The celebrations of the 1917 centenary were striking for both their diversity and the diminishment of the event they commemorated, from Moscow’s low-key celebrations, to the missing or halfhearted remembrances organized in the former Soviet and socialist countries, to the West’s many platitudes—all of them stridently contradicting the initial energy of 1917.

Embarrassment and hollowness were the key words in Russia, where, in 2017, 1917 was presented either as a “world historical event” illustrating the country’s greatness and importance by the very fact that it had taken place there, or it was buried under occasional studies of local events, with very little room left over for ideas. In the remaining post-Soviet states, as well as in the former socialist countries, silence often fell on what was until recently a hot terrain of polemics.

This essay is based on a lecture that I delivered at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute on 6 November 2017, “Rethinking the 1917 Revolution,” as well as on a presentation that I gave at the 100th Anniversary Roundtable “The Bolshevik Revolution and Its Legacy in the USSR, Post-Soviet Russia, and the West,” organized by the Davis Center on the following day. The idea for this essay came from the way I reconstructed the interpretations of the Soviet experience in the chapter “What is the Soviet Union?” in my Histoire de l’URSS (Paris: PUF, 2010; Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2016). I am grateful to Gia Caglioti, Giovanna Cigliano, Mark Kramer, Serhii Plokhii, Adriano Roccucci, Frank Sysyn, Roman Szporluk, and the participants of the Naples History Group for their criticism and suggestions.
and damnation, well represented by successive waves of destruction of monuments celebrating the “Russian Revolution” that culminated in the Ukrainian Leninopad of 2013–2014, and by the opening of museums recording the suffering caused by the regimes that 1917 had brought about, albeit indirectly, from Budapest and Warsaw to the Baltics.

The diversity in the “memory” and judgment of the October Revolution was particularly marked in the western and eastern parts of a continent that was formally, if partially, integrated into the European Union, whose contradictions and problems are also the product of the diverse historical experience that 1917 generated. In these countries, as well as in the United States and Canada, the waning of a once-powerful myth was embodied in the triteness of celebrations that often repeated old clichés and delusions, as well as in the meagerness of intellectual debates that lacked the vitality of those that accompanied the 1789 bicentenary. These debates often ignored the interpretive revolution that took place in Soviet history in the decade following 1991. Moreover, the lack of reception of the results of these new interpretations is in and of itself proof of the lessening of the appeal of an event that perhaps few want to think about, not least because in the past it had provoked so much cogitation and so much disappointment.

The diversity and multiplicity of its presence, however, still attest that 1917 was truly a world-historical event. Because of this, we have, and have had, many 1917s since the very beginning, and well beyond the traditional binary oppositions of February versus October, Reds versus Whites, and so on. Nineteen-seventeen’s many 1917s were immediately present, too, in the minds and writings of contemporaries, and they continued to live, differentiate, and multiply in the following decades in major political, intellectual, and historiographical debates both within and outside academia. In this essay, I try to reconstruct the main lines of this evolution, following a chronological order marked by often dramatic changes in the ideas, interpretations, impressions, and readings of an event thus endowed with a life cycle of its own. I first analyze the interwar years, when the accent was still on the revolution and its possible meanings and readings. Then I examine war and victory as a turning point that opened the way to the gradual but unstoppable replacement of 1917 by 1945. Finally, I assess the marking of 1917 in the post-1991 era. Authors and ideas were selected on the
basis of their relevance; it goes without saying that the selection was influenced and restricted by the limits of my knowledge.

This I do with hindsight wisdom and through today’s eyes, but also—and so far as possible—by trying to avoid the latter’s constraints and limitations by paying attention to and being aware of the perishability of previous gazes. After 1991 and the dissolution of 1917’s legitimate child, this multiple evolution also involved the legacies of 1917. I thus conclude my essay with a brief discussion of these legacies within the post-Soviet states and of their influence upon these states’ relations with the “West,” the European Union in particular, but also within India and China.

This essay makes no claim to comprehensiveness. For instance, the February revolution, too, has been plural. I chose, however, to devote most of my attention to the October revolution. Even though my choice can be defended in light of twentieth-century history, the February revolution certainly deserves more scrutiny. Furthermore, apart from a few meager references, I do not trace the evolution of religious interpretations and judgments of 1917 simply because this subject falls outside the scope of my competence. It would also have been interesting to discuss the impact of 1917 and its different readings on would-be revolutionaries, as well as to investigate the changes in Soviet official celebrations of the revolution from 1918 through 1990—a subject that merits a separate book. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this essay will help illuminate that year’s surprisingly complex evolutionary tree, and thus further our understanding of a century that was dominated by 1917.

The 1917s of the Interwar Years

The decades-long popularity of the opposition between the February and October revolutions, the bourgeois-democratic and socialist revolutions, the Reds and the Whites is further proof of the universal appeal of the simplistic, binary explanatory model for the human mind, which is attested by many similar pairs of would-be opposites: socialism and capitalism, democracy and fascism, nationalism and communism, etc.

In fact, there was an immediate plurality of Octobers even in Russia, the Petrograd one differing from that of Moscow or Siberia. We
know that it was seen and lived differently in the cities, in the countryside, and in the trenches; among workers, peasants, nomads, soldiers, and intellectuals. For urban workers, it was an October of hopes and delusions doomed to a quick collapse, while the ruling classes’ initial worries were soon confirmed by a nightmare that could be evaded only by fleeing. The appeal of a terrible, apocalyptic revolution, which was felt by many intellectuals and revolutionaries, had its counterpart in the satisfaction felt by the *vydvizhentsy*—the newly promoted workers, peasants, and “lumpen” elements of 1917–1920, a satisfaction which anticipated that of the following great waves of Soviet promotion from below: during the NEP period and the industrialization drive, during and after the war and victory. In the countryside, the peasants won their own 1917, liquidating seigneurial, ecclesiastical, and urban properties, as well as eliminating the true kulaks, and instituting in village soviets the cells of the state that they desired. All these changes were dramatic, and they tell us that, beyond the understandable polemics surrounding the 1917 of the February real revolution versus that of the October coup d’état (the binary scheme, once more), in Russia, too, 1917 was in fact a year of many revolutions.

Above all, there were as many Octobers and images of it, with different players and meanings, in Ukraine, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, on the western fringes of the Russian Empire or outside it, in the West and in its colonies. The 1917s of the areas in which Russians and Russian-speaking groups formed important urban or colonizing minorities soon took on paradoxical, unexpected features. In Kyiv, for example, the Russian Revolution was “stolen” by Ukrainian forces, and restoring it quickly became a Bolshevik priority. In Central Asia, where land was seized not from oppressive landowners but from local, often nomadic, populations, the revolution was turned upside down, quickly becoming a tool in the hands of Slavic colonists. In Transcaucasia, where the Russian presence was weaker, Red and White soon became colors that could be used in order to win mostly “local” (national and otherwise) conflicts, and the disintegration of the empire offered the possibility to achieve an independent existence that, like in Georgia, the Mensheviks had not contemplated initially, but which soon became the only available vessel by which to escape Bolshevik folly. The Russian October was thus given other territories to recover, while in those territories that the Bolsheviks considered irretrievable for the moment, like Finland or the Baltic states, 1917
was rapidly transformed into an opportunity to settle accounts. Many non-Russian populations thus had their own 1917s and their own civil wars, and did not notice the Russian one of 1918, an impairment of vision strengthened by the Central Empires’ occupation of parts of the former Russian Empire, which, for instance, shielded the Ukrainian peasants from the ferocious conflict between the Bolshevik October and the Russian peasants’ own October, which the new state won.

