

Theorising Narratives of Revolution in the Russian and Global Media

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Abstract

This paper examines conflicting narratives of revolution emerging from Russia and in global media responses to the 100th anniversary of October 1917. I first examine the contradictory responses from the Putin regime and mainstream Russian media. Putin initially re-narrated 1917 as an example of Western exploitation of victim-Russia's idealistic role in the world, then downplayed 1917 entirely due to domestic political sensitivities. Yet RT and other Russian media offered often celebratory accounts of 1917. This indicates the difficulty identifying a stable official narrative. Analysis of international news media and cultural industry coverage (26 countries) also indicates diverse and often celebratory narratives, a cultural fondness for Russian history, and lay theories of how revolution works today -- after the failures of the Arab Spring, Occupy and some Color Revolutions. 1917 for many was culturally congruent only as a 'global' event, like May 68 or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Overall, these diverse internal and external responses complicate the notion of a singular 'Russian narrative' or 'narrative of Russia'. This opens space to theorize the conditions of such narrative fragmentation, the difficulty that neo-authoritarian regimes face when managing global media.

Relation to panel theme

1. This paper shows that the anniversary of 1917 created ambivalent identity narratives *in* Russia and markedly different narratives of global relations *to* Russia in the West to in 'the rest'. This demonstrates the difficulty of any total narrative control in a global public sphere; history is too messy, within and beyond any nation. Normatively this is a reminder of the messiness of the present and the need to avoid simplifications. This analysis shows why Russia should not only have to be considered in terms of disinformation. Russia faces the same problems of identity management all states face. By placing Russia outside the disinformation question in this paper I am trying to gain a better understanding of what Russia is trying to do *and* what others think of Russia. This might help disinformation studies.

2. A political communication theory of disinformation must be reframed with a political science theory of ideas, identity and political change in the international order. Disinformation is one of many efforts to shift behaviour, and it works by playing to ideas and identities across the international order. One of the many tensions in the current international order is a political struggle between authoritarian populist kleptocracy and liberal democracy. The strategic narrative research programme is an attempt to offer a wider theorisation that meets that type of wider political struggle. It tries to explain how ideas, identity and political change come together through communication and the conditions that drive these changes.
3. Strategic narrative research cuts across IR: Strategic narrative research must be done by materialist scholars to show how narratives express interests and explain who has the economic and infrastructural capacity to determine whose narratives circulate. Constructivist IR scholars can identify when narrative entrepreneurs are successful and when not. Post-structural IR scholars can help us explain the historical roots of, and contradictions within, the wider narratives we see in today's global political struggle. Disinformation as a tactic or tool of communication can be approached within all three of those IR positions. IR and Communication can be brought together.
4. I'm not a frame analyst and would be curious how the framing scholars might interpret my data and analysis via framing concepts. I also wrote this paper using the 'imaginaries' concept as much as narrative. Still, cultural congruence and identity narratives seem important points of overlap.

Introduction

The October Revolution stands alongside the French Revolution as a template (Hoskins, 2006), model (Anderson, 1991: 83) or script (Arsenault et al., 2015: 192) that guides sense-making about revolutionary moments since. It provides a set of assumptions about the nature of antagonism, momentum, victory and defeat, and revolution's consequences. It is a way of imagining political change. This paper has two objectives. First it will map and explain how the October Revolution was imagined in different global media in the reporting of its anniversary in 2017. Second, it will use that analysis to consider the implications of these imaginaries for how revolutions are understood today.

This anniversary fell against a backdrop marked by conditions that shape how revolution is imagined. First was a set of highly contested *recent revolutions*, notably the post-Cold War Colour Revolutions in post-Soviet countries and the Arab uprising. These revolutions triggered public and scholarly efforts in the preceding decade to reconceptualise both revolution and, given the failures of some Arab revolutions, counter-revolution: socio-political processes that contain, defuse and co-opt revolutionary forces. Second, the centenary of 1917 occurred amid an already-thriving body of commentary about contemporary *Russian* politics: Putin as tsar, an undemocratic mass culture, and Russia as a 19th Century great power in a 21st Century world (Lo, 2015).

The Putin government downplayed the centenary. In Russia since the end of the Cold War, celebration of World War II had far overtaken national celebration of the October Revolution. In 2017 the government delegated official celebrations to cultural organisations and municipal authorities beyond Moscow. The minority Communist Party held festivities. As we shall see below, this can be understood within the Putin government's efforts to control a national identity narrative for the domestic population, a narrative that positions Colour Revolutions in post-Soviet states as Western-led threats to national stability. A professor of history in St. Petersburg told one German journalist, 'even the idea of a revolution is branded as national treason' (Spinella, 2017); another German writer suggested Putin suffered a 'kind of revolution-phobia' (Esch, 2017). However, opinion polls earlier in 2017 showed 48 percent of Russians felt the revolution played a positive role, to 31 percent negative, yet 49 percent felt it ultimately damaged Russian culture (Petkova, 2017). We shall see that in 2017 Putin and Russian society more generally offered *diverse and ambivalent* views of 1917 and the virtues of revolution and other models of social change. Indeed, amid much analyses about Russian efforts to

control narratives about Russia's identity in the world (Szostek, 2017), the centenary was notable for the *lack* of any strong narrative *global* projection strategy from the Kremlin. Here was a global media event in which the meaning was left to global voices.

Two research questions follow. First, *how are revolutions theorised and imagined in contemporary global media?* What comparisons and analogies did journalists offer readers when representing 1917 and its legacies? Were the French Revolution, Arab Uprisings, and Colour Revolutions the "go to" comparisons or did a more varied historical picture emerge? Second, *how is Russian politics represented, reflected upon, and compared to other countries' situations?* I analyse international media representations of Russia's official response to 1917 and their wider narratives about Russia in the world in their comments about 1917. Analysis also indicates ways that journalists represent their own country's relation to Russia and to 1917; we find condemnation from some, but, in many non-Western news media, articles that suggest 1917 inspired independence or revolutionary movements in their own countries or remains relevant for keeping that vision or possibility alive.

