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To Commemorate the 1917 Revolution in Russia – Occasions More for Reflections than for Celebrations

The centennial of the 1917 revolution in Russia provide opportunities for the public to refresh knowledge of the tumultuous events that dramatically changed the country's history. Conferences, television series and debates, exhibitions at historical and art museums are some of the activities that will illuminate the February and October revolutions in 1917. The complex, intertwined and contradictory historical process and the following tragic Civil war 1918 – 1922 calls for careful, objective and dispassionate approaches and evaluations.



Over the last years, Russia has officially sponsored or encouraged great historical commemorations, e.g. the bicentennial of the war against Napoleon in 1812 and the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. In contrast, this year's commemoration of the 1917 revolution(s) in Russia – the first in February and the other in October (old style calendar) – pose a whole range of difficult questions. In the contemporary school curriculum in Russia, the most often used concept is 'the Great 1917 Revolution in Russia', thereby avoiding the previous, inappropriately counterposed February vs. October revolution. Instead, emphasis shifts to a continuous spectrum of revolutionary processes on different levels of the state and in various social groups throughout 1917. Likewise, this concept captures the multi-ethnic character of the revolution better than 'the Russian revolution'.

In this brief, I outline the expected results from professional historians and archivists, by academic institutions and museums. In a forthcoming study of recent Russian historiographic debates (Samuelson, 2018), I intend to analyze also the changing official assessments of the 1917 revolutions.

In the Soviet era until the glasnost in the late 1980s, party-controlled historians described the 'Great Socialist October revolution' tendentiously, with many obfuscations and 'white spots'. Not only were the opponents of the Bolsheviks depicted in caricature forms; also, the later oppositionists to Stalin's party line were eliminated from the 1917 history, or mentioned merely for the alleged mistakes. In the West, on the other hand, there existed a plethora of interpretations of the Russian revolution, reflecting ideologies and worldviews of liberals, conservatives, as well as exiled Russian politicians (see e.g. Mazour, 1971 or Laqueur, 1967).

In the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian historians have profoundly enriched our knowledge of the 1917 revolutionary process as well as the ensuing Civil war. 'Un-persons' like Lev Trotsky, and hundreds of other who were expelled later from the Communist party, got back their due place in history. Works have been published of monarchists, liberals and socialists who led the Provisional governments during 1917. Historical studies by exiled scholars, as well as memoirs by politicians and diplomats that were once published in the West, have now been reprinted by Russian publishing companies (for the best survey, see Gennadyi Bordiugov, 2013 (1,520 pages!!)).

In today's Russia, there co-exist an abundance of interpretations and assessments of the 1917 revolutions. The February strikes and uprising in Petrograd triggered the abdication of tsar Nikolay II, led to the founding of a republic and the formation of new government. The revolutionary changes outside the capital, throughout the whole empire, took quite different forms and only in recent years, regional scholars could describe them objectively.

Naturally, the fundamental changes in the political landscape in Russia after the return from exile of Vladimir Lenin in spring 1917 have attracted interest by scholars. Solid biographies of Lenin by Dmitrii Volgogonov (1994), Vladlen Loginov(2017), Anatolii Latyshev(1996) and Elena Kotelenets(2017), to mention only a few, give the Russian public a more nuanced figure than the more hagiographic works published in the Soviet epoch. The British historian Catherine Merridale (2016) gives a fascinating narrative of how Lenin's return from exile in Switzerland would completely change the perspectives of the revolution. The renowned Russian specialist Vladimir Buldakov wrote profound reinterpretations of the 'Red Troubled times' (Krasnaya smuta) of 1917 in the first of a series of path-breaking research in the central and regional archives (Buldakov 2010, 2015).

As we approached the centennial of this decisive and deeply divisive year in Russia's long history,



many observers wondered how it was to be officially observed. Just like similar jubilee years, for example in 1989 of the French Revolution, it seemed obvious that this was not a time for triumphant celebrations as had been the case of the annual October Revolution holiday (on 7th November, new calendar) in the Soviet era. On the other hand, it would equally be unfortunate to pass over in silence this eventful revolutionary year. So by support from the Ministry of Culture, the Russian Historical Society (abbrev. RIO) set up a vast program of conferences, round tables, exhibitions and publications. Universities all over the Russian Federation will organize gatherings for historians and students. Central and regional archives arrange exhibitions, the explicit purpose of which is, not to give any definite value judgments, but to let the public form their own views on the personalities by pondering over original documents on Tsar Nikolai II and the tsarist family, the politicians of various parties, as well as on Lenin, Bolsheviks and others of the Left.

