

# Project ‘1917 – Free History’: Reliving the Russian Revolution in the Digital Age

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*Abstract:* The article examines Project ‘1917 – Free History,’ an innovative and ambitious online initiative that enables its followers to relive the Russian Revolution in real time. Presenting archival materials in the format of a Facebook feed, it allows one to experience what ‘really’ happened. Whereas in the state-controlled mass media discourse, the representation of the revolutionary year and the lessons it harbours for today’s Russia tend towards unambiguity, emphasising the destructive nature of radical political change, Project 1917 presents a wide array of voices without imposing a single interpretation. The article analyses how the project mediates the public remembrance of the Revolution, and what role the social media feed format and the interactivity it promotes can play in societal processes of coming to terms with the revolution’s traumatic legacy. It demonstrates how, over the course of one year, Project 1917 became increasingly entangled in current political debates as 2017 turned out to be a year of mass protests.

*Keywords:* Project 1917, Russian Revolution, digital memory, popular history, memory politics, social media, Vkontakte, Yandex

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‘The centenary of October is met with a deafening silence by the country that once counted its very existence from it’, writes historian Ivan Kurilla about the conspicuous decision of the Russian government to refrain from publicly commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ‘1917’ (Kurilla 2017).<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for the ‘silent anniversary’, Kurilla argues, is the regime’s perception that revolution, of whichever kind, is a destructive and wicked phenomenon; an opinion they see evidenced by the Colour revolutions that toppled governments across the post-Soviet space. At the same time, a full-fledged denouncement

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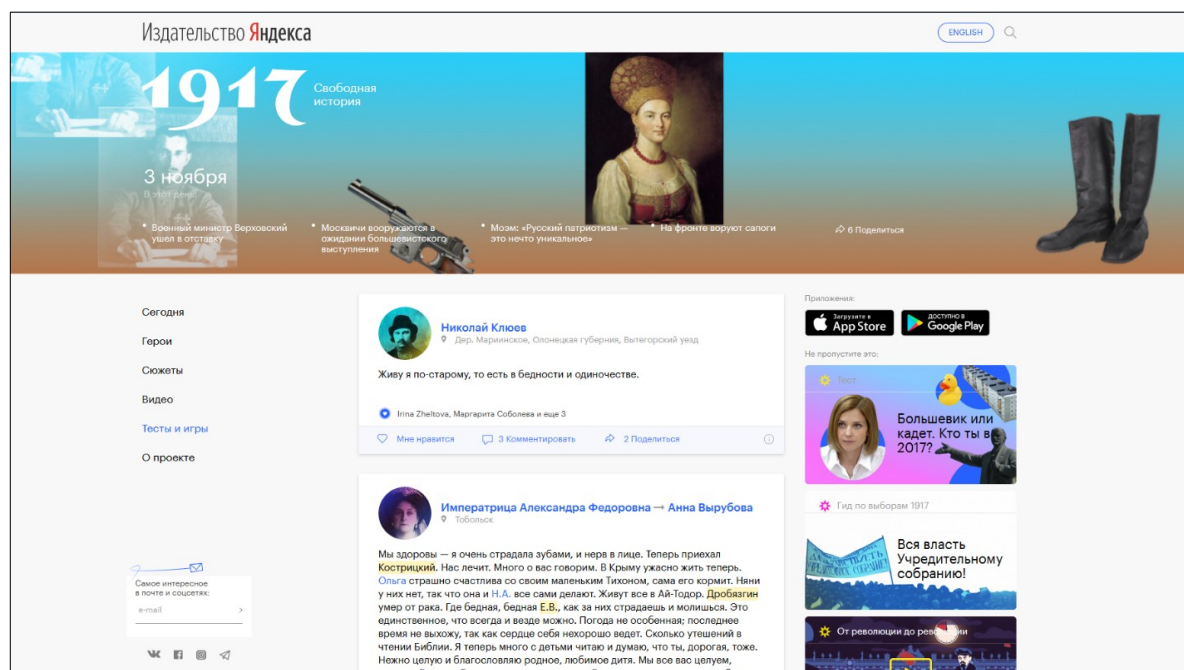
<sup>1</sup> The research for this article was conducted in the context of the project ‘Russian MediaLab: Freedom of Speech and Critical Journalism in Russia’ (2016-2018), funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. A previous version of the paper was presented at the workshop ‘Trauma Studies in the Digital Age’ at the University of Amsterdam. I wish to thank the participants of the workshop, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, for their valuable comments and suggestions.

harbours difficulties of its own: The Revolution, after all, resulted in the creation of the Soviet Union whose various legacies, in many ways, still shape the country today. Kurilla accurately captures the essence of the current political discourse. Yet, when viewed in the context of Russia's post-Soviet memory politics (Wijermars, in press), the unmarked anniversary of the Bolshevik take-over should not come as a surprise; it is the logical conclusion to a decades-long effort to dismantle the symbolic legacy of October. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new Russian state initially sought to dispose of all symbolic and ideological constructs of its communist predecessor, including its historical myths (Smith 2002). The official celebration of the Russian Revolution – the founding myth of the Soviet state – was quickly abolished and the associated 7 November holiday renamed the Day of Accord and Reconciliation. When this 'new' holiday failed to gain popular recognition, likely resulting from its lack of symbolic substance, and the tradition of celebrating the Revolution on 7 November continued to be honoured by, e.g., the Russian Communist Party, the government finally resolved to substitute it with a new 4 November holiday in 2005, the Day of National Unity. Presented as a restoration of a Tsarist holiday abolished by the Soviet regime, the Day celebrates the ousting of the Polish-Lithuanian occupying forces from Moscow in 1612 which brought an end to the Time of Troubles.

On the state level, the void that was left by abolishing '1917' has in recent years been remedied by offering '1914' as an alternative historical focal point. Building upon the gradual rehabilitation of the White Russian Movement from the 1990s onwards (in the 2000s, the re-establishment of connections to Russian émigré communities and the rehabilitation of White Army generals received support from the Russian government, see Petrone 2011) the state invested significantly in marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War One. The year 2010, Vera Tolz points out, served as a turning point in the Russian state's involvement in the revival of the memory of the First World War, after which the state started to lead rather than support its development (Tolz 2014). The centenary year of 2014 was used as an occasion to remedy the lack of memory in both public space and public discourse by dramatically expanding the memory infrastructure where very little previously existed (e.g., the unveiling of the Monument to the Heroes of the First World War on 1 August 2014 in Moscow's Victory Park). The approaching centenary of the Russian Revolution may well have influenced the decision to develop the memory of WWI: Integrated into the newly established official memory, the Russian Revolution has been recast in official statements as the closing act of the tragic demise of the Russian empire (Wijermars 2017).