Analysis was conducted of news items published between 15 September 2017 - 31 December 2017. These were sampled through the Nexis global database of English language news and through a search for relevant news items on Twitter using three accounts to ensure user profile did not skew results. Search terms were "October Revolution", "Russian Revolution" and "1917 + Russia". The sample consisted of 114 articles from 26 countries. Thematic analysis allows for identification of constituent parts of "imaginaries" of political and social change.

This analysis has significance for understanding how global media represent and imagine future change. Based on the memory work around 1917, representations of

later revolutions, and representations of Russia now, what range of scripts and theories become resources for thinking about change? What understandings of history and agency? Was 1917 used as a platform to think about future change or to close down avenues of thought and action? News reports point to role of leaders, technology, crises as opportunities, and so on, but also reflect on whether history repeats itself, whether systems and societies ever really change, and where revolutionary efforts have and have not succeeded.

Analytical framework: Themes of Revolution

The first research question asks, for global media in 2017, what is revolution, then and now? Analysis is divided into four themes. First, *depictions of the 1917 Revolution*. This includes: What happened (who, what, when, where, and why – what were the causes), and what were the effects (immediate crime and violence; civil war and a communist regime; migration of White Russians; de-colonialization in African, Asia and Latin America). The second theme is *theories of revolution*. The analysis will show how mechanisms from the core theories of revolution in social science are appropriated by journalists to construct public imaginaries of how the revolution was, and thus how revolutions can be. Table 1 below sets out these core theories. In Neo-Marxist theories revolution is driven by classes who enter structurally-determined conflict and, led by an intellectual vanguard, lead society towards a more advanced stage of human flourishing – here character development is emphasised alongside the conventional analyses of economic forces in collision (e.g. Fromm, 1968). Given that the Russian populace was tired of World War I and Lenin led a vanguard, such a theory seems to fit the historical record, until we note historical details that complicate matters. Second, Ted Gurr's (1968) alternative theory explains mass revolt as driven by mass disgruntlement not determined by structural forces but dependent on economic circumstances and which can lead to

counter-revolutionary movements – as again happened in Russia and that adds to our understanding of post-1917 global politics. The weakness of these relatively parsimonious theories led political sociologists to develop more fine-grained theories later in the Twentieth Century. Theda Skocpol argues classes have been principal drivers of revolution but this depends on a crisis of the state that opens a window of opportunity for a new movement to impose a solution; based on analysis in several countries she finds this mechanism re-occurs but the outcome can never be foreseen. Finally, Charles Tilly (2008) (and to a large extent Della Porta and Diani (1999) and Tarrow (1994)) argue that, again over several centuries, revolution always depends on “contentious” group politics whose ability to access resources and build coalitions iteratively can explain whether revolutions occur. Such theories and mechanics are present in the reporting analysed.

	Neo-Marxist	Gurr	Skocpol	Tilly
<i>Agency</i>	Classes	Social forces	Classes	Groups
<i>Antagonism</i>	Structural and determined	Masses grow psychologically frustrated at relative deprivation and call for revolution	A crisis of the state (at international level) opens space for class antagonism	Interest groups that must be observed, not assumed from theory. Each has a complex constellation of motives and their ability to act depends on access to resources. Della Porta and Tarrow: groups have social structures too.
<i>Change</i>	Vanguard and	Accumulation of	Those who	'Contentious

<i>mechanisms</i>	mass revolt	grievance and frustration reaches a revolutionary tipping point	achieve dominance can exploit the crisis to impose their will on the new order. But each class may fracture.	politics' - a mix of (i) groups with competing aims, (ii) revolutionary situations, and (iii) contingency. No outcomes can be foreseen.
<i>Temporality</i>	Linear development of human flourishing albeit it via dialectics	Linear and uni-directional.	Non-linear: varies according to the specifics of each crisis situation. Outcomes cannot be foreseen.	Trace sequences and spot causes and patterns through observation. This includes political opportunity structures (Tarrow).
<i>What gets forgotten</i>	Diverse temporalities, complex coalitions and identity politics	Frustration can lead to other outcomes: apathy, or counter-revolutionary nationalism.		When mixed with international forces does this degree of observation get too descriptive?
<i>Fits 1917?</i>	Masses were fed up after war, deprivation; needed vanguard; but misses complex divisions and counter-revolutionary forces; misses that the doors to the Palace were open.	Depends how we interpret what the masses 'really' felt and wanted. Frustration wasn't the only factor.	Groups were agitating even before the crisis of the state	Given the February and October iterations of revolution, attention to contingency seems vital.

Table 1. A typology of Western theories of revolution

For instance, *The Guardian's* review of BBC2's *Russia 1917: Countdown to Revolution* noted that the revolution depended entirely on Lenin pretending to be a drunk tramp to evade police suspicion as he travelled through St. Petersburg on the night of revolution – that is, contingency (Tilly). *The Independent's* review said the documentary-cum-reconstruction showed the role of individuals: 'an unspoken refutation of the Marxian dialectic' and 'There was no will of the people involved' -- a vanguard (Neo-Marxism) but also intra-elite contestation among those seeking to exploit the state (Skocpol) (O'Grady, 2017). Some felt the 1917 revolution "shaped much of the 20th century" but was now over; others noted today a continued antagonism between liberals, monarchists and communists in Russia and thus the endless dialectic of revolution and counter-revolution. This suggests grievances remain if not at tipping point (Gurr), and that still social forces keep contentious politics alive (Tilly).

Analysis of news and cultural responses to the 1917 anniversary will demonstrate the extent to which they are consistent with any of these academic theories. Here the theories act as a heuristic. Comparison with these *theories* is a means to produce a typology of contemporary *imaginaries* of revolution.

A third theme of RQ1 concerns *whether news media characterise the 1917 Revolution as a world event*. Lenin aspired to world revolution. Some Russians cleaving to their own government's minimal celebrations of the centenary said they were questioned by international friends. 'Are you mad?' the Hermitage director in St. Petersburg was told by an English friend; 'The entire world is doing something' (Esch, 2017). How do media communicate this world-ness to audiences? The literary

scholar Moretti has tried to document how texts invoke 'the world'. But how to represent the world and stage it's voices?

