

ELIE KEDOURIE MEMORIAL LECTURE

Ending the Russian Revolution: Reflections on Soviet History and its Interpreters

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HOW DOES ONE end the Revolution? There are two kinds of problem. First is the problem for successful revolutionaries: how to draw a line under the upheaval and get on with the task of post-upheaval government. Second is the problem for historians: when do they end their history of the revolution?

On the revolutionaries' problem: let us take as our working definition of revolution a great political and social upheaval whose participants imagine themselves to be creating a new world, consciously freeing themselves of 'the shackles of the past'. Gripped by the 'moment of madness'¹ that tells them that 'all is possible' and that familiar constraints and compromises of life no longer apply, revolutionaries may believe the moment is eternal. Yet all commonsensical observers know that it is not, and that sooner or later 'normality' will return, albeit in a world that actually is transformed in many ways, not all of them intended by the revolutionaries. If the revolutionary party remains in power, it will become—to borrow a term from Mexico—the 'Institutional Revolutionary Party':² in other words, the word 'revolution' will come to stand for the new regime.³

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¹ Aristide R. Zolberg, 'Moments of madness', *Politics & Society*, 2 (1972), 183–207.

² The long-lived Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional was the offspring of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20.

³ q.v. Martin Malia, *History's Locomotives. Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. Terence Emmons (New Haven and London, 2006), p. 304.

As for the historians' problem, its nature has changed since I entered the profession in the 1960s. Back in those bygone positivist days, historical questions needed finite, logical answers that could be found by gathering and weighing data. To answer the question 'When did the Russian Revolution end?' one needed to work out what an 'end' to a revolution was, by what characteristics it might be known, and then look at the evidence to see when such characteristics emerged. To be sure, there was another approach to the asking of questions like 'When did the Russian Revolution end?', that of the social scientist, who lumped rather than split and came up with models demonstrating how revolutions in general behaved, from which one might deduce the likely pattern for the Russian Revolution in particular. One of the most popular examples was Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*,⁴ considered in the 1960s to be a model though it may now look more like a metaphor. In Brinton's model/metaphor, derived primarily from the French Revolution but applied to others including the Russian, revolution was a pathological state, generating a fever that grew ever stronger until it reached its life-threatening climax (in the French Revolution, the Terror of 1794) and then broke (Thermidor), returning the patient to something approaching his original state.

Sometime in the 1980s and 1990s, historians lost confidence in the idea that it was possible to get history 'right', as if it were natural science, and embraced the notion that what we are doing is not finding things out and answering questions but rather telling stories. The subjects of our stories are not physical objects with definite properties; rather, they are intellectual constructions whose properties are the ones we give them. The Russian Revolution, in short, was not a meteorite whose arrival on the earth could be precisely dated; rather, 'revolution' was an idea that might, according to who was thinking, be attached to different (though probably overlapping) sets of concrete phenomena. The *story* of the revolution must have a beginning and end, but (within certain limits of plausibility) it's up to the story-teller to decide what they are; and his choices depend on what he thinks the meaning and moral of his story are.

In this essay, I will try to address both problems, but it's the historians' problem with which I am most concerned. When I speak of 'historians', I speak partly—though not only—of myself, since the practical question of how to end a history of the revolution is one I have had occasion to

⁴ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York, 1938).

deal with. The analogy between the French Revolution and the Russian that underlay Crane Brinton is a running thread in my discussion. That analogy mattered deeply to Russian revolutionaries, which means that the Russian Revolution and its historiography has always been to some extent in the shadow of the French. But, in violation of natural chronology, the opposite is also true: thanks to the obsession of late twentieth-century historians of the French Revolution such as François Furet, the Russian Revolution finally succeeded in casting its own shadow backwards and, for some, remaking the French Revolution in its image.

French Revolution/Russian Revolution

For Russian revolutionaries, the French Revolution was the towering precursor, standing both as an example and a warning.⁵ The story of the French Revolution progressed through stages, beginning with euphoria in 1789 and going through increasing radicalisation to the Jacobin Terror of 1794. The fall of Robespierre—‘Thermidor’—and the coming to power of the Directory marked the end of the French Revolution as far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, Napoleon being tacked on as an awkward postscript-cum-warning that revolutions can collapse into military dictatorships. Thus, ending the revolution and ending the terror were essentially the same thing, an opinion that has been shared by many commentators on the French Revolution: Bronislaw Baczko even wrote a book about it, *Comment sortir de la Terreur*,⁶ which is about how to end the revolution once it has spun out of control. Many historians would agree that ending terror is a good thing, but this was not the Bolshevik view. From their standpoint, terror was a revolutionary necessity, a means of purifying the body politic. They kept their eye firmly on the linkage of terror and revolution, fearing that to end one was to end the other.