When pressed to address the prickly matter, the official standpoint on how the Revolution should be remembered has been one of reconciliation. Speaking about the approaching commemorative year, President Vladimir Putin remarked in his 2016 Address to the Federal Assembly:

[...] we need history's lessons primarily for reconciliation, for the strengthening of the societal, political and civil concord we have managed to achieve. It is inadmissible to drag the schisms, anger, resentments and bitterness of the past into our life today, to speculate – for one's own political and other interests – on tragedies that affected practically every family in Russia, regardless of what side of the barricades our ancestors were on. Let's remember that we are a united people, a single people, and we have only one Russia. (Putin 2016)

**Figure 1.** Project website front page

Source: <https://project1917.ru>

Outside of the realm of state politics, however, the centenary year has occasioned renewed academic scrutiny (resulting in a great number of conferences and publications), as well as various more unusual initiatives to revisit the Revolution and its legacy. Of these, Project '1917 – Free History' is particularly intriguing and ambitious: The project enables its followers to relive 1917 in real-time. Presented in the format of a Facebook feed, it allows you to experience what 'really' happened as seen through the eyes of famous and lesser-known contemporaries (see Figure 1). Whereas, in the state-controlled mass media discourse, the representation of the revolutionary year and the lessons it harbours for today's Russia tend towards unambiguity – emphasising the tragedy of the demise of the Russian Empire and destructive nature of radical political change – the project presents a wide array of voices without imposing a single interpretative frame. As a result, narratives that have long been neglected or repressed are given a platform. This article examines Project 1917 and its contribution to the current public debates as they redefine the meaning of the revolutionary year. In particular, I explore what the significance is of the project's characteristics for realising such potential.

The aim of this article is to explore the role the social media feed format and the interactivity it promotes (linking, sharing, commenting) in societal and individual processes of coming to terms with the revolution's traumatic impact, as well as in dealing with the tensions that characterise Russian society today. How does the project mediate the public remembrance of the Russian Revolution? What new types of interaction do the chosen formats enable, and how are they used in practice? In the early days of digital memory studies, José van Dijck argued that digital technologies 'may prompt a multimodal sense of remembering and reconnect memories of the self to reflections of others or to reported events in the world at

large' (Van Dijck 2005: 313). Social networking sites (SNS) have been seen as platforms that enable connective memory practices (Hoskins 2011) to emerge. To what extent does Project 1917 give impetus to the creation of networked or connective memory (Hoskins 2009; 2011) in relation to the Russian Revolution; and how are these practices shaped or predefined by the characteristics of the platforms it occupies? And has the project succeeded in living up to its slogan 'Free History', as 2017 turned out to be a year of mass protests?

The article is based on continuous monitoring of how the project developed and expanded across multiple platforms in the (near) one-year period from its launch on 14 November 2016 to 3 November 2017 (project website, Vkontakte, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, mailing list), and qualitative sampling of project materials published during two one-month periods around the 'revolutionary' months of February and October when attention for the project can be expected to peak.<sup>2</sup> Following from my focus on the significance and impact of the 'social media feed' format, these samples were gathered from the project website which mimics the appearance of a social media feed and provides the broadest scope of project materials (on, e.g., Instagram the project functions very differently, as will be discussed below). While the qualitative sample collected in February 2017 concentrated on the content created by the project itself, the analysis concerning October 2017 also included user interactions with these materials in the form of comments and (number of) likes and shares on the social networking site used most extensively by the project, Vkontakte. A limited version of the project is available in English. Since the Russian original is the most extensive, operating across multiple platforms, and the Russian audience is my primary interest, the English-language materials are omitted from the analysis.

The article is structured as follows. I will first discuss the origins, structure and functionalities of Project 1917 and how its activities have developed since its launch. The second section delves more deeply into the idea of *reliving* the Russian Revolution. Examining media formats and user engagement, I theorise what the social media feed format means in terms of acting out and working through (LaCapra 2001) Russia's troubled past, and examine the ways users participate in the project on Vkontakte. The concluding section provides a preliminary interpretation of the (at the time of writing, still ongoing) project.

## Project 1917 – free history

The project was initiated by Mikhail Zygar', a journalist, writer and former editor-in-chief of independent television channel Dozhd'. Its aim is to 'make history popular, to show a polyphony of historical characters to an \_ as wide as possible – audience'<sup>3</sup> (project website). Working with a team of 15 editors and over 100 volunteers, the project spent several months

<sup>2</sup> Date ranges 15.02.2017-14.03.2017; 01.10.2017-31.10.2017. The project follows the Gregorian calendar ('new style') while the (majority of) archival materials it uses are dated according to the Julian calendar that was replaced in early 1918 ('old style'). The date of 'posting' is adjusted accordingly by the producers. In the selection of the sample dates for February I choose to adhere to new style dates in order to include the actual revolution; the October sample was taken to coincide with expected public interest connected to the 'October' Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations by the author. For the project materials (the 'posts' from 1917) the translations included in the English-language version of the project are used, whenever available.

to collect archival materials, e.g. memoirs and written correspondence, originating from over 1500 individuals (Ekho Moskvyy 2016). The pieces of text that are shown in the feed are authentic historical sources, albeit shortened or edited somewhat to fit the format. The multimedia project is produced by Yandex – Russia's leading internet cooperation and counterpart to Google. In addition, it is supported by various companies and organisations, ranging from state-owned financier Sberbank, newspaper *Kommersant* and social networking site V Kontakte, to archives, museums, publishing houses and the All-Russian Research Institute of Hydrometeorological Information.<sup>4</sup> Despite the support of state-owned parties, the project is generally earmarked as being 'liberal' (in Russia, the term liberal is generally understood as oppositional) based on the political orientation of its initiator, its aims and approach. The project thus serves as a useful illustration of the fact that, for any media or cultural production, interpreting the list of sponsors as a one-on-one indication of its political inclination or loyalty (typically cast in terms of 'pro-Kremlin' vs. 'oppositional') oversimplifies current Russian reality and often lacks explanatory power. The project concludes on 18 January 2018 and thereby avoids having to address the even more complicated events of the Civil War years.

