

1917–2017: LESSONS OF THE CENTURY FOR RUSSIA AND BEYOND*

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Abstract. For most Russians, the year 1917 is primarily connected with the centennial of the February Revolution and the subsequent October events. This is quite logical, as 1917 is justly considered a landmark in modern Russian history, after which both the country and the world could not return to their previous condition and instead followed a new trajectory of social development. Influenced by Russian revolutionary ideas and Russia's subsequent modernization, many countries reformed their capitalist economies to create welfare states and abandoned authoritarianism and formal democracy, while turning to a more open and diversified system of power and government. They also curtailed their suppression of individual freedoms while giving citizens more opportunities for self-expression. These developments became possible due to a thorough reflection on the Russian experience and its creative interpretation in the economy, state government, and social interactions.

The author addresses the following key questions in his article: did Russians themselves manage to reflect on this experience? In other words, did they learn from this experience? In analyzing the crucial events of 1917 and pointing to some later and contemporary parallels, he outlines his stance toward them.

Keywords: Russia, 1917, revolutions, Russians, experience, understanding.

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1917–2017: УРОКИ СТОЛЕТИЯ ДЛЯ РОССИИ И МИРА

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Аннотация. В сознании россиян 1917 год связывается, прежде всего, со столетием Февральской революции и последующими за ней октябрьскими событиями. И не случайно. Ведь тысяча девятьсот семнадцатый справедливо считается переломным моментом новейшей истории, после которого Россия и мир уже не могли быть прежними и начали развиваться по новой социальной траектории. Многие государства под влиянием идей русского революционизма и практики постреволюционной модернизации развернулись от дикого капитализма к социальной ориентированной экономике, отказались от авторитаризма и формальной демократии в пользу открытой и диверсифицированной системы власти и управления, перестали подавлять личность и предоставили людям больше прав для самореализации. Все это стало возможным благодаря глубокому осмыслению русского опыта, его творческой переработке в сферах экономического моделирования, государственного строительства и социальных взаимоотношений.

Автор формулирует следующие ключевые вопросы: как у россиян обстоит дело с рефлексией? иначе говоря, усвоили ли они собственный опыт, извлекли ли уроки из своего прошлого? Анализируя события вековой давности и проводя параллели с более поздними событиями и современностью, он обозначает свою позицию в ответ на них.

Ключевые слова: Россия, 1917, революции, россияне, опыт, осмысление.

Looking back from the present moment, it is difficult to give an unambiguous answer to the questions posed above. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that Russians have learned some historical lessons from their past and have not managed to learn others. Besides, it is unlikely that in just a hundred years—an insignificant period by historical standards—it would be possible to completely “digest” this whole block of historical heritage, and then to calmly separate the rational and positive things from the odious ones, gently incorporating them into one social synthesis. Russians simply did not have time for this sort of reflection because throughout the entire post-revolutionary period the country was either fighting or preparing for war, or in a permanent state of constant civil confrontation of one form or another. This entire experience remains rather

stressful for the Russian people. It can be said that Russians only recently began to move away from the initial emotional stage of reflecting on the events of 1917 so that *sensus* ceased to prevail over the *ratio*. Nevertheless, despite the extreme conditions of life, the acute perception of the past, and its ambiguous assessment in the national collective consciousness, I argue that Russian society has succeeded in comprehending the main lessons and universal principles of its further existence, while taking into account the past, although not to the full extent.

For example, few people in Russia think that another social revolution in this country is likely or desirable. Precisely because of historical experience, most understand that any new man-made cataclysms would lead to the death of the nation and the state, and that current technological advances could give this process a global scope. Russians, one might say, have developed an immunity to revolutions. Otherwise, how can we explain the fact that in 1991 and 1993 the vast majority of citizens did not allow themselves to be drawn into a very dangerous confrontation with the authorities, and in our day, they refuse point blank to join the protest movement in sufficient numbers to launch the next “color” project in Russia? At the same time, we see that there are many direct and indirect domestic factors that have given rise to popular discontent. First and foremost, these factors include striking property stratification, legal inequality, social injustice, a weak social safety net, and widespread poverty. Together these negative phenomena testify to the regression of the social system and the archaization of social structure, leading to the revival of long-obsolete class approaches to social life. Turning to the events of the early twentieth century, it can be said that the succession of Russian revolutions was prompted by a sharp social differentiation that angered the overwhelming majority of the population enough to fight back.¹ Misunderstanding or ignoring this historical experience is a direct route to social turbulence and cataclysm. In this context, one of the main lessons of 1917 is that society itself, and especially the excessively rich, should not provoke revolution by encouraging and conserving extreme proprietary and other social inequalities. On the contrary, it is necessary to work to ensure that such problems in social development be mitigated.

