Echoes of Great October

Toward a Life Cycle Analysis of the Russian Revolution

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Revolutions are not made; they come. A revolution is as natural a growth as an oak. It comes out of the past. Its foundations are laid far back.

—Wendell Philips

Dans une révolution, comme dans un roman, la partie la plus difficile à inventer est la fin.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

The centennial of the Russian Revolution sparked its most intensive reconsiderations in two areas: the transnational dimensions and global reverberations of 1917. As a gold rush mentality in both areas continued apace, fascinating considerations of revolutionary observers and aftershocks across national borders were not infrequently presented without larger frameworks within which to interpret them. Centering much of the commemoration on the global impact of communism in the entire 20th century may have garnered interest outside the Russian/Soviet field. But it had the unwitting effect of deflecting attention from the Russian Revolution \textit{qua} revolution, as the long-term international effects of communism overshadowed the successive stages of the revolutionary upheaval itself.\footnote{Typical of the 2017 emphasis on century-long or global ramifications was the Kennan Institute’s “The Hundred-Year Legacy of the Russian Revolution and the World Today,” the University of Texas at Austin’s “The Wider Arc of Revolution: The Global Impact of 1917,” and the Paris conference “Trajectories of October 1917: Origins, Reverberations, and Models of Revolution.” For an early publication on the global history of the communist century, see \textit{Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History} 18, 4 (Fall 2017): 741–83.} Regrettably, the centennial seems to have

For incisive and extremely useful comments on an earlier draft I am grateful to Peter Holquist, Andrew Jenks, Susan Morrissey, Steve Smith, Willard Sunderland, and John Tutino. This article was prepared with funding from the Russian Academic Excellence Project 5–100. It was written while the author was a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies.

The de Tocqueville quotation translates as “In a revolution, as in a novel, the most difficult part to invent is the end.”
avoided one of the greatest scholarly problems in revolutionary studies, one in fact critical for interpreting the international reception and transnational interactions of any revolution. How can we interpret the unfolding trajectory of one of the world’s great revolutionary upheavals?

All periodizations, historians know, are also interpretations. The sudden centennial shift in perspectives to long-term, international aftereffects is ironic, given that for much of the recent past even synthetic scholarly focus in Russian revolutionary studies has been lashed tightly, albeit productively, on the years 1917–20. While scholars can easily tick off major thematic studies with larger frameworks or landmark works that engage a broad swath of the Soviet period, scholarship operating within the rubric of the Russian Revolution itself has for some time sidestepped an expansive understanding of the revolution. Instead, it has tended toward making “the Russian Revolution” virtually synonymous with its middle, regime-changing phases—the demise of the ancien régime in the February Revolution, the radicalization leading up to and furthered by the October Revolution, and the Civil War that ended with the consolidation of the new regime. Given this relatively restricted focus, the centennial-inspired exploration of long-term international and transnational dimensions of the Russian Revolution is most welcome. But it has the effect of erecting a diffuse and expansive interpretive superstructure over a very deep yet narrow historiographical base.

The way Russian historians have marked the centennial sidesteps a long-standing weakness of the historical literature: a perennial lack of serious engagement with the literature on comparative revolutions. The field of comparative revolutions has been dominated by historical sociologists, with input from comparative historians largely outside the Russian field. Specifically, Russianists’ isolation from the field of comparative revolutions has led to neglect of a promising recent development: comparison of stages composing life cycles of revolutions. Comparativists have revived the life cycle approach in the 21st century for their own goals, such as seeking to explain democratic versus authoritarian outcomes of revolutions. Those purposes may or may not...


3 There have been important exceptions, discussed below. Richard Pipes, driven by his focus on the revolutionary intelligentsia and political power, and claiming to present the first “comprehensive view” in any language, began with the student disturbances of 1899 and ended with the Red Terror (The Russian Revolution [New York: Knopf, 1990], xxi).
be of importance to practitioners in the Russian field. But the comparative revolution field is also centrally motivated by an attempt, suggestive for all the human sciences, to weave an unfolding historical “process” into broader explanations of origins and consequences.

Why have historians of the Russian Revolution been relatively little engaged with the field of comparative revolutions? Why have comparative treatments that regularly include the Russian case almost never been written by scholars in the Russian field? To be sure, familiarity with the French Revolution, which Europeans in the long 19th century obsessed over along with the “Russian Jacobins” themselves, has been imbibed almost with our mother’s milk. Historians of Russia have often known the European revolutionary tradition very well. Martin Malia, discussed below, whose posthumous work made him the rare historian of the Russian Revolution to undertake a comparative history, was Eurocentric even more than usual. Because ideology was always Malia’s cause of causes, he claimed in *History’s Locomotives* both that revolutions in general did not originate outside Europe before the early modern period and that “Red October” constituted Russia’s break from this European lineage. Outside the European context, Steve Smith’s work on the long history of the Russian and Chinese revolutions is rather the exception that proves the rule. The lack of comparative perspectives in the historical literature on the Russian Revolution has to be seen as one of the striking features of the historiography.

Perhaps some studying the “great revolution” with the most profound impact on the 20th century felt less need to reach for comparative insights. More likely, many realize that comparative history is difficult to do well and is unpopular in the discipline. There is a traditional gulf between historians emphasizing archival depth and interpretive complexity and the sweeping,

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5 While imagining a new world and a fundamental break with the past is indeed a modern phenomenon, earlier upheavals in the name of justice and the creation of new regimes were justified in traditional terms. On revolutions in the ancient world and during the Renaissance, see Jack Goldstone, *Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chaps. 4 and 5.

macro-level works of historical sociologists and equation-like formulations of political scientists looking at revolutionary causes and outcomes. As the Russian historical field was shaped further by the cultural turn, especially in the 1990s, and comparative revolution studies only modified its dominant structuralism, this gulf has become a chasm. Finally, the field of comparative revolutions itself shrunk in recent decades, with political and scholarly interest in radical upheavals of the past on the wane.

The most significant interaction between the Russian field and comparative revolutionary studies still lies more than one generation ago in the debates surrounding the shift from social to cultural approaches in the 1980s and 1990s. Theda Skocpol’s classic 1979 *States and Social Revolutions*, which took what she termed a “non-voluntarist, structuralist” approach, was followed by the famous slogan about “bringing the state back in.” In Skocpol’s framework, international competition shaped crises of old regime states, in turn triggering social revolution, especially rural revolt—which, stepping into the breach of state crisis, was to her seemingly always on call. The centrality of the state here resonated with all those developing post-Marxian interpretations of social and political forces. For historians of my own generation, William Sewell’s landmark rejoinder in his exchange with Skocpol, insisting on the causal importance of cultural and ideological factors both triggering and shaping the revolutions that did occur, marked an important moment in the Russian field’s cultural turn. It coincided with the profound reorientation of the concept of political culture carried out by François Furet, Mona Ozouf, and allied “revisionist” students of French revolutionary culture. Neither Skocpol nor Sewell, focusing on the outbreak of revolution, was centrally concerned with the Brintonian question of stages.

The basic issue raised in the Sewell-Skocpol debate—how explanations can incorporate underlying, structuring forces yet reckon with the causal power of the ideas, cultural frameworks, and experiences that shape human behavior—can be discerned in the contrasting quotations from the mid-19th century from Philips and Tocqueville that form the epigraphs to this article.

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Philips makes the origins of revolutions to be as primordial as a force of nature; Tocqueville evokes the authorship of the novel when constructing their ends. This classic split remains as fundamental as ever for scholars of revolution. This is made clear by the ongoing discussion, detailed below, about ideas and circumstances in the long history of the Russian Revolution. Indeed, in studies of revolution more generally, as Daniel Bell has recently discussed, the rift long ago exposed by Sewell and Skocpol—between those privileging “impersonal structural change” and those investigating what he labels “hermeneutic” history, centering on how historical actors understood what they did—has only deepened. There has been a veritable explosion in the cultural history of revolutions less and less connected to the still heavily structuralist field of comparative revolutions. Bell’s opposition between structures and hermeneutics, to be sure, is a convenient oversimplification: investigation of cultural patterns can reveal deep structural forces rather than agency, and historians of revolution routinely pursue myriad vectors of analysis encompassing both. But the point, as Bell adds in a crucial addendum, is that the main tendencies in the historical discipline’s engagement with revolutions in recent decades have worked to slight comparative approaches.\footnote{Daniel Bell, “Afterword,” in Scripting Revolution, 348.}

One fundamental problem this article raises is how to potentially reconcile a Russian historiography deeply marked since the 1990s by the cultural turn and a comparative revolutions literature still pervaded by a modified structuralism. My premise here is not only that the two can be in dialogue, if perhaps not fully reconciled, but that it is high time revolutionary historians returned to an explicit debate about the nature and impact of long-term “structural” forces that would yield more sophisticated answers about how they can be related to other dimensions of the historical process.

A similar set of problems, yet with a rather different solution, lies at the center of Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein’s collection Scripting Revolution, the most important recent intervention by historians into the comparative history of revolutions (where Bell’s observations appeared). That project proposed that a uniquely historical approach to comparative revolutions lies in the flexible concept of revolutionary “scripts,” which can be traced across and within revolutions. A “defining feature” of revolutions ignored by historians and social scientists alike, Baker and Edelstein contend, has been the “self-conscious awareness with which revolutionaries model their actions on those of revolutions past.” An advantage to their method is that these scripts—models or narratives about how revolutions unfold—both connect revolutions across time and highlight how revolutionary actors
emulate, modify, or reject their predecessors. The basic insight of *Scripting Revolution*, that perceptions across borders and time must be considered a key part of comparing revolutions, is very much in accord with my own attempt here to integrate the element of transnational interaction into the comparison between the Russian and Mexican revolutions. However, in that revealing case I suggest how mutual *misunderstanding*—even widespread ignorance, occasionally willful, among top revolutionaries on both sides—was more salient than any clearly understood revolutionary script.

Baker and Edelstein do not much care for historical sociology or social science. In fact, they appear to reject it in toto. “Historians such as William Sewell and Martin Malia,” as they implicitly endorse the very different critiques of very different scholars, “have long pointed out the flaws within the sociological analysis of comparative revolutions.” They fail to note that the dominant structuralism has been modified by social scientists attempting to include the power of culture and ideas, nor do they note the stress on unfolding revolutionary processes at the center of the revived life cycle approach. The problem with their manifesto-like salvo, “Against Sociological (and Deterministic) Accounts of Revolution,” is that it constructs a crude dichotomy between a unified sociological approach to revolutionary studies, in which all “structural” determinants in modern scholarship are essentially attributed back to Marx’s privileging of socioeconomic conflict, and an historical approach. This turns out to be their own *cuvée* of intellectual and political history, one that has acquired its characteristics from a particular linguistic-turn terroir.