The fact is that Goethe and the others, needing to represent the take-off of the capitalist world system, are in search of what we might call (paraphrasing Roland Barthes) 'world effects': devices that give the reader the impression of being truly in the presence of the world; that make the *text* look like the world -- open, heterogeneous, incomplete. (Moretti, 1996: p59, italics in original)

This is a phenomenon many commentators tried to produce around the anniversary in 2017. To use their reflections to convey 1917 as a world event would require producing in the audience a sense of 'world effects'. An Indian report offered a *survey* of how 1917 led to communist parties and workers' movements in Europe, Asia and Latin America. It offered a paragraph each for over a dozen countries: a compendium of stories enabling a 'global' feel. Umberto Eco (2009) argues we can capture *multiplicity* in lists. This gives a sense of proliferating transnational connections and thus a world effect. In fact we find in the whole sum of reports, internationally, a transition from the voices of leaders of the revolution to a plurality of voices in future generations who were effected: a spiralling outwards. This is in tension with specific reports that emphasise continuities and argue Russia is still in 1917 because it is locked into divisions between liberals, monarchists and communists.

A fourth and final theme concerning how revolution is represented concerns the projected *ignorance and political softness of young people today*. Young people are regularly treated lacking: They do not know how many died in 1917. They do not know the leading figures. They do not know the geopolitical alliances of 1917,

or 1945, or 1991. Moreover, journalists suggest young people do not know how to organise a decent protest today, unlike previous, tougher, more revolutionary generations. This is important as it characterises a degree of seriousness – or its absence – for political action now or in the future and thus a normative problem with any political protest today.

The paper's second broad research question concerns how Russian politics is represented, reflected upon, and compared to other countries' situations. Here, three themes are important to representations of revolution. The first is *Russia's national identity narrative*. The anniversary was a chance to report on Putin's selective narration of 1917 and events in Russia since, and the motives steering his emplotment. Many reported that Putin prefers stability to revolution, hated the Colour revolutions, and offers alliances to leaders of illiberal regimes who experienced the Arab Uprisings and other recent civil society movements. But some journalists noted a 2016 speech in which Putin praised the 1917 Revolution as an instance of Russian idealism that was then exploited by the West. Putin differentiated between good and bad revolutions, good and bad consequences.

The second theme is *local hooks and the prism of the present*. International news reports and commentary pieces tied the revolution to their national audience – what research on news media and international perceptions labels the role of 'local hooks' (Chaban et al., 2012). AFP reported how White Russian immigrants assimilated into France, but their grandchildren still take trips to Russia. *The Times of Israel* explained the role of Jews in the revolution. *The New Statesman* reports how five revolutions in Russia 1917-2017 were responded to in Britain. Many UK articles compare Russia's distance from allies to the UK's act of Brexit. All such international news reports spanned 1917-2017 and thus pointed to the historical roots of

contemporary political dilemmas concerning migration and geopolitics. Here, the past us a resource to make sense of current global entanglements.

A final theme for imaginaries of Russia concerns the *ambiguous role of culture in remembering 'serious' events*. A common structure to news reports, internationally, was: Russia is not marking the anniversary and politically it is a non-event; but culturally there are exhibitions, plays and films. Culture is secondary – “*but culturally*”. Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of the anniversary in Russia and the sensitivity of discussing Russia internationally, culture was a way to broach the politics, at home and abroad.

Analysis 1: Depictions of revolution then and now

Many news outlets used the centenary to present audiences with chronologies. In the UK, *The Sun* tabloid newspaper offered a surprisingly detailed feature a full month before the anniversary, describing events leading up to and the aftermath of October 1917 (Hodge and Cambridge, 2017). It failed to indicate any way Russia and the UK were entangled and thus presented Russia as somewhere a fundamentally different nation – its industrial revolution was later than the West and its calendar was different. But this Russia-only chronology was common. *Gulf News* even took the chronology back to 1613 when the Romanovs united the Russias (O'Reilly, 2017). This was an event of scale.

A unique cast of characters and locations allowed many reporters to depict October 1917 as a visual spectacle. 'It wasn't at all necessary to storm the Winter Palace', the director of the Hermitage Museum (and once-Winter Palace) told *Der Spiegel*, 'All the doors were open, you could have just walked in and arrested the ministers. But it had to look like the French Revolution' (Esch, 2017). From this perspective it 'was

a bloodless coup, not a revolution' (ibid). October 1917 became a template -- 'a model that could be replicated' -- but a model that was itself staged to repeat a certain '1789' imaginary of social change held by leaders in 1917 (ibid). Even these basic descriptions in *The Sun* and *Der Spiegel* begin to suggest imaginaries of change through time and space.

News also published reflections on the Revolution's effects. October 1917 inaugurated a regime that made 'Soviet-style communism a political force that lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989' wrote political scientist Chronis Polychroniou (2017) for Al Jazeera. Staying with an imagination of history as spatial, a common metaphor saw journalists state that the revolution 'helped shape much of the last century' (O'Grady, 2017). Some pointed to concrete policy effects; for instance, Niazi (2017) argued that 1917 was partly responsible for the welfare state because Western governments had to find ways to counter and incorporate workers' movements and, as we shall see, non-Western news connected 1917 to decolonialisation and independence movements.

What theories of revolution were contained in these reports? Overall the reader is offered a multi-faceted picture that allows reflection on whether certain revolutionary factors are present today. Reflection is also invited concerning whether the Putin government can be considered the continuation of counter-revolutionary pressure in light of the many revolutions Russia has experienced and the Colour revolutions in its former territories.

Some writers depicted the revolution as a mass event. The Russian activist Roman Dobrokhotov (2017) wrote for Al-Jazeera that 1917 was driven by 'an active citizenry'; but his argument fits the Tilly theory of revolution – that it was driven by a cross-section of interest groups. Dobrokhotov wrote, 'it was preceded by mass

labour strikes, the work of various political parties and movements, critical publications in the press ... and even the efforts of the State Duma' (ibid). But he also invokes Gurr's theory, implicitly, in arguing that in 2017 Russians do not feel enough economic hardship to begin mass protests – it would take an economic crash and far more severe international economic sanctions. Others presented the October Revolution as motivated by ideology. Writing for Jordan's MENA FM James Ryan (2017), an academic at Cardiff University in the UK, wrote:

What was the October Revolution actually for? Why did the Bolsheviks take power? Their motive wasn't power for its own sake; it was communism. It was a vision of a society perfected, one in which people would live in complete social harmony ... a revolution in human culture and the creation of a 'new Soviet' person...

