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*Cromwell, Robespierre, Stalin (and Lenin?): must revolution always mean catastrophe?*, by Bill Bowring

**Abstract:**

**Leon Trotsky, reflecting on British history, wrote: 'The 'dictatorship of Lenin' expresses the mighty pressure of the new historical class and its superhuman struggle against all the forces of the old society. If Lenin can be juxtaposed to anyone then it is not to Napoleon nor even less to Mussolini but to Cromwell and Robespierre. It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell. Such a definition would at the same time be the highest compliment to the petty-bourgeois seventeenth-century Cromwell.' In this response to the call for papers, I take Oliver Cromwell, Maximilien Robespierre, and Vladimir Lenin in turn. I ask whether Stalin has indeed become a "screen memory" whose dreadful image and legacy serves to besmirch the honour of the great European revolutions, in England, France and Russia, to which Trotsky referred. It is no accident, of course, that Cromwell and Robespierre have remained, since their respective deaths, controversial and even monstrous historical figures in their own countries. Would their rehabilitation, which has also recurred throughout the centuries since their own time, mean**

**that Stalin too should be rehabilitated and recovered as a revolutionary? My answer is an unequivocal “no”.**

**Keywords:**

**Revolution, Cromwell, Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin**

## **Introduction**

On 24-25 February 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his report, the “secret speech”, in which he denounced Stalin’s crimes and the ‘cult of personality’ surrounding Stalin.<sup>1</sup> This was a catastrophe for much of the left worldwide, even for Trotskyists who had spent their political lives denouncing the crimes of Stalin. For the loyal members of Communist Parties all over the world who had taken the greatest political and personal risks to defend the Soviet Union and Stalin himself against all criticisms, publication of the report was truly a cataclysm. The brutal Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Uprising, which lasted from 23 October until 10 November 1956, and in which 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops died<sup>2</sup>, put an end to any remaining illusions.

Many intellectuals abandoned the communist project. Some have sought to grapple with the significance of Stalin, who, in the name of “socialism

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary (1957), at <http://mek.oszk.hu/01200/01274/01274.pdf> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

in one country”, consolidated his authoritarian rule over a reconstituted and enlarged Russian empire. Alain Badiou, perhaps the most significant living intellectual seeking to reinvigorate the idea of communism, has argued<sup>3</sup> that Stalinism substituted “great referential collectives” – Working Class, Party, Socialist Camp – for “those real political processes of which Lenin was the pre-eminent thinker.” But he recognises that for many “... the only category capable of reckoning with the century’s unity is that of crime: the crimes of Stalinist communism and the crimes of Nazism.”<sup>4</sup> I will have more to say about Lenin later in this paper.

Slavoj Žižek, who has often been accused of crypto-Stalinism, wrote<sup>5</sup>:

It’s appropriate, then, to recognise the tragedy of the October Revolution: both its unique emancipatory potential and the historical necessity of its Stalinist outcome. We should have the honesty to acknowledge that the Stalinist purges were in a way more ‘irrational’ than the Fascist violence: its excess is an unmistakable sign that, in contrast to Fascism, Stalinism was a case of an authentic revolution perverted.

In this passage Žižek echoes Trotsky, for whom Stalin was the “personification of the bureaucracy”, the betrayer of the revolution,

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<sup>3</sup> Badiou 2007, pp. 102-3

<sup>4</sup> Badiou 2007, p.2

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, 2005

although Trotsky would never have subscribed to the idea of the historical necessity of the Russian Thermidor.

Trotsky was clear as to Lenin's antecedents, in a way which has in part inspired the writing of this article, and also expressed an admiration for Cromwell, which would not have occurred to Marx or Engels, for whom Cromwell was, as I will explore later in this article, the petit-bourgeois leader who suppressed the radical Levellers movements and butchered the Irish. Trotsky, reflecting on British history, wrote:

The 'dictatorship of Lenin' expresses the mighty pressure of the new historical class and its superhuman struggle against all the forces of the old society. If Lenin can be juxtaposed to anyone then it is not to Napoleon nor even less to Mussolini but to Cromwell and Robespierre. It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell. Such a definition would at the same time be the highest compliment to the petty-bourgeois seventeenth-century Cromwell.<sup>6</sup>

This article therefore asks whether Stalin has indeed become a "screen memory" whose dreadful image and legacy serves to besmirch the honour of the great European revolutions, in England, France and Russia, to which Trotsky referred. It is no accident, of course, that

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<sup>6</sup> Trotsky 1974, pp.86-7

Cromwell and Robespierre have remained, since their respective deaths, controversial and even monstrous historical figures in their own countries. Would their rehabilitation, which has also recurred throughout the centuries since their own time, mean that Stalin too should be rehabilitated and recovered as a revolutionary? My answer is an unequivocal “no”.

Of course, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, Stalin is indeed being rehabilitated in contemporary Russia, but not at all as a revolutionary, but as an authentic Tsar, precisely what Lenin at the end of his life warned against<sup>7</sup>.

