

# Order in disorder

## Revolution against the state becomes but a page in its history

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It would seem that the centenary of the Russian Revolution could not have come at a more inopportune moment for Russia. The colossal scale and universalist ambitions of that event are at odds with the apathetic state of Russian society today. Indeed, efforts to dispense with this inconvenient ghost appear to provide the sole point of consensus. The policy of 'Reconciliation' [*Primirenie*] that has become central to official discourse on the centenary is a case in point: resolving a conflict that has split society is not on the agenda; rather, it is asserted that there is no conflict. The only reconciliation offered serves to consolidate the present state of affairs as not only legitimate but the only possibility. The Revolution is both condemned as a violent and utopian experiment and embraced as a 'fact' in the history of the nation.

Sheila Fitzpatrick, in her recent review of new books on the Russian Revolution, expressed her concern about the change in its status. A few decades back the Revolution was widely perceived as a tipping point in the world history of the twentieth century. Today its significance is being rapidly marginalised. Historical studies as well as current politics increasingly see it as a local accident or one of history's dead ends.<sup>1</sup> Fitzpatrick raises the alarm: in the year of its centenary this dramatic chapter in history faced, like a rare species, the threat of extinction.

### Eternal present: Russian version

The Kremlin's policy on history in general is based on the idea of a struggle to preserve a heritage that is under constant attack by external competitors and internal enemies. The only history that exists is the

history of the forebears – of rulers and their faithful subjects. This is the history of a nation that is reproduced in every one of their heroic feats or crimes, a Russia that demands devotion to itself alone. Such devotion can justify any action and leaves no room for choice.

1917 is no exception to this schema. Here also we have the devious machinations of the neighbouring countries, the moral forces of internal resistance, a thousand-year-old state imperilled. It is from this complex that the genuine spiritual 'meaning' of the conflicts of the Revolution can and must be extracted, a meaning that would have been beyond the comprehension of the actual participants in the original events, but now familiar to every present-day government official: the Revolution is a legitimate part of our history that must never be repeated.

This is precisely the 'objective assessment' of the Russian Revolution that Vladimir Putin requested from the participants in the Congress of Russian Historians a year ago.<sup>2</sup> In January 2017, at the first meeting of the official agency charged by the President with arranging the centenary events, The Organising Committee for the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Sergey Naryshkin, the former Chairman of the State Duma and one of the United Russia party leaders, unequivocally launched the following anti-revolutionary mission for contemporary Russia:

A number of countries in recent years have been victim to the import of so-called revolutionary technologies and colour revolutions, which are always fraught with bloodshed, the death of citizens, destruction and hardship for the countries subject to such experiments. The Russian nation, however, has a vivid genetic memory of the price one has to pay for

the Revolution and therefore highly values stability.<sup>3</sup>

The Organising Committee for the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution includes academics along with public figures from both liberal and patriotic camps. (Liberals such as journalists Nikolai Svanidze and Alexey Venedictov, and patriots such as film director Nikita Mikhalkov and writer Sergey Shargunov.) All of them presented the Committee as an agency of national reconciliation, assembled in commemoration of an event that no longer has any political significance. This stance was clearly articulated by Shargunov (who is also a Member of Parliament for the Communist Party):

Let us all see our national history as dreadful, murderous, tragic and yet great. Let us all see that we do have a state and that it will develop further. This trust in Russia is what should be felt by us all while commemorating this important event.<sup>4</sup>

According to this scenario, the parties to the 'reconciliation' put aside their differences in order to swear allegiance to the country. In this respect, the fate of one of the hallmark projects of the centenary – the 'Monument to Reconciliation' [*Pamiatnik primirenyia*], which, according to the initial plan, should have been unveiled in Crimea in November 2017 – is very revealing. The design for the monument consisted of a column crowned with the figure of 'Russia', flanked by two kneeling soldiers symbolising the Red and the White armies in the civil war, now reconciled in genuflection before the nation. However, the mere depiction turned out to be too 'hot' for official politics: on the eve of the monument's installation local Stalinists in Sebastopol held a number of protests at this image of reconciliation, making the future of the project rather uncertain. The litigation between the city administration and activists remains unsettled, with the project's completion now scheduled for 2018, probably not before the presidential elections in March.<sup>5</sup> This exposure of political conflict over the historical representation of the Revolution is precisely what the official celebrations seek to conceal under the veil of patriotism.