This ideology from Bolshevik leaders meshed with 'the palpable sense of popular emancipation and empowerment', fusing vanguard with mass (ibid). This reflects the neo-Marxist focus on the creation of a new subjectivity (Fromm) within the birth of a new socio-economic system.

Also writing for Al-Jazeera, Chronis Polychroniou (2017) offered a similarly multi-faceted analysis but emphasised the role of leadership. Unlike the mass uprisings of February 1917, he wrote, 'What happened in October 1917 was the outcome of a well-designed strategy on the part of the leader (Lenin) of a minority party (the Bolsheviks) to wrest control from a provisional government because of a strong ideological aversion to "bourgeois democracy" and desire for power.' In the UK, some TV critics used the BBC's *Russia 1917* documentary to offer lay theories of revolution. Some felt the documentary emphasised the role of leaders as much as social forces (e.g. O'Grady, 2017). Others pointed to the role of *contingency*, in line

with Skocpol's notion that revolutionary situations are non-linear and their outcomes cannot be predicted with scientific certainty. *The Guardian* drew attention to Lenin outmanoeuvring government patrols on the day of the October revolution by pretending to be a drunk tramp, and quoted historian Orlando Figes who said this moment of luck was 'the real turning-point of 20th century history' (Saner, 2017).

We learn that counter-revolution can stretch over a century – Putin's is described as a 'counterrevolutionary state', in contrast to the revolutionary communist one that collapsed in 1991 (Luxmoore, 2017). This presents audiences with the idea that being a counter-revolutionary state is a viable governing strategy in the Twenty-First Century and that revolution and counter-revolution are ever-present to some degree – an interesting liminality.

Concerning our third theme in RQ1, 1917 is a *world* event through various textual strategies. Many news items reported that the October Revolution inspired other political events. Deutsche Welle reported that news of the revolution 'spread like wildfire, inspiring liberation movements elsewhere, particularly in Africa. Nationwide resistance to British colonial rule broke out in Egypt in 1919, leading to its end' (Cascais, 2017). Importantly, Deutsche Welle drew on sources from those countries to give voice to those inspired and to give detail to substantiate metaphors like 'like wildfire' and 'broke out' – the audience is presented with chronologies for specific countries. That wildfire left a 'global footprint', wrote the *Gulf News*, opening its report on the centenary with a global horizon: 'From St Petersburg to Santiago, Kolkata to Havana, the Bolsheviks shook the intelligentsia and the commoner alike like never before' (Das, 2017). These 'strong vibes' had resonance across Europe, Das continued, because of mass suffering in WW1 (Gurr's mass grievance theory) and because strong communist parties could diffuse a narrative of uprising (a neo-Marxist vanguard). Where Deutsche Welle relied on a set of interviews, *Gulf News*

presented country-by-country analyses of effects of 1917 in Europe, Asia and Latin America. The textual effect is global in a different way.

Audiences are presented with a sense of how *an event or process could be part of a set of global events*. This opens space for readers to reflect on how events might be related – and still continuing. The Indian news outlet *Open* drew a series of events together. ‘Almost at the same time as the October Revolution led by the great Lenin’, then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had written, ‘we in India began a new phase in our struggle for freedom ... And although under the leadership of Gandhi we followed another path, we were influenced by the example of Lenin’ (Datta-Ray, 2017). *Open’s* journalist also wrote that the Balfour Declaration occurred a day after Lenin’s revolution, and that Lenin urged Asian countries under European occupation to look to the example of Japan, who had resisted an external power – Russia itself in 1905 – to secure independence. Struggles were happening in *many* locations.

A clear disjuncture of imaginaries occurred as non-Western reports most frequently invoked contemporary economic struggles. The *Financial Express* (2017) in Bangladesh wrote that the October Revolution remained relevant because the norm of ‘exploiter and exploited’ has transformed into a new norm ‘where the majority are left out from opportunities and the process of production’. 1917 was a symbol that alternatives to capitalism are possible. In Sri Lanka, the *Daily Mirror* (2017) editorialised that while Marxism is no longer a governing force in any society, the 1917 centenary was a reminder that ‘whereso-ever oppression raises its ugly head, it is the October Revolution ... and the spirit of revolutionary leaders like V.I. Lenin ... to whom the oppressed masses still turn to for inspiration’. That new Soviet state supported ‘anti-imperialism struggles world-wide’ and this remained an inspiration (ibid). ‘The tragedy of the Russian revolution lay in the premature death of Lenin’, added Sri Lanka’s *Sunday Standard* (2017), since Lenin had perceived the threat of a

centralised bureaucratic state developing – as it did under Stalin. In Pakistan, Niazi (2017) wrote that ‘1917 was a failed harbinger of world revolution’ because it happened in the wrong country; if it had occurred in a strongly advanced capitalist society like Germany then moving to socialism would have been meaningful; instead, communism emerged in a country struggling to industrialise at all. But in non-Western reporting the lesson here was that revolution and anti-imperialism *remained* virtues. The priority was to give greater attention – still – to post-revolutionary state-building.

Again outside the West, the British academic Ryan wrote for Jordan’s *MENA FM* that 1917’s centenary matters because it allows continued belief in the possibility of change. While he could not imagine revolution occurring soon in the West, ‘The world is still beset by grotesque inequality, excessive corporate power and corruption, militarism and warfare, deplorable political leadership, and creeping environmental crisis’ (Ryan, 2017). Ryan pointed to the British novelist China Miéville, who had just published a non-fiction account of 1917, *October*, which Ryan felt ‘allows us to imagine the possibility of a very different type of political and social order’. In Pakistan *The Express Tribune* reported from the 19th World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi in positive terms, and argued this sense of possibility was still ‘a source of great comfort’. Participants in Sochi ‘relived the charm and passion for a promised revolution which will narrow down the gap between the rich and the poor, the First World and the Third World, the occidentalists and the orientalist’ (Hasan, 2017). Another report on the centenary in Pakistani media argued that, while Britain celebrated the ‘tragedy’ of the Balfour Declaration, Putin was humbly and quietly marking the anniversary of a revolution that led to decolonisation, the defeat of Hitler’s Germany, and great strides in ‘space sciences’ (*Business Record*, 2017). As a former British colony this local prism was

central as the newspaper linked 1917 to 'independence of numerous nations from the colonial yoke' (ibid).

