

# Museum meta-narratives and micro-stories of the Great Russian Revolution (to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution)

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*Museum meta-narratives and micro-stories of the Great Russian Revolution (to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution)*

The article is devoted to an overview and analysis of Museum projects dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Great Russian revolution. Preparing for the anniversary initiated a return to the difficult topic, the desire to relate modern historical knowledge of the Museum and of a concept of Russian history on the whole space of the country. The author selects two main groups of Museum projects with meta- and microhistory, which are disclosed through the regional aspects of the event, the individual aspects, the monologue of a single event or a single artifact, cultural theoretical reflection, personal understanding of our contemporaries.

Key words: museology, the anniversary Museum projects, exhibitions, Museum concepts, modern scientific research, historical narratives

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Russian Revolution served as a litmus test to determine a degree of the subject understanding, including by the Russian museums. During the entire 2017, there was a feeling that the museums rejoiced at dealing with the subject that was devaluated in the 1990s and remained unpopular and often excluded from museums for quite a long time. Thus, we were deprived of several important exhibitions and the entire Museum of Revolution; the subject that had during the decades been supported by extensive cultural, educational and exhibition activities, disappeared.

Rare attempts over the last quarter of the century to create exhibitions devoted to the Soviet period were hardly ever successful. Preparations for the Revolution anniversary revived the subject and made us eager to compare modern knowledge and museum concepts related to the Russian history throughout the country and abroad. Therefore, during this anniversary year it finally became possible to reflect upon such a difficult subject, to deal with this complex material, bringing up new ideas or at least capturing the elusive values.

It would be rather difficult to describe and analyze numerous museum projects in course; on the other hand, sticking to a particular system will not bring us the desired results. We can only state that various exhibitions were held in museums at different administrative levels, i.e., in federal, municipal, and institutional organizations. These were historical, artistic, natural-science museums, including regional natural history and memorial museums. The exhibitions were often accompanied by cultural and educational programs. Some of them were intra-

museum and intra-institutional projects which is explained by the desire to represent the subject comprehensively and on a large scale. We can also observe creation of new and the revival of the old tourist programs, including itineraries around Lenin's sites, new birth of traveling exhibitions, and the development of traditional forms of cultural heritage presentation, that is, reconstructions and lectures, as well as innovative ones, i.e., quests, flash mobs, and illuminated performances.

In the big cities, the appearance of museum blockbusters and large-scale projects aiming at modern presentation and interpretation of historical concepts and scientific projects on the subject of revolution, was highly predictable. As for the local museums, they mainly resorted to a discourse around memorial heritage and conduct regional research.

The need to systemize the projects according to their content and to regulate somehow their diversity leads us to reflect on the importance of this event for modern Russia, its national identification and historical memory, as well as on the methodology of historical knowledge on the whole and the search for ways of interpreting the national history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in museums.



**Pict. 1:** The exhibition “Dreams of Universal Flowering” (State Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg). Excerpts from historical sources of that time (memoirs, correspondence, Newspapers) accompanied paintings of 1918-1920s. Photo from Museum website <http://rusmuseum.ru/exhibitions>

Even a superficial examination of the projects makes us agree with the ideas of post-modernism on meta-narrative crisis and the difficulty of “explaining comprehensive historical belief systems” (M.F. Rumiantseva). The knowledge is broken into shatters of micro-stories that are being subjectively interpreted, which quite often “disturbs the role of historical memory as a basis for sociocultural identity with all the foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences”<sup>1</sup>. Very often we observe only illustrations to a subject and com-

ments to an event (according to Michel Foucault, we all belong to the “era of comments”). One of the modern researchers points out in reference to Hayden White that “the 20<sup>th</sup> century history is radically different from the entire previous history. The immeasurable traumatic experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century events cannot be presented by the historians in any traditional way. Any attempt to present them in the form of a traditional narrative would mean “killing” the reality, devaluating it, which is especially intolerable when it comes to such unimaginable events as Holocaust... Instead, such events can only be presented through many micro-stories, each of them being only an attempt to understand the traumatic experience of the past”<sup>2</sup>.

For quite a long time, the traumatic experience of the Revolution did not let us make

<sup>1</sup> RUMYANTZEVA, Marina. *Teoriya istorii. Uchebnoe posobie*. Moscow, 2002, p. 5.

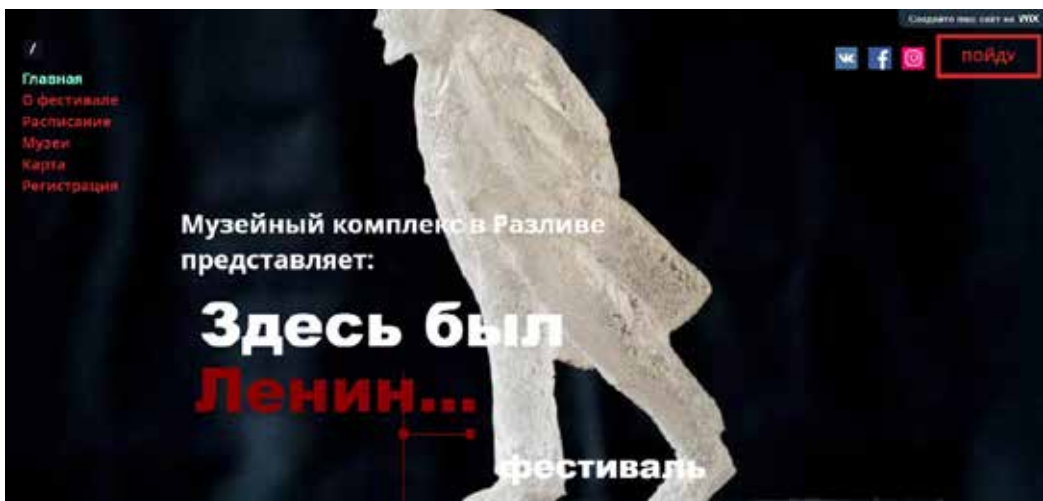
<sup>2</sup> MISIK, Maria. Istoriiopisanie «postsovremennosti»: neskolko slov o prichinah nedoveriya k metanarrativam i makroistorii. In: *Vestnik Tomskogo gos. un-ta*. Tomsk, 2004, № 281, p. 121.