At the time of its launch on 14 November 2016, the project comprised a website and a network of pages on V Kontakte. Since then, it has expanded its activities onto other platforms and produces content on Instagram, YouTube and a channel on messaging app Telegram, as well as its own mobile application.<sup>5</sup> In addition, one can subscribe to the mailing list to receive a collection of highlights. The number of sources (i.e., historical persons) included in the project continues to increase as additional materials are added. The project itself is also continuously evolving; new initiatives and formats are continually developed and, at times, equally quickly abandoned. For example, Yandex launched an application providing 'live' translation of ongoing events 'on site' by connecting a news feed to geolocations marked on the map of St. Petersburg.<sup>6</sup> The translation ran for only four days (12–15 March 2017). An English version of the project was developed in collaboration with the London-based Russian culture centre Pushkin House. The functionality of this English-language counterpart is limited: it consists only of a website displaying the main daily feed and some video and background materials. Collaborating with its partners, the project produced several spin-offs, both on- and offline. For example, Sberbank offered a virtual reality (VR) experience at its Staryi Arbat location in Moscow (Ekho Moskvyy 2016).<sup>7</sup> By wearing VR glasses inside of Sberbank's 'historical department', where the original interior has been preserved, visitors were

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the project's launch, the website listed the following partners: Sberbank; V Kontakte; Zimin Foundation; House Museum Maria Tsetaeva; Tretyakov Gallery; Russian State Archive; Gogol Center; RGALI (archive); All-Russian Research Institute of Hydrometeorological Information; Multimedia Art Museum Moscow; Kommersant; State Historical Museum; DLA PIPER (global law firm) (archived version of the website dated 14.11.2016, accessed via Internet Archive Way Back Machine). Since then, additional partners have been added: Publisher Kuchkovo Pole; Authenticclub (a 'closed community of like-minded people, uniting owners and top-managers of large companies, representatives from the sciences and arts'); online film archive Net Film; Esenin Museum; publishing house Zakharov; Russian State Library.

<sup>5</sup> At the time of data collection, the platform-specific implementations of the project were available via the following web addresses: Yandex website (<https://project1917.ru/>), V Kontakte (<https://vk.com/project1917>), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/project1917/>), Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/project1917/>), YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOEK6MI0YmpwAYomx3-3ng>), Telegram (<https://telegram.me/project1917>), Yandex app (<https://yandex.ru/february1917/app>).

<sup>6</sup> <https://yandex.ru/february1917/app>.

transported back to 1916, observing how well-known characters of the time come into the office to collect money from their savings' accounts. Drawing from the materials collected and the approach developed for Project 1917, Zygar' published a book in October 2017, entitled *The Empire Must Die. The History of the Russian Revolution in Persons. 1900-1917* [Imperiya dolzhna umeret'. Istoriya russkikh revolyutsiya v litsakh. 1900-1917].<sup>8</sup> Written with the intention to make history accessible to a wider audience, the book revisits the events of the final years of the Russian Empire through the eyes of selected individuals.

The project is active on multiple platforms that vary significantly in their functionalities (see Table 1). Consequently, there are differences in the types of content offered on each, and in how and to what degree interaction with users can occur. The website, Vkontakte and Facebook pages form the core of the project. The daily feed on the front page of the website provides the most comprehensive collection of materials. It shows – in a timeline at the top of the page – the most important events of the day and – down the middle – the feed (see Figure 1). This feed, mimicking Facebook and Vkontakte in its look, comprises posts from a broad variety of individuals as well as (news) items published on that day one hundred years ago by organisations, newspapers and magazines from across the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup> For each of the individuals, their posts are collected on a 'personal page' that shows their 'time-line' and a listing of, e.g., friends, profession and political views. For example, Lenin's profile page indicates he is a 47-year old Bolshevik professional revolutionary and lists the names of his wife, sister and friends. The website furthermore links to the ever-expanding body of complementary materials – games, videos, background dossiers. The mobile app offers a scaled version of the site and has comparable functionalities. A selection of the content is shared on Vkontakte and Facebook on the project's respective pages, although the total number of daily posts appears to be lower on the latter platform. Another difference between the two social networking sites is that, on Vkontakte, a group of over 350 main characters also has a personal page and can be followed separately. This means that, as in the real world, it is theoretically possible for users to personalise their 1917 news consumption and create a historical 'filter bubble' by, for instance, following only Bolshevik revolutionaries or monarchists, and thus circumvent being exposed to the variety of perspectives produced by the project's central feed.

<sup>7</sup>A video impression of the VR film was published on Sberbank's facebook page, see <https://www.facebook.com/sberbank/videos/1120554681375123/?pnref> (accessed 23 October 2017).

<sup>8</sup> The English translation will be published by Public Affairs under the title *The Empire Must Die. Russia's Revolutionary Collapse, 1900-1917* in November 2017.

<sup>9</sup> A full list of included persons and publications can be found here: <https://project1917.ru/heroes> (accessed 23 October 2017).

**Table 1.** Characteristics and functionalities of Project 1917 on respective online platforms and mobile applications.

	Website 'feed'	Vkontakte	Face- book	Insta- gram	You- Tube	Tele- gram	Mailing list
<i>Media format</i>							
Archival content	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Produced content					✓	✓	✓
'Live'	✓	✓	✓				
<i>User engagement</i>							
Comment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Like	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Share	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

*Source:* Mariëlle Wijermars

Whereas the core element of the project – the social media feed – contains authentic historical materials without narrative framing, this rule does not apply to the platforms and formats that were added as the project developed. On Telegram, YouTube and Instagram, Project 1917 operates rather differently (see also Table 1). The Telegram channel offers a daily summary of the main events of the day and links to newly released video content. The Instagram account diverts more radically since its posts are not limited to 1917; images (historical photographs, posters, artworks) are taken from various years in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the feed includes a 'selfie' taken by the daughter of Tsar Nicholas II, Anastasia, in 1913. The project produces videos – ranging from animations of historical events to 'live' news broadcasts – that are published on the project's YouTube channel and then integrated into the website and promoted through its social media accounts. The weekly mailing list, finally, provides the most modest version of the project: with minimal commentary, it delivers a small selection of the most interesting or significant items posted on the main feed that week (up to five) and links to new videos, games and other supplementary materials. Of the platforms mentioned above, the project is most popular on Vkontakte with 217,835 followers.<sup>10</sup> Facebook comes second with 40,580 followers, in addition to 35,655 likes. 11,700 persons follow the project on Instagram, while the YouTube channel has 4,501 subscribers. The Telegram channel, finally, has 4,200 members. The number of daily page views of the project's main website is not publicly available, nor is the number of subscribers to its mailing list.

<sup>10</sup> All data collected on 6 October 2017.