Indeed, the centenary was an opportunity for many news outlets to point to out that the event's effects were still unfolding. Some pointed to positive relations between their country and Russia borne from the Cold War period – economic and infrastructure cooperation was highlighted in Vietnam and Thailand, for instance. In Ukraine two people were arrested for using Communist symbols, illegal in Ukraine as part of a wider programme of de-Communization (Thai News Service, 2017). The *Dominion Post* in New Zealand offered a chronological account of communism since 1917 that included China's current economic rise and North Korea's continued hostility to the West (Englund, 2017).

That ongoing-ness of 1917 was also presented as one's society's entangled history with Russia. AFP narrated the history of many Russian émigrés to France, but also depicted a wider process. The civil war that followed the October Revolution, AFP (2017d) wrote, 'scattered between one and two million White Russians – nicknamed after anti-Communist forces – from China to Brazil, creating diaspora communities that in some cases endure to this day'. This global picture is given a local hook, as AFP (ibid) wrote that White Russians replaced dead French men in the factories of 'Renault and Peugeot'.

The final theme concerning how revolution is characterised, then and now, concerned the representation of young people as agents of change. Young people in 2017 were depicted in simplistic terms. Either they were a vehicle for hope because they were too young to be fully immersed in the apathetic condition Putin's government induces citizens into (Dobrokhotoy, 2017). Alternatively, they were too juvenile to revolt effectively or merely passive recipients of false information from

their elders. The former view was presented in *Der Spiegel*, whose writer reported on a contemporary protest in St. Petersburg, writing that protesters were not even aware of the historical symbolism of their meeting-place, asked 'Is this a children's birthday party or a revolution?' and found it just 'youths blowing off steam' (Esch, 2017). Regarding young people as dupes, the US conservative speechwriter Thiessen attacked the *New York Times* for running stories that showed aspects of Soviet life in a positive light:

...this twisted view of communism is being passed on to the next generation. A recent poll ... found that just 36% of American millennials have a "very unfavorable" view of communism ... Worse still, 32% believe that more people were killed under George W. Bush than under Joseph Stalin.

Thiessen invoked novelist Milan Kundera and his statement that the struggle against communism is 'the struggle of memory against forgetting'. Young people had not forgotten; they simply did not know, and this was in part the fault of the *New York Times*, he argued. Here, young people are a blank canvas upon which the correct history must be written.

Exceptions to this trend focused on *how* young people know. One report on representations of 1917 in contemporary Russian school textbooks ended with a quote from one history teacher on the textbook review board: 'Students don't just soak up the teacher's words any more. With the internet they live in a world with multiple voices' (AFP, 2017a). A *New York Times* story reported in contrast on the sheer certainty about communism's future expressed by young people of each generation, including contemporary cohorts. The report focused on the industrial town of Cherepovets, Russia who made a time capsule in 1967 to be opened in 2017 (Luxmoore, 2017). Reflecting the Marxist notion that each stage of history

would be superseded, one then-25-year-old had said, 'We were convinced that if we could transform our lives at such speed, then of course in 50 years a new era would arrive – we had absolutely no doubt'. The report then quoted a 17-year old of 2017, a member of Russia's Youth Army founded in 2016, expressing similar certitude: 'The situation in the world is tense now,' he said, 'but everything will be resolved'. As a new time capsule was stowed away in the same town in 2017, the reporter argued that each new generation has 'a new set of ideals'. This suggests young people have long been idealistic and sought certain, positive futures, and that there is nothing exceptional about the current generation.

Hence the reader is presented, ultimately, with a range of views about the capability of young people for political knowledge and mobilisation. This is underpinned by the multi-faceted picture of how 1917 happened and how revolutions work. News stories also used various devices to portray the global nature of "1917" and its effect, albeit with much greater emphasis in non-Western news on decolonisation and the continued necessity of revolutionary thinking. We begin to see the features therefore of a global event – its spatial and temporal openness and the manner in which it produces and sustains transnational entanglements. As we turn to representations of Russia on the centenary we find, surprisingly, that these features are only accentuated.

Analysis 2: Russia and its relation to other countries in 2017

The 1917 centenary gave journalists an opportunity to put the current Russia in a historical perspective. This led to many reports that offered far more insight than much immediate, event-related reporting of Russia that reproduce one-dimensional caricatures of Russia's identity. This richer picture of Russia emerges in several ways.

Some decide for the reader that this richer picture is 'confounding' (Filipov, 2017) but it remains for audiences to make up their own minds.

First, journalists put Russia's current identity narrative in historical perspective by analysing Putin's own remarks. Many presented audiences with Putin's national identity narrative at face value and argued why that might not stand up. In one Canadian newspaper the journalist Leonid Bershidsky set out why Russia feels it was let down by the West after the Cold War: Russia offered a model of its integration into multilateral bodies and openness about nuclear weapons but the West rejected this and instead encircled Russia through the expansion of the EU and NATO (Bershidsky, 2017). This was one in a line of betrayals, he argued; indeed, for Putin, 1917 actually benefited the West most by spurring it to compete and surpass the resulting Soviet model of development. For Bershidsky (ibid) this narrative of victimhood was not intended to be credible for Western audiences, but instead for leaders and publics in the non-West feeling 'burned by their brief experiment with opening up during the Arab Spring' or other revolutions promoted by the US. In other words, the journalist's analysis of Putin's Russian victim narrative pointed to continuities with anti-colonial or anti-Western mobilisation after 1917. This decentres the Western audience-cum-reader and shows how Russia's national identity narrative remains part of a *global* history and politics.

