

Alain Krivine: the integrity of a revolutionary

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The death of Alain Krivine on March 12th, at the age of 80, saw the passing of the last of the leading militants of the May 1968 revolts in France who remained faithful to the ideals of his youth, mixing anti-imperialism, anti-Stalinism and anti-capitalism. To this fidelity, writes Mediapart's publishing editor Edwy Plenel, his personality added a manifest integrity, which ran counter to the lust for power and party sectarianism.

FRANCE

Ça te passera avec l'âge - "You'll Grow Out of It". When, in 2006, Alain Krivine agreed to write a memoir recounting not his life but a "collective adventure" embodying "the possibility of a democratic revolution", he chose that phrase as the title of his account.

From his commitment to the Communist cause as a Paris schoolboy in the 1950s, to handing over the reins to a new generation in the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) half a century later, via his constant role as spokesman for the Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR) in 1968 then the Communist League (1969-1973) and, Revolutionary Communist League (1974-2009), Alain Krivine never did really grow out of "it".

But what was "it"? It was this simple idea that emancipation, the quest for freedom, the hope for equality, the demand for justice, are first and foremost a refusal, a negation of the existing order, an outburst against its miseries, its lies, its many forms of domination. What we normally call the Left is born of this infinite, ever renewed and unfinished movement, confronting the constantly reborn conservatism of all types.

But, sometimes, it so happens that the Lefts of power, of *raison d'état* or *raison de parti*, turn their backs on "it", and themselves embody injustice, to the point of turning their promise to ashes. If Alain Krivine stood apart in the world of politics, that was because his unwavering fidelity to his initial revolt was accompanied by a rejection of ambitions and compromises, careers and positions — the kind in which the ideal goes astray and becomes corrupted.

The moment of Krivine's death reminds us how much this unyielding stance - in his case, one devoid of sectarianism - can save clear-sightedness itself. His committed life began with the challenge to the imposture whose disasters and ultimate collapse have today given birth to the new Russian imperialism led by Vladimir Putin — a monstrous avatar of Soviet Stalinism, Great-Russian Tsarism and untrammelled capitalism.

This was the left-wing opposition to the "actually-existing socialism" of the twentieth century, established by USSR and its satellites after 1917, in the wake of what Leon Trotsky termed "the revolution betrayed." This is not just a remote past that fell away with the end of the Soviet Union in 1991: the war on Ukraine - invaded by the army of a KGB-educated dictator - shows us just how relevant it continues to be. As if echoing this past present, it so happens that the paternal side of Alain Krivine's family hailed from Ukraine; his grandfather Albert Meyer Krivine (1869-1946) was an atheist Jew of anarchist leanings, having fled to France from the anti-Jewish pogroms in the turn-of-

the-century Russian Empire.

Whatever its sectarian variants – born of its situations as a minoritarian or even groupuscular phenomenon – Trotskyism, to which Krivine is inextricably bound, was an ethical revolt. It compelled us to confront the truth of a totalitarian system, instead of giving in to an allegiance that meant blindness and lies. In its most libertarian version, close to surrealism, it was the refusal of inadmissible means that contradicted the proclaimed ends; it was also a refusal of a retreat into nationalism and imperialism that turned its back on internationalism, as well as of the apparatchik-logics that gave rise to bureaucracies of professional politicians.

In this respect, Alain Krivine's militant life leaves behind the promise of an honest Left when, all too often, electoral careerism and partisan cynicism have damaged its principles and dashed its hopes. It began in the mid-1950s when, as a young militant of the French Communist Party (PCF), he quickly became the cadre in charge of all the Communist high schoolers of Paris.

Krivine was thus destined for a rapid rise through the ranks of the PCF apparatus. In 1957, the year he turned 16, he took part in the World Festival of Democratic Youth, in Moscow, having distinguished himself through his record-beating sales of the Communist Youth newspaper L'Avant-Garde. But he came back wracked with doubts, especially after meeting Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) militants who were shocked by the PCF's wait-and-see attitude toward their fight for independence; the party called for "Peace in Algeria", refusing to resolutely support their struggle.