As Daniel Bell smartly observes in his conclusion to that volume, well over half the essays in *Scripting Revolution* could be subtitled as a “case study in the history of revolutionary intelligentsias.” Revolutionary intellectuals, however crucial and fascinating, hardly programmed the entire history of revolutions. Nor do they explain more than one part of the linkages among them. Large numbers of card-carrying historians investigate structuring forces, economic or geopolitical determinants, and subaltern groups in the journey from old to new regimes, as is evident below. In the end, Baker and Edelstein oscillate between soft claims that their approach is merely one “useful handle” and strong claims, including that revolutions themselves can be conceived as “variations on a script for political action and understanding invented at a particular moment.” They acknowledge that “without certain

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11 Ibid., 5–8.
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preconditions no revolution is possible”; yet once crisis occurs, it is “scripts” that “come into play.”

The Russian field, with its history of dueling reductionisms—from power and ideology advanced by the totalitarian school to the “social forces” advanced in response by revisionism to early postrevisionism’s quest to find “culture” at the root of everything—may now be more immune than most to embracing one more exclusive master key, this time to the comparative and transnational links among revolutions. While this article does not ignore differences between historical and social scientific sensibilities, I do not construct them as hostile opposites, for they are hardly as incompatible as Baker and Edelstein suggest. I thus offer several ways beyond a focus on revolutionary scripts by which Russian historians can become more comparative. The emphasis on the unfolding of revolutionary stages at the center of the life cycle approach is compelling precisely because it prompts us to think hard about how to integrate the various dimensions of the historical process—structural as well as “hermeneutic”—rather than playing the old game of privileging one part. This is an endeavor to which all the human sciences can contribute.

In terms of method, moreover, it forces historians to revisit and reintegrate long-term structural factors that have long been put on the back burner to make way for increasingly refined debates about politics and culture, ideas and agency, everyday life and lived experience.

This article argues that the framework of the revolutionary life cycle can become a richly interpretive lens for Russian/Soviet historians of the entire late imperial and Soviet periods. The first section critically reviews the history of the approach and its recent revival in the field of comparative revolutions, focusing on the frequently flawed treatment of the Russian Revolution. The second part interprets the historiography of revolutionary Russia through the first half of the centennial in 2017, highlighting how the field has steadily but as yet still partially expanded its vision of the multiple dimensions of the revolutionary upheaval. A life cycle analysis would organically fit this expanding brief yet push it further. The final section explains how a vision of revolution that takes on board the concept of “life cycle” can illuminate the comparison and the interactions between one revealing yet neglected

12 Ibid., 4, 7.
13 For my take on dueling reductionisms in the history of the field, see Michael David-Fox, Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).
14 On the distinct disciplinary contributions of history and its synergy with the social sciences, see William Sewell’s Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
pair of revolutions in Russia and Mexico that occurred in the same extended historical moment.

Let me first clarify at the outset what the life cycle approach represents and what I think historians can gain from it today. The concept of “life cycle” brings us back to Crane Brinton rather than Theda Skocpol. It encompasses consecutive stages of a revolution’s entire “biography” and has sometimes been known as the “natural history” approach, after the 1927 work by L. P. Edwards, *The Natural History of Revolution*. The problem with the term “natural history” is that it naturalizes, presenting revolutions as elemental forces; Brinton, as we shall see, used a number of medical metaphors from pathology that worked in the same direction. I have preferred the term “life cycle,” used as synonymous with life “course,” because that is the most standard term in the recent revival of interest in updating Brinton’s classic, which is far from exhausted. The main thrust of this renewed focus has to do with comparing how stages unfold as part of a revolutionary process that informs the overall course, a project that has been pursued by comparativist veterans of both Skocpol’s structuralism and its culturalist critique. The term “cycle” is not intended to suggest anything about cyclicity in history; rather, it evokes a life course, which by definition involves a beginning, middle, and end.

Differing historical phenomena within a revolutionary period are always shaped by differing temporalities; historical narratives must always begin and end somewhere. But the sine qua non of modern revolution is a regime change involving widespread conceptualizations of a new order. This is what must distinguish revolution, if it is to have any definition, from pretenderism, revolt, coup d’état, or even the most radical reform, and therefore all successful revolutions have been marked by that passage from old regime to new. It is thus only common sense that the early stages lead from a revolutionary situation to the overthrow of the old regime; that middle stages are the struggles ensuing from regime change in revolution; and the end must be located somewhere after the final entrenchment and consolidation of the new regime. Locating the beginnings and ends of revolution in particular involves considerable interpretation, and I do not believe that there is only one correct demarcation of a life cycle any more than there is one correct historian. To

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me, the concept is nothing more than a heuristic device and a tool. It is a tool, however, that leads to analysis of patterns and stages among revolutions—on both structural and heuristic grounds. To give just one example, the collapse of old regimes and their legal orders creates the framework for struggles for legitimacy and power across many national contexts; yet how those struggles play out is shaped by all sorts of deeply rooted contexts, contingencies, conjunctures, and outlooks, including how key revolutionary and ideological actors imagine the nature of the revolution after it was established as a tool in the modern political repertoire.

Historians of the Russian Revolution can deploy the life cycle prism not merely to narrate an expanded chronological frame but to debate much more explicitly and at once the long-term causes, revolutionary dynamics, and new regime consequences of this great upheaval. The social science terminology, which puts this sequence in terms of structures, processes, and outcomes, is more standardized, and those terms are not necessarily identical to the ones I have used. But historians can join the debate about how the unfolding of the revolutionary process in particular contexts can be part of a bigger interpretation of revolutionary origins and results. The concept of “life cycle” offers a chance to relate in-depth research to the big-picture questions that have too often been lacking in the field. By the same token, it should prompt all those inclined to emphasize the “hard” impact of economic and imperial frameworks, political systems, and international imperatives to grapple with the interacting impact of ideology, contingency, and culture. Because of the complexities of the long, drawn-out, multistage trajectory of the Russian Revolution, as well as its prominent place in comparative accounts of revolutionary life cycles, historians of Russia and the Soviet Union should be in a unique position to contribute to this endeavor.

From Brinton to Goldstone: The Revival of the Life Cycle Approach
The “natural” part of natural history was important for Brinton because he took his inspiration from medicine, specifically pathology. At many points he made analogies between the historian and the natural scientist. In a renowned metaphor the Harvard historian of France likened the onset of revolutionary upheaval to “a kind of fever.” The historical diagnostician or pathologist could detect the “prodromal” signs of the revolutionary fever. When it reached its height, the fever produced a kind of delirium: reigns of Terror and Virtue. “Finally,” he wrote, “the fever is over and the patient is himself again, perhaps in some respects actually strengthened by the experience, immunized at least for a while from a similar attack, but certainly not wholly made into a
new man.” The anatomist of revolution certainly saw himself as a detached scientist, but in setting out this metaphor for the “full cycle” of revolutions he did attempt to distance himself from literal organic analogies and the most obvious pathologizing connotations.16

For Brinton, delirium in the Russian case meant the Red Terror of Civil War; the New Economic Policy (NEP) to him was a Thermidorian phase. “In the first place, Thermidor in Russia began in Lenin’s own lifetime, with the coming of the New Economic Policy in 1921,” he wrote. “Stalin’s apparent return to Communism in 1928–29 is really no more significant than Napoleon’s apparent repudiation of the corruptness and moral looseness of the Directory once he had achieved secure power by the coup d’état of the 18th of Brumaire.” As this suggests, Brinton never grasped the seminal revolutionary phenomena of the Soviet 1920s. He was unable, like so many others after him down to the present day, convincingly to integrate Stalin’s “second revolution” into the life cycle of the Russian Revolution. Brinton raised and rejected the idea of “permanent revolution” and seemed to settle on the notion of what he called “sequelae, a series of lesser revolutions in which the forces present in the initial one are worked out.”17 But the historical pathologist self-administered no small dosage of ambiguity to his account about the end of the Soviet fever. Let us admit that despite our exponentially greater knowledge about the decades after 1917 today, the historiography still largely separates the NEP and Stalin-era “stages” from the history of the revolution itself.

That said, there are major exceptions. Sheila Fitzpatrick’s The Russian Revolution, penned by the most prominent pacesetter of the Soviet field, did include the Stalin Revolution as part of the narrative. Fitzpatrick’s 1982 “Short Course,” as colleagues dubbed the influential textbook with tongue in cheek, took the revolutionary upheaval up until the end of the First Five-Year Plan; subsequent editions in 1992 and 2008 firmly extended the revolution’s biography through the Great Terror of the late 1930s. It was no accident that Fitzpatrick’s work invoked Crane Brinton in the introduction. In her inimitable way, Fitzpatrick encapsulated a complex problem within an admirably clear and laconic exposition. The Bolsheviks themselves, she explained, were obsessed by the same French model of Thermidor that was central to Brinton; this itself formed one basis for the renewal of the

16 Brinton, Anatomy of Revolution, 18, 19, 22.
revolutionary upheaval under Stalin in the late 1920s. Fitzpatrick opened up the problem, still discussed in comprehensive exams, of when to conceive the “end” of the Russian Revolution—and why. Equally important, by recounting a two-decade revolutionary process with discrete stages from February 1917 to the Great Terror, Fitzpatrick contributed to a broader concern with analyzing very different subperiods of the Stalin period, an advance carried out most notably in her work on *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1932.*

While Fitzpatrick’s approach lent itself to a kind of life cycle analysis, however, her narrative picked up in earnest only in February 1917. She thus neatly reversed the field’s long-standing stress on the imperial “roots” of 1917, treating the entire question of origins along with the Russian revolutionary tradition and 1905 together in one perfunctory chapter—as if a biography were to skim over heritage, birth, childhood, and adolescence and take up the story with the subject’s first adult achievement.

In fact, Fitzpatrick’s concern with the latter stages of revolution in a general history was unusual not only in the Russian context but within the broader field of revolutionary studies. Michael D. Richards, a comparative historian, convincingly argued in his slim yet evocative 2004 *Revolutions in World History* that the Cold War concern with preventing revolutionary outbreaks produced an “obsession with the origins of revolution.” This certainly overlapped with the traditional stress in the Russian field on the decades leading up to 1917. Arguing that revolution involves “not only the seizure but also the use of power,” Richards tried to illustrate that a revolution “can best be understood by studying it over its life course.”