The ambivalence of Putin's own remarks compelled journalists to explain why this ambivalence existed. First, they argued it existed because of Putin's own appreciation that events can be both positive and negative in their nature and consequence. In Singapore, *Channel News Asia* noted that Putin celebrated the USSR by invoking victory in WW2 and progress in space, and calling its 1991 collapse 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' (*Channel News Asia*, 2017). On the other hand, the same report noted the costs of the

revolution that enabled the USSR's founding. 'Was it not possible to follow an evolutionary path rather than go through a revolution?', Putin was quoted as saying; 'Could we not have evolved by way of gradual and consistent forward movement rather than at the cost of destroying our statehood and the ruthless fracturing of millions of human lives?' Of 1917 Putin said, 'We see how ambiguous its results were, how closely the negative and, we must acknowledge, the positive consequences of those events are intertwined' (*Channel News Asia*, 2017). The *Washington Post* added that Red October 1917 was the ultimate colour revolution and created the very strong state Putin now uses to try to prevent colour revolutions (Filipov, 2017). The Thai News Service (2017) reported Putin warning against deliberate efforts to erase history, for instance attempts to 'forget' WW2, and that both bad things and good things 'should not be forgotten'. The audience is given the rationale and complexities that lie behind Putin's decision not to celebrate the October Revolution's centenary but not to ban celebrations either. One event can be good and bad at the same time, the audience is told: such doubles and paradoxes are the conditions in which leaders must make decisions.

Audiences were told that the ambivalence of Putin's remarks was also because of the effects of his communication on different political factions; that Putin must not offer too much certainty for fear of stoking domestic tensions. For instance, by replacing 7 November with a 4 November Unity Day, the *New York Times* reported that this emboldened the Russian far-right to such an extent that several far-right activists were arrested on the centenary for agitating for revolution (Kramer, 2017). The *New York Times* indicated that while Russia funded far right groups in Europe, it could not tolerate them at home – another double or ambiguity in the Putin character. The official motto of the celebration was "reconciliation" but that only highlights the existence of divisions; here German journalist Christian Esch cited the Russian nationalist-communist writer Alexander Prokhanov who had described

Soviet society as breaking into three “ice floes” – liberals, reds and whites. Esch (2017) described these as still locked into a ‘fissure that runs through [Russia’s] own history’. In this context, the audience might consider why Putin would seek to communicate with sensitivity to such divisions.

The ambiguities in Putin’s position were reflected in reporting from inside Russia. AFP (2017b) reported from the town of Ulyanovsk, Lenin’s birthplace, and home to the Lenin Memorial Museum. The journalist presented interviews with self-identifying communists who lament that younger generations have ‘moved on’, and with museum staff who seek to reframe the museum as showcasing the town and area and not just Lenin (AFP, 2017b). Those staff also report that local politicians would like to ‘raze the whole memory of the October Revolution and Lenin’ but they say ‘society won’t let this happen’ (ibid). AFP (2017c) also interviewed Communist Party leaders and found they shared many positions with Putin, for instance praising the annexation of Ukraine and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Through these local stories and use of sources, audiences are presented with a divergent range of contemporary views about Russia’s history and identity.

A second theme for reporting Russia was by using local hooks to allow audiences to understand how their country was influenced by or played a role in the October Revolution. Some simply used 1917 to tell entertaining stories of local relevance. In Canada, a museum director writes the story of Bolshevik ‘elements’ in a mining community in Canada in 1912 tapping into existing worker dissatisfaction, to the extent that when police arrested these agitators the public paid their bail. The writer describes how the federal government would spend the next two decades struggling to quash these forces (Bachmann, 2017). The New York Public Library opened a commemorative display on ‘the American experience’ of 1917, exhibiting materials produced by US eyewitnesses (Targeted News Service, 2017). More

fundamentally, however, many news outlets' tendency to associate aspects of 1917 with events ongoing in 2017 allows audiences to understand how these processes are often unfinished. In short, we understand that the complications of Russia's own identity narrative outlined above – and as recognised to an extent by Putin – is mirrored in other countries' histories *with* Russia. We can see these as attempts at patterning history for audiences. Returning to the spatial metaphor, journalists point to a historical shape in which lines or trajectories (or streams and tributaries) meet.

This local hook manifested firms in representation of forms of inter-penetration with Russia. In Finland, a National Archives exhibition about Finnish independence gained on 5 November 1917 showed audiences the *direct and contradictory relations* between Finland and Russia (*Nordic Daily*, 2017). In the late Nineteenth Century Finland was subject to various Russification measures from the regime of Tsar Nicholas II. But opposition to these measures grew in Finland not least because of ideas taken from radical Russians. In another mild contradiction, the October Revolution granted Finland space to declare independence, but the Finns had to wait until 14 October 1920 before the Soviet regime would sign the treaty. Here we see a multi-layered relationship. Like Finland, after October 1917 the Baltic states achieved independence in 1920. In the Estonian press a professor from the University of Tartu, Lauri Mälksoo (2017), wrote that the recent, more positive turn in Russian public opinion and in Putin's narrative towards the pre-1917 monarchist period is something that 'continues to haunt both Russia and the Baltic states'.

1917's centenary offered similar scope for Israeli journalists to consider the inter-penetration of Jewish and Russian history, then and now. In Israel, several newspapers reported on a new exhibition launched for the 1917 centenary at Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre. The exhibition asked what role Jews played in the October Revolution and why. By exhibiting photographs, letters

and propaganda leaflets, the museum's chairman said a debate could finally begin based on 'the facts' (Liphshiz, 2017). One mythology of 1917 remains that Jews were central to the revolution and thus to communism too. This drove anti-Semitism across Europe at the time and until today – groups that opposed communism, particularly Christians who felt victimised, could argue that if Jews led communism and communism harmed Christians then Jews harmed Christians and must be fought. The exhibition's thesis proposed that Jews supported the revolution because the monarchists of 1917 were openly anti-Semitic. The Bolsheviks by contrast immediately introduced equal rights under law, and ended school quota and military conscription laws that discriminated against Jews (Masis, 2017). For Jews, supporting Lenin was common sense.

The unfolding of this situation illustrated another paradoxical situation. By 1918 anti-Semitism was banned and the state sponsored Jewish culture and Yiddish language use. However, during 1918-20 the association of Jews with communism gave opponents the excuse to kill 100,000-200,000 Jews and religion was banned. Yet many Jews retained positions in professional elites and did not flee for some time, if at all. Hence, the exhibition – reported in Israel – not only allows for a reconsideration of the roots of anti-Semitism in Europe in the present. It gave another explanation of why Russia's identity narrative is full of paradoxes.

