

France and the centenary of October

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France and the Centenary of October

In 2017, French political discourse was permeated by the word ‘revolution’, while crowding out October. In the presidential elections, mainstream right-wing candidate François Fillon promised a ‘conservative revolution’, while, for the Front national, Marine Le Pen’s revolution made many think of Pétain’s *Révolution Nationale*. On the national-populist left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon stood for a ‘citizen’s revolution’ whose field of reference was explicitly the French Revolution. The successful candidate, Emmanuel Macron, promised a ‘progressive revolution’, drawing on both left and right. This universal use of the term ‘revolution’ could be interpreted as a doomed attempt by the political class to reconnect with and enthrone a cynical and weary electorate.

October was therefore paradoxically eclipsed by this revolutionary discourse. In the world of French publishing, the anniversary certainly did not dominate the mainstream, unlike the national then international phenomenon that was Stéphane Courtois’s *Black Book of Communism* in 1997. Granted, popular historian and novelist Max Gallo chose October as the subject of what turned out to be his last work, but October appeared especially on and about the margins. Thus the year saw the French translation of Evgenia Yaroslavskaya-Markon’s *Insurgent*, the extraordinary account of a young revolutionary woman’s disillusionment with Bolshevik power and embrace of lumpenproletarian delinquency, all written with suicidally defiant candour in a special camp for political prisoners in the Arctic Circle, precipitating her execution in 1931. The right-wing catholic journalist Victor Loupan offered up a *Secret History of the Russian Revolution* which gave a sensationalist, conspiratorial view of events, in which the ‘mystery’, the ‘hidden face’ of the ‘iceberg’ of 1917 was explained principally by the role of a handful of fanatical, often Jewish, individuals and the competing interests of American, British and German financiers and spies. More soberly, Nicolas Werth, who had contributed the Soviet chapter of *The Black Book of Communism*, was given the prestigious job of writing the *Que sais-je?* volume devoted to what Werth chose to call ‘the Russian Revolutions’. Werth thus challenged a monolithic interpretation of 1917 as well as of the Bolsheviks themselves. On the other hand, Werth gave a neat, familiarly Gallocentric coda to his text. If, as François Furet had argued in *The Past of an Illusion*, the ‘charm of October’ lay in its revival of the ‘revolutionary idea’, the collapse of communism meant that ‘man’s eternal aspirations to more justice and freedom have rejoined the paths traced by the Enlightenment’.

That said, a resolutely eclectic, open and internationalist spirit was expressed in the major exhibition, ‘And 1917 became a Revolution...’, held at the Hôtel national des Invalides, Paris, and accompanied by a lavish catalogue published by Seuil. This event marked not only the centenary of the revolutions, but also of the creation of what is now the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC), Nanterre. Originally set up to collect all documents concerning a Great War then far from over, the BDIC is now one of the world’s richest resources for the study of the history of that conflict as well as of communism. This wealth was on full display at les Invalides, complemented by partner institutions in Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. The curators aimed to put on display the diversity and scale of the events starting in 1917, illustrating a contagion that went way beyond Petrograd. It also showed new approaches to the historiography of 1917, notably the use of iconographic and audiovisual sources to explore the ‘aesthetic shock’ of that moment. Thus the first part of the exhibition used iconic photographs, rare films, election posters and postcards to plunge the visitor into the revolutionary maelstrom. There followed Russia’s ordeal in the world war and civil war, while the contagion spread throughout the erstwhile ‘prison of peoples’. The fourth part of the exhibition looked at the Russian revolutions through the prism of French documents, both private archives and the press. Here, French witnesses present in Russia were forced to adopt contrasting positions, while, back in France, the soldiers of the Russian Expeditionary Corps were also bitterly divided. Finally, the BDIC’s artefacts, from posters to porcelain and postage stamps, showed how subsequent commemorations strove to create the myth of Red October. The exhibition’s concluding image, of the military parade on Red Square in November 1977, emphasised how contemporary this history remains.

