

# ‘October’ as a marker of radicalisation: commemorations of the October Revolution in Denmark during the Cold War Period

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**O**n 9 November 1917 news of the new Russian revolution reached Denmark. On the front page of the daily *Social-Demokraten* (the Social Democrat) it announced, ‘The New State Upheaval in Russia’. At the very beginning the Danish Social Democratic Party supported the revolution and its leaders, but following the Bolsheviks’ dissolution of the constituent assembly in January 1918 this situation ended and the Danish labour movement split into a small revolutionary segment and a much bigger reformist one with different views on the questions of democracy and socialism.<sup>1</sup>

The groups at that time sympathising with the new Russian regime mainly consisted of a social-democratic left wing (mostly the youth) and a syndicalist trade union opposition. Less than two months after the Social Democratic Party had definitively distanced itself from the new Bolshevik regime, the former group formed the Socialistisk Arbejderparti (Socialist Workers’ Party). The following year it was replaced by the Venstresocialistisk Parti (Left-wing Socialist Party or VSP) which, in 1920, changed its name to Danmarks Kommunistiske Parti (Communist Party of Denmark or DKP). Ernst Christiansen (1891-1974), chairman of the Socialdemokratisk Ungdomsforbund (Social Democratic Youth League), subsequently also chairman of VSP and DKP, was the first official representative of a Danish party organisation to visit Soviet Russia.<sup>2</sup> He did so in November 1918 and his follow-up report described how he

watched the celebration of the first year of the revolution in Moscow with great enthusiasm:

This new age definitely has the upper hand. Bolshevism completely rules the city. The fact that the underclass is satisfied with this could be seen in the celebration of the first year on 7-10 November. Then hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers marched through the streets. In the evening, huge crowds thronged the festively illuminated streets, and overhead airplanes belonging to the Revolutionary Army circled the city, now dispensing proclamations, now flowers.<sup>3</sup>

This transnational transfer of the narrative of the Bolshevik revolution became the catalyst and most important point of reference for the revolutionary left wing in the twentieth century. For the period from the collapse of syndicalism in the mid-1920s to the dissolution of the Soviet state at the start of the 1990s, the memory and celebration of the October Revolution had become the most important components in the identity that defined the conception of the radical left in Denmark. Embedded within these commemorations was the narrative of Lenin and his ideas of the vanguard party, the revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Despite constant contention between various leftist parties and groups, such rivalries took place within a Leninist frame of reference and under the broad rubric of Marxism-Leninism and communism.

This article focuses on the Cold War period, characterised by global splits in the communist movement, which in turn provided the radicalisation potential of the October Revolution with renewed topicality. Before the Second World War, Trotsky had laid the foundations of a new, rival international communist movement, and from the 1950s Maoism manifested as an alternative version of communism. The 1960s then saw the birth of the youth rebellion as a movement which found inspiration in the radical roots of the Labour movement and had as one of its key issues the idea of anti-imperialist solidarity with the Third World, for example in the war in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The Danish New Left was clustered around the Socialistisk Folkeparti (Socialist People's Party or SF) founded in 1959 and its splinter party from 1967, Venstresocialisterne (the Left-

Wing Socialists or VS). During certain periods, both parties served as platforms for Trotskyist and Maoist groups. Later, these two alternative communist currents formed their own organisations, of which the most prominent were the Revolutionære Socialister Forbund (Revolutionary Socialists' Federation or RSF) founded in 1972 and renamed Socialistisk Arbejderparti (Socialist Workers' Party or SAP) in 1980; and, from 1968, the Kommunistisk Forbund Marxister-Leninister (Communist Federation of Marxists-Leninists or KFML) which was renamed the Kommunistisk Arbejderparti (Communist Workers' Party or KAP) in 1976. Both contended with the Soviet and Soviet-aligned communists over the correct interpretation of the October Revolution.

Linking the October Revolution, political contention and radicalisation is not a new idea. In a Danish context, this issue has been outlined in two essays, respectively on the media coverage of the decennial anniversaries of the revolution in the period 1947 to 1987 and on the radicalisation of the New Left in its 'Hunt for the Red October'.<sup>5</sup> In further assessing these assumptions about the importance of the October Revolution in the radicalisation process of the left wing, it is first necessary to bring to light some of the basic details regarding the different actors dealing with the revolution. This article will explore the question of 'October' as a marker of radicalisation by considering the way the commemorations were organised between 1947 and 1987. Drawing on material from the Labour Movement's Library and Archive in Copenhagen the article will seek to understand the way the commemorations were organised, who attended, how was the event reported by party newspapers.

### **'October' celebrations before 1945**

In Denmark, the October Revolution was celebrated from its first anniversary in 1918. From the outset it was seen by those who celebrated it as an event of world historical importance. To communists of different persuasions, the Russian revolution became a confirmation that their communist convictions were well-founded, and as the day of the revolution itself, 7 November, became a defining date for left-wing radicals in the twentieth century. Susan M. Corbesero, in her study of the Soviet

celebrations in the first ten years after the revolution, quotes a *Pravda* correspondent who called the 'great proletarian festival' in Moscow a 'red' version of Christmas Eve.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Frederick C. Corney has pointed out that the narrative of the revolution was particularly potent because it was a foundational narrative.<sup>7</sup>

To individuals with communist convictions, as well as societies like Soviet Russia, the memory of 'October' became the story of their roots, creating order and meaning in their lives. This was not a static story: on the contrary it was dynamic and plastic and under continuous development. But from the beginning, the annual celebrations of the October Revolution became the primary stage for the construction of the narrative. Here, the attempt was made to shape the collective memory according to the political situation and the needs of the organisers. Thus, for instance, certain aspects of the revolutionary course of events were emphasised more than others, for example the more dramatic aspects like the storming of the Winter Palace and the crucial role of the Bolshevik party. Similarly, it became possible to attribute new situational meanings to the revolution as the Danish examples discussed here will show.