Stalin was returning to pre-Revolutionary tsarist policy: Russia’s colonisation of Siberia in the 17th century and Muslim Asia in the 19th was no longer condemned as imperialist expansion, but celebrated for setting these traditional societies on the path of progressive modernisation. Putin’s foreign policy is a clear continuation of the tsarist-Stalinist line.

No wonder Stalin’s portraits are on show again at military parades and public celebrations, while Lenin has been obliterated. In an opinion poll carried out in 2008 by the Rossiya TV station, Stalin was voted the third greatest Russian of all time, with half a million

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm> (accessed on 12 February 2016)

votes. Lenin came in a distant sixth. Stalin is celebrated not as a Communist but as a restorer of Russian greatness after Lenin's anti-patriotic 'deviation'.<sup>8</sup>

And indeed, on 21 January 2016, President Putin told the Russian Council on Science and Education that Lenin was an 'atomic bomb' placed under the foundations of the Russian state.<sup>9</sup> Such denunciations of Lenin are now becoming a significant ideological marker for the Kremlin and its supporters. On 3 February 2016 General (retired) Leonid Reshetnikov of the SVR, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, and now Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), a think-tank for the SVR<sup>10</sup>, applauded Putin's words, and blamed Lenin also for the creation of Ukraine and its zombified anti-Russian population now controlled by the USA.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we can now expect the pulling down of the many statues of Lenin in Russia. Lenin, who would have detested such political idolatry, would be delighted at such an action, just

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<sup>8</sup> Žižek 2014

<sup>9</sup> "Захоронение дела Ленина: Апофеозом встречи с учеными стала идея Владимира Путина о том, что Владимир Ленин — это разорвавшаяся атомная бомба" *Kommersant* at <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2897527> (accessed on 8 February 2016), and "Vladimir Putin accuses Lenin of placing a 'time bomb' under Russia: Russian president blames revolutionary's federalism for break up of Soviet Union and creating ethnic tension in region", *The Guardian* 25 January 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/25/vladimir-putin-accuses-lenin-of-placing-a-time-bomb-under-russia> (accessed on 8 February 2016)

<sup>10</sup> See also Paul Goble 'Russian Think Tank That Pushed for Invasion of Ukraine Wants Moscow to Overthrow Lukashenka' at [http://www.jamestown.org/regions/russia/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43458&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=271db31b04e7a79825d85178132b9a8a#.Vr2vxflrLIU](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/russia/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43458&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=271db31b04e7a79825d85178132b9a8a#.Vr2vxflrLIU) (accessed on 12 January 2016)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/leonid\\_reshetnikov\\_ssha\\_visyat\\_na\\_voloske](http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/leonid_reshetnikov_ssha_visyat_na_voloske) (accessed on 12 February 2016)

as he would have preferred to be buried next to his mother rather than embalmed as a sacred icon in Red Square.

As to Stalin, in a press conference on 19 December 2013, Putin said, when asked whether statues of Stalin and Dzerzhinsky should be restored in front of the FSB's Lubyanka headquarters:

What in particular distinguishes Cromwell from Stalin? Can you tell me? Nothing whatsoever. From the point of view of our liberal representatives, the liberal spectrum of our political establishment, he is also a bloody dictator. And this very bloody man, one must say, played a role in the history of Great Britain which is subject to differing interpretations. His monument still stands, and no-one has cut him down.<sup>12</sup>

In the following section of this article I will turn to the figure of Cromwell, and to his "screen memory" as it functions in England.

A leading representative of contemporary Russian liberal thought, Andrei Medushevskii, has stated, taking me one step ahead to the next section of this article, which turns to Robespierre<sup>13</sup>:

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<sup>12</sup> Stenogram in the official *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* at <http://www.rg.ru/2013/12/19/putin-site.html>; and Ian Johnston "Stalin was no worse than Oliver Cromwell. The Russian President made the comments at a press conference after he was asked about a monument to Stalin being put up in Moscow" *The Independent* 20 December 2013 at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putin-soviet-leader-joseph-stalin-was-no-worse-than-oliver-cromwell-9016836.html> (both accessed on 8 February 2016)

<sup>13</sup> Medushevskii 1994, p.72



The most characteristic attributes of totalitarian states of recent times are everywhere the presence of a single mass party, usually headed by a charismatic leader; an official ideology; state control over the economy, the mass media, and the means of armed struggle; and a system of terrorist police control. Classic examples of totalitarian states possessing all of these attributes are Hitler's Germany, the USSR in the Stalin period, and Maoist China.

And he was clear that the roots of this phenomenon were to be found in Rousseau:

When Robespierre created the cult of the supreme being, he was consequently only acting as the true pupil and follower of Rousseau and at the same time as a predecessor of those many ideological and political cults with which the twentieth century has proved to be so replete.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Medushevsky necessarily referred to the ardent follower of Rousseau, Maximilien Robespierre.

In this response to the call for papers, I will take Oliver Cromwell, Maximilien Robespierre, and Vladimir Lenin in turn, before returning to the questions posed in this Introduction. The approach I adopt is not that of a professional historian or even of a historian of ideas. I want to bring

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<sup>14</sup> Medushevskii 1994, p.78

out some of the ways in which reflection on the destinies of the “screen memories” of each of these historical figures can help us to come to terms with the significance of “Stalin” for contemporary politics.

