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Highlights for Commemoration of the 1917 Russian Revolution – Hints for Further Study

In this policy brief, I hint at some accomplishments that may deserve to be studied for anyone who is genuinely interested in the historical debates in Russia.



Professional historians in general have an ambivalent attitude towards anniversaries and commemorations of historical events, be they epochal or not. On the one hand, centennials and similar memorials may alleviate the funding of one's research projects as the authorities likewise wish to highlight certain events. On the other hand, jubilee years can tend to divert historians from their ordinary research directions. Not for nothing would even frank scholars from Oxford, England complain in 2014 of the "tyranny of celebrations" and wish that nothing comparative to the centennial of the Great War 1914-1918 would appear soon.

In Russia, similar attitudes seem not to have appeared with respect to the centennial of the 1917 revolutions, the February and October revolution as traditionally called. In my April 2017 policy brief, I noted how universities all over Russia organized conferences devoted to various aspects of 1917. Many more publications have appeared as well as translations or new editions of classical works. Here I only hint at some accomplishments that may deserve to be studied for anyone who is genuinely interested in the historical debates in Russia.

This autumn, the leading institutes of the Academy of Sciences, the Institute for General History (IVI RAN) and the Institute for Russian History (IRI RAN) held their grand events with participation of leading scholars from the West, inter alia H el ene Carr ere-d'Encausse and Alexander Rabinovich, to mention only a few. The IRI RAN presented its two-volume "The Russian revolution in 1917: The Power, Society, Culture" with the same emphasis as the main theme of the conference, i.e. how the historiography of the February and October revolution changed over time (see <http://iriran.ru/?q=node/1699>).

Western mass media and Russia observers in particular have during 2017, in my view, one-sidedly focused on how Kremlin would, or not, 'celebrate', 'commemorate', or even 'want to forget' the epochal events in Russia one hundred

years ago. In contrast to other anniversaries, the 200th of Napoleon's war on Russia or the 100th of the First World War, the highest political spheres have, as it seems for good reasons, left the information sphere quite free for the professional historians, film and TV producers, and others to commemorate at their own behest the 1917 revolution.

One important source of information about the commemoration of the 1917 Russian Revolution is the book published by AIRO-XXI, Association for the Study of Russian History in the 21st Century, led by the renowned historiographer Gennadyi Bordiugov. Just as for the anniversaries of the Victory in World War Two (in 2005 and 2015), Bordiugov and his colleagues in AIRO-XXI started a huge monitoring project in late 2016 in order to follow how various groups and centres all over Russia, as well as in major Western countries, were to commemorate the 1917 Russian revolution. The monitoring is by now complete and the result is the mighty book "Revolution-100. A Reconstruction of the Jubilee" (<http://www.airo-xxi.ru/-2017-/2395--100->). This will for a long time serve as the best introduction to how Russia – in the broadest terms – comes to grips with the jubilee. The first articles give the background – how the October revolution was celebrated in the Soviet era and the major changes in the post-1991 Russia. Several contributions give the present-day context – how parallels are drawn between contemporary events in Russia and abroad, on the one hand, and the Russian revolution, on the other hand. The virtual sphere today, the Internet and blogosphere take up a much more important space for the younger generation than books and encyclopaedias; therefore the monitoring project also includes surveys of which aspects of the revolution are treated therein.

In contrast to what originally was set as leitmotiv for the commemoration – a reconciliation among groups and personalities with divided approaches to the Bolshevik takeover in particular and the Soviet experiment in general,



most publications, exhibitions and meetings that the AIRO-XXI have monitored show that the epochal historical cataclysms one hundred years ago still are as divisive as before. The great contrast is that disputes are formalized and fact-based, that arguments from any side are given due consideration, and that most accept the device that “there is no final truth in history, merely arguments without end”.

The AIRO-XXI monitoring also treats the cinema, television and Internet series that were shown in connection with the jubilee. Much media interest was connected with the protests from the Orthodox Church against the film “Matilda” as it allegedly defamed the last tsar Nikolai II for showing his love affair in the 1890s with a prima ballerina. The artistic freedom finally triumphed and the debates only slightly influenced the mass of cinemagoers. We can also note that Russian television channels have sent pedagogical and dramatic series on some of the major figures of the revolution. One on the mythical Aleksandr Parvus (Helphand) with his views on revolutionizing Russia during the war, even with the help of the German General Staff; the other on Leo Trotskii as people’s commissar of war from 1918. These series and many others are vividly described in the AIRO-XXI volume by the philologist Boris Sokolov, who clearly presents where historical facts might have been twisted for the sake of art.

Mention should finally be made, for those who wish to follow how Russia’s leading professional historians analyse the revolution, that many lectures given at universities during 2017 are available at YouTube. Suffice it here to mention Vladimir Buldakov (for his books, see my previous policy brief), who since the 1980s researched the Russian revolutions and presented his main theses in “Krasnaya Smuta” (Red Troubled times). In 2017, he has lectured on this theme for various audiences (compare

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG9T3H55Hrk>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnRXgCqGBrg>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UPYYBnYow8>)

To appreciate how an academic discussion on the ‘Great Russian Revolution’ – as many scholars today prefer to treat the events in 1917 – at its best can deepen our understanding, it is well worth pondering the arguments by renowned historians Aleksandr Shubin, Aleksandr Vatlin, Tatiana Nekrasova, Gennadii Bordiugov and Vladimir Pantin in the Kultura Channel program series “Chto delat?” (What is to be done) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQF0o8adIDw>).

Although each of the specialists had their own interpretations and various approaches, the mentor Vitalii Tretiakov, well-known journalist and formerly chief-editor of “Nezavisimaya Gazeta, managed to step-by-step highlight the issues that have divided historians in the past, as well as such matters that will call for renewed research.

In early 2017, some hoped that commemorative arrangements on the 1917 revolution would lead towards reconciliation between those opposing groups who still reason and argue as one or the other political parties of that era, between those who sympathized with the socialists in general and/or the Bolsheviks in particular, on the one hand, and those who ideologically has more affinity with the Liberal, Conservative or Monarchist groups, on the other hand. While such reconciliation is not yet in sight, the many articles in mass media, museum exhibitions and TV series have definitely heightened the older generations’ understanding of the very complex, intricate nature of the political, social and military forces that first led to the dissolution of tsarism, their fact-based knowledge of the tentative to establish a full democratic country even in the framework of the world war, and finally to a better grasp – than the standard Soviet orthodox narratives – of why and how the seemingly minuscular Bolshevik party could successfully grasp power in November 1917 and in the end also triumph in the devastating civil war.



It goes without saying that for school teachers all over Russia, the commemorative arrangements have provided a golden opportunity to engage their pupils and students in various forms of so-called living history, i.e. combining the state's grand story with the localities' and the families' own histories.

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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. Several institutions have rewarded his research results. 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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