The Russian revolution reconsidered

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Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1917. That turbulent year featured two revolutions—in February and October—following one another in quick succession. The first, the February Revolution, overthrew Tsar Nicholas II and ended more than a 300 year reign of the Romanov dynasty, which led to a brief period of a growing optimism and hopes for a democratic future. The second, the (Great) October Revolution, put the Bolsheviks in power and launched the 70-year communist experiment.

The event of a great historical significance, the centennial anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1917, was widely received as an occasion to revisit the topic of revolution and stirred new debates concerning Russia's intellectual and political history and identity, as well as the country's future role in the world.

“Revolution” has been one of the keywords in modern political vocabulary since the seventeenth century. However, the term itself has undergone a remarkable change. Thus, seventeenth-century British statesmen and political theorists called relatively minor events of 1688 a “Great” or “Glorious” Revolution, whereas Cromwell's Revolution was called, by its enemies “The Great Rebellion” (Williams 1976, 271–272). One of the most prominent twentieth-century Marxist critics, Raymond Williams associated the modern usage of the term “revolution” with the influence of the French Revolution. He wrote:

it was in this state of interaction between the words that the specific effects of the French Revolution made the modern sense of *revolution* decisive. The older sense of a restoration of lawful authority, though used in occasional justification, was overridden by the sense of necessary innovation of a new order, supported by the increasingly positive sense of progress. Of course, the sense

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of achievement of the ORIGINAL rights of man was also relevant. This sense of making a new *human* order was always as important as that of overthrowing an old order. (Williams 1976, 273)

However, it is not only by means of violence that a new human order can be established. Culture, which Williams associated directly with the changes occurring in the social order, can also be conceived as “the long revolution” (Williams 1961). Williams’ approach to culture is not entirely new. It is rooted in nineteenth-century liberal theories of social and cultural reform, in particular in the thought of Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Literature played a major role in this process. In the nineteenth century, it was the novel that served as a medium of self-understanding and social critique. In the twentieth century the predominance of this genre has been challenged by the emergence of film and television. However, some nineteenth-century novels, especially those by Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, whom Williams sees as the most clear-sighted observers and critics of modernity, have not lost their sociopolitical relevance in the age of late capitalism. Their poignant portrayals of the alienated individual in search of a genuine brotherly community have given a major impetus to the development of democratic culture throughout the world (cf. Williams 1976, 304–305, 307).

When examining the Russian Revolution and its legacy from today’s perspective we can neither limit our discussion to the analysis of the events of 1917 (and those that directly preceded them), nor reduce the meaning of the term “revolution” to its Bolshevik usage. A process of gradual liberalization and democratization of Russian society began well over a century before the collapse of the Romanov Empire. In fact, according to Alexander Pushkin, it was Peter the Great who was Russia’s first revolutionary. This Westernizing Tsar was certainly no democrat, and his “revolution” was largely a technological and bureaucratic transformation. In the long run, however, the Petrine reforms turned out to be a major challenge to Russia’s theocratic traditions rooted in Byzantine culture. Peter not only separated the State from the Church, thus opening the door to secularization, but also introduced the Table of Ranks that enabled social mobility and led to the development of professional classes. As Marc Raeff had argued, the true origins of the Russian intelligentsia date back to the reign of Catherine II (Raeff 1966a). This German princess, who came to power through a coup (to which eighteenth-century European observers sometimes referred to as a “revolution”), not only cultivated friendships with the leading philosophers of the Enlightenment, but also signed the manifesto that freed the gentry from their obligation to serve the state imposed by Peter the Great. This enabled them to adopt the Western aristocratic ethos unknown to the traditional Russian gentry. The ideals of personal honor, dignity, and individuality began to permeate the educated society, fermenting its self-consciousness as a cultural elite.

Ultimately, it was Russia’s intense engagement in the political affairs of Western Europe during the Napoleonic wars that encouraged the cultural elite to resent tyranny and engage in independent political thinking. In the period since the end of the Napoleonic wars and until 1825, Russian political economists and liberal political theorists, most notably, Nikolai Turgenev, Pavel Pestel, Nikita Muraviev, produced a number of competing constitutional projects as well as proposals for

