that Putin has not embraced its commemoration wholeheartedly. Whereas the global impact of 1917 is evident in the sheer number of exhibitions, conferences and publications planned in an impressive range of countries around the world, relatively little has happened in Russia itself. To be sure, Putin has admitted several times that 1917 is too significant for Russia’s history to ignore, but it is clear that the Kremlin is not sure how to approach the centenary. There were, of course, two revolutions in 1917 in Russia. The February Revolution brought down the monarchy, but was driven by individuals inspired by the ideals of western-style democracy and civil rights – hardly ideals that the current government wishes to commemorate amid a tightly-managed system of ‘sovereign democracy’. The October Revolution brought this period of

³ See, for e.g., his comments to a meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, 24 October 2014.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.

⁴ See various speeches and interviews in 2015-16, e.g. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380> and <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51685>.

unparalleled freedom to an end and instigated a repressive regime that led to the foundation of the Soviet Union; again the current state does not wish to commemorate repression, whilst the legacy of the Soviet Union remains controversial and divisive within Russia at a time when the Kremlin is keen to foster unity. Neither of these revolutions are easy to identify with or paint in an agreeable light, whilst in the background there is the state's fundamental dislike of revolution generally, and the fear of doing anything that may remind people of the power of revolution and thus might help foster a new one.

The uncertainty surrounding 1917 has been evident for many years in the state's attempts to foster a new 'useable' past from Russia's history. Since coming to power in 2000, Putin has recognised the political value of history and sought to create a unifying, patriotic version of Russia's past to help forge unity and consensus in the present.⁵ Through public speeches, official celebrations, monuments, school textbooks and even historical commissions and archival restrictions, the Kremlin has tried to contextualise the Soviet legacy, emphasising the achievements of Russia before 1917, and placing the repression and terror of the Soviet years alongside the USSR's economic and military achievements and global influence. Some major events are easy to fit into this narrative. The invasion of Russia by Napoleon in 1812, for instance, is an obvious unifying event as Russians are portrayed as coming together to defeat the French against all odds. The bicentenary in 2012 saw unabashed patriotic celebrations with new programmes commissioned, museums established and a lavish re-enactment of the Battle of Borodino.⁶ Coming in the middle of Putin's return to the presidency and after a period of civil unrest in 2011-12, his speeches called for similar unity and painted his supporters as the defenders of the motherland, akin to those Russians who fought against Napoleon in 1812, whilst his opponents were portrayed as the invaders, acting against the interests of Russia.⁷ Another historical event easy to fit into a patriotic

⁵ For more, see M. Rendle and A. Lively, 'Inspiring a 'Fourth Revolution?' The Modern Revolutionary Tradition and the Problems Surrounding the Commemoration of 1917 in 2017 in Russia,' *Historical Research*, 90, 247 (2017), 233-39, available for free in 2017 at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hisr.v90.247/issuetoc>.

⁶ For a Russia Today video of the re-enactment, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hZUxHBSnhw>.

⁷ R. Oliphant, 'Vladimir Putin invokes Napoleon invasion of Russia in patriotic call', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2012; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/9101792/Vladimir-Putin-invokes-Napoleon-invasion-of-Russia-in-patriotic-call.html>.

narrative is, of course, the Second World War or Great Patriotic War, and the continued prolonged celebrations every May attest to the importance of this event in Russian culture and popular memory, as does the state's sensitivity to any attempts by historians to paint a more complex, nuanced and thus less complimentary picture of Russia's war effort.⁸ 1917, however, has been difficult. The official public holiday commemorating the October Revolution proved to be extremely divisive after the fall of the USSR, serving as an occasion for hard-line communists to march on Lenin's mausoleum and for pro-democracy supporters to commemorate the victims and demand further freedoms. Putin's solution was to move the holiday several days earlier in November to mark instead a clearer instance of past unity – Muscovites coming together to repulse Polish invaders in 1612.⁹ Similarly, whilst the latest plans for a new textbook do suggest that the revolutionary year should be covered in an acceptable manner, as a process with all the major events covered, the emphasis remains on 1917 as a starting block for coverage of the Soviet period rather than the revolution as a significant event in its own right that could have led to numerous possible futures for Russia.¹⁰

A RELUCTANT COMMEMORATION?

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Kremlin has been slow in deciding what to do with the centenary of 1917. It was only in December 2016 that Putin authorised the establishment of a commission to organise the centennial commemorations under the

⁸ K. Engelhart, 'Vladimir Putin cracks down on historians and Ukraine invasion critics', *Macleans*, 3 June 2014; <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/worldpolitics/vladimir-putin-cracks-down-on-historians-and-ukraine-invasion-critics/>; and T. Balmforth, 'Russian archive chief out after debunking Soviet WWII legend', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 17 March 2016; <http://www.rferl.org/content/mironenko-state-archive-chief-removed-from-post-panfilov-legend/27619460.html>.