Jacobins in spirit, the Bolsheviks were not afraid of terror, which they regarded as necessary and purifying. Their nightmare was about Thermidor—that moment when the revolutionary impulse collapses and the revolution degenerates into a Directory-like mire of corruption. All

⁵ See Tamara Kondratieva, *Bolcheviks et Jacobins. Itinéraire des analogies* (Paris, 1989); Dmitry Shlapentokh, *The French Revolution and the Russian Anti-Democratic Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997).

⁶ Bronislaw Baczko, *Comment sortir de la Terreur* (Paris, 1989); English translation by Michael Petheram as *Ending the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1994).

through the 1920s, contending factions within the Bolshevik Party discerned signs of revolutionary degeneration and accused each other of responsibility, inclined to see sinister Thermidorian portents in the pessimism that was allegedly gripping the younger generation, not to mention the loss of vigour and revolutionary élan among the middle-aged. They were afraid, too, of what followed Thermidor, namely a Bonapartist coup: it was one of Trotsky's great handicaps as a revolutionary leader that he, as commander in chief of the Red Army in the Civil War, was the most plausible candidate for a Bonaparte. The Bolsheviks were determined not to let their revolution collapse the way the French Revolution had done. They were ultra-sensitive to any outside interpretation of their actions that implied (even, or perhaps particularly, with approval) that they had got through the bout of revolutionary delirium and recovered their senses. But worst of all were the accusations of abandoning the revolution that came from within their own ranks. In 1936, the now-exiled Trotsky accused Stalin of heading a Thermidorian reaction in *The Revolution Betrayed*, a book read furiously in a single night by Stalin before publication, courtesy of the NKVD. One of his post-Soviet biographers sees it as a final straw leading him to opt for the mass repression of the Great Purges.⁷

The Bolsheviks were not the only people preoccupied by the analogy between French and Russian revolutions. Historians have taken this equally to heart, especially French historians of the French Revolution. As is well known, the French Revolution has been for two centuries a touchstone of political debate for the French. This means that the historian of the French Revolution is under particular pressure: as François Furet puts it in *Penser la révolution française*,

He must show his colours. He must state from the outset where he comes from, what he thinks, and what he is looking for . . . : the writing is taken as his *opinion*, a form of judgment that is not required when dealing with the Merovingians but indispensable when it comes to treating 1789 or 1793. As soon as the historian states that opinion, the matter is settled; he is labelled a royalist, a liberal, or a Jacobin . . .⁸

⁷ Dmitrii Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia. I.V. Stalin. Politicheskii portret*, bk. 1, ch. 2 (Moscow, 1989), p. 174; *idem*, *Trotsky, the Eternal Revolutionary*, trans. and ed. Harold Shukman (New York, 1996), pp. 370–1.

⁸ François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), in English as *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981), p. 6.

At the same time, interpretation of the French Revolution has been accompanied ‘by a second, implicit discourse on the Russian Revolution; that second and latent discourse has proliferated like a cancer inside the historical analysis’.⁹ For this politically inspired fusing of the two revolutions, Furet blamed Marxist historian-admirers of the Russian Revolution,¹⁰ but others have laid the same accusation at his own door.¹¹

In France, the politicisation of interpretation of the French Revolution is a domestic matter—French talking to each other about French politics—though one that affects international historical debate on the Revolution, in which French historians have always played the leading role. Interpretation of the Russian Revolution has been equally politicised, but in a different way. With Soviet historians effectively excluded from the international scholarly community before 1991, hence from participation in international debate on the Russian Revolution, the leading role for many years was played by émigrés and foreigners,¹² and the debate—notably that between ‘revisionists’ and supporters of the totalitarian model in the 1970s—was framed and shaped by the Cold War. It was assumed that historians of the Soviet Union necessarily had ‘an opinion’ about the Russian Revolution which led them to offer their particular historical interpretations of it: they were either for it (‘pro-Soviet’, ‘soft on Communism’) or against (which in the US in the 1950s and 1960s was often considered the only acceptable position). If in France, as Furet wrote, the French Revolution was too familiar a landscape to ‘practice ethnology’ and attempts to consider it ‘from an intellectual “distance”’ were vain,¹³ the same deep scepticism about the possibility of ‘distance’ existed in the United States. Claims to detachment were highly suspect on both sides of the Cold War: for the Soviets, ‘so-called objective’ history by ‘bourgeois historians’ was read as hostile to the Revolution (because of the failure to endorse), while in the United States and Europe it was read, conversely, as sympathetic (because of failure to condemn).