economic reforms, which they had little hope of implementing under the then government. Disagreements over practical realization of their programs led to considerable struggles and divisions within newly emerged secret societies. They ultimately split into a Petersburg-based Northern Society, which was radical and planned a revolutionary overthrow of the government, and a less radical but much more numerous Southern Society based in Tul'chin, Ukraine. The Tsar Alexander I's sudden death and the ensuing interregnum provided an opportunity for a coup on December 14, 1825, known as the Decembrist Revolt (*vosstanie dekabristov*), in St. Petersburg. When the coup failed and the Decembrists were mercilessly punished by the newly ascended Tsar Nicholas I, a newly emerged Russian political theory was thereby also wiped out. Throughout the rest of Nicholas I's reign, which lasted until 1855, no official mention of the Decembrists was allowed in the Russian press. Thus, a proper analysis of the event that took place in December of 1825 had to be postponed until decades later (cf. Raeff 1966b). Whether this was merely a "Revolt" or an attempt to start a revolution was a question with which only the next generation of Russian intellectuals began to concern themselves. Raised on German philosophy, these thinkers inherited its rich and still ever-developing methodology of historical and political analysis. Thus, a tendency to regard revolution as a long-term evolutionary process within both society and the state, which distinguished the Kantian and Hegelian schools from their French predecessors, was also absorbed by many Russian thinkers. This allowed Alexander Herzen to argue in his book *On the Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Russia* (1851) that despite the suppression of the political public sphere in the wake of 1825, the anti-tyrannical dimension never disappeared from the consciousness of the Russian intelligentsia (Herzen 2012). According to Herzen, the spread of democratic ideas in Russian society continued throughout the 1830s–1840s thanks to the efforts of literary authors and critics.

The development of classical education and philosophy (which were also new imports, brought to Russia by the luminaries who visited the court and by simple house teachers in the last quarter of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries) ensured a continuous development of the intellectual tradition that fostered critical thinking, the search for intellectual autonomy and political representation. Until the second half of the nineteenth century professional philosophers were too small a group to be a major social force, and philosophical ideas became disseminated largely through literature, journalism, and other forms of humanistic culture.

From a contemporary perspective, it is impossible to underestimate the role of literature, philosophy, a variety of educational reform initiatives, and other intellectual undertakings in Russian society's quest for modernization and freedom. Unlike the radical socioeconomic changes undertaken by the Bolshevik government, which unleashed violence and precipitated the rise of totalitarianism, these long-term processes can still be regarded as a valuable legacy of the Russian revolutionary movement. Moreover, the Soviet regime did not arrest or wholly undo the results of the cultural "long revolution" initiated by the Westernizing monarchs in the eighteenth century, but rather tried to subordinate it to a new ideology, which combined the ideology of empire with the Communist ideology of class struggle. The legacy of Soviet culture, like that of most imperial cultures, is complex and manifold. Since the 1990s it has been stirring scholarly polemics among historians and other Slavic studies specialists, as well as giving rise to a stream of literary and autobiographical works.

The centennial of the 1917 Revolutions provided an occasion to reflect on the history and theoretical import of the Russian revolutionary movement and the Soviet experiment that it yielded from a more global perspective. Russia's active role in the shifting political landscape adds special urgency to this discussion, which currently begins to transcend the academy and spread into the public sphere not only throughout the former USSR and the countries that made up the Eastern bloc, but throughout Europe and North America as well. To what extent did the Soviet Union live up to (or betray) its Marxist commitment to a continual revolution? How did the dissolution of the Soviet Union influence the revolutionary and political dynamics within the former USSR and throughout the world? How did these changes affect the public sphere and academic philosophy in Russia? What are some of the leading topics and methodologies used by Russian intellectuals to think through the legacy of the Russian revolution and its place in world history?

These and many other important questions became the focus of an international conference "Russian Thinkers Between Revolution and Tradition, 1880s–1920s" held at the International Centre for Philosophy, NRW at Bonn University, in October 2017. The conference was organized by Lina Steiner, Michael N. Forster, and Marina F. Bykova with the major financial support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The articles included in the present and the following journal issues have been drawn from that conference. The guest editors of this issue are grateful to the International Centre of Philosophy, NRW and University of Bonn for hosting the conference and to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for its generous funding.

To meet the requirement of the two separate issues, we decided to include in this (first) issue the articles mainly dealing with philosophy and philosophical reflection and to focus the following (second) issue on questions relevant to literature and literary analysis. This division is certainly tentative and should be taken with caution. For the Russian intellectual tradition is well known for the unique interconnections and intimate intertwining of literature, philosophy, politics, and the arts. The articles which constitute both issues revisit the intellectual debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that catalyzed the revolutionary movement; they also reflect on discussions that emerged directly in response to the February and October revolutions. The authors use the centenary of the 1917 upheavals as an occasion for looking back on the causes and nature of the revolutions in Russia and for discussing their lessons from the contemporary perspective.

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