

# Editorial

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The Russian revolution of November 1917 – or October according to the calendar it inherited from the tsars – was the world's first successful workers' revolution and an inspiration to socialists everywhere. Established in the midst of Europe's most senseless and destructive war, the new Soviet state met with concerted resistance from within and without its borders and drew on campaigns of international solidarity as part of a world-wide movement against capitalism and colonial rule. Nevertheless, when seventy-four years later the Soviet state collapsed, there was no significant movement to defend it either nationally or internationally.

While the legacy of October remains one of defining significance for the left, there have therefore always been profound differences among socialists as to what this legacy represents. Some hold that the Bolsheviks had hijacked and betrayed the revolution already by the time of the Kronstadt revolt of 1921. Others place responsibility on the ascendancy of Stalin and the bureaucracy following Lenin's death, and culminating by the end of the 1930s in the physical eradication of so many of the revolution's most active proponents. Others still might emphasise the positive and decisive contribution made to the defeat of fascism, or the ending of colonial rule, or the possibilities of a reform communism as principal alternative to capitalism even after the crises of 1956 and 1968. As we mark the revolution's centenary in our neo-liberal times, Russia once more has probably the widest differentials of wealth and power of any major European state, and some of the worst manifestations of nationalism, racism and other forms of chauvinism. For those who continue to be inspired by the experience of 1917, or by the ideals that it represented, the centenary offers the opportunity to reflect on the issues of democracy, internationalism, social transformation and state oppression with which the Soviet experience confronts us. With this in mind, the present issue of *Socialist History* is given over to a series of reflections on the significance of this legacy for movements of social and political emancipation and the international history of the left.

For Eric Hobsbawm in *Age of Extremes*, the revolution was as central to the history of twentieth century as the French revolution had been to the nineteenth. Indeed, while the ideas of 1789 had in Hobsbawm's estimation

proved more durable in the long run, 1917 had had the far greater practical consequences and its repercussions were both more profound and truly global in their reach.<sup>1</sup> Among the most seemingly unambiguous legacies were the Soviet state itself, and the socialist states that followed in its image, and the decades-long division of the international labour movement that followed the establishment in 1919-20 of the Communist International (or Comintern). What nevertheless makes this such a multi-faceted and contestable legacy is not just the scope and longevity of these institutions, but the fact that October as their founding moment of insurgency could both legitimise them and provide the yardstick by which to measure their degeneration. The legacy of October might be the act of revolution itself, and the example of how states and social systems can be overturned from below. It might go beyond the revolution that did actually happen, which turned out to be a national one, to include the world revolution which did not, but for which (as Hobsbawm clearly saw) it was intended as the catalyst. For loyalist communists almost to the end, it might even encompass the whole course of Soviet history; for it was for many years axiomatic for those of Hobsbawm's generation that no meaningful distinction could be drawn between the initial emancipatory act of revolution and the party, state and world-wide movement which embodied it.

Still in 1927, Nikolai Bukharin, who for the time being headed the Comintern, located the Russian revolutions of 1917 within an ongoing revolutionary process which he detailed through a dozen or more such landmarks that included Finland 1918, Hungary 1919, Italy 1920, Syria and Morocco 1925, and Germany during the distinct flashpoints of 1918, 1921 and 1923. As reproduced in the British *Labour Monthly*, the Russian epithet October, synonymous with the revolution despite the calendar's modernisation, was even rendered as the November revolution, as if to assimilate it into this wider revolutionary process.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it was clear even in 1927 that the regime's massive tenth-anniversary celebrations encapsulated a shift in emphasis to what was essentially projected as a national revolution, even if one of international significance – as symbolised by the establishment internationally of Soviet friendship societies. By the fifteenth anniversary in 1932, the *Labour Monthly's* approved formulation was 'Fifteen years of Soviet power', which henceforth became conventional – as in R. Page Arnot's contribution in the catastrophic year of 1937, 'Twenty years of Soviet power'.<sup>3</sup>