Richards furthered the life cycle approach by featuring drawn-out, multistaged revolutions, deliberately setting aside the intensive decade after 1789. He began instead with the highly segmented British case, with its Cromwellian stage followed much later by the parliamentary Glorious Revolution of 1688. Although he then made the odd decision to skip from the 17th century to the 20th, his juxtaposition of the Mexican, Russian, Vietnamese, and Iranian revolutions was thought-provoking. As a historian, Richards explicitly advocated putting historical narratives of each revolution’s life course side by side, as opposed to advancing an equation-like analysis of thematic factors or a single overarching theory. Finally, Richards emphasized the periods following regime change: “If this book has some claim to originality, it lies in the idea that revolutions go well

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beyond the seizure and consolidation of power.” In the Russian case, as one might expect, this dictated an inclusion of the Stalin Revolution into the story. Richards did this while rejecting Brintonian pathology: revolutions, he wrote, “are not diseases that had to run their course or disruptions to a state of desired equilibrium that had to be dealt with before the continuity of history might be resumed.” Rather, revolutions became a “way of doing politics,” a rare but established part of the “political repertoire” from the 17th century on. In his attempt to depathologize revolutions, Richards to my mind went too far in highlighting choice and rationality in his highly “voluntarist” depiction of them as “one way of deciding what groups pay what price for whatever happens.” Despite this formulation, his work nonetheless reflected a strong structuralist legacy and only partially carved out a causal role for people’s experience beyond heads of state or revolutionary leaders.²⁰

In narrating the arc of five revolutionary processes, Richards did bring together many disparate stages often treated separately in each national case. But he deployed the life cycle approach for the dubious end of judging which revolutions were “successes” and which were “failures.” Defining success in terms of individual liberty, social well-being, and a “flexible and open” political system, unsurprisingly, made the British liberal-parliamentary outcome the only successful revolution among his five and, equally important, drew attention away from other possible ways of leveraging the life cycle approach.²¹

The limitations of Richards’s slim work raise a number of questions. To what ends can a revived life cycle approach work today? How can the analysis of the course of revolution over multiple stages incorporate the sophisticated discussions of causality that were raised both in the structuralist confrontation with ideology and culture and the rich internal historical discussions of this in the Russian field (and by extension other national historiographies)? Let us refine the agenda by first considering the interventions of several other scholars inside and outside the Russian field, and then by examining the historiography of the Russian Revolution itself in more depth.

One little-observed feature of Martin Malia’s 2006 *History’s Locomotives* was its extended confrontation with Crane Brinton’s *Anatomy of a Revolution*. Malia, the quintessential hedgehog, was animated by one big idea: the primacy of ideology between 1917 and 1991.²² If the main takeaway of his

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²⁰ Ibid., 1, 4, 87.
²¹ Ibid., 1, 96–97.
Soviet Tragedy was that Soviet history unfolded the way it did at every major turn because “the perverse logic of an impossible utopia” had created a surreal ideocracy, *History’s Locomotives* was devoted to the comparative conclusion that Red October departed from all previous European revolutionary patterns. “In October,” he wrote, “the Russian revolutionary process underwent a sea change unique in European history; once the ultra left had seized power, it simply stayed there, and no Thermidor or Bonaparte ever came along to displace it.”

Perhaps the most significant excursion into comparative history by a historian of the Russian Revolution was written to suggest that the Russian Revolution was incomparable.

The Russian Revolution was an aberration, Malia maintained, because it turned into “less an event than a regime.” This was an outcome that Malia called a Sonderweg and labeled “institutionalized revolution” or “institutionalized Party dictatorship.” Malia may have taken the term “institutionalized revolution” from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, a borrowing in fact evocative of a roughly simultaneous 20th-century revolution that was also placed on display in a mausoleum, rather than overturned in a political reversal. In both revolutions, moreover, the mummification began roughly a decade after a second revolutionary phase in the 1930s. The Russian and Mexican cases suggest—as does every other communist revolution and others, such as the Iranian—that revolutions have often been institutionalized rather than overthrown. Within the framework of a “revolutionary mass-movement regime,” to use the phrase of Robert C. Tucker, it can evolve away from its early, most radical or utopian agendas over a long stretch of phases. Malia, who revived the old notion of the “cultural gradient” running from the advanced West to the backward East, was more interested in a comparative story of how Russia left the European family.

To insist that Soviet history equaled radical revolution in power was to reject the notion that a revolution can be fundamentally altered over time by evolutionary means or the fallout from a connected yet subsequent “revolution from above.” I have argued elsewhere that we must think through “Stalinism” as an evolving hybrid of revolutionary statism and conservative, even reactionary retrenchment over radically different subperiods. Others have underlined just how much the more routinized, bureaucratic late Stalinism

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of 1945–53 represented a system different from the massive upheavals of prewar collectivization and industrialization. The multiple shifts within “Stalinism” imply—pace both the institutionalized revolution that for Malia ended only in 1991 and almost all histories of the Russian Revolution that stop before the Stalin period—that the evolution of the Stalinist hybrid needs to become the crucial focal point for analysis in any life cycle approach. This hardly means that conceiving other endpoints is not possible, or that different scholars cannot construct differing life cycle trajectories depending on their premises. But the entrenchment of a new regime, in the wake of the renewed or second phase of radicalism, is a logical endpoint particularly if we are to take comparative history seriously.

In an extended essay on Brinton and social science, Malia charged, not without justification, that the historian of France had projected the post-1789 pattern onto other revolutions. In the Russian context, contra Brinton’s notion of Thermidorian phase in Russia, there had been no genuine “moderate” alternative in 1917: “in a matter of months” the liberal Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) were no longer an option. Even so, Malia allowed that Brinton’s escalating fever analogy “was indeed a commonsense description of what goes on during a major European upheaval.” He also found that its patterns led to some “genuinely illuminating” parallels: dual power in Russia had an analogy in the “‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ sovereignties” in France between the Convention and the sections of the Parisian sans-culottes, and in England between the Parliament and the Independents in the New Model Army. In the end, Brinton was wrong because his moderates and radicals were “defined functionally, not ideologically; and in their functional capacity they are virtually interchangeable.” Malia acutely asserted that revolutions cannot repeat or “be reduced to, or even minimally comprehended as, the unfolding of functional or structural patterns. Revolutions are always about something.”

That is a powerful insight. But a revolution can be about many things. It is the victors who reduce its meanings to their own images; historians have less to lose. The Russian Revolution was not equal to what Malia loved to call “Red October.” The symbols, movements, policies, and ideas associated with February did not disappear irrevocably because the new stage opened by

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October began, for example; the February stage provided one enduring face of the Russian Revolution. To be sure, Malia’s critique of Brinton, Barrington Moore, and Skocpol in some ways expressed any historian’s impatience with generalizations. It outwardly took the form of an insistence on the importance of ideas and culture—although culture in his analysis often took the form of political culture explaining Bolshevik maximalism, rather than any deeper cultural dimension to the historical process. But Malia’s fierce anti-Marxism, in the end, was in many ways an inverted Marxism. Ideology, understood narrowly as doctrine rather than in its many incarnations and intersections with other historical spheres, was his “base,” and economics and society belonged to a superstructure determined by it. In a kind of Hegelian revenge, Malia turned Marxism on its head but retained its world-historical sweep.

Another important insight Malia approached was that revolutions were interconnected across time. The “Russian Jacobins” were intensely focused on going farther than their forefathers. While Brinton’s stages were internal to each revolution, Malia observed a “sequential pattern” of modern revolutions—up until 1917: “they have become more revolutionary,” escalating in “intensity and ambition” from England, America, and France to Russia. To assert this Hegelian pattern he conveniently left out 1848 and 1905, as well as all non-European revolutions. He ignored the new European pattern of “velvet” revolutions in 1989, which inaugurated a new wave of revolutions without mass violence. But for Malia’s world-historical anti-Marxism, the Russian Revolution was in a sense the end of history—or at least the end of the European revolutionary trajectory.

The answer to Malia’s attack on social science is that all patterns in revolutionary stages need not be shoehorned into a single universal pattern; the importance of stages and life cycles in revolutions can be taken on board by historians insist on depth and singularity simply because they prompt us to refine our understanding of the particular historical trajectory we analyze. The revelation of difference is, after all, a major goal of comparative history. The key question to be raised here, by contrast, is how to integrate what Bell dubbed hermeneutic history into a more comprehensive analytical mix.

In the years since Malia paid Brinton the complement of considering and dismissing him, there has been a revival of the original Brintonian breakthrough of putting revolutionary stages at the center of analysis. Notably, in 2014 Bailey Stone published *The Anatomy of Revolution Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of England, France, and Russia*. In this admirable extended analysis

29 Malia, *History’s Locomotives*, 305.
of Brinton's revolutions (with the American case left out) Stone avoids Brinton's medicalized analogies almost completely. His goal in interpreting revolutionary passages from old regimes to new was to update and modify Brinton's account of revolutionary stages. Specifically, Stone draws broad yet not mechanistic parallels among revolutionary “breakthroughs” to revolutions. His account of transitions from old regimes to revolution emphasizes how “state-security, constitutional, social, and political cultural” crises merged in the end games of the *anciens régimes*. He dates the breakthrough stage to 1629–37 in England, 1774–87 in France, and, curiously, 1906–14 in Russia, although his chapter on the Russian breakthrough includes a brief consideration of the war in 1916–17.31 As the recent literature on World War I has shown, war and revolution were linked not just in terms of such major factors as the disintegration of the army. Total war made regime change seem possible, accelerated the hunt for internal traitors, and fostered modes of thought from the conspiratorial to the apocalyptic. This potent mix of culture, ideology, and politics is omitted in Stone's account of the Russian revolutionary breakthrough.

Stone follows the breakthrough stage with a “honeymoon” phase after the overthrow of monarchy (in Russia the aftermath of February 1917); the “revolutionizing” of the revolutions (which in Russia William Henry Chamberlin termed the “deepening of the revolution” in the run-up to October); and then Terror and Civil War. Brinton termed this delirium or “reigns of Terror and Virtue,” while Stone hits on the awful “revolutionary climacterics.” In the Russian context, Stone’s schema took more than a stylistic misstep: it downgraded the first Russian revolution of 1905 to a “prodromal” crisis, a label in this case taken directly from Brinton’s pathology, rather than a crucial stage in its own right of Russia’s revolutionary life cycle.32 Relating 1905 to 1917—in terms of underlying structures, unfolding processes, and key post-1907 shifts—is absolutely crucial for any life cycle account. But for a full-length history of the “first Russian revolution” we still rely on Abraham Ascher’s fundamental yet chronologically and geographically contained account from three decades ago.33

The final stages, as we have seen, are by far the trickiest to interpret in the Soviet case. An important result of Stone’s book came out of his replacement

31 Stone, *Anatomy of Revolution Revisited*.
of Brinton’s sequelae, or aftershocks, with the exploration of three “revolutions from above” that followed the three popular upheavals: “In all three post-revolutionary countries, genuine ‘revolutions-from-above’ supervened … and made some genuinely basic readjustments to the situations left by the respective ‘popular’ upheavals … Cromwellian Independents, Robespierist Jacobins, and Leninist Bolsheviks, that is to say, made way for ‘Anglo-Dutch-Hanoverians,’ Bonapartists, and Stalinists.”