After Germany’s defeat, when the civil war and its horrors rapidly expanded reaching into the heart of Central Europe, a rigid dichotomy of visions about 1917 and its outcome rapidly imposed itself: the former subjects of the Russian Empire and many of the inhabitants of the new eastern states that were created at Versailles, including the mutilated countries of Germany and Austria, were partly aware of what was taking place and could thus pass a judgment on 1917, one that took reality into account. This judgment reached, albeit in distorted forms, various parts of the globe where emigrants from these countries lived, but it was often confined to their communities. Elsewhere, in Italy, France, or the British colonies, 1917 remained the year of a palingenetic myth, embodied for many in Lenin’s marvelous decrees that promised so much to so many, and which others instead saw as a threat to the very foundation of their lives. From the very beginning, moreover, intellectuals, scholars, political and religious militants, and others, in Soviet Russia as well as in different countries or in emigration, started to debate the various meanings of 1917, the list of which thus expanded.7

The question of 1917’s very nature was immediately raised: was it possible to have a socialist revolution in Russia? We know that even prominent Bolsheviks greeted with skepticism Lenin’s April theses, thus siding with the majority of socialist leaders the world over, including left socialists. Antonio Gramsci wrote that the October Revolution was indeed a revolution against capital, but he meant Marx’s Kapital, not capitalism.8 Karl Kautsky and Georgii Plekhanov accused Lenin of hubris, and denied the very possibility of a socialist 1917, concerning which Lenin himself had harbored not a few doubts that were assuaged in 1918–1919, but which reemerged reinvigorated in 1920–1921. By that point, however, many communists throughout the world, including formerly skeptical Bolshevik leaders, had quashed their doubts under the impact of the hopes generated by Germany’s defeat and the 1919 revolutionary wave. In their eyes, the Russian October had become the socialist revolution, and Lenin—the magician who, with the party’s
magic wand, had made the impossible possible. At the same time, faith in a socialist 1917 was strengthened outside the territories of the former Russian Empire as well as the countries adjacent to it by sheer ignorance of what went on during the civil war. Minds were fired up by Lenin’s decrees, which seemed to satisfy all the demands put forward by “progressives” (not just socialists) in the previous decades, as the provisions on women’s rights or support for the arts showed. February 1917 thus lost ground in favor of the October Revolution to which 1917 was now reduced. In the eyes of European conservative, reactionary, and revolutionary right-wing forces, 1917 and Bolshevism became the enemy. In both these visions, the progressive and the reactionary, the Russian October became detached from reality and thus crystallized, producing the most stable—and in many ways the least interesting—images that 1917 would present in the following decades.

In France, but not just there, this socialist 1917 was soon tied to the French bourgeois 1789, thus “proving” the accuracy of Marx’s predictions about the succession of historical “stages,” and confirming—in a teleological fashion—the universal value of October. The Russian Revolution also became the next link in the chain started by the French one in the eyes of historians like Albert Mathiez, for whom the Bolsheviks became the direct heirs of the Jacobins, in a vision in which the decisive action of violent minorities, terror included, was exalted as a crucial instrument of progressive change.9

Meanwhile, the tragic experiences of the civil war were strengthening the vision of 1917 as a gateway to an apocalypse that retained its palingenetic traits for some Bolshevik leaders and pro-Bolshevik intellectuals, who were now directly experiencing what carrying out mass killings meant, often finding solace in alcohol and drugs, as did many of their White counterparts who were engaged in the same practices. For their victims as well as for those of other military and paramilitary formations, for those suffering from the Jewish pogroms, antipeasant repressions, and decossackization, as well as for the persecuted former ruling classes and religious communities, 1917 was a portent of the apocalypse: by January 1918 Patriarch Tikhon had already excommunicated both the new regime and the revolution that had spawned it as a manifestation of evil.

After the conclusion of the civil war, 1917’s concepts and images went through a rapid evolution in which disappointed protagonists on all sides played a special role, confirming that defeat helps to see
reality better than victory, not least because it always and pressingly calls for understanding and soul-searching. In the 1920s the freshness of past events, the NEP period of relative openness in the USSR, and the relative freedom of European societies before 1929, together with the richness of sources that included the writings of the civil war’s contenders and the first generation of memoirs, multiplied the readings of the meanings of 1917. The quality of the works and interpretations long remained unsurpassed, and anticipated some of the most interesting and mature conclusions of the post–World War II and post-1991 years.

Discussions about October’s first and failed outcome, that is, “war communism,” directly involved not just Vladimir Lenin but also politically active scholars such as Pitirim Sorokin and Boris Brutt-kus, as well as Bolshevik leftist leaders like Lev Kritsman. They were directly tied to debates on the nature of the NEP, that is, Lenin’s 1921 “compromise” with the countryside, which amounted to recognition of the peasant 1917, whose main conquests and demands were for the moment satisfied.10

These discussions were grounded in Auguste Comte’s and Herbert Spencer’s analyses of war as a cause for moving backward along the path of social progress, which directly contradicted theories presenting conflicts as the springboard of positive change, theories that were revived by Ludwig Gumplowicz and Georges Sorel, but which were certainly present in Marx’s writings as well (even though in Marx one can also find arguments in favor of the opposite view). Was war communism, and therefore communism, as militarization of both society and the economy—a step forward or backward (a question that had already emerged in the Trotsky-Kautsky debate of 1920) along the social evolutionary scale that most intellectuals had in mind? Moreover, if the latter hypothesis were true, as even Lenin and Bukharin seemed to have thought when they defended the NEP not solely on opportunistic grounds (unlike the majority of the Bolshevik leaders, who hoped for a quick return to “heroic times”), then how was the outcome of 1917 and therefore of October itself to be conceptualized: as a jump forward toward socialism or perhaps a partial step backward, toward a militarized, traditional, caste-like society? This idea was certainly present in the mind of the former Bolshevik Evgenii Zamiatin when he wrote his dystopic novel My (1921), which drew a decidedly negative image of 1917 and its consequences, and later served as a model for both Ayn Rand and George Orwell.11
In the defeated émigré communities, Russian or otherwise, bitter polemics and difficult soul-searching fed original lines of thought. Yes, 1917 had opened the gates of doom. As the great economic historian of classical antiquity Mikhail Rostovtsev was to write, the empire’s peasants and plebeian strata could be compared to the barbarians that had destroyed Roman civilization. Trotsky’s image of barbarity as an unconscious tool of progress was thus nothing but a dangerous, irresponsible illusion, as Maksim Gorky himself thought before he joined the Bolshevik elite and became the chief cultural advisor of the new, barbaric emperor in the late 1920s. On the other hand, as the reconquest of large parts of the “borderlands” that were lost in 1918 (from Ukraine and Belarus to Transcaucasia) and, above all, the war with Poland seemed to prove, the barbaric Bolsheviks were the saviors of the Russian imperial state. October 1917 was thus also the beginning of a Russian national rebirth that justifiably distanced itself from a West that had tried to humiliate Russia repeatedly and impose its model on her.