⁹ See F. Corney, "'Twentieth-Century Apocalypse' or a 'Grimace of Pain?' The Vanishing Traces of October', in M. Frame et al., eds., *Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914–22. Book 2: Political Culture, Identities, Mentalities and Memory* (Bloomington, 2014), esp. 315.

¹⁰ 'Kontseptsiia novogo uchebno-metodicheskogo kompleksa po otechestvennoi istorii', 39-42, available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/docs/2013/standart.pdf>.

auspices of the patriotic and loyal Russian History Society.¹¹ This commission only met for the first time in late January 2017, just weeks before the centenary of the February Revolution. Its members were varied, but consisted of far more state officials and representatives from the media and cultural institutions, with a few heads of archives and libraries, than historians of the revolution.¹² The first meeting produced a list of events, mainly exhibitions, conferences, media projects, and publications from across Russia, most of which appear to have been already planned and simply gathered together under a common umbrella by the commission.¹³ Nothing came out of this initial meeting to suggest any co-ordinated, official national commemoration, along the lines that many countries – even Russia on a smaller scale – held on the occasion of the recent centenary of the First World War.

What is clear from these initial activities, though, is a sense of the official message that is likely to surround the discussion of 1917 throughout 2017; namely, various participants talked of learning the ‘lessons’ from the Russian Revolution and the main ‘lesson’, as stated bluntly by one participant later, was that 1917 should never be repeated.¹⁴ Revolution, then, remains a negative concept, a source of weakness and instability, and the centenary is an opportunity to learn this lesson and to remember the effects of disunity over unity, of instability over stability. This message, of course, fits neatly into Putin’s own speeches and recent actions coming from the Kremlin. The last decade or so, for instance, has seen the official promotion of a more positive image of the Romanovs – Russia’s monarchy on the eve of 1917 – with the canonisation of the family of Tsar Nicholas II followed more recently by statues of various monarchs appearing in prominent locations across Russia and positive official comments about the power of Imperial Russia. The centenary of the First World War

¹¹ The official decree is at <http://rushistory.org/proekty/100-letie-revoljutsii-1917-goda/prezident-rossii-podpisal-rasporjazyhenie-o-provedenii-meropriyatij-k-100-letiyu-revoljutsii-1917-goda.html>.

¹² <http://rushistory.org/proekty/100-letie-revoljutsii-1917-goda/pervoe-zasedanie-organizatsionnogo-komiteta-po-podgotovke-i-provedeniyu-meropriyatij-posvyashchennykh-100-letiyu-revoljutsii-1917-goda.html>.

¹³ For a table of events; <http://rushistory.org/images/documents/plan100letrevolution.pdf>.

¹⁴ ‘Aleksandr Chubar’ian: 1917 god ne dolzhen povtorit’sia’, RIA Novosti; https://ria.ru/revolution_opinion/20170201/1486787308.html.

led Putin to argue that the war had been ‘lost’ for Russia by the Bolsheviks when they had sought a separate peace with Germany after the revolution, and they were traitors in their unpatriotic actions. In turn, through their establishment of a USSR formed from arbitrary national borders, they had set a ‘time-bomb’ under Russia, placing numerous ethnic Russians into other republics which caused the tensions apparent today in Crimea and Ukraine (and thereby justifying current Russian policy to ‘correct’ these earlier mistakes).¹⁵ More recently still, in his presidential speech in December 2016, Putin noted that the centennial will be a good opportunity for Russian society as a whole to look back on the revolution; ‘we need history’s lessons’ he declared, ‘for reconciliation’ and for ‘strengthening’ political and social ‘concord’ – that is, to learn that it is best to avoid revolution.¹⁶

“LEARNING THE LESSONS” OF THE REVOLUTION

These messages or ‘lessons’ have been evident as Russia passed the centennial anniversary of the February Revolution, albeit without much fanfare. A conference of prominent official figures on the eve of the revolution organised by the commission provided an opportunity for the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, to once again condemn the national ‘tragedy’ of a revolution that had failed to solve Russia’s problems, and repress patriotism and unity.¹⁷ The politically-powerful and overtly patriotic Orthodox Church has also been prominent, hosting the aforementioned conference in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, organising an exhibition in honour of the ‘victims’ of revolution in the same cathedral, and holding a service for victims on the anniversary of Tsar Nicholas’s abdication. Patriarch Kirill linked 1917 to a crisis in belief and blamed the intelligentsia for the revolution, implying they failed to consider the best interests of ordinary Russians – a thinly

¹⁵ See various speeches from 2014-16; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46385>; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951>; <http://russialist.org/putin-on-lenin-planted-atomic-bomb-under-building-called-russia/>; and <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51206>.

