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The Wiping Out of History: What Is Left of the Revolutionary Myth?

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Abstract. This article analyzes the process of systematic stamping out in the post-Soviet society of the meaning and value of the revolutionary events of 1917 and their social and political consequences for society which brought about the rise of the totalitarian Soviet state. In the short period of *perestroika*, when attempts to assess the price of the revolution and totalitarian dictatorship were made, Russians by and large stopped short of making a fundamentally different evaluation of the events of 1917 as a radical revolt and the source of national catastrophe. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia's new reformist leadership tried to distance itself from the Soviet system and destroy the ideological basis legitimizing the totalitarian state, starting with the very idea of revolution. But the choice of undertaking economic reforms "from the top" without a profound change of the basic social institutions was stymied by ingrained popular notions and state paternalism.

With Vladimir Putin's ascent to power extrusion of the importance of historical knowledge went hand in hand with the mythologizing of the country's past and the discrediting of the very idea of reforms. Mass consciousness prizes "stability" and "the strong state" (but in their negative form—paranoia and fear of "color revolutions") typical of Putin's rhetoric.

The appearance of the idea of the past as a myth of the continuous and endless existence of the domination system as a kind of mystical body of the "thousand-year-old Russia" concept seems inevitable. In other words, the idea of homogenizing society ("Russia united") and the one-dimensional social structure of the country united only by the authorities (the "state" that is total by nature) is reproduced.

Keywords: post-Soviet society, revolutionary events of 1917, historical knowledge, mythologizing of the Russian past.

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If we accept Hanna Arendt's interpretation of revolution (see [1]) as liberation from the old regime and the founding of a new social order, institutionalization of freedom,¹ we have to admit that the evolution of Russian society in the post-Soviet, post-totalitarian period saw a systematic squeezing out of the semantic and value content of the revolutionary events of 1917. It is important that this was done by politicians of different ideological persuasions. Judging by the number of international scholarly and university conferences held in various countries, interest in the centenary of the Russian Revolution is, if anything, greater outside than inside Russia. Historians, political scientists, and philosophers analyze radical social changes that took place in the world after 1917, the challenges that emerged after the Soviet totalitarian state and the international communist movement came into being. Not so in Russia. The populace is indifferent to the centenary of 1917. Needless to say, seminars, exhibitions of documents are held, TV programs devoted to those events go on air, but they are either box-ticking or propaganda events or else events for a narrow circle of historians. The scale of jubilee events cannot be compared to the massive propaganda campaigns surrounding the celebration of Victory Day on May 9. It would be wrong to say that the jubilee is being hushed up by the authorities, but there is a sense of ambivalence in the attitude of the top leadership, born-again communists and "Orthodox Chekists" who are not exactly sure what to tell "the people."² The need to react to a milestone date does not reflect an inner need of society to understand past events and their consequences; rather, it is a forced reaction of the administration to external circumstances, the need to keep up the appearances of a "cultured country" which has a "great" history that is important to the world community.

The very concept of "revolution" in Putin's Russia evokes ambivalent and mostly negative connotations. Even supporters of the CPRF today prefer to speak about the revolution not as a victory of the proletariat and the triumph of the ideas of Karl Marx but about the achievements and grandeur of the USSR as reincarnation of the Russian Empire. No one—neither democrats nor Putinists nor the nationalist opponents of the regime—wants a repeat of the revolution in any form considering the hardship, chaos, the civil war and other cataclysms associated with it.

This attitude is of recent growth. Until the collapse of the USSR the word "revolution"³ was value-loaded and carried a positive connotation. In the Soviet ideological language the Great October Socialist Revolution (GOSR) was a synonym of a key (or even the central) event in world history, a turning point in the development of humankind (according to historical materialism, comparable to the advent of Christ and the beginning of the Christian era). This interpretation underpinned the legitimacy of Soviet power and was reproduced by all the social institutions (school, propaganda, economic planning, the army, police, social control systems, science, etc.). Of the three Russian revolutions—of 1905, February 1917 and the October coup (referred to by Russian émigrés and foreign historians as the Bolshevik putsch)—only GOSR had absolute significance. The First Russian Revolution (1905) was seen as a rehearsal of the October

Revolution.⁴ The February Revolution—the overthrow of autocracy and promulgation of a republic (which alone can be called “revolution” in the theoretical sense)—was, in the Soviet times, belittled and reduced to a prelude to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.⁵

At the tail end of the Soviet era there were three dates that determined the historical consciousness of Soviet society:⁶

(1) GOSR (the beginning of a new era, the emergence of a fundamentally new messianically oriented society seen by the bulk of its population as an example for other countries and peoples—even in January 2017 it was thought to be all these things by 36% of respondents, compared with 62% in late 1989);⁷

(2) victory in the Second World War (*Great Patriotic War*)—in 1989–2017 it was named the key event by between 73 and 83%. The Second World War was not just a tragedy of Russian history, but also the triumph of the Soviet system while May 9, 1945 gradually became the central symbol of the totalitarian system, proof of its self-sufficiency, justification of its strength relative to other countries and proof of its great power status;

(3) Gagarin’s space flight (58%) is proof of the success of Soviet science and industry, symbol of the most advanced system which could hold its own against the Western capitalist system.

Chernobyl (25%) and the break-up of the USSR (44%) were perceived as the end of the socialist epoch, the collapse of the Soviet system and its ideology.

The significance of other 20th century events varied widely depending on the political and ideological position of the ruling elite: thus Vladimir Putin’s coming to power is today thought to be a very important event by 28% of respondents, the purges of the 1930s by 15%, the Civil War by 13%, the decimation of the peasantry and collectivization by 8%, the abortive August 1991 coup by 7% and the February Revolution by 1–2%.

The attitude of the Soviet authorities to “revolution” as a sociopolitical problem (including the impact of socialist ideas on the Third World) has always been extremely ideological and highly positive. However, when the question of the reform of the Soviet system was raised the official position changed dramatically, and the attitude to all those who came up with plans of “optimizing” the ossified and sclerotic system of communist party rule was openly hostile. Nevertheless, after the death of Joseph Stalin, and after Nikita Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th party congress, already by the late 1950s the romantic image of genuine revolutionaries—selfless idealists, the old Bolsheviks who wished well to the common people became fairly widespread among the intelligentsia.⁸ Feeble attempts to renew or revise Marxism (“a return to the early Marx”) formed the framework of “the ethic of the possible”: illusions of “socialism with a human face” born of the good Lenin—bad Stalin opposition. The culture of the intelligentsia of the 1960s was permeated with allusions and underlying argument with the “revolution,” assessment of its moral price and the search for an answer to the question as to whether the degeneration of the revolution into Stalin’s GULAG was inevitable. Most of the dissidents and those who sympathized with them, although

they did not openly take part in the human rights movement, gave a positive answer to that question believing that communism and violence were inseparable, that the Bolshevik party, in proclaiming “the dictatorship of the proletariat” was the source and model of a state-society which cannot function without terror and mass reprisals. However, no one had an answer as to how to get out of this state. Those who were close to power or were part of the Soviet *nomenklatura* or bureaucracy believed that change and humanization of the communist regime could only happen “from within” the system, and that the only way was gradual transformation into a more human state or even gradual convergence with capitalist democracy. The generation (which eventually initiated *perestroika*) never went beyond this agenda. *Perestroika* brought these differences to the surface, but did not give an insight into the nature and causes of the totalitarian system.

Under Mikhail Gorbachev the traditional Soviet interpretation of “the humane and moral” character of the revolution and Soviet power in every sense came in for a significant revision in the course of public discussions which still influenced public opinion, as witnessed by the opinion poll taken in October 1990 (the last year of Soviet power). Thus, 73% of respondents said that their views on revolution had changed in recent years compared to the end of the Brezhnev era and that they had changed their opinion of the Bolsheviks’ actions at the time. 57% of respondents largely agreed that the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power was necessary (23% thought there was no need for that). However, as if in contradiction to the majority opinion expressed earlier, a significant proportion (30%) believed that the Bolsheviks should not have dissolved the Constitutional Assembly (only 29% approved of Lenin’s actions and 41% could not answer the question). 53% condemned the liquidation of the free press, 73% the execution of the Tsar’s family, 51% the nationalization of private property, 62% the putting down of peasant revolts, etc. 66% said that the liquidation of the bourgeoisie as a class (withdrawal of industrialists and entrepreneurs from the country’s economy) was “a significant loss” for the country. Thus the views that prevailed in the country’s public opinion contradicted the whole Soviet tradition of heroization of the revolution and the proletarian ideology.

That, however, was the short period of *perestroika* and attempts to revise the Soviet past and determine the price of the socialist experiment, the revolution and totalitarian dictatorship. While they condemned certain aspects of the Bolshevik dictatorship, the Russians on the whole did not dare to give a fundamentally different assessment of the events of 1917 as a radical coup that triggered a national catastrophe (the “anthropological catastrophe” that followed, to use Joseph Brodsky’s expression). The illusions of the 60s generation that it was possible to build a “humane socialism” avoiding the extremes of terror and abuses of the totalitarian state excluded in fact a different concept of the revolution (understanding of the nature of the Soviet state), which had a negative impact on the country’s subsequent development. The next generation of Russians reverted to the former views: a 2017 poll similar to the one described above revealed a noticeable leveling of opinions and the differences registered during *perestroika* (see Tables 1, 2).