The call from the Russian political leaders has been to strive for a balanced, as dispassionate as possible, reassessment of the 1917 revolution in Russia. The ensuing civil war 1918–1922 created a generation-long, deep division among Russians, inside the country and in exile. Just as was the case in other countries, e.g. Finland and Spain, where civil wars scarred the national fabric in the 20th century, at present, the goal should be for reconciliation and mutual understanding of the historical actors on all sides of the political spectrum.

This spring, the Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk organized a round-table on the 1917 revolution. Dozens of scholars presented their research findings and opinions on various events in the region; the protocol's understatement that "the discussions had often a polemical character" indicate that the Russian revolution is still a subject of hot controversies, even in academic circles. On 29–31 March, the Moscow State University arranged the first of several grand international conferences planned

this year. In twenty sessions, hundreds of scholars from all over Russia and from foreign countries gave papers on widely different aspects of the revolutionary processes. Likewise, universities in Samara, Volgograd, Cheliabinsk and other cities have announced their forthcoming conferences on the 1917 Revolution.

The main depository of political archives, RGASPI, in Moscow has contributed over 800 archival documents to a special exhibition, '1917. The Code of the Revolution' at the Central Museum of Contemporary Political History. (<https://www.sovrhistory.ru/events/exhibition/58becc2aa0e5981d9da515c4>, accessed 31.03 2017). Two grand exhibitions projects with less-known archival documents attempt to give new perspectives, first, on Tsar Nikolai II, and, later this year, on Vladimir Lenin; both are of course well-known personalities, but the archivists and museums' commissars hope to inspire visitors to renew their perspectives. In St. Petersburg, besides conferences, round-tables and exhibitions, there will be theatrical performances to reproduce dramatic events of 1917 and precisely on the streets and squares where they once upon a time took place. Russian Internet sites will provide pieces of contemporary news from 1917 for each day (<https://project1917.com/>).

Publishing houses have started new series devoted to the 1917 revolution in Russia, and the shelves in bookshops give abundant 'food for thought' for eager readers. Here one can find not only Trotsky's own renowned History of the Russian Revolution written in his exile in the USSR. There are also memoirs by officers in the White Army during the Civil war, and a multitude of new popular-history works that reflect today's 'lessons of history'. The leading publishing company Rosspen will edit an archival documentary series, and compile an encyclopedia on the 1917 Revolution, thus hopefully summing up what has been accomplished in the former states of the USSR concerning the dramatic year of 1917 that was to profoundly change not only the



country's history, but even global history for many years ahead.



Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and other Russian exiles in Stockholm, 13 April 1917, on their way from Switzerland, to change the course of the Russian Revolution and world history of the 20th century. Social democrat Ture Nerman is talking with Lenin (4th from right, with umbrella).; behind them - mayor Carl Lindhagen and Aleksandra Kollontay, radical feminist who spent World War One here and in the 1930s to return to Stockholm as ambassador of the USSR.

Note: This Swedish photograph is in the public domain in Sweden because one of the following applies: (i) The work is non-artistic (journalistic, etc.) and has been created before 1969, (ii) The photographer is not known, and cannot be traced, and the work has been created before 1944.



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Samuelson's research in Russian economic history re-started when the archives opened in 1992. His major research topic is the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex of the 1930s and onwards. He has participated in several research projects on Soviet agrarian history of the 1930s, on the Great Terror 1937-38 and the Gulag camp system, and also on Sweden's relations with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. His research results have been rewarded by several institutions. The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities rewarded its prestigious Rettig Prize in 2014 to Samuelson for his fundamental research and innovative grasp of the Russian archival materials. On 4 November 2014, he was awarded Orden Druzhby (the Friendship Order) by President Vladimir Putin at the National Day ceremony in the Kremlin.

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