In addition to the ambitious scope of its activities, the project is remarkable in two further respects. First, the very decision to develop a highly visible project revisiting the revolution makes it stand out given the ear-deafening silence on the topic on the part of the state. As was noted in the introduction, the government seems unwilling or unable to address the meaning of 1917: the idea of revolution is diametrically opposed to the promise of stability on which the Putin presidency is based (Wijermars, in press). The official stance therefore consists of a call for historical reconciliation of ‘reds’ and ‘whites’. Speaking at a meeting of the Human Rights Council, Putin declared:

I trust this date will be understood by our society as drawing a line under the dramatic events that divided our country and our people; that it will become a symbol of overcoming this schism, a symbol of mutual encouragement and the acceptance of our national history as it is. With its great victories and tragic pages. (Kaliukov 2017)

In fact, the Kremlin did not host any events to mark the centenary of the October Revolution (RBK 2017). When asked about this, Kremlin spokesman Dmitrii Peskov replied: ‘Please explain to me why this should be celebrated. I do not completely understand the question’ (idem). The very notion of revolution, it seems, is rather ignored in the year leading up to the presidential elections of March 2018. A year, moreover, that has been marked by the return of mass protest across the territory of the Russian Federation. Viewing these protests against the historical backdrop of a revolution that succeeded in toppling a regime could, by association, bolster the perception of the movement’s magnitude and chances of success in a way that is undesirable to the current government. The rhetorical persuasiveness of historical analogies can be put to good use to argue that the popular momentum created by Alexei Navalnyi’s anti-corruption and presidential campaigns amounts to more than just anti-governmental protest; that it is the prelude to revolutionary change. Any comparison, therefore, between 1917 and 2017, is to be avoided. Film critic Anton Dolin has drawn attention to the conspicuous lack of Russian cinema productions on any theme that is connected to the centenary in his commentary on the film *Matilda* (Aleksei Uchitel’, 2017). This costume drama became the subject of months of controversy for depicting the love affair between Nicholas Romanov, the later Tsar Nicholas II, and prima ballerina Matil’da Kshesinskaya. Duma representative Natal’ia Poklonskaia aggressively campaigned to get the film banned from Russian cinemas because it would offend the feelings of religious believers:<sup>11</sup>

Consciously or not, Aleksei Uchitel’ has touched upon a taboo theme, and it extends beyond the fate of the emperor-passion bearer [Tsar Nicholas II and his family were canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000, MW]. In the centenary year of the 1917 revolution our cinema is completely silent. Everyone senses that it is equally dangerous to touch the Reds, the Whites, Lenin, or the Tsar: you are certain to offend someone. (Dolin 2017)

Russia’s principle broadcaster Pervyi Kanal, meanwhile, will mark the centenary of the Revolution with a TV series on Trotsky (*Trotskii*, 2017). While the series had yet to premiere

<sup>11</sup> For a timeline of the scandal, which culminated in, e.g., an attack on Uchitel’s St. Petersburg studio with Molotov cocktails and acts of car arson (linked to Orthodox activist groups), see Sapronova et al 2017.



at the time of writing, the description by its producer Konstantin Ernst suggests a truthful representation of history is not its main aim:

Trotskii is famous across the world. During the student revolution in France in 1968, he was no less popular than Herbert Marcuse. We made a TV series that is not just about history, we made a series about a pop star. The armoured train, the leather cloak, the flying goggles and motorcycles – the only thing missing from this list are the electric guitars. Contrary to Lenin, Trotskii really looks like a rock-n-roll hero. And his entire life – the prison, revolution, his position as minister of war, exile, the love of Frida Kahlo and his assassination – this is a true drama. If you sleep with Frida Kahlo, and Stalin sends David Alfaro Siqueiro to kill you - that is a truly interesting life. 'Trotskii' is a series about a man who lived an interesting life. (Pervyi kanal 2017)

Russian international broadcaster RT runs an online (English-language) counter project to Project 1917 under the banner #1917LIVE. The project is most active on Twitter and, contrary to Project 1917, its content is fictionalised and directly responds to current news. As its language of production already suggests, it is aimed predominantly at foreign audiences.

A second noteworthy feature concerns the selection of materials: the producers have not limited their selection of persons and 'posts' to those that are politically relevant in a direct sense, as is often the case with anniversary projects. In as far as available archival materials allow, the feed represents a diverse slice of Russian society at the time. The messages these characters post on their timelines cover a wide range of aspects of daily life in revolutionary times – many of which are not about politics. Indeed, many 'status updates' and posts concern daily struggles and occurrences, and in this way the feeds are quite similar to how the average person today uses their social media account. For instance, the diary of Tsar Nicholas II, frankly speaking, was quite tedious for most of the year. He recounts about the weather, with whom he went out on a walk, and how many times he attended mass that day. On 18 April, writer Ivan Bunin relates that he is staying at hotel The Bear in Petrograd and that he is particularly excited to have access to a bathtub. Rosa Luxemburg, who is imprisoned, has just received the news that her favourite cat has died and, in a post on Klara Tsetkin's timeline, asks herself why cats seem to die so easily (13.04.17). Lilya Brik shares with Vladimir Mayakovsky that she has 'put on three pounds' and is 'feeling desperate': 'I want to lose it, but for some reason, I spend all day hungry and I can't restrain myself' (17.10.2017).

These kind of messages dramatically change the image of 1917; snippets of a past daily reality that make the historical experience of the revolution more relatable but, more importantly, that make our understanding of the Russian Revolution more complex. When given insight into the daily struggles of well-known historical figures, one's perception of their character and, by extension, one's understanding of the motives behind their actions may change. In this sense, the project indeed is a brave attempt at achieving 'free history', as its motto declares, or at least to establish a relation to the past that is more multifaceted. Followers can immerse themselves in the past events without the restrictions of a superimposed frame of interpretation, with as little preselection as possible, and supposedly without knowledge about the future outcomes.

By using new media as both platform and format, the project clearly aims to speak to the younger generation and to groups of the population that normally may be less interested in history. As a result, it is tempting to view it exclusively in terms of popular history and, perhaps, nostalgic entertainment. This is also how Zygar' characterised the initiative before its launch:

