

# Editorial

1917 is considered the „key year“ of the 20th century – the „hinge between the long 19th century and a new world order“, as it has recently been described by the historian Jörn Leonhard from Freiburg.<sup>1</sup> Whereas during World War I the previous European great powers were fighting a bitter, resources- and human lives-consuming struggle for predominance over “old” Europe and the world, in the third year of the war the outlines of a new world order became visible, which was soon to become bi-polar. Wilson or Lenin, democratic restructuring and the nations’ right to self-determination under US leadership or the revolutionising of the world according to Bolshevik ideas and under Soviet Union leadership – these were the utopian drafts of a “double-internationalism”.<sup>2</sup> Both concepts, the US American one and the Soviet one, could push through only indirectly and after civil wars against exhausted, highly indebted as well as morally and politically devitalised European powers. After 1917 both concepts became enormously attractive, in the context of which the new, dictatorial rule of the Bolsheviks, however, was not at all only a terrible vision but also a projection screen for longing for peace and claims to participation. At the same time these new political institutions, the “Soviets” (Councils), seemed to unfold new potentials for participation. Even Hannah Arendt, who clearly rejected the Communist ideology, temporarily considered the institution of the Councils an important stimulation for grass-roots democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Even if in early 1917 the Russian Tsarist empire, as a result of a long reform deadlock and a costly war, was close to economic bankruptcy and political-moral devitalisation, this does not sufficiently explain why the democratic forces did not go on pursuing Wilson’s ideas and were instead pushed away by the more successful Bolsheviks, to be finally destroyed. On the one hand we may point out to the irresolute attitude of the Liberal and Socialist democrats towards democratisation in their own country and the masses longing for peace. On the other hand, however, we may not neglect the Bolsheviks’ populist promises of imminent peace and a swift land reform; despite the propaganda in support of the Councils they did not seem to reject the intended constituent assembly, at least not categorically.

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- 1 Jörn Leonhard, 1917 – Relief eines Schlüsseljahres. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 30.1.2017.
  - 2 The same, Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges, München 2014, p. 651.
  - 3 On the concept of the Councils, their historical development in the course of the great revolutions since the 18th century and finally – from Hannah Arendt’s point of view – during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 see: Hannah Arendt, Interview mit Adelbert Reif. In: The same, Macht und Gewalt, 25th edition München 2015, p. 105–133, here 131–133; the same, Über die Revolution, 4th edition München 1994, p. 327–358. On the interpretation of the concept of the Councils in Arendt see recently Grit Straßenberger, Hannah Arendt zur Einführung, Hamburg 2015, p. 114–120.

However, the fact that the Bolsheviks were so successful after just a few months was also due to support of quite a different kind: The German Empire, being under heavy pressure at its western and eastern fronts, needed relief at the eastern front as soon as possible to be able to win the war in the West. Thus, parts of its traditional elites were playing “with the revolutionary fire”<sup>4</sup> when, in April 1917, helping the revolutionary and “peace apostle” Lenin to leave his exile in Switzerland for Russia. They hoped that the further revolutionising of Russia, of all, would result in the country leaving the war front and would thus result in the urgently needed relief in the East.

This ‘experiment’ worked very well, however the results it produced – even affecting Germany itself – had hardly been expected by anyone in Berlin. If Herfried Münkler speaks of the “powers of the underworld” which had been “unleashed by transporting Lenin through Germany”,<sup>5</sup> this is a telling statement concerning the personality of this revolutionary and the global dimension of the coming event. The founder of the Soviet Union as the ‘Messiah’ and as ‘anti-Christ’, the Bolsheviks as a peace-supporting power and new, militant political party, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a promise, brutal suppression and finally the Cheka and the “red terror” fired the imagination of the contemporaries already at an early stage and has been determining the agenda of historians up to these days.<sup>6</sup> Connecting to this, the historical shape and resonance of the Bolshevik October Revolution are the focus of this special issue. Six historians and political scientists approach the phenomenon of Lenin’s dictatorship from different angles. By a first step, light is shed on (conceptual) origins of the underlying concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its realisation in the first year of “Soviet power”, and the subsequent effects on Germany and Georgia are analysed. By a second step it is analysed in how far this caesura made critical contemporaries reflect on it. This is done by the examples of Russian sociologist Fedor Stepun, German historian and political scientist Arthur Rosenberg, and the education politician Siegmund Kunfi from Hungary.