This succeeds in upgrading the importance of “second” revolutions. But the relationship between the revolutions from above and below, or first and second revolutionary shocks, in Stone’s handling perpetuates the long-standing interpretational problem of how to fit the Stalinist 1930s into the Russian revolutionary trajectory. Stone, following Brinton, characterized these revolutions from above as “postrevolutionary,” distinguishing them from a Thermidorian stage. As Steve Smith has pointed out, projecting a French model of separate Thermidorian and Bonapartist stages may work for England, given the gulf between Oliver Cromwell in the 1640s and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but it is much more dubious for early Soviet history. In Smith’s words:

For the Russian case, however, the distinction is blurred. Stone sees Thermidor as starting with the New Economic Policy of 1921 and the “postrevolutionary stage” as starting with Stalin’s “revolution from above” of 1929–1932…. Yet even if one construes the latter events as marking a sharp rupture with early Soviet power, most contemporaries saw Stalin as continuing the revolution begun in October 1917…. This points to a more general problem that derives from Stone’s state-centered interpretation. For it leads him to keep his eye firmly on high politics and to pay relatively little attention to mass mobilization. Yet it is precisely the entry of the masses into politics that has over the centuries come to define revolution.

To sum up: Stone’s approach to stages, most glaringly, leaves at least two major problems for further interpretation. First, 1905 is downgraded into a symptom of Skocpolian state crisis rather than analyzed in terms of its crucial and multilayered relationship with 1917, the splits and strategies of the revolutionary movement, mass politicization, lessons learned, hopes dashed, and memories assimilated—or, most crucially in terms of political outcomes, the shift in the center of gravity from liberalism to socialism. If the revolution was a life cycle, the period after 1907 was a difficult transition from youth to adolescence. Russian obshchestvennost´ would not at all have recognized

34 Stone, Anatomy of Revolution Revisited, 474–75.
the interrevolutionary period as a “breakthrough” to revolution; it was seen as a period either of “reaction” or major reassessment. Neither does the label hold at all for the dynamics of the tsarist state and economy before 1914. Second, the key problem of how to integrate Stalinism into the life cycle of the Russian Revolution remains paramount.

In terms of method, Stone claims that his emphasis on “process” modifies Skocpolian structuralism by allowing for cultural factors, ideologies, and actors outside the state. Old regime, revolutionary, and postrevolutionary states, as he puts it in some awkward prose, “responded not only to long-term exogenous imperatives of a geostrategic nature, but also to endogenous pressures reflecting the ‘objective’ needs, anxieties, and cosmologies of ‘ordinary’ men and women (as well as, admittedly, to demands of intra-elite ‘special interests’).”

Despite the achievements of Stone’s study, it has to be said that he seems a bit lost when it comes to understanding the import of the cultural, intellectual, and transnational approaches in the Russian field of the last several decades. Stone diligently incorporates a large historical literature into what he depicts as the basic social science consensus of a state-centered and structuralist approach. His favorite Russian historians are those who deal with the “hard,” state-centered, geopolitical issues such as Theodore von Laue, Hans Rogger, and Dominic Lieven. With others, he seeks and finds elements to support his approach even in works he views as superficial cultural or new-fangled “postmodern” literature.

In the end, Stone essentially throws up his hands; rather than taking away insights, he concludes there is an utter lack of consensus among Russian historians. But, as I suggest, there is an alternative to Stone’s despair. This is to think through how understandings of stages can be informed by assimilating the admittedly tacit insights of cultural, ideological, and transnational history into the analytical mix. As Stone of course recognized, moreover, Brinton himself was a “pre-structuralist.” There is nothing to dictate that a new interest in stages and life cycles among historians need be predominantly structuralist; historians are well equipped to interrelate structural considerations with other dimensions of the historical process.

Finally, we are in a position to consider the leading scholar of comparative revolutions today, Jack Goldstone, a sociologist equally at home in political science and comparative history. In his textbook *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies*, which went through three editions between 1986 and 2008, Goldstone described four generations of

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theoretical approaches: the so-called natural histories identifying common patterns beginning in the 1920s; general theories of political violence in the postwar decades; the structural approach pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s; and an incipient “fourth generation” emphasizing “agency, ideology, and the revolutionary process.” In many ways, Goldstone was already partial to the emphasis on stages, writing that the early scholars including Brinton “succeeded in finding a remarkable correspondence among the major events in each of these revolutions,” valid so often that they “appear to be law-like empirical generalizations.”

In subsequent works, Goldstone has raised the issue of relating origins to processes and outcomes by further attention to revolutionary stages. In an important 2009 article Goldstone continued: “The best-developed theory of revolutionary processes remains the classic ‘natural history’ approach. Yet these scholars looked only at a few cases and sought to identify a uniform course of events leading to a similar outcome, rather than develop a typology of trajectories or account for key differences in outcomes.” What Goldstone has brought to the table is the incorporation of a vastly expanded portfolio of revolutionary upheavals, and not just a handful of European or great revolutions. A student of Skocpol himself, Goldstone is well aware that the formative structuralist school concentrated on origins and state-centered outcomes, which he has attempted to rectify with greater attention to unfolding processes or stages. To this renewed emphasis on “process” within a more comprehensive comparative frame he has incorporated a degree of causal attention to agency and ideology in discussions of such topics as political leadership and the social psychology of mass mobilization.

Goldstone developed a typology of 12 possible stages that “usually” occur in differing combinations or incarnations in a wide array of revolutions. He grouped these 12 stages into 3 “suites.” The first three stages form one suite leading up to the overthrow of an old regime: elite defection and the formation of opposition; polarization and coalition building; and mass mobilization. This is followed by initial regime change and a second suite made up of five closely interconnected, frequently intertwined stages: further polarization; counterrevolution; civil war; international war; and radical regime change and terror. The final “postrevolutionary” suite of changes includes revolutionary moderation; renewed radicalism and terror; and, finally, regime consolidation.

Goldstone’s own purpose in constructing a more flexible and comprehensive set of revolutionary stages was implicitly to integrate the strengths of the different generational approaches, and explicitly to ask questions about why the newest types of “color” revolutions, with their lack of class-based mass mobilization and revolutionary wars, have been largely nonviolent. These he opposes to “radicalizing” revolutions, which include classic social (or class-antagonistic) and anticolonial revolutions.

Goldstone’s broad-brush concern with factors producing different outcomes, which in far more neutral and refined guise continues Richards’s earlier thesis about successful and unsuccessful revolutions, is likely not the takeaway that Russian historians will engage. Rather, from his “suites” we can appreciate more the singularity and complexity of the extended Russian revolutionary sequence. The first major revolutionary upheaval in 1905, which included massive rural unrest, crippling general strikes, and a virtual epidemic of populist terrorism along with the political ascendancy of liberalism and the left-liberal Kadets, failed to produce his fourth stage, the “initial” regime change. However, both the relatively neglected revolution of 1905 and the interrevolutionary period deserve to be further investigated as organically linked in all sorts of ways to 1917 and its consequences. These links include, but are far from limited to, the recurrence of peasant rebellion in specific regions, interethnic violence in the multiethnic borderlands, major cultural and ideological shifts in the state and educated society, and, not least, the marked evolution of all the major revolutionary parties, the party system, and its leaders. Second, and no less crucial, the experience of two regime changes in 1917 made for two distinct revolutionary paradigms in February and October, so that “counterrevolution” (Goldstone’s stage six) is problematic as a label for the broad coalition of the Whites in 1918.

The Whites were a disparate coalition that included February’s revolutionaries, liberals, and some moderate socialists. But that is not the only reason it is dubious to identify them all (or, for that matter, the entire nobility and propertied elites) as counterrevolutionaries. Much of the White movement was a product of tsarism’s total war incarnation and the unprecedented autonomy of the army administration in the western borderlands after 1914. In other ways, the Whites represented the February Revolution against October. In White territories on the ground, moreover, it is difficult to discern a coherent counterrevolutionary set of ideas.40

40 See esp. Liudmila Novikova, Provintsial’naia “kon travoljutsii” : Beloe dvizhenie i Grazhdanskaiia voina na russkom Sever, 1917–1920 (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011); Matthew Rendle, Defenders of the Motherland: The Tsarist Elite in Revolutionary Russia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2–3; Peter Holquist, Making War, Forging Revolution:
Goldstone is thus entirely right to conclude that even those great revolutions that Brinton did discuss were “more complex than his formal schema.” Drawing on over seven decades of scholarship on revolutions since Brinton’s Anatomy, Goldstone identified “another pattern, unseen by Brinton: a renewed phase of radicalism, often two or three decades after the initial change in regime. This phase occurred in revolutions that were not overturned but had begun to be consolidated or had taken a turn toward moderation.”

Goldstone’s work suggests that from the perspective of revolutionary life cycles, the Stalin Revolution should be seen in the context of phases of renewed radicalism implemented from above, such as the Cárdenas period in 1930s Mexico. Of those second revolutions from above, in scope and scale it can be compared only with Mao’s Great Leap Forward and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (themselves directly linked to if not variations on Stalinism). Yet the late Stalin period, unlike Maoism and perhaps in uniquely hybrid radical-reactionary fashion, also encompasses the bureaucratic entrenchment, unfinished routinization, and partial deradicalization of the new regime.

What can Russian historians do with the promises and the problems of the life cycle approach? To answer this, we must interpret the dynamics of the historiography of the Russian Revolution over the last several decades.

An Unfinished Historiographical Revolution

In an article written in the wake of the collapse of communism, Steve Smith tried to set out an agenda for historians of the Russian Revolution once the end of the Soviet state had removed the most blatant politicization and late Cold War isolation of the field. What he bemoaned most of all was “the general distrust of theory and explicit conceptualisation that is evident among so many historians of Russia.” Historians of the Russian Revolution shied away from big debates and big problems:

How many of us rose to the challenge to conventional ways of thinking about the Russian Revolution that were posed by the work of Theda Skocpol or Perry Anderson? … What parallel is there among historians of Russia to the lively debate on the English Civil War between the exponents of a structural explanation—either couched in terms of constitutional crisis or of class conflict—and the “revisionists” who emphasise short-term causation and a concatenation of mishaps? … This


evasion of debate about big issues, linked to the reluctance to generalise out of and bring theory into substantive historical research is, in my view, at the root of the malaise that besets our field.  

