

The Unimaginable Revolution: 1917 in Retrospect

JOHANN P. ARNASON*

Nepředstavitelná revoluce: rok 1917 v retrospektivě

Abstract: The essay takes off from current controversies about Communism, and on the relative weight of its cultural, political and economic components. The discussion then moves, in light of recent historical scholarship, to problems of conceptualizing the revolutionary process that gave rise to Soviet Communism. A strong emphasis is placed on the singularity of the Russian revolution, and on the limits to general theories of revolution. Hasegawa's revised work on the February revolution of 1917 is discussed at some length, and his interpretation of that event as an interaction between popular and liberal forces is accepted. The following months saw the emergence of multiple revolutionary movements, but also the strengthening of an organization and an alternative leadership with a project different from the main currents of the revolution, but capable of conquering power through a selective mobilization of revolutionary forces. The presuppositions of Bolshevism are analyzed, as well as the implications of its victory. The essay finishes with reflections on Stalinism and its roots in the revolutionary process.

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As the “end of history,” celebrated around the turn of the century (surely one of the flimsiest delusions of all times), gives way to a re-enactment of the cold war, it seems appropriate to reflect on background implications of the shift. The resurgence of the cold war imaginary, massive enough to confuse and aggravate a conflict structurally different from the supposed paradigm, is a complex phenomenon irreducible to any main actor or impulse. The present paper will not deal directly with its unfolding impact [for a recent judicious discussion, see *Legvold 2016*]. But to grasp the broader context, we need to reconsider both presuppositions and prompting circumstances of this recent – and very muddled – reawakening to history.

Rethinking Communism

The vision of an end to history, or more precisely a definitive triumph of “liberal democracy” over all conceivable alternatives, was based on strong assumptions about a certain counter-history having run its course. More important than anything else was the belief that not only had the Soviet Union disintegrated, but the Soviet model had departed from the scene, suffered a total collapse, and its history could be written as “the past of an illusion” [*Furet 2000*; the English translation unjustifiably replaces “past” with “passing,” thus suggesting an ongoing process, whereas Furet was unequivocally talking about a past

* Prof. Johann P. Arnason, Department of Historical Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, U Kříže 8, 158 00 Praha 5. E-mail: J.Arnason@latrobe.edu.au.

that had run its course]. This view was never more than wishful thinking, and the course of events – the rise and rise of China, the persistence of authoritarian rule in Russia, and a variety of unexpected developments in more peripheral ex-Communist states – soon dispelled the illusion of a clear exit from illusion. But the dominant response has, as noted above, been a return to earlier stereotypes and simplifications, rather than an effort to rethink expectations. This is not to belittle the vast amount of scholarly work done on the historical trajectories, mutations and legacies of Communism, and and on the implications of these factors for the prospects of the contemporary world. The opening of archives, the critique of ideological constructs, and the new possibilities of critical debate in post-Communist societies have brought the historiography and historical sociology of this field to a new level. However, the scholarly breakthrough has not had any decisive impact on the climate of opinion in the broader public sphere.

This is probably to some extent due to the complexity of the emerging picture, and to the variety of perspectives in play. Multiple aspects of the Communist experience have been explored in much greater detail than before, but there is still extensive work to be done on synthesizing the different approaches. For one thing, scholarly work produced during the last quarter of a century contains claims to the effect that the cultural, the political, the economic or the geopolitical dimensions of Communism deserve particular attention and have been highlighted by newly available sources. As an eminent historian puts it: “Without its transforming cultural objectives, Bolshevism makes no sense at all” [Read 1996: 300]. It is, on this view, the termination of the Soviet regime that enables us to put the aspirations and problems of the cultural project, as well as the resistance to it, into proper perspective. Politically centred interpretations will emphasize the beginning and the end of the trajectory from 1917–1918 to 1989–1991. At the outset, an exceptionally acute power struggle, culminating in an unprecedentedly radical change, determined the uses and understandings of ideological themes; in the final phase, unforeseen ramifications of political reform confronted the whole power structure with problems insoluble on its terms. This double reference becomes the defining context for analyses of the Soviet experience.

As for economic aspects, probably most prominent in popular narratives of Soviet decline and fall, an emerging line of argument maintains that enduring foundations were laid at a very early stage, when the victorious Bolsheviks had to cope with a spiralling collapse made worse by their mixture of ignorance and extremism. The continuity of the economic culture and strategy that crystallized in this setting, was obscured by labelling the early version as war Communism (although its basic contours were visible before the main round of the civil war) and the later stages as a planned economy. There were, obviously, significant organizational and institutional differences between early Bolshevik, Stalinist and post-Stalinist phases, but the continuity seems well expressed by the concept of *économie mobilisée*, used in French debates [Sapir 1990]; this might be translated as “permanent war economy,” and is reminiscent of Oskar Lange’s prewar description of the Soviet model as a war economy *sui generis*). Lenin’s 1918 reference to the creation of two separate components of socialism, the German war economy and the Russian dictatorship of the proletariat, may be read as a first indication of this turn. The long-term impact of the model thus anticipated was to prove a major obstacle to the change of economic institutions. A comparison with China would be instructive on this point as on many others, but

here I can only suggest a plausible line of analysis. On the level of economic policies, the Chinese Communist leadership was at first inclined to apply Soviet methods in principle while striving to accelerate development beyond Soviet precedents. When this strategy did not achieve the desired results, including the aim of imperial parity with the Soviet Union, the next step was a shift to more home-made but fundamentally unhinged visions of acceleration, linked to supposedly unique Chinese possibilities of mass mobilization; this combination marked the two decades of the Maoist ascendancy (1956–1976) and left the whole regime in an unsettled state that in the end made it easier to redefine the frameworks and priorities of development.

Finally, a geopolitical perspective will highlight the global context of Communist trajectories. The rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe after World War I was – not least – a response to a profoundly but ambiguously restructured constellation of powers. The pre-war empires of Central and Eastern Europe had collapsed, whereas the victorious Western European states found themselves in a situation marked by the vastly increased all-round power of the United States, although the implications were to some extent obscured by a temporary isolationist stance of the emerging superpower. At the same time, military success seemed to open up new prospects for Western hegemony in Africa and Asia, but this was obstructed by inter-imperial rivalry as well as by rising waves of resistance. Seen in this context, the totalitarian reconstructions of empire – beginning with the rebuilding of the Russian one under Bolshevik rule – appear as attempts to reverse or redirect global changes in progress. Their very different outcomes, especially when China – the main non-European case – is taken into account, show how difficult it is to define the last century in terms of a main trend.