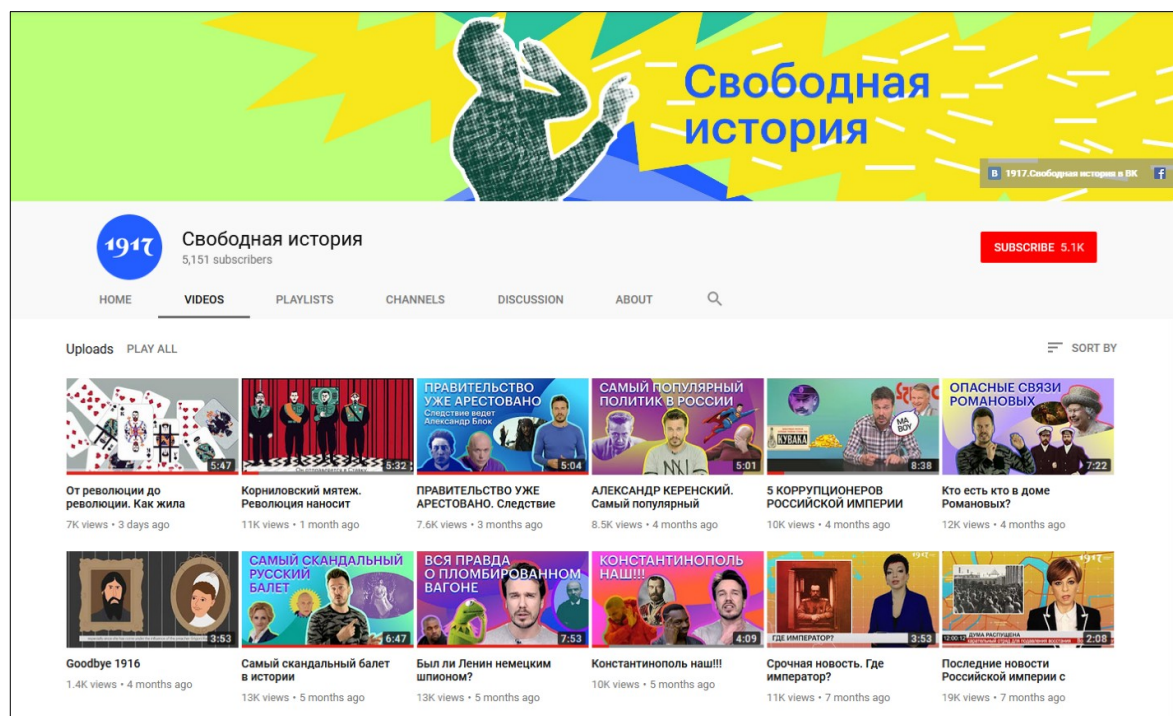
Our project, moreover, is absolutely unpoliticized: the political part of the history of 1917 is heavily diluted and blurred in our project. It is not a project about the politics of 1917, or about the Russia we lost back then; it is more about the bread-and-butter, everyday history. The political story here is one among dozens of others, because an enormous number of our heroes are located outside of the political field: some discuss it, reflect upon it, but others do not. What do people think about, what do they fear most, what do they talk about in times of tremendous upheavals? Mostly they talk, not about the greatness and global nature of the events outside, but about their personal, daily experiences, that therefore seem very strange to us, even though this is how it always is. People do not recognize big politics and big history. (The New Times 2016)

A few months into the project, this statement no longer held true. While the original core of the project – the feed – continues to offer the broad spectrum of viewpoints described by Zygar' without overarching narration, other components exhibit a noticeable shift towards *explaining* the past. In addition, there has been an increase in direct references to and supposed parallels with current affairs. The supplementary materials increasingly acquired political undertones. The way Project 1917 has responded to the controversy about the film *Matilda*, mentioned above, is a case in point. Matil'da Kshesinskaya was included as a main character from the very beginning. But unlike the others, she has a 'story' [siuzhet] dedicated to her: a page where materials from and about her are collected – all marked with the hashtag #matilda. Of the some fifty stories available on the website at the time of writing, only a handful revolve around a single individual, most of which are politicians. It is unlikely a story would have been created on Matil'da had it not been for the controversy. By increasing the visibility of materials about the prima ballerina in this way, the project explicitly positions itself as a contributor to this debate. Kshesinskaya is also included in the video '5 corrupt officials' (22 June 2017) where she ranks fifth among the 'most corrupt' officials in the Russian Empire around the time of the Revolution; in this case, through her affairs with members of the royal family. Yet, this particular video constitutes a political commentary in another, more direct manner: in its topic, investigative style and visuals (e.g., graphics) it hints at Aleksei Navalnyi's video investigations into contemporary corruption, e.g. against Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev, that inspired a series of mass protests in 2017. To underscore the connection, the figure of business magnate Alisher Usmanov, who recorded much ridiculed video responses to Navalnyi's allegations, is inserted on multiple instances. In the video Zygar' furthermore remarks that 'by the way, one hundred years ago, it was possible to accuse that other tsar of corruption even from the stands of the State Duma' – as the picture of a confused looking Vladimir Putin gently slides into the frame.

If we take a closer look at the video content created by Project 1917, it is evident that the references to current political agendas have become increasingly pronounced over the course of the project's first year (see Figure 2): in the first few videos the actualisation of the past

was done primarily by inserting memes that are popular on Runet. Later, historical parallels were suggested by inserting images of a contemporary counterpart to the person or event described, or hinted at in the formulation of the video title. For example, the video 'Contantino-ple is ours!' [Konstantinopl nash!] (16.05.2017) is a variation of the phrase used to approve of the Russian annexation of Crimea – 'Crimea is ours' [Krym nash].

**Figure 2.** Project YouTube channel



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOEK6MI0YmpwAYomx3-3ng>

The final stage is where the current-day situation dictates the choice of topic, as exemplified by the corruption video described above. Another significant change concerns the format of the videos. The first few videos consisted of archival footage or animation. Then, Project 1917 started to produce videos that mimic the format used by popular vloggers on YouTube – a host, in this case Zygar' himself, commenting on current affairs, complemented by plenty of visual references. Zygar' made his first video appearance in May 2017 and, besides a few animations, the majority of videos produced since then follow this format. The increased actualisation of the project should, to some extent, be seen as a strategy for maintaining and expanding the project's audience; to keep followers engaged and entertained over the course of the project's prolonged running time. It was already noted, however, that history is highly politicised in Russia, and the memory of the Russian Revolution perhaps even more so. As 2017 turned out to be a year of protest, Project 1917 increasingly explicitly references Navalnyi's anti-corruption *slash* presidential campaign.

## Implications of the social media format for user engagement

What, then, is the significance of the chosen social media format for how the project functions in terms of collective remembrance? To what extent may the innovative characteristics of the project – the social media feed format and the interactivity it promotes – open up new avenues for societal and individual processes of coming to terms with the revolution's traumatic impact, as well as for dealing with the tensions that characterise Russian society today? Dominique LaCapra differentiates between two forms of dealing with trauma. The first is 'acting out', in which 'the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed' (2001: 70). The boundary between past and present collapses. The second form is 'working through', a process which involves the mourning of what has been lost. Working through allows the subject to distance themselves from the traumatic memory. As a result, 'one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognise something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now' (ibidem: 66). The distinction between past and present is restored, making it possible to imagine a future and move forward. The process of working through aims at gaining a critical distance from the past and necessarily involves the drive to create a logical, coherent account of what happened. The continuity of experience is restored. I will use the distinction between these forms of traumatic remembrance to analyse how the social media feed format functions in Project 1917, focusing on two aspects: media format and user engagement.