This presentation of inter-penetration leads to *patterning* of history; that in the context of these forms of interpenetration over time, lines or trajectories of history are discernable. Reference to Americans in Russia or to refugees generated by 1917 and its aftermath point to a degree of mobility that existed in the early Twentieth Century and thus another continuation – that people lived transversal lives. If events continue then this also gave scope for groups to use the centenary to wage their own domestic political warfare by pointing to ways of learning from history. Both

those opposed to and committed to “post-truth politics” drew parallels between 1917 and the present. *The Guardian’s* Emine Saner (2017) pointed to a ‘sweet moment of release’ in the BBC documentary *Russia 1917: Countdown to Revolution*, in which a historian said ‘We live today in a world of rampant populism and of post-factual politics, and much of this can be traced back to Lenin, that ultimate political manipulator’. What could be learned from that was left to the audience. In another liberal-left UK newspaper, *The Independent*, one writer used the centenary to attack opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn through analogy to Lenin, writing ‘It’s all in the dustbin of history now, thank God, but worth remembering how the utopian promises of a populist demagogic socialist politician in a beard and workers’ cap can be so seductive and so dangerous’ (O’Grady, 2017). ‘Dustbin of history’ may appear a throwaway line but it offers another theory of history. Walter Benjamin’s “Theses” essay invokes Paul Klee’s painting of an angel facing backwards, being blown into the future, witnessing a pile of debris piling up at its own feet. Note that that debris is not put in a dustbin, but always visible. Benjamin interprets this as a parable. The debris stands for ideas of universal history and progress, the ideas of Kant and Hegel, an ‘ideological sham’ that distracted us from the victims of history and the violence of today (Hoy, 2009: 154). There is no telos or line into the future because if humanity is facing backwards we cannot see what is coming or spot signposts showing direction or progress. However, that accumulation of debris offers hope: an imperative for a messianic moment of seeing history’s wreckage and realizing a new direction. That new direction might not bring progress, but it could bring redemption and keeps history open (Felman, 1999). O’Grady’s invocation of history’s dustbin offers instead the ending of new directions; ‘thank God,’ he writes with finality, as if history is settled.

Again, pointing to a line through history, US President Trump used the moment to denounce communism and claimed the US was the country to ‘shine the light of

liberty for all who yearn for a brighter, freer future' (Voice of America, 2017). US conservatives and libertarians attacked the *New York Times* for its sympathetic coverage of events in Russia after 1917 and its then-recent series of articles about Russian communism including one essay arguing women had better sex lives in the Soviet Union than today (Stossel, 2017; Thiessen, 2017). Here, audiences are given a sense that we can learn lessons from the past event for the present.

In the UK, the *New Statesman* published a long report about five Russian revolutions: February and October 1917, Hitler's revolution that shaped Russian history, Khrushchev's social revolution, and Gorbachev's revolution that ended the USSR (Reynolds, 2017). The report sought to explain how Britain was entangled with or effected by each revolution. Above all, the author tried to persuade audiences to see history made up of 'continuous lines' not 'vivid dots' of events (ibid). The pedagogic function was that in 'Brexit Britain, where self-knowledge and historical awareness are woefully lacking, such reflection may be no bad thing' (ibid). 'Brexit' was a template also mobilised by Putin's cultural representative Mikhail Shvydkoy, who warned that 'the revolution was the death knell of Great Russia – it was 'Brexit,' when we stopped our development in Europe' (O'Reilly, 2017). By revolting, Russia left Europe. Hence, the reader is again confronted with continuities and repetitions – warnings and models of how social change occurs.

These local hooks play a series of functions. By learning history through the prism of how your country engaged with another – Russia or the USSR – this opens space for the formation of analogies. An Irish priest reflecting on 1917's meaning argued that religion was crushed in Soviet times, and states must avoid this mistake today (Ellis, 2017). More ambiguous was Nehru's praise for Lenin cited above – was his role analogous to Lenin's? Not quite – the *Open* story about 'The Echo of the Russian Revolution in India' noted instead that Nehru borrowed the USSR's subsequent

model of economic planning and centralisation of power in one office. For Nehru, it was because of Gandhi that India was able to avoid the devastating path wrought by Stalin (Datta-Ray, 2017). But other Indian news reports about the centenary used it to criticise that path. In the *Indian Express*, Desai (2017) wrote that 1950s India copied Soviet industrialisation despite its complete unsuitability for Indian socio-economic conditions at the time, and argued this held India back in the 1960s and 1970s just at the historical moment that Asia's "tiger" economies showed development was possible.

In short, comparative stories offered by news outlets in the same country and across countries gave audiences the resources to build composite, rich narratives about the relative merits of how their own and other countries had developed – how they handled political dissent, religiosity, economic transformation. While some used the opportunity to score political points about preferred ideological choices in the present, the composite picture of this array of news texts offers audiences resources to consider how events are connected across time and space and how practices of mobility (forced or voluntary) and learning or adaptation from others' experiences has continued through several generations.

The final theme in representations of Russia and its relations concerned the ambiguous role of *culture* in remembering "serious" events. Once Russia is reported upon in cultural terms, a greater, richer range of reporting emerges that the narrow range of opinion about Putin, domestic and geopolitics. Putin's government allowed cultural celebrations. The Russian State Duma, the lower house of parliament, exhibited 'young painters dedicated to the revolution' (Filipov, 2017). When this was repeated, a common grammatical structure was repeated: political authorities will not pay attention *but* cultural organisations can safely commemorate. 'Only 15 percent' of Russians would celebrate the centenary, reported the *Irish*

Times, 'But major Russian museums are not letting the centenary go unnoticed' (Gorst, 2017, italics added). If media events function through depicting a social, ceremonial centre upon which a public gazes and feels affirmation (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Couldry, 2005), then, for the 1917 centenary in Russia, culture is presented here as a distinct field less central than politics.