*Table 1***Do You Believe There Was a Need For...?**

	1990	2017	Difference
ARMED SEIZURE OF POWER BY THE BOLSHEVIKS?			
Yes	57	42	-15
No	23	37	+14
Don't know	20	21	+1
THE BOLSHEVIKS TO DISSOLVE THE CONSTITUTIONAL ASSEMBLY?			
Yes	29	39	+10
No	30	34	+4
Don't know	41	27	-14
THE BOLSHEVIKS TO SHUT DOWN NEWSPAPERS AND BAN OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES?			
Yes	23	28	+5
No	53	46	-7
Don't know	24	26	+2
THE BOLSHEVIKS TO EXECUTE THE TSAR'S FAMILY?			
Yes	13	10	-3
No	73	76	+3
Don't know	14	15	+1
THE BOLSHEVIKS TO NATIONALIZE PRIVATE PROPERTY?			
Yes	24	33	+9
No	51	45	-6
Don't know	25	22	-3
VIOLENT SUPPRESSION OF PEASANT REVOLT BY THE BOLSHEVIKS?			
Yes	11	19	+8
No	62	58	-4
Don't know	27	23	-4

Table 2

Do You Agree That the October Revolution Caused Serious Damage To...?

	1990 October	2017 March	Difference
RUSSIAN CULTURE?			
Yes	69	49	-20
No	17	41	+24
Don't know	14	10	-4
RUSSIAN PEASANTRY?			
Yes	68	48	-20
No	20	42	+22
Don't know	12	10	-2
RELIGION AND CHURCH?			
Yes	85	69	-16
No	6	20	+14
Don't know	9	12	+3
Number of respondents	1047	1600	

Thus, while rejecting the “extremes” of the proletarian dictatorship—the murder of the Tsar and his family, disbanding of the Constitutional Assembly, liquidation of private property, freedom of the press, the war against the peasantry, crack-down on the Church—the Russian population (a large part of it) accepts Soviet power as a necessary and inevitable phase of Russian history. The number of those who approve of the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary seizure of power diminished but is still significant. Polarization of opinions is more diluted and less clear-cut.⁹ Uncritical and largely traditionalist, routine preservation (reproduction) of Soviet stereotypes and perceptions of the character of the revolution and its causes is more characteristic of poorly educated, elderly people, residents of provincial small and medium-sized cities and the rural population untouched by *perestroika* processes. Among the younger respondents—aged 18-24, those who recently finished school or university and other educational establishments—there is a noticeably higher number of don’t-knows, which indirectly reveals a lack of interest in history (and the quality and character of teaching).

Russia’s new leadership which came to power after the collapse of the USSR was going out of its way to distance itself from the Soviet system and to destroy the ideological basis underpinning the legitimacy of the totalitarian state, above all the very idea of revolution. The reformers tried to establish a connection between post-Soviet Russia and the country’s pre-revolutionary development as if to erase the Soviet period from history. Thereby they tried to prove that there

could be continuity between the pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Russia stressing the importance of the evolutionary way of continuing a peaceful modernization that was taking place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and not a forced (violent totalitarian, Stalinist) modernization to turn Russia into a “normal European country” similar to other states in Central and Eastern Europe which had already made such a pivot. However, “modernization from the top” (determined institutional reforms forcibly conducted by the authorities in spite of the open resistance of conservative-minded remnants of the party and Soviet *nomenklatura*, the regional bureaucracy and the inertia of the main mass of the population) was chosen as the model for political movement in the first half of the 1990s.¹⁰ The commitment to economic reform without a profound change of basic social institutions—the political police, the courts, the law enforcement bodies, mass education, etc. was checked by the stable reproduction by them of mass perception and the expectations the populace pinned on state paternalism.

One sign that the very idea of revolution was discredited in the post-Soviet period was the radical change of Russian public attitude to the events of August 1991, the failure of the GKChP coup followed by the liquidation of the union power institutions and total destruction of the USSR. The victory over the coup-makers who tried to stage a communist comeback was for a while perceived as the last, this time democratic, anti-Soviet revolution. It was seen as an analog of “velvet” revolutions in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe (or continued processes of de-communization) putting an end to the long period of totalitarianism and utopian transformations of society and man. However, the 1991 romantic aura disappeared two or three years later (after a showdown between the Yeltsin government and the post-Soviet Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR and shooting at the White House in 1993). Only 10% of respondents stubbornly continued to refer to the victory of Yeltsin’s supporters over the coup-makers as a “democratic revolution” in spite of Putin’s demagoguery, denunciation of the “wild 1990s” and his description of the breakup of the USSR as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” Twenty-five years later, in 2016, half of the respondents no longer remembered or could answer the question what happened in August 1991. During the Putin rule these events lost all meaning turning into an insignificant “episode of power struggle” [7, p. 253]. 90% of young people know nothing about what would seem to be a turning point in Russia’s recent history. This is probably the most striking fact.

Three Revolutions: Selectiveness of Rituals of State Identity

The anniversary of the GOSR was the main national holiday in the USSR (the holiday was established on November 7, 1918 and since 1927 November 7 and 8 were proclaimed to be official holidays). Every year on November 7 a military parade was held in Moscow’s Red Square (big cities and regional centers held their own smaller parades) and all the cities saw mass demonstrations and rallies organized by the party and Soviet leadership and in the evening there were

gala concerts, fireworks, street parties and feasts. With the demise of Soviet power these rituals were discontinued, the last military parade was held on November 7, 1990. After the failure of the August 1991 coup the CPSU was banned, November 7 ceased to be a national holiday; from 1992 only November 7 was a non-working day. Five years later (in 1996), under Yeltsin, who faced Communist resistance in parliament, renamed the holiday The Day of Accord and Reconciliation.¹¹ In late December 2004 Putin cancelled that holiday as well and November 7 became an ordinary working day. The Day of Popular Unity became a day off. It was close in time to the holiday of the Holy Mother of God of Kazan marked by the Russian Orthodox Church on November 4 in memory of the “liberation of the Moscow Kremlin from the Poles in 1612” (historians do not confirm this date).

Judging from our sociological surveys, the last official celebration of November 7, 1990 took place “in a pretty much the same way as in the former years” (51% of respondents thought so). Although the cancelation of the holiday first by Yeltsin and then finally by Putin met with a mixed reaction among the grassroots, a negative attitude to this state ceremony took hold rather quickly.

Those who opposed the cancelation argued that “you cannot erase from popular consciousness the memory of such a great event.” These sentiments endured for several more years: even in October 2011 the ratio of those who were for and against the cancelation of the holiday was 50:30. But what is done cannot be undone: the status of the main state identity ritual was taken over by Victory Day, May 9. Although the memories of the GOSR survive—practically two-thirds of the population (63% in November 2011) remember it. However, fewer people intended to mark it in the same way as in the former years: 17-18% in 2010-2012 and 12% in 2014-2016. In social terms these are mainly elderly people, hard core supporters of the Communist Party, Stalinists, the vanishing generation of Soviet people (see Tables 21.12.1 and 21.12.2 in [5, p. 167]).¹²

The centenary of the February 1917 Revolution (collapse of the autocracy) passed almost unnoticed. The Kremlin bosses were tardy in reacting to this date. The propaganda machine took a long time getting started tossing into the public space various versions of the distant past: from a masonic plot against the Tsar and betrayal of the elites to clerical bemoaning of the holy martyr-Tsar and passion-bearer. The collapse of the empire was attributed to the sins of the educated society, the atheism of the rootless intelligentsia, Western influence and general moral degradation. Rare pronouncements by liberal historians and political philosophers treated the Tsar’s abdication either as the “dawn of Russian democracy” or as the start of a chain reaction that led to social “chaos” and national tragedy (see [9]; see also the remark by Aleksey Kara-Murza to the effect that “the thesis that ‘the liberals destroyed Russia’ was shared by the conservatives who tried to clear themselves of the accusation of bringing about the Russian catastrophe and by the Bolsheviks” [10, p. 47]). As with their opponents from the Russian conservative camp, the liberals tended to idealize and condone those they sympathized with (the Constitutional Democrats, Octobrists) exaggerating their virtues and demonize the enemy (monarchists, Socialist Revolutionaries

and Bolsheviks). The more moderate historians and journalists said that the Russian state was doomed because of its inability to initiate reforms in time and to adapt to the changes happening in the world, the Tsar’s weakness, incompetence and political dilettantism, inability to grasp the logic of the collapse of the empire, the inevitable erosion of patriotism as the imperialist war was being lost, the weariness of society, the consequences of the social problems that were not addressed, etc. However, both camps failed to answer the key questions: why was it that for all the merits of those who came to power, the mass euphoria and the intoxication with the proclaimed freedom and the introduction of republican rule the victors in the February Revolution proved to be worthless as politicians and easily surrendered power to the Bolsheviks? On the whole an inclusive discussion of the question did not take place.

