THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Edited by
Aaron B. Retish and Matthew Rendle
The Global Impact of the
Russian Revolution

This book explores the global impact of the Russian Revolution, arguably the most influential revolution of the modern age. It explores how the Revolution influenced political movements on the radical Left and Right across the world and asks whether the Russian Revolution remains relevant today.

In Part One, four leading historians debate whether or not the Russian Revolution’s legacy endures today. Part Two presents examples of how the Revolution inspired political movements across the world, from Latin America and East Asia, to Western Europe and the Soviet Union. The Revolution inspired both sides of the political spectrum—from anarchists, and leftist radicals who fought for a new socialist reality and dreamed of world revolution, to those on the far Right who tried to stop them. Part Three, an interview with the historian S. A. Smith, gives a personal account of how the Revolution influenced a scholar and his work. This volume shows the complexity of the Russian Revolution in today’s political world.

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Aaron B. Retish is Associate Professor of Russian History at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA. He has published on the revolutionary period and the peasantry, local courts, and prisons of modern Russia.

Matthew Rendle is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Exeter, UK. He has published on various aspects of the revolutionary period in Russian history and is the author of The State versus the People: Revolutionary Justice in Russia’s Civil War, 1917–22 (2020).
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Notes on Contributors

Paul Dukes, Emeritus Professor of History, University of Aberdeen, UK.

Tatiana Linkhoeva, Assistant Professor of Japanese History, New York University, New York, NY, USA.

Steven G. Marks, Professor of History, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA.

Matthias Neumann, Senior Lecturer in Modern Russian History, University of East Anglia, UK.

Daniel Orlovsky, Professor of History and George A. Bouhe Research Fellow in Russian Studies in the Clements Department of History, Southern Methodist University, Texas, TX, USA.

Christopher Read, Professor of Modern European History in the Department of History, University of Warwick, UK.

Matthew Rendle, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Exeter, UK.

Aaron B. Retish, Associate Professor in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA.

S. A. Smith, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College, University of Oxford, UK.

George Souvlis, Teaching Fellow in History and Sociology, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece.

Franziska Yost, doctoral student in the Department of History, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL, USA.

Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez, PhD candidate, European University Institute, San Domenico di Fiesole, FI, Italy.
As the Bolshevik seizure of power was well underway, Lenin spoke before the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Pulling a declaration from his coat, he hailed the revolution of workers, peasants, and soldiers and the establishment of a Soviet government with a call to end Russia’s war. The Congress concluded the ‘Report on Peace’ gazing beyond Russia’s borders with a dream, a need, for the revolution to unite with industrialized nations’ workers movements to overthrow their bourgeois governments and create a world of socialism and peace. This move—to promote revolution to achieve socialism and peace globally—would remain as a bulwark of the Soviet ideal until its waning days.

This seemed to happen by April 1989, when Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev flew to Cuba to pledge the Soviet Union’s continued support of its Communist ally and encourage it to implement reforms like those that Gorbachev was championing in the Soviet Union. The visit turned into a disaster. Fidel Castro’s government had been a long-time beneficiary of Soviet aid and was itself inspired by the Soviet Union and interpreted its Communist mission to spread revolution to the Global South. Castro and Gorbachev clashed as the Cuban leader lectured Soviet delegates for hours on how to be proper Communists and Gorbachev was caught on TV stealing a look at his watch. At the end of the visit, the Soviet Union, as part of Gorbachev’s wider developing foreign policy encouraging international cooperation, pledged not to export revolution to Latin America. By the end of the year, the Soviet Union watched as Eastern Europe broke free from the Soviet grip and Red Army troops began to return home. Was the Soviet Union’s turn away from the expectation of world revolution the end of the Russian Revolution’s impact? Soviet support for the exportation of Communism, a point implied by the decrees that Lenin pulled from his coat in October 1917, was one, albeit central, part of the lasting impact of the Russian Revolution but it highlights a larger question—how deep and enduring was (or is) the global impact of the Russian Revolution?