⁹ Furet, *Interpreting*, p. 87.

¹⁰ Furet, *Interpreting*.

¹¹ Steven L. Kaplan, *Adieu 89* (Paris, 1993), p. 726.

¹² This is not to deny that interpretation of the Revolution was political within the Soviet Union: of course it was, with a canonised ‘official version’ that was intermittently challenged by ‘liberals’ (to use the Western term for challengers), usually in aesopian language. But that is the subject for another essay.

¹³ Furet, *Interpreting*, p. 10.

Writing *The Russian Revolution*

Dating the Russian Revolution was not only an abstract problem for me. It became a highly practical one in the early 1980s, when I agreed to write a book on *The Russian Revolution* for Oxford University Press's OPUS series. I had no difficulty deciding when the Revolution began (1917, February and October);¹⁴ the problem was to decide when it ended. Though I knew about the expectation that anyone writing on the Russian Revolution must have an Opinion on it in Furet's terms, i.e. be for or against it, I intended to disappoint it and establish 'intellectual distance'. 'The Russian Revolution is now a part of history, not an aspect of contemporary politics,' I wrote in the first edition of *The Russian Revolution* in 1982 (the wish, clearly, being father to the thought). 'In this book, I have tried to treat it as such.'¹⁵

I already had some experience with end-date problems. My first book, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, took the story of the first Soviet Ministry of Education and Culture from October 1917 to 1921 (the latter date marking the introduction of Lenin's New Economic Policy, which incidentally meant a drastic cutback in government funding for education); and a Soviet reviewer chastised me for taking an end-date that implied that the revolutionary project of enlightening the people ended in failure. This was an eye-opener to me, as I had never thought of my end-date in these terms. My book ended in 1921 largely as a matter of convenience (or so I thought at the time), since it turned out that I had too much material to carry out my original intention of ending the story with the resignation of the first Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, in 1929. Nor did I consciously intend to tell a story of failure, although with hindsight I can see that the Soviet reviewer's interpretation was reasonable: the subtext of *The Commissariat* is indeed the pathos of revolution¹⁶—the

¹⁴ Looking back, it is perhaps surprising that the beginning seemed so self-evident. One could, after all, make good arguments for a revolutionary starting-point of 1905, to name only the most obvious. Moreover, a February starting-point is not exactly the same thing as an October one, but that was not a problem to me: I saw February as the 'moment of madness' when authority collapsed and all seemed possible (a perspective to be found in memoirs from across the political spectrum), and October as when reality set in and the hard work of revolutionary government began (the perspective of Bolsheviks like Lunacharsky, reflected also in my first book, *The Commissariat*).

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Russian Revolution* (1982 edn.), p. 9.

¹⁶ The book's title was intended as an oxymoron, conveying the incongruity (of which the Bolsheviks themselves were well aware) of creating a bureaucratic agency to advance popular enlightenment. The sense of pathos is most overt in the introduction, where I invoke Thomas

inevitability of disappointed hopes and tarnished idealism that is close to, though not identical with, the inevitability of failure. In any case, I took the point that end-dates can convey Opinions, in Furet's sense, even if you don't mean them to.

Thus, when I took on *The Russian Revolution*, I was already alert to the Opinion-conveying potential of end-dates. I was also in a mood to suppress my natural pessimism and over-developed sense of pathos in favour of a strict social-science rationality. (The move to America had had its impact.) The book I wanted to write would not convey an Opinion of the revolution, *pro* or *contra*. It would ignore the red herring of the idealists' inevitable disappointment to concentrate on *outcomes*, that is, what turned out to have changed when the revolutionary upheaval settled down and the shape of the new, post-revolutionary regime emerged. But when did that happen? One possibility was the end of the Civil War in which the Bolsheviks emerged victorious, that is, the early 1920s. This was Leonard Schapiro's choice, as it was then that he saw the consolidation of the 'political autocracy' (others would later use the term 'totalitarian dictatorship') which, for him, was the most significant outcome of the revolution.¹⁷ But I was wary of that, both for its implied Opinion and because I agreed with Schapiro's great rival, E. H. Carr,¹⁸ that further revolutionary events, integrally related to those of 1917, were to come.