By 1920–1921 Nikolai Ustrialov and the smenovekhovtsy were the first to support this “national interpretation” of October. By the late 1920s they were followed by some of Eurasianism’s founders who, after appreciating the loss of the empire’s western territories because it allowed Russia to rediscover her Eurasian otherness, came to see in 1917 a national revolution that had saved both the Russian state and Russia’s essential diversity. At the end of the following decade, even important former liberals like Pavel Miliukov, without renouncing the negative verdict passed on the communists and on their aims and their methods, acknowledged that perhaps Great Russian state continuity owed something to them, thus coming to terms with the Soviet regime, a choice made after the 1945 victory even by Vasilii Maklakov.12

The non-Russian national communities, first and foremost the Ukrainian, looked instead at their own 1917s, stressing not so much the differences between February and October as their “national” characteristics, which were often raised in acrimonious debates to explain the failure of their state-building efforts. Especially before 1929, these other “national” 1917s often became the natural counterparts to the Russian one within the USSR. Lenin and Stalin’s support for self-determination, the ideas voiced at the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, the formation of the Soviet Union, the choice made in 1923 in favor of korenizatsiia (indigenization), which was concretized in a
number of specific policies, could indeed lead many to read October as the harbinger of non-Russian nation building, so that one could, in fact, speak of a 1917 of the non-Russian nationalities. Among Ukrainians, where some historians and activists like Pavlo Khrystiuk explained the defeats of 1918–1919 by pointing to the colonial character of the Ukrainian experience, even Mykhaïlo Hrushevs’kyi was enthusiastic about this anticolonial 1917 and decided to return from exile in order to build the new Ukraine that 1917 seemed to make possible. In Central Asia, in spite of Sultan Galiev’s expulsion from the party in 1923, the new pro-native policies implemented in 1922–1924 brought about a reversal of the previous verdict of October as a colonial revolution.13

From this perspective, 1917 could be seen as the herald of an anticolonial “world revolution,” to quote from the title of Hans Kohn’s autobiography; that is, of a world nationalist revolution against the imperial powers. Lenin’s insights and words could be used to validate this reading, as was his decision to allow M. N. Roy, the “father” of Indian (and Mexican) communism and himself a former radical Bengali nationalist, to present his thesis along with his own at the Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920. At the time, Stalin was quick to add the words “and the colonial” to his famous booklet, Marxism and the National Question, and Willi Münzenberg, with his League against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression, contributed the fundamentals of communism’s anticolonial discourse, which was to prove so important after 1945. In fact, throughout the 1920s Kohn lauded the Soviet national experiment, maintaining that revolutions would take place not in developed countries, as Marx had predicted, but in those where “the idea of social revolution is linked with that of national liberation,” adding that “it is only in an era of social revolution that the peoples can achieve national liberation” by getting rid of alien rulers. He thus gave new meanings and coherence to elements that one could find in Lenin’s writings and praised the USSR as a “free league of nations enjoying equal rights,” as well as Stalin personally for his management of the “national question.” By the late 1920s such conceptions of 1917 reached their first zenith. In a letter written right before his death in 1925 to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Sun Yat-sen expressed his admiration for the Soviet Union, which stood “at the head of the Union of free republics, the heritage left by the immortal Lenin to the oppressed peoples of the world.” And in 1927,
after visiting the country on the tenth anniversary of the revolution, Nehru expressed similar feelings. At the opposite end of the spectrum, soon after the end of the civil war, the murderous antipeasant and antiworker repressions carried out by the Bolsheviks in 1918–1922 began to crystallize into a vision of the Bolshevik October as a *betrayal* of the hopes for a better future and therefore of “true” socialism, communism, or anarchy. The memoirs of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman and accounts of the Makhnovist movement and the Kronstadt rebellion were of crucial importance, as they revived debates about 1917’s “socialist” and “class” nature. In the 1920s, however, the penetration of this particular reading of 1917 was confined to small (but not insignificant) leftist, especially anarchist, circles and specific émigré communities, like the relatively large leftist Jewish one. Yet, this was only the first of the many waves of disillusionment that in the following decades affected a growing number of leftist leaders and intellectuals, each of whom had her/his own “Brest-Litovsk,” “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” or “1956” moment, in which the meaning and consequences of 1917 were rethought and reassessed.

One might surmise that the disillusionment with the outcome of a self-declared socialist revolution experienced by many inhabitants of adjacent countries, which did have access to a plethora of information about the realities of the civil war and life in the USSR, represented in some way a parallel development, one that, however, immediately worked to discredit socialism, rather than stimulate the search for ways of salvaging it from the Bolshevik disaster.

Stalin’s “Great Turning Point” of 1928–1929, forced collectivization, the “kulak” deportations, and the famines of 1931–1933 brought with them new, crucial changes. Starvation peaked in non-Russian areas, from Kazakhstan to Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, and the German Volga Republic, and culminated—at least in Ukraine—in a drastic revision of pro-Ukrainian policies. The peasant 1917 was thus buried underneath millions of victims, while the nationalities one was seriously damaged and perverted, especially but not solely in the western part of the Soviet Union, with Ukraine and Kazakhstan experiencing a dramatic switch from nation building to nation deconstructing (and rebuilding, at least in Kazakhstan, on a completely new basis).

These two 1917s, however, survived in their original form in photographs of smiling kolkhoz women and Uzbek girls, and their
death and distortion were but rarely verified by external observers. With a few exceptions, such as the works of William Chamberlin and Ante Ciliga, they did not become a matter for reflection. This was so because the European countries that possessed reliable information decided not to use it. Mussolini, for example, read detailed consular reports about the Ukrainian famine, but ordered Italian newspapers to praise the progress of Soviet agriculture, while the anti-Versailles and pro-Russian traditional German elite protected the Soviet image, which Moscow, too, aggressively defended. The 1917s of peasants and nationalities could thus survive in large segments of Western public opinion (where, paradoxically enough in view of collectivization, the slogan “land to the tiller” remained an important tool of communist propaganda), and especially among the European colonies’ newly created nationalistic elites. Churches, including the Catholic Church and religious communities like the Mennonites or the Jews, which also had reliable information at their disposal, did, instead, take notice, as did some émigré communities, especially in North America.17

