What's Left?

Sheila Fitzpatrick

- *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* by China Miéville
  Verso, 358 pp, £18.99, May 2017, ISBN 978 1 78478 280 1
- *The Russian Revolution 1905-1921* by Mark D. Steinberg
  Oxford, 388 pp, £19.99, February 2017, ISBN 978 0 19 922762 4
- *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928* by S.A. Smith
  Oxford, 455 pp, £25.00, January 2017, ISBN 978 0 19 873482 6
- *The Russian Revolution: A New History* by Sean McMeekin
  Basic, 496 pp, $30.00, May 2017, ISBN 978 0 465 03990 6
- *Historically Inevitable?: Turning Points of the Russian Revolution* by Tony Brenton
  Profile, 364 pp, £25.00, June 2016, ISBN 978 1 78125 021 1

For Eric Hobsbawm, the Russian Revolution – which occurred, as it happens, in the year of his birth – was the central event of the 20th century. Its practical impact on the world was 'far more profound and global' than that of the French Revolution a century earlier: for 'a mere thirty to forty years after Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station in Petrograd, one third of humanity found itself living under regimes directly derived from the [revolution] … and Lenin's organisational model, the Communist Party'. Before 1991, this was a fairly standard view, even among historians who, unlike Hobsbawm, were neither Marxists nor Communists. But finishing his book in the early 1990s, Hobsbawm added a caveat: the century whose history he was writing was the 'short' 20th century, running from 1914 to 1991, and the world the Russian Revolution had shaped was 'the world that went to pieces at the end of the 1980s' – a lost world, in short, that was now being replaced by a post-20th-century world whose outlines could not yet be discerned. What the place of the Russian Revolution would be in the new era was unclear to Hobsbawm twenty years ago, and largely remains so to historians today. That 'one third of humanity' living under Soviet-inspired systems before 1989-91 has dramatically dwindled. As of 2017, the centenary of the revolution, the number of Communist states in the world is down to a handful, with China's status ambiguous and only North Korea still clinging to the old verities.

Nothing fails like failure, and for historians approaching the revolution's centenary the disappearance of the Soviet Union casts a pall. In the rash of new books on the revolution, few make strong claims for its persisting significance and most have an

apologetic air. Representing the new consensus, Tony Brenton calls it probably one of 'history's great dead ends, like the Inca Empire'. On top of that, the revolution, stripped of the old Marxist grandeur of historical necessity, turns out to look more or less like an accident. Workers – remember when people used to argue passionately about whether it was a workers' revolution? – have been pushed off stage by women and non-Russians from the imperial borderlands. Socialism is so much of a mirage that it seems kinder not to mention it. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the Russian Revolution, it is the depressing one that revolutions usually make things worse, all the more so in Russia, where it led to Stalinism.

This is the kind of consensus that brings out the contrarian in me, even when I am to a large extent part of it. My own *The Russian Revolution*, first published in 1982 with a revised edition coming out this year, was always cool about workers' revolution and historical necessity, and made a point of being above the political battle (mind you, I wrote the original version during the Cold War, when there was still a political battle to be above). So it's not in my nature to come out as a revolutionary enthusiast. But shouldn't someone do it?

That person, as it turns out, is China Miéville, best known as a science fiction man of leftist sympathies whose fiction is self-described as 'weird'. Miéville is not a historian, though he has done his homework, and his *October* is not at all weird, but elegantly constructed and unexpectedly moving. What he sets out to do, and admirably succeeds in doing, is to write an exciting story of 1917 for those who are sympathetically inclined to revolution in general and to the Bolsheviks' revolution in particular. To be sure, Miéville, like everyone else, concedes that it all ended in tears because, given the failure of revolution elsewhere and the prematurity of Russia's revolution, the historical outcome was 'Stalinism: a police state of paranoia, cruelty, murder and kitsch'. But that hasn't made him give up on revolutions, even if his hopes are expressed in extremely qualified form. The world's first socialist revolution deserves celebration, he writes, because 'things changed once, and they might do so again' (how's that for a really minimal claim?). 'Liberty's dim light' shone briefly, even if 'what might have been a sunrise [turned out to be] a sunset.' But it could have been otherwise with the Russian Revolution, and 'if its sentences are still unfinished, it is up to us to finish them.'

Mark Steinberg is the only one of the professional historians writing on the revolution to confess to any lingering emotional attachment to it. Of course, revolutionary idealism and daring leaps into the unknown tend to result in hard landings, but, Steinberg writes, 'I admit to finding this rather sad. Hence my admiration for those who try to leap

anyway.' But even Steinberg – whose study of the 'lived experience' of 1917, based largely on the contemporary popular press and first-person reports, is one of the freshest of the recent books – has largely abandoned his earlier interest in workers in favour of other social 'spaces': women, peasants, the empire and 'the politics of the street'.