In that connection, we may briefly digress on the American factor, not judged in the same way by all historians of the period. In an essay on rethinking the Russian revolution, Luciano Canfora [2017] raises the question of limits to the historical horizons of those who seized power in 1917 and launched the Soviet project; he suggests that two interconnected misperceptions were crucial. The ideologists and strategists of Bolshevism assumed that capitalism had, in principle, run its course, exhausted its possibilities, and reached a state of terminal crisis. They also failed to grasp the weight and significance of American involvement in global affairs, backed up by the most dynamic and increasingly dominant capitalist economy. The question of capitalism, its place in the Bolshevik imaginary and in the historical environment of the Soviet Union, will be revisited below. As for American influence, a very different view is taken in one of the most ambitious reinterpretations of early twentieth-century history, Adam Tooze's book on the "reconstitution of global order" between 1916 and 1931 [Tooze 2015]. In this perspective, the defining aspect of global constellation after World War I was "the painful fact that the United States was a power unlike any other. It had emerged, quite suddenly, as a novel kind of 'super-state,' exercising a veto over the financial and security concerns of the other major states of the world" [*ibid.* 6]. "The end of the war was thus the beginning of American hegemony, at first muted by an isolationist turn of foreign policy, but in the long run leading to the 'pax Americana' that still defines our world today" [*ibid.* 7]. Communism, fascism, and Japanese ultra-nationalism are then analyzed as responses to the imminent threat of an American world order; Churchill, Hitler and Trotsky are cited as witnesses to this historical conjuncture.

There is no doubt that Tooze's work throws new light on a crucial period. His argument is too complex to be further discussed here. But doubts may be raised about some of the most far-reaching conclusions. Is our world defined by a *pax Americana*? Does that kind of peace prevail across Eurasia? To ask that question is to answer it. And it seems clear that in this case as in many others, an overdrawn image of the present has affected perspectives on the past. Tooze's own account of contradictory American responses to the new situation suggest a more complicated storyline than the one summed up in his most condensed formulations: he describes the worldwide depression of 1920, precipitated by Wilson's defeat, as "perhaps the most underrated event in the history of the twentieth century," and the Great Depression of 1929 as the moment "when the all-consuming crisis of the early twentieth century claimed its last victim – the United States" [*ibid.* 28–29]. His references to protagonists of the supposed counter-offensives are also problematic. It seems well established that Hitler expected a final struggle for world domination between Germany and the United States, but this was a long-term perspective (to the extent that Hitler was capable of such things), and an open contest; occasional mentions of a looming American threat may have been designed to motivate supporters rather than to clarify prospects. Trotsky wrote some perceptive comments on the growing power of the United States, but they reflect a sensibility to international affairs that set him apart from the Bolshevik core. As for Stalin, whom Tooze also ranks among the politicians reacting to American ascendancy, there are good reasons to disagree. Stephen Kotkin's monumental biography of Stalin [*Kotkin 2015, 2017*] is very informative on this point. Stalin's strategic vision was, in the interwar years, resolutely and consistently Eurasian, in the broad sense that included the flanking insular powers at the western and the eastern end. He saw Britain as the main imperialist power, even after its relative decline *vis-à-vis* America should have been quite visible, and Japan as a particularly serious threat to the Soviet Union. That did not prevent him from paying particular attention to the geopolitically central problem of relations with Germany. But he seems to have underestimated the potential and – in due course – the ambitions of the United States. In the aftermath of World War II, two successive but divergent developments forced a change of perspective. Confrontation with the United States came earlier than the Stalinist leadership had expected (though partly as a result of its own actions), and the Soviet Union thus faced a more powerful adversary with a more assertive global policy than the image of mutually hostile imperialisms had allowed for. But very soon after this turn, the Communist victory in China held out the hope of a Eurasian bloc and a massive change in the geopolitical balance of power. That led, among other things, to the Korean War, which Stalin would not have allowed to go ahead without assurance of Chinese support. These different trends may to some extent explain the unsettled character of Stalin's foreign policy in his last years. It was left to his successors to try to rationalize relations with the US in a global environment where Soviet power was structurally inferior.

Finally, the imperial project pursued by Japanese ultra-nationalism was not foredoomed to a collision with the United States. An unequal compromise with Chinese nationalism, resulting in partial conquest of China and war against the Soviet Union, was a possible choice for the architects of Japanese expansion. To sum up, the conflicts, developmental paths and plausible alternatives of the twentieth century are best understood in terms of multiple geopolitical pattern and processes, rather than a unidirectional march of history (culminating, as we would now have to add, in the epiphany of Donald Trump).

Following the Weberian maxim that emerging historical constellations open up new perspectives on their past, the discussion below will examine the genesis of the Soviet model in light of later destinies, with reference to issues noted above: the multiple mutations that put an end to Communism as an integral regime, retrospective questions about its cultural, political or economic core, and to the specific problems posed by a geopolitical frame of reference. The last-mentioned aspect has until recently been given less attention than it deserves. Western cold war perspectives were disproportionately focused on ideology and politics; a stronger emphasis on economics came later, and with ambiguous implications: first because of concerns that the Soviet Union might after all prove more capable of economic competition than had been expected, later on the grounds that precisely economic failure had sealed the defeat of Soviet-type regimes. Notwithstanding the revival of cold war attitudes, post-Communist conditions have made the importance of geopolitics clear enough for it to be brought back into historical and sociological analysis.

This essay makes no claim to independent contributions on the historiographical level. The aim is, rather, to spell out some conceptual and interpretive lessons that can be learnt from the very rich harvest of historical scholarship on Communism as well as on early twentieth-century Europe, especially from works produced over the last quarter of a century. As will be seen, these lessons are largely related to the correction of traditional assumptions and limiting perspectives on the events in question. Efforts to reimagine the Russian revolution have been hampered by inadequate approaches. But the title referring to an “unimaginable revolution” has another and stronger connotation. The October revolution had a global impact surpassed only by its French predecessor (and if the influence of the latter was more lasting and far-reaching, that of “Red October” was more concentrated). But no revolution has been marked by a comparable gap between initially imagined goals and long-term historical outcomes. The process began with hopes for an imminent and worldwide proletarian uprising; it must, however, be assumed that there was from the outset a less explicit commitment to Russian leadership, not only in the sense of a first move, but also with a view to international guidance by the organization that was taking over Russia. The party as an ultimate decision-maker and an all-round supervisor had become an integral part of the revolutionary imaginary. At the end of the upheaval, after an explosion of violence and destruction unequalled in any other revolutionary process, the Bolsheviks found themselves reconstructing an empire, more capable of mobilizing power resources than its predecessor (and characterized, in its formative phase, by a more extreme despotism than the tsarist regime had ever achieved), but internationally more isolated.

To stress the distance between imagined beginnings and actual results is not to deny the role of ideas in the process. The Marxian thesis that human beings make their own history is as valid in this case as in others; and as Max Weber grasped better than anybody else, the pursuit of interests (in the broadest sense) that fuels the making of history is channelled by ideas. Bolshevik political culture centred on a set of ideas. The point is that these ideas were, when put to the test, imaginary significations with a surrounding field of meaning whose logic emerged in confrontation with unforeseen circumstances and led to results that took many of the protagonists by surprise. To cut a complicated story short, the seizure of power in the name of an authoritarian leadership superimposed on a mass movement (or, more precisely, on a briefly convergent set of mass movements) culminated

in the deification of despots, in human sacrifices legitimized either as judicial acts or as unavoidable side effects of progress, and in the model of a super-state claiming complete fusion with society. To clarify the context of these transformations, we must take a closer look as historical landmarks.