### *Media format*

The selection of materials and the way the content is displayed influence how the Russian Revolution is conceptualised on respective online platforms and mobile applications. There are two characteristics of the social media feed format that place the project's activities in the sphere of 'acting-out': the lack of comprehensive narration and polyphony of viewpoints on the past, and its (illusion of) unfolding in real-time. Combined, these features create the impression that the past comes back to life; that is, they dissolve the distinction between then and now. By following the occurrences on a day-to-day basis, users can digitally step into the past. The fact that, on Vkontakte and Facebook, the historical status updates become integrated into the user's feed, appearing among real posts and notifications from their friends as if they were small flashbacks to 1917, reinforces this effect. The diversity of opinions among the historical persons that feature in the feed is illustrated well by the reactions to the February Revolution. On 12 March 2017, the feed included the following posts:

Today is one of the greatest and most joyous days for Russia.

Writer Leonid Andreev, Petrograd

The world has gone mad and is dying before our very eyes.

Prince Felix Iusupov, Rakitnoe estate

I hauled firewood to the church.

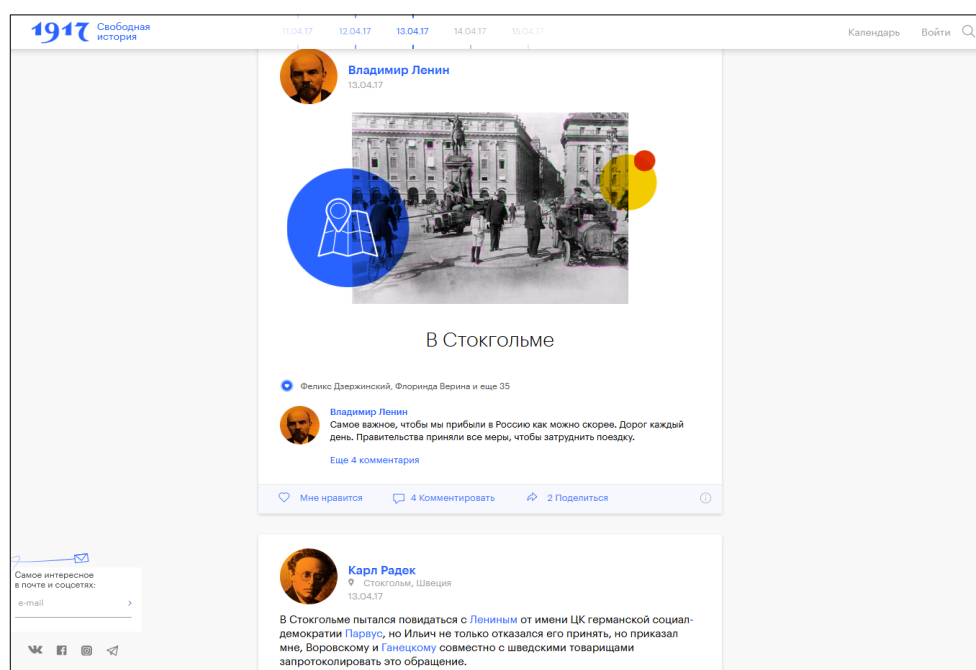
Peasant Aleksandr Zamaraev, Totma

What was considered a utopia yesterday, today seems so simple and natural to all.  
Prince Petr Kropotkin, Brighton, UK

I walked alongside the motorcars toward the Duma. I popped into Radzianko's office. I inspected Miliukov. He was silent. But for some reason it seemed to me that he was stuttering. I was bored an hour later. I left.  
Poet Vladimir Maiakovskii, Petrograd

The project seeks to recreate the complexity of pre-revolutionary Russian society by including representatives of various social layers and regions, as far as the availability of archival sources allows. Farmer Aleksandr Zamaraev from Totma, a town some 200 km east of Vologda, quoted above, is a good example of such 'ordinary citizens' in the collection. The fractured image of reality that emerges as a result resists the emergence of a singular narrative. The simulated inability to fully comprehend what is going on and what will happen next is what makes the glimpse into the past both 'real', persuasive and engaging. When placed in the broader context of the current reworking the memory of the Russian Revolution in the spheres of Russian politics, culture and society, such fragmentation of the memory may well be a necessary intermittent phase to move beyond a state of denial and dissociation; to begin the memory process of coming to terms with the events of 100 years ago in all their grandness, promise, ambivalence, violence and suffering. Perhaps, releasing thousands of forgotten voices of the past into the present can serve as a first step towards remedying the memory's 'unspeakability' (Caruth 1996).

**Figure 3.** Status update by Vladimir Lenin upon arrival in Stockholm



Source: <https://project1917.ru/heroes/lenin>

The illusion of merging past and present revolves around the temporal experience of Project 1917: the revolution is live, unfolding before you in real-time. In April, for example, Lenin and his company of revolutionaries returned to St. Petersburg from Switzerland (announced with the hashtag *#pora domoi* – time to go home) and Lenin was posting status updates along the way (see Figure 3). To heighten the sense of anticipation and excitement (Will they make it to their final destination? What will happen after Lenin returns?) an online game was released before their arrival in which players had to prevent Lenin from entering the country. Notwithstanding such ludic additions, the experience of reliving the Revolution is ultimately dependent on the authenticity of the included source materials. The archival texts and images take on the function of the ‘symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals and, in the process, create communality across both time and space’ (Erll and Rigney 2009: 1. Quoted in Rutten et al 2013). The remediation (Erll and Rigney 2009) of these traces of a past reality consolidates the effect of turning compatriots and others who lived through revolutionary times into persons of flesh-and-blood, with feelings, convictions, hopes and fears, and bringing the past back to life.

### *User engagement*

The various platforms on which Project 1917 is active (with the exception of Telegram) allow users to engage with the project and its characters in ways that are common to social media: through comments, likes, and shares (see Table 1). The possibilities for interaction that the social media formats enable is crucial for the societal impact this project may have as a memory project. Because of its choice to adopt the social media feed format, new forms of interactivity and emotional engagement become possible. Users are invited to not just follow along, but participate: to comment and like, but also to share their own family narratives in response to a post. Thereby, these personal and family memories are woven into this expanding digital reconstruction of the reality of the revolution, creating an ever more complex image. The creation of (emotional) points of connection or identification with individuals in the past on the personal level is, in turn, is what enables the project to potentially contribute to societal and individual remembrance processes. In this sense, interactivity functions in terms of acting out. But, it simultaneously offers possibility for initiating a process of working through. Because of the interactive features, users obtain agency within the project: they can select elements of past reality (by deciding what to like or share) and these choices are then visible to the outside world. In their comments, followers can put forward their opinions or interpretations. The process of selection and reflection can then be viewed as part of the process of working through: it aims to (re-)establish narrative coherence of the memory and restore the distinction between past and present realities.