In 1918, the Socialist Workers' Party, precursor of the communist party, was in the forefront of commemorating the revolution. The event was advertised in the party paper, the *Klassekampen* (The Class Struggle) as a 'festival' for 'the Russian Proletarian Revolution'.<sup>8</sup> It was held at the Gimle assembly hall in the Frederiksberg district of Copenhagen. This was a venue steeped in labour tradition and it was here in 1876 that the Social Democratic Party had adopted its first party programme, the Gimle Programme, inspired by the German SPD's Gotha Programme of the previous year. The anniversary festival in 1919 included speeches, coffee and cakes, songs, congratulatory telegrams and commemorative postcards showing the leaders of the movement: a set-up, all in all, that did not differ greatly from other events in the Danish labour movement of the time.

To this extent, the main features of the celebrations in Denmark adhered closely to the European socialist movement's cultural system and traditions.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, in terms of substance some obvious differences may be observed. The most significant difference between this and other events in Denmark's labour movement calendar was that

the anniversary celebrated an event that changed the government system in another country. Moreover, unlike for instance the May Day celebrations, this was a revolution that had been carried out and sustained by means of violent force. In this way, the marking of 7 November was a much more radical expression, and 'October' was from the very outset a potential marker for radicalisation. This will be explored below in relation to the Cold War period.

While the celebration of October would always retain these Danish, European and Soviet features, the marking of the revolution has also been influenced by the historical moment and by the party, the DKP. While before the Second World War the DKP never achieved widespread support in a social-democratic and largely anti-communist society, it did, in the 1930s, experience increased support and secure parliamentary representation, against the background of the economic recession and high rates of unemployment. Popular Front policies focussing on the struggle against nazism and on national independence also led to some increase in support. At the same time, there was an interesting change in the name used for celebrating the revolution as from 1936 the communists ceased to call it a 'Revolutionsfest' (Revolution Festival) and instead used the term 'Novemberfest' (November Festival). It seems likely that in keeping with the popular front policy, the motivation for this rhetorical change was to tone down the revolutionary perspective in favour of national and popular aspects so that, on the one hand, the event could provide associations to an ordinary harvest festival while, on the other, it paid tribute to Soviet progress and the USSR's peaceful intentions.

### **The November Festivals after the Second World War**

The Popular Front-inspired commemorations which began in Denmark in 1936 continued after the Second World War in what was a notably peaceful manner considering the communists' participation in the wartime armed resistance. The 1945 celebration was the biggest ever celebration of the October Revolution in Denmark. Nearly 25,000 people over more than four days took part in the DKP's extensive anniversary event which included speeches, a cabaret dealing with Occupation themes, and ballet, singing and music by a forty-man orchestra in the

country's largest indoor venue – the KB-Hallen in Copenhagen.<sup>10</sup> The reason for this level of support was, of course, the Soviet contribution to the defeat of Hitler Germany and the communists' participation in the resistance movement. This had changed many people's opinions regarding the DKP which immediately after the war had achieved a membership of about 60,000 as compared with around 8000 members in 1939.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it must have seemed an obvious choice to link the October Revolution in 1917 with the liberation of Denmark in 1945: 'Without the victory of the socialist revolution, Denmark would not have regained her freedom' as the party chairman Aksel Larsen (1897–1972) put it.<sup>12</sup> Or, in the words of another keynote speaker, Inge Merete Nordentoft (1903–60), a popular member of the Danish parliament: 'We have always celebrated the day 7 November, but never with greater gratitude than today'.<sup>13</sup>

The thirtieth anniversary in 1947 was also celebrated in the KB-Hallen, again with speeches, a cabaret and a large orchestra, but with the celebrations this time limited to two days. The concept was almost the same as during the previous two years. There was still a desire to create a popular and enjoyable commemoration event, but the party newspaper *Land og Folk*, clearly indicates the growing bitterness within the DKP regarding current political developments. Harsh language was used against the anti-communist leaders of The Social Democratic Party and against US dollar-capitalism, and according to the keynote speaker, editor-in-chief Martin Nielsen, (1900–62), it was the Soviet Union which had saved the Danes during the Second World War and secured the people's democracies in Eastern Europe. Conversely, in line with the Zhdanov two-camp theory adopted from 1946, the western capitalist countries headed by the USA were leading the world towards another war, and Nielsen urged that the people needed to realise this as soon as possible:

The time when the death knells will toll for the third and last time for the overly ripe and rotting capitalism will not only depend on external circumstances, but also on the conscious will of the people ...'<sup>14</sup>

The Association for Danish-Russian Cooperation organised another Soviet loyalist October celebration in the Odd Fellow Palace, with room for roughly 1,000 participants. This annual event also comprised speeches and entertainment, but additionally it encompassed more culturally sophisticated features like the string quartet by Dmitri Shostakovich performed in 1947. There were also recitations from the writings of Maxim Gorki, and a speech on foreign policy from the Soviet ambassador to Denmark, Andrej Plakhin, which *Land og Folk* reported under the headline: 'You can't scare the Soviet Union with the Threat of Nuclear Weapons'.<sup>15</sup> There were also events in the larger provincial cities, especially in Aalborg, Aarhus and Odense. Yet, there was a marked decline in the number of participants from an estimated 50,000 in 1945 to approximately half that number two years later.

If we jump forward ten years to the fortieth anniversary in 1957, the party had abandoned the idea of making 7 November a national anniversary. The party's big event in Copenhagen was moved back to a smaller venue, the Idrætshuset, and it was also shortened to a single day. It was no longer the national party which formally organised the event, but its Copenhagen section, which also came to organise future events in the city. The contents of the November Festival had now become a hybrid between a Danish popular festival and the Danish-Russian event earlier held by the friendship society, which now went by the name of the National Association for Cooperation between Denmark and the Soviet Union. The programme was a mixture of fourteen Soviet artists encompassing a pianist, an opera singer, a solo dancer, an accordion virtuoso, a folk dance troupe, a string quartet, two magicians and a Danish orchestra with a youth choir delivering songs with 'modern rhythms'.<sup>16</sup> According to an internal Copenhagen party evaluation, the festival was considered to have been one of the best November Festivals in the party's history.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the commemoration no longer held a wide national appeal.

