

## History and Memory in Russia During the 100-Year Anniversary of the Great Revolution

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All last year, the Russian state kept largely silent about the 100th anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. In its attempt to control historical narratives, and to prevent any excessive ruminations about the pros and cons of revolutions, it has shown itself to be selective about highlighting historical events. It has clearly favored messaging about patriotic examples from the World War II era, while the year 2017 revealed that it would prefer to skip any type of remembrances about 1917. If there is any takeaway from the (semi-)official cues about the jubilee, it is the endeavor to connect contemporary Russia to its Tsarist past rather than the Soviet era.

At the same time, certain non-governmental developments spoke powerfully to other historical perceptions and memories. Examples include the emergence of the citizen-led Immortal Regiment movement and a public investigation by Denis Karagodin into atrocities committed by the 1930s secret police. Even though the state tries to keep its historical “languages” clear and accessible—and geared toward a certain type of self-servicing—such grassroots movements can be seen as attempts by Russians to manifest their own ownership of history. In this regard, another actor of note when it comes to covering historical events and anniversaries is the Russian Orthodox Church, which, unlike the Kremlin, has not been shy about exploring and sharing its views on Russian history. Finally, considering how the government, the public, and the Church handle historicism, we see that, in a broad sense, history in Russia today is really the only available “language” for societal discussions about political issues. This history-oriented political lexicon, however, is different from the West’s, even though many of the same words are used.

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## **The Revolutionary Silence and *Matilda***

Spring 2017 marked the 100-year anniversary of the start of the Russian Revolution (the February Revolution that ended monarchy in Russia). In April and May 1917, political emigrants returned to Russia, including Vladimir Lenin with his plan to radicalize the revolution by replacing democratic goals with socialist ones. Several crises of the post-monarchic Provisional Government in May, June, and July facilitated Alexander Kerensky's rise to the leadership. In July, the Bolshevik party was banned and Lenin went underground, and in September, Russia was proclaimed a republic. Finally, in what at the time was the month of October (November in the calendar we observe today), the Bolsheviks seized power, laying the foundation for their 74-year rule in Russia. Neither of these events were commemorated a hundred years after.

What is interesting – and paradoxical – is the virtual absence today of a discussion about the Russian Revolution in the Russian media and by leading politicians, including President Vladimir Putin. His silence is unusual. Putin is famous for his love of history and he is known to make speeches on historical anniversaries such as the centennial of the beginning of World War I and the anniversary of the death of Prince Vladimir. Even this recent November, discussions were muted among present-day Communists celebrating the jubilee of the Bolsheviks seizing power – a day that used to be a major holiday before Putin moved it to another date.

It seems unusual (if not unprecedented) that such a major event in a country's national history would be so openly ignored by the state. How can there be such little recognition for an epoch of such historical significance? We may compare the general silence not only to the wide celebrations that took place on the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the Russian Revolution in 1967, but also to the centennials of other great revolutions, such as 1876 in America or 1889 in France.

The reason for the silence seems obvious: the revolution does not fit with the current "history politics" promoted by the Russian government. For example, Sergei Naryshkin, chair of the Russian Historical Society and director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, in his [address](#) to the Organizing Committee, pointed to the "import of so-called revolutionary know-how and all sorts of color revolutions" that "always cause blood, death of citizens, destruction, and disaster to the countries that are victims of those experiments." He recognized the "value of stability" that should be "remembered and known in those centers, primarily on the other side of the ocean, where decisions are made on the financing of coups d'état."

The current Russian regime is based on decisively anti-revolutionary ideology, and thus it could not praise the Russian revolution. However, it also could not condemn it.<sup>2</sup> The year 1917 was the foundation of the USSR, the predecessor of, and many observers think a model for, Putin's Russia. Since 2000, the Kremlin has made several symbolic decisions to marry pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary pasts. It re-used Tsarist coats of arms, and the new national anthem is squarely based on the Soviet one. The Russian president's vision of a continuing Russian history from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union to post-Soviet Russia prevents him from devaluing the Soviet period of Russian history and the revolution of 1917 as its foundational myth.

