The international echoes of the commemorations of the October Revolution (1918-1990)

Jean-François Fayet

Commemorations express a political will to remember, a process that relies on establishing a mythologised historical referent. The Russian Communists were aware of the importance of this instrument for the implantation of a regime whose legitimacy was contested both domestically and abroad, and proceeded therefore to construct a new collective memory through the reordering of time around the regime's founding act: the great socialist revolution of October. From 1918 on, 7 November was a day of celebrations: speeches, military parades, orderly marches, inaugurations of public monuments and commemorative plaques, political carnivals, mass spectacles, and popular parties that united the peoples and territories of the Soviet Union in celebration of October.[1] In addition to their domestic role in fostering unity, providing legitimacy, and facilitating internal mobilisation, commemoration practices also supported the regime's international eminence, especially when it presented itself as a model for world revolution.

From the earliest years, the choreography of October commemorations involved consideration for the gaze of the outside world in the organisation of the celebrations. This willingness to give the October commemorations an international echo was manifested in three ways: the first was the participation of foreigners in the celebrations taking place in the Soviet Union. As an allegory of the people marching towards revolution, the 7 November march had to reflect the solidarity of the international proletariat with October. The second international echo was the organisation of commemorative events outside Soviet borders,

thus extending the territory of October. The third international echo was in broadcasting the celebrations in the foreign media: this was the media echo of October.

Inviting foreign dignitaries to National Day celebrations is a tradition as old as diplomacy itself. However, assisted by the communist parties, the trade unions, and the mass organisation, the Soviets took this tradition to a whole new level. This unusual feature was quantitatively manifested in the number of guests, and qualitatively in the techniques used to select them.

During the years of civil war, only a few non-Soviet delegates attended the celebrations. They were almost exclusively foreign communists living in Russia. With the New Political Economy and the first diplomatic recognition, the numbers of foreigners visiting the USSR increased significantly, and there were several dozen of them in the commemorations of 1921 and 1922. The first attempt to give the event a truly international dimension was in 1923,[2] but this sixth anniversary commemoration was a failure because most of the communist machinery had been mobilised elsewhere by the organisation of an uprising in Germany. The subsequent commemorations over the next three years had little more non-Soviet participation. But in 1927, a thousand foreign delegates, from forty-three different countries, were invited to the Soviet Union for the tenth anniversary of the revolution.[3] Around 80 per cent of them were workers. The others were mainly representatives of the 'nationalist-revolutionary movements of the oppressed and colonised countries'; and the members of the Western progressive intelligentsia, such as the writers Henri Barbusse and Theodore Dreiser. Unlike the ambassadors, these representatives of the international working class and progressive social forces were not passive spectators, though their status was ambiguous. Despite having been invited as observers, they were expected to take sides, and then to commit themselves, because they had a role in the October spectacle and its political uses. The Soviets intended to show the world that the USSR was not isolated, and that its international legitimacy extended beyond the limited gamut of its diplomatic relations.

After the peak in 1927, the number of foreign representatives invited to the USSR was limited to just a few hundred for the anniversaries over the next ten years. While the overall number of invitees remained rela-

tively stable, there are nonetheless significant variations by country according what was happening at an international level. During the years of the Great Depression, the largest delegations came from countries that were in crisis. In 1936, and especially in 1937, the Spanish delegation occupied a special place in the parade, due to the support provided by the Soviet Union to the Republic during the Civil War that began in 1936. However, international delegates to the October commemorations became increasingly rare during the Great Terror, before disappearing altogether during the Great Patriotic War. In a context marked by international tensions and then by the Second World War, the commemorative parade reinforced its military and patriotic component. Far from the internationalist ambition of the first few anniversaries, the commemorations were now reduced to a display of Soviet military power.

During the Cold War, it became standard to invite the ambassadors posted to Moscow, the heads of friendly States from Europe and Asia, and the leaders of Communist parties to the celebrations. The invitees traced the contours of, and the fluctuations in, Soviet foreign policy. The beginning of the 1950s marked the development of Soviet influence in the Middle East and Latin America. Conversely, the disappearance of the Yugoslav communists from Red Square illustrated the schism of the years 1948-1953. The Soviets also took advantage of this concentration of communist leaders to organise political meetings outside the celebrations. Thus, as a prolongation of the fortieth anniversary, a meeting of Cominform was held in Moscow in the presence of CP leaders from twelve socialist countries including Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Enver Hoxha, Todor Zhivkov, Janos Kadar, Walter Ulbricht, and Vladislav Gomulka.[4] Communist party leaders from fifty-six capitalist countries were also included in the group. It was during the 7 November celebrations that Khrushchev staged the reconciliation with Yugoslavia and the end of the Cuban missile crisis. In the 1960s, Red Square became an almost obligatory passageway for the representatives of the 'progressive' movements of the 'Third World'. The Vietnamese were the most regular visitors, but there were also Ethiopians, Somalis, and others. Meanwhile, the Chinese, who were very well-represented there during the 1950s, disappeared completely from the guest list, as did the Albanians. Also at this time, women and young people began to take a more central role in the