Also in 1957, the friendship society itself had scaled back its independent contribution to a smaller Soviet photographic exhibition on daily life in the Soviet Union and on Soviet film history.<sup>18</sup> The exhibition was opened by Jørgen Jørgensen, the association's president, and Nikolaj Slavin, the Soviet ambassador, and was subsequently visited by approximately 2000 guests.<sup>19</sup> On the Revolution Day on 7 November the

ambassador also held a large reception at the embassy. This brought together several hundred prominent people from the spheres of diplomacy, public administration, the military, the arts, etc., including the social-democratic prime and foreign minister Hans Christian Hansen.<sup>20</sup> Overall, the number of participants taking part in the celebrations was 10,000 people.<sup>21</sup>

Aksel Larsen, the party chairman, did not participate in the celebrations held that year in Denmark, but, as can be seen from the front page of the party paper, was a member of the Danish delegation that went to Moscow to take part in the fortieth anniversary there. Also on the paper's front page, readers were told on 8 November of the assurances of the Soviet defence minister Malinovsky concerning his country's peaceful intentions, while also receiving details of the large-scale military parade in Red Square, including new powerful rockets, tanks and other military vehicles. The mood of the paper had certainly improved in comparison with 1947. This was not because of the DKP's own success, for the Hungarian crisis in 1956 had made the party even more unpopular and together with Khrushchev's secret speech had led to major internal divisions which two years later came to a head and split the party down the middle. Nevertheless, in November 1957 the paper was more upbeat than a decade previously, demonstrating an optimism and pride in relation to the USSR that was based on developments in the Middle East, with the consolidation of Syria loyal to Moscow, and more especially on the launching of the first Sputnik satellite. These were events into which Danish communists read confirmation of the strength and ingenuity of the Soviet Union in comparison to the USA, and they were also interpreted as (renewed) confirmation of the historical correctness of the October Revolution. The greetings sent to the Soviet Communist Party by DKP read: 'You have shown the way for the future of mankind', and the headline of the leading article on 7 November read, 'Triumph of Socialism'.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, the 1957-celebration concealed a disaster now waiting to happen, namely another split in the global communist movement by way of a conflict between the Soviet Union and China. It is obvious that the DKP was aware of the problem. It was pointed out that 'China's aim is entirely identical with that of the Soviet Union', and that



Mao 'warned against revisionist deviations within the parties'.<sup>23</sup> However, it was not until the early 1960s, as we will shortly see, that this had direct consequences for the communist movement in Denmark and for the way in which the October Revolution was celebrated. With the emergence of the Cold War the main purpose of the November festivals had become more that of an internal exercise involving the swearing of allegiance to the Soviet comrades. Even though the rhetoric could be harsh and even militaristic on behalf of the Soviet Union, the celebrations contained no call for violent measures nor any encouragement to prepare a revolution.

### **Trotskyist Permanent Revolution**

The only counter-narrative of the left to be voiced in the early Cold War period was that of the Trotskyists in 1947. The editorial of their newspaper deplored the fact that the October Revolution had not spread to the more highly developed countries in Europe. The consequence of this was that the Soviet Union had been isolated and as a result had evolved in a totally erroneous direction with Stalin in charge. The Soviet Union had, to the Trotskyists, therefore ceased to be a workers' state, and yet the Danish *Revolutionære Kommuniste* (Revolutionary Communists, 1947-54) celebrated the revolution and its leaders, Lenin and Trotsky.<sup>24</sup> It seems that no public event was held on the occasion, for there were very few Danish Trotskyists at the time, and the group had almost no political significance at all. Just as the counter-celebrations of the Soviet Left Opposition groups had been drowned out by the noise and the lights of the celebrations in 1927, the alternative interpretation of the revolution in Denmark in 1947 was drowned out by the DKP's big celebrations, the memory of the occupation and the new polarisation of the Cold War. The October Revolution was not at this stage up for debate, and the DKP still exercised a firm grip on the telling of what it meant to be a communist in Denmark.

In 1957, most Trotskyists joined the *Danmarks Socialistiske Parti* (Socialist Party of Denmark or DSP), a party which in its short existence until 1959 gathered lapsed and expelled communists, among them the so-called Titoists. However, the DSP bulletin does not reveal that the new party celebrated the October Revolution.<sup>25</sup>

In 1959 the monopolistic status of DKP as the only party to the left of the Social Democratic Party was finally broken with the formation of Socialist People's Party (SF), chaired by Aksel Larsen, the former DKP chairman. The new party did not celebrate the October Revolution, because Larsen and his supporters came into conflict with the communist party majority precisely over the issue of dependency on the Soviet Union. In and around SF there were, however, groups for whom the October Revolution was part of their frame of reference. In the first instance, this meant the Trotskyist group *Revolutionære Socialister* (Revolutionary Socialists or RS) which represented a Danish section of the Fourth International and which with a so-called 'entrism' purpose worked within SF.

A key player in this context was Vagn Rasmussen (1936-2016), who in 1967 was behind the Trotskyist counter interpretation of the October Revolution by way of his book, 'An anthology of the Permanent Revolution'. This included edited translations of Lenin's 'Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution' from 1921 and Trotsky's 'Fourteen Theses of the Permanent Revolution' from 1929. One of the central assessments of this tendency was that the socialist countries had nothing to celebrate: socialism throughout the world was in decline, especially in the third world, it was the Soviet communists who were chiefly responsible for this state of affairs:

The experience of the Russian Revolution is vital for the labour movement, but the communist parties had sought to monopolize it, and the ideas they propound are not the true October Revolution. ... The watchwords of the October Revolution are not 'socialism in one country', 'incremental revolution', or 'peaceful co-existence', as claimed by Stalinists, but rather 'Permanent Revolution' and 'World Revolution'.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that Vagn Rasmussen's criticism was a radical one. The Soviet communists had betrayed the October Revolution for their own advantage and to the detriment of the rest of the world's socialists resulting, for instance, in the mass killing of nearly a million Indonesian communists. The Chinese line of lending support to various revolu-

tionary rebel groups was a better course of action, and the Cubans' involvement in the revolutionary struggle in Latin America was better still, despite the fact that neither of the two had completely understood the radical consequences of Trotsky's ideas concerning the permanent revolution.<sup>27</sup> The RS journal *Socialistisk Information* does not, however, yield any information that allows us to believe that the Trotskyists held a public commemoration event in 1967.