That said, inequality will never be leveled by itself, for however psychologically difficult it is for individuals to part with a portion of wealth in favor of their neighbors, it is equally problematic for an entire social stratum to do so. Hence, there must be a force capable of ensuring certain behaviors at the macro level, encouraging or requiring large masses of people to follow them; this force is the state. Possessing the mechanisms of sovereign power, this political apparatus sets the course of movement for the whole of society in a chosen direction. For example, the so-called “welfare

¹ All Russian social thinkers of the twentieth century wrote about social injustice as the cause of the Russian revolutions. See, for example, Berdiaev 1990; Rozanov 2001; Il'in 1993 et al.

state” pursues a policy of redistribution of material possessions in accordance with the principles of social justice for the sake of achieving a decent standard of living for all citizens, smoothing out social differences and helping those in need. With this approach on the part of the authorities, society begins to realize and appreciate the advantages of social peace; it strengthens its solidarity and integrity, and becomes immune to radical ideas and their carriers. On the contrary, the class state fosters traditionally asymmetric distribution of material and social resources in society. The majority of the population perceives such a structure as unfair, the society is divided, and one part begins to protest, creating a revolutionary situation. In the case of the success of a revolution or coup, state authority is swept away together with the social order it defends, and the “cursed days”² begin. Such cause and effect relationships, rather simple in the doctrinal sense, but unfortunately very difficult to comprehend in social practice, are also an invaluable historical experience. Their essence lies in the fact that the modern state by nature can only be generally social, but not class-oriented. This is almost an axiom of contemporary life, for it is hardly worth proving that state power becomes fully legitimate only if it is recognized by a broad swath of the population, as well as the fact that stability in society directly depends on the state's ability to perform social functions.

Undoubtedly, if the state does not want revolutionary upheaval, then it should not only be social, but also strong. After all, Soviet statehood was rooted in the people (*obschenarodnaia gosudarstvennost'*), but could not protect the country from erosion and collapse. The power of the Provisional Government and the tsarist regime were incomparably weaker. The latter decomposed so much that, according to Vasili Shul`gin, an early twentieth century politician, “There was not a battalion of soldiers to protect the 300-year-old monarchy” (2015, 214). Today, when a wave of “color” revolutions (Lobanov 2015) has swept across the world, mercilessly eliminating unstable, internally fragile regimes, these lessons of the past have become more relevant.

This last point is of even greater importance for multinational, complex states. For such systems, an era of revolutions and wars always provokes a severe test of survival. In a period of calm economic development and growth, national problems within the country are not usually very pronounced. However, when central authorities encounter turmoil, peripheral territories are quick to declare their sovereignty, announce secession, and so forth. Thus, the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires failed to withstand such stress tests. The disintegration of these great powers is a direct result of revolutionary events and the unprecedented surge of nationalism. At the same time, post-imperial sovereignty, as a rule, does not bring obvious advantages to the former national provinces.

² The revolutionary chaos and terror in Russia was realistically described by the Nobel prize winner in literature, Ivan Bunin (1991).

Moreover, many of them are unable to support their own statehood due to the weakness of their economies, the lack of traditions of statehood, and internal conflict. Within these failed states, a process of reverse crystallization begins around one center of attraction and power. Most of the outskirts of the former tsarist Russia rallied in 1922 around the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to form a new state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The same was done by the Yugoslav fragments of the collapsed Danube Empire, which were drawn like drops of mercury to the Serbian state and created the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918 (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Both federations—Soviet and Yugoslav—were built on a new ideological basis, and, it would seem, should have been more monolithic than the previous superstate formations of the imperial period. However, the virus of nationalism, brought to life by the revolutionary cataclysms of the early twentieth century, proved to be stronger and more tenacious than the communist doctrine.⁵ The socialist federations did not survive the new onslaught of nationalist revolutionary sentiment and ultimately collapsed. Events repeated themselves and with immeasurably greater losses. As a result, the Yugoslav and Czechoslovak federations were not to be reborn, while Russia, which survived from 1991 to 2001 in a state of political and economic half-decay, eventually restored integration, albeit with great difficulty. Yet even this success will ultimately be doomed to failure if the collective consciousness of the people does not recognize the need for a limit on revolutions in Russia. Another revolutionary shock in this country would unequivocally lead to a new explosion of nationalism and separatism, which would mean its death as a federal state. To avert this devastating cycle of *sansâra* is in the powers of society and the authorities, provided, of course, that they understand their past miscalculations.