*Mike Schmeitzner* in his study addresses the dictatorship of the proletariat which Lenin, connecting to Marx and Engels, exploited as a legitimacy resource and developed further from 1902 on. In this context it becomes obvious that right from the beginning Lenin’s concept was much more based on a rigidly disciplined

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4 Herfried Münkler, *Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914 bis 1918*, 2nd edition Berlin 2014, p. 547.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 549.

6 Of the publications of the recent years, the following ones are worth mentioning: Hélène Carrière d’Encausse, *Lenin*, München 2000; Robert Service, *Lenin. Eine Biographie*, München 2002; Christopher Read, *Lenin. A Revolutionary Life*, London 2005; Wolfgang Ruge, *Lenin. Vorgänger Stalins. Eine politische Biographie*. Bearbeitet und mit einem Vorwort von Eugen Ruge, edit. by Wladislaw Hedeler, Berlin 2010; Jörg Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror. Die Geschichte des Stalinismus*, München 2002; the same, *Verbrannte Erde. Stalins Herrschaft der Gewalt*, München 2012; Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered. What is to be Done?*, Leiden 2006.

and hierarchically organised party – the “avant-garde” – as well as on violence than it had been the case in the ‘classics’. This shift of emphasis was predominantly a result of a specifically Russian situation and traditions of thought which are only insufficiently outlined by referring to the predominantly agrarian structure of the country and the Tsarist autocracy. In how far Lenin, being the Social Democrats’ agrarian expert, attempted to integrate the ‘peasant factor’ into his concept of proletarian dictatorship is a question Schmeitzner discusses in detail, taking into consideration Lenin’s political strategy and tactics. It is undebated that already at an early stage Lenin identified proletarian dictatorship with three institutions which were supposed to be in charge of the coming transformation of society – that is the Party, the Councils and the government. In the debates on the relationship between Party and Councils the government, the executive, has been mostly neglected as an autonomous entity. Shortly after the precarious establishment of rule in late autumn, 1917, it became obvious that this new kind of dictatorship was predominantly based on the Party and the executive and less on the Councils which, after the second establishment of rule one year later, had only a backdrop function. Until immediately before this time, in particular Georgi Plechanow’s critique is woven in as a backdrop, as it had been him who, already since 1900, had popularised the dictatorship of the proletariat among the Russian Social Democrats and had much influenced Lenin.

*Werner Müller* and *Siegfried Heimann* in their studies deal with the effects of the October revolution or Lenin’s dictatorship on Germany and Georgia. Müller’s contribution focuses on the German Left and its diversity. Doing so, he discusses both unintended and purposefully initiated influences from Moscow: For the year 1917 he states a consensus across the divided left-wing camps, when both the MSPD (Majority Social Democrats) and USPD (Independent Social Democrats) welcomed the double revolution in Russia as a hope that peace might be achieved sooner. The Bolshevik move of dissolving the Russian constituent in early January, 1918, where the Bolsheviks had only been a minority, marked a clear rift. From then on the MSPD, being much influenced by the principle of parliamentary democracy, kept a critical distance to the Bolshevik Party ruling in Moscow, whereas the much more heterogeneous USPD became ever more entangled in debates on the question of parliament vs. Councils or a combination of both. Since early summer, 1918, the new Soviet-Russian embassy in Berlin on the other hand made several attempts to support German partners with their efforts for a revolutionary rising in Germany, in order of relieving the establishment of rule in Russia. Thus, Moscow tried to drive on the German revolution of November, 1918. In this context, the just founded KPD and quickly growing left wing of the USPD were considered partners and soon underlings. With the 21 conditions of the Moscow-initiated Third Communist International having been accepted, the Moscow dictators forced their ‘democratic-centralist’ principles of organisation also on the left-wing majority of the USPD which, after its unification with the KPD, initiated the March rising of 1921 – which had already been decided in Moscow – and, in contrast to the Russian rising of October, 1917, suffered a

