In March 1917 the Romanov dynasty, which had ruled the Russian Empire for more than three hundred years, collapsed amid popular unrest and the travails of the First World War. A provisional government was set up in Petrograd under Alexander Kerensky, but eight months later the provisional government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, a small but well-organized party led by Vladimir Lenin. Unlike Kerensky, the Bolsheviks immediately began establishing a new autocracy, giving rise to what became the Soviet communist regime and the immense Soviet state that it ruled for nearly seventy-five years. Andrea Graziosi has provided a wide-ranging, erudite survey of the past century’s changing interpretations of 1917. He discusses not only how the Soviet regime over the years altered its official interpretation of 1917, but also how Western scholars, Soviet dissidents, and key figures in Ukraine and other non-Russian republics of the USSR interpreted 1917 at various moments. Graziosi extends his survey into the twenty-first century, showing how governments and scholars in both the former USSR and the West have viewed 1917 during the first few decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly on the hundredth anniversary in 2017.

In this brief commentary I want to address the two questions I have raised in the title: What was 1917 and what was its significance?

**What Was 1917?**

Graziosi’s own conception of 1917 is broad. Rather than limiting it to the events of that one year, he conceives of it as a process that was set
in motion by those events—a process that led to the Russian Civil War, the victory of the Bolsheviks, the consolidation of a Bolshevik regime, the formal creation of the Soviet Union, and, eventually, the Stalinist transformation of Soviet society. He is fully justified in adopting this broad conception, but he never really explains why he adopts it. He could have done so by discussing what a revolution is. A revolution can best be defined as a process that unfolds in phases: (a) one or more unofficial political groups emerge that seek to wrest control of part or all of a state from the existing authorities, usually through extralegal means, in order to implement a new political and social order; (b) the challenging group marshals sufficient resources and support to gain control of part or all of a state and to begin getting rid of all potential rivals; and (c) the newly empowered group begins implementing the new political and social order it envisages.¹

This processional conception of revolution, or what Charles Tilly called a “great revolution,” encompasses the period in Russia, Ukraine, and other lands of the former tsarist empire from 1917 through the 1930s. The process began in 1917, but it can be understood as a revolution only if one extends it beyond that one year to include all the features of a revolution. Hence, Graziosi is right to adopt a broad conception of 1917. Changing interpretations of 1917 necessarily pertain to the entire process that began that year.

**What Was the Significance of 1917?**

Graziosi’s lapidary analysis of the way official and academic interpretations of 1917 have changed over the years alludes repeatedly to the significance of 1917. Although he never precisely specifies what he himself sees as the significance of that year, his discussion touches on several topics that help us understand its current meaning. At the same time, Graziosi omits or downplays certain topics that need to be taken into account in order to gauge the scholarly and political significance of 1917.

Graziosi briefly mentions the role of the First World War as a breeding ground for 1917 and the rampant violence that followed, but this topic deserves even greater emphasis. The war was the culmination of profound organizational and technological changes. The Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century had transformed warfare
into “total war,” involving clashes of enormous armies, wide-ranging destruction, and immense bloodshed. This phenomenon, reinforced by the advent of railroads, high-powered explosive shells, photography, and the telegraph, had shaped Russia’s interactions with great-power rivals throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The First World War markedly accelerated that trend, bringing violence to a new scale. More than three million inhabitants of tsarist imperial lands, including 1.2 million in Ukraine, were killed in the war. Many of these were soldiers who died during the failed offensive launched by Kerensky’s government in the summer of 1917—a failure that gravely weakened the army’s morale. The rampant violence of the war not only helped spawn the upheavals of 1917, but also carried over to the gruesome fighting of the Russian Civil War and the Bolshevik consolidation of power.

The violence that gave rise to and surrounded the events of late 1917 had important conceptual implications. Scholars of revolution from the nineteenth century through the 1970s had only a limited number of cases on which to base their theories and observations. The French Revolution was one such case, figuring prominently in all classic works on the subject, including those by Alexis de Tocqueville, Crane Brinton, Charles Tilly, Ted Robert Gurr, and Theda Skocpol, among many others. The events of 1917–1921 in the former Russian Empire became another standard case in the literature. Because of the limited number of cases and the seminal importance of 1789 and 1917, the literature on revolutions long assumed that the transfer of power in a sociopolitical revolution had to occur violently, as it did in both of those momentous years. The upheavals in Russia and Ukraine from late 1917 through 1921 were one of the main reasons that social scientists and historians came to see violence as an intrinsic feature of revolutionary change.