By 1977, the successor organisation was the Revolutionary Socialists' League (RSF). Though this was at this time the dominant Trotskyist organisation, it still numbered little more than two hundred members in the late 1970s, though it did in 1977 hold two smaller local commemorative events. These were showings of the Eisenstein film 'October – Ten Days that Shook the World', made for the tenth anniversary in 1927. One of these was held at the Youth House in Roskilde and the other at Søborg School in a Copenhagen suburb, where an introductory speech was given by the veteran activist, Børge Trolle (1917-2004), who had been an active Trotskyist since the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> In the RSF's bulletin, the *Klassekampen* (Class Struggle), the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of October was rounded off by a piece of very hard criticism levelled at the Norwegian Arbeidernes kommunistparti (marxist-leninistene) (the Workers' Communist Party Marxist-Leninists), which at this time was one of the strongest Maoist parties in Europe. The reason for this was that the Norwegian Maoists had put forward 'Stalinist lies' concerning Trotsky's role during the revolution in Russia, allegedly with the object of brainwashing its members and preventing them from accepting the ideas and policies of Trotsky and the Fourth International.<sup>29</sup>

Still in 1987 there was optimism among the Trotskyists, and they held a bigger Trotskyist celebration of the revolution than ever before. Together with the annual collection for the party newspaper they celebrated a 'Socialist November Festival' in the premises of Pædagogmedhjælpernes Fagforening (the Kindergarten Assistants' Union) in Copenhagen with a keynote speech by Vagn Rasmussen, cabaret, music, singing, a showing of Eisenstein's film and food and drink. In all, about seventy people participated.<sup>30</sup> The veteran Børge Trolle once again recounted the Trotskyist narrative in the form of a

poem about the October Revolution in which he expressed the hope that someday the Soviet Union would rehabilitate Trotsky and that all honest revolutionaries would therefore be able to celebrate together smashing the bourgeois state and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>31</sup>

### **Maoist pro-Stalin, anti-Soviet Union commemorations**

The Chinese party line also had its Danish followers. In 1967 there were two such groups. One was *Kommunistisk Arbejdskreds* (Communist Working Circle (or KAK) from 1963, which, at that time, through its chairman, Gotfred Appel, (1924-92) had the official connection to the Chinese Communist Party and received financial support from the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen. Nevertheless, it numbered only a few activists, probably not more than thirty.<sup>32</sup> This group published the journal *Kommunistisk Orientering*, which celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of October with an article that praised both Lenin and Mao. The latter, according to the article, had taught them to understand the lessons of the revolution concerning the implacable struggle against all deviations, the iron discipline of the communist party, and the armed struggle against the old class rule which had to be crushed. Denmark and other western countries were seen by KAK merely as imperialist parasitical societies in which the working class had been corrupted and was therefore of no use in the revolutionary struggle.<sup>33</sup> Already the following year, the Chinese broke off contact with KAK after which the group gave up ordinary political work in Denmark. Instead it used its energy to give clandestine support to revolutionary groups abroad such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).<sup>34</sup> Thus it was no longer relevant for the most sectarian and radicalised Danish group of the Cold War period to take part in any local rivalry regarding the October Revolution, which was in fact not mentioned in the group's bulletin in November 1977.

The other Maoist group was active around the magazine *Politisk Revy*. This magazine was independent of political parties, but in November 1967 was chiefly connected to the left faction of SF which, soon after, broke with the party and established a separate party, the Left-Wing

Socialists. *Politisk Revy* marked the October Revolution in 1967 by putting a weeping Lenin on the front-page of the magazine.<sup>35</sup> The revolution had, according to the Maoists and in line with the Trotskyists, been betrayed by Soviet revisionism and so-called 'bureaucratic capitalism'. The class struggle in the Soviet Union had been abandoned, and the egalitarian society was not now even a utopian dream. On the contrary, it was China which offered a clear and uncompromising picture of the October Revolution, and which through the initiation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution the year before had confronted the issue of bureaucratic powers which was the central problem of the Soviet Union.

The author Jan Bredsdorff (b. 1942) put it as follows:

The fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution will also be celebrated in China – and the flowers will constitute a sharp contrast to the invective that will be aimed at those who have ravished Marxism and the Soviet people; the leaders of the Soviet Union since Stalin's death. They have administered the revolutionary legacy in such a manner that the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Socialism in Russia must also mourn its demise.<sup>36</sup>

So, unlike the Trotskyists, the Maoists maintained that things had gone wrong only after Stalin's death, which also went some way towards explaining why China had also broken with the USSR only after this event. Or, to put it another way: the interpretation of October was a matter not only of ideological disagreements between various communist schools of thought, but of the question of who was to lead the way forward for world communism. Who, in other words, were the legitimate leaders of the revolution? In the year of the fiftieth anniversary of October there was no longer broad agreement on this point among Danish communists.