If one turns the clock forward to 2017, one does perceive a certain continuity, insofar as a specialized, professional, and empirical field often does seem reluctant to stand back and engage the kinds of big issues that (to name one example) the life cycle approach might inspire. However, an interpretation of the historiography as it has developed from the time Smith wrote to the centennial year also provides an understanding of why the historical field became so distant from the “modified” structuralist, frequently state-centered, often factorial approach long predominant in comparative revolutions literature.

The post-Soviet trajectory of the historiography can be interpreted as one of steady expansion in the scope of investigation. This expansion has been first and foremost geographical, moving the focus out of St. Petersburg to the provinces, borderlands, and empire itself. But it has partially also been chronological, while not to the degree I am advocating with the life cycle approach, nonetheless connecting 1917 far more to World War I and new conceptions of the Civil War. Finally, it has also been methodological, conditioned as is almost always the case by a particular portfolio of dominant trends in the field, in this context since the arrival of the new cultural history of the 1990s. This expansion, I contend, has progressed to a point where historians of the Russian Revolution are poised to profit from adopting the life cycle lens for their own purposes. It has also made for overlaps and confluences with comparative social science that historians can leverage.

It took roughly a half-century after 1917 for the modern historiography of the Russian Revolution to truly gain critical mass. If at first historians’ attention was focused on the two regime changes, political struggles, and social movements above all in the capital city, Petrograd, a literature on the “revolution in the provinces” transformed our understanding of both dual and soviet power. Eventually, regional studies went far beyond the traditional state-society focus to produce innovations such as Igor’ Narksii’s exploration of chaos, survival struggles, and bezvlastie in the Urals.  

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The “imperial turn” has created rich historiographies; it inspired an entire journal, Ab Imperio. While there are questions of depth and coverage in this flowering of interest in the breakdown and reconstitution of the imperial and Soviet multinational states, we now have such landmark studies as Adeeb Khalid’s Making of Uzbekistan, a multiregional history anchored between the poles of Istanbul and St. Petersburg and researched in the Turkic and Persianate languages of Central Asia as well as Russian. With some justification, Steve Smith’s centennial synthesis Russia in Revolution can claim to incorporate a “Eurasian perspective.” The collapse of empire in revolution and civil war is now reconceived through the lens of individual lives, notably in Willard Sunderland’s The Baron’s Cloak, about the imperial-subject-turned-warlord Baron Roman Fedorovich Ungern-Sternberg. A promising innovation in Mark Steinberg’s new history of the revolution as lived experience is his juxtaposition of three “wanderers, exiles, and cosmopolitans,” each grappling with complicated national affiliations in the anti-imperial revolution.44

The emergence of a significant new literature on World War I in recent years has also expanded our understanding of the revolutionary era. The many links between total war and the Russian Revolution were hardly ignored in the field in earlier studies. But an older focus on the deeper “crisis of autocracy” and the prewar radicalization of the labor movement derived from the important late Soviet contributions of Boris Anan’ich, Rafael Ganelin, and their Leningrad colleagues as well as the classic Haimson-Yaney debate influencing a generation of US historians.45 When the Soviet Union still existed, emphasis on war as the key driver of revolution was an overtly politicized issue. Furthermore, the small place military history occupied in the field aligned with a broader neglect of the Eastern Front both in older histories of the Great War and in Soviet commemoration.


The last decade in particular has seen a qualitatively new level of research about the multidimensional connections between war and revolution. Peter Holquist’s treatment of Russia’s “continuum of crisis” opened the door to firmly connecting the Russian Civil War to the era starting in 1914. The decade-long effort to produce the massive book series “Russia’s Great War and Revolution” is both a reflection of the increasing traffic between 1914 and 1917 and further erosion of the splendid isolation of 1917 prominent in the past. The dual conceptual consideration of total war and total revolution, to use Holquist’s evocative phrase, promises to add depth to our understanding of Goldstone’s first “suite” of revolutionary stages.

It is now hard to recall the time, not so long ago, when all nationalities and the “nationalities question” were lumped together as one neglected aspect of the history of the crucial nine months between February and October. Studies of non-Russian national movements and imperial borderlands began to reveal just how much vertical as well as horizontal fragmentation must be integrated into understanding the breakdown of the old regime and the centrifugal forces of civil war. But merely “adding” the non-Russian national movements led to an interpretive framework suggesting how state breakdown in February stimulated further demands for autonomy and independence.

This single-stream type of analysis about national movements has now been enriched and complicated by new lines of research that interconnect the collapse of the tsarist empire, substate movements throughout entire regions and borderlands, and interimperial or interstate competition. Particularly revealing is Mark von Hagen’s recent work thinking through the marginalized Ukrainian Revolution, whose highly complex dynamics challenge standard narratives from the Russian “imperial-national” heartland at many turns. As von Hagen points out, the Ukrainian Revolution was the key challenge from a minority nationality to which many other national movements looked. Its

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46 Holquist, Making War, Forging Revolution. For a recent contribution on social psychology devoted to Russia’s failure to pass the test of total war, see V. P. Buldakov and T. G. Leont’eva, Voina, prorodivshaya revoliutsii (Moscow: Novyi khrongraf, 2015); in English, see also the several works by Eric Lohr and Joshua Sanborn. For a list of publications thus far in the Great War and Revolution series, see https://slavica.indiana.edu/series/Russia_Great_War_Series.


complex evolution, part and parcel of the war and imperial collapse in the western borderlands, holds even broader implications:

By ignoring the Ukrainian “failed states,” of which there were at least four—the Ukrainian People’s Republic, the Hetman State, the Directory, and the West Ukrainian People’s Republic—and if we add two “Soviet Ukrainian” states proclaimed in 1917 and then in 1919, we have ignored some very important matters and voices. Although there was certainly a strong element of civil war in all the countries along the still active Eastern Front of World War I, they were also wars between states—incipient, aspirational states admittedly—but, again, that was true for the new-born Polish state, the Russian Bolshevik state, the several White states on the peripheries, and Belarus and the Baltic states.49

A general expansion from the “national” to a series of other levels of analysis is also the major point of Michael Reynolds’s study of the Russian and Ottoman struggle over the Caucasus and Anatolia, which encompasses a broad comparative discussion about the two trajectories of imperial collapse and postimperial rebirth within a tighter focus on the importance of interstate competition in the borderlands.50 Josh Sanborn expands the lens even further, connecting the collapse of empire to a long global moment of “decolonization.” This Peter Holquist challenges on the grounds that it has come so far as to omit the entire trajectory of revolution itself as long-term “project and process.”51

There is a related, 21st-century development in the field that links rather than disaggregates war, imperial collapse, and the many vectors of revolutionary revolt. This is the intensive focus on political violence.52 The depth and breadth of this literature is now such that it is time to think

about synthesis. It prompts consideration of just how the entire Russian “continuum of crisis” was a key launching point for the heightened state interventionism of the short 20th century. Linkages and putative interrelationships between terrorism and state terror, popular and state violence, everyday and political violence, class-based and ethnic violence—and, ultimately the massive social revolution circa 1917 and Stalin’s massive second revolution from above—are complicated and controversial. So they should be. But they have often been obliquely or even latently treated in the literature. One hardly needs to posit straight lines or inevitable progressions to see how this chronological expansion, were it continued further, could open up wider perspectives on the early and later stages of the revolution’s biography, mediated by the fulcrum of 1917.

Let us now turn to how cultural history has expanded the field in ways relevant to the concept of the revolutionary life cycle. The expanding, mutating wave of cultural history, corresponding both with the new historiographical situation after 1991 and the “archival revolution,” has shaped the field in such fundamental ways that any summing up is an interpretive challenge. Small wonder that comparative historians outside the field such as Stone have difficulty distilling its relevance. In an initial phase, a form of cultural reductionism became visible—equivalent to the way political, ideological, and social forces in turn had been previously championed as primary causal explanations—and the expansionism of “culture” into other realms became an assertion of the new trend. But this was followed by an equally typical phase of integrationism. Cultural approaches since the 1990s have thus merged with or informed many other types of investigation—political, economic, and international history included. I will risk singling out three major problems addressed by the scholarship in cultural history that affect our understanding of the stages of revolution. These are the discussion of social identities, connected to the concept of popular revolution; the discussion of symbols and myths, connected to the understanding of legitimacy; and the discussion of ideas and circumstances, part of the exploration of agency.

As social history became old and the new cultural history was still young, a kind of social-cultural admixture emerged. Historians of Russia began to interrogate the implications of the constructedness of class and, in the process, wrote less about single social groups and more about identities. The advent of cultural approaches imparted new appreciation for overlapping,

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complex, and multiple identities. Historians examined how social, national, gender, and political identities acted on one another, and they began intensively to investigate individuality and the self. It became possible to speak more authoritatively about different vectors of revolution such as the urban revolution, an agrarian or peasant revolution, and myriad national movements.

In his major reconsideration of politics and society in 1917, Rex Wade incorporated these differently cadenced yet converging revolutions into an authoritative narrative. He tended to speak of popular aspirations or the “aspirations of Russian society,” before differentiating and including into that construct, for example, women and the middle classes. However “constructed” society itself and the state-society dichotomy may be, there is consensus that the sudden expansion of the political sphere after February, so typical of major revolutions, was accompanied by a startling proliferation of grassroots organizations and activism. This alone fully justifies the notion of a popular revolution that overlapped with but is distinguishable from the political revolution centered in political parties and regime changes.

Orlando Figes’s widely read *A People’s Tragedy* made this people’s or popular revolution central to the narrative, raising as its central (and hardly exhausted) question of why this popular revolution could never capture the state or how it connected to the political revolution. More limited in its ambition to shape the grand narrative yet vastly more sophisticated in its handling of popular identities, Steve Smith’s 2008 *Revolution and the People in Russia and China* was less a history of comparative revolution in any traditional sense than a juxtaposition of the multiple dimensions of worker identities in St. Petersburg and Shanghai. In particular, that juxtaposition worked to analyze the relative weight of “class” and “nation” in a time of modernization and urbanization or, as he put it, capitalist modernity.

The implications of this entire line of inquiry are twofold. First, we need to consider not just the two regime changes in 1917 but the notion of the popular revolution. Even more, we can now allow for multiple revolutionary processes, each with distinguishable dynamics yet connected to the whole. The historiographical discovery of multiple revolutions in the Russian case, ultimately, has major implications for the comparative effort to analyze revolutionary “process.” Second, to state what some may find obvious, the multiple meanings and faces of the Russian Revolution are not solely derivative of regime changes in a time of what was, after all, state breakdown.

