

It's not a good time to revel in revolution

Putin is whitewashing history to paint himself as the Tsar, writes Konstantin von Eggert

In early July the chairman of the Russian Historical Society addressed a gathering on how the country should mark the centenary of the revolutions of 1917 which toppled the Romanov dynasty and then brought the Bolsheviks to power. The Russian people, he said, should avoid 'radical' assessments of the events of 1917 and rather find in them 'a source of national unity'. 'Radicalism is generally harmful,' he said, adding that 'such momentous events [as those of 1917] cannot be painted in black and white'.

The Russian Historical Society is officially an umbrella organization for Russian historians as in any other country, but in fact it exists to deliver government talking points on ideological matters. Bizarrely, its chairman is not a professional historian but none other than Sergey Naryshkin, director of the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence service.

The key word 'radicalism', uttered by the country's top spy, reveals the depth of unease with which the Kremlin greets the anniversary. Russia's rulers – Soviet people through and through as far as their upbringing, views, tastes and political perceptions are concerned – are deeply worried because 1917 was the year of revolution ... and revolution is something that the Kremlin fears.

Ten years ago, when the country marked the 90th anniversary of 'the year of two revolutions' there were more TV programmes, conferences and books on the subject. There are visibly fewer such activities today. One project that attracted a lot of attention is '1917: Free History', created by journalist Mikhail Zygar. It paints a vast panorama of political, military, cultural and societal events of the revolutionary year with diary entries and letters by hundreds of the era's protagonists presented in the form of imaginary social network posts. Apart from this project – not much.

Paradoxically, the Kremlin's reticence regarding the anniversary of the 1917 February and October revolutions stands as indirect proof of the dates' lasting importance today.

Vladimir Putin's Russia is a country in which history plays a pivotal role in maintaining the legitimacy of the political regime. Putin sees himself as a leader that has given the Russians back their sense of pride. Ever since becoming president in 2000 he has been hard at work at whitewashing the Soviet period of Russian

history and creating an uninterrupted narrative linking the Romanov Empire, the USSR and modern Russia. Not unlike the official French version of history, Putin's Russian story is all about greatness – but with a twist. While France with all its respect for *l'état* still sees itself as the cradle of human rights and dignity, Putin's version of Russian history is all about the glory of the state and the people's perennial readiness to sacrifice themselves for it.

For such a narrative, 1917 is a particularly tricky moment. On the one hand, older people, those who remember the Soviet Union, still see it as 'their' state. For them, 1917 is a date when this state came into being. These people also happen to be the bedrock of Putin's support. They tend to see Vladimir Lenin in a positive light. But for most of these citizens, the revolution is rather a part of their Soviet nostalgia than a call to arms. For a significant minority – mostly the electorate of the Communist Party of Russia – it is still a shining example of social justice at a time when Russia, according to a 2015 report by Credit Suisse, is the most unequal among the world's major economies with the richest 10 per cent owning 87 per cent of all the country's wealth.

On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church, quite justifiably, sees 1917 as the year militant atheism triumphed and nearly destroyed religious life in Russia. At the same time its condemnation of the Communist regime that ruled in Russia for the best half of the 20th century is not wholehearted. Patriarch Kirill regularly calls on the Russians to recognize the 'positive sides' of the Soviet period of history. Despite state atheism, the moral foundations of Soviet society remained rooted in Christianity, he told a visiting delegation of Orthodox clerics from the US in May. The patriarch compared the USSR favourably with the current state of affairs in the West, which in his words is 'losing its Judeo-Christian foundations'.

The Russian church has a particularly delicate balancing act to perform – a significant part of its faithful and clergy consider the events of 1917 a 'Jewish-Masonic plot' to destroy 'Holy Rus'. These people see Lenin and the early revolutionaries as agents of this conspiracy while treating Josef Stalin as a man who reversed the trend, eliminated the Leninist 'old guard' and recreated the Russian empire under a new name.

PUTIN – IN HIS OWN WORDS

Over the course of two years Vladimir Putin granted 12 interviews to the filmmaker Oliver Stone which resulted in a four-hour documentary, 'The Putin Interviews'. The quotations in this section are all taken from the film.