In the West, plagued by the severe economic crisis of 1929, the 1917 of oppressed workers, peasants, and nationalities was undergoing a crucial mutation. The Soviet state’s organized and planned economy was now the revolution’s most remarkable product, and 1917 thus became the foundation upon which a more rational, efficient, and just socialist “modernity” could be built. Many also swallowed this story because it was consciously and neatly packaged by intelligent intellectuals such as Maxim Gorky. Sydney and Beatrice Webb, for whom Soviet communism was a symbol of a “new civilization” begotten by 1917, were arguably the best known and most gullible Western proponents of such a view, which in many ways harked back to Lenin’s 1917 decrees and the first Soviet laws that, as noted earlier, embodied the hopes of Western progressives who were all too eager to confound words with reality. Some of those who bought or sold 1917 as the herald of a superior socialist modernity knew and at times even proclaimed that this modernity could not simply be the product of good intentions and good laws, but needed to be built barbarically, following in the footsteps of Peter I, who became the first Russian tsar to be rehabilitated by the Bolsheviks. Yet, they added, once this new modernity was built, it could not fail to produce positive effects—a convincing argument, especially in the eyes of Marxists, who were predisposed to believe in the superiority of “structures.”18
Meanwhile, the crises caused by Stalin’s own “Great Turning Point” were pushing him and the bureaucracies he relied upon toward yet another reading of 1917, which at least partially converged with that of the Russian nationalist one. The most important result—and thus the true meaning of the revolution—was now the preservation of the Russian state tradition and state continuity, as the savior of which Stalin began to present himself. This implied the rediscovery of some of that state’s traditions and heroes, great tsars included, with Ivan IV now replacing Peter I, as Eisenstein’s 1944–1945 films would soon indicate.

Not surprisingly, by 1937 Nikolai Berdiaev maintained that 1917 had generated a fifth Russia (after Kyiv, the Tatar yoke, Muscovy, and the Russian Empire) and that Soviet extreme étatisme was but Russia’s traditional state hypertrophy in new clothing. In 1946 Nicholas Timasheff called the choices of the late 1930s a “great retreat,” a phenomenon that was indeed apparent in the cultural field, from the arts to family law, even though, of course, history never moves backward.\(^{19}\)

Stalin, however, did not relinquish any of the new characteristics of the “socialist modernity” whose construction he had supervised: collectivization of the countryside, state control of the economy, maximum possible suppression of markets, the supremacy of politics over society and of the state over the individual, etc. Paradoxically enough, in his influential work *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), Trotsky, while joining the many leftists who had denounced the betrayal of 1917, also justified, in a way, his many followers who had sided in the late 1920s with Stalin’s revolution from above (and were exterminated almost to a man in 1936–1938, when the bulk of the 1917 leadership was liquidated). He did this by acknowledging that the modernity they had odiously built was, after all, essentially good, a womb out of which a new socialist society could emerge. In this version of 1917 as a betrayed revolution, the betrayal was thus redeemed in the long run by the new modernity it had generated.\(^{20}\)

However, even among Trotskyites and former Trotskyites some did not buy this argument, and apparently Trotsky himself was torn by doubts just before his assassination. Was it not the case that Zamiatin’s premonitions were correct and that 1917 was to be seen as a breeder of totalitarianism, a new political category that, after its emergence in early fascist Italy, had transmigrated to anti-Stalinist and anti-Nazi émigré circles? This was the thesis proposed by Bruno Rizzi and James Burnham but also, albeit from another perspective, by the
A CENTURY OF 1917s

distinguished historian Élie Halévy, who, in 1938, saw in World War I (and therefore in 1917 as part of it) a breeding ground of new types of political and social systems that, albeit different from one another, were still genetically connected through their common descent. The Great War and some general trends that were current before its onset were now presented as the wellspring of October and of the regime it begot, whose roots were therefore not to be sought in 1905 or in the socialist tradition alone. Of course, the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact strengthened this reading of 1917, which Rudolph Hilferding, the social democratic thinker whose works had deeply influenced the organization of the Soviet economy, adopted before his death at the hands of the Gestapo in 1941.21

FROM VICTORY TO COLLAPSE: 1917 VERSUS 1945

Then came World War II and the great, epochal victory which seemed to justify and validate all that had happened before. Lenin’s 1917 and Stalin’s 1929 now seemed, to many people, friends and enemies alike, to be a two-stage revolution that had permitted the creation of a different modernity, whose superiority was proved by the capacity to defeat Hitler’s Germany, against whom the European democracies seemed powerless. The iconic year of 1945, therefore, almost immediately began to trump revolution, albeit in an indirect way.

As Stalin said in his famous toast, victory belonged first and foremost to the “Russian people,” who had united around the new state and its leaders. Peoples, not classes, were thus crucial, and the Russian national interpretation of 1917 reached its acme both within the country and in the Russian emigration, some of whose leaders were now willing to cooperate with the regime, as were many Eurasianists and former socialists and liberals of many hues. It seemed clear now that 1917 had refounded, on new and apparently more solid and original foundations, the Great Russian state. Stalin’s sponsored renaissance of the Russian Orthodox Church also pointed in this direction, and in 1947 the official celebrations marking the eight hundredth anniversary of the founding of Moscow received more attention than those connected with the thirtieth anniversary of October, for which, apparently, no official commission was established.22
The revival of the national 1917 applied as well to some non-Russian nationalities, albeit on much more modest and distorted terms. While punished peoples (again: peoples, not classes) suffered from extremely harsh repression, Ukraine and Belarus were allowed to join the United Nations, probably following the British dominions’ example in the League of Nations. The repressed and discriminated Ukrainians, most of whom had lived under German occupation and were thus regarded with deep suspicion, were also given the “Great (soborna) Ukraine” that Ukrainian nationalism had dreamt about for decades.

The 1917 of the victors was also strong in the West, where E. H. Carr was arguably its most intelligent and knowledgeable interpreter. In his *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, written in 1950–1953, he extolled the new and now victorious state as the revolution’s most precious fruit, and the Bolsheviks as state builders, which they were indeed. The year 1905 was both 1917’s herald and necessary basis, the Great War was accorded a minor role, and repressions and the new state’s conflicts with the countryside and many nationalities, as well as the tragedy of war communism and the great famine of 1921–1922, were played down. His focus was, rather, on the attempt to build a rational, new “economic order” based on planning. In fact, the book followed a 1946 publication in which Carr had expressed the wish that the values he saw embodied in the Soviet experience—planning and social justice—could merge with what remained valid in the Western tradition, thus giving life to a new and better modernity, of which 1917, 1929, and 1945 were the founding dates. In a way, Carr followed in the Webbs’ footsteps, as did William Beveridge, who was then using the imaginary Soviet model that the Webbs had created as a tool in the remolding of British society. In so doing, he was substantiating, in a way, the theories used by former Soviet sympathizers after 1991 to legitimate 1917 and the Soviet experience: as terrible as they had been for those who suffered because of them, they had benefited the West, which was compelled to take Soviet propaganda, if not Soviet reality, into account for bettering itself.23

The Soviet victory did not go unnoticed in the crumbling colonial empires, where it strengthened the positive image left by the 1920s, an image that had not been erased by the largely unknown 1930s (no one, for instance, could even suspect that the crudest colonial famine was the one imposed by Moscow upon the Kazakh nomads). In spite of Stalin’s new, war-provoked focus on Europe, which at least partially
contradicted the pre-1929 openness to the colonial world, the leaders of Indian, Chinese, Burmese, Indochinese, and Indonesian anti-Western movements (communist and others) continued to look to the Soviet Union as a model and to 1917 as the harbinger of their liberation.\(^{24}\)