56 Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China*. 
In fact, the popular revolution was in many ways predicated on the collapse of the state.  

Another major branch of the cultural history of revolutionary Russia resembled the “revisionism” of French revolutionary studies with its examination of symbols, festivals, language, and political culture. In Richard Stites's pioneering explications of how a divided Provisional Government essentially failed in the symbolic realm to create legitimacy, for example, the political implications for understanding revolutionary turning points were overt. In a path-breaking article another pioneer, Boris Kolonitskii, shed light on the acute dilemma of moderate socialists: even as their propaganda fanned the bonfire of popular anti-*burzhui* “consciousness,” they joined the Provisional Government and maintained ideologically that socialism could only follow the bourgeois stage. Now Kolonitskii's long-awaited centennial book devotes over 500 pages to the emergence of the Kerenskii cult in the four months starting in March 1917. The euphoria of February, or the honeymoon stage, created new rituals and its own political culture. As Kolonitskii has repeatedly asserted, after the sudden disappearance of the state monopoly on violence, power was inextricably linked to symbolic struggles for legitimacy.

The implications of Kolonitskii's work on the Kerenskii cult reach well beyond 1917. Kerenskii was a figure that N. N. Sukhanov “with some justification” dubbed a “nondemocratic democrat.” His cult, in the St. Petersburg historian's treatment, emerged out of micro-struggles for power, a dynamic of high-low interaction, and, in the end, what Kolonitskii calls on the last page of the book the “authoritarian political culture in 1917.” These explanations serve to connect the Kerenskii cult backward to tsarist monarchical culture and forward to the cult of the *vozhd’* under Lenin (the first stage of which began after the attempted assassination in 1918), Trotsky and, of course, Stalin. Crucially, Kolonitskii asserts that the standard “above-below” dichotomy is too simplistic to explain the emergence of all the

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57 Thatcher, “Scripting the Russian Revolution,” 214–15; this point was central to Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.

revolutionary leader cults—even, he acutely observes, Stalin’s.\textsuperscript{59} Here again we notice how the study of culture and politics opens up new connections between the multiple faces of the revolution (the popular and political revolutions). The binary of revolutions from below and above is ultimately misleading—an insight that deserves a separate article of its own.

The final area where post-Soviet historiography holds relevance for comparativists revolves around the discussion of agency. This moves us from the interaction of culture and politics toward the impact of ideas, ideologies, and the historical actors who expounded them. A key word here is impact. Agency is not only about what actors want, but how they can get there; this can be affected by events, ideology, access to resources, and, ultimately, power.

The discussion of agency and revolution engages venerable debates. One of the oldest arguments in the study of the French Revolution revolves around the dichotomy between the \textit{thèse de circonstances}, or the notion that circumstances such as the outbreak of war led from 1789 to the Terror of 1793–94, and the \textit{thèse du complot} blaming the Enlightenment or fanatical ideas of the revolutionaries. Revisionism in the Russian case is associated with emphasizing contingency, alternatives, and challenging the totalitarian notion that communist dictatorship inevitably grew out of original ideological or political sins.\textsuperscript{60} This is a neat reversal of revisionism in the French context, which rediscovered ideas through political culture to show the deep roots of the Terror.

If you reread Sheila Fitzpatrick’s classic discussion of “The Civil War as Formative Experience,” however, you will find a more nuanced picture than the boxes of historiographical classification often suggest. While the essay did indeed argue that the militarizing and centralizing stage of the revolution was formative, Fitzpatrick flagged “important qualifications” about earlier party experience and doctrine. This, she argued, was an experience Lenin and the Bolsheviks expected, welcomed, and even prompted as a steeling experience for the Party. While the Bolshevik Party entering the Civil War was nothing like the vanguard party of Lenin’s 1903 \textit{What Is to Be Done?}, “one should perhaps give Lenin a little credit for leading his party the way he wanted to

\textsuperscript{59} Boris Kolonitskii, \textit{“Tovarishch Kerenskii”: Antimonarkhicheskaia revoliutsiia i formirovanie kul’ta vodeb’ia naroda” (mart–iiun’ 1917 goda)} (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017).

In light of the comparison with the Mexican Revolution at the end of this article, see Ilene O’Malley, \textit{The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920–1940} (New York: Greenwood, 1986).

go, just as one should give Stalin a little credit for being a faithful Leninist.”

In Fitzpatrick’s hands, any assertion of the power of circumstances was necessarily interrelated with both agency and the power of ideas.

The long-standing debate about ideas versus circumstances, as this suggests, is a close relative of the classic dichotomy between structure versus agency in the social sciences, which most modern social theory attempts to transcend. In a discussion of “Circumstances and Political Will in the Russian Civil War” published the same year as Fitzpatrick’s consideration of formative experience, Reginald Zelnik went farther than Fitzpatrick to question the dichotomies themselves: there was a “complex dialectic” historians needed to work through between “ideology and circumstance, consciousness and experience, reality and will.” Of course, objective circumstances can sometimes be taken as a given, the great historian of labor averred, but even then “it is hard to conceive of ways of perceiving and reacting to them that are not ideologically mediated.”

Picking up where Zelnik left off, Peter Holquist’s discussion of “Russia in the epoch of violence” questioned the “binary opposition between ‘context’ and ‘intent.’” Of course, both Russian particularities and codified ideas must be brought into any explanations of widespread violence in the Russian Revolution. “But the binary model—either context or intent—fails to account for how these two factors interact.” This risks “de-historicizing the specific conjuncture in which these two components catalytically acted upon one another.” Here Zelnik’s notion of a dialectic is particularly apt, in that the Bolsheviks embraced not just any ideology but one that self-consciously tried to adapt doctrine to history in a dialectical fashion. Nonetheless, conceptually linking ideas to circumstances in the manner of Zelnik and Holquist does not fully address the somewhat different theoretical problem I am attempting here to raise through the life cycle approach: the interrelationship among enduring structures, the unfolding of the revolutionary process, and the evolving configurations of the new regime.

Steve Smith’s Russia in Revolution provides one corrective to Zelnik in that the work incorporates a consideration of “structuring forces” as a

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63 Holquist, “Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism,” 628. For my own take, see “Ideas versus Circumstances in the French, Russian, and Nazi Revolutions,” in Crossing Borders, 97–102.
key part of a deliberately more encompassing explanatory synthesis. At the end of the work structural imperatives are invoked to explain why even the radically different Soviet new regime in many ways came to resemble the old. Historical actors, *pace* Zelnik, could hardly have been fully aware of many long-term geopolitical, territorial, demographic, or economic issues, many of them incremental, as they navigated the twists and turns of revolution. Summing up his interpretive task, Smith talks of an attempt to relate “human agency and the power of ideas to the deeper structuring forces of geopolitics, empire, economy, and culture.” To these forces he later adds the “competitive pressures of the international state system” and the “tasks of modernization” the Soviets faced and interpreted. In many respects, Smith emphasizes, the early Soviet state remained a weak state. The revolution itself was all about power moving from elites and state institutions to the streets and the fields. At the same time, he hastens to add, the Bolsheviks were not completely hemmed in by those structures, nor did “revolutionary energies” exhaust themselves “as Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ demonstrated.” The end product was a “new synthesis of revolutionary and traditional culture.” In a phrase clearly aimed at moving the debate forward, Smith reflects on how many factors “other than those connected to ideology or circumstances shaped the course of the revolution.”

Both the chronological sweep of Smith’s new narrative (from 1890 to 1928 with a look forward to Stalinism) and its analytical synthesis (considering structures, contingency, agency, and ideas) comes closest in recent memory to the kind of life cycle approach I am advocating. However, by ending in 1928, Smith leaves out a full consideration of the “renewed radicalism” Goldstone identified in many revolutions. In this case, moreover, as we have seen, the Stalin period encompassed not one but several additional stages. Even as unprecedentedly radical state interventionism combined with systemic entrenchment and reactionary appropriations from the past, the element of revolutionary volatility was always present until Stalin died. Smith’s partial decoupling of the last stages of the revolution from the narrative was a response to his skepticism of straight lines over discontinuities, which he expresses in his reading of the recent historical literature on political violence: “we should pause before accepting the view that the Russian Revolution initiated a cycle of escalating violence that inevitably culminated in the gulag.”

As we perceived in Kolonitskii’s work on authoritarian culture in 1917, however, one can look forward to the Stalin cult without resorting to a sense of simple inevitability. Writing a history of the Russian Revolution from 1890 to 1928

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64 Smith, *Russia in Revolution*, 5, 375, 386, 387.
65 Ibid., 384.
is analogous to writing a history of the Chinese Revolution that would end in 1965, the year before the Cultural Revolution.

There is logic to treating both Stalin’s and Mao’s revolutionary revivalism as weighty, complex phenomena to be studied in their own right. Smith’s decision to end in 1928 is defensible. The political battles over the Stalinist outcome, including successive designations such as the “revolution betrayed” and the “Great Retreat,” have combined with the long search for other possible socialist outcomes to make navigation treacherous for all those trying to avoid the Scylla of teleology and the Charybdis of imaginary alternatives. One solution is to turn to deep, fine-grained study of stages and subperiods within a broader vision of the life cycle. In particular, I have long believed in the substantial payoff to be had from honing in on pivotal moments of historical transformation. The revolutionary process is full of these fateful turning points—not necessarily 1905 or 1917, years often identified with the revolution as a whole, but 1907, the summer of 1918, 1920–22, 1928–29, 1931–32, and 1947–48. To understand their dynamics, what they changed and what they perpetuated, one must zoom in and zoom out; the microscope of the historian and the telescope of the historical sociologist both would come in handy.

As this suggests, the study of revolutionary stages not only forces us to confront how they are linked and connected; it also places the question of contingency front and center. A long-standing Western response to the inevitability and preemstvennost’ at the heart of Soviet Marxism was to talk about the accidental nature of key revolutionary turning points, the flip side of seeking out barely missed liberal alternatives to autocracy ranging from the “constitutional crisis” of 1730 to the derailed 1881 “constitution” of Count Mikhail Loris-Melikov. A conventional trope of such thinking was to pose questions such as what would have happened if a brick had fallen on Lenin’s head in 1917. Robert Vincent Daniels, a foundational figure in Russian revolutionary studies, observed about Lenin’s escape from capture as he sneaked across Petrograd to Bolshevik headquarters at Smolny on 24 October: “On such chance escapes does the fate of nations and revolutions sometimes depend.” But for Daniels, it was “Kerensky’s ill-conceived countermove” immediately preceding the October coup that was “the decisive accident.” In a new, uneven collection about contingency in the Russian Revolution,

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Orlando Figes takes up the same topic of Lenin’s close call en route to Smolny. He uses it to ask a useful question: how Lenin affected those moments when multiparty soviet power might conceivably have been an outcome. But the interpretive result is essentially the same, to conclude (shades of Goldstone’s invocation of “political leadership”) that without Lenin there would have been no Bolshevik Revolution.