complete disaster. If Müller in his contribution is able to demonstrate that more than just a few leftists in Germany were fascinated by the way and organisation model of the Bolsheviks and consequently supported them, Siegfried Heimann draws a different conclusion: In February, 1921, the Republic of Georgia, which had been granted independence from Russia in 1918, was overwhelmed by the Red Army despite fierce resistance and once again made a part of its bigger – if now Soviet – neighbour. The particularities of the development in Georgia until the renewed annexation are due to the country's democratic-socialist inner life: Although this small republic in the Caucasus had no major industry and working class, the Social Democratic Mensheviks had succeeded, via elections, to become the strongest party and to enforce a number of reforms – also in favour of the many peasants. They exercised a “dictatorship of the proletariat on a democratic basis” (Karl Kautsky) and thus acted as a democratic counterpart to the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks. They were most of all supported by the German Social Democrats and Kautsky himself.

The ways in which theory and practice of the proletarian dictatorship of the Bolsheviks were reflected by the thought of important contemporaries in Europe is very illustratively shown by Leonid Luk's portrait of the Russian sociologist Fedor Stepun. In the second half of the 1920s this intellectual, who had been banned from Soviet Russia in 1922, had found a new home in Germany, was a Professor at the TH Dresden from 1926 on, and published several contributions on the pre- and early history of the Bolshevik dictatorship in the Catholic “Hochland” journal. Stepun emphasized that also democrats had been responsible for the failure of the first Russian democracy after the February Revolution of 1917, and he also underlined the basically positive significance of a parliamentary democracy. In this respect this intellectual was different from other expatriates who found their way back to monarchism or indeed to inwardly accepting Bolshevik Russia. Furthermore, Stepun analysed the effects of the Bolshevik dictatorship on the individual as such – that is on its intellectual uniformity and mobilisation. *Mario Keßler's* study on the well-known German historian (and former KPD politician) Arthur Rosenberg once again views at one of the most important works of the latter – the “Geschichte des Bolschewismus (A History of Bolshevism)”, published in the final year of the German republic, that is in 1932. In contrast to Rosenberg's best known works, the two volumes on the creation and the development of the Weimar Republic, his history of Bolshevism was arguably his most debated publication. Rosenberg's book was no settling of scores with his own political past, which he had left behind in 1927, but a serious scientific analysis of an ideology and political system which he traced down while also having a keen eye on the long 19th century. For Rosenberg, the Bolshevik party concept was an “early version of Marxism” which had been “enormously progressive” for Russia itself but “reactionary” for the modern Western industrial countries.

Insofar, for him the October Revolution was a logical result of the historical development, although he soberly stated that after mid-1918 Soviet Russia had been a one-party state, a dictatorship of the minority. This fact again had “spelled doom” to “council democracy” already at that early stage.

If this work, due to its theses, was met with surprising response and opposition at the same time, at first in exile and then among the 1968 movement, Siegmund Kunfi’s comparative analyses of the Russian and French Revolutions were, strangely enough, rather neglected. Uli Schöler portrays a Hungarian-Jewish educational politician who, being a Socialist, headed the Hungarian Ministry of Education in early 1919 but went to exile to Austria as an opponent of the Communist-Socialist council republic and worked as a publicist there. Kunfi’s comparative backdrop – and this makes him appear alongside other contemporaries, such as French historian Albert Mathiez – was the French Revolution of 1789 which provided suitable “spectacles” also because the Bolsheviks themselves repeatedly drew parallels to the Jacobins. In contrast to Mathiez, however, Kunfi did not draw parallels to the period of the October Revolution but between the late 1920s and the period of Jacobin dictatorship. That was also why he did not focus on Robespierre and Lenin, like Mathiez, but on Robespierre and Stalin as well as on the respective political institutions, factions and social strata. Although such parallels were indeed stimulating, nevertheless the comparison looks problematic in view of how long these dictatorships lasted: the Jacobin dictatorship lasted just one year, and the Bolshevik dictatorship lasted a whole decade – at least from Kunfi’s point of view, who wrote his texts at about 1927. This then sheds a completely different light on dealing with the “Thermidor”.

Between the contributions and the reviews column, this edition presents a longer section with omnibus reviews discussing several selected new publications on the topic of the Russian Revolution(s). For this section, in particular publications on Russian, German and Austrian actors were considered. What all these actors have in common is their specific relation to Russia and the Bolsheviks – may it be of a reflecting or an immediately politicising nature. For their thought and actions, the year 1917 marked an extremely important caesura.

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