In 1987, seventy years after the Russian Revolution, [General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed](http://historic.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000235/st060.shtml): “In 1917 we departed from the old world, having rejected it utterly. We are heading towards a new one—the world of communism. And we will never swerve from this path.” Famous last words. This was in fact the last great commemoration of “October,” as it was known, before Gorbachev and the Soviet Union as a whole first swerved from the path to communism and then made a complete U-turn. Over the following decade of radical economic hardship and political chaos, Russia rejoined the “old world” of capitalist market economies and bid farewell to the ideals of the Soviet communist project. This year, perhaps surprisingly, Russian society is commemorating the Russian Revolution’s centenary with a myriad of events, exhibits and publications. Yet the historical and political meanings of all this activity are far from straightforward.

The Soviet men and women who heard Gorbachev’s address in 1987 would hardly recognize the Russia that emerged from the transformations of the 1990s. Nevertheless, many things have remained unchanged in Russian society today—and this is a source of both pride and heated debate. In the patriotic rhetoric of President Putin and his supporters, the achievements of the Soviet past—from space programs, to industrialization, to the victory over Nazism—are a matter of unquestioned pride. They represent a great tradition that was temporarily and mistakenly interrupted in the years of post-Soviet transition and that must be continued in the present. In contrast, an oppositional minority views the revival of authoritarian politics under President Putin and Russia’s more and more belligerent projection of military power as a perverse legacy of the Soviet past that is yet to be overcome.

An additional continuity of the Russian present with the Soviet years is a taste for grand commemorations of important historical events. Nothing reveals more about contemporary Russian patriotic culture than this penchant for memorialization. The most important Russian national holiday is without a doubt the Victory Day celebration of WWII's end, which has been marked each year since President Putin first came to power with more and more impressive parades of soldiers and military hardware and with more and more rousing oratory. Yet Russian public life is equally given to commemo­rations of other moments in Russian history—from the bicentennial of the Russian defeat of Napoleon at Borodino, celebrated in 2012, to the 1020th anniversary of the Christianization of ancient Rus, celebrated in 2010. For the Kremlin leadership, all of Russian and Soviet history is a treasure trove of great events that grant legitimacy and luster to contemporary Russia.

This logic breaks down in the face of the centenary of the October Revolution. It makes perfect sense that President Putin, a KGB agent turned billionaire autocrat, would celebrate both the Russia of the tsars, with its victory over Napoleon, and the USSR of the commissars, with its victory over Hitler. Yet how can he possibly respond to the bloody transition from the former to the latter—the murder of tsars by commissars? The October Revolution demands that President Putin and his supporters somehow both commemorate the founding of the USSR that he served in his younger years, and lament the demise of Imperial Russia, whose gilded palaces provide models for his villas. The mind boggles.

Revolution, in short, is a problem in Russia today. Contemporary Russian patriotic culture is deeply invested in historical continuities—in a vision of the past as an uninterrupted stream of national high points and grand accomplishments. Revolution is a break in continuity. The very word “revolution” is an object of profound derision in Russian political rhetoric, which emphatically denounces “colored revolutions” such as Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine’s Orange one in 2004–5, supposedly fomented by hostile Western powers who would like nothing better than to stage a similar revolt in Russia itself. An armed revolt against a corrupt and abusive state led by self-appointed represen­tatives of the oppressed masses is the last thing the Kremlin wants to celebrate.

Yet the centenary of the Russian Revolution cannot be so easily ignored. After all, this is the opening act for all subsequent Soviet achievements. The answer to this conundrum is a peculiar form of energetic non-commemoration. The presidential administration is devoting over 100 million rubles ($1.7 million) to projects concerning the Russian Revolution. However, these are to emphasize not revolution, but reconciliation. As [Putin announced in December 2016 in his Address to the Federal Assembly](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53379) (the Russian equivalent to the State of the Union address), preparing the ground for the centenary year:

We need the lessons of history primarily for peacemaking, for the strengthening of the social, political and civil amity that we have achieved today. We must not drag the schisms, rage, offense and excess of the past into our contemporary life. We must not, serving our own political and other interests, speculate on the tragedies that touched on practically every family in Russia, no matter which side of the barricades our ancestors were on. Let us remember: we are a united people, we are one people, and we have only one Russia.

With this formula, commemoration of the October revolution is transformed into its repudiation, in the service of reconciliation. The message, seemingly, is that everyone would be better off if revolutionaries and tsars, past and present, could just get past their “differences of opinion” and get along. The point of this commemoration, apparently, is not to remember the revolution, but to forget it.

Why does Putin think Russians need to forget the October Revolution? As Russian commentator [Ilya Kalinin has recently observed](http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/spectre-russian-revolution/), it is hardly the case that descendants of the Bolshevik revolutionaries and White monarchist counter-revolutionaries who fought during the revolutionary years are at one another’s throats in the present. In other words, this anti-commemoration aims to forget not the political conflicts of the past, but those of the present, in order to reiterate the constant refrain of a president whose party is named United Russia: “we are a united people, we are one people.” One can only marvel at this clever use of a history of bloody conflict in order to eliminate all possibility for political dissent.

In conclusion, we might ask: how *should* the Russian Revolution be remembered today? My answer is: with respect for complexity. The revolutionary events of 1917 were driven by the legitimate anger of Russia’s people against their corrupt and inept rulers and by a desire for social justice and an end to war. They were swept along by the idealistic utopian energies of the era, so visible in the art and political dreaming of the 1920s. However, intentionally or by false steps, through hubris and callousness or as a result of pettiness and self-interest, the Russian Revolutions of 1917 also became the occasion for enormous violence, bloodshed and murder. They gave birth to a new society that sank to new depths of political oppression and unparalleled mass violence. This same society also rose to great achievements not only in space exploration, but also in social and economic equality and welfare.

This fear of revolution, of even its mention, in Russia today is misguided and self-defeating. Respect for complexity and debate over historical interpretation and political distinctions is not the same as conflict. In discussion of both past historical events and present realities, what Russians need more than ever is to find room in their public life and institutions for reasonable dissent and political debate. It is the devolution of public life into enforced consensus, more than anything else, that creates the preconditions for violent confrontation. In sum, then, the best commemoration of the Revolution of 1917 would be a debate on the achievements and failures of those years, of the Soviet era that it inaugurated, and of Russia’s present, rather than a repudiation of revolution, past and present. Otherwise, a repeat of revolutionary transformation will become, sooner or later, inevitable.