Could it be said that 1917 has become less divisive and polemical in France? The presence of Nicolas Werth in the special issue of *L’Humanité*, ‘What is left of the October Revolution?’, illustrated the journey made by the French Communist Party (PCF) since the polemics of the Cold War then around the *Black Book of Communism*. Carrying on its back cover the words of Lenin, ‘you cannot make a revolution wearing white gloves’, the issue brought together historians, critics and philosophers to investigate the multiple aspects of October, the light and the shadow, the good and the bad. There was a great emphasis on the revolution’s impact on culture, the role of women, notably Alexandra Kollontai, as well as that of French people, such as the military attaché Pierre Pascal, in the infancy of the Soviet Union. Beyond the event and the ‘great men’ associated with it – the editor listed Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin and Zinoviev -, there was also emphasis on the role of the masses as well

as the importance of local political cultures, beginning with the French, touched by, but not swept away by, the October wave.

The subjects of the round table discussions organised at the Party's headquarters as part of 'three weeks of celebration' also illustrated both historical and contemporary preoccupations: 'Social classes, people and subject of history'; 'The French sources of communism'; 'Europe and globalisation: for a more just control of interdependences'; 'The new sites for revolutions: ecology, the digital age, new modes of production and exchange'. In his concluding address, Pierre Laurent, the PCF national secretary, stressed how the French tradition of revolt, from the *canuts* uprising in Lyons to the Paris Commune, preceded and anticipated the October Revolution: 'the socialist idea that Balzac already, before Marx, called "communism" was progressing'. The emancipatory promise of October had been betrayed by the 'monstrous Stalinist system' from which the French communists had 'definitively drawn the lesson'. Today, the French Communist Party, which has kept its name and, surprisingly, its groups in the National Assembly and the Senate, therefore does not jettison the October reference, while seeing itself as contributing to a new left-wing alternative. In November 2018, there will be an extraordinary congress aimed at 'revolutionising' the Party. The question arises: what will the French left look like in 2020, centenary of the Congress of Tours and the split between Socialists and Communists over adherence to the Comintern? Will the PCF and PS even exist?

Of course, the PCF does not have a monopoly on French communism. In September 2017, I returned to the Fête de l'Humanité and explored the streets of this immense tent city of bars and restaurants – hegemony through gastronomy - in search of traces of October. In the avenue Georges Marchais I found the stand of the Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière, who were preparing for a big celebration of October at the legendary Paris meeting hall, La Mutualité: in 1917, they argued, the workers had seized power; it was time to do the same in the face of Emmanuel Macron's labour reforms. A hundred metres away, in the avenue Olga Bancic, I met Olivier Besancenot, former presidential candidate of the Trotskyist New Anti-Capitalist Party. He signed for me his new book, *What is to be done with 1917?*, a 'counter-history' of the Russian revolution which concludes with a eulogy to Soviet *autogestion* (self-management) betrayed by Stalinist bureaucratisation. Indeed, as I wandered on I wondered: whatever happened to Stalin, *le petit père des peuples*, to whom the PCF – the most pro-Soviet of the major western communist parties - had sent presents by the train-load for his seventieth birthday in 1949? Luckily, I soon found the stand of the erstwhile pro-Albanian Communist Workers Party. Here, a jovial Maoist from the Auvergne dismissed the

‘electoralist illusions’ of the rest of the French left and argued that the USSR had worked perfectly fine before the arrival of Nikita Krushchev. The fractious splendour of French communism therefore lived on in the rather frayed ‘Red Belt’ around Paris one hundred years after October.

The silence of the non-communist left was striking. On 7 November, the centre-left (and originally Maoist) daily *Libération* made no mention of the centenary. Instead, its concerns were the global sexual harassment scandal and indignation at President Macron’s plans to officially commemorate the 50th anniversary of the events of May 1968. The only other echo of October was to be found in the resolutely right-wing and anti-communist *Le Figaro*. In its pages, Stéphane Courtois traced the origins of totalitarianism to Lenin, while a long feature was devoted to white Russian émigrés in France, including a visit to the Museum of the Cossacks of the Imperial Guard, in Paris. Historian Jean-Pierre Arrignon explained the October Revolution as a well-organised coup d’état and dwelled at length on the murder of Tsar Nicholas II and his family. At least here there remained traces of the deep cleavages carved in France by October 1917.