Therefore, the popular consciousness (public opinion monitored by the Levada Center) embraced what were basically Soviet interpretations of the February Revolution which started the October Revolution (see Table 3).

Table 3

Which of the Following Points of View on the February 1917 Revolution Do You Share Most?

	2017 January
The February Revolution paved the way for Russia’s bourgeois-democratic development, for making the country like other European states.	21
The February Revolution in itself had no significance, it was merely the first, preliminary stage of the October Revolution	45
Don’t know	35

Still under Yeltsin, who began searching for a Russian “national idea” that would replace Communist ideology, there was in society and the public space a noticeable growth of the number of those who after the collapse of the USSR tried to attribute the country’s degradation to the collapse of the monarchy, who then slightly outnumbered the respondents who adhered to the standard Soviet view that the overthrow of the Tsar was a progressive event. This is indirectly confirmed by the growing number of people who disapprove of the overthrow of the autocracy, by the growing sympathy for the last Tsar who was seen as an innocent victim and martyr at the hands of the revolution (see Table 4). However, the watering down of the Soviet ideological clichés did not indicate a pivot toward pro-Western democratic ideas. By now the problem of choosing the direction of national development hardly commands any interest among ordinary people for whom the main national idea remains “stability” (renunciation of change and social upheavals) and the current system is increasingly seen as the best compared to the Soviet past or Western-style democracy.

Table 4

The Russian Emperor Nicholas II Abdicated on March 5 (March 2 Old Style) 1917. Opinions about This Event That Put an End to the Russian Monarchy Vary. Which of the Following Points of View Would You Rather Agree With?

	1997 III	2012 II	2017 III
The collapse of the monarchy was a progressive step in the country's development	16	9	13
The collapse of the monarchy resulted in Russia losing its national and state grandeur	23	25	21
The positive and negative consequences of the collapse of the monarchy balance each other	19	18	23
Never thought about it	29	36	32
Don't know	14	12	11
N = 1600.			

Popular Ideas about the Causes of the Revolution

Putin's propaganda made more thorough preparations for the centenary of the October Revolution. One can discern two mutually exclusive opinions about the consequences of the October Revolution: one is the routine version of the tail end of the Soviet era, a kind of paraphrase of the character of Russian modernization—"the revolution ushered in a new era in Russian history" (a somewhat diluted version has it that "it gave a push to the socioeconomic development of the backward and poor Tsarist Russia"). In contrast to this position the émigrés who fled Russia after the Civil War and the terror that accompanied it, a different position was accepted by the enemies of the Soviet power of all ideological persuasions. It boiled down to this: the revolution is a catastrophe (or in a more moderate interpretation, "the revolution disrupted the country's normal evolution" or was a serious "brake on it") (see Table 5). The 2:1 ratio of opinions today shows a higher share of the positive attitude to the revolution (especially in the provinces, in the inert communities of ill-educated poor people). The transformation crisis of the 1990s and falling living standards had a noticeable impact on the preservation of the Soviet interpretation of the Revolution (the struggle of the exploited classes) thus bolstering state-paternalist attitudes.

Opinion surveys reveal several understandings or parallel versions of the events of the time that hardly conflict with one another. On the one hand, we see a policy of destruction of the Soviet ideology whose central idea is that the "Great October Socialist Revolution" ushered in a new era in human history (the revolution marked a fundamental pivot of history, because it put an end to exploitation of man by man and opened up an opportunity for building a classless society). On

Table 5

What Did the October Revolution Bring to the Peoples of Russia?

1997-2017	97 X	'01 XI	'02 X	'03 X	'04 X	'05 X	'06 X	'07 X	'09 X	'10 X	'11 X	'17 III
Ushered in a new era in the history of Russia's peoples	23	27	27	20	30	26	30	24	28	29	25	25
Gave a push to their social and economic development	26	32	33	32	27	31	28	31	29	29	27	36
Slowed down their development	19	18	18	19	16	16	16	17	16	14	19	21
Became a catastrophe for them	15	12	9	14	14	15	9	9	10	9	8	6
Don't know	17	11	13	15	13	13	17	19	17	19	21	12
The sum of positive responses	49	59	60	52	57	57	58	55	57	58	52	61
The sum of negative responses	34	30	27	33	30	31	25	26	26	23	27	27
N = 1600.												

the other hand, the revolution is seen as a catastrophe or a tectonic shift in history, in the entire previous development of the country (see Table 6). The latter opinion is shared by both extreme conservative nationalists (Orthodox and monarchy fundamentalists) and by liberals who advocate gradual Westernization of Russia and see the Bolshevik victory as a historical pivot, as a counter-modernization historical pivot.

The disintegration of the ideological structure of perceptions of the revolutionary process was accompanied by growing contradictions in the perception of the causes and motives of the revolution. Mass consciousness is moving away from the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of Revolution (as liberation from exploitation) toward the ideas of "stability" and "the strong state" (but in the negative form, paranoia and fear of the "color revolutions" and a warning that weak power is the source and cause of all Russian troubles, which is reflected in public

Table 6

What, in Your Opinion, Was the Main Cause of the October Revolution
(multiple choice; ranged against March 2017)

	1990 October	1997 October	2001 November	2007 October	2011 October	2017 March
The plight of the working people	66	57	60	57	53	50
Weak government	36	40	39	35	34	45
Conspiracy of the enemies of the Russian people	6	11	11	13	12	20
Extremism of political adventurers	16	14	15	17	15	19
Spontaneous aggression of the mob	15	15	14	12	15	15
Other	2	1	<1	1	2	2
Don't know	12	11	9	9	12	7

opinion)¹³ characteristic of Putin's rhetoric. Three main versions have clearly emerged: *conservative*—irresponsible demagogues and political adventurers, i.e., the liberals and revolutionaries, destroyed the great state; *the Soviet view*—the people ran out of patience by the end of the imperialist war, the exploited classes arose and Lenin founded the first socialist state of workers and peasants in history;¹⁴ the third view which is expressed more and more clearly holds that it was *an external geopolitical conspiracy* (the USA, Germany, Great Britain and other Western powers which were afraid of a strong and great Russia).

The most popular version explaining the “revolution” (the overthrow of autocracy and seizure of power by the Bolsheviks) boils down to the “plight of the working people,” it is the most common explanation of what happened.¹⁵ This explanation owes its strength not only to the fact that it proceeds from the habitual view of man, but also to the fact that it projects the current situation—the dissatisfaction over paternalistic expectations from the Russian leadership's social policy—onto the past. Paternalism is the underpinning of legitimacy in the post-socialist society. The mass of the population was used to this explanation of the revolution. But it is not enough to reduce interpretation to the inertia of ideological brainwashing, conservative socialization of whole generations of Soviet people if we are to understand the underlying mechanisms of restoration in the present of the cultured strata of totalitarian society. More complicated and unrecognized causes lie in the fact that *Russian society preserves and reproduces itself as a poor society or a society of poor people*. Economic determinism (and that is all that has remained of Marxism in the post-Soviet consciousness) turns out to be one of the key principles in the perception of human nature, it was the

ideological motto of reforms conducted by Yegor Gaydar (one has to introduce a market economy and democracy, rule-of-law state and human rights and freedoms will automatically follow). Soviet propaganda, education, arts and literature practically scratched out everything that had to do with the theme of freedom raised by the February Revolution and the state of society during that short period. Soviet and post-Soviet school textbooks date the beginning of the revolution from April 1917 when Lenin arrived in Petrograd, and not from the abdication of Nicholas II. Therefore popular “memory” does not have a single vestige of the feelings that were most strongly manifested in February 1917: mass euphoria, a sense of the new times, a new life that was in store for the country. In contrast, the priorities of materialistic needs reflect the hierarchy of ideas about the values embraced by Russians today: a guaranteed level of consumption (“Goulash socialism,” to use a Hungarian term) is far more important for them than protection from arbitrary rule.

However, this main explanation of the revolution is losing ground from year to year (the percentage of those who share these views dropped from 66 to 50%). At the same time the versions that are being stressed and assiduously promoted by the present-day regime and that were at Soviet time no more than secondary additions¹⁶ to the basic version: “weak government,” “weak power” (up from 36 to 45% during the past quarter century; these causes are mentioned almost as frequently as “class”) and “conspiracy of the enemies of the Russian people” (up from 6 to 20%) are gaining ground. The first of these motives reflects the current leadership’s fear (real or feigned, used only to control the opposition) of the “color revolutions.” It is of fairly recent growth, a product of Putin’s rule, the era of “stability” and the struggle against extremism, etc.¹⁷ The second version is very old in terms of origin (it appeared among monarchists and the Black Hundred back in the early 20th century and prevailed among Russian émigrés after the 1917 Revolution); today these interpretations of the present and past ceased to be the exclusive ideological resource of the political fringe, the Russian conservatives and nationalists, and have gradually become part of mainstream popular mentality.