World War I as a Catalyst and Pathmaker

It is a commonplace that the first world war had major and lasting effects on subsequent history. George Kennan's description of it as "the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century" is one of the most frequently quoted statements on the subject; less frequently noted is the particular emphasis on "seminal," suggesting origins and directions rather than mere accelerating or disruptive effects on more central processes. This distinction is, as will be seen, relevant to the understanding of war and revolution in the Russian setting.

Traditional approaches to Russia's twentieth-century trajectory tended to see the involvement in an all-European war as an accelerating factor, speeding up a revolutionary dynamic essentially rooted in internal conditions. Variations on this theme could serve to distinguish liberal and Marxist narratives. To the former, acceleration caused by war played into the hands of extremist forces and favoured a radicalizing turn not unlike those known from brief episodes in the history of Western revolutions; but in Russia this gave rise to a new regime that lasted for three quarters of a century. After 1991, this view could be amended to the effect that Bolshevism had been a long parenthesis, after which Russia would return to a "normal" path of modernization. On the Marxist side, acceleration due to war was held to have opened the way for a socially and historically progressive deepening of the revolution; but Marxist critics of the consolidated Soviet regime could also argue that the impact of the war had aggravated problems and caused deformations or even derailed the whole process. A third perspective saw the war and the revolution as parts of a general, pan-European explosion of violence that marked the period from 1914 to 1918.

None of these approaches can be dismissed out of hand. If we want to move beyond them and spell out more specific connections between the world war and the revolutionary upheaval in Russia, the first step must be a closer look at the character and the unfolding of the war. In this regard, there is much to draw on in recent scholarship, and a convincing effort to revise standard accounts of a conflict that was long viewed from a primarily Western European (or more precisely Anglo-Saxon) vantage point. To introduce the new perspectives, a quote from Dominic Lieven's book on imperial Russia and the war seems particularly apt: "A basic point about the First World War" is that "contrary to the near-universal assumption in the English-speaking world, the war was first and foremost an eastern European conflict [...] The great irony of the First World War was that a conflict which began more than anything else as a struggle between the Germanic powers and Russia to dominate east central Europe ended in the defeat of both sides" [Lieven 2016: 2]. These observations call for further comments on the overall pattern of the war. Both historians and the broader public long favoured an interpretation that emphasized and blamed the rivalry of nation-states. This was an integral part of the Western-centred view. It is now more widely recognized that the war was, first and foremost, a multi-imperial conflict, to that date the most complicated of its kind. It involved two different groups of imperial powers, the Western European states with overseas possessions or affiliated territories and

the continental empires of Central Europe, Northern Eurasia and the Middle East. Germany may be seen as an intermediate case: it had acquired overseas colonies, but on home ground, it was an imperial power by virtue of its having incorporated a whole system of smaller states, and because of the presence of national minorities. It was also, as events were to show, disposed to conquest in Eastern Europe. But the rivalry of these major geopolitical actors was not the whole story. The European constellation left space for imperial or at least large-state aspirations by newcomers to the scene. Italian efforts to join the ranks of the great powers, at first unsuccessful, led to conquest at the expense of the weakened Ottoman empire. That precedent is generally believed to have had a part in triggering the Balkan wars against the Ottomans; the creation of a unified Italian state by the kingdom of Piedmont also became a model for Balkan states aiming at enlargement in the region. A greater Bulgarian state was cut down to size by its erstwhile allies, but Serbian visions of expansion remained active and were an important part of the background to the July crisis in 1914. More generally speaking, the sub-imperial periphery was an integral and lasting aspect of the European power cauldron. For one thing, the postwar resurrection of the Polish state was linked to activated memories of a much larger domain, leading to the invasion of Ukraine in 1920. To complete the picture, it should be added that imperial powers outside Europe were drawn into the conflict. Apart from American intervention, certainly not unrelated to the imperial vision and self-image that went back to the origins of the United States, two East Asian states intervened on very different premises and with contrasting results. Chinese participation in the war was very limited, but began with high hopes of improving the position of a declining empire; they were disappointed, and that experience did much to trigger a political and cultural upheaval in China after the war. These events, encapsulated in the 4th May movement, established new frontlines for internal power struggles and paved the way for Chinese reception of the emerging Soviet model in its double capacity as an alternative to the West and a recipe for restoring an empire. Japanese intervention was also limited, but much more successful. Japanese expansionist policies had already laid the foundations of an empire; the recognition of Japanese claims to German colonial footholds in East Asia helped to stimulate and legitimize further moves, and Japan's international standing was further consolidated by treaties after the war. At the same time, Japanese nationalist leaders could choose between three different strategies *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union: a war that would have continued the 1918–1921 intervention on a much larger scale, a *modus vivendi* that would facilitate offensives in other directions; or an alliance, at one stage seriously considered in influential circles. In the end, it was a version of the second alternative that prevailed. But the uncertainty about relations with Japan was of some importance for Soviet policies between the wars.

Finally, the view of World War I as a multi-imperial conflict entails some changes to the traditional chronology. Gewarth and Manela [2005] date a “war of empires” from 1911 (the Italian attack on the Ottoman empire) to 1923 (the end of the war between Greece and Turkey). But the picture can be extended. A global cumulation of imperial ventures during the last two decades before 1914 included a war between China and Japan, between the United States and Spain, and the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia. The ways of avoiding war developed in Europe before 1914 were not negligible, but they were clearly weakened by the overall dynamics of world affairs. As for the aftermath of the main conflict, it involved both interstate struggles and civil wars.

The Russian Empire from Crisis to Reconstruction

The prelude and the sequel to the revolution of 1917 should be placed in this broader historical context. Among the imperial powers in play, Russia underwent the most total collapse, the most brutal struggle about its future, and a uniquely radical rebuilding. To begin with a background factor, Russia went to war with memories of recent upheavals. It had suffered a defeat by Japan, followed by a peace settlement supervised by other powers, and by a revolution whose ultimate failure was due to dissonances between its driving forces, as well as to concessions later curtailed but hard to revoke completely. This recent past affected all responses to the new crisis caused by the war, not least the mutual perception of the last defenders of autocracy, the remnant of parliamentary institutions and the army that in the end was forced to choose between the former two. There was no similar case; the Ottoman situation was different in that a successful revolution had preceded territorial losses of a magnitude unique in that period, but the revolutionary project was active enough for the leadership to hope for redress through alliance with the most promising partners.

