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# 'October: The Story of the Russian Revolution,' China Miéville in Conversation With Barbara C. Allen and Bhaskar Sunkara

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*Remarks by Barbara C. Allen, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, La Salle Univ.*

I am pleased to be here to help celebrate the launch of China Miéville's wonderfully engaging narrative of the Russian Revolution in this year, its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>1</sup> My comments will relate to anniversaries of the revolution and will weave in some of Alexander Shlyapnikov's biography. Anniversaries of some unsuccessful revolutionary events have been used to press continuing grievances against repressive regimes. That was the case with the anniversaries of Bloody Sunday, January 9, 1905 in Russia prior to the 1917 revolution, which were marked with illegal demonstrations, strikes, and other protests. With the Bolsheviks' victory in the Russian Civil War, their revolutionary anniversaries over time became celebrations that reinforced the power of the one-party state. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia's government has found it difficult to deal with the legacy of 1917. It replaced the holiday marking the Bolshevik seizure of power

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<sup>1</sup> China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London/NY: Verso, 2017).

with a day of national unity celebrated a few days earlier, and associated with military victories expelling foreign invaders. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the entire revolutionary year of 1917 is complex, for it encompasses events with different meanings for socialists, liberals, nationalists, and conservatives. The memory of these events stirs tension as one considers that in coming years, we will meet the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Russian Civil War battles, massacres, and pogroms. Indeed, commemoration of the revolution arises out of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conflagration of World War I.

In 1927, ten years after the Russian Revolution, socialist feminist Alexandra Kollontai was Soviet Ambassador to Sweden and Norway. She found herself assisting her comrade from the former Workers' Opposition, Alexander Shlyapnikov, in his negotiations of trade agreements with Scandinavian countries for machinery and metals imports to the USSR. As a side note to her businesslike advice to him, she reminded him of their romantic stroll in Paris in 1911, when they began an affair that would last into 1916. She remarked that if anyone had told them then that sixteen years later they would be corresponding about the quality and price of iron, they would have not have believed it.

By the later years of the New Economic Policy, revolutionary romanticism seemed to have surrendered to the realities of power in a country desperate for machines and metals to build industry that would help realize the socialist dream. Stalin sought to harness the idealism of a new generation to carry out his own revolution in 1928-32, but many of the Old Bolsheviks who would perish in his Great Terror in 1936-38 saw Stalin's society as a perversion of their dream.

In the twentieth anniversary year of the Revolution, 1937, Alexander Shlyapnikov, like many other Old Bolsheviks was executed, having been convicted

falsely of leading an 'anti-Soviet terrorist organization, the so-called Workers' Opposition'. He was cremated and buried in an unmarked grave; his memoir histories of the revolutionary movement had been banned already in 1932 and his revolutionary past would be omitted or distorted in Soviet history textbooks for decades to come. His personal documents would be sequestered away in secret archives, his wife arrested, and their children separated and sent to orphanages. Memory of him was suppressed but not erased, however. Kollontai survived the Terror; her diary entries in 1936 and 1938, framing the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, mourned her innocent friends who were being destroyed and expressed trepidation that she, too, though without guilt, might fall a victim. For decades, revolutionary holidays celebrated Stalin's role or that of the party, without mentioning individuals who had been disgraced.

Then came the release of prisoners from the Gulag and the Thaw under Nikita Khrushchev. In the fiftieth anniversary year of the revolution, 1967, historian Eduard Burdzhhalov's book *The February 1917 Uprising in Petrograd*, was published in the USSR.<sup>2</sup> Burdzhhalov's history crested the wave of a thaw in Soviet historiography, and he restored Shlyapnikov's memoirs to their place as valuable sources about the revolutionary year. By the time an English translation of his book was published in 1987,<sup>3</sup> the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union was gripped by Gorbachev's policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), which were necessarily accompanied by the political rehabilitation of Stalin's political rivals and reconsideration of the various alternatives within the Russian Communist Party. By 1997, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

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<sup>2</sup> Eduard N. Burdzhhalov, *Vtoraia russkaia revolutsiia: vosstanie v Petrograde* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Eduard N. Burdzhhalov, *Russia's Second Revolution: The February 1917 Uprising in Petrograd*, translated and edited by Donald J. Raleigh (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

the revolution, most Russians had abandoned thoughts of alternatives to Stalinism within the communist tradition and instead were struggling to adapt to the unstable and unpredictable economic conditions of the Yeltsin era. Yet at the same time, the opening of former Soviet archives had allowed both Russian and foreign scholars to explore the events of 1917 in ways not possible before – through the eyes of women, peasants, inhabitants of the provinces, minority nationalities, by publishing documents from the history of non-Bolshevik parties, and so forth.

Now we have reached 100 years since the Russian Revolution of 1917; numerous special conferences and panels are being held to mark the anniversary, and many books about the revolution have been published. Some of the topics are old – about workers, sailors, dual power, while others explore new themes like gender, sexuality, and memory. Some focus on the events in Russia, while others look at the revolution's international context and its reverberations not only in Europe but also in European colonies. Ideological perspectives vary, as some conference organizers seek lessons from the Russian Revolution for building a more successful revolutionary socialist movement, while others hope to discover why the liberal institutions formed during the February Revolution failed to take root. Nationalism remains on the scene as well, for one conference looks at 1917 not primarily as the year of a Russian revolution, but as the first year of Ukraine's short-lived statehood.

Not only have conferences been held and books published, but numerous museum exhibits around the world are showcasing artifacts from 1917 during this anniversary year. For example, the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia in Moscow put on display over 1,500 rare October 1917

Revolution artifacts, including hand-written notes by Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and a window from the iconic cruiser Aurora.<sup>4</sup> One of the most promising developments during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year has been the explosion of digitized primary sources about the revolution, which are going online. Russian archives and libraries are digitizing and posting on their websites copies of 1917 documents, newspapers, memoirs, images, and more. All of this should enable students of the revolution to draw meaning from it for decades to come.

For all these developments to have an impact, however, the revolution must remain alive and engaging in popular culture. China Miéville's book *October* serves this goal by means of its energetic style, vivid characterizations, and rapid pace. It rekindles the optimistic spirit of the Russian revolutionaries in 1917, before Civil War crashed upon the people. Perhaps his book will help rescue the Russian Revolution from its near disappearance in many current history textbooks and in popular awareness. I congratulate him upon the release of his book.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sovrhistory.ru/events/exhibition/58becc2aa0e5981d9da515c4;>  
[http://vm.sovrhistory.ru/sovremennoy-istorii-rossii/specproekt-semnadcatiy-god/#/.](http://vm.sovrhistory.ru/sovremennoy-istorii-rossii/specproekt-semnadcatiy-god/#/)