Merging together different versions, including optional ones—political adventurism, the spontaneous aggression of the masses, etc., establish and support a negative attitude to revolution as chaos, time of troubles, disorganization, duping of the masses and destabilization reminding ordinary people of the hardships of the transformation crisis of the 1990s and the concomitant processes of social anomie as well as Maidan and the Ukrainian “government coup.” This suggests that the people should rally around the government to avoid cataclysms and common misfortunes. It provides a justification of the policy of discrediting liberals, human rights and other non-governmental organizations not under the Kremlin’s control, a justification of vote-rigging, tightened censorship of the media and the Internet, the promotion of the view that “a strong arm” policy is needed capable of neutralizing the “spontaneous aggression of the mob” and protecting the law-abiding majority against the “extremism of political adventurers,” “the fifth column,” subversive activities of “foreign agents,” “export of democracy,”

called upon to stop the “conspiracy of the enemies of the Russian people” and thus avoid past common woes.¹⁸

These ideas, that agenda being imposed on society today, preserve the paternalistic legitimacy of power (combining both Soviet and post-Soviet components), justify the need for preventive reprisals against disloyal or “hostile” groups. The ideology of “stability” in the country is asserted on behalf of the majority of the population which sees itself as a victim of post-*perestroika* history and, when looking at the past, is identified with the poorest classes in pre-revolutionary Russia. Demagogic pledges of constant sympathy and compassion for the downtrodden, dispossessed, suffering poorest strata of the population act as a mechanism of projecting the “difficult situation of revolutionary crisis” onto themselves today, a condition of self-pity and therefore a prerequisite for understanding the current situation and interpretation of the past. That this policy is aimed at protecting “the majority” (while violence is allegedly used mainly against the “minority” or some isolated social groups that are socially alien to the majority, fellow travelers, *kulaks* and parasitic elements) diminished the moral sense that state terror was inadmissible, diminished anxiety and a guarded attitude to the brutality of the state and blunted the perception of the crimes of the Soviet regime. Revolutionary terror, which morphed from a state of emergency into permanent institutions of mass coercion thus acquired an instrumental character (the lesser evil, lower costs) dehumanizing the very image of the victim and pushing out of consciousness the sense and moral and psychological discomfort of the knowledge about repressions and annihilation of people. Insensitivity with regard to the very practice of total institutional violence makes it easier for the population to identify itself with the state leaving as a part of the past only those meanings that make it a history of the Great State. History (in its Russian version) can only be the history of a great power. Any other approach to the past is declared to be denigration or falsification of the Motherland’s heroic history.¹⁹

With Vladimir Putin’s advent to power the policy of rationalizing the past as the precondition of society’s understanding of itself (what have we become? Where are the roots and causes of repeated abortive modernizations of the country?) was totally paralyzed. The squeezing out of the importance of historical knowledge went hand-in-hand with mythologization of the country’s past and with the discrediting of the idea of reforms, the foisting on the population of the idea that democracy is alien to Russia’s spiritual traditions because Russia has a different path, that the dreams of becoming a “normal,” European country like other countries which have already completed the transition from totalitarianism to the modern rule-of-law state is an illusion. At the same time, the idea has been gaining ground in mass consciousness that the Soviet period was not an “anomaly” or a tragic disruption of Russian history but an organic continuation of its traditional development. It is not only about the strength of conformist opinions (“if the Bolsheviks had lost” power would anyway have been seized by other adventurers and dictators who could be much worse than Lenin—these arguments are used by between a quarter and a third of all respondents to justify their

unprincipled attitude; see Table 7), but about the fact that the number of those who support the democratic perspective (today!) is decreasing.²⁰ It is the hopelessness and lack of faith in the possibility of changing life for the better characteristic of present-day Russian society that leads people to recognize that even if the Bolsheviks had not remained in power, nothing good would have come out of it considering the total collapse of the state: “the Romanovs would have been back” or “Russia as a country would have fallen apart and ceased to exist,” etc.

Let us stress the disparities in the answers to this question, which attest to a lack of intellectual influence on public consciousness: historians, philosophers whose authoritative opinions could set the tone for the assessment of key events of the distant path. The Putin regime can survive only in a context of constant downgrading of the intellectual level of the population, censorship of the public space, the media and denial of the possibility of public debates and free competition among political parties. Another important factor is the preservation (like in the Soviet times) of near-total dependence of the social sciences on the state, on fluctuations of the political interests of the ruling elite and on the ideological situation. At best academic and university science is isolated from society (perhaps self-isolation and opportunism of historians, sociologists and lawyers would be a more accurate description) and at worst scholars deliberately opt for servility and put themselves in the service of the regime. In the absence of this work routine ideas formed in the preceding periods come to the surface.

That is why almost half of the Russians (48%) believe today that the October Revolution was inevitable and had played a positive role in Russian history, with about a third of respondents (31-32%) disagreeing and one in every five having no answer. However, when asked if the revolution was “legitimate” respondents reverse their opinions: only 35% see the Bolsheviks’ coming to power as an entirely legitimate process, 45% consider their seizure of power to be “illegal.” Opinion

Table 7

**What Would Have Happened in Our Country If the Bolsheviks
Had Failed to Seize/Hold Power in 1917?**

	2002 October	2017 March
The Romanov monarchy would have been restored	22	19
Power would have been seized by some other extremists and adventurers who would have inflicted even more suffering on the people	26	32
The country would have followed the path of a Western-style democracy	22	16
Russia would have disintegrated and lost its independence	14	14
Don't know	16	11
Number of respondents	1600	1600

polls reveal even greater ambivalence and contradictions of public opinion if the question is put in this way: is the Soviet system (Stalinism, the Khrushchev era, the Brezhnev era) that came into being after Lenin's death a continuation of the revolution or is it a deviation from its principles and ideals? In September 1990 only 16% of respondents considered the Soviet system to be a continuation and development of the tasks and goals set by the Bolsheviks under Lenin; in March 2017 the share of such answers rose to 30%. An alternative opinion—the practice of the Soviet state has “departed, deviated from the ideals of the revolution”—was expressed by 65% in 1990 and only 43% in 2017. The number of “don't knows” increased by one and a half times from 19 to 27%. Analytically, it is impossible to tell whether these answers have more to do with unflinching faith in the possibility of building “socialism with a human face” (even if only in the negative form as refusal to recognize as “normal” for the communist system the practices of terror, universal coercion, abiding poverty of the population) or, on the contrary, the conclusion based on the analysis of the entire experience of the implemented “utopia,” namely, logical consequences of the revolution can only be universal coercion, repressive institutions, work and poverty as described by Andrey Platonov in *The Foundation Pit*. The same thoughts can be in the same head of the respondent without the respondent being aware of their logical incompatibility, something an intellectual would be aware of. Disappointment with the results of the country's 70-year development needs not go hand-in-hand with the discarding of old clichés and attitudes. Inertia is a key characteristic of mass consciousness in a stagnant society.

This feature of public opinion appears to be more important than the ideological content of the faith in socialism. The persisting double-think (both in the mass attitude to the Revolution, to the Soviet past in general and the present Putin regime) is a consequence of society's inability to make a moral and social assessment of the Soviet state. Why this is so is a separate problem. *Forced* (like in any totalitarian or unfree society) *identification of the populace with power* prevents people from admitting the criminal nature of the Soviet system because such an admission would totally destroy their collective identity and the established forms of collective self-identification. It is not even allowed to admit that Stalin was “a state criminal” although a majority (even though it is shrinking from year to year) is quite conscious of the fact that the state murdered, starved to death and stripped of their rights and livelihoods, denied choice of the place of residence, job and family to tens of millions of people. The apparent absurdity of the situation lies in the fact that the groups that express the greatest solidarity with such a state are precisely those which in the past suffered the most from reprisals and arbitrary rule, violence and humiliation, and that is the poor and depressed periphery (rural areas, small towns, people with a low level of education and accordingly incomes, whose parents were peasants or workers). They ought to know better than others how in the 1920s–1930s grain, food and farming implements, cattle and other property were requisitioned from peasants, how crippling taxes were imposed in the 1950s–1960s, and yet it is elderly people with a

rural background who say more often that the revolution brought more good than harm, that it was “inevitable” (even if it was “illegal”!).