Yet culture became an entry-point to political struggles. First, that autumn entertainment became, for those in Russia, a site of struggle over the meaning of historical characters. Conservatives and monarchists attacked a film *Matilda* that depicted Tsar Nicholas II, now a canonised saint, as a weak leader who took a lover. The television miniseries *Demon of the Revolution* depicted Lenin as driven by German gold while WW1 still raged (Gorst, 2017). Second, for those outside Russia, cultural fields could be explored in ways that allowed writers to introduce audiences to Russia's political dimensions. Several travel articles about visiting St. Petersburg and educating readers on the city's 'darker history' (Steves, 2017), including the role of the Aurora battleship (now a museum) and Winter Palace (now the Hermitage) in the October Revolution.

Cultural representations of the revolution also allowed writers to consider imaginaries of revolution that bear upon our earlier discussion of theories of revolution. Revisiting Sergei Eisenstein's *October*, *The Guardian's* film critic Peter Bradshaw wrote, 'The storming of the Winter Palace is a concept Eisenstein almost invented. It became the eternal trope for the revenge of the dispossessed: a simple, dual image. Power and wealth inside the luxurious palace; downtrodden poor outside.' But Bradshaw notes a far more ambiguous imagery:

...more astonishing is an earlier sequence, in which the government orders the raising of a drawbridge to prevent the Bolshevik masses from entering the city;

in the melee, a dead white horse ... is caught at the point where the bridge separates. It dangles high above the river: poignant, awe-inspiring and in some mysterious way sacrificial. It has a stranger-than-fiction reality [...] In its unreadability it has a poetic power (ibid)

Bradshaw proceeds to discuss Eisenstein's representation of events as 'unquantifiable' and in some way 'dark'. Hence the reader is taken from a simple, binary image and theory of revolution to the characterisation of Russia and social change as unclear, perhaps mystical. This corresponds loosely to Putin's own effort to characterise present-day Russia's relation to 1917 as ambiguous and attendant to its positive and negative dimensions and consequences.

In summary, in historicising Putin's narrative and the dilemmas he faced, news media offered a nuanced and lively account of contemporary Russia. Critically, the complex identities within Russian society are mirrored in its relations with other societies. Degrees and forms of inter-penetration led journalists to highlight historical patterns – lines, shapes, trajectories – that cut across nations. Reporting on Russian culture extended and deepened the characterisation of these paradoxical and ambivalent identities. This provided audiences with rich resources for understanding Russia, 1917 and for reflection on global history and their nation's place in that.

Conclusions

This paper first asked how global news media used 1917 to represent revolution then and now. No single (academic) theory was used by journalists to describe

1917. Instead, as an heuristic to guide imaginaries of change, audiences were presented with a range of mechanisms and accounts. Audiences were also presented with the idea that being a counter-revolutionary state – like Russia today – is a viable governing strategy in the Twenty-First Century and that revolution and counter-revolution are ever-present to some degree – an interesting liminality. Accounts from the non-Western and postcolonial world also emphasised the continued relevance of aspirations for mass, structural political change and pointed to economic and social inequities that demanded revolutionary visions. Such accounts were notably absent in Western news coverage.

The second question concerned how Russia and its relations were characterised. As set out in the introduction, the centenary of 1917 was an interesting case because it functioned as a global media event function whose meaning was not guided by the “home” state – Putin downplayed 1917 as an opportunity for global celebration. This left writers and journalists free to make associations and this worked to Russia’s favour, offering richer pictures of international affairs than in routine news reporting. It was taken as odd that a society like Russia with a history of ritualized national anniversary events would project a quietness, and certainly there were characterisations of Putin as emphasising stability, continuity, and fulfilling a government strategy against revolution. Nevertheless, audiences were not presented with a homogeneous identity narrative. Audiences were instead educated about the problem Putin faced managing the three ‘ice floes’ of reds, whites, liberals. It was explained that those floes are not fixed and that the identity of many groups cuts across them. For example, Jewish Russians were pro-red because many white monarchists were anti-Semitic. However, some whites were -- like many Jewish Russians -- pro-democracy, more so than some reds (Liphshiz, 2017). It was widely reported that Putin stated that 1917 was good and bad; that humanity should not forget good or bad; that a colour revolution enabled the

strong counter-revolutionary state – a series of paradoxes, ambivalences and composite identities.

That in turn allowed local media to connect their nation to the global event and thus show how national histories are entwined. Contradictory relations with Russia help audiences understand Russia's own ambivalent positions in Finland and the Baltic states. In India journalists wrote that Nehru borrowed economic planning and political centralisation; Gandhi avoided Stalin's excesses but still used violence. These entwined histories were often represented as ongoing and unfinished, whether arrests for using communist symbols in Ukraine or the spiralling outwards of migrants and their ancestors. As pedagogy, these articles allowed audiences to learn their country's history in the context of global patterns.

For these reasons of paradoxes and global patternings, the narrativisation of "1917" can be said to be characterised by complexity and connectivity. Moretti asked how texts can produce a "world effect" – how textual features can express the experience of being in the world as a whole. This analysis shows news reports together achieve this by suggesting analogy, interpenetration, and inspiration or warning. These are all *processes of comparison* that go beyond one text and require audiences to piece together elements across the few months that media attention was focused on 1917. The news texts available in English-language media certainly provide the resources for audiences to do this with little effort. To return to the ice floe metaphor, the news reporting analysed expresses that world history flows through Russia; that it has long been a tributary for many streams and while some may appear to lock into ice floes, these are all continually moving in relation to one another and contested.

If Russia had tried to impose a more simple and fixed narrative then would this opportunity to build a richer picture have been missed? As anniversaries of global events continue to surface, should governments “home” to those events seek a degree of openness and ambiguity in their portrayal? Can they allow some divergence between how they characterise the event to domestic and international audiences? Given that contestation is an inevitable function of media events (Couldry, 2005) then this degree of latitude would appear sensible. Other analysis has pointed to the manner in which even RT offered highly divergent accounts of 1917 (Hutchings, forthcoming; Crilley et al, forthcoming). We can also ask: to whom does an event belongs? 1917 is inseparable from world wars, the spread of emigres and refugees, decolonialisation, the Cold War, and the post-Cold War period of insecurities. If voice goes to those affected, then many had a right to speak about 1917. Indeed, perhaps a less cautious Putin could have leveraged these global connections to make 1917’s centenary a global celebration of the centrality of Russia to world history and world culture.

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