To understand the current scholarly consensus on the Russian Revolution, we need to look back at some of the old controversies, notably the one about inevitability. For Steinberg, this isn't a problem, as his contemporary worm's-eye view ensures that the story is full of surprises. But other writers are almost excessively eager to tell us that outcomes were never set in stone and things might always have gone differently. 'There was nothing preordained about the collapse of the tsarist autocracy nor even of the Provisional Government,' Stephen Smith writes, in his sober, well-researched and comprehensive history. Sean McMeekin seconds this, affirming that 'the events of 1917 were filled with might-have-beens and missed chances' while at the same time tipping his hat to show who the intellectual enemy is: these events were 'far from an eschatological "class struggle" borne along irresistibly by the Marxist dialectic'. In other words, the Marxists, Western and Soviet, were all wrong.

Historically Inevitable?, an edited collection, addresses the question of necessity directly by offering a series of 'what if?' studies of key moments of the revolution. In his introduction Tony Brenton asks: 'Could things have gone differently? Were there moments when a single decision taken another way, a random accident, a shot going straight instead of crooked … could have altered the whole course of Russian, and so European, and world, history?' But Dominic Lieven is surely speaking for the majority of the volume's contributors when he writes that 'nothing is more fatal than a belief that history's course was inevitable.' To be sure, those contributors see contingency as playing a greater part in the February and October revolutions than in the post-October path towards terror and dictatorship. Orlando Figes, author of a widely read study of the revolution, *The People's Tragedy (*1996), devotes a lively essay to showing that, had a disguised Lenin not been admitted without a pass to the Congress of Soviets on 24 October, 'history would have turned out differently.'

In play here are various politically charged arguments about Soviet history. First, there is the question of the inevitability of the collapse of the old regime and the Bolshevik triumph. This is an old Soviet article of faith, hotly disputed in the past by Western and, particularly, Russian émigré historians, who saw the tsarist regime on a course of modernisation and liberalisation that the First World War interrupted, plunging the country into disarray and making the previously unimaginable Bolshevik victory possible

(Lieven, in one of the most sophisticated essays in the volume, characterises this interpretation of Russia's situation in 1914 as 'very wishful thinking'). In the context of past Sovietological debate on the revolution, raising the question of inevitability was interpreted not just as a Marxist claim but as a pro-Soviet one, since the implication was taken to be that the Soviet regime was 'legitimate'. Contingency, conversely, was the anti-Marxist position in Cold War terms – except, confusingly, when the contingency in question applied to the revolution's Stalinist outcome, as opposed to its onset, in which case conventional wisdom held that a totalitarian outcome was inevitable. Figes holds the same view: while contingency played a big role in 1917, 'from the October insurrection and the establishment of a Bolshevik dictatorship to the Red Terror and the Civil War – with all its consequences for the evolution of the Soviet regime – there is a line of historical inevitability.'

In an attack on the whole 'what if?' genre of history, Richard J. Evans has suggested that 'in practice … counterfactuals have been more or less a monopoly of the Right' with Marxism as target. That's not necessarily true of the Brenton volume, despite the inclusion of right-wing political historians like Richard Pipes and the absence of any of the major American social historians of 1917 who were Pipes's opponents in the bitter historiographical controversies of the 1970s. Brenton himself is a former diplomat, and the last sentence of *Historically Inevitable?* – 'We surely owe it to the many, many victims [of the revolution] to ask whether we could have found another way' – rather endearingly suggests a diplomat's propensity to try to solve problems in the real world, as opposed to the professional historian's habit of analysing them.

Pipes, who served as Reagan's Soviet expert on the National Security Council in the early 1980s, was the author of a 1990 volume on the revolution that took a particularly strong line on the basic illegitimacy of the Bolshevik takeover. His argument was directed not only against the Soviets but also against revisionists closer to home, notably a group of young US scholars, mainly social historians with a special interest in labour history, who from the 1970s objected to the characterisation of the October Revolution as a 'coup' and argued that in the crucial months of 1917, from June to October, the Bolsheviks had increasing popular, notably working-class, support. The 1917 revisionists' work was solidly researched, usually with information from Soviet archives which they had been able to access thanks to newly established official US and British student exchanges; and much of the field held it in high regard. But Pipes saw them as, in effect, Soviet stooges, and was so contemptuous of their work that, in defiance of scholarly convention, he refused even to acknowledge its existence in his bibliography.