If we turn to the analysis of social-demographic differences in the respondents’ answers to diagnostic questions about the past, the first thing that leaps out is the high share of “don’t knows” who know nothing about the country’s history or are indifferent to it among young people (27-33% on average, i.e., twice the corresponding figures for elderly people: 14-17%). Second, the higher share of anti-Soviet and negative opinions about the consequences of the revolution, illegality of the Bolshevik coup (and illegitimacy of the post-revolutionary social order) or denial of the “historical inevitability” of the Revolution by people who are better educated, have a higher social status (executives, entrepreneurs), are economically better off, Muscovites, inhabitants of major cities where discontent with the incumbent government is more pronounced than in other social environments. Such an attitude to the revolution among a fairly diffuse or amorphous social group during *perestroika* was essential for the support of the changes that were initiated (Gorbachev’s *perestroika* followed by Yeltsin’s reforms) because a negative attitude to the Soviet past guaranteed a positive view of Western models of an open market economy, rule-of-law state and democracy. Now that body of opinion has shrunk to 25-30%. Pro-Soviet views and perceptions—hangovers of the totalitarian ideology—persist (are reproduced) in the social groups that have minimal access to the institutional resources of culture and education, have extremely limited possibilities of intellectual reflection, memory—all that enables one to resist the pressure of the authoritarian state. These are peripheral social strata and groups in every sense. They differ substantially (functionally and culturally) from the center (the population of the capital, megalopolises where there is not only a maximum concentration of symbolic and cultural resources, the highest density of information and communication networks, education, incomes and where therefore the capacity for receiving the new and the high potential of change is assumed). The prolonged period of state coercion in rural areas, small towns, urban townships during collectivization, the Second World War, and post-war restoration changed the mass consciousness of the greater part of the country’s population turning collective farms and factories into forms of serfdom and the people into serfs who have no passports and hence have no freedom of movement. This state had a far more destructive impact on the social environments with a low level of education untouched by the pluralistic modern culture (with its immunity and inner resistance to violence). In these social environments the combination of administrative, fiscal, police and ideological coercion was more likely to crush the rigid traditional way of life. Because the bulk of the Russian population comes from the Soviet rural areas and small towns ravaged by collectivization and the war (more than 80% are first- or second-generation city dwellers) the powerful impact of such violence and the corresponding readiness to adapt to the repressive totalitarian state can be understood.²¹ Particular properties of this mentality (collective hostages, passivity, fear, renunciation of civil activism and responsibility, acceptance of poverty and a low level

of aspirations, the prevalence of the strategy of physical survival) are relevant to this day.²² Total and forced identification with the state destroyed not only historical memory of state crimes but any awareness of the events of the past and present, the very idea of personal dignity and the value of the human being, destroyed the ability to independently assess what is taking place. The traumas of the past have left only scars, taboos or unconsciously manifested reluctance to touch upon or raise certain “dangerous” topics and questions. Therefore the historical “unconsciousness” of young people²³ who grew up in a situation of severed links with the past and of an approaching historical chasm, their indifference to the past and scant knowledge can be seen as a logical reaction to the practices of coercive ideological socialization and mental disciplining of society in the Soviet and post-Soviet times. It is hard to call it “normal.” Nor can one deny the effectiveness of such collective norms of social control. “Forgetting everything” turns out to be a more appropriate social behavior (it is easier and more comfortable in the school environment or under information pressure) than rationally reappraising the past. Therefore in opinion polls we get proof of a strange duality of mass consciousness: a combination of the reproduction of old clichés and, at the same time, their dilution, erosion but not rational analysis. This indicates weak potential for possible sociopolitical change, for a new “revolution” or at least for protest against the Putin regime.

Lenin as Indicator of the Processes of Desacralization of the Revolution

Let us turn to the dynamics of the changes using as the operational marker symbolic names associated in the Russian popular consciousness with various historical epochs (see Table 8).

As seen from Table 8, Lenin’s status dropped more than that of any other figure (above all as a revolutionary, Bolshevik and Marxist theoretician, author of the doctrine of “dictatorship of the proletariat,” initiator of Red Terror and the Civil War, later as the leader of the world’s first proletarian state associated by the present generation mainly with the post-war period, the authority of one of the two superpowers created by Lenin). Lenin dropped from first place (72% in the final years of Soviet power to fourth place (32%). All the former Soviet idols—Marx, Engels and still earlier forgotten figures of the revolution and the Civil War in Russia famous in the 1930s who were forcibly erased from memory during the Stalin purges and reprisals—sank into oblivion. The attempts to put in their place Tsar Peter I (who forced European ways on the traditional, almost Byzantine Russia) undertaken by Russian liberals in the early years of institutional reforms, as mentioned above, quickly petered out—the peak of Peter I’s symbolic significance, of imposing a “revolution from the top” falls on the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s. Along with the imperial names that occupied top places in the national pantheon the symbols of Russian culture (Pushkin), Russian science and education (Lomonosov) as well as famous military commanders (Suvorov, Zhukov,

Table 8

Please Name Ten of the Most Outstanding Personalities of All Times and Peoples
 (% of the number of references, an open question, data ranged against the latest poll; only those names mentioned at least by 12% of respondents are included)

	1989	1994	1999	2003	2008	2012	2017
1. I. Stalin	12	20	35	40	36	42	38
2. V. Putin	—	—	—	21	32	22	34
3. A. Pushkin	25	23	42	39	47	29	34
4. V. Lenin	72	34	42	43	34	37	32
5. Peter I	38	41	45	43	37	37	29
6. Yu. Gagarin	15	8	26	33	25	20	20
7. L. Tolstoy	13	8	12	12	14	24	12
8. G. Zhukov	19	14	20	22	23	15	12

Kutuzov and others) were shoved into the background. The political and moral authorities of the times of *perestroika* (Gorbachev, Sakharov) were also quickly forgotten. The only figure whose symbolic capital kept growing was Stalin who in the early years was rarely mentioned as one of the most important figures of the past. After Putin came to power a quiet but steady re-Stalinization began. And by 2012 Stalin topped the list of the most significant great people of Russia competing only with Putin. Needless to say we are talking not about the real historical personality of Stalin but about the reworking of the “great power” myth: Stalin won the Second World War, and he was an “effective manager” whose harsh methods ensured rapid industrialization of an agrarian and backward Russia.

Not only the rankings of the names of famous past historical figures but also the attitude to the actors in the revolutionary epoch and their public assessment changed (see Tables 9 and 10). Sympathy for all the revolutionaries (except Stalin) diminished,²⁴ and, on the contrary, antipathy and negative assessments of their roles (again except Stalin) increased. During the *perestroika* years Nikolay Bukharin, Lev Trotsky and other key figures of the revolution, the Civil War and the establishment of Soviet power were in a way seen as a moderate socialist alternative to Stalin’s terror and industrialization at the expense of the peasantry, but they lost all their appeal along with the idea of socialism. Not only Lenin but they too are ranked higher only in the milieu of elderly people who ideologically matured in the mid-1960s when the idea of “socialism with a human face” which died together with the suppressed “Prague Spring” was popular among the educated bureaucrats. The same happened not only with Feliks Dzerzhinsky,²⁵ but also, according to other data and materials, with Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Vasily Blyukher, Iona Yakir and other Red Army commanders in the Civil War who were executed in the 1930s. Initially society was clearly sympathetic toward them, but

Table 9

Which Revolutionary Has Your Greatest Sympathy (answers ranged against the first probe)

	1990 October	1997 October	2002 October	2007 October	2017 March
V. Lenin	67	28	36	27	26
F. Dzerzhinsky	45	25	28	21	16
N. Bukharin	21	13	9	7	10
L. Trotsky	15	5	8	4	4
N. Makhno	8	3	4	6	2
I. Stalin	8	15	22	15	24
Nicholas II	4	17	18	11	16
A. Kerensky	3	4	4	3	2
A. Kolchak	3	8	8	7	16
P. Milyukov	2	1	1	1	2
Don't know	12	26	19	37	38
N = 1600.					

later it turned its back on them as knowledge about their role in punitive actions against peasant revolts in the 1920s spread.

During the past 27 years—from 1990 until 2017—the share of “don’t knows” when it comes to assessing revolutionary figures increased noticeably (from 12 and 25 to 38-39%). The reason is not only that the new generation has come along which is indifferent to the old ideological disputes about the catastrophe of 1917, but also due to the change of emphasis in the ideological work of reproductive institutions (in secondary schools and universities) and the Kremlin propaganda and docile media. These changes may be called “a conservative turn” which went a long way to neutralize and suppress the former Soviet standards of legitimization of power (revolution and socialism) and paved the way for the restoration of imperial and anti-revolutionary ideas borrowed from the anti-Bolshevik milieu. That this policy is effective will be seen from the growing sympathy for Nicholas II and the generals who led the anti-Bolshevik movement after the Revolution. The diagnostic name here turned out to be admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Army which fought against Soviet power, who was executed in 1920.²⁶ Simultaneously we should speak about a change of emphasis in the attitude to the symbolic figures in the Soviet pantheon: Stalin (and the body of ideas about the victory in the war, the Great Power and “effective” modernization) gradually pushed aside Lenin (the founder of the world’s first proletarian state, leader of the revolutionary Bolshevik party

Table 10

For Which Revolutionary Do You Feel the Greatest Antipathy and Rejection?
(answers ranged against the first probe)

	1990 October	1997 October	2002 October	2007 October	2017 March
I. Stalin	49	36	30	29	21
A. Kolchak	22	12	15	9	7
N. Makhno	19	22	26	11	21
A. Kerensky	19	12	10	8	9
L. Trotsky	10	13	10	13	17
Nicholas II	10	7	6	4	5
V. Lenin	5	12	11	11	13
P. Milyukov	5	3	3	2	3
F. Dzerzhinsky	4	6	6	7	6
N. Bukharin	3	4	3	3	5
Don't know	25	25	26	42	39

and Marxist theoretician). What was neutralized here was precisely the meanings connected with mass reprisals, state violence, extermination of the peasantry, the death of people from starvation and privation and the price of victory and forced modernization.