Russia's "imperial apocalypse" [Sanborn 2015] began with defeat, retreat and loss of territories in the last months of 1914, and continued the following year. The decomposition of the imperial army began at this early stage. According to Allan Wildman, who researched this process more thoroughly than any other Western historian, "wholesale desertions, plunder, and disorderly flight, compounded by the intermingling of hundreds and thousands of Polish, White Russian, and Jewish refugees" [Wildman 1980: 91] marked the beginning of a crisis that was to reach much more catastrophic proportions. But he also notes that the mutinies accompanying this breakdown did not in themselves "reflect an incipient politicization of the army" [*ibid.* 115]. The decisive impulse in that direction came from social and political upheavals in the rear. To put this next stage of the crisis in proper context, we must place due emphasis on specific factors, rather than on general backwardness and a discrepancy between ambitions and resources of the Russian state, frequently stressed in earlier scholarship. More recently, historians have shown that social and economic developments during the years 1914 to 1916 were not uniformly negative. It was a conjunction of two particular problems that brought about a crisis of revolutionary proportions, and it took a very distinctive spatio-political setting to force an escalation to ultimate stakes. A bread supply crisis in the main city centres combined with a breakdown of relations between the autocratic state and the remaining beneficiaries of its tenuous political concessions; a third and decisively aggravating factor was the mutiny that paralyzed the military response to popular protest in the capital. The result of all this was the next phase of imperial decomposition: a local and bipolar revolution. Its scene was St. Petersburg, and recent historical scholarship has done much to clarify the significance of that site. Karl Schlögel's writings [2009; 2017] are particularly insightful. Multiple aspects of the capital as an urban and political formation were relevant to the unfolding events. The spatial relationship between working-class suburbs and industrial quarters on the one hand, the centres of power, wealth and representation on the other, was a crucial circumstance. A public sphere originally created by autocracy in its own image, but now more weakly linked to that source (after several recent de-legitimizing upsets, from the firing on protesting crowds in 1905 to the departure of the ruler for the front), was therefore

more easily taken over by alternative powers. The proximity to a very vulnerable frontier, unusual among European capitals, affected the social and political atmosphere, and not least the mood of the army stationed in the capital (the neighbourhood of Finland, the imperial domain that had most effectively sought to chart its own path, also counted for something).

If the revolution that broke out in this setting can be described as bi-polar, that label should be clarified through confrontation with the more familiar notion of dual power. The victors of October constructed a narrative that became official truth in Soviet discourse. On this view, the February days had seen the triumph of a popular insurrection against tsarism, but without the kind of leadership that would have been needed to pursue power in a more sustained way. As a result, governmental authority fell to an improvised grouping of politicians, whereas the Petersburg soviet – and in due course a broader set of similar emerging institutions – retained some of the power growing out of revolutionary action, and during the year became a strategic basis for a second, more radical revolution. This story of a rapid rise to final victory did not survive the Soviet regime, but even before its fall, it had become clear that adversaries of the Bolsheviks could invoke an adapted version of the same narrative. “Dual power” then appeared as a fracture favouring the designs of a third party, marginal at first but gradually moving to centre stage. The Bolsheviks benefited from the weakness of the government and the unstable orientations of soviet power, and in the end they defeated the former and instrumentalized the latter.

It seems clear that the narrative model of dual power calls for more critical examination, and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa’s revised account of the February revolution [*Hasegawa 2017*] is a particularly instructive guide to the field. Hasegawa does not discard the very notion of dual power, but he makes several points that suggest a new view of the whole constellation. He admits that the “revolution from below provided the general framework, but the specific course of the February Revolution was determined by the conflict within established society,” and adds that “when the revolution did come, it was the liberals that tipped the balance between the to forces and who had the most telling effect on the specific course of events during the revolution” [*ibid.* 650, 652]. Hasegawa accepts Leopold Haimson’s thesis about a dual polarization inherent in the modernizing processes unfolding in tsarist Russia: “The revolt of the masses against the established order and the irreconcilable conflict between ‘society’ and ‘state’” [*ibid.* 639]. It was the specific interaction of these two trends in the conditions of war that shaped the trajectory of the first 1917 revolution; and if the “working class provided the most important source of social instability in Russia” [*ibid.* 639], direct confrontation with the state had to take place within privileged society. The conflict aced out on that level did not simply pit the liberals against the autocracy. There was also, in the final phase of the February revolution, a dispute on strategy among the liberals. Hasegawa stresses the different options favoured by Rodzianko and Miliukov: the latter, who prevailed, advocated the formation of a provisional government as a revolutionary body with strong if temporary powers, rather than subordinating it to the duma, which might then have been converted into a constituent assembly. Miliukov was obviously striving to maximize the power of the politicians who had taken over from a paralyzed autocracy and faced the task of managing an unfinished revolution. In the short run, this strategy was effective. The provisional government came into being with “enormous prestige, power and authority,” and Hasegawa describes it as a “paradox” that

it nevertheless came to rely on the “incomparably weaker and more divided” institution of the St. Petersburg soviet” [*ibid.* 660]. It seems a safe guess that the architects of the new centre saw the paradox as a short-term problem, resulting from the revolutionary circumstances to which they had responded. The fact that events took a very different turn was not due to any logic of dual power as such.

In a comment inspired by developments in Russia, though not directly related to the events discussed above, Max Weber noted that “great politics is always made by small groups (*Kreisen*) of people,” but that their action presupposes the support and “free commitment (*Hingabe*) of sufficiently broad powerful groups” [*Weber 1988: 106*]. Both the basic truth of this statement and the necessary qualifications can be illustrated by closer comparison with the 1917 trajectory. Great politics was certainly made by successive small groups, from the Duma Committee to the Bolshevik leadership. It is equally true that they always relied on the backing of significant social forces. But the Russian case also shows that the constellation of committed and participating forces could undergo rapid changes, and that this complicated the relationship between the background actors and the most visible players; it could also increase the distance between the two sides. The presence of divergent forces could enlarge the scope for action by the “small groups.” However, the interaction of forces and protagonists was always crucial, and it repeatedly led to results unintended by either side.

The soviet pole of dual power never replaced the governmental one. A proposal in that vein made at the beginning of March was only supported by a tiny minority, and when – almost eight months later – the government was overthrown in the name of soviet power, that was already a smokescreen for something very different. If dual power was important for further developments, it was in the capacity of an opening for divergent but in the upshot co-radicalizing processes, rather than a mechanism for transfer and re-transfer of power. Moreover, the war was, at all stages, a key factor in the evolving situation, and its effects changed with the overall picture. Following Hasegawa, it seems well established that the military urgency that had arisen at the beginning of 1917 favoured the liberals who had taken control in St. Petersburg. The plans for a military counterrevolution, associated with the generals Alexeyev and Ivanov, were serious, and they were not thwarted by mutinous soldiers. The decisive reason seems – when it came to the crunch – to have been the reluctance of the generals to launch an operation that would very likely have spiralled into civil war and dealt a fatal blow to Russia’s war effort. The politicians in St. Petersburg were aware of this, integrated it into their calculations and left the generals unclear about how far the civilian leaders were prepared to move against the monarchy. This micro-history of exchanges between very few people was the first but not last of such episodes in 1917; the interaction between Kerensky and Kornilov belongs in the same category, as does Lenin’s bullying of the Bolshevik leadership before the October insurrection.