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The colonial question had made Alain Krivine see the need for solidarity with peoples struggling to become masters of their own destiny, and he gradually detached himself from the Stalinism which, reigning in the PCF of the time, weighed heavily on the French Left. This development was also a family affair: here he crossed paths with his elder brother Jean-Michel and his twin brother Hubert, who were already members of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCI), which was one of the Trotskyist organisations and also the French section of the Fourth International.

Engaged in clandestine support for Algeria's FLN with the Jeune Résistance network, while remaining a Communist, Krivine, who had in the meantime also begun his undergrad history studies, became a militant in both the Union of Communist Students (UEC) and the French Students' Union (UNEF). Anticolonialism and antifascism were the two decisive markers of his political engagement in this period, as materialised in the creation of the Antifascist University Front at the Sorbonne. He was one of its leaders, together with Henri Weber, who died in 2020.

The final break with the PCF came in 1965, when the Sorbonne-Lettres section of the UEC, in which he worked together with a Trotskyist "entryist" fraction, refused to support François Mitterrand's presidential candidacy, to which the PCF had given its backing. The future president's commitment in opposition to Algerian independence and in support of the war against "separatism" was still fresh

in the memory - and unforgivable in the eyes of this young generation, politicised and radicalised by anti-colonial struggles.

Now excluded from PCF ranks and preparing to become a history teacher, Alain Krivine gradually became the figurehead of a collective adventure of which he never sought to be the leader but rather one of the spokespersons. Claiming to be a better organiser than a theorist - and in any case an excellent orator, deft debater and a remarkable pedagogue - he always asserted his role as one activist among others, without hierarchies or privileges.

The emblematic trio he originally formed with Daniel Bensaïd (1946-2010) and Henri Weber (1944-2020), which became a duo in the 1980s when the latter joined the ranks of the Socialist Party, reminds us of the youth that was the driving force behind this lifelong commitment. When he stood for the presidential election in 1969, in the wake of May '68, while doing his military service, he was only 27 years old. At that time, a whole generation shook up its elders and ventured far beyond them, invented and innovated, challenging the established order with audacity and courage.

However, this apparent generational break masked an essential continuity: a Jewish history, as his entry in the Maitron biographical dictionary of the workers' movement emphasises. The core leadership of the Communist League, founded in 1969 after the JCR was banned in 1968, was largely the heir to "revolutionary Yiddishland", rooted in the political culture of a diasporic Jewish workers' movement which refused to dissolve into the nationalism of the Zionist movement.

Nous vengerons nos pères (We Will Avenge Our Fathers), a 2017 documentary by the next generation (Florence Johsua and Bernard Boespflug), shows the weight of the memory of the genocide and the primary role of anti-fascism in activist commitment to the Communist League in the 1970s. Its logical consequence was a fierce resistance to the revival of the murderous ideologies of fascism and Nazism.

How come they give up so quickly? Why did these heretics convert so easily? It would seem that their heresy was never more than a form of snobbery.

Daniel Bensaïd and Alain Krivine, *'Mai si !'* (1988)

After a first spell in prison following the banning of the JCR in summer 1968, there would also be a second, lasting a few weeks, provoked by the second ban on the League [in 1973], after it organised a violent demonstration against a far-right meeting in Paris on the theme "Stop uncontrolled immigration" [the adjective in French also evokes the "uncivilised"]. Today, with the ideological climate of the current presidential campaign filled with xenophobic and racist obsessions, Krivine's passing underlines the continued relevance of a struggle that forever occupied him.

In the inextricably democratic, social and internationalist radicalism that inspired Krivine, he was determinedly on the side of the movement of society rather than institutional politics. The supporters of the latter would confront him with the need to take responsibility faced with the impotence of his activism. In view of the state of the Left today, with its weaknesses, its divisions

and its splits, it would be worth confronting them with the importance of concrete struggles, as close as possible to the people most directly concerned, as the breeding ground for the Left's rebirth.