Not until the late twentieth century did the role of violence in theories of revolution come up for reexamination. Driving this new scrutiny was a long series of revolutionary upheavals from the late 1970s onward that never turned violent. Nowadays a crucial topic in the literature on revolutions is the distinction between violent and nonviolent revolutions. A plethora of research has shown that violent revolutions are likely to be followed by renewed bouts of violence, as contending groups increasingly sense that they will be marginalized.
or even wiped out if they do not seek to assert themselves forcibly.\textsuperscript{3} The repeated use of violence creates a moral hazard whereby even normally peaceful groups lose their inhibitions about resorting to violence. Moreover, a violent revolution tends to empower the most ruthless of the contending factions and brings to the fore the most implacable elements within these factions, who usually have little or no inclination to share power afterward.

The violent change of power also instills a zero-sum mentality among those who emerge victorious, spurring them to eschew any future compromises with opponents and to try to remain in power through all means fair and foul. These conditions militate against the emergence of liberal democratic institutions and favor the rise of brutal rulers who seek to entrench themselves in office. Peaceful revolutions, as in Portugal in 1974, the Philippines in 1986, Czechoslovakia and East Germany in 1989, Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Tunisia in 2011, are by no means guaranteed to be followed by the emergence of liberal democracy. The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 occurred with almost no violence, but it was followed by the entrenchment of a ruthless authoritarian state headed by Islamic clerics. In other cases, too, extralegal changes of power are apt to hinder the acceptance of democratic practices and institutions and may create opportunities for rent-seeking and political corruption for many years afterward. Nonetheless, on average, the prospects for the eventual emergence of democracy are better after peaceful revolutions than after violent ones, including the violence used by the Bolsheviks from late 1917 on.\textsuperscript{4}

Another question that needs to be explored more is how to conceptualize the strikingly different events of 1917. Graziosi highlights the diverse national perspectives on 1917, not least in Ukraine, Georgia, and Central Asia. Various elements in Russia, such as journalists, scientists, Kremlin officials, parliamentarians, Russian Orthodox clergy, university professors, entrepreneurs, and social activists, also diverge markedly in their attitudes toward 1917. The multiplicity of these national, social, and political perspectives is part of the reason that Graziosi is correct in arguing that there were “many 1917s.” But in making that argument, he goes too far when he dismisses “the traditional [dichotomy of] February versus October,” a juxtaposition he regards as “simplistic” and “binary.”
No doubt the juxtaposition is “binary,” but it is not “simplistic.” The disjunction between March (February) and November (October) is fundamental to the meaning of 1917, and Graziosi in both the title of his essay and the text focuses on the “October Revolution.” He contends that “the February Revolution certainly deserves more” attention than he gives it in his essay, but he insists that his decision to focus solely on November (October) “can be defended in light of twentieth-century history.” Perhaps he is right about this (I assume he is referring to the fact that the Bolsheviks remained in power for seventy-four years), but his curt dismissiveness of the contrast between March and November is regrettable.

The contrast between March and November is in fact one of the most tantalizing features of 1917. March brought the overthrow of a despotic regime in the face of widespread popular unrest and ushered in a brief period of relative freedom—the only such period in Russia’s and Ukraine’s history until the end of the Soviet era. November brought an end to that fleeting period of relative freedom and the advent of a new, harsher autocracy. March was crucial for what happened in November, even though the outcome was very different. If just November had happened, 1917 would be remembered solely as a catastrophe. The fact that March occurred allows us to see 1917 as a year of initial promise and excitement followed by calamity and tyranny. In that respect, it presaged other revolutionary years, such as 1973 in Afghanistan, 1979 in Iran, and 2011 in Arab countries.