In reflecting on the period of revolutions and wars in modern Russian history, we cannot but mention the role of the human factor in the course of social upheaval and changes. Along with the public and political institutional dimensions, this section of analysis deserves no less attention. As experience shows, people participate in revolutionary and post-revolutionary events under the influence of certain ideologies, prompted by interested political organizations. Depending on the doctrines and political leadership, *l'homme révolté* becomes either a destructive or constructive force of social change.⁶ One might recall, however, that under the influence of communist ideology, Soviet man—the ultimate subversion of the old social structure—turned into a builder and defender of his restored great country. To be clear, I do not advocate for the reanimation of Marxist-Leninist theory in Russia or in any other country. At the same time, it is clear what an

⁵ For more details see Lobanov 2014.

⁶ See Camus 1999.

ideological vacuum can lead to in the present context. Today, Russian society and the authorities are faced with the task of creating a new national idea that can unite people. The basic concepts of this emerging ideology are citizenship, statehood, patriotism, great national culture, and a heroic past. This is now increasingly spoken about by ordinary Russians and government representatives. If such an ideological system is proposed and adopted by the majority of society at the level of both consciousness and practice, it will be very difficult to organize a *rebelión de las masas* in Russian society, and citizens will not have to make a painful choice between social organization and disorganization.⁷

Faith has always been an important spiritual component in the life of both individuals and society. For many centuries, Orthodoxy gave the Russians and the entire Orthodox world a sense of meaning and created the necessary internal energy for social creativity. Atheistic power, the rejection of God and the persecution of faith, sowed confusion among the people and ultimately cultivated new spiritual principles, which later proved to be unviable. Do all social changes necessarily lead to the overthrow of the traditional foundations of society, including its spiritual component? Probably, but this is a universal enigma of modern history, which must be deciphered not only for our people, but for the whole of mankind.

It is from the perspective of the global, universal principles of coexistence (*homo—mensura*) that the world community should also reflect on a larger problem: the human element in how social change is implemented. Are social revolutions humane in their essence? Is this the only way for individuals to ameliorate conditions that do not satisfy their reality? The Russian experience of the twentieth century suggests otherwise. Colossal in its destruction and human suffering, the Civil War in Russia in 1918–22, triggered by the February and October revolutions, was anti-human, as anti-human in its content as the revolutions that gave birth to it. The leader of Russian Bolshevism, Vladimir Lenin, drawing a parallel between the Russian and the French revolutions, asserted, “Take the history of the French Revolution; see what Jacobinism is. This is a struggle for an objective without fear of any decisive plebeian measures, a struggle not in white gloves, a struggle without tenderness, and unafraid to resort to the guillotine” (Cited in Valentinov-Vol`ski 1953). Even more inhuman are the revolutionary upheavals of this time and for good reason. First, the causes of most revolutions of the post-bipolar era are not class, but rather ethno-confessional conflict, which is among the most brutal and implacable forms of confrontation. Second, the arsenal of revolutionary struggle has expanded to such an extent that it can destroy not only the immediate adversary, but also the whole of mankind in the event the situation spirals out of control. Third, the revolutions of the current century have a different format: they quite easily overcome the local framework and expand to entire geographic

⁷ See Ortega y Gasset 2016.

regions, thus broadening the zone of social destruction; the extent of collective violence thus increases exponentially. With all of this in mind, the human population must search for and find alternative (and more humane) methods than revolutionary changes to social life. Early twentieth century strategies have already been deployed in global practice. For example, in politics, the social-democratic tradition was a clear expression of the evolutionary side of social development. In economic life, it was the convergent model; in ideology, it was the paradigm of solidarity and reform. Those states that used these tools of smooth, harmonious social reconstruction eventually turned out to be the winners, in contrast to those who preferred to move toward progress by fits and starts.⁹ Today, Russian society and the Russian state, as well as other young democracies, have the imperative to adhere to the evolutionary path of development and to make maximum use of the mechanisms of self-organization and integration to achieve socially positive results. The lessons of the past should warn against diversion from this chosen course and the danger of succumbing to the temptation to solve problems quickly in one fell swoop.

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The topic of revolution is, of course, vast. It is not exhausted by the aforementioned dimensions of social ties, state power, personality, and the global development of society. Nor does it end with such analysis. That said, one thing is clear: Russia's revolutionary heritage and its meaning for Russians and other peoples endures. Not all questions have been answered, not all experiences have been mastered, and not all lessons have been learned. For various reasons, many elements remain outside of objective, honest, and thorough analysis. Until this is no longer the case, the main demands of our time—the achievement and preservation of social unity, the resolution of civil divisions and conflict, and in turn, security and prosperity for the entire world community—will remain unsatisfied.

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⁹ Originally "by gaps and leaps." See Zedong 1967.

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