A very different dynamic emerges when we consider the longer-term implications. If the provisional government started from a position of strength, it was – more than anything else – the war that undermined this advantage. No revolutionary government had ever come to power in a military situation comparable to the one faced by Russia in early 1917. Since the new liberal leadership was still committed to an imperial vision of the Russian state, no radical downscaling of war aims could be considered. On the other hand, a government aspiring to constitutional rule and public confidence could not speak

the same language as the defunct autocracy, neither on matters of war nor peace; some adjustment was needed, and that was bound to awaken disagreements. Most importantly, the continuing decomposition of the army deprived the government of its most decisive power resource. Historians disagree on the importance of “order no. 1,” issued by the St. Petersburg soviet and designed to democratize the structure of the army; it seems more appropriate to explain the links between social upheaval and army disintegration in terms of processes. Traditional notion of social revolutions tended to treat the upheaval in the army as a by-product of changes involving classes and their power struggles, but there are at least two weighty reasons to regard the revolts of the soldiers and the political activism of the soldiers as distinctive and momentous parts of Russia’s terminal imperial crisis. The clash between commanders and subordinates within the army differed in kind and degree from the class conflicts that spread throughout Russian society, and were more conducive to maximal radicalism without clear definition of aims; even more significantly, the disintegration of the army was an irreparable blow to state power, and thus to the position of the provisional government.

The transformation of power balances and conflict patterns in Russian society during 1917 was neither a unilinear turnaround of the divide briefly stabilized after the February revolution, nor a maturing of the whole revolutionary process into a new stage. Following the Czech historian Michal Reiman and his collaborators, whose work [*Reiman et al. 2013*] will be more extensively discussed elsewhere in this issue, it seems more adequate to describe the dominant trend as a growing divergence of distinct and in the end incompatible revolutionary logics. Against the traditional but untenable concepts of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions, Reiman proposes a dichotomy of civic and plebeian revolution, obviously related to the argument about dual polarization (between state and society and between upper and lower classes). The civic revolution, primarily associated with urban middle strata (not reducible to the Marxist notion of a bourgeoisie), aimed at constitutional limitations and the codification of citizen’s rights; in the given context, that was bound to include social reforms. The plebeian revolution demanded an overthrow of the privileged classes, without much interest in constitutional or institutional innovation as such, and could easily drift into visions of liquidating class enemies. A growing tendency to identify democracy with the collective action of the oppressed classes reflects the ascendancy of this current in the summer and autumn of 1917.

The distinction between civic and plebeian revolution is convincing, as far as it goes. But questions may be raised about additions and modifications. Some nuancing of social affiliations is needed. There is no doubt that the Mensheviks – and to a lesser extent the Socialist Revolutionary Party – were aligned with the project of a civic revolution, and to the extent that they influenced working-class action, the civic logic had a foothold in that social milieu. One of the significant examples is working-class support for efforts to replace the Bolshevik government (after its self-proclamation at the congress of soviets) with a coalition of socialist parties; that strategy was inseparable from the hopes linked to a constituent assembly. On the other hand, the notion of a plebeian revolution calls for further differentiation in regard to worker-, peasant- and soldier-based struggles. It is a noteworthy point that the peasantry took the logic of plebeian revolution much further towards social secession than other actors; the outcome was a significant revival of rural institutions that had variously been seen as possible stepping-stones to socialism or obstacles to

non-revolutionary modernization. Neither of these expectations was confirmed by the events of 1917 or their aftermath.

Not the least important reason for further reflection on Reiman's dichotomy is the cluster of national revolutions that accompanied the downfall of the empire. There is certainly room for applying the distinction to these diverse cases, but with due allowance for varying patterns of dispute and interaction between the two logics. To mention only two particularly striking examples, the Menshevik government in Georgia (overthrown by Bolshevik intervention after a very short reign) seems to have striven to reconcile civic and plebeian aims, whereas the conflict between them was one of the factors that led to civil war on the threshold of Finnish independence.

However, the most pressing question in regard to Reiman's conceptual scheme is what to make of the revolution that did prevail over both of the alternatives most visible until late in 1917. The Bolshevik takeover was undoubtedly a revolution within the revolution, but as Reiman rightly insists, "proletarian" and "socialist" are equally inappropriate labels. It goes without saying that "Red October" and its more decisive sequel had nothing to do with a civic revolution; and in view of the sustained Bolshevik push for a power monopoly, from the outset and throughout the following years, they were obviously not acting in the spirit of plebeian revolution. The roll-back of popular resistance, autonomous collective action and alternative political currents became a defining feature of Bolshevik rule. A concise label for the transformation that took off between the insurrection in St. Petersburg and the consolidation of a Bolshevik dictatorship is not easy to find. But a somewhat more complex description might refer to a Jacobin, military, statist and imperial revolution with democratic pretensions, significant urban popular support, anti-statist self-imagery and internationalist delusions. If we use the concept of Jacobinism in Eisenstadt's sense, denoting the vision of a political vanguard equipped with ideological prescriptions for rebuilding society, Lenin's takeover was the paradigmatic breakthrough of that kind. The French revolutionary episode that gave the phenomenon a name was a first adumbration, limited by dependence on a representative institution which the original Jacobins could not fully control. The question of later variations on Lenin's model is too complicated to be pursued here. Kautsky's reference to Mussolini as "Lenin's monkey" is not inappropriate; it is much more difficult to defend the idea that Bolshevik precedents inspired National Socialism.

It was the control of strategically situated military units, in conditions of generalized military breakdown, that enabled the Bolsheviks to gain power in the main city centres; a popular basis, also strategically located, was nevertheless crucial to the survival of the regime. The construction of a new power apparatus signalled a shift to revolution from above, but that turn must be seen in a longer-term context. As argued above, the February revolution was already an interplay of action from below and from above. At the other extreme, Stalin's revolution from above, beginning at the end of the 1920s, instrumentalized urban aspirations to change as well as antagonisms within rural society, and can to that extent be said to have incorporated residues of a revolution from below. The two dynamics thus interacted, in drastically changing proportions, for some two decades (if we regard the great purge as the concluding phase of the revolutionary process, as distinct from the longer trajectory of the Soviet regime). There is no doubt that the Bolshevik seizure of power marked a statist reorientation; but the paradox of this strategic shift was that the vision of an all-encompassing party-led transformation served both to enhance and

to disguise the statist implications. The notion of the party as a totalizing institution and a sovereign maker of history became, in practice, a framework for a new type of state-centred development. At the same time, the party was imagined as a unifying focus for social activities and aspirations, thus holding out a promise for an ultimate fusion of state and society. In this connection, a few words may be said about Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written in hiding in the summer and autumn of 1917 but not published, and therefore not accessible to any broader readership, until early in 1918. There is consequently no reason to assume that Lenin regarded this text as important for the revolutionary action launched in October. A more plausible view is that he felt a need to clarify the long-term ideological perspective required to sustain the conquest and maintenance of state power. But if the text is read in isolation, even this view may seem hard to defend. The Italian Marxist Lucio Colletti (later a prominent follower of Berlusconi) once wrote that *State and Revolution* related to the state created by Lenin and his successors roughly as the Sermon on the Mount to the Vatican state. On a less evangelical note, some authors have interpreted the text as an attempt to theorize direct democracy, with reference to the soviet movement, but in a short-lived atmosphere of optimism about mass support and international impact. The insoluble problem with this reading is that it has to construct a brief but radical break with the notion of the party as a vanguard, defended in Lenin's earlier representative writings and unmistakably applied in practice and propaganda when he acquired the power to follow it up. This is a hermeneutical absurdity, and the obvious alternative is to assume that the party – though not theorized in the context of the vanishing state – is taken for granted as an agency of transformation and mobilization. *State and Revolution* was never meant to be a comprehensive exposition of Leninism, nor written for direct strategic purposes. Its specific task was to spell out the anti-statist promises of the supposedly imminent revolution, while avoiding the issue of super-statist implications built into the project.