This was also influenced by the apparent success of the Stalinist “big push” of 1928–1932, which seemed to many (we now know this was not the case) to have laid the foundation for victory over Nazism, and which in its turn deeply influenced what was soon to be known as “Development Economics.” Thanks to Alexander Gerschenkron, the Russian and Soviet cases were thus becoming the paradigm of state-led development, a doctrine that of course greatly attracted the leaderships of the newly independent countries of the “Third World,” and which presented October in a new light.\(^{25}\)

However, in spite of Stalingrad and the victory, the antitotalitarian views that had developed in the 1930s and which had matured in the two years of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact did not subside, not least because of the new information about the 1930s that reached the West, for example, via the many war refugees. In 1944 Friedrich von Hayek presented 1917 as the entrance to what he famously called “the road to serfdom.” In postwar Britain George Orwell, who had clashed with Stalinism in Catalonia, passed harsh judgment on Carr, whom he called an “appeaser” ready to follow Moscow’s lead and to abet Stalin’s crimes. In his influential novels, which echoed Zamiatin’s and the anti-Stalinist left’s theories, Orwell, too, presented 1917 as the door to the formation of a totalitarian state.\(^{26}\)

In fact, the totalitarian reading of 1917 was gaining ground and rapidly becoming—albeit in a formalized and at times formalistic version—the leading interpretation of the Soviet experience in a West wishing to fight the Cold War as a continuation of the good war against Hitler and Mussolini. Hanna Arendt’s seminal work of 1951 was followed by famous and influential books, such as those of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl J. Friedrich, who used totalitarianism as a tool to compare communism with Nazism or fascism. Moreover, Mathiez and his school’s interpretation was turned upside down, with Rousseau and Jacobinism becoming carriers of totalitarianism. In 1957 another former member of the communist opposition, Karl Wittfogel, using Marx’s ideas and echoing Plekhanov’s interpretation of Russian history, went so far as to present 1917 as the seed of an “Oriental despotism” that, under Stalin, had spawned a modern version of the “Asiatic
mode of production.” This while in émigré communities, such as the Ukrainian diaspora in North America, the Soviet state was presented as an evil empire and 1917 as the beginning of a series of dreadful “black deeds,” including genocidal famines that still escaped the attention even of anticommunist observers and scholars.27

The less dogmatic Left, which could not deny the Stalinist horrors because of the past Trotskyite sympathies of many of its representatives, responded by rehashing the arguments of the late 1930s, centering on the promise of “another, better modernity” that 1917 held in its bosom. Isaac Deutscher was perhaps the most intelligent and famous proponent of this vision, and in a way his works constituted a more problematic but, all things considered, friendly alternative to Carr’s more straightforwardly pro-Soviet interpretation. According to Deutscher, the modernity that Stalin had built at such a terrible cost could not but provide, in a not so distant future, the basis for a transformation for the better of the Soviet system, which would eventually prove the essentially good kernel of 1917 and the superiority of the revolution vis-à-vis “capitalism.” Khrushchev’s Thaw seemed to confirm his theses, and the groundwork for many popular, if short-lived, accounts of Gorbachev’s perestroika was thus laid.28

The admissions made at the Twentieth Congress, and the many “socialist” regimes that were springing up in the newly decolonized countries which Moscow acknowledged in its slogan of “the national ways to socialism,” gave a new plasticity and multiplicity to 1917 as well. The Soviet socialist regime, in particular, was freed from its previous rigidity. Contrary to what has been maintained by the anti–Cold War, antitotalitarian historians of the 1970s and 1980s, the 1950s were a decade in which ideas and interpretations moved at a fast pace, and distinguished historians, such as Richard Pipes, Oliver Radkey, Solomon Schwarz, and Firuz Kazemzadeh, produced ground-breaking works that greatly advanced our knowledge of the 1917 revolution and the years immediately following it.29

In the early 1960s this process accelerated, especially in the Soviet Union, under the pressure of many intellectuals’ reactions to what could now be openly said about Stalinist repression. As had happened during and immediately after 1917, the nature of the revolution could be—and was—discussed more or less openly in Moscow as well. The publication of the fifth edition of Lenin’s works played a special role here because it included his more problematic writings, especially
those attesting his conflict with Stalin, an aspect that had been censored in previous editions. Their publication strengthened the myth of the “good” Lenin in the eyes of many Soviet critics of the Soviet system, who focused on the relationships between the two leaders and between socialism and Stalinism, searched for the “true Lenin,” and raised the question of the nature of the system built through collectivization and industrialization, leaving aside the civil war and war communism. This agenda also deeply influenced Western historiography, the leftist-leaning one in particular, while the study of collectivization led to a revival of Soviet peasant studies that refocused attention on the peasant 1917 and its destiny, merging with the more general flowering of peasant studies and studies of agrarian structures tied to the post-colonial experience as well as to modernization theories.

Already by the second half of the 1960s, however, the gradual widening of the chasm between Soviet “progressives” and the new Brezhnevite ruling group, and the subsequent crisis precipitated by the suppression of the Prague Spring, impelled part of the Soviet intelligentsia to raise new questions about Lenin and 1917. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who almost won the Lenin Prize at the beginning of the decade, was the main player here. By the time the 1960s ended he had written *The Gulag Archipelago*, a powerful indictment of the regime since its very beginning (1917 was when it all began). This work would be followed by an equally damning analysis of Lenin’s role in this moral disaster. Overall, however, Lenin and 1917 remained outside the target of criticism that in the USSR was still directed mainly against Stalin and the 1930s. Even Ukrainian protodissidents like Ivan Dziuba initially presented their denunciation of Great Russian nationalism in the Soviet Union within the framework of the betrayal of Lenin’s initial, well-intentioned policies, lauded as the embodiment of the 1917 of the non-Russian nationalities.

Despite this relative shielding of October and its magician from criticism, the 1960s were also the years that marked the beginning of 1917’s open enfeeblement. In the USSR, the regime that once based its legitimacy on it decided to celebrate the 1945 victory as an alternative, closer, and much stronger (because it was more popular in Soviet, especially Russian, society) source of such legitimacy. In 1965 the first victory parade was held with immense success, and even books that criticized Stalin’s catastrophic 1941, as Alexander Nekrich’s did, contributed to placing the war at center stage.
In the West, the weakening also came with blows that were struck at the links established between 1789 and 1917, between the Terror and the October, between Jacobins and Bolsheviks. In that same 1965, when the disgraced Marshal Zhukov marched triumphantly in the May 9 parade, François Furet analyzed the difference and the discontinuities between 1789 and 1792–1793, reevaluating the former and removing the aura surrounding the Terror and its protagonists. They were no longer presented as the acme of the revolutionary process, as Marxist historiography once did, but rather as an accident caused by contingencies. Indirectly, this also meant liberating February from October’s grip and breaking the chain of inevitability linking the Jacobin Terror to the Bolshevik October via 1848, the Commune, and 1905—a chain in which February was just a minor parenthesis. Furet’s work also reinforced Alfred Cobban’s criticism of the “bourgeois” nature of 1789 (and thus indirectly of 1917’s socialist nature). He thus undermined the unidirectionality and predictability of history claimed by Marxism at a higher level, a maneuver that Walt Whitman Rostow had just completed in the field of economics with his anti-Marxist theory of economic stages, presented as a “noncommunist manifesto.” Thus, by the second half of the 1960s, February was acquiring a life of its own, even though scholars like Marc Ferro, who in 1967 devoted to it the first volume of his opus on 1917, still presented February as the origin of October.33