The followers of Project 1917 respond more actively to posts published on Vkontakte than to those posted on the website. The number of likes, shares and comments on posts are consistently higher on the social networking site. Since the number of regular visitors to the website is not publicly known, it is not possible to ascertain whether this difference results from a lower number of total followers. It is likely, however, that the difference is connected to the fact that individuals who prefer the website have to visit the page to see new content (or access it through the app), while those who follow the project on Vkontakte can opt to receive alerts whenever new posts are published. On Vkontakte, posts receive comments in the

range of 5-60 on average, with some soliciting up to 200 (or none at all). The number of likes appears to be somewhat more volatile: averaging around 100-150, with outliers up to the several thousand likes. A post by Kazimir Malevich outlining his vision for the House of Arts (16.10.2017), for instance, gathered 9,824 likes.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the number of shares rarely exceeds 10 (the same Malevich's post was shared only five times).

The fact that the adoption of the social media format also raises expectations on the part of followers is evidenced by manifold personal messages sent to the main characters through their personal pages (Ekho Moskvyy 2016). These messages range from questions and declarations of love and admiration (including indecent proposals) to scolding and cautionary warnings about impending assassinations (Afisha Daily 2016). These are private messages, demonstrating that the project exerts sufficient emotional appeal for users to want to engage with the digitally resurrected past compatriots. Genuine interactivity occurs only through the chat bots the project launches every now and then, that allow users to exchange thoughts with, e.g. Rasputin.

Which of the types of engagement described above are actually present in the comment sections? Analysis of comment threads responding to Project 1917 on V Kontakte during the sampled month of October 2017 shows that different types of posts (photograph or text) and different subjects result in widely diverging responses and discussions. Without aiming to overgeneralise how users respond to the project, it is possible to differentiate between four types of statements:

- *Comments discussing the historical occurrence of the past itself:* 'The Bolsheviks were a progressive party, all the other ones were reactionary', 'Bunin is the main hater [govnosracher] of his time, and then they wondered why everyone was hating at him [kheiteriat]?'
- *Comments that use the post as an occasion to discuss or compare it to other periods in Russian and Soviet history:* 'Khrushchev was a traitor! He poisoned Stalin, fed the Soviet people American corn instead of meat'
- *Comments relating the topic of the post to the present:* '100 years have passed, but everything has stayed the same (((('', 'If you look at today's little offshore elite [elitku] the same thoughts arise', 'I do not want a third Jewish revolution in Russia!'
- *Comments about the integrity of Project 1917, questioning its neutrality, aims and political loyalties:* 'Yet another confirmation that this project was created to slander the Revolution', 'The project's supply of material is one-sided. But how could it be otherwise, when Sberbank is the general sponsor. Greetings to German Gref [CEO of Sberbank, MW]'

Indeed, as debates heat up, even the commenters themselves sometimes get confused about whether they are talking about 1917 or 2017 ('Sergei, [do you mean] now or back then?'). Only a small proportion of comments reply directly to the post itself; the majority respond to previous comments and prolonged (and often passionate) discussions between (small groups of) users are common (cf. the analyses of 'memory battles' and prevalence of

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<sup>12</sup> By 3 November 2017.

verbal aggression in relation to contested pasts in, e.g. Russian social media in Rutten et al 2013). Some years ago, Ilya Kukulin remarked the following about argumentative practices in historical discussions on Russian-language blogs:

[...] in Russia, such controversies [over historical memory] are not really about memory (or, more precisely, *not only* about memory. Their underlying goal is the elaboration of the political and cultural self-definitions, or, we might say, identities of the participants of those discussions. Emotional posturing over more or less mythologized historical events is not only a subject or frame for Web conversations; it is also a *tool* for self-legitimization. (Kukulin 2013: 112. Italics in original)

One of the argumentative practices outlined by Kukulin is ‘self-definition based on genealogical references’, when ‘participants set out to define themselves as *heirs*, whether of the victims or the victors in Russia’s traumatic past’ (Kukulin 2013: 120. Italics in original). The sample of comments did not reveal examples of such self-definitions in relation to the history of the Russian Revolution. This does not mean that this type of user engagement with Project 1917 does not occur. Indeed, I have observed it within my personal network: an individual shares a Project 1917 post with their friends and adds a personal story in the caption. A possible explanation for this is the fact that comments are public, while a comment attached to an item shared on your timeline is private. The visibility of these actions may play a role in the decision-making process when determining whether to like, share or comment or not, and what to comment (cf. the analysis of the importance of visibility as a factor in social media-based collective action in Margetts et al 2016). The threshold for sharing a family history may be lower if you can control with whom you share it.

Notwithstanding its social media feed appearance and presence on social media platforms, the content differs from an *actual* feed in two ways: the sequencing of messages is not generated by algorithm but determined by the producers. The ‘personal’ accounts on V Kontakte and how their messages appear in the feeds of persons who follow them mimic actual accounts more closely, but with the important distinction that interacting with them is unidirectional: users respond to status updates from 1917, but their historical compatriots fail to respond or engage with the future. This lack of actual interactivity is the second difference. As a result, the conditions under which networked or connective memory could arise are weakened. Contrary to, for instance, memory practices observed in SNS groups (see, e.g., Kaun and Stiernstedt 2012; MacDonald 2015) there are no indications of community building. The fact that followers cannot introduce their own content, but are only allowed to respond to the content provided by the project, may play a role in hindering the realisation of connective memory practices on the public pages of Project 1917.

Examining the number of shares and likes, and the contents of the comments gives us only a partial understanding of how Project 1917 functions as a memory project: it tells us something about those persons who choose to openly express their opinion, but very little about the hundreds of thousands of followers who choose not to. This leaves important questions to be examined in further research: How do followers perceive Project 1917 and the diversity of perspectives on the Russian Revolution it contains? What have they learned from following the project, how has their understanding of the Revolution changed as a result? To what extent has the experience of ‘reliving’ the year 1917 influenced how they understand



and think about Russian society and politics today, and the expectations they have for the future? At the same time, a more extensive analysis of user comments, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, could shed light on how pervasive the activity of trolls and bots is on the project's various platforms. Based on the sample examined here, it is apparent that some followers are *very* actively involved in Project 1917, responding to the majority of posts and stirring up discussions, at times provocatively. Identifying such followers and tracing their activities may help understand whether they are simply history fanatics, or whether Project 1917 is subject to trolling. There are indications that some comments are automatically generated by bots: for example, repetitive occurrences of identical comments that do not stand in relation to the posts or preceding comment thread. Further analysis could ascertain whether this suspicion about the presence of bots is founded, and how extensive these practices are in the case of Project 1917.