Graziosi perceptively discusses the Bolsheviks’ anticolonial rhetoric, referring to the external as well as internal implications of the rhetoric. This topic, however, deserves even greater emphasis, not least because the Bolsheviks’ proclaimed opposition to colonialism attracted support in large swaths of the world over the decades—especially in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East—and even today it still shapes interpretations of 1917 in those regions. As the First World War was ending, both Woodrow Wilson in the United States and Vladimir Lenin in Russia were calling for “national self-determination,” a concept that the European colonial powers found distinctly unwelcome. Wilson and Lenin were using the same phrase but were referring to different things. In a speech before a joint session of Congress in February 1918 Wilson enunciated the principle of national self-determination in expansive terms: “National aspirations must be
respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. ‘Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase; it is an imperative principle of action.” This formulation could have had far-reaching repercussions, but Wilson in his 14 Points applied it only to nations subsumed within contiguous European land empires, and he did not subsequently extend it to most of the overseas colonies.

Lenin had been writing about “national self-determination” long before 1917, applying it specifically to the tsarist Russian Empire, which he had famously denounced as a “prison house of nations.” In a series of essays in 1913 addressing ongoing debates in Russia about the “right of nations to self-determination,” and even more in a lengthy three-part essay “On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination” published in 1914, Lenin argued that national groups living in the Russian Empire had a right to secede from the central Russian state. Shortly after the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in November 1917, they issued a Declaration of the Rights of Russia’s Nations, affirming that the constituent nationalities in the former tsarist empire were entitled to secede.

But after several nations, including Ukraine, set up independent states, the Bolsheviks moved swiftly to annul the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and reassert control through military force. This process took several years, but by 1922, when the Soviet Union was formally constituted, the Red Army had regained the former holdings (above all, Ukraine) for the new state. Even though, as Graziosi points out, the Bolsheviks’ emphasis on korenizatsiia in the 1920s indicated some continued tolerance of separate nation building within the USSR (until Joseph Stalin decisively ended that approach in the 1930s), the quest to bring secessionist areas back under Soviet control might have eroded the Soviet Union’s image among colonized peoples in Asia and Africa had it not been for the Bolsheviks’ skill in presenting their new regime as an opponent of colonialism throughout the world, not just in the Russian Empire. In his November 1918 essay on “The October Revolution and the National Question” Stalin declared that “the great worldwide significance of the October Revolution lies chiefly in the fact that it has widened the scope of the national question and converted it from the particular question of combating national oppression in Europe into the general question of emancipating oppressed peoples, colonies, and semicolonies from imperialism.” These sentiments were spread far and wide by the newly created Communist International (Comintern)
and by other bodies sponsored by the Bolsheviks to promote “world revolution against imperialism,” thus paving the way for the Soviet Union’s later role as a champion of guerrilla warfare used by “national liberation movements” to break away from European colonial powers.

As decolonization unfolded from the 1940s through the 1970s with active Soviet support, the Bolsheviks’ proclamation that 1917 “greatly facilitated the cause of the emancipation of the oppressed peoples of the West and East” gained further cachet in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. According to Aboubacar Maiga, a political commentator in Mali, the 1917 upheavals gave African radicals “hope for [waging] such a struggle for freedom in their own countries.”

Despite the Soviet Union’s own colonial-like policies in Central Asia and other republics of the USSR, most of the leaders of African and Asian independence movements (especially those supporting far-left agendas) saw the USSR as an ally in their struggles. "The centenary of 1917 came around, many commentators and officials in Third World states continued to speak warmly and nostalgically about the help they believed their countries had received from the Soviet Union.”

However, the Soviet regime’s efforts to imbue 1917 with an anti-colonial ethos and to depict itself as a principled opponent of colonialism came back to haunt Soviet leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when independence-minded groups in the non-Russian republics of the USSR increasingly referred to the Soviet Union itself as an “empire.” These activists’ use of an anti-imperialist discourse was intended to legitimize their own claims to independence and to discredit the Soviet state, in much the same way that the Bolsheviks used such rhetoric as a weapon against their main rivals in Europe. By the time the USSR ended, the term also had gained favor among Russians, who argued that Russia, too, had been exploited by the communist regime.