We already knew that. What if, however, we were to make the progression of revolutionary stages into the centerpiece of thinking through questions of continuities and contingencies, perhaps even to raise questions about path dependencies? Here, thinking about the genesis of new revolutionary stages can be aided by the concept of conjunctures. Drawing on the Annales school, Leopold Haimson taught several generations of historians of revolutionary Russia to think in terms of structures, conjunctures, and events. Yet his own analysis gravitated especially to revolutionary conjunctures. Investigating conjunctures, by definition located in between long-term and short-term factors, involves weighing both long-term structures or zakonomernosti, which Haimson himself tended to foreground, and questions of contingency. In analyzing these historical situations, one great and sometimes missing piece involves consciousness and mentalities: how did actors and groups experience and understand turning points and shifts as they were living through them?

Here the kind of work done by Smith, so strong on incorporating “structures” without ceding to them primacy or inevitability, can be supplemented by Mark Steinberg’s attention to lived experience. Steinberg’s centennial history of the revolution covers the period 1905–21 and relies in particular on newspaper publications. Invoking Martin Jay, Steinberg defines experience as “the self’s encounter with existence outside the self”; one of his goals is to assemble sources revealing of “history as an experience of time, especially the feeling in the past that [people] were living in ‘historical’ times.” Although it is not the focus of his book, this kind of approach would be especially productive when applied to those extended moments when one stage of the revolution morphed into another, those “great breaks” on which, in compacted and simplified form, we all hang our interpretations of the revolution’s course.

Revolutionary Waves, For and Against

Revolutions are always international events, and they are connected to one another across time and space, but as comparativists have long known they also come in waves. Mark N. Katz, in the best-known work on revolutionary waves, defines them as “groups of revolutions with similar objectives.” One revolution can often belong to several waves. The Russian Revolution, of course, was the “central revolution” of the Marxist-Leninist wave. This is what Katz calls a “for” wave that concertediy sought to replicate itself abroad. “In addition to belonging to a particular ‘for’ wave,” Katz wrote, “a revolution can also belong to one or more ‘against’ waves.” A life cycle approach to the Russian Revolution, however, suggests that the first half of Katz’s proposition is wrong: it did belong to more than one “for” wave.

It is true that the Russian Revolution formed part of many “against” waves, although Katz is not concerned with elaborating this in his work. Russia was part of a series of antimonarchical revolutions on the periphery of European modernity that included 1905, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, and China in 1911. This was also the international context in which the Mexican Revolution’s overthrow of the Porfiriato, the 35-year rule of Porfirio Díaz, occurred in 1910. Both the Russian and Mexican revolutions were, in important elements, anticapitalist (in the latter case, particularly in the armed rural revolutionary movement of Emiliano Zapata, or Zapatismo). With its non-Russian national movements and regional separatism, the Russian Revolution was certainly anti-imperial; one can also identify a certain strand of Russian as well as Leninist anti-imperialism. In the event, Katz makes the Russian Revolution synonymous with October by analyzing it only in terms of the Marxist-Leninist wave.

But was the Russian Revolution, as perceived by the proverbial hedgehog, really about one big thing? Or did it stand “for” many things, as observed by the proverbial fox? Once we include 1905 and February 1917 as integral parts of a revolutionary life cycle, the Russian Revolution can also be seen as an affiliate part of the constitutionalist wave that connects it backward to 1848 and to the global wave of 1905–11. It has been argued that the constitutionalist upheavals of that wave not only belonged to the same historical moment but exhibited a similar revolutionary strategy (or, if you

70 Mark N. Katz, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 12.
Revolutionaries watched one another attentively. As we move beyond exclusive consideration of political ideologies and the orientation of the state, moreover, Russia also must also be seen in the context of such widely shared phenomena as agrarian revolution and urban revolt.

It is possible for a life cycle analysis, therefore, to bring together consideration of successive and disparate revolutionary stages without completely identifying the multiple dimensions of major revolutions with one sole “outcome,” which successful revolutionaries try to impose after they consolidate power. Yet this very kind of reductionism has been a perennial temptation for the comparative revolutions literature. It is also a problematic feature of comparativists’ labeling of revolutionary stages—as we have seen, for example, when NEP, a crucial period of revolutionary state building, is identified with Thermidor or moderation. We have also observed an analogous type of reductionism in the case of historians such as Malia and Pipes, whose single-minded focus on ideology and political power, respectively, brought them in certain interpretive contexts to conflate the Bolshevik Revolution with the revolution as a whole. If there is one major insight historians can build on from the approach advocated here, therefore, it lies in the fundamental proposition: the Russian Revolution had many faces.

Toward the Revolutionary Mausoleum: Two Modes of Comparing Mexico and Russia

The Mexican Revolution, very much like the Russian, also displayed many faces not just in the course of its extended trajectory but within its individual stages. My treatment here will juxtapose two kinds of comparisons between the Russian and Mexican revolutions. The first mode, using the notion of life cycle, simply compares the stages of the two revolutions in a conventional fashion. The second mode, which potentially looks very different, represents the kind of life cycle approach I have been advocating here. It is fully attentive to the tensions within each stage and accords a central place to the exchange of revolutionary models and ideas across borders. While the intention is to suggest how the second approach opens up new agendas for historians, it should also become clear just how much it is predicated on the first.

Here is Goldstone’s very compact account of the stages of the Mexican Revolution, following a description of the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz and the moderate-radical split between the reformer Francisco Madero and the movements lead by Emiliano Zapata in the north and Pancho Villa in the rural heartland.\footnote{Major studies in English are John Womack, Jr., \textit{Zapata and the Mexican Revolution} (New York: Knopf, 1969); and Friedrich Katz, \textit{The Life and Times of Pancho Villa} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).}

A revolutionary civil war that defeated Díaz was followed by the moderate Madero regime. Madero then broke with his more radical supporters, producing first a counterrevolution by [Victoriano] Huerta and then another civil war led by radical leaders who defeated Huerta. Yet Huerta’s defeat produced not peace but another civil war between radicals and moderates, won by the Constitutionalists. Although economically moderate, the Constitutionalists killed their radical opponents and started a major attack on the Catholic Church. This provoked yet another civil war, followed by an interlude of moderate stability overseen by [Plutarco Elías] Calles.

Goldstone compares the unfolding stages in Mexico with other revolutions to show just how “complex and variable” are the relationships “among the triumph of radical policies, counterrevolution, civil and international war, and terror.” He also demonstrates, as we have seen, that Brinton’s model did not account for Mexico’s revolutionary revivalism after 1934 under Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized the oil industry, carried out major land and labor reforms, and launched a significant cultural revolution—all from above.\footnote{Goldstone, “Rethinking Revolutions,” 26–27. On the Mexican cultural revolution in the 1930s, see Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., \textit{The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Vaughan, \textit{Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).}

Not so completely unlike Stalin and the Communist Party, if one permits the comparison, after 1938 Cárdenas and in the decades that followed the PRI oversaw a reversal of the revolutionary revivalism the regime itself had launched. In the words of Richards, the PRI “embalmed the revolution and put it on display much in the same way Lenin’s corpse was displayed in the mausoleum in Red Square.”\footnote{Richards, \textit{Revolutions in World History}, 34.}

A conventional comparative history would in one way or another tally up similarities and differences in the origins, stages, and results of two revolutions. For example, much as deep structural factors are routinely and plausibly posited for Russia’s two state breakdowns in the 20th century, the
forces shaping the overthrow of Díaz and the state breakdown of 1913–15 lay not just in the evolution of the Porfiriato (1876–1911). For well over a decade historians of Mexico have increasingly made the upheavals leading to the independence era after 1821 into “an integral part of revolutionary history,” and because a centralized national state did not emerge until the end of the 19th century they have focused (in a rough parallel to Russia’s “imperial turn”) on regional and local histories. John Tutino’s forthcoming study of the Mexican rural heartland over the longue durée traces a history punctuated by two revolutions, each marked by a decade of revolutionary violence, major rural insurgencies, and state breakdowns. The first, starting in 1810, ended “silver capitalism”; the second, a century later, ushered in a contested and contradictory “national capitalism.” A major structural factor in 1910–20 was the division between the more industrialized north and the rural heartland communities, with their long-standing pursuit of local autonomy, land rights, and patriarchy. During the Mexican Revolution, this division deeply affected the Villista-Zapatista alliance and split, thus affecting the outcome of civil war.

There is a long catalogue, furthermore, when it comes to major “circumstantial” differences. There was nothing in Russia analogous to the weighty, often overt presence of the United States; there was nothing in Mexico remotely like the political, social, and economic shocks of total war on the Eastern Front. An economic downturn after 1905 did precede the overthrow of Díaz, but in Mexico World War I led to an export boom, including in petroleum, which mirrored the disruption of oil production in Baku and economic catastrophe in Russia. This economic upturn in Mexico provided a stabilizing factor for the Constitutionalists in 1915 and after. In the Mexican Revolution in general, compared with other revolutions in the 20th century and certainly with Russia, intellectuals and students played a very minor role.

The year 1917, as in Russia, marked a fateful new stage in the history of the Mexican Revolution, but here it signified the triumph of the Constitutionalists. The Constitution of 1917 sanctified the revolution and a new legal framework, including the right to strike, a minimum wage, and official mediation. But it was inconsistently fulfilled or, better to say,

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deliberately unfulfilled by the populist coalition until political necessity intruded. Even so, the more moderate and far less violent trajectory of the Mexican Revolution in comparison with the Russian can be explained in part because the constitutional order held out just enough hope for urban workers and especially the peasantry to participate in a national revolutionary project—within the framework of a market economy. Industrial workers, in the first instance, held more political importance within the Constitutionalist movement than their overall numerical size implied, and after 1917 “revolutionary nationalism became a resource for the subaltern classes in their demands to honor the promises of the revolution and to hold the governing elites to some degree of accountability.”