The Russian working class was an object of intense interest for historians in the 1970s. This wasn't only because social history was in fashion in the profession at the time, with labour history a popular sub-field, but also because of the political implications: did the Bolshevik Party in fact have working-class support and take power, as it claimed, on behalf of the proletariat? Much of the revisionist Western work on Russian social and labour history despised by Pipes focused on workers' class consciousness and whether it was revolutionary; and some but not all of its practitioners were Marxist. (In the non-Marxist wing, I annoyed other revisionists by ignoring class consciousness and writing about upward mobility.)

The authors of the centenary books all have their own histories that are relevant here. Smith's first work, *Red Petrograd* (1983), fitted the labour history rubric, although as a British scholar he was somewhat removed from American fights, and his work was always too careful and judicious to allow for any suggestion of political bias; he went on to write a fine and underappreciated study, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History* (2008), in which the workers and labour movements continued to play a central role. Steinberg, a US scholar of the next generation, published his first book on working-class consciousness, *Proletarian Imagination*, in 2002, when social history had already taken the 'cultural turn', bringing a new emphasis on subjectivity with less interest in 'hard' socio-economic data. But this was more or less a last hurrah for the working class in writing on the Russian Revolution. Pipes had rejected it outright, holding that the revolution could be explained only in political terms. Figes in his influential *People's Tragedy* focused on society rather than politics, but minimised the role of the 'conscious' workers, emphasising instead a lumpen proletariat raging in the streets and destroying things. In their new works, Smith and Steinberg are both uncharacteristically reticent on the subject of workers, though street crime has entered their field of vision.

McMeekin, the youngest of the authors here, set out to write a 'new history', by which he means an anti-Marxist one. Following Pipes, but with his own twist, he includes an extensive bibliography of works 'cited or profitably consulted' that omits all social histories except Figes. This includes Smith's and Steinberg's earlier books, as well as my own *Russian Revolution* (though it is cited on p.xii as an example of Marxist, Soviet-influenced work). It could be argued that McMeekin doesn't need to read the social histories since his focus in *The Russian Revolution*, as in his earlier work, is on the political, diplomatic, military and international economic aspects. He draws on a multinational archival source base, and the book is quite interesting in detail, particularly the economic parts. But there's a whiff of right-wing nuttiness in his idea

that ‘Marxist-style maximalist socialism’ is a real current threat in Western capitalist countries. He doesn’t quite call the whole revolution, from Lenin’s sealed train in April 1917 to the Rapallo Treaty in 1922, a German conspiracy, but that’s more or less what his narrative suggests.

The end points people choose for their histories of revolution reveal a lot about their assumptions of what it was ‘really about’. Rapallo is, appropriately, the end point for McMeekin. For Miéville it’s October 1917 (revolution triumphant), for Steinberg 1921 (not so much victory in the Civil War, as you might expect, as an open end with revolutionary business unfinished), and for Smith 1928. The last is an awkward choice in terms of narrative drama, as it means that Smith’s book ends with two whole chapters on the 1920s, when revolution was on hold under the New Economic Policy, a retreat from the maximalist aims of the Civil War period made necessary by economic collapse. It’s true, something like NEP *might* have been the outcome of the Russian Revolution, but it actually wasn’t, because Stalin came along. While the two chapters on NEP, like the rest of the book, are thoughtful and well-researched, as a finale it’s more of a whimper than a bang.

This brings us to another highly contentious issue in Soviet history: whether there was essential continuity from the Russian/Lenin Revolution to Stalin, or a basic disruption between them occurring around 1928. My *Russian Revolution* includes Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ of the early 1930s, as well as his Great Purges at the end of the decade, but that is unacceptable to many anti-Stalinist Marxists. (Not surprisingly, Miéville’s annotated bibliography finds it ‘useful … though unconvincingly wedded to an “inevitabilist” Lenin-leads-to-Stalin perspective’.) Smith’s cohort of 1917 social historians generally felt much like Miéville, partly because they were intent on defending the revolution from the taint of Stalinism; but in this book, as on many issues, Smith declines to take a categorical position. Stalin certainly thought of himself as a Leninist, he points out, but on the other hand Lenin, had he lived, would probably not have been so crudely violent. Stalin’s ‘Great Break’ of 1928-31 ‘fully merits the term “revolution”, since it changed the economy, social relations and cultural patterns more profoundly than the October Revolution had done’ and moreover demonstrated that ‘revolutionary energies’ were not yet exhausted. Still, from Smith’s standpoint it’s an epilogue, not an intrinsic part of the Russian Revolution.

