

H-France Review Vol. 17 (September 2017), No. 166

Albert Mathiez, *Révolution russe et Révolution française*, Yannick Bosc and Florence Gauthier, eds. Paris: Éditions critiques, 2017. 139 pp. Notes. €14.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-97331-00-9.

Review by Micah Alpaugh, University of Central Missouri.

Collecting twenty-two editorials on the Russian Revolution by the French Revolution's leading early-twentieth century historian, Albert Mathiez, as the events unfolded, *Révolution russe et Révolution française* presents fascinating insights into the era and the comparative study of revolutions. Yannick Bosc and Florence Gauthier's collection, released in time for the latter revolution's centenary, provides an excellent lens both into international reactions to the events in Russia and the public engagement of a prominent historian in the greatest revolutionary upheaval of his time.

Historiographically, Mathiez (1874-1932) is best known today as a transitional figure who helped develop the 'Marxist' approach that would dominate French Revolutionary historiography for much of the twentieth century. Though a student of the great liberal historian Alphonse Aulard, who became the first Chair of French Revolutionary History at the Sorbonne and helped lead the Third Republic's Centennial celebrations, Mathiez broke from his advisor's approach. Indeed, in one of the editorials collected here, Mathiez accuses Aulard of wanting a revolution "sans violence, sans illégalités, sans dictature, une révolution sans révolution" (p. 115). Mathiez' politics progressively radicalized, from being a Dreyfusard agitator in the *fin-de-siècle*, to joining the Communist Party (though for only two years) in 1920. Of peasant origins himself, Mathiez consistently displayed a sympathy towards popular movements—rare in previous French Revolutionary historiography—and embraced revolutionary radicalization as necessary given the circumstances of the time.

Excluded from World War I by the earlier loss of an eye in military training exercises, and with few academic duties during the conflict's third year, Mathiez enthusiastically took up his pen in support of Russia's February Revolution of 1917. He remained a passionate defender of the French Revolutionary Rights of Man and Citizen, and believed the path toward socialism could be achieved through universal suffrage. Soon after the Russian revolution's outbreak, Mathiez sent an encouraging telegram to the Russian Duma from the *Société des études robespierristes* (an organization he founded), hoping "ardemment que la révolution russe trouve pour la diriger des Robespierre et des Saint Just" to bring events to their full potential (p. 13). Curiously for a student of revolution, Mathiez considered that the French should have "aucune inquiétude, aucune apprehension" over the outcome of Russian events (p. 27). Rather, he saw the revolution as a necessary step in history, hoping the new regime "supprimeraiient les abus qui avaient rendu la révolution inévitable" in Russia (p. 35). A believer in the scientific progress of history, he confidently predicted positive outcomes despite his knowledge of France's tortured Revolutionary path.

Red October, for Mathiez, represented a natural development "sur le rythme de la Révolution française" with the difference that the Russian Revolutionaries had been "tous nourris des oeuvres de nos grands historiens" and were thus able to move faster to establishing a legitimately revolutionary regime (p. 38). He considered the Bolsheviks a peace party (like the Montagnards before them) dedicated to ending

foreign war, and asserted that they—curiously, along with the United States—would bring about “une nouvelle diplomatie, celle de la lumière” (p. 41). Believing the peasants (significantly, not the workers) to be the chief force in Russian revolutionary politics, Mathiez declared the Bolshevik seizure of power necessary as a means to extract Russia from the war.

For reasons unknown, Mathiez ceased publishing articles about the Russian Revolution between November 1917 and January 1920. Thereafter, around the same time that he joined the *Internationale*, Mathiez’ articles generally highlighted the similarities between the Jacobin French republic and the Bolshevik model. For both Robespierre and Lenin, he argued, “la fin justifie les moyens” and humanitarian goals like abolishing the death penalty and maintaining a free press became impossible to maintain in times of foreign and civil war (p. 46). Indeed, Mathiez considered Lenin to be following a model of virtue not dissimilar from that of the Incorruptible. Robespierre’s ally, Saint-Just, Mathiez reminded his readers, had also proposed confiscating the property of the new regime’s opponents. “S’ils ont commis des erreurs,” Mathiez wrote in apologia for Russian excesses, “ils ont été de bonne foi” (p. 66). More than many of his predecessors in the French academy, Mathiez accepted violence, terror and disorder as a necessary part of revolution—and thus considered the much larger body-counts of the Russian Revolution to be a natural escalation from the French model. From the vantage-point of a century later, one can see in Mathiez’ approach the genesis of historiographical over-identifications of the French with the Russian Revolution that would become common across the last decades of the twentieth century.[1]