Both the economic consequences of the Constitutionalist victory and the outcome of agrarian revolution in Mexico provide a major contrast with the Russian case. Mexico remained firmly integrated into global capitalism, while some of the most distinctive and defining features of communism were connected to the unprecedented Soviet economic experiment first pursued in the red zone during War Communism. As for the peasantry, after Álvero Obregón replaced the more conservative Constitutionalist president Venustiano Carranza in 1920, in Tutino’s words, he “knew that the heartland villagers could not be defeated; they had to be accommodated…. He offered a deal giving Zapatistas positions in his government and promising agrarian reform as a national program.” This alliance of 1920, moreover, “set the course of post-revolutionary Mexico. Heartland communities had not won—yet certainly had not lost.” The right of villagers to land became a central political issue for decades. In the Russian context, there is a case to be made that the Provisional Government after February foreshadowed aspects of later approaches to the peasant question. The resulting Mexican national framework, in any case, appears vastly different from the Soviet “peasant war” first peaking in the famine of 1920–22 partly caused by War Communism and culminating in Stalin’s manmade famine of the early 1930s. Recent works have explained, in turn, just how much the era of collectivization conditioned the Great Terror. Yet in Mexico this more negotiated outcome does not have to be called “post-revolutionary,” in Tutino’s periodization. It was an integral part of the latter stages of the Mexican revolutionary life cycle.

In the end, however, a conventional comparison, including one with stages centrally in mind, takes us only so far. Indeed, the focus only on stages in a comparative context tends willy-nilly to privilege structural analysis and potentially simplify revolutionary “process.” This is because global comparisons by their very nature lead almost inevitably to large-scale synthesis, hence simplification. What if, by contrast, stages within an overall revolutionary trajectory were to become merely the contextual launching point for historians, not the end object of analysis? What if to a general life cycle framework historians added the transnational interaction between and among revolutions? Here I would like to suggest how a consideration of stages is directly relevant for understanding political ideas and cross-cultural exchange, and how robust inclusion of the cultural and ideological spheres also produces greater emphasis on the conflicting forces at play within each revolutionary phase.

At first glance, the interactions between the Mexican and Russian revolutions seem not only under-researched but less than substantial. There are some direct ideological connections lurking behind the parallels between Russian revolutionary populism and agrarismo in Mexico. Tierra y Libertad, land and liberty, became a slogan of the Zapatistas. But in general, Mexican revolutionaries had only vague conceptions of the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism. The ignorance was mutual: “in fact, the leadership of the Bolshevik Party [and] the leaders of the Comintern knew practically nothing about the situation in Mexico.” At the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920 Lenin, who avoided the topic of Mexico, admitted he knew only that a “bourgeois-democratic revolution” had occurred and the peasant masses sought land. Zapata was the only Mexican revolutionary who conducted significant propaganda operations on his home base of Morelos, and Zapatist agents were the only ones to propagate the ideological influence of the revolution abroad. Zapata’s 14 February 1918 letter on the Russian Revolution, written from the Liberation Army headquarters in Tlaltizapán and published in Cuba, the most important Zapatist outpost abroad, invoked the alliance between workers and peasants and the threat of the bourgeoisie. It thereby deliberately smoothed over any differences between Bolshevism and agrarian revolution in Mexico. This appeal to Russia came, moreover, as

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82 Enrique Semo, “El agrarismo mexicano y el populismo campesino Europeo,” in Impacto de la Revolución Mexicana (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 2010), 69–84. For one full-fledged comparative history, see Dittmar Dahlmann, Land und Freiheit: Machnooščina und Zapatismo als Beispiele agrarrevolutionärer Bewegungen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986).

83 V. L. Kheifets, Komintern i evoluzija levogo dvizhenia Meksiki (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2006), 50.
Gilly has noted, after the peak of revolutionary and socialist activity in the Mexican Revolution.\(^{84}\)

As this suggests, the 1917 turning point in both revolutions holds one key to understanding their transnational interaction. At first even the agrarian revolutionary Zapata and a wide assortment of urban workers and intellectuals saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a universalistic boost to their own emancipatory dreams. But as the more moderate stabilization in Mexico coincided with the radicalization of Bolshevism in War Communism, as Daniela Spenser’s work suggests, sharp splits emerged in the Mexican apprehension of the Russian Revolution. On the one hand, some turned to communism because the reforms promised in the Constitution of 1917 had stalled; on the other hand, “in Mexico the revolution influenced and strengthened existing radicalism to the point that it could offer a rival model to the Bolshevik experience.” On the most fundamental level, Spenser forcefully argues, the Bolshevik model of revolution could be apprehended in Mexico only after the Mexican Revolution had already taken a course that could not be “detained or detoured.”\(^{85}\)

That may well be, but the point is also that there were countervailing tendencies that broke out into open conflicts at each stage. Tutino suggestively comes out against the notion of a single, unified revolutionary trajectory:

> An enduring political narrative presents Mexico in the 1920s as consolidating the regime that won the revolution…. If focus is restricted to the heights of state power, there is reality in that narrative. But … if the diverse interests and goals of Mexican capitalists and generals, workers and communities enter the narrative, a history emerges that is more complex, often conflictive, at times violent—and certainly not the history of a singular trajectory that might be called “The Revolution.”\(^{86}\)

As I would prefer to put it: the life cycle approach must avoid unifying and oversimplifying the notion of trajectory and smoothing out conflicting tendencies within individual stages. Indeed, it was those very conflicts within post-1917 Mexico that stimulated some to embrace for their own purposes, for example, the missions of Mikhail Borodin and the nascent Comintern. But ultimately even the flawed social pact that the Mexican state offered to the


\(^{86}\) Tutino, *Mexican Heartland*, chap. 11.
masses had far more traction than the putative dictatorship of the proletariat. This nonsynchronicity of Mexican and Soviet revolutionary stages, each with their many internal tensions, also formed a key backdrop to the influx of Mexican visitors to the early Soviet Union. Many noncommunist cultural and intellectual figures were motivated by the hope that the Soviet Union would reradicalize what they saw as their own stalled revolution. If one digs deeper than the top leaders and into the 1920s and 1930s, moreover, there is a richer terrain to be explored. In Mexico, the Russian Revolution became a cultural as well as an ideological resource, reflected in key phenomena ranging from muralismo and Mexican modernism to the project of the Mexican “socialist school” in the 1930s. By the same token, in addition to the Mexican sojourns of figures ranging from Vladimir Maiakovskii and Aleksandra Kollontai to Lev Trotsky, the Mexican case affected Soviet understandings (and misunderstandings) of nationalist and anti-imperialist forces in developing countries. This can be analyzed as one connection between the “East,” that key Russian/Soviet ideologeme, and the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, there are fascinating transnational triangulations that remain little known: a flood of foreign radicals was attracted to Mexico before Moscow became the socialist Mecca, and American Soviet sympathizers often learned about the Mexican Revolution first.

Both revolutions shifted dramatically in the 1930s, a period in both cases not conventionally integrated into the history of the revolution itself. Here I would suggest, is not only where the importance of second revolutions comes into play. This is precisely the opportunity to insert the perspective of international and global developments with their own temporalities into any account of contemporaneous revolutionary life cycles. Both the Mexican and the Russian revolutions were decisively affected first by the Great War and then by the Great Depression, in part because both opened up major opportunities. In the end, the two revolutions may have been like two ships that passed in the night, but they left extensive ripples and intricate eddies in their wake.

89 Kheifetz, Komintern i evoliutsiiia, 59.
90 Spenser, Stumbling Its Way through Mexico, 38.
Looking Forward

When did the life course of the Russian Revolution meet its end? Institutionalized revolution lasted until 1991. But the more we learn about the postwar period, the less revolutionary it seems. The Soviet system had become highly entrenched; two bouts of reform communism in the 1950s and 1980s were precisely attempts to shake up and renovate an existing order. The intelligentsia’s quest to remodel and lead the masses that had fueled revolution since the mid-19th century also was no more. Ideology became increasingly ritualistic, rather than a blueprint for change, and major social and cultural shifts turned revolutionary iconoclasm into a thing of the past. The Bolshevik Revolution and above all Stalin’s second revolution, the wild swings of which had both constructed the Soviet order and entombed it in steel and cement, lived on to haunt all the post-Stalin decades. In places where revolution has been institutionalized, perhaps, the end of revolution should be seen as no less profound than the end of empire.

This article argues that historians of the Russian Revolution would profit from becoming more engaged with the study of comparative revolutions. In particular, the revival of interest in Crane Brinton and the life cycle approach raises intriguing questions for the Russian field. How do we include the processes driving the succession of revolutionary stages into already extensive literatures on the origins and results of the revolution? I have further argued that historians are especially well equipped to investigate how one phase of a revolution morphs into another; how such major historical turning points were understood and experienced; and how the complex and competing forces at play within each stage affect how we analyze them retrospectively. Finally, an understanding of revolutionary life cycles can form a necessary backdrop for investigating how revolutions are perceived and revolutionary models are received—across borders and, by extension, over time. Answers inviting an explicit balancing of structural and state-centered factors with a panoply of contingent, ideological, cultural, and transnational dimensions to revolutionary history hold the potential to bridge a long-standing divide within and between disciplines.

The consideration of life cycles, moreover, forces revolutionary historians to grapple with second revolutions. In the Russian case, it prompts us to reckon with the relationship of Stalin’s second revolution, and the hybrid nature of the long Stalin period, with the earlier stages of the Russian Revolution. Most likely, the shopworn dichotomy of yore between socialist alternatives to Stalinism and the seeds of totalitarianism growing to fruition is responsible for the semidormant state of historiographical discussion about
the relationship between the earlier and later stages of the revolution. In the case of the Mexican Revolution, the revolutionary revivalism under Cárdenas and his own post-1938 reversal of it are also not nearly as integrated into the history of that revolution as they could be; Mexican revolutionary studies could benefit from a life cycle approach as well. In the Russian case, both the comparative history of second revolutions and our need fully to grapple with the totality of the revolution’s path demand a reintegration of what have largely been four semidetached areas: the revolution of 1905 and its aftermath, the history of war and revolution, the study of the 1920s, and the history of Stalinism.

Finally, the Mexican-Russian comparison suggests how the course of revolutions occurring in roughly the same time period holds special advantages for historians. These are shaped by synchronic, global moments such as World War I and the Great Depression as well as transnational exchange, and the attention to stages and trajectories helps us better interpret those interactions. We now need, it appears, not yet another history of the great European revolutions from the English and French on, but rather more international investigations of interacting revolutionary trajectories within the same revolutionary waves or historical periods.92 Using the life cycle approach to pair the Russian Revolution with cases such as the Mexican example discussed here, and by extension others such as the Ottoman/Turkish and Chinese cases, opens promising postcentennial vistas for the Russian field.

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92 For example, within the periods of 1780–1830, 1900–40, or postwar decolonialization.