parade. The Young Communist Organisation ran 'friendship trains', transport which enabled thousands of young people from the People's democracies to visit the Soviet Union during the celebrations.[5] Despite this attempt to display youth, the 1960s celebrations actually highlighted the stagnation of the regime and its ageing leaders. In 1977, the sixtieth anniversary parade was watched from the grandstand by over a hundred foreign delegations from left-wing organisations, joined by the heads of state of communist countries. The number of attendees remained high for the seventieth anniversary a decade later and until the last commemoration, in 1990.

Commemorative events were also held outside the Soviet Union, constituting another aspect of the international reach of the October Revolution. Communist communities around the world also sought to celebrate a date that was understood as an integral part of their own triumphal revolutionary calendars. They appropriated the October Revolution to legitimate local projects as parts of a wider history of social and political achievements.

Initially, they were small events, organised spontaneously – in Zurich in 1918, Turin 1919, Beijing 1923, but also in Prague, London, Paris, Chicago, etc – small street processions, lectures, discussions in factories, an evening at a community centre, evidence of the hopes the revolution inspired beyond its borders. But in 1927, mass meetings took place in Berlin,[6] Paris, London, New York, with workers' banquets and the projection of Soviet films.[7] An exhibition of fifteen pictures travelled across Europe and the Americas, under the title 'Ten years of socialist edification', putting the Soviet Union on international display.[8] Agitprop theatre troupes in the image of the famous Blue Shirts from the Moscow union toured the capitals of Europe in autumn 1927.[9] In many countries, workers organised strikes in solidarity with the Soviet working class.[10]

The internationalisation of the celebrations becomes progressively enmeshed in a very structured context that includes Soviet institutions (embassies, commercial services, and cultural missions), the Communist International, and the many mass organisation that orbit the Communist Parties – in the manner of, for example, the Friends of the Soviet Union. A similar development takes place in Russia: the chaotic, political and

artistic carnival of the early commemorations is transformed with time into a very conventional, repetitive, and scripted display of militarism and patriotism. The commemorative date is fixed, but it is part of a changing commemorative calendar. At the beginning, 1 May remains the other great 'proletarian commemoration day'. A focus on leaders and martyrs – the '3 Ls' of Lenin, Luxemburg and Liebknecht – then shifts under Stalin to the leader's birthday and a form of commemorative competition.[11] The military victories of the Soviet Union in the 'Great Patriotic War' will lead to the further key commemoration day of 9 May.

There is also the exportation of the soviet culture of commemoration, initially to the newly 'liberated' areas, with celebrations of 7 November taking place across a Russia that extends from Kaliningrad to Sakhalin, as well as in the Baltic countries and in Moldavia. Next it is the turn of the people's democracies to integrate the date of the October Revolution in their official calendar, and also to reproduce the Soviet commemorative model in the scope of their own national days, albeit with efforts to mark it with certain national variations.[12]

In capitalist countries, the Soviets took advantage of the new prestige of the USSR, victor of the Second World War, in order to hold commemorative events. In Vienna, the philharmonic orchestra staged the opera *Boris Godunov* to celebrate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the revolution. In Berlin, Soviet soldiers used the thirtieth anniversary commemorations to place wreaths on the monument to the Russian dead in the British sector. In Washington, the Soviet ambassador, Vychinski, organised commemorative receptions over several years. These last manifestations of the great alliance against Nazism gradually disappeared with the advent of the Cold War.

The echo of October nonetheless persisted in western communist microsocieties in the form of meetings, concerts, and conferences. This was particularly the case in France and Italy, where the communist parties represented up to one quarter of the electorate in the 1950s and 1960s. On the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, the French Communist Party organised a large meeting in the hall of the *Mutualité*, with speeches by Soviet and French communist leaders, followed by a dance.[13]

The commemorative territory of October then developed in line with the many changes of regime that affected the Third World. Egypt, North

Vietnam, and then Cuba opened the door to Soviet commemorative practices to prove their socialist allegiances.

Finally, the spectacle of the celebrations is broadcast around the world, first by press, radio and news reels, and later by television. This staging of the regime took advantage, right from the early years, of the technological revolutions that took place in the mass media throughout the twentieth century. The illustrated press, the radio, the newsreels that preceded the film in cinemas, and later the television, enabled circulation of the spectacle of the celebrations within the USSR and outside it.[14] It was with these mass media, capable of reaching audiences that were not physically present, that 'commemoration' in terms of 'remembering together' took on its full meaning. In this respect, the media significantly contributed to the international echo of October.