The most characteristic and recurring ideas of Lenin and his role in 20th-century history are reduced to the following social stereotypes:

(1) founder of the Soviet state (this description in the past 20 years has been given by 29%, though that share drops, albeit insignificantly, in the total structure of ideas about Lenin);

(2) leader of the proletariat (18%, the figure does not change over time), great thinker (11%);

(3) a calculating and cynical power-hungry politician, a political adventurer (the share of such opinions drops from 19 to 6%);

(4) cruel dictator (a drop from 12 to 6%); a leader pursuing an anti-Russian policy who does not understand Russia and does not like its people (at a steady 3-5%) (see Table 11).

That the negative attitude to the leader of the Bolshevik Party and the first chairman of the Soviet government is diminishing means that the generation of dissidents and educated circles close to them, part of which espoused anti-Soviet, anti-Marxist principles and ideas, is leaving the scene. Such views made up the factual result (for all its insignificance) of reflection and thought about the

Table 11

How in Your Opinion Will Lenin Be Remembered 40-50 Years from Now?
(the respondent was given a card: multiple choice)

	1995 IV	2000 IV	2005 IV	2006 IV	2010 IV	2011 IV	2013 III	2017 III
No one except historians will remember him	25	36	41	32	45	39	31	35
As the founder of the Soviet state	30	34	26	29	30	27	28	25
As the leader for whom the interests of the working people came first	17	18	20	18	16	19	17	20
As a great thinker who had a correct vision of the future	10	11	12	13	9	12	13	12
As a calculating politician who managed to impose his will on a huge country	19	13	14	12	9	10	9	8
As a successful political adventurer	12	6	6	8	8	6	7	6
As a cruel dictator prepared to sacrifice the lives of millions	12	7	9	8	6	5	5	5
As a person who did not understand or like Russia	5	2	5	4	3	3	2	3
Don't know	14	8	5	7	7	8	9	10
N = 1600.								

Soviet past, something that only became possible in the post-Stalin years. But it turned out to be impossible to convey these results to other groups in the 1990s and, even more importantly, to the modern youth which is totally indifferent to this subject area.

The overall attitude to Lenin is increasingly becoming today one of indifference. Lack of interest in Soviet history and in the significance of the revolution is an important factor. Asked "What is your attitude to Lenin as a whole?" the share of positive answers (with respect, sympathy, admiration) dropped from 60 to 44% in the last 16 years (2001-2017) and the share of negative answers (with dislike, fear or disgust) has not changed and hovered around 12%, however the number of indifferent respondents increased from 30 to 46%, exceeding the percentage of those who "respect" him. This is the prevalent attitude among people

aged 20-40 (that is, those who were born or reached adulthood after the collapse of the USSR), it is expressed by 53-54% who say that they are not interested in Lenin, that they are indifferent to him. In Moscow (and slightly less so in other megalopolises) this is the opinion expressed by 50% and in the provinces by about 40%.²⁷ The prevailing attitude to Lenin comes down to the following: "The memory of Lenin will be preserved in history, but nobody would follow his path" (35-36% of respondents expressed that opinion). Or: "No one except historians will remember him" (this opinion is shared by 25-35%, the average 26% peak falls on 2005-2007). The older the respondents the more respect they show toward Lenin (among people aged 18-40 the figure is 36-34% and among those older than 55, 57%). Negativism is not growing: both among young and elderly people the share of those feeling antipathy toward Lenin is 9-11%. The maximum of negative judgments falls on the *perestroika* generation, Russians in the 40-55 age bracket, but even there the figure never rises above 15%. Traditional reverence for Lenin is far more frequently encountered in the provinces, in rural areas or small towns than in the capitals (54 and 25% respectively). And the negative attitude is registered rather in Moscow (25%) than other big cities and not in the provinces (7% in small towns, 2% in rural areas). The Soviet ideological construct of history is being slowly diluted, but does not disappear entirely. Totalitarian (revolutionary) identity survives in groups possessing the least intellectual and meaning resources for rationalizing their state which depends more on the inertia of the former institutional framework. The social periphery, poor in every respect, holds on to former perceptions of reality and history more than other social strata.

The destruction of Soviet symbols occurred in the late 1990s. This was the time of disenchantment with the chances of rapid modernization of the country and its integration into Europe, with the hopes for a dramatic improvement of people's material well-being after Soviet rule was renounced and simultaneously of a final parting with the socialist ideals and Marxist ideology. For all that Russians do not question the morality of Lenin's policy or the strength of dogmatic faith in the correctness of his course. In 1998, 28% (19% in 2017) shared the opinion (more characteristic of Communist Party supporters) that "Lenin tried to rely on the best aspirations and hopes of the people in order to lead them into a bright future." They are partly justified by the inertia of education acquired and the conviction that it was Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, "who took our country along the path of progress and justice." The average figure during these years was 20%. If one assumes that this attitude to Lenin is symbolic of the significance of Soviet ideology, one can say that by now no more than 20-25% of the population has clearly preserved the Soviet complex of ideas of the revolution and subsequent development becoming just one of the ideological currents determining collective identity.

Pure fanatics of the Communist ideology who believe in Lenin as the prophet of the future victory of communism throughout the world or the messiah of a bright future, who believe that Lenin's ideas will always be a beacon on people's road to a better life, are gradually diminishing; these people are turning into a fringe party or a dogmatic sect (their numbers in recent years never rose above 6-7%). Their future is

dim because the apogetics of Lenin characteristic of the 1960s is vanishing much faster (the number of those who believe that “Lenin’s ideas have been distorted by his followers” dropped from 37% in the mid-1990s to 21% in 2017). The residue of the revolutionary-romantic justification of Lenin (“Lenin was mistaken in his expectations regarding revolution and communism”) has also dropped from 21 to 10-11%.

However, the same years have not seen any increase in the critical rejection of Lenin’s utopia (“Lenin steered our country along a false road and this became the cause of many woes”) (such judgments of Lenin are expressed by 15-19%) which shows the weakness of liberal or democratic positions. Interpreting Lenin as a dictator, stressing the immorality of his policy are also becoming less common (the share of those who agreed that “Lenin was a cruel man who used violence to transform the country” dropped from 14 to 7%).²⁸

Public consciousness is trying not so much to “understand” communism as to get rid of its temptations (as well as of an opportunistic reluctance to change anything when change is inevitable). This path can be described as a movement from worship and deification of revolutionary leaders, and sacralization of power to mockery and cynical belittling of revolutionary ideas, liberation without deciphering the former meanings, the plebeian play with symbols and values which in the past were seen as “lofty ideals.” It is not by chance that Sergey Kuryokhin’s film *Lenin Was a Mushroom* became so popular in youth subculture.²⁹ We can therefore talk about the demise or erosion of ideological systems of totalitarian state in the 1930s—1960s, but not of trying to understand the processes that led to the formation of totalitarian rule and “the Soviet man.” There turned out to be no intellectual resources nor social forces—moral, conceptual and political—to rationalize and derive lessons from history (if that is at all possible).³⁰ Therefore the current state of Russian society can best be described as routinization, the wiping out of the past and forgetting the past, which only yesterday was considered to be lofty, important and “sacred.” However, because the picture of historical reality, the causes and motives of social actions in the past remains unclear and unexplained, it is unconsciously reproduced in the attitudes to basic institutions, above all institutions of power and to themselves.

The result is primitivization of the ideas of society and immunity to the accusations of Soviet power of violence and arbitrary rule, inefficiency, collective farm slavery, and quasi-moral justification of the totalitarian regime to which, it is claimed, there is no alternative. Because the bulk of the population is unable to recognize this internal conflict intellectual (historical) horizons are limited and resources for understanding the present are lacking. Hence suppression of the motivation for change, a sense that nothing can be done at all and only one path, one life strategy remains: to adapt and to endure in order to survive until better times. The penchant for opportunistic passivity is brought out by the distribution of answers to a projective question as to how current respondents would have behaved in the conditions of 1917 (see Table 12).

In 1990, relative majority of respondents would in one way or another have supported the Bolsheviks (“actively” only a quarter of respondents in 1990) or would have cooperated with them. In twenty-seven years, the share of citizens loyal to the Communists dropped almost by half (from 49 to 28%). The prevalent form of behavior

Table 12

Imagine That the October Revolution Happens before Your Eyes. How Would You Behave?
 (% answers ranged against the first probe; all measurements
 in October of the corresponding year and in January 2017)

	1990	1997	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2007	2011	2017
Would actively support the majority	23	15	22	23	19	15	17	17	14	12
Would cooperate with the Bolsheviks on some matters	26	16	19	20	16	18	17	13	17	16
Would fight against the Bolsheviks	5	7	6	8	9	8	7	6	6	8
Would try to wait out the times and stay out of the events	12	27	24	28	22	26	28	23	24	33
Would go abroad	7	15	13	16	14	15	14	18	14	14
Don't know	26	18	15	5	21	19	17	24	25	18
Bolshevik supporters	49	31	41	43	38	33	34	30	31	28
Passive agents	19	42	37	44	36	41	42	41	38	47
+/-	2.6	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.6
N = 1600.										

has been a passive tactic of *wait-and-see and non-participation* (the share of such answers increased from 12 to 33% and if one adds those who don't know or avoid stating a position we get an absolute majority, 51%, in 2017) or *escapism* as the most rational behavior. "A strategy of physical survival" would perhaps describe such behavior more correctly. Signs of making an active choice or of political behavior (both "for" and "against" the Bolsheviks) are shown by very insignificant groups (6-8% respectively). In other words, a commitment to passive adaptation prevails (let somebody else court trouble, it is none of my business, I do not rebel against the authorities and do not "put my head above the parapet").