In the scholarly world as well, characterizations of the Soviet Union as an “empire” suddenly became commonplace in the wake of the state’s demise. To the extent that “empires in the modern world,” as Ian Lustick has pointed out, “are expected to break apart,” this new fashion was perfectly understandable. Before December 1991 some scholars had still been leery of describing the Soviet Union as an “empire” lest they imply that the state would definitely come unravelled, but those concerns became obsolete once the USSR was formally dissolved. Typical was the title of a book that was published in 2014.
by my colleague Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire*, analyzing the final months of the Soviet Union. Some experts on China, such as Odd Arne Westad, whose survey of Chinese history from 1750 through the early twenty-first century is titled *Restless Empire* (a characterization he applies to current-day China, with its hold over Tibet and Xinjiang Province, and not just to Imperial China), might dispute Plokhy’s characterization of the Soviet Union as the “last” such entity, but the term “empire” has appeared in many other books and articles about the USSR’s multinational configuration. Although one can argue that the term obscures more than it illuminates, there is no doubt that it is now commonly used by scholars when discussing the state that once prided itself on being the leader of the world’s “anti-imperial” forces.

One final point worth highlighting in Graziosi’s first-rate analysis is the Bolsheviks’ war against the peasantry. In 1917 peasants constituted some 80–85 percent of the tsarist empire’s population and were close to 100 percent in large parts of the country. Some romanticized versions of 1917 have depicted the Bolsheviks as champions of the peasantry as well as the urban proletariat, but Graziosi demonstrates convincingly both in this essay and elsewhere that the regime’s campaign to crush the peasantry and subordinate the countryside to the needs of the urban population began as soon as the Bolsheviks seized power, with forced confiscations of grain, the uprooting of peasant families, and the use of brutal repression against those who resisted. The destruction of the peasantry was as much Lenin’s policy as it was Stalin’s. Even though Stalin greatly intensified the campaign by pursuing dekulakization, which killed millions of people, forcible collectivization, which led to mass starvation and the deaths of millions more in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and southern Russia, and crash industrialization, which came at a terrible price for the countryside, the tragic fate of Russian and Ukrainian peasants was sealed earlier, in 1917.

**Conclusion**

Graziosi’s superb overview of changing interpretations of 1917 during the Soviet era and in the years since 1991 enables us to see how a single momentous year can take on multiple (and often incompatible) meanings. Other years in this category include 1492, 1776, 1789,
1848, 1945, and 1989. Official, popular, and scholarly interpretations of such years are apt to change over time, often guided by the demands of the present or by the passing of generations. In almost all cases, meanings continue to fluctuate long after everyone who was alive in those years has died.

One fascinating illustration of how much interpretations can change is the posture of the Russian government under Vladimir Putin toward 1917 during the centennial year. In contrast to the grandiose ten-year anniversary celebrations of 1917 during Soviet times, Putin and other Russian officials largely ignored the anniversary for most of the year, and when they did refer to it they depicted it through a conspiratorial prism, suggesting that the upheavals were an early version of a “color revolution” supposedly instigated by nefarious Western governments in a bid to undermine Russia’s glory.17 Putin argued—accurately—that November 1917 was a “coup d’état,” but then he insisted that this coup was instigated by unspecified “Western powers” to “steal a great victory from Russia” in the First World War. He castigated Lenin for promoting national self-determination and thereby “planting a nuclear explosive under the edifice that is now Russia.”18

Strange as the official commemorations (or lack of commemorations) in Russia may have been in 2017, the advent of that centennial year afforded scholars an opportunity to reflect on the upheavals of 1917, the nature of the regime that ruled in Moscow for the next seventy-four years, and the implications of the Soviet Union’s demise. Graziosi’s survey deftly puts those reflections into a larger historical context and enhances our understanding of Soviet history and public memory of it.

Notes

The conceptual literature on revolutions is immense. Among the scholars whose work I have found particularly useful are Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, Nikki Keddie, and Jeff Goodwin, as well as classic works by Alexis de Tocqueville, Crane Brinton, and Theda Skocpol. For an illuminating set of exchanges about key issues involved in understanding revolutions, see Nikki R. Keddie, ed., *Debating Revolutions* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).


11. A notable exception was José Fragoso, a former Marxist-Leninist radical in Angola, who in 2017 said he now sees November 1917 as “a dark date in history,” adding, “The October Revolution wasn’t good for Angola.” Ibid.