This was evidently the case with countries in the Soviet orbit. Like in many other people's democracies, the television services of East Germany and Hungary broadcasted the ritual processions.[15] But this mediated commemoration reached also into Western democracies. Every year in the United States, regularly in Great Britain, France, and Italy, the parade organised for the October commemorations was broadcast by the national broadcasters. In this context, it was not to obtain public support but, on the contrary, to suggest to viewers the dangers that might threaten them. The broadcasting of the military parade thus formed part of the staging of the Cold War. It fulfilled the same mobilising function as for the Soviet audience, but in the opposite direction. The programme mobilised military experts and sovietologists, or kremlinologists.[16] The interest of the former was concentrated on the appearance of the troops and the presentation of the new arms (tanks, aircraft, missile launchers, and rockets). The latter used the broadcast to sketch out hypotheses about the balance of Soviet power, depending on the places occupied on the platform by the various leaders. Last-minute cancellation of the popular parade, as in 1974, aroused speculation about the state of health of one or other of the main leaders. In short, the broadcasting of the celebrations served as a pretext for a discussion about the state of the regime.

Overall, the international echo of the celebrations enables us to sketch out a map of the October territories, which means that part of the inter-

national space that the supporters of the October Revolution took over. This is what we might call the 'territory of the comrades'.

Notes

1 Christopher Binns, 'The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accomodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System', Part I-II, in *Man-Journal of Royal Anthropological Institut*, Vol. 14, no.4, Dec 1979, pp555-606 & Vol. 15, no.1, Mar 1980, pp170-187; Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: memory and the making of the Bolshevik Revolution,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004; Vladimir V. Glebkin, *Ritual v sovetskoj kul'ture,* Moskva, 'Ianus-K', 1998; Emilia Koustova, 'De la 'fête partisane' à la 'fête d'Etat': Célébrations et rituels révolutionnaires au lendemain d'Octobre', *Le Mouvement social*, 212, juillet-septembre 2005, pp59-76; Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2013.

2 Agitpropotdel du CC, F.17/60/, RGASPI.

3 List of foreign delegates, F.495/99/19, doc. 153, RGASPI and F.5283/8/47, GARF. Sophie Coeuré, 'Les "fêtes d'Octobre" à Moscou. La dynamique des structures d'influence soviétique et kominternienne autour d'un anniversaire', *Communisme*, n°42-43-44 (1995), p. 57-74

4 N.G. Tomilina (Gl. red.), *Nasledniki Kominterna. Meždunarodnye sovešanija predstavitelej kommunističeskih i rabočih partij v Moskve (nojabr' 1957): Dokumenty ,* Moskva : ROSSPÈN, 2013.

5 M-1/30/1489, 1977, RGASPI.

6 'Demonstration in Berlin for the tenth anniversary', *Sovkino-zhurnal,* N°48/106, 1927, RGAKFD.

7 *October* by Eisenstein, based on the book by John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Pudovkin's *End of St. Petersburg* and Barnet's *Moscow in October.* Alexandre Sumpf, *Révolutions russes au cinéma. Naissance d'une nation: URSS, 1917-1985*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2015.

8 Soviet Exhibition: 'Ten years of socialist edification' F.495/30/373, doc.91-176, RGASPI.

9 Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational solidarity. Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany,* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015, pp178-180.

10 Report on Lithuania, 29.11.1927, F.495/30/371, doc.264, RGASPI.
11 Jean-François Fayet, 'Le 9 mai contre le 7 novembre: Concurrence commémorative et nouvelle légitimé internationale de l'URSS', *Relations internationales*, Paris, no.147, 2011, pp7-18.
12 Jürgen Danyel, Politische Rituale als Sowjetimport», Konrad H. Jarausch & Hannes Siegrist (Hg.), Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland 1945-1970, Frankfurt/Main, 1997, pp67-88 ; Monika Gibas, Die Inszenierung kollektiver Identität. Staatssymbolik und Staatsfeiertage in der DDR, *Universitas. Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Wissenschaft,* no.4, 1999, pp312-325 ; R. Rytlewski et D. Kraa, « Politische Rituale in der Sowjetunion und der DDR », *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte,* no.17, January 1987, pp33-48.
13 http://www.cinearchives.org/Catalogue-d-exploitation-MARCEL-CACHIN-DOCUMENTS-494-1063-0-1.html?ref=5a728727717b789d667feea90aadd844
14 Gianni Haver, Jean-François Fayet, Valérie Gorin, Emilia Koustova (eds), *Le spectacle de la révolution: La culture visuelle des commémorations d'Octobre, en URSS et ailleurs,* Lausanne : Antipodes, 2017.
15 Kati Jutteau, L'*enfance embrigadée dans la Hongrie communiste. Le mouvement des pionniers,* Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, p155.
16 David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009: Whitman Bassow, *The Moscow correspondents. Reporting on Russia from the Revolution to Glasnost*, New York: Paragon House, 1989.