The centenary of the Russian Revolution has brought this question of the lasting significance of the Revolution sharply into focus. Scholars and pundits debated how the Russian Revolution should be commemorated, which was followed soon after by how it actually was (or was not). There were several articles, including inside the covers of Revolutionary Russia, on how the Russian state in 2017 tried to downplay the historical message of the February Revolution of the people overturning an authoritarian state and side-step the October Revolution and the onset of Communism. Yet, arguably, in its attempts not to talk about the Revolution, the Russian state only underscored the October Revolution’s lasting impact on the nation’s current politics. It has used Soviet
historical triumphs like the Second World War to promote Russian nationalism today without directly addressing the revolution that gave birth to the Soviet state.\textsuperscript{4}

Scholars inside and out of Russia also did not know how to address the centenary of a revolution that established a Soviet state that was no more. There were several new insightful surveys of the Russian Revolution but just a few monographs based on new archival research. Scholars and public thinkers instead tried to offer larger lessons of the Russian Revolution—the power of democracy and popular movements, the dangers of an authoritarian regime, the greatness or malevolence of Marxism and Leninism (depending on the author’s politics), and so forth. Through this cacophony of voices, most scholars and pundits agreed that the Russian Revolution and the Soviet system that it bore, for better or for worse, had a lasting impact on global politics and society and shaped the 20th century;\textsuperscript{5} it may have even been ‘the defining episode of the twentieth century’.\textsuperscript{6}

Russia’s revolutionaries began to talk about the global impact of their revolution almost as soon as the tsar abdicated in March 1917. As has been pointed out elsewhere, Russia’s revolutionaries before and after October were well aware that they were part of a global history of revolution and they consciously drew on ideas, practices, and symbols from France, Germany, the United States, and even New Zealand to justify their actions.\textsuperscript{7} If many participants of the February Revolution saw themselves as heirs of the French Revolution and hoped to inspire others to follow in Russia’s footsteps, those enacting the October Revolution intended to export their socialist revolution to the rest of the world. While the idea of world revolution became more problematic as the years passed, this dream initially inspired many within Russia.\textsuperscript{8} Furthermore, it was the October Revolution and the Soviet experiment that would become the enduring model from 1917 that would reverberate around the world.

The Russian Revolution did affect the world beyond Russia’s borders and in far too many ways and places to list here. Indeed, it is hard to find a corner of the world that the Revolution did not affect in some way. As the authors in this volume show, its message of worker and peasant power sent waves across the world.\textsuperscript{9} These were the immediate, inspiring revolutionary acts from French soldiers who set up soviets in 1917, to Polish, German, and Hungarian Communists in 1918–19. The Soviets also encouraged, and tried to control, international revolution with the Comintern’s founding in 1919. The October Revolution provided a model and point of departure for the Communist movement in China. The Soviet message of anti-imperialism and justice gave hope to oppressed peoples, like African Americans, and especially after the Second World War inspired the decolonization movement—from South Africa to Indochina.\textsuperscript{10} The Soviets supported leftist movements in the Global South like Cuba, Chile, and Nicaragua. Inspiration did not always mean clientelism. As Odd Arne Westad has argued, nonaligned nations of the Global South, some like Yugoslavia inspired in part by the Soviet state, had their own foreign policy dreams and were sometimes able to play the two sides of the Cold War against each other.\textsuperscript{11} Inspiration also did not preclude tensions, animosity, and rivalry between an often contradictory and muddled Soviet foreign policy that tried to dictate ideology to countries and groups that read Marx and Lenin differently than their comrades in the USSR.\textsuperscript{12}

The Soviet system itself affected global politics as the leading example of a Communist state. The Soviet Union would export its model of a one-party state with a centralized economy that attempted to use its state power to intervene and transform society. It
was part of a global trend of state intervention, but its system of rapid industrialization, collectivized agriculture, forced nationalization of industry, persecution of political and social enemies, and the reliance on state terror became a blueprint that spread across Communist countries.

The global impact of the Russian Revolution can be stretched even further if we count how countries and their citizens reacted to Soviet policies or regimes and economic systems set up from the Cold War. The Prague Spring, for example, demanded a more democratic and open system than the one established under the thumb of the Soviet Union after the Second World War. But the ideas of Reform Communism championed by intellectuals of 1968 were themselves in conversation with the ideals of October 1917. Likewise, the liberation movement across Central Europe in 1989 was a reaction to the Soviet system established in 1917 and, while Europeans may not reference 1917 as much, the lasting effects of 1989 are still on their minds.

It also inspired anti-Communists and the radical Right, a point made in this volume by Tatiana Linkhoeva for Japan. From the First Red Scare in the United States in 1919 to anti-Communist attacks in Hungary and Yugoslavia, those on the political Right or state leaders mobilized against the perceived global threat of the Soviet Revolution. The Fascist movement identified itself as the counter, the antithesis and cure, for the Bolshevik plague. After the Second World War, the fear of Communism would continue to inspire political witch trials like the McCarthy Hearings in the United States and Western democratic powers to intervene in national revolutions and ally with authoritarian regimes.