Carr chose 1929 as the climax of his multi-volume history:¹⁹ the onset of the new upheaval associated with forced-pace industrialisation, collectivisation, and Cultural Revolution that has been called 'Stalin's revolution'. That date, too, seemed to convey an Opinion, namely that the creation of a state-socialist economic order ('foundation of a planned economy', in the words of the title of Carr's last volume) was the

Carlyle, writing of the fallen Jacobin leader Robespierre that he was executed in the sky-blue coat he had had made for the revolutionary Festival of the Supreme Being: 'O Reader, can thy hard heart hold out against that?' Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1970), p. xviii (quoting Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1st pub. 1837), vol. 2 (London, 1955), p. 359).

¹⁷ Leonard Schapiro, *Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State, First Phase, 1917–22* (Cambridge, MA, 1955).

¹⁸ On my intellectual and personal relationship with these two great British scholars, see The Editors, 'Interview with Sheila Fitzpatrick', *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 8 (2007), 479–86.

¹⁹ E. H. Carr, *History of Soviet Russia*, usually cited by its separate titles: *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, 3 vols. (London, 1950–3), *The Interregnum, 1923–1924* (London, 1954), *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926*, 3 vols. (London, 1958) and (with R. W. Davies) *The Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926–1929*, 2 vols. (London, 1969–71).

significant outcome of the Revolution. I was somewhat wary of that, too, being less interested in economic organisation than Carr and thus less convinced of the significance of the economic-structural changes of the late 1920s.²⁰ From my standpoint as a social and cultural historian (I was then working on the Cultural Revolution), 1929 was a point of rupture—but a rupture whose outcome would for some years remain unclear.

That led me to the idea of ending my story in the mid 1930s, the period of post-revolutionary ‘normalisation’ that the émigré sociologist Nicholas Timasheff labelled ‘the Great Retreat’ because of its turn to less radical and more conciliatory social and cultural policies, and that Trotsky (now exiled and deeply critical) called ‘Revolution Betrayed’ for the same reason. This looked more promising, particularly because of its ambivalence in terms of Opinion: what Trotsky saw as failure and betrayal, Timasheff saw as a salutary triumph of common sense. I did not agree with Timasheff about the extent of retreat from revolutionary objectives (after all, the big structural economic changes of ‘Stalin’s Revolution’ stuck), but that was if anything an advantage: I could write the story as a balance sheet, with ‘Revolution accomplished’ on the one side and ‘Revolution Betrayed’ on the other.

But what was to be done about the Great Purges of 1937–8? If they were to be included in my story, there was the awkward problem of having the Russian equivalent of 1794 and 1795—Great Purges and Great Retreat—running simultaneously. But the Great Purges certainly looked revolutionary, especially to anyone brought up, as I was, on the French Revolution. It did not then occur to me that *looking* revolutionary might be part of the point as far as Stalin was concerned, given that a discreet and partial Thermidor had recently been launched. In the first edition of *The Russian Revolution* (1982), I announced my intention to treat the Great Purges as ‘a monstrous postscript’ rather than an ‘integral part’ of the revolution,²¹ but put them in the story all the same, conceding later in the book that they might well be seen as ‘a final product . . . of the impulse towards revolutionary transformation that had gained ascendancy in 1917’.²² It is hard, now, to recapture the reasons for my hesita-

²⁰ In the closest that he came to a summation of his conclusions on the Revolution, Carr wrote in the last paragraph of his last volume: ‘Seldom . . . has so monstrous a price been paid for so monumental an achievement’ (Carr and Davies, *Foundations of a Planned Economy*, vol. 2, p. 451).