As for the public, the only issue slightly reminding them about the revolution was the discussion last summer in the lead-up to the release of the movie *Matilda*, which depicts a love story between Tsarevich Nicholas (future Tsar Nicholas II) and ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaya. Some of the controversy about this movie originated from State Duma Deputy (and former Crimean prosecutor) Natalia Poklonskaya, who considered it inappropriate because Tsar Nicholas is an Orthodox saint and thus could not be portrayed as having a love affair. Poklonskaya's followers organized "praying stands" (*molitvennye stoyaniya*) against the movie and lobbied regional authorities not to show the film in movie theaters.

### **The Russian Orthodox Church**

There is one important actor of history politics in Russia that has a very definite attitude toward the 1917 revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church. It sees practically everything about 1917 as a calamity and believes that the Bolsheviks made Nicholas II suffer before finally killing him. Nicholas II and his family were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church abroad (ROCOR) in 1981 and by the Moscow Patriarchate in 2000.

In 2017, Orthodox Church hierarchs and activists spread their views about Russian history. The state-supported initiative to build 30 new interactive exhibitions, called "Russia. My History," in 27 regional centers of Russia, reflects this. This movement was presumably begun by Tikhon Shevkunov, an Orthodox priest close to Putin and active in the promotion of his own historical views. The construction of these "museums" has started in many cities, such as in Volgograd, an important place in Russian memory politics, and in Yekaterinburg, where the Russian Orthodox Church considers it a counter-weight to the "too liberal" Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center. As the Church shares its views of Russian history, including openly commenting on the events of 1917, it has somewhat filled the narrative gap left by the state's irresolution on the matter. By late fall 2017, the "museums" began to open their doors to the public, which ignited

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<sup>2</sup> Putin did [ask](#) for preparations to commence for the centennial jubilee but he did so on December 19, 2016, just six weeks before the start of the anniversary events, which is very late for bureaucratic planning.

some heated controversy between historians and exhibit organizers (the Church and state “memory activists”).

### **History as the “Language” of Politics**

In order to fully appreciate the meaning of the Orthodox Church’s expansion into the field of history, we should notice that history in Russia is the only available language nowadays to discuss political issues. Indeed, most of the main words in the world’s political lexicon are misused in Russia. For example the terms “liberalism,” “democracy,” “conservative,” and “elections” mean something quite different in Russia than they do in the West. Historicism thus is a way to speak about political outlooks and affiliations, and as a way to educate younger generations in accordance with top-down ideological templates. Attitudes toward Stalin or about the collapse of the USSR are better markers of a person’s political views than are descriptors such as “liberal” or “conservative.” Often, Russian politicians use historical explanations for their political moves and the Church’s vocal presence in the history domain reflects its growing political influence.

Through such lenses, the state’s attempts to create and maintain a historical canon can be seen as a policy to keep preferred stories unequivocally understandable by everyone. The main period that the state wants to use as a source for political references is the World War II era. If there is anywhere that a top-down historical canon has been created, it has been here. Any new research about this consequential era was made difficult (if not dangerous) due to the passing of the 2014 law that prohibits the “rehabilitation of Nazism.”<sup>3</sup>

In a well-known example of political pressure, there was a huge outcry in March 2016 from patriotic activists when St. Petersburg historian Kirill Alexandrov defended his dissertation that covered World War II and the Russian *Vlasovites* (named after General Vlasov, who collaborated with Germans during World War II). His dissertation was a scholarly examination but some segments of society viewed it as a political statement. His thesis presentation was interrupted by activists in the audience, and after the review council voted to grant Alexandrov his degree, objections were filed at the prosecutor’s office and with the central Attestation Commission (VAK) in Moscow that oversees higher education dissertation councils. After a year of deliberation and a second thesis defense at a military history institute, the VAK overruled the decision to accept Alexandrov in April 2017. It became clear that writing about World War II from divergent angles was toxic.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Ivan Kurilla, “[The Implications of Russia’s Law against the “Rehabilitation of Nazism,”](#) PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 331, August 2014.