The policy of sterilizing history coming from "the top" is in one way or another accepted and supported by the population, with the "lower classes" providing their own justifications.

Summing up our analysis, let us cite the opinions of respondents about the use and importance of knowledge of the 1917 Revolution. These opinions fall roughly into two parts: some said that "we should move forward and leave the past alone." We should "forget what happened during the revolution and the Civil War" because "while there is no harm in studying the history of those years, there is no need for

that either” (the opinion of 56% of respondents). Others still believe we should know more about that period “in order not to repeat the past mistakes” (44%). It is important however that the young and better adapted, successful and well-to-do groups are largely unwilling to know anything about the country’s past, which means that history may repeat itself in its worst form.

This kind of self-limitation eliminates the idea of the start of the times of an active political system, including the Putin regime. There is no reference point (the date when the social order was founded) hence there is no system for referring to and determining the present on the map of time. Discrediting of the Revolution and the Bolsheviks, along with growing neo-traditionalism puts the beginning of Russian history into a mythological time warp (“from time immemorial,” “from the time of yore”) or to the equally foggy times of Kievan Rus. Such answers added up to 69% in 2003 and 74% in 2017) (see Table 13).

Against this background the most symbolically important period—the 1917 Revolution and the emergence of Soviet state—totally lost its significance. Today only 13% of respondents say they are interested in the history of the Revolution. These are mostly the former intelligentsia from large provincial cities, and to a lesser extent from Moscow, people of mature age, often pensioners, struggling to understand the roots and nature of Soviet totalitarianism and its consequences for present-day Russia. They show more interest than any other people in the period between 1930s and 1950s, the time of the Great Terror, mass reprisals, Stalin industrialization and the emergence of the USSR as one of two superpowers. Many of them belong to state

Table 13

What Date, Epoch or Event Marks the Beginning of the History of Our Country?

	2013	2017
From time immemorial, from the time of yore	39	36
From Kievan Rus	19	26
From the Christianization of Rus	11	12
From the reign of Peter I	10	5
From the formation of the Russian principalities	3	6
From the October 1917 Revolution	4	3
From the creation of the Moscow Tsardom	2	2
From the collapse of the USSR and the creation of a sovereign Russian Federation (1991)	1	2
From Putin’s election as President	1	2
From the Declaration on Russia’s Sovereignty (1990)	0	0.8
Don’t know	10	5
The number of respondents	2000	1600

bureaucracy or are entrepreneurs and office workers, but there are very few young people. Inevitably in such situations there emerges an idea of the past as a myth about continuity and infinite existence of the system of dominance as an idea of the mystical body of the “thousand-year-old Russia,” hence the disappearance of concrete ideas of the social system of the past, present and future, of insight into its social structure and changes, the pluralism of social estates or group differences and interests. In other words the consciousness is reproduced of homogenization of society (“Russia United”), of unidimensional structure of the country united only by power (the “state” which is inherently totalitarian). This idea is not prominent in Soviet history textbooks which contain the concepts of socioeconomic formation, social estates, difference of class interests, specificities of Russian statehood at various phases of its historical existence. Today all this has been erased leaving only the totalitarian idea of society and history. The sources of the state go back to a mythological past which becomes a scene of eternal struggle against enemies (including former “fraternal” peoples, for example in the Baltics, Poland and now also Ukraine with which we are at war in the direct and indirect meanings of the word, for Kiev as “the mother of Russian cities” where Russia was baptized and from where “sacral” Russian history begins).

Turning to the mythological past from the sociological point of view amounts to recognizing that there is no alternative to the vertical structure of society, i.e., constitutional function of power, hierarchic structure of society, recognition of the priority of collective meanings of the whole symbolized by the figure of the ruler (monarch, despot, leader, president, etc.) and limited value and optional nature and dependence of the subjects—individual or the minority, social group, etc. Besides, an idea is formed of the social homogeneity and total unity of the country deprived of any social complexity, variety, of groups with their own interests and cultural autonomy. Therefore the current vagueness of subjective perceptions of the social status, groups, social background (80-83% of respondents say they belong to “the middle class”) is not accidental but stems from the lack of consciousness of self-sufficiency, intrinsic value, grounds for self-respect and demands that individual dignity be taken into account. Such primitive culture (images of the social whole, lack of influential functional elites) is derived from the ideology of “national unity,” of a single Motherland, a single “people.”

An awareness of the importance of history and interest in it arise only from a spirit of a complex society, from conflicts and struggle among different groups, from the need of civil society to understand itself, from the search of answers to the questions: who are we and where are we from? Why are things as they are? However, neither such questions, still less answers have been forthcoming. Over the 25 years of post-Soviet life Russian society has not produced a single new idea about political or cultural life. The same can be said of the sphere of popular historical ideas [2]. No new views of the past, of the revolution or the Stalin period have emerged. This state of affairs is undoubtedly the result of systematic suppression of public life under the Putin rule, “institutionalization of crisis” which broke out after the collapse of the USSR and the demise of the Soviet system. Destruction of history is a precondition for the restoration of the authoritarian system.

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Notes

- ¹ Following Hannah Arendt we can (must) see the Revolution as the collapse of autocracy or as liberation from the old order (first period) and as a starting point or foundation of a new social order (second period). Problems arise in connection with the concept of “freedom” because the system established after the revolution can least of all be described as freedom. The founders of the Soviet state themselves spoke not about freedom, but about dictatorship as the precondition for building a new state system within which a fundamentally new society could be formed and nurtured.
- ² Pursuant to V. Putin’s decree, a government commission for celebration was set up headed by state leaders and directors of academic institutes and universities, a plan of jubilee events coordinated by the Russian Historical Society led by former State Duma Speaker Sergey Naryshkin, now Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, was set up [11]. The plan includes more than 100 events—exhibitions, roundtables, publications, etc. The celebrations begin with an exhibition of the icon of the Most Holy Mother of God [12]. The plan is a purely bureaucratic list of assignments to various state institutions (RAS institutions, museums, libraries, etc.) which have to present expositions and programs of conferences by that date. The directives of the Kremlin spin doctors (on how these events are to be interpreted and explained to the populace) stem from the ideological agenda of Russian conservatism which underpins Putin’s policy. According to Patriarch Kirill, the intelligentsia, “having committed heinous crimes against faith,

against God, against its people and against its country,” bears “the main responsibility not only for the 1917 Revolution,” but “for everything that happened in the 20th century” (speech at a meeting of the guardians of the Patriarchal Literary Prize on March 29, 2017) [13]. As a response to this agenda being foisted on the nation, some liberal journalists and historians (Leonid Mlechin, etc.) and extreme right, not to call them the Black Hundred, appeared on TV channels such as NTV, Tsargrad, Zvezda, etc.).

- ³ When the word “revolution” (without definitions or additions) was used everybody knew that it meant the Great October Socialist Revolution (elsewhere referred to as GOSR, as it was commonly referred to in Brezhnev’s newspeak) or its broader context, the Civil War and the period of War Communism (until NEP).
- ⁴ Almost nothing has remained in popular consciousness of the first Russian Revolution of 1905 although the events of the time were symbolically celebrated in the early Soviet years through the names of streets, squares, factories, etc. By the 1960s the semantics of these place names became routine and almost inscrutable. With the collapse of Soviet power a new wave of renamings and restoration of pre-revolutionary place names began, which destroyed any traces and links not only with 1905, but also with 1917. Few people today could say why this or that place has the name it has. In the provinces Soviet place names (like monuments to Lenin, Kirov and other Soviet figures) remained virtually untouched. In the capitals restoration of pre-revolutionary names is noticeable only in the city center. But Moscow still has *Krasnaya Presnya*, Uprising Square, *Oktyabrskaya* Square and metro stations named Year 1905, *Baumanskaya*, *Barrikadnaya*, Revolution Square, not to speak of the Lenin Avenue, Leningrad Railway Station and other place names. The only figure of the 1905 events singled out by the Kremlin spin doctors was Pyotr Stolypin, Prime Minister in the tsarist government. The fact that his name is associated with the suppression of that revolution, the dissolution of the first Russian parliament, court martials and executions has been forgotten. What remains in modern political rhetoric is his sonorous phrase: “They [the opposition] need great upheavals, we need a great Russia,” which became the motto of the conservative group of politicians and economists called the Stolypin Club.
- ⁵ The meaning (content) and the course of historical events in February–May of that year have always been interpreted in a biased way as nothing but consistent implementation by Lenin’s party of the plan for preparing an armed uprising which was inevitable according to Marxist scientific inclusions. No other political leaders except the leaders of the RSDLP(B) were mentioned in school or university textbooks. The role of Lev Trotsky, the old Bolsheviks purged during the Stalin terror, was scrupulously avoided and distorted. The interpretation of revolutionary events followed the canon set by Stalin’s *A Short Course of the History of VCP(B)*. The scheme of the historical process assimilated by mass consciousness is reproduced today being reflected in a vague way in the public opinion surveys.
- ⁶ This set of symbolic events was obtained through public opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center over more than 25 years. Here and elsewhere data of representative Levada Center national surveys are cited. The question was formulated in the following way: “Name 5–6 key events in the 20th century.” Such a structure of key events of 20th century Russian history was embraced by all the institutions that ensure mass socialization and reproduction of totalitarian consciousness—by school education, cinema, literature, and television. The best examples could be the epic novels of the late Soviet era which were published in millions of copies by Pyotr Proskurin, Georgy Markov and Aleksey Cherkasov which were the most read books in the Brezhnev era.
- ⁷ Here and elsewhere data of nationwide representative polls conducted by the Levada Center are cited.