The art exhibitions listed in the government's plan also promise to depoliticise the Revolution. The State Tretyakov Gallery held an emblematic exhibi-

tion, 'Someone 1917', which laid out a history of the Russian artistic avant-garde independent from the Revolution. The exhibition's curator, Irina Vakar, believes that 'in 1917 the artists didn't think about the Revolution at all. However, after it took place they started to use it ... For Russian painting, 1917 became a sum total, a final point in concluding the decade of freedom.'<sup>6</sup>

## On the way to 'Historical Russia'

These commemorations to reconciliation are, of course, merely epiphenomenal to the principal reconciliation between the Revolution and its opponents: the Russian state itself. According to Vladimir Medinsky, the Soviet state emerged from the revolutionary conflict as a 'third power', realising the continuum of 'historical Russia.' He argues that the Bolsheviks, despite their own anti-state attitudes, 'were obliged to deal with the restoration of the ruined institutions of the state and the struggle against regional separatism. ... The unified Russian state became known as the USSR and maintained almost exactly the same borders. Moreover, 30 years after the demise of the Russian Empire, Russia unexpectedly found itself at the pinnacle of its military triumph in 1945.'<sup>7</sup>

This reproduces a conservative thesis first proclaimed about the French Revolution more than 200 years ago: the true significance of a revolution is not grasped by its revolutionaries. Conservative thinkers were convinced of their own ability to perceive the true content of a revolution, whether determined by divine providence, a metaphysical national destiny or historical inevitability. This was the ability, as Joseph de Maistre expressed it, 'to delight in the order in disorder.'<sup>8</sup> De Maistre wrote with satisfaction: 'All the monsters begotten by the Revolution have evidently only laboured for the sake of royal power.' Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the French Revolution completed the work of creating a centralised bureaucratic state that had been begun by Bourbon absolutism. Following de Tocqueville's logic, one could say that the French Republic existing today is heir to both the *ancien régime* and its revolution. Revolution is rendered



a myth, a quasi-religious faith in the ability of people to overthrow the old, sinful world through their own conscious effort and create a Kingdom of God on earth that lives according to completely different laws. A nation split apart by revolution can become aware of its continuing common history and overcome its own internal division only when it buries the destructive revolutionary religion conjointly. In this spirit, on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, the historian François Furet called for the completion of the Revolution by taking final leave of the illusions to which it gave rise. The history of the Revolution has not been completed as long as the political tradition that it created, based on myth, is still alive.<sup>9</sup>

This conservatism infuses the Kremlin's commemoration of the Russian Revolution: dismissing the revolutionary ambitions to create a new world reveals the true significance of the events that happened one hundred years ago, enabling us to see the contours of the millenary state organism in the obscurity of the period's self-awareness.

But the more direct precedent for Medinsky's conservative notion of 'historical Russia' is the 'Change of Signposts' movement of the 1920s. Its ideologues, such as Nikolai Ustryalov and Yuri Kliuchnikov, saw Soviet Russia as the continuation and development of a thousand-years-old Russian state, the logic of which has proved more profound and more powerful than the internationalist perspective of the Bolsheviks. Sergei Chakhotkin, in his article 'To Canossa' from the programmatic compendium *A Change of Signposts*, published in Prague in 1921, wrote: 'history has forced the Russian "communist" republic, contrary to its official dogma,

to take up the national cause of gathering together a Russia that had almost fallen apart and at the same time restoring and increasing Russia's relative weight internationally.'<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in the opinion of the 'signpost-changers', the very victory of the Revolution had realised an internal necessity of Russian history, by overcoming 'the gulf between the people and power.' In Ustryalov's opinion, the tragically high cost of the Revolution was the price 'paid for the rehabilitation of the state organism, for curing it of the prolonged, chronic malady that led the St. Petersburg period of our history to its grave.'<sup>11</sup>