²¹ Fitzpatrick, *Russian Revolution* (1982 edn.), p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

tion about including the Great Purges in the Russian Revolution, all the more since, in terms of current scholarly debate, the alternative was to treat them as an example of the ‘permanent purge’ that some political scientists saw as systemic in Soviet totalitarianism.²³

Long before the revised second edition of *The Russian Revolution* came out in 1994, I had overcome my scruples and made up my mind that the Great Purges were a part of the Revolution, not just a postscript. From my way of justifying this inclusion in the second edition, it is evident that the new cultural history (history as story) had left its mark. ‘For dramatic reasons alone’, I wrote, ‘the story of the Russian Revolution needs the Great Purges, just as the story of the French Revolution needs the Jacobin terror.’²⁴ What the *non*-dramatic reasons were remained unstated, but I think I had become less worried about unintentionally conveying an Opinion (contra the Revolution, in this case) and more willing to let my small-o opinions show, notably that sense of pathos that was strong in *The Commissariat* but repressed in the first edition of *The Russian Revolution*. Pathos was back in the second edition, if only in connection with the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, where instead of quoting Carlyle I wrote my own purple passage:

Through the Revolution, Russia [once famous for backwardness] became a trailblazer, an international leader, a model and inspiration for ‘the progressive forces of the whole world’. Now, overnight as it seemed, all that was gone. The party was over; after seventy-four years, Russia had fallen out of ‘the vanguard of history’ into its old posture of recumbent backwardness. In a poignant moment for Russia and the Russian Revolution, it turned out that the ‘future of progressive humanity’ was really its past.²⁵

Alternative endings

The collapse of the Soviet Union was an arresting moment for historians of the Russian Revolution, as for Soviet historians in general. It’s rare to have the subject of one’s academic work deconstruct before one’s eyes,

²³ For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Permanent Purge. Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA, 1956). As a ‘revisionist’ social historian, I was sceptical of the totalitarian model, which postulated total political control and hence appeared to deny the very possibility of a Soviet social history. I also regarded (and still regard) the Great Purges as essentially a one-off event.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Russian Revolution* (1994 edn.), p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–2. I have dropped this, though regretfully, from the 3rd edn., as the moment that I hope it captured has passed.

and the deconstruction turned out to have unexpected implications. For example, we were no longer sure what to call ourselves: could we still be ‘Soviet historians’ when the Soviet Union no longer existed? Another surprising shift in perspective had to do with periodisation. On the one hand, as the revolution of 1917 shrank in significance by ceasing to be a founding-of-the-nation event, the First World War, long obscured in the story of twentieth-century Russian history, came back into focus. On the other hand, the question of the revolution’s end suddenly looked different. If there were no stable outcome—that is, if the Russian Revolution had *not*, as previously thought, given birth to a Soviet nation that was a permanent fixture on the scene—did it make sense to look for an ‘end’ other than the end of the Soviet Union in 1991?

As I did the revisions for the second edition in 1993, I was tempted to rewrite my *Russian Revolution* as volume 1 of a two-volume work covering the whole period from 1917 to 1991. The Second World War was the obvious break-point, though whether volume 1 would end with its disastrous beginning or victorious conclusion I wasn’t sure; volume 2 would have featured both a mini-rerun of revolution under Khrushchev and a plausible Thermidor in Brezhnev’s ‘era of stagnation’.

For pragmatic reasons, I soon thought better of such a radical revision. But others were thinking along similar lines, both with respect to the *longue durée* of the Russian Revolution and, specifically, to the inclusion of the Second World War. In *The Furies*, Arno Mayer’s comparative study of violence in the French and Russian revolutions, the Second World War is not a revolutionary war as far as the Soviet Union was concerned, but something close: while Stalin proclaims ‘a *levée en masse* and *dictature de détresse*—in the spirit of the declaration of total war of August 23, 1793—in defense of the Fatherland of Socialism’, he nevertheless calls for ‘a Great Patriotic War against Fascism, not a revolutionary war or crusade for Communism’.²⁶ But for the Russian Revolution, 1945—unlike 1815 in France—was not a defeat or a restoration: in Mayer’s analysis, ‘the Revolution’ (as well as the ‘[Soviet] regime’) was ‘strengthened for having weathered a monstrous but also glorious ordeal by fire’; moreover, ‘upon liberation, Europe witnessed a groundswell for radical reform and renewal, the very opposite of a *retour à l’ordre*’.²⁷

²⁶ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies. Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 673.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 690. Mayer does not explore the possible analogy between the export of the Napoleonic system to Europe via the Napoleonic Wars and the export of the Soviet system to

