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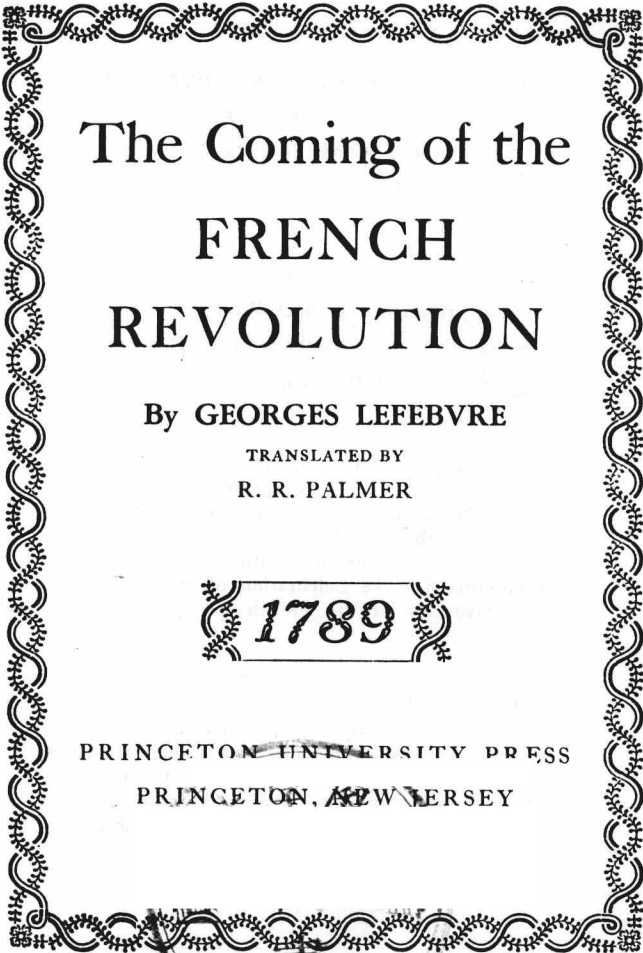
The Coming of the French Revolution

BY

Georges Lefebvre

TRANSLATED BY

R. R. Palmer



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1789

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PREFACE

EVEN today in the middle of the twentieth century, despite all that has happened in the lifetime of men not yet old, and even here in America or in any other part of a world in which the countries of Europe no longer enjoy their former commanding position, it is still possible to say that the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century was the great turning point of modern civilization.

From it subsequent revolutionary movements have drawn much of their doctrine, and also much of their confidence in eventual success; from it have come likewise the accentuated division of the earth among national sovereignties, the recognition of national self-determination as a desirable principle and at the same time the hope that peace might reign over nations equally free. Reinforcing and tremendously magnifying the example set by America, the Revolution in France made it the custom of reformers to specify individual rights, and to regulate the powers of government, in written constitutions planned explicitly for this purpose. Paradoxes of the modern world are found also in the Revolution. The Revolution liberated the individual, and it consolidated the modern state. It confirmed the rule of law, and it launched a tradition of violence. It denounced war as a stratagem of governments, not of peoples, and made war more terrible and more "total" by putting whole nations behind the armies. It cleared the way for the triumph of capitalism, and inspired the socialism that was to subvert it. It based society on the institution of private property, but also on the human rights of the average man. It

declared all peoples to be alike, and at the same time, by a process first noticeable in Germany in the time of Napoleon, persuaded many peoples that their interests were opposed to the "West," and that their peculiar national character forbade assimilation into a uniform world civilization. And so far as the tensions of modern society result from telling all human beings that they enjoy the same rights, while in fact they do not participate equally in the good things of life, these tensions may be ascribed to the French Revolution; nor will they disappear until the doctrines of the Revolution are repudiated, or until that distant day when the world is perfectly just.

The present book was first published in Paris in July 1939, to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the French Revolution. A few weeks later Europe went to war, resuming a conflict of which the Revolution was itself one of the ultimate causes. Within a year the Third Republic collapsed. Eight thousand copies of this book were destroyed by order of the Vichy government. With communications interrupted for some years, few copies reached this country, so that it is difficult to obtain here even in its original language.

The author, M. Georges Lefebvre, is Professor Emeritus of the History of the French Revolution at the University of Paris. He is the most distinguished living authority on the period of the Revolution. None of his work has been hitherto available in English. That of two of his predecessors at the University, Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez, is known to the English-speaking public through translation of some of their principal writings, which were of interest because they were both pioneering and controversial. M. Lefebvre has also been a pioneer, but his writings have been as little subject to controversy as any on the French Revolution can be, and have been generally praised by all schools of thought on the subject.