### Conclusion: free history?

The year 2017 turned out to be year marked by mass street protests. The development of Project 1917 has clearly been influenced by this fact. As the months passed, the project became ever more entangled with current affairs. Indeed, on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution on 7 November, the temporal dynamics in its approach appears to have been reversed. Whereas reliving the Russian Revolution first served to improve the general audience's understanding of the historical events, by now the digitally revived past has come to serve explicitly as a prism for understanding what goes on in Russia today. On 23 October the project published a quiz on its website named 'Bolshevik or Cadet? Who are you in 2017?' (the thumbnail can be seen on Figure 1). The occasion for the quiz was the 'upcoming' elections for the Constituent Assembly of November 1917. Based on the answers to a set of questions concerning present-day political issues, the quiz determines for which party users would have cast their votes in 1917. Upon completion of the test, the user is taken to an elections page that shows the outcome of the poll. On the page, it is also possible to consult the programmes of parties. One could argue that such a translation of the most pressing political questions of 1917 into the language of current issues can help to gain a fuller understanding of what the 1917 elections were about and which standpoints the respective parties represented. In the context of the approaching presidential elections of 2018, however, the questions read as an election quiz to help voters decide whom to support on 18 March:

- Should there be a punishment for offending the feelings of religious believers? [refers to the legislation on this issue and Poklonskaia's campaign against *Matilda*, MW]
- How can we fight corruption? [refers to the anti-corruption campaign led by Aleksei Navalny and series of mass street protests in 2017, MW]
- Is Crimea ours [*Krym nash*]?]
- Sanctions are... [refers to the sanctions introduced against Russia by the US, European Union and other countries, and the countersanctions introduced by Russia in response, MW]
- Should the outcomes of the privatisation of the 1990s be reconsidered?
- How long should the presidential term be?

- Should there be patriotic education for the youth? [refers to the much-critiqued introduction of patriotic education in school curricula, MW]
- Should there be a visa regime for Central Asia? [refers to plans for limiting the number of migrant workers from Central Asian countries, MW]
- Should Russia admit guilt for the crimes of the Soviet Union?
- Who should own the oil and gas [reserves]?
- Are you in favour of the death penalty?
- Is it correct to take down monuments?
- What should be done with the five-storey buildings? [refers to the plans for mass demolition of *khruushshevki* in Moscow, MW]

In a year of protest, revisiting the idea of revolution cannot avoid turning very political very quickly. Reliving the Russian Revolution in the digital age is not confined to the spheres of education and entertainment. Interestingly, within days of announcing her candidacy bid, aspiring presidential candidate Kseniia Sobchak did not hesitate to publicise the result she (allegedly) got after taking the test: Menshevik. Nor did Project 1917 hesitate to publish this statement on their social media accounts.

An optimistic commentator could read Project 1917 as an illustration of how, within Russia's restricted media sphere, the internet indeed still provides an alternative space for diverging views on the past to circulate. Because of its potential to complicate our take on the revolution era, the project may be of great societal value in Russia by providing a counterforce to the government's increasing dominance regarding historical interpretation, the commentator could add. By providing a platform for diametrically opposed viewpoints, the project could, perhaps, even function as an act of resistance against the way in which history in Russia is increasingly interpreted in black-and-white terms, and by extension of how this polarised mentality is equally applied to current events. By allowing users to immerse themselves in a multifaceted experience of past reality through the words and images of contemporaries, and by opening up the public debate about this traumatic period in Russian past, it might, in the end, help foster an understanding of current reality as being equally complex.

My analysis of how Project 1917 has developed over the course of one year and, in particular, of how users engage with it on Vkontakte shows, however, that the potential of Project 1917 to facilitate the emergence of alternative and connective memory often fails to actualise. As was indicated earlier, this may result from the fact that the project mimics social media and is present on them, but does not fully function as such. Followers are not equal participants; their contributions are restricted to responding to project content in the form of likes, shares and comments. Any expectations about the possible societal impact of the project should be tempered for yet another reason. In their introduction to the special section 'Digital Media – Social Memory', editors Emily Keightley and Philip Schlesinger criticise the emerging scholarly field of digital memory studies for its singular emphasis on the 'connective capacity of digital remembering' and predisposition towards examining 'how traditional bearers and constructors of memory – such as the state or the press – are being challenged as key definers of collective memory by emergent communicative constellations through which dominant memory narratives may be challenged and reworked' (Keightley and Schlesinger 2014: 747). They caution:

[...] while digital media allow new articulations of memory to emerge and provide new resources for developing consensus around a shared past, their potentialities exist in a terrain already marked and structured by powerful institutions, social systems and dominant ideologies. Their possibilities for facilitating 'alternative' social memories and remembering practices are inescapably connected to the economic, political and representational inequalities in which they are being, or may be, performed. Adequately accounting for the mnemonic potential of new media, therefore, requires us not only to hold in view the persistence of older media technologies but also the socio-political contexts in which they, and the newer, are embedded. (Keightley and Schlesinger 2014: 747)

My findings on Project 1917 appear to corroborate their estimation. The 'free history' Project 1917 promised to provide has, from its very outset, been conditioned by the characteristics and limitations of the formats, online platforms and mobile applications it has chosen to employ. The ambitious scale and innovative character of the project furthermore required substantial (financial and technological) investments. In particular, the project would never have existed without the support of the leading companies of Runet: Yandex and V Kontakte. In this respect, the politicisation of Project 1917 may also be explained differently: did the project import the social media business model, alongside the social media formats? When the success and impact of a popular history initiative is expressed in metrics (user engagement statistics, and so on) connecting historical intrigues to current affairs is an effective strategy to increase the project's appeal and visibility (the aim of its coordinator) and, for its commercial hosting partners, increase revenues.

While the history of the Russian Revolution as it is represented by Project 1917 may be interpreted as 'free' in its (initial) lack of interpretation and diversity of perspectives, this also means that the condition of fragmented memory is allowed to persist. Albeit presented in nobler terms, the project's avoidance of 'taking sides' is not *that* different from the government's empty words about reconciliation. It fails to offer a concrete starting point for formulating a new understanding of the Russian Revolution to benefit Russian society today.

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