In those very years, however, under the combined impetus of the “anti-imperialist” struggles waged by many communist-influenced or -led national liberation movements as well as students’ and workers’ agitations in the West, 1917—October in particular—was getting a new lease on life that was to last approximately one decade. The new left’s innovations did not vanish without a trace, as some of its members later joined the ranks of historians. Richard Stites, for example, stressed 1917’s alternative cultural traits, and many studies exploring the women’s role and question during the revolution and afterwards were produced, giving women their own 1917. Yet, as attested by the many books devoted to the workers’ 1917 and by the return of more orthodox Marxist interpretations, including those stressing the teleological nature of history (Leopold Haimson, for example, studied the 1905 and 1912 strikes to show that the revolution was not a consequence of World War I or of Lenin’s abilities), this revival was, at least on the surface, of a rather traditional nature, with the working
class and the party trumping other players. In line with the exaltation of grassroots activism in the 1960s, however, the emphasis was on an approach “from below,” focusing on social actors and contesting the totalitarian school, which was reduced to a rigid, mechanical, and ideological caricature. In particular, the social trumped the national, as if it were possible and fruitful to detach elements that were so closely intertwined; this choice was also applied to the study of the interwar decades. An original perspective on the role of the social in 1917 was put forward in the late 1970s by Barrington Moore Jr.’s student Theda Skocpol. She revived the comparative study of revolutions associated with Crane Brinton by stressing the role of structures rather than individuals (thus anticipating, in a way, the functionalists versus intentionalists debate on Nazism), but was later to recognize the role of state bureaucracies as agents of social change.

The weakening of the national 1917 continued throughout the 1970s and part of the 1980s, a consequence of the end, in the mid-1970s, of the great wave of decolonization that had given such a preeminent role to the national question after 1945. It was attested, for example, by the ease with which “Russia” and “USSR” were used synonymously in influential books by prominent scholars, not to mention in Western public discourse—a choice that both Lenin and Stalin would have contested. This was the case even with Moshe Lewin, perhaps the most original student of Soviet history of that period, despite his past militancy in a left Zionist organization that offered him a clear vision of the importance of state building, state builders and despots, as well as of national considerations. In fact, his social history, which stressed the role of both social, especially agrarian, structures and political agency, was significantly different from the one prevailing among historians at the time. In his 1917 and civil war, as well as in his 1929, classes—the working class in particular—were relegated to a lower position compared to state-building attempts, “plebeian” bureaucracies, and peasants, while the national question figured prominently in the book he devoted to the Lenin-Stalin conflict. This work imported into Western academia the notion of an essentially good Lenin and good October betrayed by a terrible Stalin, who succeeded in temporarily crushing that positive kernel of which Stephen Cohen made Bukharin a symbol in 1973, in a biography whose impact was to be revived by perestroika.
The “modernizing” 1917 also made a comeback, along with some minor analytical innovations that at times trivialized it and strengthened its predictive pretensions, already present in both Trotsky and Deutscher. Whereas authors like H. Gordon Skilling and Jerry Hough presented the Soviet Union as an already modern society, which should have been understood as such as far as its certainly peculiar political system was concerned, Richard Lowenthal saw in it a fully formed modern society waiting for a backward political regime to come in line with it. In 1977 Basile Kerblay put forward such a thesis, bolstered by seemingly solid empirical evidence; in 1983 Lewin tied this modernizing 1917 to the “good Lenin, good October/bad Stalin” hypothesis by claiming that the changes that 1917 had permitted (as described by Kerblay) created new possibilities and solutions that could have been quickly embodied in a new, reformist leadership, which found its inspiration in Lenin and Bukharin’s NEP. Meanwhile, the modernizing reading was being applied also to single nationalities, as was the case in Bohdan Krawchenko’s study of Ukraine.36

Eastern European dissidents noted instead the peculiarities, limits, and internal contradictions of socialist “modernization,” that is, of the regimes that were directly or indirectly begotten by 1917, emphasizing how such supposed modernization also produced economic and cultural backwardness as well as mass reactionary behaviors and ideologies. Albeit often unwittingly, they thus echoed the early 1920s’ war communism debates. The 1970s also saw the emergence of a vision of 1917 and the socialist October, in particular, as the generators of a move “backward” to a neotraditional society of a new, modern, yet far from “modern,” type, among whose features were a pyramidal power system legitimated by and intimately tied to an official, para-religious ideology, the static nature of a caste-like, status-based society, and the extreme feebleness of civil society, etc. Emmanuel Todd called the Soviet Union a “feudal society” whose ruling caste was not a class because it derived its privileges from its hierarchical position, not its economic position, and even Brzezinski maintained that 1917 had caused the reemergence of old traits of Russian political culture, including autocracy. Robert Tucker reached similar conclusions, and questioned his earlier, positive reading of Soviet modernization, thus acknowledging its “essential” peculiarity. Lewin spoke of Stalinism as an agrarian despotism, while Richard Pipes established a parallelism between ancient Muscovy and the USSR, interpreting both as “patrimonial” states. In 1983 this
reading was formalized by Ken Jowitt’s “Soviet Neotraditionalism,” which presented another neo-Weberian interpretation of 1917’s results, stressing charisma and its degeneration, rather than patrimonialism.37

These pessimistic prognoses went hand in hand with political pronouncements coming, significantly, from opposite sides, such as Enrico Berlinguer’s 1981 commentary about 1917’s loss of promise and potential and Ronald Reagan’s 1983 concept of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” (a creature from the past, however imaginary). Meanwhile, anticommunist historians like Robert Conquest were presenting the state born out of 1917 as a malevolent creature starving its own subjects to death rather than as a modern totalitarianism. The image of 1917 and its power of attraction were thus receiving what seemed to be definitive blows.