Amir Weiner goes further in his *Making Sense of War*, subtitled *The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, where he writes that the war, being the long-dreaded ‘Armageddon of the Revolution, . . . the event that would either vindicate or bring down the system . . .’, was not only ‘a part of the revolutionary era’ but also provided renewed stimulus to the ‘impetus for revolutionary transformation’ that was central to the Soviet enterprise.²⁸ For Weiner, however, there was no post-war or post-Stalinist Thermidor because Soviet leaders never gave up their revolutionary ideology: ‘Thermidor as a full-blown alternative could not have occurred before December 1991, when the communist leadership acknowledged that the Revolution had exhausted itself and that they, the revolutionaries, were unwilling to start it all over again or even try to resuscitate it.’²⁹

‘The Revolution is over’—or is it?

Twenty years earlier, with the bicentennial of the French Revolution (1989) already on the horizon, François Furet had made his famous pronouncement that ‘the revolution is over’.³⁰ The French Revolution was overtly his subject, but for Furet the Russian Revolution and the French had become intertwined, the Russian Revolution being the ‘cancerous’ Doppelgänger of the French Revolution. Now that Solzhenitsyn had situated Gulag (the Stalinist labour camp system) ‘at the very core of the revolutionary endeavour’, in Furet’s words, this must ‘turn around, like a boomerang, to strike its French “origin”’.³¹ ‘*La Révolution est terminée*’ was less an analytical statement about the French Revolution than a prescriptive one: if it wasn’t finished, it should be (and the same applied, *a fortiori*, to the Russian Revolution).

Eastern Europe in the wake of the Second World War. While he notes that ‘Soviet leaders were unshaken, if not fortified, in their belief in progress, socialist construction, economic planning, forced-pace industrialization, and the universal destiny of socialism, with their project serving as universal model and inspiration’, and moreover that ‘ideology was the Kremlin’s only hope and its only edge for intervention’, these points are made with regard to ‘Central and Western Europe’ (*The Furies*, p. 693). As far as Eastern Europe was concerned, Mayer tends to emphasise initial Soviet hesitancy about imposing a Soviet-type system and the Realpolitik (as implicitly opposed to revolutionary) underpinning of Soviet interest in the region.

²⁸ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), pp. 17, 21.

²⁹ Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, pp. 16–17, n. 17.

³⁰ Title of the first section of Furet, *Penser la Révolution française [Interpreting]*, 1978.

³¹ Furet, *Interpreting*, p. 12.

For Martin Malia, a Russian historian who was also a francophile admirer of Furet, the end of the Russian Revolution came in 1991 and was an awakening from a nightmare. In *The Soviet Tragedy*, Malia wrote of a ‘permanent revolution from above’ that became ‘frozen in place’ in October 1917 and remained so ‘until the meltdown of 1989–91’.³² With the meltdown, it became clear that the whole Revolution had been nothing but a mirage:

There is no such thing as socialism, and the Soviet Union built it. Thus, when a disastrously noncompetitive economic performance at last made this paradox apparent, the institutionalized fantasy of ‘really existing’ Marxism vanished into thin air. The ‘surreality’ of Sovietism suddenly ceased, and Russia awoke as from a bad dream amidst the rubble of a now septagenarian disaster.³³

According to Malia, ‘when the Soviet regime collapsed, it left no usable heritage to Russia’.³⁴

That certainly was how it looked to many people in post-Soviet Russia in the early 1990s. Like Malia, Russians were inclined at first to treat the whole Soviet era as a monstrous mistake, dismissing seventy-four years of history as a bad dream or an empty place and trying to reconnect with Imperial roots. It was ‘a forced stoppage in time’, one commentator asserted in the main literary weekly in 1990. ‘There was no break in the historical sequence but a chronometric stoppage in the history of Russia filled with nothing but chimeras and pretence’, a ‘hallucination’ that has now, happily, vanished.³⁵ A proposal to abolish the Soviet Revolution Day holiday (7 November³⁶) in 1990 led the media temporarily to adopt a discourse which, as one European observer noted, “‘abolished” October itself, not as a holiday (a historic symbol) but as a historical fact. Chimeric, October is unreal and has therefore never really existed.’³⁷

³² Malia, *History's Locomotives*, p. 2. The phrase ‘permanent revolution’ is from Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy. A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York, 1994), p. 496.

³³ Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*, p. 497.

³⁴ Malia, *History's Locomotives*, p. 278.