In 1968, most Maoists were organised in the Communist League Marxists-Leninists (KFML), which took over the official party contact to the Chinese representation in Denmark. In 1976, the League changed its name to Communist Workers' Party (KAP) and in the following years it endeavoured without success to get candidates elected to the national

parliament. The party membership peaked in the late 1970s with around 1,000 members. These undoubtedly identified strongly with the October Revolution in that they gave their publishing company and their bookstores in Copenhagen, Aarhus and Aalborg the name *Oktober*. In 1977 they held the largest non-Soviet communist commemorative event for the anniversary in Copenhagen in the form of a three-day festival that included speakers, a showing of Eisenstein's 'October' and a closing party with dancing and music by the music group Oktober. The keynote speaker at the event, held in one of the halls at Grundtvigs Hus (House of Grundtvig), was the KAP chairman Benito Scocozza (b. 1935). An estimate based on photos taken at the venue indicates that the maximum number of participants must have been around 1,000. In addition to this event, at least one local KAP-event was held in Elsinore, to which can be added a book exhibition in the KAP-bookshop in Copenhagen.<sup>37</sup>

The Maoist political analysis in 1977 had changed compared to the 1967 anniversary: China and Stalin were no longer mentioned, and although Mao's thoughts on a continuing class struggle even after the revolution was still usable, the primary focus was now on Lenin. Blame was still directed at the DKP and the Soviet Union. Geopolitical developments during the Cold War clearly set the frame of reference for the radical left in Denmark:

On the sixtieth anniversary of the October Revolution, the propaganda machine has really started running. Naturally, the Soviet Union boasts about being the cradle of the October Revolution and of maintaining its ideals. In Denmark, at one and the same time, the DKP attempts to pay tribute to the Soviet Union and to make its mark as the Danish representative of the ideals of the October Revolution. Even more, Danish Trotskyists think that they are the ones representing the ideals that the October Revolution celebrated ... The Communist Workers' Party (KAP), too, commemorates the October Revolution. At public meetings in Copenhagen, we use this event to defend the October Revolution and at the same time to expose the fact that today the Soviet Union is an imperialist superpower that, together with the USA, is the chief enemy of the peoples of the world.<sup>38</sup>

Ten years later, in 1987, the Maoists and the Trotskyists between them only had a few hundred party members. The KAP was still the larger of the two, but although the party had made much of celebrating the sixtieth anniversary, it did not hold any events in 1987.

### **The Soviet-loyal festival continues**

Although the DKP no longer had a monopoly on defining the October Revolution, the party continued its celebrations undeterred. The concept of the November Festival in 1967 was not much different from a decade earlier, though once again expectations for the number of participants were scaled down with the decision to use the smaller Odd Fellow Palace venue at which the Friendship Society had held its festival in 1947. The programme included an inaugural address by the chairman Knud Jespersen (1926-77), and entertainment with singing, dancing and music, and a closing party. There was also a Soviet feature consisting of a youth ensemble which went on a nationwide tour of thirteen commemorative events with a reported aggregate attendance of around 8,000.<sup>39</sup>

The Friendship Society organised a classical music concert, also at the Odd Fellow Palace, and on the following day a separate 'friendship assembly' in a Copenhagen theatre, *Det nye Teater*, which could also accommodate 1,000 persons. This was followed by 'a festive evening' with Russian food and drink at some banqueting rooms at Frederiksberg Have, a Copenhagen park. This time, too, the celebrations organised by the Friendship Society were more sophisticated than those of the party, with a Soviet female singer, a violinist, and a pianist. Prominent speakers took the rostrum, notably the Soviet health minister Trofimov, and the Danish prime minister Jens Otto Krag. Subsequently, Krag was quoted as having said that 'time had confirmed what Lenin had said', and that 'the fruits of the October Revolution had made the Soviet Union into a guardian of peace'.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the obligatory tribute to the Soviet Union and sharp criticism of the United States, NATO, the EEC and political opponents in the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist People's Party, the commemoration held by the DKP in 1967 was characterised by its focus-

sing relatively strongly on the party's communist rivals. Thus, the party stressed that the fact that the socialist revolution could only be carried out 'as a movement of the masses of working people and not as a coup or a conspiracy by a group of heroes'.<sup>41</sup> Maoism was downright harmful because it split the world communist movement. Ib Nørlund (1917-89) was the party's head of ideology and one of its most loyal supporters of the USSR and its principal personal contact with the Soviet party. According to Nørlund, it was the October Revolution which 'provided our lives and our struggle with direction whose correctness and sustainability have only been confirmed by the experience gained during the times that followed'.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, it is noteworthy for the first time the DKP considered it necessary to let Ingmar Wagner (1921-77), its secretary for peace and solidarity work and the vice-president of Friendship Society, take part in a public debate with the Maoist Scocozza and the Trotskyist Rasmussen. In addition to this increasing political competition, the background was that of the reduction of Cold War tension following the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 which had brought about greater openness in the discussion of alternative societal models and reduced hostility towards the Soviet Union in some sections of the Danish community. This was also reflected by the fact that, in addition to transmitting the parades in Red Square, Denmark Radio, the Danish public-service broadcaster, transmitted a three-hour programme about the revolution with the title 'Ten days that shook the world'.<sup>43</sup>

While in 1967 the DKP was a decimated party with less than one per cent support at the previous year's general election, in the years that followed it actually succeeded with its policy of 'working with the broad masses', firstly in the anti-war 'Vietnam Movement' and later in *Folkebevægelsen mod EF* (The People's Movement against the EEC). This was a process which was crowned by the party's return to parliament in 1973 with 3.6 per cent of the vote. In 1977 the DKP still had solid support and an impressive party apparatus that was partly financed by the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> A considerable investment was accordingly made into turning the celebration of the revolution's sixtieth anniversary into a large and popular 'Revolution Festival' for the masses – for this year, the term 'November Festival' was used only in a few places outside Copenhagen.



A multitude of different activities were launched. The party newspaper in the period 1 to 15 November announced as many as twenty-eight commemorative events around the country. Eisenstein's 'October' film was shown in at least seven different places, but new ideas also saw the light of day. One such was the one-week-long course held by the DKP folk high school, Tidens Højskole, under the heading, 'The October Revolution and Leninism Today'.<sup>45</sup> Children and young people were also to be involved in the celebrations, and the children's committee of the Danmarks Kommunistiske Ungdom (Communist Youth of Denmark), in cooperation with the Friendship Society, organised a drawing and essay competition on the importance of October to children and on the lives of children in the USSR.<sup>46</sup> Another example was an Aarhus children's group, Røde Spirer (Red Sprouts) that organised a festival with tombola, children's films and conjuring shows.<sup>47</sup>

Once again, the largest events were organised by the party and the Friendship Society in Copenhagen. The party held a revolution festival at the Falconer Centre, accommodating a little over 2,000 persons, with speeches, music, singing by the October Choir and once again a cabaret on the programme. The title this time was 'Revolution and a parochial hole', the parochial hole being the social-democratic, capitalist and almost hopelessly out-of-the way Denmark – the rough antithesis to the Soviet Union. According to the keynote speaker Nørlund, replacing the party chairman Jespersen who had fallen ill and shortly after died, the Soviet Union was like nothing less than the sun which, despite a few dark spots, is a life-giving source of warmth and light.<sup>48</sup> There was no room here for euro-communist misgivings.

