

Call for papers

The Peripheries of the European Revolutionary Process(es) 1917–1923

International Conference at the European University Institute, Florence 5–7 October 2017

The fall of the Russian Tsar and the rise to power of the Bolsheviks sent shock waves across Europe and beyond, initiating a period of momentous revolutionary transformations. Indeed, the protagonists of 1917 did not envisage their endeavour as an exclusively Russian phenomenon, but as the first act of the world revolution. As Lenin reflected in 1921, ‘we have made the start. When, at what date and time, and the proletarians of which nation will complete this process is not important. The important thing is that the ice has been broken’.

The revolution emboldened the war-weary propertyless classes and terrified the rich and powerful, sharpening social conflict and accelerating the downfall of age-old empires. In the years 1917–19 it generated levels of continental revolutionary effervescence not seen since 1848. It also led to momentous shifts and realignments in the international labour movement. Not only did the Russian Revolution help wreck the Hohenzollern and the Habsburg dynasties, it also threw down the gauntlet to the dynasties of the Kautskys and the Bauers. The Communist International, founded in Moscow in 1919, presented itself as the new party of world revolution, aiming to supplant the old and discredited Social Democratic International. The international labour movement was shaken by intense polemics, and, in the heat of the events in Russia, underwent debilitating splits from which the new communist organisations emerged.

However, the years 1917 to 1923 were not merely a phase of socialist-proletarian activism, and the power of the Bolshevik spell went beyond revolutionary Marxists, captivating a very mixed bag subversives, radicals, and iconoclasts. The turbulences unleashed by the October Revolution created spaces for numerous political and social movements which at times aligned themselves with the Russian Revolution, at times vehemently opposed it: anarchists, radical bourgeois intellectuals, nationalists, often became temporary fellow travellers for the Bolsheviks. The Russian Revolution became a beacon flare for revolutionaries and radicals of very different persuasions, challenging traditional political-ideological affiliations, strategies, and identities. The first congresses of the Third International were, as English syndicalist John Murphy put it, a cacophony ‘socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, trade unionists, revolutionary nationalists of almost every race and clime’. The tremors of October went well beyond the borders of the former Russian empire, into Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, and were felt in the remote anarchist villages of Andalusia, the Greek armies fighting in Anatolia, the Jewish districts of Warsaw, the ateliers of Dadaist painters in Berlin, among striking women workers in Paris, and in the street battles of Dublin.

The conference aims to bring together many of these often-neglected geographic and ideological peripheries of the revolutionary process. Rather than focus on the familiar stories of the German, Austrian, or Hungarian revolutions and the debates and schisms within the major Social Democratic parties, we aim to discuss movements and actors that participated in the major transitional processes in Europe that followed the Russian Revolutions but that have traditionally fallen outside of the purview of the historiography. These include not only political

organisations of the radical left, but a medley of fellow travellers: national and independence movements, bourgeois intellectuals and artists, feminist activists, religious militants, anti-colonial groups, and others who, even for a short period, associated themselves with the promise of radical change heralded by the Russian Revolution.

We are especially interested in the question of what motivated these diverse groups of actors, what drew them to the idea of revolution, how they imagined the revolutionary process and the future society it promised, and how the images and sub-images invoked by the Russian Revolution conditioned these motivations. We find the kaleidoscopic permutation and adaptation of the Russian model and its conjugation with local and national circumstances and the emergence of various “Bolshevik myths” particularly pertinent. Local activists often perceived the Russian developments from their local perspectives, “translating” it in a peculiar ways. Secondly, we want to ask why many of these companionships remained only short-term, what led to the frictions, schisms, and ruptures with the official communist movement, and how these conflicts were discussed and perceived on the various sides of the debate. Thirdly, we want to look at the bearing of the Russian example in daily practices of revolutionary activism and therefore especially encourage local or regional case studies, asking how local circumstances determined the particular forms of revolutionary activism, gazing beyond commonplace political-organisational narratives.

Our confirmed keynote speakers are Stephen Smith from Oxford University, a world-renowned scholar of the Russian Revolution and its international impact, author of several books on the Russian and Chinese revolutions, including an upcoming monograph written for Oxford University Press on the occasion of the centenary of 1917; and Robert Gerwarth, from University College Dublin, director at the Centre for War Studies, and author and editor of numerous widely acclaimed books on the post-war crisis in Central and Eastern Europe.

The conference will take place at the European University Institute in Florence (Italy), on October 5-7. Participants with no institutional support can apply for funding of their travel and accommodation expenses.

Please send an abstract (circa 300 words) with a short biographical note to the organisers by March 31, 2017 to: EuropeanRevolution@EUI.eu

Participants should receive confirmation of acceptance no later than May 1, 2017. Written papers (of circa 8,000 words) should be submitted by September 1, 2017, so they can be circulated to the participants in time. There be an opportunity to publish some of the papers in an edited volume or special issue.

For more details, see: <https://europeanrevolutionblog.wordpress.com/>