By September 1920, however, Mathiez began turning against the Russian regime. Starting with an editorial titled “Le Bolchevisme, est-il anti-démocratique?” (p. 75) he criticized the Bolsheviks for remaining a minority party, ruling through terror – even while continuing to acknowledge their revolutionary links with Robespierism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his reading, also had suggested revolutionary redistribution: “la démocratie ne pouvait exister si l’égalité politique n’était conditionnée par une certaine égalité de fortunes et de classes” (p. 78). Yet for Mathiez, democracy remained a paramount revolutionary goal. While still blaming Western politicians for pushing Russia to extremities, his declarations of support and assertions of revolutionary parallels faded by mid-1922, after which he stopped writing on the subject entirely, and renounced his Communist Party membership.

The final article included in Bosc and Gauthier’s volume comes nine years later, in 1931. It was not published in a popular review but instead in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*—the flagship academic journal he founded. Mathiez affirmed the importance of Marxist ideas for the study of the French Revolution, “non parce qu’elles sont de Marx, mais parce qu’elles seules rendent possible l’analyse historique véritablement scientifique” (p. 128). Mathiez turned against Stalinism, however, pillorying Russian universities for suppressing academic freedom. He highlighted the lectures given by the Soviet historian Eugène Tarlé at the Sorbonne, for which Tarlé was imprisoned for over a year. Most concerned now with scholarly objectivity, Mathiez denounced how, “[d]ans la Russie de Staline, il n’y a plus de place pour une science indépendante, pour une science libre et désintéressée, pour une science tout court” (p. 135). The revolutionary possibility for Russia to establish a new path forward for the world appeared lost to Mathiez in an ill-founded dictatorship and the suppression of truth.

A product of the Dreyfus era, Mathiez helped inspire a rich tradition of French Revolutionists intervening in political affairs. Albert Soboul, Mathiez’ successor to the Sorbonne’s chair from 1967-82, rose high in the ranks of the French Communist Party. Yet scholars from political backgrounds as varied as the neoliberal François Furet, liberal David Bell and conservative Simon Schama have also each made extensive efforts to draw the French Revolution explicitly into contemporary political debates.[2] The Revolution’s 1989 Bicentennial indeed remains remembered for the extent to which Furet turned scholarly debates into a referendum on Marxism.[3] Though politicized historical analogies tend not to age well, they nevertheless demonstrate the French Revolution’s importance and usefulness as an exemplar. Throughout the Russian Revolution’s early stages, one is struck most by how much Mathiez

believed the French Revolution provided a model (perhaps even a necessary one) for the Russian experience, despite the manifold differences of time and space.

Bosc and Gauthier deserve praise for rescuing these editorials from deep obscurity, and providing an accessible introduction that places the essays in their immediate context. The volume could have further situated these works in relation to Mathiez' wider *oeuvre*, discussing how they related to the more than 225 other editorials he published, or examined how closely they influenced the intellectual development of Mathiez' works as a French Revolutionist (his three-volume *La Révolution française* of 1922-4 remains widely influential and available as a paperback in France today).^[4] But the works presented here may well inspire intellectual historians to pursue such subjects.

This short book provides a thought-provoking read for students and teachers of revolution. Particularly given resurgent interest on the nature and processes of revolution, as seen in recent books by Bailey Stone, Jack Censer, Dan Edelstein and Keith Michael Baker, *Révolution russe et Révolution française* deserves consideration for scholarly study and university library ordering lists.^[5] Insofar as comparing the most radical and thorough revolutions of the eighteenth and twentieth century continues to draw scholarly interest, this collection should command attention.

NOTES

[1] François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Shelia Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] Claude Mazauric, *Un historien en son temps: Albert Soboul (1914-1982)* (Narrosse: Albret, 2004); Furet, *Le passé d'une illusion: Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1995); David A. Bell, *Shadows of the Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1989).

[3] Stephen L. Kaplan, *Adieu 89* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

[4] Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution française*, 3 vols. (Paris: Colin, 1922-4). Historians also still consult his *La vie chère et le mouvement social pendant la Terreur* (Paris: Payot, 1927).

[5] Bailey Stone, *The Anatomy of Revolution Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of England, France and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jack Censer, *Debating Modern Revolution: The Evolution of Revolutionary Ideas* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Dan Edelstein and Keith Michael Baker, *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Micah Alpaugh
University of Central Missouri
alpaugh@ucmo.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without

permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172