Introduction: communism and political violence

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Communist history is violent history. Communism was, after all, envisaged as a revolutionary creed committed to the forcible overthrow of one class by another. Integral to communism was the notion of revolution and class conflict; the communist recourse to violence became one of the key factors separating it from social democracy over the twentieth century. True, Marx only fleetingly countenanced the use of revolutionary terror, just as he toyed with the possibility of a peaceful transition to socialism under certain circumstances. Taken generally, however, the spectre that Marx claimed to be haunting Europe brought with it the promise of intensive social conflict and a subsequent dictatorship of the proletariat.[1] The economic basis on which the class struggle and the existence of classes depended would have to be 'removed by force', Marx insisted, and its transformation 'speeded up by force'.[2] As this suggests, Marx presumed the victory of the proletariat to be dependent on the utilisation of violence in some form or other.

Lenin, of course, was far less circumspect. Like Marx he took inspiration from the French Revolution. Unlike Marx, he proved unequivocal in his enthusiasm for the methods of the Jacobins.[3] Come the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian civil war, moreover, and Lenin showed little to no hesitation in introducing policies of revolutionary terror to ensure the retention of Soviet power. Victory was all but impossible, Lenin reasoned, 'if we don't [make] the harshest use of revolutionary terror'.[4] Trotsky, too, by as early as December 1917, stated in reply to Bolshevism's critics: 'You wax indignant about the naked terror which we are applying against our class enemies, but let

me tell you that in one month's time at the most it will assume more terrible forms, modelled on the terror of the great French revolutionaries. Not the fortress but the guillotine will await our enemies.'[5]

Thereafter, the history of the Soviet Union would be stained with the blood of countless victims, left strewn across the Bolshevik road to socialism. Violence – or at least the threat of violence – became an integral part of the Soviet state's modus operandi, with the Great Terror of the late 1930s serving as the most extreme example of its potential fervour. And if the people's democracies that formed across eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War did not quite descend into such a fury of state repression, they retained the Russians' resort to coercion in order to maintain their authority. Similarly, the communist regimes established in China and south-east Asia were quick to add a violent touch to their own particular variants of the communist creed. In Pol Pot, perhaps, we have the communist psychopath *par excellence*.

But communism's relationship with violence was not one-sided. Communists were themselves the victims of often bloody repression. Those communist parties that formed in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution found their efforts to harness history both resisted and repelled. If communism was forged as a response to the iniquities of capitalism, its emergence as a fully realised politics was ruthlessly opposed by ruling elites and the propertied classes across Europe and beyond. As this suggests, communist history was often one of clandestinity, imprisoned activists and revolutionary martyrs. It was a history of confrontation, both on the streets and on the battlefield. It encompassed terror given and received; it involved bloody struggles with fascists in Europe, warlords and nationalists in China, and the US military in Vietnam. At the very least it was – and is – a history of industrial protest and class conflict. Communism was born of hate and war, and its history bears many a scar.

Into battle …

The current edition of *Twentieth Century Communism* is designed to explore and assess aspects of communism's relationship with violence.

Our contributors were invited to apply their own interests to the theme, with the objective of teasing out useful and interesting approaches to a relatively under-developed current of communist history. As hoped, this facilitated a diverse range of engaging and original articles that both complemented each other and raised fresh perspectives on the communist experience across the twentieth century.

For Andreas Wirsching, any attempt to understand communist policy and practice, be it violent or otherwise, must engage with the language of marxism-leninism. To this end, Wirsching takes the 'linguistic turn' and applies it to the history of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (German Communist Party; KPD) in the Weimar period. This leads to a fascinating analysis of the ways in which communists understood the world around them, detailing the scope (and limits) of a communist discourse shaped and refracted through the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution. Wirsching argues that the politics of communism were only comprehensible within the context of an already established and linguistically constructed reality. Communists had to learn to 'speak Bolshevik' and thereby interpret events within a Bolshevik lexicon, contained within a discursive 'archive' forged from the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Certainly, the KPD's history was regularly ensnared within the violent upheavals of the early twentieth century. Emerging from the bloody remnants of the First World War, the KPD cut its political teeth in the violent and politically fluid context of 1918-23 and ended its life crushed beneath the wheels of Hitler's Nazi juggernaut. In between, as Eve Rosenhaft demonstrated in her classic *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-33* (1983), KPD activists fought physically to retain their spheres of influence among the German working class. Indeed, Rosenhaft's study proved to be something of a revelation, as Eric Weitz explains in his welcome appreciation of her work. Most importantly, perhaps, her pioneering spatial analysis was complemented by a contextualising of the political violence that informed both communist politics and the last years of the Weimar Republic. For the KPD, the resort to violent struggle flowed easily from its members' revolutionary objective, and a

socio-political struggle that shifted beyond the Reichstag and factories and onto the streets. Here, as elsewhere, political violence may be seen as a rational response to the circumstances in which the party and its members found themselves. But it could also be justified theoretically. If we follow Wirsching, then the KPD – and, it could be argued, the terrorist actions of the radical Red Army Faction in the 1970s, whose cultural legacy is explored by Rosemary Stott – reconciled its recourse to violence through the linguistically-defined 'system of meaning' that shaped both its revolutionary theory and practice.