Through the zig-zags of Bolshevik policy, determined by the contradiction between communist ideology and reality, Ustryalov glimpsed the triumph of the 'reason of the state', manifested outside the law. In effect approximating Carl Schmitt's concept of a 'state of emergency', Ustryalov regarded the Russian revolution as a triumph of the spirit of the state through the flouting of its letter.<sup>12</sup> Every step the Bolsheviks viewed as taken under compulsion – the limited recognition of the market through the New Economic Policy, or the temporary rejection of world revolution in the name of 'socialism in one country' – was regarded by the 'signpost-changers' as being legitimate and inevitable. The Bolsheviks, having assumed the burden of state power, even though they regarded it as a dangerous instrument from the moral point of view, started becoming transformed into its agents. Their revolutionary practice, undertaken from outside the state, had attempted to subordinate it to the goals of an anti-state and liberating moral order. But the dictatorship of the proletariat was gradually reduced to the condition of a dictatorship of the bureaucracy over the proletariat. Under the influence of circumstances, the means were victorious over the goal.

## The Revolution as a moral problem

The course of events in 1917 was a challenge, not only to the old world, but also to the revolutionary social-democratic movement in its previous form – a movement which saw itself as no more and no less than an instrument for the realisation of the laws of history. From the moment it was established, the

Second International, which had proclaimed Marxism to be its official doctrine, based itself on a clear teleology of progress in which the socialist character of revolution was determined by necessary and inevitable preconditions. A social revolution had to be prepared by objective circumstances and it had to be the resolution of the contradictions that are inherent in the capitalist mode of production. The Russian Revolution was the direct and deadly negation of this entire tradition of Marxist politics: it was a revolution in an unexpected place, with an unexpected result. This aspect of 'defiance' runs through the entire history of 1917, engendering hope and surprise in European radical dissidents within social-democracy. Thus, in April of that year Rosa Luxemburg writes exultantly that the Revolution is taking place 'despite the treason and the universal decline of the working masses and the disintegration of the Socialist International.'<sup>13</sup> Six months later Antonio Gramsci hails the October coup in Russia, calling it a 'revolution against *Das Kapital*.'<sup>14</sup> For Gramsci, Russia became a place where 'events have defeated ideology', and the Bolsheviks had opted for events. The unique combination of these events, which preceded the coup, repudiated the absolute determinism of the 'laws of historical materialism' by giving the masses, who had liberated themselves from the dictatorship of external circumstances, an opportunity to make their own history. According to Gramsci, this liberating act also signified the beginning of the liberation of Marxism itself, which had previously been 'corrupted by the emptiness of positivism and naturalism.' He concluded with an open appeal to return to the sources of Marxist thought in German idealist philosophy.

Despite the fact that class-conscious workers, organised into Soviets, were the main driving force throughout 1917, the goals of the Revolution and its socialist character resulted from moral and political decisions taken by the Bolsheviks. Just as the Russian Revolution was not predetermined by a simple combination of circumstances that added up to a crisis, the goal of the transition to socialism did not in itself grow out of the dynamics of the class struggle. On the contrary, it was a kind of new, autonomous circumstance, a genuine moment of

Kantian 'practice': a moral action that was based only on an inner conviction of the correctness of the decision taken. The party of Lenin accepted this moral burden of making the transition to socialism in a country which, according to all the definitions, was not ready for it. The dead weight of this decision would assert itself throughout the whole of Soviet history, and without any doubt the moral responsibility for all the events of that history runs back to the crucial decision taken by the Bolsheviks to seize power in October 1917. The Bolsheviks themselves were fully aware of this responsibility. The choice made by Lenin's supporters began as a tragic acceptance of the risks involved in the contradiction between goal and means, in the decision to seize state power.

This contradiction was expressed most precisely and profoundly by Georg Lukács in his 'Bolshevism as a Moral Problem', written at the very dawn of Soviet history in 1918.<sup>15</sup> According to Lukács, the goal of the Revolution is not determined by it itself, but lies outside its specific social content. It is directed not simply towards the victory of the working class, but to surpassing class society as such. This is a path from the 'great disorder' of capitalism, alienation and the splintered condition of human life to universal good. Such a goal is universal, global and transcendental in relation to the circumstances of the specific historical situation in Russia. A little later, in his 1919 essay 'Tactics and Ethics', Lukács writes: 'The final goal of socialism is utopian in the same sense in which it transcends the economic, legal and social framework of present-day society and can only be realized by destroying this society.'<sup>16</sup> Lukács diagnosed the new moral decision as follows: either remain 'good people', autonomous in one's moral relation to immoral circumstances, and wait until the general good becomes real 'through the will of all', or seize power and impose your will on these unjust circumstances. Inevitably the state becomes the instrument of this volition towards the common good, although historically it was founded for a diametrically opposed goal. The state is acknowledged as an evil which is nonetheless necessary. To use the state, which was designed to assert inequality and injustice, for the triumph of equal-