The renaming of the main event by its pre-1936 name, 'Revolution Festival' did certainly indicate a will to compete with other actors in a more radical milieu. Nevertheless, the confidence of the party in 1977 was strong. As a *Land og Folk* editorial put it:

The ten days that shook the world, have existed for sixty years and have transformed the world. Our imagination is not strong enough to imagine a world without the October Revolution.<sup>49</sup>

Danish communists, in other words, could not imagine a world without

the USSR, while far-left rivals within Denmark seem no longer to have been perceived as serious competitors, as they had been in 1967. Neither the Maoists nor Trotskyists were mentioned by even a single word in the party newspaper; and the Maoists set great store by the October Revolution, they were very few in number and weakened by Mao's death and the course of the Cultural Revolution, as well as being divided by the conflict between Albania and China.

It looks as if in total more people participated in the festivities organised by the DKP in 1977 than in 1967. The party paper carried advertisements for more celebrations, and measured by the two largest events held in Copenhagen the overall number of participants rose from around 2,000 to 3,000. It is also clear that celebrations of the revolution had gradually developed into an institution in themselves, and like the revolution were also worth commemorating. Thus in one article a party member thought himself back to the celebrations in 1927:

My very first meeting concerning the Soviet Union was the tenth anniversary at 22 Rømersgade. The hall was packed like a tin of sardines. I was deeply moved by the mood permeating the hall ...<sup>50</sup>.

In 1987 the DKP once again held the largest commemoration event of the year, but this time in Nørrebrohallen, which could only accommodate about 800 people, and this time under a new name: the October Festival. The programme included speeches by the new chairman Ole Sohn (b. 1954), Ib Nørlund and Nicolai Podolsky from the CPSU. The role of the last of these was to explain what was happening in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. There was a musical cabaret, the October Choir sang Russian songs, and there was a pop-concert by popular artists. Similar large-scale celebratory events took place in Aarhus, Aalborg, and Odense as well as in several other towns where Podolsky again attended to explain the situation in the USSR. In addition, a cinematic week was held at Kino Kosmos as well as a book and photo exhibition in the bookshop Sputnik, both located in the Friendship Society's Friendship House in Copenhagen. A less conventional feature of the festivities was the Danish tour of the Soviet rock-and-roll band, Dialogue.<sup>51</sup>

The Soviet communists also agreed to debate with rivals on the left. In particular, the DKP branch in the working-class district of Nørrebro in Copenhagen took the dramatic step of organising a three-day programme of films and political and historical debates with the participation of political opponents representing the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party and the Left-Wing Socialists. The inclusion of these participants in a debate would have been unimaginable just a few years before. Thanks to Gorbachev's glasnost, a Pandora's box had been opened, and as we all know it was never closed again. Doubts surrounding the legacy of October quickly took hold, and the signs of decline were symbolically marked already in 1987 when Frank Aaen, the new editor-in-chief of the DKP newspaper, did not even mention the revolution in his 7 November editorial.<sup>52</sup> The symbolic value of the October Revolution was in rapid decline.

### 'October' as a marker of radicalism

As to how far the commemoration of October was a marker of radicalisation, this, of course, is first of all a matter of definition. The present hypothesis leans on Eitan Y Alimi, Chares Demetriou and Lorenzo Bosi's book *The Dynamics of Radicalization* (2015), in which radicalisation is defined as 'the process through which a social movement organization (SMO) shifts from predominantly nonviolent tactics of contention to tactics that include violent means' and as 'a process emerging out of contentious interactions between various parties and actors'. Thus violence-prone ideologies or intentions will not in themselves suffice to justify characterising an organisation as radicalised.<sup>53</sup> As a consequence of this, it may be argued that scrutiny of the forms and substance of the peaceful commemorations of the October Revolution in Denmark cannot on their own establish whether 'October' can be perceived as a marker of radicalisation. Seen in the context of studies of collective actions in Denmark, there are however certain indications of plausible links. Here it can be demonstrated that, in the period from the mid-1960s to the late-1980s when the October Revolution was contested, there was also an upswing in violent action primarily in the form of street riots, occupation of buildings, vandalism, industrial action and confront-

tations with the police in which the groups connected to the competing communist tendencies took part.<sup>54</sup>

Against this background, the commemoration of October can be perceived as only a potential marker of radicalisation in at least three respects. First, the commemorations were at the beginning an opportunity for communists to present themselves to the rest of the society as genuine revolutionaries and as representatives willing to spearhead a violent and radical social upheaval. Later, however, this message was undoubtedly toned down by the DKP, as can be seen from the several remarkable changes of the name: from 'Revolution Festival' to 'November Festival' in 1936; through the one-off renaming of the event as a 'Revolutionary Festival' in 1977; and finally in 1987 with the term 'October Festival', which could be interpreted to indicate that the October Revolution had faded so much that it was now seen to belong to a different era. In addition, it seems as if in the end the only meaning left in commemorating the event was to reaffirm loyalty to the Soviet Union. In conclusion it must therefore be said that, as far as the DKP was concerned, 'October' was *not* a marker of radicalisation during the Cold War period. It is true that the party's rhetoric was sometimes harsh and militaristic, and even bitter and implacable, as we saw when Nielsen in 1947 when, predicted the imminent outbreak of the Third World War. What is nevertheless relevant here is that the DKP after 1945 was not involved in violent action to any degree that is worth mentioning.