## The Grassroots “Language” of Politics

The emergence of the grass-roots Immortal Regiment movement and the attempt by the state to appropriate it, as well as efforts by citizen-investigators to understand the past, stand as key examples of historical entanglement. The Immortal Regiment started as an idea in Tomsk, Siberia, in 2011-12. It grew organically until it consisted of millions of people marching on Victory Day (May 9) in various cities holding portraits of their veteran grandparents. Karagodin [researched and published](#) the names and biographies of the Tomsk secret police (NKVD) executioners who murdered his great-grandfather in 1938. Surprising everyone, state archivists responded to Karagodin’s requests for information and sent him a letter in 2016 that had the actual names of the executioners. Similarly, in the fall of 2016, Memorial, a leading Russian historical and civil rights organization, published a list of the NKVD operatives during the Time of Terror, which prompted people to embark on an initiative of putting plaques with the names, occupations, birth dates, arrest dates, and execution dates of the victims on the buildings and houses where the victims last lived (an initiative called “Last Address”). In these examples, society at the grass-roots level has been attempting to comprehend and acknowledge Russia’s past. There are two possible theoretical approaches that explain these developments.

The first one, suggested by French historians Francois Hartog and Henry Rousso, postulates that the history of the mid-twentieth century represents an “instant past” that is still alive. The tragedies and crimes of that time were so deep that societies are unable to set a distance between the present and that past, thus prolonging the traumatic past, possibly into perpetuity. The Russian state fits this approach. It tries to maintain certain lines of “memory” indefinitely, particularly about World War II and its tragedies. By playing up the heroisms, victories, and fears associated with the Great Patriotic War era, the Kremlin tries to retain the loyalty of the Russian population.

The second approach proceeds from the view of history as the language of politics. The Immortal Regiment movement within such a paradigm can be explained as an attempt by society to use this (only available) language to manifest its ownership of history. One of the major incentives for the participants of the Immortal Regiment marches was the effort to reclaim notions of Russian heroism back from state control and to place it in the domain of family history. This was a genuine political challenge to the state—an attempt by society to own and define its own history, which had been absorbed into the state language of politics and sometimes merely used as a propaganda tool. If we link this approach to the Immortal Regiment, it would be the largest political movement in recent Russian history, even though observers do not usually see it this way. The state perceived this challenge and naturally responded by bureaucratizing the movement and subordinating the initiative to the official language. Not surprisingly, the initiator of the Immortal Regiment, the Tomsk media group TV2, was punished and lost its right to broadcast in 2015. Still, as we see, Russian society has been making efforts to counter the

Kremlin's attempts to turn historical traumas and pride into stage shows for regime mobilization and legitimization.

### **Conclusion: Poklonskaya as the New Face of Historical Politics?**

If the hypothesis is true that history is exceedingly important for the state (because it is the language of politics), it provides us with a different optic to explain the absence of state-sponsored celebrations of the 1917 Russian Revolution. In a society where the public often gets its cues from state representatives or state-associated media, the Kremlin's silence about the centennial is an attempt to prevent wide-ranging discussions and avoid any "politicization" of Russia.

When she was still serving as a Crimean prosecutor, Poklonskaya shocked the public when she appeared in an Immortal Regiment march holding a portrait of Tsar Nicholas II instead of her veteran relative. At first, this looked like an incomprehensible mismatch with the event's idea and point, but with hindsight, her move may have been calculated. Her affection for the Tsar, her struggle against the movie *Matilda*, and her religious fervor tilted sideways any meaningful and diverse societal discussions about the Russian Revolution. Poklonskaya's activities worked to link the Immortal Regiment to the Tsarist past (rather than Soviet) and to shape the march as a religious procession. Combining this with her fight against the movie, we can conclude that the former Crimean procurator accelerated and took the lead of the Church trend to perceive Russia's main genealogy not in the Soviet Union but in the Tsarist era. If anything, this seems to have been the most visible new history language of the jubilee year.