Even-handedness is the hallmark of Smith’s solid and authoritative book, and I’m uneasily conscious of not having done justice to its many virtues. Really the only trouble with it – and with many of the works being published in this centenary year – is that it’s

not clear what impelled him to write it, other than perhaps a publisher's commission. He identified this problem himself in a recent symposium on the Russian Revolution. 'Our times are not especially friendly to the idea of revolution … I suggest that while our knowledge of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War has increased significantly, in key respects our ability to *understand* – certainly to empathise with – the aspirations of 1917 has diminished.' Other contributors to the symposium were similarly downbeat, the Russian historian Boris Kolonitsky noting that, while finding out the truth about the Russian Revolution had seemed enormously important to him back in Leningrad in the 1970s, interest in the topic is now 'falling drastically'. 'I sometimes wonder: who cares now about the Russian Revolution?' Steinberg asks sadly, while Smith writes on the first page of his *Russia in Revolution* that 'the challenge that the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 posed to global capitalism still reverberates (albeit faintly).'

*

In purely scholarly terms, the 1917 revolution has been on the back burner for some decades now, after the excitement of the Cold War-fuelled arguments of the 1970s. The days are long gone when the late imperial era could be labelled 'pre-revolutionary' – that is, interesting only in so far as it led to the revolutionary outcome. That started to change in the 1980s and 1990s, with social and cultural historians of Russia starting to explore all the interesting things that didn't necessarily lead to revolution, from crime and popular literature to the church. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the revolution shrivelled as a historical subject, revealing behind it the First World War, whose significance for Russia (as opposed to all the other belligerents) had previously been remarkably under-researched. That same collapse, by stripping away the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, brought questions of empire and borderlands to the fore (hence Smith's subtitle, 'An Empire in Crisis', and Steinberg's chapter on 'Overcoming Empire').

In the 1960s, it was self-evident to E.H. Carr, as well as to his opponents like Leonard Schapiro, that the Russian Revolution mattered. It mattered to Schapiro because it had imposed a new political tyranny on Russia that threatened the free world, and to Carr because it had pioneered the centralised state-planned economy that he saw as a portent of the future. Coming to the subject in the 1970s, I concluded that, along with the many 'betrayals' of socialist revolution pointed out by Trotsky and a host of others, there were also many achievements in the realm of economic and cultural modernisation, notably state-sponsored rapid industrialisation in the 1930s. Hobsbawm made a similar point on a wider canvas when he noted that 'Soviet-based communism … became primarily a

programme for transforming backward countries into advanced ones.' The modernisation point still seems right to me, but it has been tarnished by the fact that, on the economic side, it is a kind of modernisation that no longer looks modern. Who cares now about building smoke-stack industries, except in a context of polluting the environment?

Brenton's confident summation has a free-market triumphalism that, like Fukuyama's *End of History*, may not stand the test of time, but it reflects the negative verdict of much current writing on the Russian Revolution:

It has taught us what does not work. It is hard to see Marxism making any sort of comeback. As a theory of history the revolution tested it, and it failed. The dictatorship of the proletariat did not lead to the communist utopia, but merely to more dictatorship. It also failed as a prescription for economic governance. No serious economist today is advocating total state ownership as the route to prosperity … not the least of the lessons of the Russian Revolution is that for most economic purposes the market works much better than the state. The rush away from socialism since 1991 has been Gadarene.

If the Russian Revolution had any lasting achievement, he adds, it is probably China. Smith, in more cautious terms, makes a similar assessment:

The Soviet Union proved capable of generating extensive growth in industrial production and of building up a defence sector, but much less capable of competing with capitalism once the latter shifted towards more intensive forms of production and towards 'consumer capitalism'. In this respect the record of the Chinese Communists in promoting their country to the rank of a leading economic and political world power was far more impressive than that of the regime on which it broadly modelled itself. Indeed, as the 21st century advances, it may come to seem that the Chinese Revolution was *the* great revolution of the 20th century.

Now that's a conclusion that Putin's Russia – still uncertain what it thinks of the revolution, and therefore how to celebrate it – needs to ponder: the 'Russian Revolution' brand is in danger. Perhaps by the time of the bicentenary Russia will have worked out a way to salvage it, as the risk of losing a chapter in the world history of the 20th century is surely one that no patriotic regime should ignore. For the West (assuming that the extraordinarily resilient dichotomy of 'Russia' and 'the West' survives into the next century), it is bound to look different as well. Historians' judgments, however much we hope the opposite, reflect the present; and much of this apologetic and deprecatory downgrading of the Russian Revolution simply reflects the – short term? – impact of the Soviet collapse on its status. By 2117, who knows what people will think?

Vol. 39 No. 7 · 30 March 2017 » Sheila Fitzpatrick » What's Left?
pages 13-15 | 3706 words