Of course, the Revolution also influenced the direction of countless individuals, popular culture, artistic and literary movements, fashion, language, international law, and so forth. The contributors to the recently published *The Wider Arc of Revolution* in the Russia’s Great War and Revolution project argue similarly by positing that the Russian Revolution only comes into focus when it is understood in its transnational and transimperial perspective. As Lisa Kirschenbaum states, we need to think about the Russian Revolution ‘as at once transnational, regional, local, and deeply personal’. Well after 1917, people both inside the Soviet Union and out formed their identities through their relationship to what the Soviet seizure of power in Petrograd meant.

This volume assesses the global impact of the Russian Revolution. Part One is a forum that debates the extent of this enduring impact. Steven Marks challenges the lasting legacy of the Russian Revolution. Marks compares Russia’s revolution with its antecedents, finding more similarities than differences. He concludes that, ‘the Russian Revolution flashed brilliantly in the twentieth century, but burned out after seven decades as it ran out of oxygen in the digital age’. Three leading scholars of the Russian Revolution reply to Marks. Paul Dukes challenges specifics of Marks’s argument and argues that the Russian Revolution had an even greater global impact than previous revolutions like the French and American because of growing globalization. Daniel Orlovsky emphasizes how February 1917 independently continued to impact the world even after the fall of the Provisional Government. He also makes an important intervention on Marks’s argument to show how the most important political revolution of the 21st century to date—the Arab Spring—while not directly influenced by the Russian Revolution, had many similarities with the most important revolution of the 20th century. Finally, Christopher Read notes the calculated ambivalence that met the centenary of 1917, examines ways in which the Revolution has been memorialized, and points out overlooked aspects of the
Revolution still worth remembering. Interestingly, while all three go out of their way to highlight the global impact of the Russian Revolution and Soviet system, they all agree with Marks that the Revolution’s influence has waned, at least for now.\textsuperscript{14}

Part Two presents specific examples of the global impact, from Brazil to Japan, of the Russian Revolution for the 20th century. The Russian Revolution inspired revolutionaries on the Left to organize, even as the Bolsheviks clung to power during the Civil War. Arturo Zoffmann Rodríguez’s study of anarchists in Spain and Franziska Yost’s description of leftist revolutionaries in Brazil and Argentina both reveal how local political activists were initially emboldened to try to recreate the Bolshevik victory, even when they did not agree with them politically or even know who they were or what was happening in Russia. They also show how the inspired unity of the Russian Revolution was fleeting after more accurate accounts of who the Bolsheviks were emerged and political infighting, both within the Left and from the Right, took its toll. Tatiana Linkhoeva studies the same period in Japan as Rodríguez and Yost do in Spain and Latin America. She also sees a leftist radicalization inspired by Bolshevism but in Japan it came as a consequence of Japanese intervention in the Russian Civil War in part to stop the spread of Communism to East Asia. Fear of the spread of Communism to East Asia led to Japanese imperial anti-Communism, a central feature of Japan’s foreign policy in the Interwar period. Finally, Matthias Neumann brings us back to the Soviet Union in an examination of the evolving idea of world revolution among members of the Komsomol. He finds that Komsomol youth were deeply inspired by the Leninist dreams of world revolution. Even as the Soviet government promoted the policy of Socialism in One Country, Komsomol rank and file members personally invested themselves in promoting world revolution by preparing for war with the capitalist countries and aiding the republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

The interview with the historian S. A. Smith that concludes this volume underscores how the Russian Revolution has impacted individuals. As is clear in the interview, Smith’s career has been shaped by the global impact of the Revolution—first as a young man drawn to socialist debates on the lessons of the Revolution for Great Britain and then later as part of the educational system shaped by the Cold War. Smith’s interests in the land that experienced the other, more enduring, major Communist revolution in the world—China—as well as the global history of Communism is a lesson in studying comparatively and emphasizes the global impact of the Russian Revolution. Smith’s remarks reveal his measured, ‘sober’ approach to the lasting impact of the Revolution. He agrees with his interviewers that socio-economic modernization and national self-determination, anti-colonialism, and women’s emancipation were some of the Bolshevik goals that inspired others around the world to push these issues forward. However, he notes lasting global injustices that the Soviet Union could not destroy and points out that the socialist world revolution is still nowhere to be seen. Independently and from different angles, Smith and Marks both conclude by wondering about the legacy of the Russian Revolution today.

