

THE 1917 REVOLUTIONS: A NEW CULTURE IN THE MAKING? DISCOURSES, LANGUAGES AND ARTISTIC ISSUES

International conference organized by the CIRRUS team of the EUR'ORBEM Centre (CNRS/Paris-Sorbonne, UMR 8224) in cooperation with the ERLIS team (EA 4254) of the University of Caen Normandy and with support from the CEFR (Moscow)

Thursday 21st, Friday 22nd, Saturday 23rd September 2017 in Paris;
Monday 25th September 2017 in Caen.

At the present time, deep changes seem to affect the study of the October 1917 revolution. Firstly, we notice its almost total disappearance from the "politics of history" in Russia. This shows best through the suppression of the public holiday commemorating the uprising of October 25th (November 7th according to the current calendar), which was replaced by "National Unity Day" (November 4th) that recalls the liberation of Moscow by the Second Coalition, in 1612¹. This obliteration, which is nevertheless not a taboo, may raise interrogations and investigations from the international scientific community on the occasion of the centenary of the year 1917.

The reexamination of the year 1917 and of the larger context in which it belongs is motivated by **three observations**.

The first one concerns the succession which took place in research. The generation which dominated the debates from the 1960s onwards is no longer in the foreground. Its representatives shared the hope, or the great illusion, that there would be a return to the principles of the revolution, supposedly betrayed in the 1920s and 1930s. They often sought to determine the moment when the "right track" was abandoned and sometimes succumbed to the conspiracy theory.

The second is the tendency to "desideologisation". It is no longer compulsory to choose between February and October and it is easier to focus on continuity, meaning to consider the revolutionary continuity of 1917. This is what the title of a series published by the State Pedagogical University of Russia, located in Saint Petersburg suggests: "The Russian Revolution of 1917: New Approaches"²

According to Jörg Baberowski, it is not October, but February, which is presented as the point of no return, the moment when the split with the right becomes permanent and when all the institutional work of the Old Regime, including the governors, the justice and self-administration institutions, the parliament and the fundamental laws, disappear for good.³ The result is a regression (or a "temporary archaisation" of society. The logical strength of the argumentation is obvious, although objections can be made about details. The fact that this approach appears simultaneously in several national historiographies, without them communicating much between each other, proves it is not a historiographic fashion, but rather the answer to a real challenge.

If historians and linguists tend to oppose the idea of a radical split, another interpretation of the events depending on political discourses often formed under the old regime, concerning cultural history and literary and artistic creation, the notion of "continuity in the splits of 1917" is less studied and deserves to be questioned, especially certain areas such as theatre or cinema which were used by the Bolsheviks as propaganda and mass education tools.⁴ In this regard, the attitude of Mayakovsky, who rapidly abandoned his futuristic positions seen as too elitist, or of Meyerhold, who left the artistic direction of the imperial theatres to become the forerunner of the "theatrical October" or the agitprop trains and boats which travel throughout the country in order to transform the peasants, artisans and factory workers, 80% of whom were illiterate, into "new men" are well-known examples.⁵ The creation of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1918 which oversees education and arts from the start is the sign of an instrumentalisation

¹On the interaction between the politics of memory and historiography, see Kolonitskii B. "Russian Historiography of the 1917 Revolution: New Challenges to Old Paradigms?" *History & Memory*, vol.21, N 2, 2009, p.34-59.

²*Revoljucija 1917 goda v Rossii : novye podxody i vzgljady*. Sankt-Peterburg, 2009; Sankt-Peterburg, 2010, Sankt-Peterburg, 2011, Sankt-Peterburg, 2012, Sankt-Peterburg, 2013.

³Jörg Baberowski, *Verbrannte Erde. Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt*, München, 2012, p.49.

⁴Jean-Michel Palmier, *Lénine, l'art et la révolution*, Payot, 1975.

⁵*Le Theatre d'agitprop de 1917 à 1932*, T.1 et 2. L'Age d'Homme/La Cité, 1977.

of literary and artistic creation which did not happen until then. However, the head of this key institution in the Bolshevik politics of culture, Anatoly Lunacharsky, embodies transition without radical split, moderation within revolution, preservation of heritage while calling for the creation of new forms.⁶ Moreover, he is the head of "Proletarian Culture" organisations which emerge from the February Revolution. Elsewhere, to attract the masses, the actors of Bolshevik culture and propaganda call out to traditional representations, such as those of the lubok and of the icons, and to popular or religious literary forms, already present in the avant-gardes.