sense of it, both in museums and the scientists' cabinets. To date, different studies have been conducted on the subject, including the methodological ones; however, we are still under the influence of the said paradigm; therefore, we will try to consider the examples we have under these restrictions. On the other hand, there is quite a popular trend to consider the Russian Revolution from the cultural point of view, which led to it being defined as a “great cultural revolution”<sup>3</sup>. This thesis is quite interesting in terms of analyzing the projects that were conducted in museums in 2017.

One can single out two main groups of the anniversary year museum projects, that is, *meta-narratives* representing macro-history, and *micro-stories* the variety of which could be structured according to the ways of integrative involvement of people in a historical narrative, that is, *through* a certain setting defining the angle of perceiving the historical “text” of the exhibition.

Thus, the micro-stories include:

- 1) regional aspects of the event;
- 2) individual aspects and human beings as the contemporaries of the revolution;
- 3) monologue of one event or artefact (item/object/document);
- 4) cultural realizations (mainly through different arts);
- 5) individual realizations through the reflections of our contemporaries.



**Pict. 2:** Festival „Here was Lenin“ (the project involved museums of the Leningrad region, which are associated with the name of Lenin).

The analysis of various projects has led us to conclude that no comprehensive story or meta-narrative can be created without a solid methodology base, as they split into micro-stories that are either perceived “quite subjectively” or viewed in the context of new myths. The museums would certainly like to get across to people a plausible and comprehensive presentation of such a significant event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, as the Russian philosopher M.S. Kagan stated, “in the modern society, collective consciousness remains quite malleable in the face of various myths, that is, a cult of personality in totalitarian societies or the idea of absolute freedom in democratic societies. This is partly explained by an underdeveloped logical reasoning in the

<sup>3</sup> SMIRNOV, Grigoriy. Rossiyskaya intelligentsiya i modeli miropostroeniya: problem ustoychivogo razvitiya. In: *Intelligentsiya v protsessah preobrazovaniya mira: materialy XVIII Mezhdunar. konfer.* Ivanovo, 2007, p. 24.

society and partly by the actions of ideologists taking advantage of such childishness. Full freedom of mankind from myths and illusions... can only be achieved in the future, in the course of development of collective consciousness based on a realistic scientific worldview”<sup>4</sup>.

This problem can be overcome by creating serious scientific concepts. However, “beautiful and coherent concepts are born only from facts, not separate ones but the entire body of facts, and not from a free flow of ideas”. Unfortunately, we often observe a fact being transformed from “a tool for understanding the past into a selected proof of an initially created concept”<sup>5</sup>. As a result, several *conceptual* projects become in a certain sense epistemological objects that convey different meanings from what was initially implied by their creators, which distorts the already complicated historical memory.

Such distortions are aggravated by what a Russian historian V.B. Kobrin called “the era



**Pict. 3:** The exhibition „Revolution from the first person“ (Museum of the History of the youth movement, Ryazan). The story was based on the diary of one of the residents of Ryazan.

of inverted stereotypes” when researchers and interpreters replace a plus by a minus and vice versa maintaining at the same time “unconditional division into us and them”<sup>6</sup>. First attempts to change this scenario and to avoid confrontation in museums were made in 2017 which is no doubt a great achievement of this anniversary year.

It is worth mentioning the titles of the museum projects<sup>7</sup>, as they reflect if not the historical concept of revolution on the whole but at least the reflections of the society on these events. These events are considered not only in the linear time perspective but as a parallel to the present day, and this reflects modern state of affairs in historical and museum spheres. *The energy of dreaming of the global prosperity which aims to make everything around us new* is a driving force that has moved societies forward throughout the entire human history and will hardly ever be devaluated. In museums, it allows for dealing with the development of the identities and to place precise intellectual and emotional marks in historical memory.

<sup>4</sup> KAGAN, Moisey. O structure mifologicheskogo soznaniya. In: *Seriya “Myslitye”. Smysly mifa: mifologiya v istorii i culture. Vypusk 8*. Peterburg, 2001, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> KOBRIN, Vladimir. *Komu ty opasen, istorik?* Moskow, 1992, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> Exhibitions “The Energy of a Dream” in the State Historical Museum (Moscow); “To arrange so that everything becomes new ...”: to the 100th anniversary of the 1917 Revolution in Russia” (Presidential Library, Saint-Petersburg); “Dreams of Universal Flowering” (State Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg); “Revolution of People” (intra-institutional project of the Lumiere Brothers Center for Photography, Moscow), etc.

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