## **Cromwell**

Christopher Hill has done more than any other historian to explore the minute detail and to defend the actuality and honour of the English Revolution – and a revolution it certainly was, bourgeois or not. England was utterly changed. The English constitutional model to this day, parliamentary supremacy, is the direct consequence of Cromwell’s execution of Charles I in 1649. What is certain also is that as a result of the victories of Cromwell’s New Model Army, his Ironsides, England could not follow France in the direction of an Absolute Monarchy.

Hill wrote:

Historians have given us many Cromwells, created if not after their own image at least as a vehicle for their own prejudices... But there is a validity in the image of Cromwell blowing up the strongholds of the king, the aristocracy and the church: that, after all, is what the Revolution had achieved.<sup>15</sup>

That is precisely why Cromwell has remained an enduring point of sharp division in England, with educated people to this day identifying as

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<sup>15</sup> Hill 1970, pp. 257 and 262

Roundheads or Cavaliers, Parliamentarians or Royalists. The ‘Sealed Knot’ is the oldest re-enactment society in the UK, and the single biggest re-enactment society in Europe. To join and to refight the battles of the English revolution, you must identify as a Cavalier or a Roundhead, and there is no shortage of Roundheads.<sup>16</sup>

I must declare a family interest in this matter. Hill describes the fact that in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Whigs had portraits of Cromwell, and “so did John Bowring, a radical fuller of Exeter, grandfather of the biographer of Jeremy Bentham”.<sup>17</sup> This biographer and Bentham’s literary executor and editor of the first edition of his works, also named John Bowring, my ancestor, wrote

My grandfather was a man of strong political feeling, being deemed no better in those days than a Jacobin by politicians and a heretic by churchmen. The truth is that the old Puritan blood, inherited from a long line of ancestors, flowed strongly in his veins, and a traditional reverence for the Commonwealth was evidenced by a fine mezzotint print of Oliver Cromwell, which hung in his parlour. He took a strong part with the Americans in their war of independence, was hustled by the illiberal Tories of the day, and was, I have heard, burnt in effigy in the cathedral yard at the time

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.thesealedknot.org.uk/about-us> (accessed on 12 February 2016)

<sup>17</sup> Hill 1970, p. 263

of the Birmingham riots, when Dr Priestley was compelled to flee his native land. Many prisoners from America were, at the time of our hostilities, confined at Exeter, and my grandfather was much persecuted for the attentions he showed them, and for his attempts to alleviate their sufferings. When John Adams was in England, he, with his wife (who, by the way, was a connection of our family), visited my grandfather at Exeter as a mark of his respect and regard.

To keep up the family tradition, I have a portrait of Cromwell, warts and all, in my study. The sentiments of those who hang portraits of Stalin in their homes are quite different, as I have shown.

As Vladimir Putin correctly noted, in the quotation above, Oliver Cromwell's statue still stands, sword in hand, a lion at his feet, outside the House of Commons in Westminster<sup>18</sup>. This is a relatively recent, and very controversial monument. It was erected in 1899, but only following a narrow victory for the government on 14 June 1895, saved by Unionist votes. All the 45 Irish Nationalists present voted against, as did most Conservatives including Balfour.<sup>19</sup> On 17 June 1895 the Nationalist, Home Rule, MP Willie Redmond declared that every newspaper in Ireland, of all shades of opinion, had condemned the proposal, and that

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<sup>18</sup> The statue was designed by Hamo Thornycroft and erected in 1899

<sup>19</sup> "Political Notes". *The Times* (34604). 15 June 1895. p. 9.

erection of the statue would give great offence to a large portion of the community.<sup>20</sup> The proposal was withdrawn the next month, and the statue was finally erected in 1899, following a personal donation by Lord Rosebery, the Liberal statesman and Prime Minister in 1894-5.

The statute has not ceased to be an object of intense debate. In May 2004 a group of MPs including Tony Banks proposed removing the statue to the “Butcher of Drogheda”.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, many on the left in Britain remember Cromwell as the conservative leader who, shortly after the execution of Charles I on 30 January 1649, arrested in a lightning night attack and executed, in the town of Burford on 17 May 1649, three leaders of the radical republican Levellers: Private Church, Corporal Perkins and Cornett Thompson.<sup>22</sup> Every year since 1975 Levellers Day has been held in Burford, and in 1979 Tony Benn unveiled a plaque at the church there to commemorate them.<sup>23</sup> He said of the Levellers:

Their cry was Power to the People; they demanded free schools and hospitals for all - 350 years ago. They were the Levellers, and, despite attempts to airbrush them from history, they are an inspiration, especially in the current election.”