ity and justice, entails consciously accepting the destruction of one's own moral integrity, deliberately attempting, as Lukács put it, 'to drive out Satan with the hands of Beelzebub.'

In effect, Lukács explains in the terms of Kant's moral philosophy the contradiction of a workers' state, which was formulated in the terms of Marxist theory by Lenin in *State and Revolution*. This text was written in August 1917 on the eve of the seizure of power. Lenin assumed that the state the revolutionaries were about to seize would cease to be a continuation of the old type, an instrument of one class's domination of the others. On the contrary, Lenin's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a dictatorship to end all dictatorships. For Lenin, the mission of the new proletarian state lay in proving itself unnecessary to a victorious class, the true class interest of which lay in dissolving both its own domination and itself in a consciously organised society. The task of the Bolsheviks should not be to reinforce the state apparatus they have inherited from previous overlords, but to 'smash and break it.' According to Lenin, such a state should not attempt to present itself as a moral force, an educator of the masses: on the contrary, it must convince these masses that they no longer need any educators.

However, while accepting responsibility for the creation of such a historically unprecedented, self-negating state, the Marxists were aware of the immense danger implicit in it. Having become the stewards of the proletarian state, the revolutionaries must not forget that it is evil. The moment this state starts believing in itself as the good, not only will it not 'disappear', it will consume society and be transformed into a totalitarian apparatus of oppression, exploiting the argument of the common good as the basis for its own monopoly on violence.

Not only do these conclusions, which follow directly from the reasoning of Lenin and Lukács, contain a prophecy of the Stalinist dictatorship, but also, and most importantly of all, they are founded on an awareness of responsibility for its very possibility. The Bolshevik coup was not therefore the consequence of that old, familiar, unreflecting political instinct to seize the power that has fallen out of the hands of the previous government, as the coup is

often explained by banal anti-communists. On the contrary, it was a moral choice that opposed itself to the previous laws of power and politics; a choice which also recognised the terrible risks of failure. Stalinism – this victory of 'the ethical state' over the striving for an 'organised society', to use Gramsci's terms – was this failure.

However, even in the harshest conditions of totalitarian dictatorship, the moral basis of Bolshevism, its will to struggle against overwhelming circumstances, remained. This can be seen in the tragic struggle of the Left Opposition in 1920s and 30s, and in the interpretation of the experience of the gulag by writers such as Varlam Shalamov. Forty years after 'Bolshevism as a Moral Problem', Lukács, having himself endured the tribulations, if not the trials, of the times, wrote that Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was the finest example of genuine 'socialist realism', since the true question of 'real socialism' was still the moral question.<sup>17</sup> However, it is Lenin's *State and Revolution* that must be regarded as the fundamental text of the Soviet age and the mystery of its origins. It was always something like the ghost of Hamlet's father, hovering over the Soviet state throughout its entire history. Packed into the canon of official ideology, this book was a constant reminder of the arbitrary nature of this ideology, placing in doubt over and over again the very right of the bureaucracy to hold power.

This dual nature of Bolshevism – as moral choice and actual historical experience, as conscious practice and the overwhelming force of circumstances – constitutes its heritage in an essential, undivided form. Historical Bolshevism was an attempted answer to an irresolvable moral contradiction: the question of correct action by the individual in an incorrect, distorted reality. Admittedly, this attempt was not conclusive and it ended in defeat, but it is perhaps the only such attempt in modern history to have been undertaken so seriously and on such a vast scale. Reflecting on the centenary of the Russian Revolution one can conclude that its fundamental moral question remains unanswered.