STALIN'S BIRTHMARK

The excessive demonization of Stalin is one of the ways to attack the Soviet Union and Russia, to show that today's Russia bears some birthmarks of Stalinism. So what? What I am saying is that Russia has fundamentally changed. Something has remained in our mentality, but this does not mean we should forget the atrocities committed under Stalinism, the concentration camps, and the extermination of millions of our compatriots.

In 1943, at the height of the battles to beat back German armies in the Second World War, Stalin allowed a few Russian bishops who were lucky enough to survive the purges of the 1920s and 1930s to elect a patriarch and rebuild some church structures under tight government control. This gives an additional boost to his popularity among many Orthodox church-goers who see the Soviet dictator as a 'saviour of Orthodoxy'. Patriarch Kirill, the first in history to be born in and raised in the USSR, cannot ignore this trend in his own church.

As if to complicate things even more, memory of the White movement, which stood up to the Bolsheviks and was defeated by them in 1922, is also controversial. The majority of Russians today are descendants of peasants and workers for whom the revolution undoubtedly provided unprecedented social advancement – if at a great cost. But 'the Whites' – aristocrats, merchants, intelligentsia, rich farmers – are also a vital link to more than a thousand years of Russian history with its cultural richness, military glory and the pomp and ceremony of the Romanov Empire. This makes them also indispensable to the Kremlin.

In the early 2000s Vladimir Putin personally supervised the reunification process of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, founded in the 1920s by emigre bishops. Putin cultivates descendants of White Russian émigré families, including the Romanovs.

The authorities have repatriated to Russia for reburial the remains of those who were forced to spend their lives in emigration – White Russian commander general Anton Denikin, monarchist philosopher Ivan Ilyin, and the writer Ivan Shmelyov, known equally for his idyllic recreations of life under the Tsars in a childhood memoir *The Year of Our Lord* and hair-raising descriptions of the Red Terror in *The Sun of the Dead*.

Putin enjoys seeing himself as an inheritor of the Tsarist legacy. He could not hide his satisfaction when during a pilgrimage last year to the Russian monastery on Mount Athos he was seated on the throne reserved for the emperor. This strategy has partially paid off, with many scions of prominent Russian families supporting the 2014 annexation of the Crimea as a return of Russia's imperial greatness and 'an act of historical justice'.

Adding to the Kremlin's difficulties is a minority – no more than 10 per cent of the population – that refuses to see the 1917 events in a cool and detached way, as the country's spy chief advises. They view it as Russia's greatest tragedy that cost the country tens of millions of victims of the civil war, famine, the Gulag and military adventurism. It may seem strange but this minority gives Putin his biggest headache, because one thing that he studiously avoids is any attempt at moral judgment in history and politics.

To paraphrase Lenin, for the Russian president anything is moral that serves the interests of the Russian state – and his own. Those who condemn the Communist regime as immoral tread on true revolutionary ground. By refusing to accept any equivalence between good and evil, they undermine the Kremlin's cynical narrative of the state interest always trumping the individual to achieve some higher goal – modernize the country, win the war, conquer space.

It is not for nothing that Putin during his 17 years at the top of the power pyramid has denied political representation to this 10 per cent. They are the democratic parties that the Kremlin banned, took over and denied publicity and financing most. No doubt that Putin dislikes leftist and nationalist radicals as well. His attitude to them fluctuates between toleration and sporadic, selective repressions. However, they have one thing in common with the president's world view – they share his worship of the state. The disorganized and dispirited Russian democrats do not. And this makes them especially dangerous in the eyes of the Kremlin.

What could have been the year of an honest national conversation about overcoming the tragic past and charting a course towards the future turned into 12 months of tepid enforcement of an imaginary national unity by the leadership that fears historical truth and likes to construct historical myths.

The year of two revolutions remains contentious and unexplained to the public at large. And as long as it does, the Russian civil war is not over.

Konstantin von Eggert is a commentator and host for TV Døzhd, Russia's independent television station. He was Moscow Bureau Chief for the BBC Russian Service in 2002-2009