Soon afterwards, however, October got a new lease on life (its last) thanks to Gorbachev’s perestroika. This brief but exciting period seemed rather to confirm the old Trotskyite prophecy, renewed by Deutscher in the 1950s and revived by Kerblay and Lewin only a few years earlier. Yes, socialists could now shout: Stalinism had been a monstrous disaster, but 1917 planted good seeds, Soviet society did modernize along original and promising ways, and now the time had come to reap their fruits. Great expectations, however, gave way quickly to even greater disappointment. Paradoxically enough, by the end of the 1980s the very term “totalitarianism,” under whose banner the Cold War had been fought, became current among Soviet reformers, including Gorbachev, who had also openly disowned, since the beginning of his leadership, one of the main legacies of October: the legitimacy and profitability of the use of force to reach one’s goals. After the bitter failure of Soviet reformism, at least part of the Western intellectual left followed suit, applying the “totalitarianism” label to the product of the 1917 revolution soon after the most original critics of the Soviet experience had begun referring to it critically.38

1917 AFTER 1991

The 1991 shock, with the lowering of the red flag over the Kremlin, seemed to solve all the riddles: 1917—October, first and foremost—had been a wrong turn. “Russia” had then taken a Sonderweg course that was doomed to fail and which had brought her from capitalism back
to capitalism via seventy years of totalitarian disaster; a path attested in important books such as those by Martin Malia or François Furet, not to mention The Black Book of Communism.\textsuperscript{39}

In the new Russia’s public discourse, within a few short years 1945 spontaneously replaced 1917 as the state’s legitimizing event, even on the revolution’s traditional holiday celebrated on 7 November. As Arsenii Roginskii noted perspicaciously,\textsuperscript{40} this happened almost by default during a frantic search for a usable past. First, there was a brief interval in which a democratic and liberal February, not the Bolshevik October, was extolled. But the realization came soon that 1917 was not a good year to celebrate in any case. Alternative figures and events thus followed one another but to no avail: from Petr Stolypin, whom no one remembered, to the distant—from all perspectives—Peter I. By 1995, following the bombardment of Russia’s Parliament, the Russian constitutional crisis of 1993, and with the First Chechen War causing nightmares for the democrats (not to mention the liberals) in power, the victory in World War II made a dramatic comeback because it was indeed a truly popular event. Besides, it was possible to build—perhaps unconsciously at first—upon the solid Soviet foundations of the Brezhnev era. On 13 March 1995 Yeltsin signed a law proclaiming November 7 the “Day of Russian Military Glory” celebrating the anniversary of a military parade held on Moscow’s Red Square in 1941 that commemorated the twenty-fourth anniversary of the “Great October Socialist Revolution,” a Great October Revolution that was thus shown the door.\textsuperscript{41} However, as Brezhnevites had already discovered in the late 1960s, a stake on the war unavoidably meant reanimating not just the people’s anti-Nazi epic, but also Great Russian pride and arrogance, and the despot who presided over the victory in World War II. This was so because, as Vasily Grossman demonstrated so beautifully, the Soviet war experience was a deeply and dramatically ambivalent phenomenon—and for some “Soviet peoples” more so than for others. Choosing it as the legitimizing myth of the new Russian state thus had profound and only partly palatable consequences.

The search for alternative usable “legitimizing” pasts and events to replace the revolutionary ones also took place in other postsocialist and post-Soviet countries. In the Baltic republics and the former Soviet satellites of Central-Eastern Europe, 1917 was replaced by 1918, chosen as the year that generated the interwar republics in which many
of these countries saw their legitimate predecessors (in Poland, for instance, an illusory continuity between the post-1989 Republic and the pre-1939 and prepartitions republics was postulated). In Ukraine, the choice fell instead on the Holodomor of 1932–1933, with the 1918 republic remaining but a minor option, while in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan, the situation was more complicated because of the human and cultural destruction that the Soviet experience wrought upon the land.42

In the scholarly world in the 1990s, new sources and new studies undermined what was left of the traditional, ritualized 1917 of the past. Despite bitter but in fact superficial disagreements, with his monumental edition of political police reports on the countryside from 1918 through the 1930s Viktor Danilov was in fact completing the work of Robert Conquest and other scholars studying the famines, proving that the new state had engaged in a cruel war against its peasantry already during the civil war, a war that was fought again in 1928–1933 and won thanks to the use of starvation and unrelenting violence. The peasant 1917 was thus laid to rest. Meanwhile, Lewin wrote of the “quasi genocidal” character of the civil war, Peter Holquist studied the 1914–1917–1921 continuum and the consequences of the Bolsheviks’ “category-based” approach to “social surgery,” while Richard Pipes and Vladimir Brovkin stressed the links between 1917 and the civil war, bestowing an image on the latter that was much closer to the complicated and terrible one which had emerged soon after its conclusion, than to the later, ritualized Red-and-White affair.43

The diversification of 1917 and of the civil war that it unleashed was also fed by archive-based studies of their developments in the provinces, such as Orlando Figes’s work, or in the national regions of the former Russian Empire. In this way, too, 1917 became an integral part of the following conflicts, set in motion in December 1917 by socialist Russia’s declaration of war on socialist Ukraine, not by the Czechoslovak Legion affair of 1918. These conflicts were closely related to World War I, and the civil war clearly was not just “Russian,” as it had been commonly called. Rather, it was an intricate web of political, social, national, colonial, and religious confrontations, in which ideas and ideologies counted as much as elementary passions and impulses, and whose protagonists were scores of protostates in formation and of an extremely diversified character, covering the entire spectrum from
new, grand imperial, or supranational schemes to national, local, or even anarchist ones. Multiple 1917s thus generated multiple civil wars, with multiple victories and defeats, from Finland to Central Asia and Siberia, wars in which multilingual, multireligious territories played a crucial role. An imperial and colonial 1917 and civil war also emerged, in Ukraine as in Kazakhstan, with its imperial and colonial legacy, a legacy that the events and the famines of the early 1930s were to complicate and deepen.44

The discovery and slowly growing awareness of the genocidal nature of the 1931–1933 famines and of the mechanism of group targeting and liquidation that lay at the basis of dekulakization and the secret decrees regulating the Terror of 1937–1938, the genocidal consequences of the “punishment” of peoples during World War II, and the almost complete destruction of religious hierarchies, targeted as such, in the 1930s, etc., are slowly making of the USSR one of the classic loci of twentieth-century genocidal practices. In the not too distant future this may well lead to a conceptualization of 1917 as an incubator of genocides, directly tied to the formative experience of the civil war as well as to the Marxist category-based approach to social analysis and political action, and to the ways of thinking of some Soviet leaders.45

New sources and new research also gave new life to the debates around 1917 as the breeding ground of a new, different society. Intelligent observers, such as Stephen Kotkin, spoke of a specific “Soviet modernity,” noting how, beyond unquestionable but often superficial affinities, modernizations could in fact be very different and produce social systems following essentially different rules.46 In this way a bridge was created to the neotraditional reading of the Soviet experience, which of course did not deny the reality represented by large factories, urbanization, or the modernizing discourse of Soviet ruling groups. The problem thus became why and how some of the principles governing this new, different modernity reproduced, albeit in a new garb, traits that were specific to premodern societies, including the formation of a status-based system and “traditionalist” cultural beliefs and value-systems.