Arnot also published that year a *Short History of the Russian Revolution*, which as a matter of course, was purely Russian-focused and included the entire twenty years of post-revolutionary developments.<sup>4</sup> For communists

like Arnot, the equation of the revolution with the current Soviet state was an article of faith, and one of the non-negotiable tenets of their Stalinist world-view. Nevertheless, in that same year of 1937, Trotsky, albeit with a very different purpose, also recognised the connection with 1917 in publishing *The Revolution Betrayed*, while Victor Serge with similar intent lamented what he called the destiny of a revolution.<sup>5</sup> It might therefore be thought something of a retreat into revolutionary nostalgia that Tariq Ali could this year list the top ten books on the Russian revolution without indicating any item that goes beyond the civil war period. Indeed, the inclusion of Franco Venturi's marvellous *Roots of Revolution* might even give the impression of a revolution that had causes that mattered, but no consequences.<sup>6</sup>

It is a truism that liberals remembering the French revolution wanted 1789 without 1792 or 1793. One hesitates to draw the analogy with those who can acknowledge so expansively Bolshevism's impact on culture or ideas, but draw back from the immediate sequel in the society that it had set out to reshape.<sup>7</sup> But if 1937 was not the inevitable corollary of 1917 – and it was not – then it is all the more important in a journal of socialist history to understand how what need not have happened nevertheless did happen. For if even Stalin's USSR could enthuse and inspire such commitment internationally, what, as Serge asked in his book, 'would the radiating force have been of a USSR that was genuinely sovietic, truly socialistic, in which human dignity would be revealed as superior to what it is in the older countries ...?'<sup>8</sup>

If the legacies of October were absolutely of the scope that Hobsbawm indicated, they therefore confront us with some of key historical issues of the entire twentieth century from the standpoint of the left. Among these issues one might instance the role of party, attitudes to the state, the uses and abuses of political violence, conflicting notions of democracy, the role of law and socialist ethics, the challenges of religion, ethnicity and national identity, and a whole gamut of questions to do with socialist strategy and political agency. Hobsbawm himself could not have done justice to these issues within the word limits we imposed to be able to include as wide a range of contributors as was consistent with their having some reasonable scope to develop their arguments.

There was no point, within these constraints, in attempting a general rehearsal of these themes, and we therefore left it to the contributors themselves to decide how narrowly or broadly they wished to define the October revolution, and on which aspects of this experience they wished to focus. Again with a view to the word limits, we specifically asked for

critical (though not pointlessly polemical) reflections rather than research papers. In this loosely co-ordinated way it was hoped that the issue as a whole would give a sense at once of the breadth of the experience of the revolution itself, the importance of engaging critically with this experience both intellectually and historically, and the diversity of the arguments and reflection that the legacies of October continues to stimulate. We owe a great debt to our contributors for responding so readily to the journal's invitation and providing the stimulating reflections which follow on the many-faceted legacies of October. There is no single narrative here and it would not be appropriate to have a conclusion. The essays are presented alphabetically by author and readers are invited to read them in whatever order they prefer.

*Kevin Morgan*

## Notes

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph, 1994, ch. 2.
2. N. Bukharin, 'Ten years of victorious proletarian revolution', *Inprecorr*, 3 November 1927, 1347-54; idem, 'The world revolution and the USSR', *Labour Monthly*, (November 1927), pp652-659.
3. R.W. Robson, 'Fifteen years of Soviet power', *Labour Monthly*, (November 1932), pp676-680; R. Page Arnot, 'Twenty years of Soviet power', *Labour Monthly*, (November 1937), pp665-669.
4. R. Page Arnot, *A Short History of the Russian Revolution from 1905 to the present day*, London, Gollancz, 2 vols, 1937.
5. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), Max Eastman (trans.), New York, Pioneer Publishers, 1945; Victor Serge, *Destiny of a Revolution* (1937), Max Schachtman (trans.), London, Hutchinson, n.d.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/12/top-10-books-about-the-russian-revolution-tariq-ali> (access 18 August 2017).
7. As for example <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/06/russian-revolution-matter-china-mieville> (access 18 August 2017).
8. Serge, *Destiny*, p265.