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<sup>20</sup> "House of Commons". *The Times* (34606). 18 June 1895. p. 6

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/print/2003-04/1172> (accessed on 9 February 2016)

<sup>22</sup> Hill 1970, p.105

<sup>23</sup> Tony Benn 'Set my People Free' *The Guardian* 13 May 2001, at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/may/13/election2001.uk10> (accessed on 9 February 2001)

In Ireland Cromwell is remembered with horror and disgust as the “Butcher of Drogheda”, responsible for the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford in September and October 1649. After his troops had killed more than 3,500 at the siege of Drogheda, Cromwell declared, in his characteristic mangled English, in his report to Parliament on 17 September 1649:

I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood and that it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds for such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret."<sup>24</sup>

The Irish have by no means forgiven Cromwell not only for his shedding of so much blood, but also for his characterisation of them as ‘barbarous wretches’.

Cromwell remained in the historical shadows, England’s brief republican history before the Restoration and the ‘Glorious Revolution’, a disgraceful episode better to be forgotten. As Christopher Hill noted<sup>25</sup>, it was Thomas Carlyle’s *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*<sup>26</sup> which “finally allowed Cromwell to speak for himself”. Carlyle’s argument was

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<sup>24</sup> Letter 160 'For the Honourable William Lenthall, Esquire, Speaker of the Parliament of England: These.' Dublin, 17th September, 1649. in Vol 2, Carlyle 1850, p.128

<sup>25</sup> Hill 1970, p.258

<sup>26</sup> Carlyle 1850

with the Scottish Enlightenment 18<sup>th</sup> century sceptic David Hume and others for whom Cromwell was an insincere hypocrite, ambitious for himself.

For the romantic reactionary Carlyle, Cromwell was precisely the Hero needed to save 19<sup>th</sup> century England from Chartism, the franchise and extended democracy, and other socialist evils. Cromwell was selected as an example of “The Hero as King” in Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*.<sup>27</sup>

Carlyle was at any rate clear as to the significance of the English Revolution, and wrote, remembering England’s characteristic history of internal strife in a way which is forgotten by those who seek to highlight England’s essential decency and peaceableness, ‘British values’:

We have had many civil-wars in England; wars of Red and White Roses, wars of Simon de Montfort; wars enough, which are not very memorable. But that war of the Puritans has a significance which belongs to no one of the others... One Puritan, I think, and almost he alone, our poor Cromwell, seems to hang yet on the gibbet, and find no hearty apologist anywhere.<sup>28</sup>

It is not hard to understand why Cromwell so appealed to Trotsky, the organiser of the Red army in Russia’s Civil War, even if Cromwell was

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<sup>27</sup> Carlyle 1841

<sup>28</sup> Carlyle 1841, pp. 335, 337

hardly mentioned except with distaste by Marx and Engels. Carlyle recognised the revolutionary nature of the New Model Army.

Cromwell's Ironsides were the embodiment of this insight of his; men fearing God; and without any other fear. No more conclusively genuine set of fighters ever trod the soil of England, or of any other land.<sup>29</sup>

Without the religion, this is no doubt what Trotsky thought of the Red Army he created in the Russian Civil War.

And in the Introduction to the *Letters and Speeches* Carlyle stated, in a language which prefigures Badiou's emphasis on truth:

And then farther, altogether contrary to the popular fancy, it becomes apparent that this Oliver was not man of falsehoods, but man of truths whose words do carry meaning with them, and above all others of that time, are worth considering.<sup>30</sup>

And finally, Carlyle understood, as only perhaps a romantic reactionary could, the nature of the continuing revolution in Europe:

Precisely a century and a year after this of Puritanism had got itself hushed up into decent composure, and its results made smooth, in 1688, there broke out a far deeper explosion, much more difficult

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<sup>29</sup> Carlyle 1841, p.347

<sup>30</sup> Carlyle 1850, p.20



to hush up, known to all mortals, and like to be long known, by the name of French Revolution.<sup>31</sup>

Scott Dransfield cites Carlyle in even more rhapsodic vein, replete with arcane phraseology and many Germanic capital letters:

Very frightful it is when a Nation, rending asunder its Constitutions and Regulations which were grown dead cerements for it, becomes transcendental; and must now seek its wild way through the New, Chaotic - where Force is not yet distinguished into Bidden and Forbidden, but Crime and Virtue welter unseparated, - in that domain of what is called the Passions.<sup>32</sup>

Crime and virtue are indissolubly linked to the name of Maximilien Robespierre, to whom I turn next.

## **Robespierre**

Hegel devoted a section of his 1807 (written soon after the Terror) *Phenomenology of Spirit* to a reflection on the French Revolution, entitled 'Absolute freedom and terror'<sup>33</sup>. This contains two very disturbing passages (Hegel's italics):

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<sup>31</sup> Carlyle 1841, p. 382

<sup>32</sup> Dransfield 1999, p.62, citing from Carlyle, Works 4:2

<sup>33</sup> Hegel 1977, pp.355-363

Universal freedom, therefore, can produce neither a positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only *negative* action; it is merely the *fury* of destruction.<sup>34</sup>

And

The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death*, a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water.<sup>35</sup>

Hegel, the absolute idealist, frequently used very concrete examples!