³⁵ A. Arkhangel'skii, ‘To die, so as to be reborn’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19 Dec. 1990, cited in Véronique Garros, ‘History in the Perestroika: Difficult to make, impossible to write’, paper for Conference on ‘Germany and Russia in the 20th Century’, 19–22 Sept. 1991, University of Pennsylvania, p. 14.

³⁶ According to the pre-revolutionary Julian calendar, the October Revolution occurred on 25 October 1917. However, in January 1918, the Russian Republic adopted the European (Gregorian) calendar, thus moving the date forward by thirteen days. Because of this, the Revolution was commemorated on 7 November.

³⁷ Garros, ‘History in the Perestroika’, p. 13.

But forgetting only carries you so far. It was not long before a popular nostalgia developed for the stability, predictability, safe streets, low prices, guaranteed employment and welfare system of Soviet times (in so far as this had a real-life referent, it was the Brezhnev era, but the Stalin period was also invoked). The Soviet value system proved difficult to dislodge: when Yeltsin conducted a public search for a new ‘idea of Russia’ in 1996–7, competitors often cited victory in the Great Patriotic War³⁸ as a key element of Russian identity, and some noted that ‘Russia, having tackled problems of incalculable difficulty in the previous decades, could surmount any obstacle’³⁹—surely an echo of Stalin’s old revolutionary dictum that there were no fortresses Bolsheviks could not storm. For Gorbachev, out of power but still a voice on the scene in 1997, the Bolshevik revolution remained ‘the grandest attempt to bring, with one powerful thrust, the country to a new civilization level, making it technologically and economically capable of competing with the West and of surpassing it, and prove the superiority of a fundamentally different social system over capitalism’.⁴⁰

The Revolution Day holiday was abolished—but, as with so many things in post-Soviet Russia, not without ambiguity. In 1996, President Yeltsin ordered that the name be changed to Day of Accord and Reconciliation (*Den’ soglasiia i primireniia*) ‘in order to diminish confrontations and and effect conciliation of different social strata of Russian society’. In 2005, President Putin had the day renamed again, this time as National Unity Day (*Den’ narodnogo edinstva*), and moved the holiday to 4 November, the date of the end of Polish occupation of Russia in 1612.⁴¹ But this was widely criticised for its nationalist and anti-Polish connotations, and polls showed that over 60 per cent of the population were against dropping the old Revolution Day holiday.⁴² Communists called it ‘a crime against history’ and continued to celebrate the old holiday on 7 November (with the permission of the Mayor of Moscow in 2007, though without it the year before), bringing out a claimed 10,000 persons to the demonstration on Moscow’s Tverskaia Street.⁴³

³⁸ The Soviet (and post-Soviet Russian) term for the Second World War.

³⁹ Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia* (London, 1997), p. 184.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Gorbachev, ‘History is not fatal’, *Moscow News* no. 43 (1997), p. 3. Thanks to Sam Casper for finding this article.

⁴¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_holidays_in_Russia> (accessed 1 May 2008).

⁴² <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4406526.stm>> (accessed 1 May 2008).

⁴³ <<http://www.akm1917.org/boi/ak492.htm>> (webpage of Avangard Krasnoi Molodezhi (Vanguard of Red Youth), accessed 27 April 2008).

Evidently Malia had been premature in asserting that the Soviet regime had left Russia without any usable heritage, for by the 2000s it was abundantly clear that there was a heritage and Russia's new leaders were using it. It was the story of Soviet national achievement and rise to superpower status in the Stalin period that was primarily celebrated—a worrying development for Russia's increasingly lonely and embattled liberal intellectuals—with the Second World War increasingly serving as a national foundation myth in Russian popular consciousness. 'Is there nothing good to remember about the Soviet period of our country?' President Putin asked rhetorically in 2001. 'Was there nothing but Stalin's prison camps and repression? And in that case what are we going to do about Dunaevski, Sholokhov, Shostakovich, Korolev . . . [i.e. the cultural and scientific achievements of the Stalin period]?'⁴⁴

If there were good things to remember about the Stalin period, however, it was not clear that the same applied to the October Revolution. In a textbook approved by the Ministry of Education for high-school use, the heading for the relevant chapter was 'A Divided Country (Revolution and Civil War, 1917–1922)', and the section on the October Revolution was entitled 'Formation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship'. The textbook, a collective work of respected senior (and Soviet-trained) historians, gave a neutral account of events, concluding its brief discussion of October with the comment: 'thus occurred an event that exercised the greatest influence on the fate of Russia and the whole world'.⁴⁵ The authors were equally circumspect with regard to the Stalinist 1930s,⁴⁶ though they characterised 'the Great Patriotic War' as a 'great tragedy' and example of 'true popular heroism'.⁴⁷