¹⁶ Presidential Address, 1 December 2016; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379>

¹⁷ Conference account; <http://rushistory.org/proekty/100-letie-revoljutsii-1917-goda/ne-dopustit-razdeleniya-nauchnaya-konferentsiya-fevral-tragediya-uroki-istorii-1917.html>

veiled message for those tempted to listen to similar messages coming from educated, urban intellectual elites today.¹⁸

It seems clear, therefore, that the first ‘colour’ revolution is fated to be portrayed in the same light as its recent successors; in short, officially 1917 de-stabilised Russia, heralding a period of weakness between the imperial power of tsarist Russia and the military and global influence wielded by the Soviet Union. It led to death and material hardship, political and economic chaos, and various decisions – not least those effecting ethnic and national boundaries – whose repercussions are still felt by many Russians today. 2017 is an opportunity to restate these conclusions and to draw the obvious lessons – revolutions should be avoided at all cost. Moreover, through learning these lessons, it is an opportunity to foster the political and social unity and reconciliation so desired by the Kremlin.

The key question, of course, is whether this official narrative will succeed in becoming the dominant narrative during 2017. Certainly, it seems likely in most public arenas where the centenary is discussed. The current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary History in Moscow is an interesting case in point; one reviewer has noted that its descriptions of exhibits refrain from drawing explicit conclusions, instead leaving the viewer to make up their own minds. But the broader construction of the exhibit – design, light and sound – make for an unsettling and unnerving experience, reinforcing the sense of revolution as violent, frightening and destructive, as might be expected from an exhibition sponsored by, and unveiled by, the official commission.¹⁹

Online debates will be harder to control, but here conspiracy theorists dominate, particularly those framing 1917 as a western-inspired conspiracy, with British agents (such as the ambassador, George Buchanan), French financiers (through state loans) or the German government (by funding the Bolsheviks) playing crucial roles at various times. Although not

¹⁸ See, variously, <http://vm.ru/news/2017/02/19/zhertv-fevralskoj-revoljutsii-prizivayut-pomnit-i-chtit-355237.html>, <http://www.pravmir.com/100th-anniversary-emperors-abdication-patriarch-prays-victims-revolution-civil-war/>, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/546943>, and <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/555912>.

¹⁹ See <https://www.sovrhistory.ru/events/exhibition/58becc2aa0e5981d9da515c4>, <http://rushistory.org/proekty/100-letie-revoljutsii-1917-goda/vystavka-1917-kod-revoljutsii-v-muzee-sovremennoj-istorii-rossii.html>, and a forthcoming review by Tricia Starks, *Revolutionary Russia*, 30, 1 (2017).

condoned officially, this approach is agreeable to the Kremlin as it fits with their portrayal of recent 'colour' revolutions as western-inspired and funded, and revolution as an alien concept forced on Russia to the detriment of ordinary Russians. It also finds a ready public audience – particularly given such theories are also the subject of numerous popular books on 1917; as a recent article has noted, whether re-enactments, historical video games, films or books, the popular demand for a patriotic history is growing, so much so that the boundaries between history, fantasy and ideology are becoming ever more blurred.²⁰

Ultimately, it seems that a broader, more complex debate on 1917 will be confined to academic circles, with plenty of thought-provoking conferences and publications already planned. The academic narrative on 1917 is now a far cry from the formulaic, predictable interpretations of the revolution produced during the Soviet period. Yet as this narrative becomes ever more divorced from official and popular narratives surrounding the revolution, it becomes more and more difficult for historians of the revolution to make themselves heard outside of academic circles. This is true of historians of many contentious periods of history in numerous countries across the globe but it is particularly evident in Russia, and particularly significant given the enduring importance and global influence of the Russian Revolution.

²⁰ J. Brooks and B. Dralyuk, 'Parahistory: History at Play in Russia and Beyond', *Slavic Review*, 75, 1 (2016), 77-98.

The Cicero Foundation

Independent Pro-EU and Pro-Atlantic Think Tank Founded in 1992

Hondertmarck 45D

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

The Netherlands

Tel. +31 43 32 60 828

Tel. +33 1 41 29 09 30

Fax: +33 1 41 29 09 31

Email: info@cicerofoundation.org

Website: www.cicerofoundation.org

Registration No. Chamber of Commerce Maastricht 41078444