However, some decades later, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel recovered the revolutionary enthusiasm he had shared while at the Tübinger Stift from 1788-1793 with his fellow students, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, and the philosopher-to-be Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and declared:

It has been said that the French revolution resulted from philosophy, and it is not without reason that philosophy has been called *Weltweisheit* [world wisdom]; for it is not only truth in and for itself, as the pure essence of things, but also truth in its living form as exhibited in the affairs of the world. We should not, therefore,

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<sup>34</sup> Hegel 1997, p.359

<sup>35</sup> Hegel 1997, p.360

contradict the assertion that the revolution received its first impulse from philosophy... This was accordingly a glorious mental dawn. All thinking being shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds at that time; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if the reconciliation between the divine and the secular was now first accomplished.<sup>36</sup>

But Hegel's enthusiasm was not characteristic of the majority of conservative (if Hegel was indeed a conservative) and mainstream thought.

In a pithy and accurate remark, Slavoj Žižek wrote

The identifying mark of all kinds of conservatives is its flat rejection: the French revolution was a catastrophe from its very beginning, the product of a godless modern mind; it is to be interpreted as God's punishment of the humanity's wicked ways, so its traces should be undone as thoroughly as possible... In short, what the liberals want is a decaffeinated revolution, a revolution that doesn't smell of revolution.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, for perhaps the majority of commentators, Robespierre epitomises all that is catastrophic in the revolution, and acts as a potent "screen memory" almost to the extent that Stalin is taken to show that

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<sup>36</sup> Hegel 1980, p.263

<sup>37</sup> Žižek 2007, p.vii

any attempt to change the course of history in the name of socialism or emancipation must end in disaster.

A leading exponent of this school of thought was François Furet<sup>38</sup>, who died in 1997. He led the rejection of the “classic” or “Marxist” interpretation of the French Revolution, and his polemics overshadowed the grandiose celebrations in France of the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989. He joined the intellectual mainstream by proceedings from the perspective of 20th century totalitarianism, as exemplified by Hitler and Stalin.

This path had been blazed at the onset of the Cold War, by Hannah Arendt’s in her *On Totalitarianism* of 1950<sup>39</sup>. However, in a footnote, Arendt wrote

Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*. (New York and London, 1949), is indispensable for its rich documentary and great insight into the internal struggles of the Bolshevik party; it suffers from an interpretation which likens Stalin to—Cromwell, Napoleon, and Robespierre.

It is a great shame that it is not now possible to ask her exactly what she meant.

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<sup>38</sup> Furet 1981, 1996, 2000

<sup>39</sup> See Arendt 1973

Furet's *Penser la Révolution Française* (1978; translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution*)<sup>40</sup> led many intellectuals in France and, after translation, in the English-speaking world, to re-evaluate Communism and the Revolution as inherently totalitarian and anti-democratic.

In a reflection on Furet, Donald Reid has asked whether the historical figure of Robespierre had actually become harmless:

If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories and discussions, have become lighter than feathers, frightening no one. There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads.<sup>41</sup>

As explained by Reid, Furet was not at all of that view. For him Robespierre remained a continuing dreadful threat not only to France but to the whole world, a threat of the eternal return of totalitarianism:

Furet, like Tocqueville, saw the American and French revolutions as quite distinct. The American Revolution was predicated on the demand for the restoration of rights and the continuation of an

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<sup>40</sup> Furet 1981

<sup>41</sup> Reid 2005, 196

earlier democratic experience; the decision to emigrate from Europe to the United States had been Americans' revolutionary rejection of a repressive past. The French Revolution sought to establish a radical break with an aristocratic past and to create a novel social regime. The American Revolution was a narrative that ended with independence and the ratification of the Constitution; the French revolutionary narrative remained open to the future and fearful of a return of the past.<sup>42</sup>

A number of French historians led by Sophie Wahnich<sup>43</sup> of the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) are leading a counter-attack against Furet. In her introduction to her 2003 *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme*<sup>44</sup>, provocatively if inaccurately translated as *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*<sup>45</sup>, Wahnich wrote, referring to Furet and to Marc Fumaroli's 2001 *Cahiers de Cinéma* article 'Terreur et cinéma':

We see here the conscious construction of a new reception of the French Revolution which, out of disgust at the political crimes of the twentieth century, imposes an equal disgust towards the revolutionary event. The French Revolution is unspeakable

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<sup>42</sup> Reid 2005, p.205

<sup>43</sup> Agrégée et docteure en histoire, habilitée à diriger des recherches, elle est directrice de recherche au CNRS rattachée à l'Institut Interdisciplinaire du Contemporain (IIAC) et directrice de l'équipe Tram, « Transformations radicales des mondes contemporains »

<sup>44</sup> La Fabrique éditions 2003

<sup>45</sup> Wahnich 2012

because it constituted ‘the matrix of totalitarianism’ and invented its rhetoric.