Under the banner of the "permanent revolution" theorised by Trotsky, the movementism of the current of which Alain Krivine was, for a long time, the voice and the face has always been on the lookout for the foundational event — that improbable and unforeseen moment, that breach in the fatality of the present, which the promise of the future could slip through. Marching together with this cause, Krivine was part of all manner of mobilisations, from the workers at Lip [an occupied and worker-managed watch factory] to the Larzac farmers, from the women's movement to migrants' struggles, from internationalist solidarity to alterglobalist rallies, without let-up.

Krivine became a full-timer for the Revolutionary Communist League, then a journalist for Rouge, a newspaper that appeared as a daily from 1976 to 1979; he was also a Member of the European Parliament for one term, from 1999 to 2004. It would be an understatement to say that he didn't really enjoy this, feeling much more powerless in this assembly than he did in activism as a militant. He was decidedly and determinedly on the outside, distancing himself from everything that could erode the ideal, compromise it or undermine it.

Krivine's was a sincere and good-natured intransigence - explaining his popularity, as today evidenced by the many tributes coming from his political rivals. He wore his ever-joking modesty on his sleeve; he loved laughing with his fellows and willingly indulged in self-mockery. Krivine professed the asceticism of a bon vivant who had abandoned any desire for fortune or any ambition to "make it".

Without doubt, it was this stubborn refusal to dominate and possess that made possible the challenge presented by the founding, in 2009, of the NPA, with the passing of the baton to a new generation, of which Olivier Besancenot was the first spokesperson, as the story with which Krivine's own name is associated - that of the League - came to an end.

He gave his last long interview to Mediapart in 2018, when he was one of ten figures interviewed for a documentary series marking the fiftieth anniversary of May '68 (see it here). Thirty years earlier, upon the twentieth anniversary, he and Daniel Bensaïd had published *Mai si!* in which the pair took a stance as "rebels" - against those of their generation who had "repented".

"How come they give up so quickly?" they asked. "Why did these heretics convert so easily? It would seem that their heresy was never more than a form of snobbery. [...] People of different times, made of different stuff. The ancients were tempered by the test of misfortune. The moderns have often failed to resist the sweet seduction of notoriety. No one chooses what era they live in. We can only be saddened that those who so loudly demanded the right to speak were so easily satisfied with the right to chatter; that they could not bear the first reversal of opinion. So much for the spirit of the times."

Whether the winds were behind him or against him, Alain Krivine chose to keep the same course. At the start of the conclusion to their *C'était la Ligue* (That Was the League), their work of reference on the history of which Krivine was the herald, Hélène Adam and François Coustal cite an extract from *Sans la nommer* [1], a song by Georges Moustaki, written and composed in 1969. It is a fitting accompaniment to the last farewell to this man whose fidelity, humility and integrity command the esteem of all, including those who did not follow the same path:

*She's the one who's beaten with a truncheon,
She's the one who's chased and hunted down.
She's the one who rises up,*

*Who suffers and goes on strike.
She's the one who's imprisoned,
Who's betrayed and abandoned,
Who makes us want to live,
Who makes us want to follow her
To the last, to the last*

I would like, without naming her,
To tell you about her.
Beloved or unloved,
She is faithful,
And if you want
Let me introduce her to you,
We call her
Permanent revolution.

Edwy Plenel

Black Box

I came to know Alain Krivine firstly when I was a militant with the Revolutionary Communist League during the 1970s, and notably between January 1976 and June 1978 at the daily *Rouge*, where he was one of the principal members of the team along with journalist Jean-Paul Besset, who taught me the rudiments of the profession.

P.S.

- MEDIAPART. MARCH 16, 2022:
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/160322/alain-krivine-integrity-revolutionary>
 - This English translation is by David Broder, courtesy of publishing house Verso Books
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-vVlpCTwDk>