Of course, both the violence and the rhetoric of violence detectable in the history of German communism were not wholly unique. But just as communism and its fascist nemesis did battle to differing degrees across Europe and beyond in the mid-twentieth century, so the leftist violence that sprung from the various protest movements of the 1960s similarly crossed national boundaries. This, indeed, provides the focus of Isabelle Sommier's comparative analysis of leftist armed groups in France, Germany, Italy, America and Japan. Sommier outlines the common origins and processes of radicalisation that informed the turn to armed struggle in the late 1960s, while also noting the divergent trajectories of the groups involved. An emphasis is placed on the relationship between the new leftist groups and the wider working-class movement (especially the communist party), as well as on the theoretical foundations of groups comprised to varying degrees of young university-educated radicals. Sommier explains how analyses of consumer capitalism, modern media, identity politics and geopolitics (most obviously Vietnam) helped forge the conception of a 'new fascism' emergent within the west. By the late 1960s, it was the anti-imperialist guerrilla struggles of revolutionaries beyond Europe that fuelled the imaginations of a generation too young to remain enthralled by the early promises of the Soviet Union.

Such an approach is complemented by Monica Galfré's analysis of leftist political violence in 1970s Italy. Galfré makes clear the importance of tracing the changing ideological basis from which the murderous events of these years evolved. In so doing, she grapples with difficult questions relating to the 'progressive' socio-political movements of the 1960s and the violent campaigns that often sprung

from an overlapping milieu of young radicals. As becomes clear, especially when set against Marco Albeltaro's overview of the Italian Communist Party's relationship with political violence from its formation through to the post-war settlement, the focus of leftist violence shifted over the course of the twentieth century, away from direct physical confrontation with the political enemy and towards a terrorism that engulfed the wider population. Could it be, therefore, that as leftist politics became detached from the mass basis of the working-class labour movement, so the tendency to evermore terroristic forms of violence became more acute? In Italy, links between leftist armed groups and militant workers remained well into the 1970s, and Galfré is keen to underline the specificity of the Italian case. Nevertheless, the trajectory of leftist violence in Italy led eventually to an endgame very similar to the formula devised by Heinrich Böll to describe the RAF: a war of 'six against sixty million'.[6]

Elsewhere, of course, the resort to violence appeared more apposite. For many communists (and nationalists) beyond Europe who sought either to overthrow their imperial rulers or establish political hegemony in sites of political flux, the armed struggle proved integral to their revolutionary praxis. With regard to Kashmir, for example, Andrew Whitehead explores the ways in which communists informed the people's militia of the Kashmiri nationalist movement in the late-1940s.

Throughout all of the contributions contained within this current issue, there exists a double tension. First, as Sylvain Boulouque points out at the beginning of his analysis of the French Communist Party, the nature of communism's relationship to violence varied according to whether the party existed in a position of power or opposition. Given the remit of the journal, we are concerned mainly with communism in the latter position. Thus, if we may assume that communists were aware of the violence engrained within their revolutionary modus operandi, then the key questions revolved around the nature and timing of any violent act. Certainly, Boulouque tackles this and related issues head-on, exploring the ways in which French communists battled to apply a revolutionary heritage, drawn from both indigenous and external influence, to the shifting contours of the mid-twentieth

century. But it also arises throughout Albeltaro's analysis of the Italian party, as communists found themselves, first, emergent within a period of social tension and political flux, before then being subjected to Fascist repression and, later, taking the lead in the armed resistance that helped liberate Italy from the Second World War.

This, of course, introduces the second site of tension; that is, the legitimacy of communist violence depended very much on the context in which its adherents found themselves. Indeed, to use the language of marxism-leninism, a communist's resort to violence depended on the objective situation and the balance of class forces. Assessing such a relationship proved complex. For communists of the Comintern generation, it was forever framed within a Bolshevik-derived paradigm centred on the experience of 1917. Even then, however, communists beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union had to relate that experience through a prism of interweaving socio-economic, political and cultural forces peculiar to where they lived and the time in question. As a result, communist history is scattered with revolutionary moments missed or gone awry; of revolutions forced in the face of public opposition or disregard; and, in the case of a country such as Britain perhaps, of revolutionary dreams left unfulfilled or confined to the over-eager imagination.

One last point: in assessing the violent nature and the violent acts of communism, we must keep in mind the wider history of the twentieth century. This, after all, was a century that spawned two world wars, the Holocaust, and numerous episodes of bloody conflict. Communism, of course, was born out of and amidst all this, and if its revolutionary objective sought to perpetuate a culture of violence in times of peace then it was not alone in doing so. As Barack Obama recently reminded us on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, even liberal democracies have to confront the apparent dichotomy that is the use of violence in the pursuit of an imagined future peace.

Notes

1. For a synopsis of Marx's attitude to violence, see David McLellan, *The Thought of Karl Marx*, London: Papermac, 1995 edition, pp223-9.

2. Cited in Ibid, p235.
3. Robert Service, *Lenin: A Political Life Volume One: The Strengths of Contradiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985, p135; idem, *Lenin: A Political Life Volume Two: Worlds in Collision*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991, pp226-7 and pp289-91.
4. Quoted in Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: Life and Legacy*, London: Papermac, 1995, p233.
5. Quoted in Service, *Lenin: A Political Life Volume Two*, p290
6. For the history of the RAF, see Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, London: Bodley Head, 2008.