A splendid chapter in Wahnich’s recent collection<sup>46</sup> is written by Jolène Bureau, who is researching the ‘black legend’ of Robespierre, constructed by the Thermidoreans immediately after Robespierre’s execution, and its destiny since his death. She writes elsewhere in English:

Maximilien Robespierre has reached legendary status due to his ability to embody either the many forms of revolutionary and State violence, or a set of seemingly unaccomplished revolutionary ideals. Long before François Furet demanded the French Revolution become a “cold object”, Marc Bloch had made the following plea: “robepierristes, anti-robepierristes, nous vous crions grâce : par pitié, dites-nous, simplement, quel fut Robespierre”<sup>47</sup>. However, this demand was not met.<sup>48</sup>

And in her chapter<sup>49</sup> in Sophie Wahnich’s collection<sup>50</sup>, she poses precisely the question of the “screen memory” of Robespierre:

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<sup>46</sup> Wahnich 2013

<sup>47</sup> “Robepierristes, anti-robepierristes, we ask for mercy: for pity’s sake, tell us, simply, what Robespierre did.”

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[https://www.academia.edu/12387445/Robespierre\\_meurt\\_longtemps\\_the\\_Construction\\_and\\_Evolution\\_of\\_a\\_Black\\_Legend\\_Through\\_Time](https://www.academia.edu/12387445/Robespierre_meurt_longtemps_the_Construction_and_Evolution_of_a_Black_Legend_Through_Time) (accessed on 9 February 2016)

<sup>49</sup> Bureau 2013

<sup>50</sup> Wahnich 2013

Cette légende noire agit comme un filter qui bloque notre accès au Robespierre historique.<sup>51</sup>

Robespierre therefore shares Christopher Hill's characterisation of Cromwell referred to above. Minchul Kim has recently added:

... from 1794 up to the present day, there has been no one Robespierre, no one positive or one negative view of Robespierre, no one Robespierre the demonic dictator or one Robespierre the revolutionary hero. There have always been so many 'Robespierres' even within the positive and within the negative...<sup>52</sup>

The most controversial aspect of Robespierre's career is of course the so-called 'Reign of Terror' from 5 September 1793, to 27 July 1794, culminating in the execution of Robespierre himself on 28 July 1794.

Robespierre explained what he meant by terror, and its relationship to virtue, in his speech of 5 February 1794:

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government in revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so

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<sup>51</sup> Bureau 2013, p.91 'This black legend acts as a filter which blocks our access to the historical Robespierre'

<sup>52</sup> Kim 2015, p.996



much a specific principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our homeland's most pressing needs.<sup>53</sup>

The novelist Hilary Mantel, who entered into the period imaginatively in her famous novel *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), has provided a convincing account of the real meaning of 'virtue' for Robespierre:

There is a problem with the English word 'virtue'. It sounds pallid and Catholic. But *vertu* is not smugness or piety. It is strength, integrity and purity of intent. It assumes the benevolence of human nature towards itself. It is an active force that puts the public good before private interest.<sup>54</sup>

In any event, there are many myths as to the nature of the Terror and the number of casualties. Marisa Linton, the author of *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*<sup>55</sup> and of many other works on the period, recently published a popular blog<sup>56</sup> to set the record straight. On the Terror she wrote:

The revolutionaries of 1789 did not foresee the recourse to violence to defend the Revolution and some, like Robespierre in 1791, wanted the death penalty abolished altogether. Execution by

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<sup>53</sup> Robespierre 2007, p.115

<sup>54</sup> Mantel 2000

<sup>55</sup> Linton 2013

<sup>56</sup> Linton 2015

guillotine began with the execution of the king in January 1793. A total of 2,639 people were guillotined in Paris, most of them over nine months between autumn 1793 and summer 1794. Many more people (up to 50,000) were shot, or died of sickness in the prisons. An estimated 250,000 died in the civil war that broke out in Vendée in March 1793, which originated in popular opposition to conscription into the armies to fight against the foreign powers. Most of the casualties there were peasants or republican soldiers.<sup>57</sup>

It is evident that Robespierre cannot be compared with Stalin.

And as to Robespierre himself, in particular the allegation that, like Stalin, he was a bloody dictator, Linton commented:

Robespierre's time in power lasted just one year, from July 1793 to his death in July 1794 in the coup of Thermidor and even in that time he was never a dictator. He shared that power as one of twelve members of the Committee of Public Safety, its members elected by the Convention, which led the revolutionary government. He defended the recourse to terror, but he certainly didn't invent it.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Lindon 2015

<sup>58</sup> Linton 2015

And Eric Hazan, in his recently published in English *A People's History of the French Revolution*, is even more a partisan of Robespierre:

Under the Constituent Assembly... Robespierre took up positions that were remarkably coherent and courageous – positions in which he was always in a minority and sometimes completely alone: against the property restriction on suffrage, for the civil rights of actors and Jews, against martial law, against slavery in the colonies, against the death penalty, for the right of petition and the freedom of the press.<sup>59</sup>

And as to Robespierre as dictator, Hazan added:

... Robespierre was never a dictator. All the major decisions of the Committee of Public Safety were taken collectively... One could say that within the Committee Robespierre exercised a moral leadership, but can he be reproached for what was simply his elevated perspective? The proof that Robespierre was not a dictator is his end... Isolated and at bay, he let himself be brought down... A dictator, a Bonaparte, would have behaved rather differently.