Ex-nihilo creation? Recovery and reorientation of old forms? The dialogue between old and new, the permanence in the changes displayed, will carry on after 1917 until the mid-twenties.

Finally, the third observation is about the impact of 1917 in Central and Western Europe. The Revolution which begins in Russia initially brings about centripetal movement: it is the result of the internal decay of the Russian Empire and of the collapse of the other empires and states which continue to fight on the battlefield, with the aim of winning over all the European countries in order to triumph. Later on, after the failure of the Finnish, Austrian, German, Hungarian and Italian revolutions and of the conquest of Poland, a centrifugal movement begins for Soviet Russia, which is bloodless and isolated. It will no longer export the revolution, but emigrants, intellectuals and artists leaving their country to settle in Central and Western Europe. Before and after 1917, the revolutionary collective imaginary participates, as much as military realities, in the reshaping of the map of Europe in the minds, in the wavering of the notions of border, territory and nation: this phenomenon will be studied from the point of view of cultural history.

Our reflections will be within the framework of the "new cultural history" as it particularly manifests itself in the book of Boris Kolonickij and Orlando Figes. These historians see in the "underground revolutionary subculture" the main source of the rituals and of the characteristic principals of Russia between the two revolutions, underlining the fact that this subculture is one of the main elements of continuity around 1917.⁷

They will also be linked to anthropology and sociology of violence which, throughout the past decades, has attempted to explain not only the 1917 revolution, but also further developments. Its central thesis, based on a theory by George Mosse, is that violence breeds violence in a society brutalised by war.⁸ According to Vladimir Buldakov, leaders and political parties can only channel this violence, but the strength, the volume and the periodicity of its eruptions are out of control.⁹

The conference will be focused on three themes: The first, "Languages and discourses", will mainly mobilise historians and linguists. The second, "The old and the new. Restructurations, reinterpretations, innovations", will be orientated towards cultural politics, literary and artistic creation questions. These first two themes will be covered in Paris. The third theme, "Central and Western Europe", will be devoted to the reception of the 1917 Russian Revolution and its consequences on the cultural, scientific, political life in Central and Western Europe. It will be addressed in Caen.

List of themes

First theme:

Land reform projects between February and October.

Justice and revolution.

The emancipation and the political rights of women.

The old army, the new army.

⁶A. Lounatcharski, *Théâtre et révolution*, Maspero 1971, Léon Trotsky, *Littérature et révolution*, Julliard, 1964, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky October 1917-1921*, Cambridge University Press, 1971, rééd. 2002.

⁷Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii. *Interpreting the Russian Revolution. The Language and Symbols of 1917*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999.

⁸George Mosse, *De la Grande Guerre au totalitarisme : la brutalisation des sociétés européennes*, Hachette littératures, 1999.

⁹Buldakov VI. *Krasnaja Smuta.. Priroda i posledstvija revoljucionnogo nasilija*, Moskva, 2010.

The principle of election in the Church.

Money and inflation.

Language transformations.

Second theme:

Cinema and revolution (1910s-1920s).

Caricatures and posters (1914-1921).

The literary avant-gardes.

Tradition and modernity in plastic arts.

Representation of violence.

Theatrical October.

Musical innovations.

The construction of gender by the state in Soviet society.

Reorganization of education and culture (the nationalizations, the role of Lunacharsky, the agitprop, the Proletkult).

Third theme:

This will take up the issues of the second theme, by adding the subjects of political repercussions and links between Russian and Western intellectuals within the framework of a new political configuration.

Suggestions for submissions must be about 15 lines long, in English, French or Russian.

Please, address your submissions to Organizing committee: Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, Eur'ORBEM (autant.mathieu@wanadoo.fr), Boris Czerny, Erlis, Caen (bczerny@aol.com), Aleksandr Lavrov, Eur'ORBEM (allavrov@yahoo.com).

The oral presentation should be no longer than 30 minutes, including discussion, and must be submitted to the organizing committee by October 15th 2016.