



# Editorial

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‘The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words.’<sup>1</sup> So wrote Henry James in a letter addressed to Howard Sturgis the day after British forces entered the First World War on 4 August 1914. Different autocrats, dressed in a little brief authority, now stalk the world’s stage as the centenaries come and go, but the passing years are no less treacherous, and the wanton feats of power no less tragic.

Although he had been dead some eighteen years, the outbreak of the First World War grimly realised Morris’s darkest predictions about the likely outcome of inter-imperialist competition between the great powers of Britain, Germany, France and Russia. This rivalry, Morris augured in his *Commonweal* ‘Words of Forecast for 1887’, could well eventuate in a devastating ‘war which will embrace all the nations of Europe’.<sup>2</sup> Such a war, Morris wrote, ‘would seem to be the most disastrous event that could cross the path of progress’, yet he also commented that ‘it may be hoped that it would stir up a fresh force of resistance from all the elements which tend towards liberty, and that the struggle would develop [sic] in the proletariat a more definite consciousness of what real liberty means, so that the onrush of a mere reactionary current might be met with the rising flood of revolution’.<sup>3</sup> One of the more concrete *meanings*, in the Jamesian sense, to arise out of the First World War was the October revolution of 1917, the legacy of which, one hundred years after the event, remains both complicated and hotly contested.

2017 has seen a spate of interventions on this topic – about which much ink has certainly been spilt over the years – not the least of which comes from the science fiction author China Miéville. His book, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (2017), retells these events with at least half an eye on their contemporary resonance. As Miéville comments, ‘[i]t is not for nostalgia’s sake that the strange story of the first socialist revolution in history deserves celebration. The standard of October declares that things changed once, and they might do so again.’<sup>4</sup> Much as Morris looked back to the symbol and example of the Paris Commune of 1871, Miéville argues that ‘October is still the ground zero for arguments about fundamental, radical social change’ in the contemporary moment, and adds that ‘[i]ts degradation was not a given, was not written in any stars’.<sup>5</sup>

James’s comment about the superfluity of words in the face of world-historical tragedy might also put one in mind of Raymond Williams’s judicious observation that revolution

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itself is also marked by tragedy, particularly because of the way in which ‘revolution – the long revolution against human alienation – produces, in real historical circumstances, its own new kinds of alienation, which it must struggle to understand and which it must overcome, if it is to remain revolutionary’.<sup>6</sup> He adds that ‘[i]t is undoubtedly true that a commitment to revolution can produce a kind of hardening which even ends by negating the revolutionary purpose’.<sup>7</sup> Williams offers a timely reminder, here, that revolution must be both a process of radical social transformation and painstaking self-transformation if it is to be even partially successful.

The prospect of revolution similarly occupied the horizon of Morris’s political imagination, even if he did not live to see such hopes come to pass. Yet insofar as he imagined what such a revolution might be like, Morris seems to have been keenly aware of what Williams would come to recognise as the tragic dimension of revolutionary activity. On the evidence of *News from Nowhere*, at least, it is clear that Old Hammond, the narrator of Nowhere’s fictional revolution, in no way diminishes the suffering and sacrifice that the revolution involved. As he retrospectively comments to the utopian visitor William Guest, shortly before going on to describe the outbreak of a bloody civil war, ‘terrible tragedy lay hidden behind this grinning through a horse-collar of the reactionary party’.<sup>8</sup>

This issue of the *Journal* takes the centenary of the October revolution as a suitable occasion on which to reassess Morris’s thinking about revolution, and his relationship to the communist tradition, broadly conceived. Tariq Ali, like Miéville, has also revisited the Russian revolution, pointing out that ‘the 1917 October Revolution transformed world politics and, in the process, remade the twentieth century with a frontal assault on capitalism and its empires, accelerating decolonization’.<sup>9</sup> Although Morris did not live to see the Bolsheviks’ revolution unfold, some of his erstwhile comrades and contemporaries looked eastward with varying degrees of hope and trepidation once it had become clear that the events in Russia were no mere hiatus or historical parenthesis.