Stalin died in his bed, having executed all his political competitors and enemies, and having directly caused the deaths of untold millions of

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<sup>59</sup> Hazan 2014, p. 376

Russians and Ukrainians through his policy of forced collectivisation, and having consigned many more to the horrors of the Gulag.

Perhaps we should give Slavoj Žižek the last word as to Robespierre's ideology:

Can one imagine something more foreign to our universe of the freedom of opinions, or market competition, of nomadic pluralist interaction, etc, than Robespierre's politics of Truth (with a capital T, of course), whose proclaimed goal is 'to return the destiny of liberty into the hands of truth'?<sup>60</sup>

## **Lenin**

It is my contention that Stalin was in no way Lenin's successor. If Vladimir Putin now regards Lenin as anathema, as the ideologist who through his insistence on the right of nations to self-determination laid an atomic bomb under the foundations of the Russian state, Stalin is honoured as a great heir to the Russian tsars. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 mirrors Catherine II's annexation in 1783. Lenin would have been horrified. Equally, Lenin was very well aware of the history of the French Revolution.

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<sup>60</sup> Slavoj Žižek 'Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror', at <http://www.lacan.com/zizrobes.htm> (accessed on 10 February 2016)

Alistair Wright speculates as follows in his highly relevant article, 'Guns and Guillotines: State Terror in the Russian and French Revolutions' – I hope I will be forgiven for quoting from it at some length:

The impression that the French Revolution and in particular the Jacobin Terror left on the Bolshevik party during its seizure and consolidation of power is a broad and contentious subject.

However, there can be little doubt that the party's leading figures, namely Lenin and Trotsky, were acutely aware of these precedents from French history. Indeed, this may well have been significant in shaping their policies during and after 1917.

Admittedly there is more controversy surrounding the depth of Lenin's knowledge of the French Revolution but the same cannot be said for Leon Trotsky. It is fairly evident that the latter was steeped in the history of the French Revolution. He regularly looked at the Bolshevik Revolution through the prism of the French and was even keen to stage an extravagant trial for Nicholas II in the manner of that arranged for Louis XVI between November 1792 and January 1793.<sup>61</sup>

Stalin, although a voracious reader, did not have the multilingual and cosmopolitan intellectual formation of Lenin or Trotsky, and in particular did not suffer their prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe, and

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<sup>61</sup> Wright 2007, p.177

there is no reason to believe that he shared their anxious consideration of historical precedents. Wright continues:

Some consideration of the fact that Robespierre became strongly associated at the time and subsequently with the Great Terror during the French Revolution, regardless of whether or not he should really be held personally accountable for it, may well have influenced Lenin's course of action.

In fact, the Bolsheviks succeeded in the longer term because they consciously learnt from the mistakes made by their French counterparts. Consequently, during the Russian Civil War a different path was taken to that followed by the Jacobins when it came to tackling the Bolsheviks' political opponents, the established church and peasant disturbances.<sup>62</sup>

As Wright shows, it was not only in his approach to the national question that Lenin's political strategy and methods differed sharply from Stalin's, but in his relations with comrades with whom he often had acute disagreements, denouncing them in his fierce and often very rude polemics.

... it is noteworthy that the Bolsheviks' approach to the threat posed by their political opponents was somewhat more tolerant

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<sup>62</sup> Wright 2007, p.178

than that of the Committee of Public Safety during 1793–94. The latter, albeit after a number of heated disputes and resistance, sent their main political opponents, the Girondins, to the guillotine, where they were shortly to be followed by the Hébertistes and the Indulgents. In comparison, relative tolerance on the part of the Bolsheviks was evident both in their sharing of power with the Left Socialists-Revolutionaries (Left SRs) up until March 1918 and in their limited co-operation with their other socialist rivals, the Mensheviks and the Socialists-Revolutionaries proper, by allowing them, intermittently, to take part in the soviets and to print their own newspapers.

Admittedly, the number of political opponents actually killed during the period of the CPS was by no means comprehensive but the fact remains that no prominent opposition leader would die as a result of the Red Terror. Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that any political executions were planned. Even at the 1922 trial of the SR leaders, although several defendants were sentenced to death they were quickly granted amnesty and no one was actually executed. In part this was because of the pressure applied by Western socialists but nevertheless the Bolsheviks

could quite easily neutralize their political rivals during the civil war by other means.<sup>63</sup>

In my view, Lenin's restraint in relation to political opponents had nothing to do with pressure by Western socialists, but on the contrary flowed from his political outlook, his theoretical understanding, and his commitment to the application of a dialectical method, fortified by his deep study not only of Marx and Engels but also of Hegel. Stalin, on the contrary, once he had accumulated full power in his hands, began systematically to eliminate the Bolshevik leadership as it had been constituted at the time of the Revolution.