Secondly, in line with Alimi et al's 'Competition for Power in the Within-Movement Arena' the commemorations were an occasion for competing communist parties to present themselves as more revolutionary and more communist than the DKP.<sup>55</sup> Both Trotskyists and Maoists argued that the Soviet communists had betrayed and abandoned the revolution's original radical *raison d'être*. In respect of the violence enacted by these groups over the period under review, for these 'October' *can* be regarded as a marker of radicalisation. It is true that they did not meet with much success in this competition: they only challenged the DKP to a modest degree when it came to the 1967 anniversary, and only sat up smaller counter commemoration events in 1977 and in 1987, at which point October as symbolic landmark was appar-

ently running out of time. That said, the use which these groups made of violence and the dynamics of their radicalisation do obviously require more scientific attention.

Thirdly, it is interesting that the most radicalised group of Maoists, KAK, later known as Manifest-Kommunistisk Arbejdsgruppe (Manifest – Communist Working Group) or Blekingegadebanden (the Blekinge Street Gang), was increasingly involved in covert activities with the PFLP during the 1970-1980s, but also abandoned the 'the Within-Movement Arena' and therefore the public dispute and competition about the narrative of the October Revolution. This group, in other words, actually became too radical to commemorate the revolution.

## **Conclusion**

The Danish communist party, ever loyal to the Soviet Union, together with the DKP-dominated Danish-Soviet Friendship Society were the primary organisers of commemorative events for the October Revolution in Denmark. However, from the 1960s, alternative narratives gained ground on the radical left wing. Trotskyist and Maoist versions of the revolutionary narrative were primarily told from 1967 and practiced from 1977. The scope of the commemorative events, as we have seen, by and large followed the ups and downs of the DKP. The November Festivals peaked in 1945 with a roughly estimated 50,000 participants, after which numbers declined rapidly, to around 25,000 in 1947, and to probably not more than 2,000 in 1987. In between, in the 1970s, the party enjoyed a comeback which is reflected by the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary that covered more and larger events than had been the case a decade earlier in 1967.

The form and content of the commemorative events did not vary a great deal over the years, even though their political content was adjusted to the prevailing political situation. Following the Second World War it is, however, worth noting that the DKP attempted to turn the commemorative events into a national red-letter day. On the celebration of the largest manifestation in Copenhagen in 1945, considerable efforts were made to re-enact the German occupation by means of a large-scale cabaret which was not only intended to affirm the commu-

nists own understanding of themselves, but was also aimed at influencing the overall worldview of larger parts of the Danish population. However, the Cold War put a definite stop to such ambitions, and events commemorating the revolution subsequently became Danish-Soviet hybrid festivals with Soviet cultural features and speeches confirming the Danish party's close links to the mother party. Despite its strong affiliation to the DKP, the Friendship Society had a different role to play throughout the period. For that organisation, it was much more a matter of focussing on the bonds of friendship between Denmark and the Soviet Union as states, and for this reason it was possible also for social democratic prime ministers to take part in the commemorative events in 1957 and 1967.

The main individual agents were primarily the leaders of the organisations, especially the party chairmen and ideological authorities. From the 1950s in the DKP it was more than anybody one of the secretaries of the Central Committee, Ib Nørlund, who was continuously present and gave several keynote speeches, among them the most important one in 1977; he also wrote many articles on the subject. As the unofficial chief ideologist in charge of the party's contacts with its foreign sister parties, with close links to the Soviet ambassador in Denmark and the International Department of the CPSU, this was by no means accidental. More than anybody else, Nørlund was the Danish 'translator' of Soviet policies in Denmark.<sup>56</sup> Similar ideologists were also at work, albeit less prominently so, in the other parties that celebrated the revolution. As far as the Trotskyists were concerned they were activists like Børge Trolle and Vagn Rasmussen, whereas KFML/KAP endorsed Benito Scocozza, chairman of the party from its foundation in 1968 and until 1984.

Commemorating 'October' was from the outset an activity linked to the will of using violence as a political tool, but it changed from the mid-1930s and more unambiguously from after the end of the Second World War where the Moscow-aligned communists in Denmark aspired in practice to gaining influence through the conventional democratic power channels. It could even be argued that the DKP's attempts to make the commemoration of the revolution a national festival day became a part of the party's de-radicalising process. At the same time a flank was

opened for a new left wing with a radical agenda and a competitive willingness to fight in the streets for the 'real' ideals of October. With the split in the world communist movement, new actors entered the political stage and filled out the political space to the left of the old communists, ultimately making 'October' once more a marker of radicalism.

*Translated from Danish by Lena Flugler*

## Notes

1. Morten Thing, 'The Russian Revolution and the Danish Labour Movement', pp177-219, in *L'Urss, il mito, le masse*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1991. See also: Bent Jensen, *Danmark og det russiske spørgsmål 1917-1924, Dansk Ruslandspolitik fra bolsjevikernes magterobring til anerkendelsen af det bolsjevikiske regime de jure*, Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget i Aarhus, 1979, pp63-9.
2. Morten Thing, *Kommunismens kultur. DKP og de intellektuelle 1918-1960*, Vol 2, Copenhagen: Tiderne skifter, 1993, p930.
3. Ernst Christiansen, *I Bolschewikernes Rusland. Indtryk fra en Studierejse*, Copenhagen: Socialdemokratisk Ungdomsforbunds Forlag, 1919, p26.
4. Karen Steller Bjerregaard, "*Et undertrykt folk har altid ret*". *Solkidaritet med den 3. Verden i 1960'ernes og 1970'ernes Danmark*, PhD, Roskilde University, 2010, p471.
5. Iben Bjørnsson, 'En mindre veldid jubilar. Sovjetunionen i dansk presse 1947-1987', pp181-201, in Carsten Due-Nielsen, Rasmus Mariager & Regin Schmidt (Eds.), *Nye fronter i Den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2010; Thomas Ekman Jørgensen, Jagten på røde oktober – en historie om radikaliserings, pp73-90, in Adam Holm & Peter Scharff Smith (Eds.), *Idealisme eller fanatisme? Opgøret om venstrefløjen under den kolde krig*, Copenhagen: Forum, 2003
6. Susan M Corbasero, *The Anniversaries of the October Revolution, 1918-1927: Politics and Imagery*, PhD, University of Pittsburgh, 2005, p140.
7. Frederick C Corney, *Telling October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp1-10. See also: James van Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