After the February revolution which deposed Tsar Nicholas II, Peter Kropotkin wrote a hurried note to May Morris, proclaiming how ‘happy [he was] for Russia, and also for our friends who must now be on their way from the [...] jails of Siberia to Russia! And – freed not by a Tsar’s “clemency”, but by the will of the people’.<sup>10</sup> Kropotkin himself returned to Russia after forty years of exile shortly thereafter. Some years later, Henry Mayers Hyndman expounded a distinctly anti-Bolshevik position in *The Evolution of Revolution* (1920), dismissing the Bolsheviks’ alleged attempt to ‘skip several steps in the slow advance of social evolution’ as ‘autocratic, cruel, and butcherly to the last degree’, whilst denouncing Lenin as ‘a Communist Ivan the Terrible’.<sup>11</sup> Ernest Belfort Bax, by contrast, hoped that a ‘new Internationalism’ might emerge out of the wreckage of the war, and welcomed the ‘advent of the first Russian Revolutionary Government and the forces behind it to power’, adding that it was an ‘epoch-making event in human history when a great modern nation like the Russian, dared, in the midst of a still *bourgeois* world, to proclaim the Socialist principle of international ethics, rather than national interest, as the basis of its foreign policy’.<sup>12</sup> ‘So far as it goes’, Bax went on, ‘this is a significant symptom of the beginning of the change from the supremacy, material and ideal, of the Nation-State to that of the universal Commonwealth of Nations’.<sup>13</sup> Of the later generation of communist militants in Britain, Sylvia Pankhurst stands out as a figure who attested to Morris’s influence on her political outlook at the same time as she offered a critical defence of ‘the Lenin Revolution’.<sup>14</sup>

For Tariq Ali, it remains important to revisit such historical episodes because ‘today’s dominant ideology and the power structures it defends are so hostile to the social and liberation struggles of the last century that a recovery of as much historical and political memory as is feasible becomes an act of resistance’.<sup>15</sup> This work of recovery and resistance can take many shapes and forms. In this spirit, I am delighted to welcome Terry Eagleton into the pages of this *Journal*, who offers a wise and witty set of reflections on what the idea of revolution meant to Morris, and what it might still for us mean today. In particular, Eagleton draws attention to the striking *plausibility* of the revolutionary scenario that Morris envisaged in *News from Nowhere*. John Bellamy Foster offers an excellent exegesis of the importance of nature, labour and gender in *News from Nowhere*, integrating his discussion into a wider account of Morris’s revolutionary commitment, while Tony Pinkney polemically engages with Morris’s communist politics, offering some concrete suggestions as to how an understanding of this politics might shape the activities of The William Morris Society. John Stirling’s deftly researched article on Morris’s trip to Tyneside during 1884, where he delivered his lecture on ‘Art and Labour’, contains an intriguing account of Morris’s meeting with Elijah Copland over breakfast at Bensham Grove, where their conversation turned to that familiar topic: revolution. Peter Faulkner also marks the passing of one of the Society’s founding members, and the first editor of this *Journal*, Ronald Charles Hawkswell Briggs.

There are also some more localised, but certainly significant, matters to which I should like to draw readers’ attention. Firstly, Peter Faulkner has decided to step down as Reviews Editor, and he has handed on this important role to Rosie Miles. For many years, Peter has been tireless in his efforts to serve the Society, and particularly this *Journal*, for which he has acted as both Editor and Reviews Editor. For my own part, I would like to affirm that it has been a pleasure to work with Peter on putting together the last few issues of the *Journal*, and I am sure all readers will join me in wishing him well for the future. Many readers will also remember that Rosie edited the *Journal* from Winter 2001 to Summer 2007, and it is fitting that she has now followed in Peter’s footsteps in taking on the Reviews Editorship. Secondly, I am very pleased to welcome Elizabeth Carolyn Miller to the Editorial Advisory Board, and I have no doubt that the *Journal* will benefit from her expertise and input over the coming years. Finally, a major exhibition entitled *May Morris: Art & Life* will open at the William Morris Gallery on 7 October 2017, promising ‘the most comprehensive survey of May’s work to date’.<sup>16</sup> This exhibition, which has been made possible through a successful crowd-funding campaign, will doubtless appeal widely to Morrisians within striking distance of Walthamstow.

Owen Holland  
Editor

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#### NOTES

1. *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. by Percy Lubbock, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1920), II, p. 398.
2. William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to ‘Justice’ and ‘Commonweal’ 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 219.
3. *Ibid.*
4. China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 317.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

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6. Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 82.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  8. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1910-1915), XVI, p. 110.
  9. Tariq Ali, *The Dilemmas of Lenin: Terrorism, War, Empire, Love, Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 1. (Afterwards Ali).
  10. Peter Kropotkin to May Morris, 23 March 1917, British Library Add. MS 45347.
  11. H.M. Hyndman, *The Evolution of Revolution* (London: Hyndman Literary Trust, [1920]), pp. 383, 382, 386.
  12. E. Belfort Bax, 'The Modern State, Internationalism and War', *English Review*, 27:117 (August 1918), 120-128 (128).
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. For Morris's influence on Pankhurst, see David Mitchell, *The Fighting Pankhursts: A Study in Tenacity* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 239; and Katherine Connelly, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist and Scourge of Empire* (London: Pluto, 2013), p. 83. For Pankhurst's defence of the October Revolution, see her 'The Lenin Revolution: What it Means to Democracy', in *A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader*, ed. by Kathryn Dodd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 81-83.
  15. Ali, p. 1.
  16. See the 'Exhibitions' section of the William Morris Gallery website: <<http://www.wmgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions-43/may-morris/>> (last accessed 17 July 2017).