

‘Revolution? What Revolution?’ Russia Asks 100 Years Later

By Neil MacFarquhar

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MOSCOW — The Kremlin plans to sit out the centenary of the Russian Revolution.

Never mind that the upheavals of 1917 transformed the country and the world, abruptly ending the long rule of the czars, ushering in the Communist era and spawning an ideological confrontation with the West that still resonates.

There will be no national holiday on Sunday, March 12, the date generally recognized as the start of the uprising. Nor will there even be a government-issued official interpretation, like the one mandating that World War II was a “Great Victory.”

The official reason proffered for ignoring the event is that Russia remains too divided over the consequences of that fateful year.

The more likely explanation, some Kremlin officials, historians and other analysts say, is that President Vladimir V. Putin loathes the very idea of revolution, not to mention the thought of Russians dancing in the streets to celebrate the overthrow of any ruler. Moreover, 1917 smudges the Kremlin’s version of Russian history as a long, unified march to greatness, meant to instill a sense of national pride and purpose.

For the record, the Kremlin is sticking to the official line of avoiding domestic discord.

“For one group of people, the revolution was the death knell of Great Russia — it was ‘Brexit,’ when we stopped our development in Europe,” said Mikhail Shvydkoy, Mr. Putin’s special representative on cultural matters, in an interview in the wood-paneled cafe at the Central House of Writers, a prerevolutionary mansion. “For many other people, the Soviet past was the best time of their lives.”

Mr. Putin strives to unite the country, he said, whereas “any festivities on the state level would deepen those divisions.”

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Despite the widespread perception that the czar was overthrown in what the Soviets called the Great October Socialist Revolution, there were two revolutions in 1917. The February Revolution (now falling in March, given a different calendar) deposed the czar and replaced him with a provisional government that introduced liberal reforms like universal suffrage. Eight months later, Lenin and his marginal Bolshevik faction engineered a remarkable coup that gave rise to the world’s first communist state.



A painting of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik revolution, at a flea market on the outskirts of Moscow. There will be no national holiday on Sunday, March 12, the date generally recognized as the start of the uprising. Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Mr. Putin's critiques of the revolution contrast markedly with his usual glowing tributes to Russian history.

"We know well the consequences that these great upheavals can bring," he said in his state of the federation speech in December. "Unfortunately, our country went through many such upheavals and their consequences in the 20th century."

At an earlier public forum, after disparaging Lenin, he said, "We didn't need the world revolution."

The president shunted the anniversary off into the realm of academia, appointing a special committee to organize seminars and the like.

Previously, the official narrative was an essay written by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in which he argued that deep distrust between the court and the educated elite along with German meddling brought about catastrophe.

The latter fits the Kremlin narrative that Russia has long been besieged by foreign aggressors and that the West strives to implant friendly governments everywhere by sponsoring “color revolutions.” Columnists have been lumping 1917 among more recent color revolutions in places like Georgia and Ukraine, naturally listing the United States among the suspected agitators.

There is also a damning lack of heroic figures in the revolution. Czar Nicholas II was deposed and thus weak. Alexander F. Kerensky, the central figure in the provisional government, proved ineffective. Lenin fomented appalling bloodshed and destroyed the Russian Orthodox Church, a pillar of Mr. Putin’s support.



Workers demonstrating in Kharkov during the period of the Russian Revolution in

“Vladimir Putin cannot compare himself to Nicholas II, nor to Lenin nor to Kerensky, because that is not Russian history to be proud of,” said Mikhail Zygar, a Russian journalist and the author of a best-selling book, “All the Kremlin’s Men,” which details the inner workings of the Putin government. “In terms of 1917, nothing can be used as a propaganda tool.”

In comparison, the Kremlin has turned World War II into the apogee of national unity.

In the absence of official spin, other factions are only too happy to provide some, often referring to current events. At one recent forum, Vladimir R. Medinsky, the conservative minister of culture, said the revolution underscored the dangers of letting liberals rule, because they always put self-interest above Russia.

Metropolitan Hilarion of the Russian Orthodox Church, speaking at the same event, lambasted those who destroyed the czarist state rather than seeking compromise.

Liberals retort that a repressive government ignoring vast income disparity and curbing basic rights should be worried about history repeating itself.

“The authorities cannot celebrate 1917,” said Nikita Sokolov, a historian. “Whatever might have happened, the impulse of the revolution was social justice. A country with such inequality can’t celebrate this. Also, the authorities think that any revolution is a color revolution.”

For the Communist Party — an ever-weaker link in the loyal opposition — the establishment of the Soviet Union was a singular achievement. It plans to celebrate not least with parades in Moscow and elsewhere on Nov. 7, which in Soviet times was the main national holiday.

Amid the mudslinging, there are efforts to bring the momentous events to life.

Mr. Zygar, a former editor in chief of the independent TV Rain news channel, established one of the more ambitious projects, called Project 1917.



Members of the Russian Communist Party — some dressed in old-style uniforms, some carrying portraits of Lenin, some of them retired Soviet officers — celebrated the 90th anniversary of the revolution in Moscow in 2007. James Hill for The New York Times

Excavating a vast trove of historical archives, he and his young staff compiled a Facebook imitation, chronicling 1917, in Russian and English. It uses snippets from the diaries of hundreds of mostly prominent Russians of that epoch to create a snapshot of every single day, including the weather.

On March 8, for example, as the St. Petersburg bread riots gathered steam, there is Nicholas II lamenting that his children have the measles. Others focused on the mushrooming chaos. Mikhail Rodzianko, the head of the Duma, or Parliament, wrote, “Something was broken today, and the state machine derailed.”

On March 15, the day of his abdication, the czar wrote, “All around there is treason, cowardice and deceit.” The next day he mentioned reading a book about Julius Caesar, then avoided political references until April, Mr. Zygar noted.

If the emperor was phlegmatic, scores of others are more stimulating. It was the era of Russian giants in literature, ballet, painting, music and movies — people like Serge Diaghilev, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Eisenstein, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Kazimir Malevich. Political figures such as Lenin, Maxim Gorky and Leon Trotsky weigh in often.

“Almost all the most famous Russians known in the world happened to live at that time,” said Mr. Zygar, who was first inspired to write a history of the epoch called “The Empire Must Die,” and then dreamed up the website to try to reach a wider audience.

Many historians and others note that Russia lives with a certain ambivalence toward 1917. Although many perceive it as having wrecked the country, its symbols are still enmeshed in the fabric of daily life.

At a recent forum, Leonid Reshetnikov, a historian and retired lieutenant general in Russia’s foreign intelligence service, described trying to explain to his granddaughter why the city of Yekaterinburg had a church dedicated to the czar and his family, who were canonized by the church, as well as a monument to Yakov Sverdlov, the local Bolshevik commander believed to have ordered them shot there.

“We live in historical schizophrenia, with these monuments to Lenin, to all of them,” he said, going on to denounce any street protesters as potential revolutionaries.

“How do we explain to young people that they must not be revolutionaries, that they must be loyal citizens — yes, fight for Russia, wish it well, but under no circumstances plot, overthrow, march, kill?”

Correction: March 25, 2017

Because of an editing error, an article on March 11 about the Kremlin's plans to sit out the centenary of the Russian Revolution misidentified, in some editions, the subject of a statue in the city of Yekaterinburg and the man who a historian said had ordered Czar Nicholas II and his family shot there. The statue is of Yakov Sverdlov, a local Bolshevik commander, not Lenin. And while it has never been firmly established who issued the order to kill the royal family, the man the historian was referring to was Sverdlov, not Lenin.

Sophia Kishkovsky contributed reporting.

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