Finally, the real historical and geopolitical space available for international aims was the domain of the Russian empire, with certain limitations. The secession of the north-western periphery – Poland, the Baltic countries, Finland – had to be accepted, but as later events were to show, it was regarded as unfinished business. Whether the half-hearted intervention of foreign powers might have led to more extensive loss of territories is an open question; the most serious possibility was certainly Japanese conquest of the far eastern region, still feared by Lenin's successors. But the way things developed, the international – or more precisely trans-national – dimension of the revolutionary transformation was a rebuilding of the collapsed empire, on a somewhat diminished territorial basis and in new social and political forms. It became officially an empire of nations united under a universalist centre. One of the paradoxes of Soviet history – and not the least important in its final stage – was that an ideologically internationalist and effectively transnational power structure became a promoter of nation-forming processes, albeit with specific – and in the Stalinist phase very brutal – constraints.

The Russian Metamorphosis of Marxism

All the aspects mentioned above have to do with the intertwinings and discrepancies of ideological visions and actions in pursuit of power; that raises further questions about the sources and character of the ideas that entered into the Russian revolutionary process.

Four different approaches to this field have been most in evidence. The ideas of Leninism, explicit claims as well as tacit presuppositions, have been interpreted as derived from Marx and the Marxism of the Second International, or as a result of the revolutionary intelligentsia appropriating the vision of coercive Westernization represented by Peter the Great (but this time with the twist that a superior version of the West was envisaged). In a very different vein, they have – despite their militantly anti-religious stance – been traced back to religious sources, either a distinctive Messianism of the Orthodox tradition or the universalist vision of Russia as a third Rome. Finally, some authors have seen Lenin's key texts, especially *What Is To Be Done?*, as malign innovations and landmark steps towards the invention of totalitarianism. It cannot be said that these different perspectives have ever been debated in a way likely to facilitate comparison of their merits and weaknesses.

That state of things is a good reason for considering a view different from all those listed above, and to the best of my knowledge never discussed, but – as I will argue – likely to throw new light on the others. Franz Baermann Steiner (1909–1952), a long neglected but now gradually rediscovered thinker with roots in the Jewish cultural milieu of inter-war Prague, left a rich collection of notes and sketches which he did not live to elaborate. Commenting on the kind of Marxism that had become an exclusive official ideology in post-revolutionary Russia, he wrote: “Marx is Russia's Descartes. He does not come after, but instead of Descartes; he is the Descartes of human groups instead of individual reason. Instead of, and as an equivalent of ‘Cogito ergo sum,’ we now have the teaching of the class struggle; the collective form – the authentic reality – exists inasmuch as it seeks to defend, maintain or establish a social order” [Steiner 2009: 384]. The formulations are somewhat condensed, but Steiner was thoroughly familiar with classical Marxism, and knew that the Marx transfigured and canonized by Lenin was not identical with the original; the message is not difficult to decipher. For Lenin and his followers, the evidence of the class struggle – in the broad sense of a clash between polarized groups with alternative societal projects – was the unassailable foundation of social science, the key to historical development, and not least a condition of possibility for the harmony of partisanship and truth. To spell out the foundations of this class foundationalism, we must add that it defined Lenin's vision of capitalism and its progress in Russia. Capitalism was, as he saw it, first and foremost a socio-economic regime developing towards a visibilization, simplification and escalation of class conflict. This shortcut between capital and class replaced Marx's much more complex and unfinished analyses of capitalism and class formation (as often noted, the so-called third volume of *Capital* ends, after a long journey through the labyrinth of capitalist development, with bare prolegomena to a theory of social classes). That has not gone unnoticed in critical scholarship on Lenin, but Steiner's observation helps to place it in a more revealing context. The “Russification” of Marxism, as conceived and imposed by Lenin, was a re-contextualization of the Western Enlightenment, with an exacerbated but also more elaborately masked version of its dissonances between particularism and universalism.¹

¹ There are other examples of Marxism adopted in non-European cultural settings and becoming a privileged bearer of specific hopes and promises – or illusions – associated with the Enlightenment. Masao Maruyama [2006] explained the importance of Marxism in modern Japanese thought in terms of its perceived capacity for critical and context-transcending thought, hence on very different grounds than those emphasized in Steiner's comments on the Russian case. There is obviously comparative work to be done in a broader context, including China and India.

Steiner's suggestion can be taken one step further. If the reception of Marx's work in Russia led to an interpretation that credited him with a quasi-Cartesian achievement, the logical next stage of a highly compressed development corresponded to the transmutation of the *cogito* into a transcendental subject. That step was taken in *What Is To Be Done?*, with Lenin's conception of the party as a vanguard with a mission to maintain the unity, the objective interests and the long-term orientation of the class. The party thus acquires a quasi-transcendental jurisdiction over empirical expressions and meanderings of class action. The problem that spurred this turn was the threat of spontaneous and fragmented struggles obscuring the path prefigured by class foundationalism. If we stay with Steiner's comparison, that danger was analogous to the empiricist decomposition of the *cogito*.

The main merit of Steiner's thesis is that it identifies a significant but unacknowledged shift inherent in the very transfer of Marxian ideas to Russia. In light of this basic ambiguity (a claim to Marxist orthodoxy made in the name of a misconceived deviation), attempts to "rediscover" Lenin [e.g. *Lih 2008*] through an exhaustive survey of his links to German Marxism are pointless. To ignore the distance between the invoked German sources and Lenin's highly charged pre-understanding of them. That aspect gives us a key to the relationship between Western and Russian sources of Bolshevism, and more specific links to Russian traditions can be integrated into the picture. The imaginary elevation of class makes it easy to claim "progressive" legacies of earlier ruling classes, including those who supposedly determined the modernizing strategies of Russian rulers. The question of religious sources is more complicated, but some suggestions may be made on the basis of interpretations developed in other contexts, especially in the debate on secularization and its underlying Christian presuppositions. The work of Hans Blumenberg is particularly instructive in this regard. His line of argument is, in brief, that the idea of enduring religious contents (especially visions of salvation) in secular disguise is untenable, but that the modern secular modes of thought and interpretations of the world are conditioned by the preceding patterns with which they break, and by the circumstances of the break. Secular visions of the world and of the human condition have to meet demands for orientation that survived their original religious framework, fulfil inherited criteria of meaning, and answer questions that remain on the agenda. If the prevalent Russian understanding of Marxism makes it appear as a narrower but precisely for that reason more uncompromising version of the Enlightenment, the lessons derived from Western debates on secularization may be applied to the Russian constellation. The question is too complicated to be tackled here in any detail, but some remarks are in order on Lenin's response to the problem of demarcation from religion without conceding any terrain to it.