8. Klassekampen, 7/11/1918.
9. Cf. Corbasero 2005, p5.
10. Land og Folk, 12/11/1945.
11. Åsmund Egge & Svend Rybner (Eds.), *Red Star in the North. Communism in the Nordic Countries*, Stamsund: Orkana Academic, 2015, p322.
12. Land og Folk, 8/11/1945.
13. Land og Folk, 12/11/1945.
14. Land og Folk, 23/11/1947.
15. Land og Folk, 03/11/1947.
16. Land og Folk, 08/11/1957.
17. Labour Movement's Library and Archives (ABA), Communist Party of Denmark's archive (DKP), box 664.
18. Land og Folk, 13-14/11/1957.
19. The Royal Library (KB), Jørgen Jørgensen's papers (JJ), capsule 26. Thanks to Kim Frederichsen for drawing my attention to these documents.
20. Land og Folk, 08/11/1957.
21. ABA/DKP/664.
22. Land og Folk, 7/11/1957.
23. Land og Folk, 7/11/1957.
24. Det nye Arbejderblad – Organ for revolutionære kommunister (4. Internationale), 10/11/1947.
25. Medlemsblad for Danmarks Socialistiske Parti, 1957.
26. Vagn Rasmussen, *En antologi om den permanente revolution*, Frederiksberg: Tema, 1967, p6.
27. Ibid., pp12-4.
28. Klassekampen, 1-14/11/1977
29. Klassekampen, 15-28/11/1977, 'Trotskij-sabotør og forræder'. Norske mao-stalinister fejrer 60-året for oktober-revolutionen med genopfriskning af gamle stalinistiske løgn by Allan Bækholm.
30. Klassekampen, 29/10-18/11/1987.
31. Klassekampen, 12-18/11/1987.
32. *PET's overvågning af den antiimperialistiske venstrefløj 1945-1989, PET-kommissionens rapport*, Vol 9, Copenhagen: PET-kommissionen, 2009, pp143-5.
33. Kommunistisk Orientering, 3/11/1967.
34. PET kommissionen 2009, p153. See also: Lars Hedegaard, 'Farvel til



- arbejderklassen. Blekingebåndens vej til illegaliteten', pp198-2016, in Holm & Smith 2003.
35. Subsequently many readers had asked if the front-page was meant to show that Lenin wept over Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's death (shot in Bolivia in October 1967), but it had not been the intention of the editors (Politisk Revy, 24/11/1967).
  36. Politisk Revy, 27/10/1967, 'Sovjet som skræmmebillede' by Jan Bredsdorff. The other articles on the subject were written by Ellen Brun and Jacques Hersh.
  37. Arbejderavisen, 10-16/11/1977.
  38. Arbejderavisen, 3-9/11/1977.
  39. Land og Folk, 2/11/1967; 'Report from the National Congress, 25 February 1968', KB/JJ/28.
  40. Land og Folk, 12-13/11/1967. See also: speech manuscript, ABA, Jens Otto Krag's archive, box 100.
  41. Land og Folk, 4/11/1967.
  42. Land og Folk, 7/11/1967.
  43. Land og Folk, 7/11/1967.
  44. Morten Thing, 'Kommunisternes kapital', pp165-86, in Morten Thing (Ed.), *Guldet fra Moskva. Finansieringen af de nordiske kommunistpartier 1917-1990*, 2nd Ed., Copenhagen: Informations Forlag, 2012, p182.
  45. Politisk Revy, 23/9/1977.
  46. Land og Folk, 5-6/11/1977. See also: 'Plan for Landsforeningen Danmark-Sovjetunionens arrangementer i året 1977, der markerer 60-året for Den store socialistiske Oktoberrevolution', ABA, Foreningen til Samvirke mellem Danmark og Sovjetunionen's archive, box 27.
  47. Land og Folk, 3/11/1977.
  48. Land og Folk, 12-13/11/1977. See also: speech manuscript, ABA, Jørgen Ib Nørlund's archive, box 15.
  49. Land og Folk, 5-6/11/1977.
  50. Land og Folk, 1/11/1977, 'Tanker ved en 60 års dag' by Svend Wandall. From 1879 to 1982, the address 22 Rømersgade was the Workers' Union and Assembly Hall, the first building belonging to the Danish labour movement. Today the Workers' Museum & ABA have their premises in the building.
  51. Land og Folk, 1/11/1987.

52. Land og Folk, 6-8/11/1987. In the following years, the positive narrative about the October Revolution further collapsed in the public debate and was downsized as a teaching subject in primary schools (Thomas Wegener Friis & Jesper Jørgensen, 'Dänemark und die October Revolution' in *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung*, 2007, pp245-54.
53. Eitan Y Alimi, Chares Demetriou & Lorenzo Bosi: *The Dynamics of Radicalisation. A Relational and Comparative Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p11.
54. René Karpantschof & Flemming Mikkelsen: Vold, politik og demokrati i Danmark efter Anden Verdenskrig, *Arbejderhistorie*, 2008(1), pp56-94. Pp57, 61-2. See also: Flemming Mikkelsen, 'Contention and Social Movements in an International and Transnational Perspective: Denmark 1914-1995' in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12(2), 1999, pp128-57; and *PET-kommissionens rapport*, Vol 9, 2009.
55. See Alimi, Demetriou & Bosi 2015, pp45-6.
56. Jesper Jørgensen, 'Partiets grå eminence? Ib Nørlund og de interne magtkampe i DKP i 1970'erne' in *Årbog 2009*, Arbejdermuseet & ABA 2010, pp81-107, p81.