Vladimir Dobrenko adds as to the Moscow Trials, orchestrated by Stalin:

... why should the Moscow Show Trials warrant a separate investigation from other show trials throughout history? The answer to this lies in the fact that while the Moscow Show Trials share common links with other political trials, chiefly that of the ruling regime willingness to use their adversaries in a judicial context to legitimise their own rule, they are distinguished in several crucial respects. The Trial of Louis XVI is a case in point. All the leading Bolsheviks were conscious of the historical parallel between their revolution and that of the French Revolution, most

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<sup>63</sup> Wright 2007, p.179



notably Trotsky, whose critiques of Stalin in the 1930's drew historical parallels between Stalin and Robespierre. Yet in retrospect, Trotsky only scratched the surface. True, the Moscow Show Trials, like the trial of Louis of XVI, were less a judicial process rather than foregone political decisions to kill and that the trials resembled ritual murders.<sup>64</sup>

Wright adds, reinforcing his earlier comments:

Executing factions within the Bolshevik Party was, of course, an eminent feature of Stalin's Great Terror during the late 1930s. But, it is worth stressing that Lenin and his followers did not resort to terror against any Bolshevik dissidents during the civil war, despite the existence of such groupings as the Democratic Centralists and the Workers' Opposition. Of course, the Bolsheviks did move towards disabling their political rivals but certainly not through the same process of open executions as their French counterparts had done.<sup>65</sup>

Wright's highly apposite conclusion is as follows, comparing

Robespierre's role to that of Lenin:

Although Robespierre came to be regarded as the leading spokesman for the Committee, he was in an entirely different

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<sup>64</sup> Dobrenko 2010, p.77

<sup>65</sup> Wright 2007, p.180

position to that held by Lenin as the leader of the Bolshevik government. By no means did he possess the same popular following within the CPS or the Convention, nor did he have anything like the same influence as Lenin did within the Bolshevik Party. In this respect, the political climate in France during the revolution and the Terror was quite different to that pervading Russia during the civil war.

The Bolsheviks also showed relative clemency when it came to dealing with the leading figures of the political opposition. Often, this was perhaps due to the personal role of Lenin. For example, Victor Serge (V.L. Kibalchich), the Belgian-born anarchist and socialist who worked with the Bolsheviks during the civil war, believed that Lenin protected Iurii Martov from the Cheka (that is, from execution) because of his former friendship with the man with whom he had part founded and developed Russian Social Democracy. Moreover, Lenin would also intervene to save the lives of the Mensheviks Fedor Dan and Raphael Abramovich when the Petrograd Cheka was preparing to shoot them for allegedly being involved in the Kronstadt revolt in March 1921. Serge noted that 'once Lenin was alerted they were absolutely safe'. Although a great advocate of the use of mass terror, Lenin was apparently

willing to show mercy when it came to the case of individuals with whom he was acquainted or simply individuals in general.<sup>66</sup>

Trotsky himself wrote, with hindsight, as to the bloody revenge of the Thermidors of France and of Russia:

The Jacobins were not destroyed as Jacobins but as Terrorists, as Robespierrists, and the like: similarly, the Bolsheviks were destroyed as Trotskyists, Zinovievists, Bukharinists.<sup>67</sup>

The Thermidoreans systematically exterminated the Jacobins; Stalin annihilated the leaders of the Bolshevik Party, and, while cynically taking their name and elevating Lenin to sacred status, ensure that none of the Old Bolsheviks apart from his cronies survived.

## **Conclusion**

It is my contention, as explained at greater length in my 2008 book<sup>68</sup>, that the English, French and Russian Revolutions were most certainly Events in the sense given to that word by Alain Badiou. That is, Events which have, in each case, dramatically changed the course of human events in the world. As Badiou would put it, these are Events to which fidelity should be and was owed by millions. Indeed, these were Events which now call upon the human participants in the politics of the present

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<sup>66</sup> Wright 2007, p.182

<sup>67</sup> Trotsky 1969, p.226

<sup>68</sup> Bowring 2008

day to honour their decisive and explosive shattering of the hitherto prevailing situation, while at the same time exploring and taking full account of their human tragedy. Just as in the case of St Paul and the universalisation of Christianity, so lucidly explained by Alain Badiou<sup>69</sup>, great human figures stand out in each case, the subjects of this study: Cromwell, Robespierre and Lenin. There is no need to subscribe to Carlyle's acclamation for Heroes in order to explain why in each case precisely these particular individuals rose to the occasion, through long individual experience of internal turmoil, as in the case of Cromwell, lack of charisma as in the case of Robespierre, and on occasion complete isolation, as in the case of Lenin in April 1917, when he stood alone against his Party.<sup>70</sup> In each case the individual has indeed become a "screen memory" for conservatives and reactionaries, dreadful examples used to prove that all revolutions are necessarily disasters.

What is perfectly clear is that neither Cromwell, nor Robespierre, nor Lenin, could become an icon or avatar for the reactionary and historically outmoded regimes they helped to overthrow. Stalin had none of the personal characteristics of the three leaders examined in this article. He was a revolutionary, and a leader of the Bolshevik Party. But his trajectory was to destroy utterly that which he had helped to create. That

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<sup>69</sup> Badiou 2003

<sup>70</sup> See the incisive Introduction, 'Between Two Revolutions' to Slavoj Žižek's important collection of Lenin's writings from this period, Žižek 2011.

is why the present Russian regime seeks to elevate him to the status of the murderous Tsars of Russian history.

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