On the most elementary level, Lenin had to condemn the attempts of heterodox Bolshevik intellectuals to add a religious message to the idea of the revolution. This was a minor skirmish, but it led directly to more fundamental moves. A key theme in Lenin's first major intervention in philosophical debates, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, is the dismissal of philosophical idealism (and especially the subjective idealism seen as more prominent in contemporary thought) As a philosophical text, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is worthless, but as an ideological pronouncement, it defined a guideline that remained in force during the subsequent Soviet period. For the damnation of religion (and by association of idealist thought) to be sustainable, the revolutionary vanguard – supposedly

constituted by the Bolsheviks – had to claim possession of a comprehensive and self-contained world-view. Lenin praised the all-powerful truth and all-round coherence of Marx's teachings, but this was an imaginary construct. European Marxism had not reached that stage of ideologization, and Russian additions had not gone beyond statements of authority and intent. Engels's writings, especially *Anti-Dühring*, were the closest thing to a systematic coverage, but they did not add up to the kind of world-encompassing ordering and explanatory model later produced under the label of dialectical materialism. That could only take shape with the aid of political control and prescriptions. But the result was an ideological edifice comparable to the most elaborate religious doctrines, and complete with a hierarchy of prophets. This was supposed to be a system of rational principles and procedures, conferring total meaning, capable of justifying a social order and its dominating party-state as the culmination of a progress defined in cosmological terms. It was the most extreme version of the attempt to fuse rationality and meaning that Jan Patočka ascribed to the radical type of modern civilization. On the other hand, the similarities to religious systems of belief are too significant for the concept of secular religion to be dismissed. Within that category, some further differentiations will be needed, not only when Communism is compared with other secular religious phenomena, but also between varieties of the former. In the case of Maoism, the deification of a supreme leader went further than in the original Stalinist model, at the expense of systematic ideology, and of the rationality claims linked to it. Secular religions are not simple or uniform returns of the sacred; rather, they represent varying combinations of more or less significant adaptations to inherited religious patterns, across a cultural and political divide.

Making Sense of Stalin

Neither the ideological foundations nor the political structures of the renewed empire were completed by Lenin. His writings after the seizure of power do not even contain clear indications of ways to go; least of all can such pointers be found in his much-quoted and overrated last texts, marked by rapidly failing health. But strange hints appear even before October. Lenin's musings on the ability of the Bolsheviks to maintain their expected hold on state power, written a few weeks before the St. Petersburg insurrection, draw a comparison with the pre-revolutionary ruling elite and conclude that victorious revolutionaries should at least have the same staying-power as their predecessors. The question would hardly have arisen if an international revolution had been taken for granted; in such circumstances, survival in power would have been guaranteed. The whole argument suggests a caveat that was not in evidence when Lenin pressed for instant action. His obsession with the bid for power was overwhelming, but seems to have allowed for occasional glimpses of problems that might upset the scenario. Even so, the argument is puzzling. Lenin ignores the fact, obvious by then, that the Bolsheviks would have to put a collapsing empire together again, and restore it to the status of a great power – something that the tsars and their officials had worked on for several centuries.

Another example of rambling rationalization can be found in a later text, a review of N. Sukhanov's book on 1917. Lenin rejects the criticism that the Bolsheviks had acted against Marxist theory by seizing power in a country where the conditions for a socialist society had not been created; his rejoinder is that it is possible and historically legitimate

to take power and use it to create the conditions in question. In other words: is there anything wrong with standing a theory on its head and then pretending that it is still the same theory?

The unwavering logic of Lenin's policies after October was the effort to consolidate a Bolshevik monopoly of power. In the initial phase, he assumed that this power could be used to bring about a rapid social transformation, but by 1921, that project had collapsed. The regime characteristic of the following period, known as NEP, was neither a coherent model nor a conceivable long-term option. Its core component was a political monopoly, uncompromisingly defended, combined with loosely defined concessions and relaxations in the economic and cultural spheres. None of the political factions that emerged after Lenin's death had a privileged Leninist legitimacy; but whatever the textual basis, there is a growing consensus to the effect that Stalin's "socialism in one country" was a logical continuation of Lenin's reorientation after the abandonment of hopes for revolutionary breakthroughs in Europe. It is now, in any case, generally agreed that Stalin, rather than Lenin, was the main architect of the Soviet state and the protagonist of its resurrection as a great power, modernized in immensely costly and destructive but in some regards very effective ways. But it is also beyond dispute that he was one of history's great mass murderers, and that he presided over the creation of a regime that incorporated both slavery and serfdom into its power structures. It is not proving easy to strike the appropriate balance between these two aspects of Stalin's record. In a recently published book on Lenin as the inventor of totalitarianism, Stéphane Courtois, editor of the *Black Book of Communism* and an author unsuspectable of any sympathies for Communist theory or practice, refers to Stalin as the "greatest politician" [*le plus grand homme politique* – Courtois 2017: 443], at least in the sense that he used the means at his disposal most successfully to achieve his ends. Faced with such statements, one is tempted to quote Elias Canetti [1980: 523]: "The respect for the 'great' of his world is very hard to destroy." But if we want a more detailed response, we will have to take a closer look at the record.

We can start with a reminder of contingency. Stalin's success, such as it was ("triumphant debacle" is Kotkin's word for the initial phase of crash-through collectivization and industrialization) cannot be seen as historically necessary. The "great socialist offensive" launched at the end of the 1920s might have ended with the self-destruction of the regime. One of Stalin's many paradoxes seems to be that he was, most of the time, a cautious politician averse to grand risks; but when he gambled, he did it in colossal style. There may, however, be a relativizing point to make. As Stalin is likely to have seen it, long-term coexistence with a very insufficiently controlled peasantry was no less a gamble than the offensive that was chosen, and only the latter was in line with the vision of an empowered socialist state. But when it comes to the great purge of 1936–1938, and especially to Stalin's murderous rampage through the elites and institution on which he had previously relied, matters are more complicated. The chaos caused by the purge was such that it is easy to imagine it spiralling into a collapse, and no sufficient reason has been found for Stalin's decision to embark on a massacre of this magnitude. The question will be considered from another angle below. A third case is perhaps best described as a situation where caution became indistinguishable from gambling. The decision to avoid anything that might provoke a German attack, in the hope that a quasi-alliance might last a little longer, was also a gamble, and turned out badly (there is no evidence to suggest that Stalin ever expected a

long-term partnership). In light of later events, and of Hitler's whole way to fight the war, it is tempting to suggest that Stalin unknowingly outwitted him; but the claim goes too far. No historical necessity guaranteed that the geopolitical entanglements culminating in World War II would end with the destruction of Nazi Germany by an alliance of the Soviet Union and Western powers.