The turn soon taken by Russia under Putin seems to emphasize the strength of the neotraditional Soviet legacy. It also gave new life to the reading of 1917 as an event reviving Russian “otherness,” that is, Russia’s purported essential difference from the West, which the
intellectuals praising the new president soon began to sing in different tones. The Russian Orthodox Church, too, joined the chorus, but without forgetting about its martyrs (in 2017 Putin’s spiritual father, Bishop Tikhon, inaugurated an imposing new church devoted to them on Bolshaia Lubianka Street). The early Eurasianists’ 1917 thus appears to be vindicated, while contemporary extollers of Russian state glory preach, in the “single-flow” conception of Russian history, an oxymoron in which communism and its opponents, along with Stalin, traditional peasant values, and the clerics whom he exterminated, can all embrace each other, because they all contributed to the greatness of Russia and to her victory. According to this interpretation, the fall of tsarism is a catastrophe that endangered the survival of the Russian state and which was partially remedied by the Bolsheviks’ state-building capability, and 1917 is a source of embarrassment because it lays bare the many contradictions and possibilities that today still vivify Russia and her history. Thus, it needs to be played down or, when this is not possible, emasculated.47

Conclusions

Nineteen seventeen is plural in its legacies as well. The most obvious legacy is that represented by the radical aspiration to a new and better world, which still continues to exist, even though it is much weakened in comparison to its past strength; traces of it have appeared in recent opinion articles that the New York Times published on the “Red Century.” Some of the reasons explaining this diminishment, which may be connected, especially in Europe, to the aging population, have been discussed above. Today, as in the past, this is a 1917 detached from knowledge of the Soviet experience and fed by the moral rejection of the reality in which its believers live, as well as by their desires to improve this reality.

Of course, there are other, much more concrete, legacies. One is embodied in what can be called the 1917 of the “structural damage” suffered in the twentieth century by former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries. This is primarily due to their socialist experience, which ranged from the tragedies of the interwar period in the Soviet republics to the stunted and crippled, yet comparatively good years of the late
1950s and 1960s. The damage is especially apparent when compared to the West’s economic miracle, and when one considers alcoholism and a disastrous life expectancy rate in the Soviet and Eastern Bloc space, particularly but not solely among men. These phenomena go a long way toward explaining the repudiation of 1917 in the former socialist Europe and its substitution by 1945 victory in Russia. Because of 1917, Russia too “lost the twentieth century,” to quote Solzhenitsyn, and caused many other countries and peoples to lose it; bad times were worse and good times shorter and less brilliant than elsewhere in Europe, and life today is generally more burdensome.

The legacy of 1917 in Central Asia can be seen as a version of the structural-damage category: Uzbekistan’s cotton monoculture and ecological disaster evoke an extreme, if peculiar, colonial experience, as the Soviet past is indeed presented in the republic’s post-1991 narrative. Above all, the 1931–1933 famine provoked a radical break in Kazakh history, which then embarked on a new path. The strength of this blow was such that knowledge and awareness of it are slowly emerging only today, and it is not difficult to imagine that they will not fail to have important repercussions in the future.

There is thus also a political, cultural, and psychological legacy of 1917 and of the Soviet experience, comprised of the traumatic and long-denied pasts of traumatized peoples, beginning with the “punished” ones. In Russia this legacy is also embodied in a state continuity that the Putin regime has been very careful to emphasize in the “single-flow” conception of Russian history, which brought the regime to downplay 1917, on the one hand, and to vaunt it as a Russian world-historical event, on the other. Such an interpretation of Russian history has little to do with historical research and much with state propaganda. Yet, the continuity between Putin’s Russia and the Soviet state or, better, the legacy of the latter in the former cannot be denied—either in the ideological field, in whose brew “Soviet patriotism” is an important ingredient, or in state behaviors, as attested by the recourse to dezinformatsiia (misinformation) and repressive practices, or in the policies being pursued in the “near abroad,” now renamed Russkii mir. Furthermore, the still huge Russian strategic arsenal, Russia’s military-industrial complex, and the wars fought along the old Soviet internal borders are reminders of the still-powerful presence of 1917.

However, 1917’s most important legacy for Russia as well as Europe is perhaps the chasm that the revolution, and then its interpretation by
the Stalinist leadership, and Soviet behaviors dug over time between Moscow and the rest of the continent. In this context, the early Eurasianists’ interpretation of 1917 as a stop on the march leading Russia toward becoming an integral part of Europe in cultural, political, and economic terms is at least partially validated. And this is perhaps the most important legacy of 1917—and the saddest, especially but not solely in view of the 1990s delusions—for both the European continent in particular and Western culture more generally. Even though, of course, new events may still reverse this course toward separation.

On a global scale, however, the most important legacies are those deriving from Lenin’s two main political intuitions and innovations. The first is the 1917 of the nationalities, embodied, at first glance, in the states of the post-Soviet space. Yet its most important incarnation may be India’s linguistic state reorganization of the mid-1950s, which looked directly at the Soviet experience of the 1920s, albeit with important variations. The second and perhaps by far most important legacy derives from Lenin’s discovery and formalization of the party-state model in 1917–1918. Despite its crisis in countries where it was combined with an unviable socialist economic system—in those places where the party-state was capable of eliminating the latter, as Deng did quite effectively in China after Mao’s death, the party-state seems capable of managing, and, given the crisis besetting liberal democracies, it may even prove to be a dangerous competitor in the future.50

In spite of its undeniable enfeeblement, therefore, 1917 is still alive but wearing new clothes. And recognizing it and its consequences and legacy is still crucial to understanding the world in which we live, a world that still bears its mark.

Notes


As Professor Roccucci wrote to me, the religious dimension deeply influenced the representations of 1917; more, however, on the public opinion level and within religious confessions than in the reflections of intellectuals. Persecutions resulted in the swift elaboration of a negative image of 1917, reconnecting with the antirevolutionary animosity raised by 1789, which was revived by the persecutions of the 1930s, when both Pope Pius XI and the Archbishop of Canterbury repeatedly condemned the revolutionary experience (the Russian Orthodox Church having been drastically weakened by that point). American public opinion proved particularly receptive.

4. This is now made easier by the site *Velikii oktiabr’ god za godom (1917–1990)*, https://leninism.su/revolution-and-civil-war/4251-velikij-oktyabr-god-za-godom-1917-1990.html, which has published many of the official speeches given by Soviet leaders over time.


38 G R A Z I O S I


Bolsheviks’ “tyrannical socialism” in 1920, in the 1930s the Austrian socialist leader Otto Bauer adopted a more favorable position toward what he thought was being built in the USSR. See O. Bauer, Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen? Die Krise der Weltwirtschaft, der Demokratie und des Sozialismus (Bratislava: E. Prager, 1936).


22. Roccucci, Stalin e il patriarca.


40. Roginskii shared his thoughts on this question at the international conference on Stalinism organized by ROSSPEN in Moscow in 2008.


45. N.M. Naimark, *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also the forum devoted to Naimark’s book in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 149–89. Many years ago, Oleg Khlevniuk emphasized in a letter to me the fact that many of Stalin’s policies presented what could be termed genocidal features: “No matter the problem which arose in the country, it was solved through the application of violence directed at specific and well-defined socio-cultural or national groups of the population.” An impressive, if indirect, checklist of why the Soviet Union may be considered a classic locus of modern genocides can be drawn up by reading the insightful discussion of the genocide category that Scott Straus offers in his *Making and Unmaking of Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015), 17–27.