For some informed contemporary observers, 'it seems clear that the role of the Revolution as the foundation event is by now completely lost—there is simply no state any longer of which it was a foundation act . . . W[orld] W[ar] II has by now emerged as the central event of Russian history, almost a myth of the d'origine of the national commu-

⁴⁴ Quoted in Service, *Russia*, p. 195.

⁴⁵ A. O. Chubarian, with A. A. Danilov, E. I. Pivovarov *et al.* (eds.), *Otechestvennaia istoriia XX–nachala XXI veka. Uchebnik dlia 11 klassa obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii* (Moscow, 2004).

⁴⁶ Whether by accident or design, their two-paragraph conclusion (*Otechestvennaia istoriia*, p. 95) is similar, though less resonantly expressed, to that offered by E. H. Carr at the end of his multi-volume *History of Soviet Russia* (see above, n. 20).

⁴⁷ *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, p. 117.

nity'.⁴⁸ Yet, even so, 'our students, when asked about the period of Russian history they are particularly interested in, usually answer: the Revolution and the [19]20–30s, for it was a period of big passions and big struggles'.⁴⁹ While Stalin came in higher in a recent poll conducted by Russian state television to identify Russia's greatest heroes, Lenin made a more than respectable showing with over 400,000 votes.⁵⁰

We are not so far from a first centennial of the Russian Revolution, and the question arises: 'Who will celebrate the anniversary in Russia in November 2017, and how?' No doubt there will still be Communists out on the street, but it is surely not out of the question that Putin's successors (or Putin himself) will see fit to mark the occasion as well, celebrating the revolution on its hundredth birthday as an act of national liberation enabling Russia's ascent to greatness in the Stalin era. If this happens, many Russians will, of course, object to such an interpretation (except in the unlikely event that the defusing of tensions sought by Yeltsin's short-lived Day of Accord and Reconciliation has been accomplished). But contestation is to be expected on issues of significance to national identity (think of the example of the French Revolution over two centuries!); indeed, it is the contestation itself—already evident on Moscow streets on each 4 November/7 November—that might propel the Russian Revolution back into the centre of historical myth-making and political debate. Russia's great revolution, like its French counterpart, could become a reference point for national discussion in Russia, a permanently contested topic on which everyone must have an Opinion, whether it be a nationalist neo-socialist *pro* or a market-oriented neo-liberal *contra*. It seems unlikely, then, that the Russian Revolution is really

⁴⁸ Nikolai Koposov, Professor and Dean, Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, St Petersburg, email communication with the author, 21 April 2008. Koposov and Dina Khapaeva are currently preparing a new version of the opinion survey they conducted in 1990 (see Dina Khapaeva and Nicolai Koposov, 'Les Demi-Dieux de la Mythologies Soviétique. Étude sur les Représentations Collectives de l'Histoire', *Annales ESC*, 4–5 (1992), 963–87.

⁴⁹ Koposov, email communication with the author, 17 April 2008.

⁵⁰ The result of the much-publicised competition which drew four and a half million telephone votes, was (1) Alexander Nevsky, thirteenth-century Russian leader against the Teutonic Knights, saint; 524,575 votes; (2) Petr Stolypin, reforming prime minister under the last Tsar, assassinated in 1910; 523,766 votes; (3) Stalin (519,071 votes); (4) Alexander Pushkin, Russia's national poet; 516,608 votes; (5) Peter the Great, eighteenth-century leader who built St Petersburg as a 'window to the West'; 448,857 votes; and (6) Lenin, 424,283. The 'Tsar-Liberator', Alexander II, emancipator of the serfs, nominated by the historians, came in twelfth with a mere 134,622 votes. Information from 'Imia Rossiia' website, <<http://www.nameofrussia.ru/doc.html?id=1648>>, accessed 8 Jan. 2009.

over in Furet's sense, at least in Russia. Indeed, the significant afterlife of the Russian Revolution may be just about to begin. For, as the French experience suggests, it is even harder to end the memory of the revolution than it is to end the revolution itself.