

• Author: [Bartłomiej Gajos](#)

[Reframing Revolutions: Russia's Centenary of 1917](#)



A leading Bolshevik historian once described history as “politics projected into the past.” Russian officials today seem to do their utmost to give these words of Mikhail Pokrovsky a ring of truth. When it comes to the Revolutions of 1917, however, projecting a historical interpretation that enforces the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin’s regime is not so easy. The very word “revolution” has negative and dangerous connotations for the current government and is inseparable from 1917. Neither is downplaying or sanitising these events an option: the centenary of 1917 is too significant and divisive to shrug off.

So far, it seems the Kremlin is eager to portray the revolutionary aspect of 1917 as a tragedy. The keyword for the centennial anniversaries is to be “reconciliation,” as the Ministry of Culture Vladimir Medinsky [stated](#) in his “Five thesis for national reconciliation”. Recently the [same message was reiterated](#) by Putin in his address to Federal Assembly on 1 December 2016. The most visible manifestation of this choice is the “Monument to Reconciliation,” which is to be erected in occupied Crimea, where the Civil War, set off by the events of 1917, ended in 1921.

It is easy to see why the revolutionary aspects of the February and October Revolutions have been dialled down by the regime: They pose two direct ideological challenges. First, since revolutions represent an illegal seizure of power from established rulers, any celebration of their occurrence is far from welcomed by the

Russian government. Ever since the Colored Revolutions erupted across the post-Soviet space, and after the anti-government protests in Russia in 2012, the Russian government has been eager to highlight the negative consequences of revolution. A positive commemoration of revolutionary activity is unthinkable in this context. Secondly, the October *coup* – contrary to “the Great Patriotic War,” which has been successfully adapted from Soviet times into the Russian Federation’s culture of remembrance – is still a bone of internal contention in Russia. It resulted in a Civil War that split society into two main camps: “Whites” and “Reds” – historians and politicians to this day are divided over which was the righteous cause. It leaves the Kremlin in a strange state of indecision on whether it should give an answer to a perennial question of Russian history: was the USSR a continuation of the Russian Empire or its distortion?

So despite clearly set goals of a theme of “reconciliation,” attempts made to reach them are inconsistent, incomplete, and may undermine the current regime’s legitimacy. The most important dilemma, which encompasses the essence of the problem, centers around what the Bolshevik Revolution should be called. It ceased to be “the Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution” (still valid for the Communist Party) in Russia as early as 1995. Today it is not even a public holiday. The Day of National Unity, introduced in January 2005, has replaced the old communist holiday and is celebrated three days earlier. (Tellingly, its introduction coincided with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, one of a few “Colored” revolutions in post-Soviet states that have occurred during Putin’s rule, which have all been strongly opposed by the Kremlin.)

Three new names were proposed to replace the old communist one: “the Great Russian (*Rossijskaya*) Revolution”, “the Revolution 1917 in Russia” and “the Great Russian (*Russkaya*) Revolution”. Each of them represents a competitive interpretation of the events in 1917. Alexander Chubaryan, the head of the National Committee of Russian Historians, presented his proposal at the meeting between academics working on the new history course book for schools and the president in January 2014. According to him, events that took place 1917–1921 should be called “The Great Russian (*Rossijskaya*) Revolution” analogically to the French one that took place in the 18th century. However, that name bears also specific Russian context: in 1909 Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, an anarchist, published his famous book entitled “The Great French Revolution”. So one might assume that it is a revival of an old paradigm describing the French revolution, which was prevalent in the USSR. This is in spite of Yuri Petrov’s claims – a scholar who like Chubaryan is a member of the Committee for Preparation and Conducting Events on the hundredth anniversary of the Revolution 1917 – that this name (in particular a controversial adjective “Great”) emphasizes only a scale and importance of the Revolution in relation to world history, while not recognizing it as a positive event.

The first meeting of that Committee, which includes representatives of politicians, Orthodox priests, journalists, scholars and filmmakers, ended in disagreement. The chair of the Committee Anatoliy Torkunov, the rector of MGIMO, stressed the continuity of Russian statehood and positive aspects of Soviet history such as the victory over fascism; Natalya Narochnickaya, a politician and scholar associated with Russian Orthodox Church, focused on the Bolsheviks’ hatred of religion and reiterated her long-held arguments that only after the victory over the Third Reich the continuity of statehood was re-established. The representative of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, Sergey Stepashin, and former prime-minister and former head of Russian FSB, continued in the same vein [claiming](#) that the Bolsheviks were “conducting the genocide (sic) of Russian religion”.

It seems that divergent opinions were taken into account by Putin long in advance. A decree, issued by him on 19th December 2016 when he established the abovementioned Committee, [uses a neutral phrase](#) “the 1917 revolution in Russia”.

To make this picture even more complicated an [Internet website](#), recently launched by the RIA Novosti and dedicated to the February and October revolution was named “Great Russian (*Russkaya*) Revolution”. This term was used in 1920s by a specific group *Smenovekhovtsy* led by Russian emigre Nikolay Ustrialov. While being in Harbin in 1921 after the failure of admiral Kolchak, whom he had initially supported, Ustrialov compared the new rulers in Russia to a radish, arguing that they are red outside, but white inside. Later, in Prague, he developed his views and claimed that the Soviet regime had saved the Russian state. Thus, Russian “White” emigrants should accept Lenin and return to Russia. Ustrialov’s interpretation, who is recognized as a one of pioneers of National Bolshevism ideology, is consistent with leader of the Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov’s opinion. It also seems to be applicable for at the least part of the opposite site such as Medinsky, for whom the state as such is the greatest value.

In comparison with those opinions, Putin's view on revolutions of 1917 is some kind of mystery. There are hardly any excerpts from his speeches in which he directly addressed those specific events. The most extensive one and the most illustrative dates from 1999, when Putin was prime minister. In his speech [he commented](#) only on the Bolshevik *coup*, pointing out that the October Revolution had happened due to the lack of unity of power [*jedinstvo vlasti*]. Then, as the president of Russia Putin spoke of revolution as a phenomenon.

On the other hand, his notion of the early Bolshevik regime is not difficult to discern. Recently, Putin [explicitly blamed Lenin](#) for the collapse of the USSR, because the latter had recognized equality of Soviet republics and their right to leave the USSR. In 2012 Putin's claims of Bolsheviks' national treason in the First World War led to a fierce debate with Zyuganov. A surprisingly fiery [response](#) from the leader of the Communist Party confirmed a diagnosis that Russian elites as well as society are split into two opposite camps.

The only thing on which they all agree is the fifth thesis presented by Medinsky: a recognition of a mistake made by both sides during the Civil War, namely an appeal to foreign countries for help. In the context of the ongoing conflict with Ukraine and West, one should expect that this issue will be further exploited in order to consolidate Russians around the current regime.

Nevertheless, Kremlin faces a serious challenge of how to present events that are not so ideologically flexible. The fate of Nicholas II is treated by Putin as an admonition of what the lack of unity of power could cause. Therefore, he positions himself as an arbitrator using neutral terms such as "the 1917 revolution in Russia" and avoids explicit answers whether, or to what extent, the continuation of Russian statehood was preserved. Saving the *status quo* and sense of stability is the main goal for the current regime in the face of the upcoming presidential elections in 2018. However, the tactic chosen by Kremlin, may not be enough to satisfy both sides of this internal conflict. At the international level, the centennial anniversaries will be exploited by the Kremlin in order to present a revolution as a tragedy, and a source of destabilization, first of all with reference to the contemporary situation in Ukraine. And a warning to any in Russia who wish to go down that revolutionary path.

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