Marks cautions us that the influence of the Russian Revolution has waned since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the rise of the Digital Age. Today, many revolutions and social movements may not consciously harken back to the Russian Revolution. Politicians and social activists use other events as symbolic markers to justify their actions. Neoliberalism may have triumphed over Communism in much of the world. Yet the legacy of Communism lives on in many places, not least in Eastern Europe.
as a recent study has discovered. There, citizens in former Communist countries still support state-sponsored social welfare, gender equality, and a controlled market that were the hallmarks of Communist ideals more than citizens in capitalist countries, even if most people today have a negative view of the Communist period. As Dukes and Read suggest, the language of the Left, their forms of protest, and conceptions of the welfare state have all, in part, been inspired by October 1917. All of the authors in this volume also reflect on a feeling in the revolutionary period of a crisis of global capitalism, something that continues to resonate today. The several authors ask, in different ways, in what ways did the Russian Revolution inspire others across the world and did 20th century (and beyond) politics come from the pocket of Lenin’s overcoat?

Notes

1 Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti, 12–16. The playful allusion here is to the phrase attributed to Fedor Dostoevsky that Russia’s writers all ‘came from Gogol’s overcoat’. It is unclear if Lenin actually did pull the Decree that he read from his overcoat. For one account, see Reed, 10 Days, chapter V.


4 A point made by Mjor and Lunde, ‘Introduction. Special Issue’.


7 Rendle, ‘Making Sense of 1917’.

8 As recently reiterated in Albert, Das Charisma der Weltrevolution Revolutionärer Internationalismus in der frühen Sowjetgesellschaft 1917–1927.

9 This global influence has been made evident in various publications emerging from the recent centennial commemorations. From Russia, see especially, Galliamova, Velikaià Rossiiskaià revoliutsiia; Petrov, Velikaià rossiiskaià revoliutsiia; Torkunov and Chubar’ain, Rossiiskiià revoliutsiia. In English, as well as works cited elsewhere in this article, see Adamski and Gajos, Circles of the Russian Revolution; Fayet, Gorin and Prezioso, eds., Echoes of October; and Myklebost, Nielsen and Rogatchevski, The Russian Revolutions of 1917; as well as the special issues of Journal of Contemporary History 52, no. 4 (2017) and Twentieth Century Communism 13 (2017). These influences can also be seen in how various countries commemorated 1917 in 2017; see the surveys of various parts of the

10 See especially the conference ‘The Red and the Black—The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic’ held at the University of Central Lancashire, 13–15 October 2017, and two forthcoming volumes from this conference: Featherstone and Høgsbjerg, eds., *The Red and the Black* and Feathersone, Høgsbjerg and Rice, eds., *Revolutionary Lives of the Red and Black Atlantic*. The Russian Revolution’s lasting impact on anticolonial thought is clearly seen in the writings of the Guayanese intellectual and political activist Walter Rodney. His writings have been published in *The Russian Revolution: A View from the Third World*.

11 Westad, *The Cold War*.

12 This point is explained by Friedman and Ruthland who also see inherent contradictions in Lenin’s ideas of world revolution. ‘Anti-imperialism: The Leninist Legacy and the Fate of World Revolution’.

13 Kirschenbaum, ‘Reframing Slavic Studies’, 347; Chatterjee, ‘The Global Impact of 1917’. The three books of the volume parallel this volume and argue for seeing 1917 as a seminal event in the spread of world communism and the shaping of the 21st-century world.

14 It is worth reiterating, though, the differences between countries. October has inspired far more discussion amid left-wing circles in the UK than it seems to have done in the US, both in terms of assessing its past influence and in examining what lessons it might still hold for future action; see, for example, Morgan, ed., *1917: The Russian Revolution, Reactions and Impact*; Panitch and Albo, eds., *Socialist Register* 2017; and the special issues of *International Socialism* 156 (2017), *Monthly Review* 69, no. 3 (2017); and *Theory & Struggle* 118 (2017).

15 Pop-Eleches and Tucker, *Communism’s Shadow*. See Matthew Blackburn’s study on Russians’ ambiguous views of 1917 and the Soviet period as a whole; ‘Myths in the Russian Collective Memory’.

References