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## Notes

1. Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'What's Left?' *London Review of Books*, 39:7 (March 2017), 13–5.
2. 'Putin: revolyutsii 1917 goda nuzhno dat "glubokuyu obyektivnuyu otsenku"' [Putin: The Revolution of 1917 should be given 'a profound objective assessment'], *Rossyia segonya*, <https://ria.ru/politics/20141105/1031839813.html>
3. 'Pervoe Zasedanie Organizatsionnogo Komiteta po Podgotovke i Provedeniyu Meropriyatij Posvyashchennykh 100-letiyu Revolyutsii 1917', *Rossyiskoye Istoricheskoye Obchestvo* [The First Meeting of the Organising Committee for the Centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Russian Historical Society], <http://rushistory.org/proekty/100-letie-revolutsii-1917-goda/pervoe-zasedanie-organizatsionnogo-komiteta-po-podgotovke-i-provedeniyu-meropriyatij-posvyashchennykh-100-letiyu-revolutsii-1917-goda.html>.
4. Ibid.
5. On the disputes over the monument see Andrey Yalovets, 'Memorial geroyev vmesto Pamyatnika primireniya. Putin postavil krest na prozhekhte Ovsyannikova?' [Memorial instead of the Reconciliation Monument: Has Putin put paid to Ovsyannikov's project?], *Nakanune*, <https://www.nakanune.ru/articles/113196>; and 'Pamyatnik Primireniya ne smog primirit' storony v sude' [The Reconciliation Monument: No Resolution in Court], *Informer: Krymskij Novostnoj Portal*, <http://ruinformer.com/page/pamjatnik-primireniya-ne-smog-primirit-storony-v-sude>. On the still unresolved plans for the monument see 'Vladimir Medinsky v interview *Der Spiegel*: "Ya ne odobrau rezkih suzdenii o proshlom"' [Vladimir Medinsky in interview to *Der Spiegel*:

'I don't approve of harsh judgments about the past'], *Russia Today*, <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2017-11-04/Medinskij-v-intervyu-Der-Spiegel>.

6. Olga Kabanova, 'Irina Vakar: idei umerli. iskusstvo ostalos' [Irina Vakar: Ideas Die, but Art Remains], *Vedomosti*, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/lifestyle/characters/2017/08-17/729854-irina-vakar-idei-umerli>. The exhibition ran from 28 September 2017 until 14 January 2018.
7. Vladimir Medinsky, 'Pobedila istoricheskaya Rossiya' [It is Historical Russia that Triumphed], *Rossiyskoye Voenno-Istoricheskoye Obshchestvo*, <http://rvio.histtrf.ru/activities/news/item-2170>.
8. Joseph De Maistre, *Considerations on France*, edited by Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
9. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
10. Sergeev, Kiselev and Konstantinov, V *Kanossu. Politicheskaya istoriya russkoy emigratsii. 1920–1940 gg. Dokumenty i materialy* [To Canossa: A Political History of the Russian Emigration, 1920–1940. Documents and Materials] (Moscow, 1999), 190–195.
11. Nikolai Ustryalov, *Rossiya (iz okna vagona)* [Russia (At the Carriage Window)], Biblioteka Maksima Moshkova, [http://lib.ru/POLITOLOG/USTRYALOV/rossia.txt\\_with-big-pictures.html](http://lib.ru/POLITOLOG/USTRYALOV/rossia.txt_with-big-pictures.html).
12. Nikolai Ustryalov, *Ponyatiye gosudarstva* [The Concept of a State], Biblioteka Maksima Moshkova, [http://www.lib.ru/POLITOLOG/USTRYALOV/ustrqlow-7.txt\\_with-big-pictures.html](http://www.lib.ru/POLITOLOG/USTRYALOV/ustrqlow-7.txt_with-big-pictures.html).
13. Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, edited and introduced by Robert Looker (New York: Random House, 1972), 227.
14. David Forgacs and Eric J. Hobsbawm eds., *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 32.
15. Georg Lukács, 'Bolshevism as a Moral Problem', *Social Research* 44:3 (Autumn 1977), 416–424.
16. Georg Lukács, 'Tactics and Ethics', in *Tactics and Ethics, 1919–1929* (London: Verso, 2014), 5.
17. Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, trans. W.D. Graf (London: Merlin Press, 1971).