In short, a non-determinist reading of the record has to admit that Stalin might have gone down in flames. A closer examination of his rule will reveal more specific internal weaknesses that help to explain later developments, both the need for hastily improvised reforms when Stalinism – properly speaking – decomposed with the death of its founder, and the impossibility of a more thoroughgoing reform when the regime faced a crisis. A good starting-point is Kotkin's comment on Stalin's much-quoted saying about cadres deciding everything. Kotkin notes a subtext: it is the reliability of officials in the state and party apparatus, their loyalty to the supreme leader, that counts for most, and this emphasis implies a downgrading of institutions. Stalin has gone down in history as a state- and empire-builder, but his capacity for institution-building in a more specific sense was of a lesser order, as shown by his remorseless battering of institutions whose integrity and functioning should have mattered to him (a certain minimal consolidation of institutions was therefore the first task of those who had to ensure the survival of the Soviet Union after Stalin). It was the bond between leader and cadres that supposedly decided everything. This point has a direct bearing on the understanding of the great purge. Kotkin is undoubtedly right to stress the overwhelming evidence for calculation behind the massacre, but there was another side to it. In view of the whole context, it is plausible to assume that the calculation was inspired by a vision: a total identification of subordinates with the wisdom and strategy of the leader was what Stalin strove for. The cadres that had supported him against various oppositional groupings were suspect because they had acted and matured in an environment marked by opinions and strategies in conflict. Their replacement by new people was to ensure closer bonds. The "social mobility" resulting from the purge, often noted by historians and sometimes seen as a symptom of social pressures behind the onslaught on the party-state apparatus, seems to have been an organic part of Stalin's strategy.

This analysis will, however, remain one-sided if it is not complemented by another perspective. Stalinism was not simply a drive for total control by an all-powerful leader. There was, notwithstanding the weak grasp and feeble identity of institutions, a specific institutional aspect of the regime that should be noted; it had to do with the institutionalization of ideology. Here we must take issue with Kotkin in a more critical fashion. As a biography, his work is a masterpiece unlikely to be surpassed by later scholarship on the subject; there are more problems with his ideological interpretation of Stalin. He is certainly right to insist that Stalin was both an ideologist and an ideology-builder and that anti-capitalism – in the double sense of building an anti-capitalist order and defeating capitalist encirclement – was central to his outlook. But what did capitalism mean for Stalin? Kotkin's remark on the "use of capitalism as an antiworld" [2017: 7] appears to be on the right track, but he does not take it further. His weirdly inadequate approach to the history of ideas interferes with the argument. He writes: "The tragedy began unfolding with the very invention of 'capitalism.' Once markets and private property were named and blamed as the source of evil, statization would be the consequence" [*ibid.*: 302]. This suggests a

linguistic determinism hard to take seriously. The history of the notion of capitalism is much more complex than Kotkin suggests. To the best of my knowledge, it is generally accepted that it was introduced by Louis Blanc in the 1840s, but had no broader impact at the time. Marx very rarely used it; he preferred to talk about the capitalist mode of production, with strong emphasis on the power structures and conflicts built into this organization of social labour. Capitalism became a more central concept of a more complex reality in the works of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers familiar with Marxism but critical of its reductionistic bent; Werner Sombart, Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter are the obvious cases, but Georg Simmel also deserves a mention, although the word “capitalism” was not as important for him as for the others. The growing insight into the complexity of capitalism (indulging its cultural dimensions) is thus first and foremost a Central European development, and so is the conflict of interpretations in the field, still relevant to theorizing about capitalism. All that was, of course a closed book to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but not so much because of sheer ignorance as because they had built a defensive wall against it. As noted above Lenin had adopted a more streamlined view of capitalism as a simplifier and polarizer of class conflict than Marx ever did; this entailed a more emphatically reductionistic view of politics and ideology as expressions of capitalist contradictions. A further step was taken in Lenin’s treatise on imperialism; the world war became a necessary result of these contradictions, and the amalgamation of war and capitalism completed the subordination of politics and ideology to the all-encompassing dynamic of an economic regime on the road to self-destruction. This was the view that Stalin inherited and adapted to his post-revolutionary strategy. A vastly simplified notion of capitalism became an over-extended symbol of Western modernity as a whole, up to and including its supposedly fatal propensity to global war; and overcoming this adversary became the mission of the renewed Russian empire. In fact, the regime remained – on practical, institutional and imaginary levels – more dependent on the horizons of capitalism than the official ideology could admit.

Stalin’s institutionalization of this ideology began in the early phase of the succession struggle after Lenin’s death and was completed in the 1930s. His speech at Lenin’s funeral was already an important step towards sacralizing the party, legitimizing a permanent purge as its *modus operandi*, dogmatizing Marxism-Leninism and preparing a more explicit claim to be the Lenin of a new age. Wolfgang Leonhard [2009] was one of the relatively few authors who took this episode seriously enough. One of the crowning pieces was the construction of the “four classics of Marxism-Leninism,” Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, as a spiritual authority superior to all institutional ones. This chain of prophets became the central axis of Soviet ideology. Stalin did not claim superiority over the other classics (and he was capable of disparaging himself through comparison with Lenin). But he was the last classic (the list was never meant to be extended), the only living one, and the ultimate interpreter of the others. In that sense, his position was not altogether unlike the Islamic image of Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets.”

The question of anti-capitalism is thus more complicated than it might seem to those fixated on a benign image of today’s really existing capitalism (it is hard to avoid the impression that Kotkin belongs to that school of thought). The revised picture of the ideological background, as outlined above, may raise new questions about some episodes in Kotkin’s biographical narrative. It is not being suggested that it will offer a better explanation of the

central enigma of Stalinism: the great purge. Nor can Kotkin be blamed for not offering a comprehensive explanation.² Nobody has so far done that. This may be one of the cases where the limits of historical explanation become most visible. But tentative understanding will always venture beyond them. In this context, it seems best to end on that note. To make sense of Stalin, we need the work of Robert Tucker, Oleg Khlevnyuk and Stephen Kotkin, as well as the analysts of totalitarianism, from Arendt to Gauchet. But we also need Elias Canetti and his unique if cryptic insight into the nature and possibilities of power.

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Johann P. Arnason, born 1940 in Iceland, studied philosophy, history and sociology in Prague and Frankfurt. He taught sociology in Heidelberg and Bielefeld from 1972 to 1975, and at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia, from 1975 to 2003. He is now emeritus professor of sociology at La Trobe University and a founding faculty member of the Department of

² This seems to be the message (or one of the messages) of Sheila Fitzpatrick's less than enthusiastic review of Kotkin in *The London Review of Books* [Fitzpatrick 2018].

historical sociology at the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University, Prague. His research interests centre on social theory and historical sociology, with particular emphasis on the comparative analysis of civilizations. He has written several monographs and articles including Social Theory and Japanese Experience (1997) and Axial Civilizations and World History (2005).