

• Author: [Jan Claas Behrends](#)

[The Russian Revolution is not over](#)



Exactly one hundred years ago, soldiers and citizens marched through the streets of Petrograd and shouted “down with autocracy!” Women protesting the long bread queues that made their lives miserable while the aristocrats feasted in their palaces during Russia’s third year of war joined them. As news from the front was dire, public support for the war, as well as mobilization, began to dwindle. Rumors about the German-born Tsaritsa betrayal helped erode the legitimacy of the ruling house. In February 1917, there was a wide consensus that Nicolas II. needed to retire in order to save Russia and the war effort. His military advisers pressured him to abdicate. While the masses in the capital and across the vast empire celebrated the end of autocracy, few of the elites had thought about what kind of political order would follow three hundred years of Romanov rule. And, it seems, few of those who had pushed for the end of the ancient regime understood that autocracy was in fact the institution that had held the empire together. Russian liberals thought that constitutional rule was inevitable but imperial conquest would continue. After half a year of political struggle, state collapse, and public radicalization, it was the Bolsheviks - i.e. the very fringe of the revolutionary movement - seized power, defended it in Civil War, and held onto it for seven decades. This is the story of 1917.

In the year of its centenary, the Russian Revolution seems like distant history. Marxist ideology and the international communist movement have long returned to the fringe of politics. Few, if any, still dream of world revolution. Putin’s Russia, the successor to Lenin’s revolutionary dictatorship, seems to be embarrassed by (its) revolutionary heritage. Today, Moscow prefers to view itself as a stalwart of order and conservatism. In history, it has long chosen to remember the victory in the Great Patriotic War as the country’s defining moment, not the Bolshevik seizure of power and the ensuing Civil War. So what, if any, is the relevance of 1917 for our understanding of today’s Russia? Why is it still worth to think about it?

Most significantly: because the Russian Revolution is not over. Why? It is not over because none of the pressing issues of 1917 have been resolved. Today the citizens of St. Petersburg would have the same right to go out on Nevsky and shout “down with autocracy” because Russia is still fundamentally ruled in autocratic fashion. Neither the Bolsheviks nor the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev could break this tradition. Vladimir Putin is as much an autocrat as any tsar or gensek since Peter I. And similar to Tsarist Russia, this seems to be the natural order of things: Like in 1917 few Russians have a (realistic) idea what alternative order would look like. Once again, the country is held together by one man and his entourage, with the unresolved question of succession looming large in the political sphere. One hundred years on, Russia has not developed a system to freely elect a new leader nor a mechanism to peacefully pass power from one president to his successor. Autocracy, with all its problems, still looms large.

Russia is also still haunted by its need to modernize and by its backwardness vis-à-vis the West. The Bolsheviks’ attempt at totalitarian modernization of the country left scattered ruins across the post-Soviet landscape but a few industries competitive in the global marketplace. Russia’s aborted attempt to liberalize and diversify its economy in the 1990s hardly reached most regions of the country. Instead, local networks stemming from late socialism, oligarchs and *siloviki* dominate positions of power, and often block creativity and change on a local level. As in late Tsarist times, the local power structure is as oppressive as the national power vertical: it is corrupt and equally suppresses initiatives of the population. Effective self-government - one of the major goals of early 20th century Russian liberals - is still suppressed by the ineffective rule of a

center ready to subdue regional initiative. Combined with a lack of public discussion comparable to late Imperial Russia, corruption and backwardness prove hard to tackle and seem to be here to stay for the foreseeable future.

One of the main issues of 1917 was, of course, the quest of the soldiers and peasants for social justice. After the October Revolution, the elites - nobility, clergy, and bourgeoisie - lost their property and their status overnight. Many also lost their liberty or life during the months of the civil war, and millions had to flee their homeland. Despite this violent and dramatic break with the obvious social injustices of the Tsarist order, neither the USSR nor post-Soviet Russia succeeded in establishing a social equilibrium. Today, Russia is as socially divided as ever: a small group of the super-rich face an impoverished population. And perhaps most crucially, neither the wealthy nor the poor are able to defend their property rights against a state and its rogue agencies often ready to deprive citizens of their entitled property. Thus Russia is not merely a country with a vastly unjust social order, it is also unable to provide legal protection for its citizens. The destruction accomplished in 1917 has never been settled by a new legal framework providing trust and security for those living in Russia.

Yet the historic revolution of 1917 was not exclusively a Russian event. It also made the establishment of nation-states in Finland, Poland and the Baltics possible. In 1917, the Russian Empire collapsed for the first time. At the end of the Civil War, however, the Bolsheviks had re-established control over most of the territory initially lost. In 1991, the USSR also disintegrated along the borders of its republics. The imperial collapses of 1917 and 1991 provided Russia with the opportunity to become a nation-state and accept the independence of its neighbors. Twice, however, this did not happen. Neither after 1917 nor after 1991 was the Russian elite willing to accept the new status quo. Thus, we have a situation since 1917 that Russia is - to a greater or lesser degree - a revisionist power, unwilling to accept the European order and destabilizing other states within the East European realm. Unlike Britain or France, Russia has yet to find a post-imperial national identity. Moscow seems unable to build friendly ties with neighboring countries. Its elites remain stuck in a Petrine mindset dangerous for Europe and their own country because as a nation-state, Russia could leave its imperial projects behind and would finally focus on the well-being of its citizens. A Russia with imperial ambitions, however, will certainly continue to be a source of instability and danger.

As in 1917, the Russia of 2017 is at war. Wars have proven to be transformative experiences for Russia, accelerating political and social change. This was true in 1812, after the Crimean War, World War I or Afghanistan. Still, despite the transformations triggered by war and violence, it is striking to look back and examine the continuities of Russian history. Autocracy, despotism, social injustice and imperial overstretch were problems that led to the Russian Revolution one hundred years ago. It is stunning that a century on, none of these fundamental questions have been solved. Rather, they still impede stability both in Russia itself as well as in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. In retrospect, we may conclude the Russian Revolution of 1917 raised more questions than it has helped solve. Today, its legacy still overshadows all the parts of the former Romanov Empire. The problems we experience are those of a major power in a revolutionary transition.

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