

Introduction

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Describing the French Revolution as the founding moment of the nineteenth century, Eric Hobsbawm maintained that it was so universally regarded as such that a key dimension of its history was what the nineteenth century made of it. As Hobsbawm would have been the first to acknowledge, for most of the twentieth century the same was true of the Bolshevik revolution of November 1917. If the nineteenth century, in other words, had variously ‘studied, copied, compared itself to, or tried to avoid, bypass, repeat, or go beyond the French Revolution’, the Russian revolution served as exactly such a reference point and bone of contention for the century that followed.¹ Indeed, the immediacy of the issue was in many respects incomparably greater in that the Russian revolution, unlike the French, was for decades thereafter continuously embodied in a party, state and global political movement tracing their origins to the revolution and claiming to uphold its legacy. For large parts of Hobsbawm’s short twentieth century, this was the defining issue of international politics, and often, depending on the time and place, of domestic politics too.²

What the twentieth century made of October – the shorthand for the revolution which communists continued to derive from the pre-revolutionary Russian calendar – is therefore a rich field of study. Through the institutionalisation of its legacy in state and party, there was, from the start, a culture of official commemoration which in the French case could only be paralleled in any durable way once the Third Republic became established after 1871. Even then, the annual celebration of the falling of the Bastille was of far more limited resonance, except in France itself. The Bolshevik revolution, by contrast, was not only commemorated on a large scale internationally, but beyond the reach of the party-states of the

Eastern bloc this gave rise to forms of political rivalry and ideological contestation between different movements and parties taking their own distinct positions on the legacy of October.

As the revolution, on its centenary, once more provides the focus of extensive media interest and public comment, it is fitting that *Twentieth Century Communism* turn its attention to the commemoration of October in its several different aspects. It does so by publishing papers presented at the conference on 'The International Echoes of the Commemorations of the October Revolution (1918-1990)' held at the University of Lausanne in September 2016 and co-sponsored by the journal. While for most part the echoes discussed were European ones, the papers were of sufficient scope and quality to justify both a themed issue of the journal, appearing in the autumn of 2017, and a separate volume in the journal's new book series 'Studies in Twentieth Century Communism'. Only the introduction, by the project's initiator Jean-François Fayet, appears in both publications. While the contents of the issue focus on the contested commemorations of the Cold War period, the reader is thus also referred to the companion volume *Echoes of October* which features papers on the three decades or so immediately following the Russian revolution.³

As Jean-François Fayet describes, the commemoration of October had as one important function the marking out of the 'territory of the comrades'. At the same time, he also notes, this was always a contested territory. Just as everybody, according to Hobsbawm, had his or her own French Revolution according to the circumstances and predilections, so as the gap between revolutionary ideals and Soviet realities appeared to widen October similarly was the occasion for rival appropriations, critical commentary and attempted delegitimation. In their different ways, four of the articles that follow provide examples of such contestation or adjustment over time from Cold War western Europe. Generalisation even within these limits is often problematic, and one need hardly underline the differences between the post-war communist 'microsocieties' of France and Italy and the marginal role played by their counterparts in most of the other democratic states of northern Europe. Nevertheless, one obvious common factor was the importance in each case of the communists' relations with the *frère-ennemi* of social democracy. It is an

issue which at some future point will surely deserve an issue of the journal, and which in the meantime can be traced through the examples of Denmark, France and Italy which feature here.

The Danish case, discussed by Jesper Jørgensen, may stand for those other European countries in which communism not only lost out in its contest with social democracy but, as demonstrated here, found itself increasingly subject to competing claims to October's legacy from its left. The French and Italian cases are a good deal more familiar to historians of communism, but approached here from new angles that bring fresh perspectives to the extensive comparative historiography of the two countries' communist parties. It is fascinating, for example, to have the comparison extended by Virgile Cirefice to their respective socialist counterparts, and how the contrasting positions these took up towards October shifted over time. This may arguably both reflect and help to explain the famously diverging trajectories of the French and Italian communist parties and in the latter's case Alexander Höbel demonstrates through the PCI's cultural journals, how the communists were also prone to changing assessments of the revolution's legacy which followed much more slowly and sometimes grudgingly in the case of the PCF. Focusing on the Venice Biennale of 1977, Matteo Bertelé goes beyond a party focus to trace the further interplay of state cultural agencies with party interests and ideological rivalries, while Valérie Gorin in her contribution broadens the compass still further to embrace what Jean-François Fayet calls the 'media echo' of the commemorations through their coverage by US television networks.

The book and special issue together constitute an important contribution to the understanding of the communist politics of memory. As editors of *Twentieth Century Communism* we are therefore greatly indebted to Jean-François Fayet, Stéfanie Prezioso and Valérie Gorin for both proposing and editing these publications and (along with Korine Amacher) acting as principal organisers of the conference from which they derive. Norman LaPorte and Kevin Morgan represented the journal at the conference and also assisted with editing and language issues. Acknowledgement should also be made of the support received from the Swiss National Foundation and the University of Lausanne which made the conference possible. When *Twentieth Century Communism* was

launched in 2009 it was intended as a journal of international history in respect of both its scope and its range of contributors. It is consequently a pleasure to feature our first publications edited from outside the UK and we hope they will be the first of many.

Notes

- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two centuries look back on the French revolution*, London: Verso 1989, xi, 69.
- 2 For Hobsbawm's observations, see his *Age of Extremes: the short twentieth century 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph 1994, ch2.
- 3 Jean-Francois Fayet, Valerie Gorin, Stefanie Preziosi. *Echoes of October: International Commemorations of the Bolshevik Revolution 1918-1990*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 2017.