- ⁸ We may remember the Thaw film *The Communist*, Bulat Okudzhava's song about "commissars in dusty helmets," and many Brezhnev-era films from *There Is No Crossing Under Fire* to adventure films about the Revolution such as *The Elusive Avengers*, etc.
- ⁹ Negative consequences of the establishment of Soviet power are more frequently noted by better educated respondents who live in the capital and major cities. This applies above all to the assessment of the consequences of the atheist state's policy with regard to the Church: here condemnation of terror went hand-in-hand with the processes of religious revival characteristic—in the 1990s—mainly of the above-mentioned groups.
- ¹⁰ It is not by chance that Yegor Gaydar's party showed as its emblem The Bronze Horseman, an equestrian statue of Peter I, as a European tsar who imposed Western forms of management and way of life by force. Attempts to raise the symbolic significance of the February Revolution that paved the way for development towards a Western-style democracy, failed. Cf.: "It is unlikely that the reformers themselves were aware of the importance of February events. They didn't look to that time but to the era of Alexander II, the Liberator Tsar who abolished serfdom in 1961" [10].
- ¹¹ As President Boris Yeltsin said in his decree: "To moderate the contradictions and reconcile various strata of Russian society."
- ¹² But as early as 2005 the share of those who approved the cancelation of the November 7 holiday rose to 27% and the number of those who are against it dropped accordingly(—see Table 24.7 in [6, p. 183]).
- ¹³ Sympathy for exploited classes who formed the majority of the country's population, the wish, out of compassion for them, to radically destroy social injustice ascribed to the Russian revolutionaries is, in the eyes of living Russians, a precondition and the main moral justification of the policy of the revolutionary party. Thereby the violence, terror, the experiments of the revolutionaries who had seized power (after 1917) are perceived today as if under "anesthesia" or are totally wiped out of consciousness.
- ¹⁴ The state which—as the conservatives surrounding Putin make a point of stressing—was also betrayed and destroyed by windbags, party functionaries and reform-minded democrats.
- ¹⁵ A dramatic deterioration of food supplies in the late 1916 and early 1917 in Petrograd during wartime and the incompetence of the Tsarist bureaucracy in emergency circumstances is an indisputable fact which must not however obscure the rhetorical character of the cliché "the plight of the working people" as the cause of the Revolution: the level of incomes and quality of life enjoyed by the Russian population in 1912-1913 were not achieved until the second half of the 1950s.
- ¹⁶ They were a component of Lenin's definition of the revolutionary situation—"the bottom does not want and the top is unable," which is not the same thing as Putin's mantra about "inadmissibility of a weakening of state power."
- ¹⁷ The topic of Maidan, Georgia, the Arab spring, protests in Venezuela, destabilization caused by "subversive elements" and similar scare-mongering exercises are constantly present in the speeches of Vladimir Putin and the people around him. Table 6 shows the results of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda: a noticeable growth after 2014 of answers referring to "weak government" and "conspiracy of Russia's enemies."
- ¹⁸ In suppressing freedom, the Kremlin destroys not only intellectual diversity and political pluralism, it sterilizes the potential of the country's development making society unidimensional and poorly structured. Therefore the disappearance of the stratum of groups that could provide a different understanding and knowledge of the revolution, rationalize the past in order to understand the nature of the current regime is a totally logical process of the evolution of post-Soviet Russia.
- ¹⁹ See the opinion of the revolutionary myth that underpins it: "The spread and prolonged existence of the revolutionary myth is explained by the fact that it became the foundation of the Soviet state that formed the social demand to maintain it throughout its existence" [4, p. 8].

- ²⁰ Over 15 years the number of those who would consider correct and possible such a version of political evolution dropped from 22 to 16%. In addition to long-term factors the effect of patriotic mobilization and euphoria caused by the annexation of Crimea and anti-Western propaganda played a certain role.
- ²¹ Until 1961 the USSR was, even formally, a country with the largely peasant population (and if one takes into account the way of life in small and even in some medium-sized cities, the prevalence of peasant mentality survived until the late 1970s).
- ²² This circumstance is constantly stressed by Anatoly Vishnevsky, one of the best Russian demographers (see chapters 2 and 3 in [8]).
- ²³ The indifference of society to the problems of the Revolution can be attributed to various, including demographic causes. Over the quarter century since the collapse of the USSR a new generation of young people entered life who have no direct experience of Soviet life, the totalitarian ideological brainwashing of the population and are therefore indifferent to the symbols of a past epoch.
- ²⁴ For Lenin from 57 to 26% (the share of people who dislike him, on the contrary, increased from 5 to 13%); for Trotsky from 15% of those who assessed him positively in the *perestroika* years to 4%, for Bukharin—from 21 to 7-10%; negative assessments accordingly became more common: of Trotsky from 10 to 17%, Bukharin from 3 to 5%, etc.
- ²⁵ The popularity of Feliks Dzerzhinsky is due to the consistent practice of “humanizing” and “warming” of the fanatical and brutal head of the Cheka, a fighter against child homelessness, the image created after his death by the Soviet propaganda and cinema, school textbooks and popular literature. Therefore the attitude toward him has always been positive, with 45% of the respondents showing sympathy for him, but by 2017 the share of such opinions dropped to 16%. The antipathy figures, however, did not change. This indicates that there is a stable, albeit a small group of people who are more or less familiar with the literature on the activities of repressive bodies under the Bolsheviks.
- ²⁶ As seen from Table 9, the share of those who sympathized with Nicholas II rose from 4% in 1989 to 17-18% in the late 1990 (at the same time expressions of contempt and antipathy characteristic of the entire Soviet period diminished). The effect is due not only to his glorification by the Russian Orthodox Church (the Tsar was canonized in 2000 and declared to be a martyr and passion-bearer), but also the changed attitude of the Russian authorities to the imperial family. Still under Boris Yeltsin, the state and Church started attempts to establish a continuity between post-Soviet Russia and pre-revolutionary Russia, and “to find the national idea there.” A feature film about Aleksandr Kolchak got very good reviews and a considerable audience. The film focuses on the First World War and the Civil War although Kolchak first became famous as an oceanographer and Arctic explorer and also as a lucky naval commander, military and naval minister. That such an attitude to anti-Bolshevik leaders is not accidental and reflects certain shifts in public consciousness taking place in the course of the search for a new legitimacy for Russian power, is borne out by the 2005 opinion poll which revealed a growing positive attitude to General Anton Denikin, one of the organizers of the White movement, painted by Soviet propaganda, writers, film directors, etc. in the darkest of colors (see Table 23.47 in [6, p. 181]).
- ²⁷ On the contrary, a positive attitude to Nicholas II was expressed in January 2017 by 46% (57% in provincial cities) and the negative attitude was expressed only by 6% whereas the prevailing attitude was one of indifference (50%, mainly in rural areas and small towns which have not yet been touched by “new ideological trends”—neotraditionalism, “spiritual bonds” and “Orthodoxy” as “the basis of Russian statehood and culture). The most advanced groups turned out to be the bureaucracy in Moscow and the provinces, better educated people looking to their bosses and copying “what they wear at the top.”
- ²⁸ Of the few latest works or discussions on Lenin the collection [3] can be cited.

- ²⁹ *Lenin Was a Mushroom* is a mystifying TV story prepared by musician Sergey Kuryokhin and journalist Sergey Sholokhov and first screened in January 1991 on Leningrad television in the *Fifth Wheel* program.
- ³⁰ Andrey Medushevsky made this comment on the role of the scholarly community: “A general mistrust of theory and the tendency to avoid coming to grips with general questions is observed in recent historiography of the revolution: as a result we see a constant ‘conflict of interpretations’ in contemporary Russian historiography: evidence-based knowledge is supplanted by ideological schemes of interpretation... This historiography does not offer any new methodology and is in many ways in grip of the old Soviet clichés reproducing them with the use of a different conceptual toolkit... The author has become convinced... of the conservatism and impossibility to reform the Russian academic bureaucracy in practice” [4, pp. 12, 14, 27].

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