That there have been diverse schools on the French Revolu-

tion is a reflection of wide differences within modern France on all social and political questions, differences which in turn resulted from the fact that the Revolution, though it became very violent, never exterminated its enemies, and in fact never even attempted to do so. It made enemies of the Church, the aristocracy, the upper bourgeoisie and in many ways even the peasants; but the violence used against these groups was only enough to terrify and disgust them, so that they remained, after the troubles subsided, resentful of the great Revolution and fearful of all signs of its renewal. That the revolutionary movement was renewed, in 1830, 1848 and 1870, confirmed and gave new life to these old feelings. The Revolution remained a continuing movement, spasmodically reappearing; counterrevolution therefore remained a continuing movement also. People in France have always been either for or against the great events of '89 and '93. Historians, far from serving as the arbiters and ultimate judges that they are sometimes expected to be, have generally taken one side or another, and their work has in fact intensified the differences of opinion.

These differences on the French Revolution, as on any revolution, ultimately revolve about unanswerable questions. Was the Revolution "necessary"? Or how much of it was "necessary," and at what point in its progressive course did the "excesses" begin? At one extreme is the belief that no revolution was necessary at all in 1789, either because the Old Regime was a satisfactory society (which few maintain), or because wiser and more statesmanlike policies could have met and mastered the problems of the day without revolution. This latter view was expressed at the time by Edmund Burke, and has attracted followers ever since; but no one has ever been able to suggest positively by what means the crisis of 1789 could have been met within the limits of the prevailing regime, so that partisans of this view usually reveal themselves nega-

tively, by dwelling on the errors and imbecilities of the original revolutionaries. At the other extreme is the view that the whole Revolution was necessary, from the Oath of the Tennis Court in June 1789 to the so-called Great Terror of the early summer of 1794; that the whole sequence of events was a *bloc* which stands or falls together; and that each successive wave of revolutionary action, each going farther than the last, was necessary to prevent relapse into the Old Regime and loss of all gains accomplished, so that, strictly speaking, there were no "excesses." This theory too is incapable of proof, and suffers from the fact that most of the revolutionary leaders themselves did not believe it, since one group after another, each in turn concluding that the movement was going "too far," dissociated itself from it and went over to the counterrevolution, or at least to what was called counterrevolution by the newly emerging revolutionary party. Thus there are various middle grounds, in which the early phases of the Revolution are called wise and constructive, the later phases ruinous or fanatical. In general, the argument that the Revolution was necessary, wholly or in part, reveals itself in the argument of self-defense: the revolutionaries *had* to do thus and so because of the threats and provocations of their opponents. Contrariwise, writers who sympathize with what may be called the relatively conservative forces in the Revolution, the king or the aristocracy in 1789, or the Girondists or Dantonists in 1793-1794, also resort to arguments of necessity and self-defense: these elements, they seem to say, *had* to rally against the uncalled-for, impolitic or unnecessary provocations of the Left.

Necessity in these contexts does not mean a necessity imposed by a superhuman determinism or indemonstrable dialectic. It is a necessity compatible with freedom of choice, a necessity flowing from judgment, purpose and policy, expressible in the formula that one must do so-and-so in order to

achieve such-and-such ends. It is the familiar necessity of practical life, that one who wills an objective must will the means to attain it, or, if the means are unacceptable, change the objective. This is essentially what happened in the French Revolution: many Frenchmen in 1789 shared in similar objectives; but some, continuing to hold to the objective, "had" to adopt means which they disliked (Robespierre, for example, did not "like" the Terror), while others, unable sooner or later to accept the means, "had" to change their objective, i.e., turn against the Revolution. Differences of opinion over what was necessary turn into differences as to what objectives were legitimate. So long as one thinks it to have been wise, feasible or legitimate to try to introduce a kind of political democracy in France in the eighteenth century, one must regard as necessary, in the judgment of the present translator, virtually all the steps taken by the revolutionaries down to the dictatorship of 1793-1794. To consider these steps unnecessary, deploring them as "excesses," requires one to say that the objective of political democracy in France at the time was a false or impossible one, which should have been given up as the means necessary to attain it became apparent. At the far pole, in this direction, lies the doctrine of Burke, who held in effect that the wise, feasible and legitimate policy for the French in 1789 was to maintain the aristocratic class structure and established Church of the day, and that the whole Revolution from the beginning was therefore an unnecessary outburst of irresponsible extremism. On the relative merits of the two polar viewpoints represented by Robespierre and Burke there can never be general agreement, nor will the same person, if judicious, always and in all moods be of exactly the same opinion. This is because the issue is a question of policy, and questions of policy are not and should not be matters of dogma.

More concretely, the modern schools on the French Revolu-

tion may be symbolized by the names of Taine, Aulard and Mathiez. Taine, who wrote seventy years ago but has had many followers, was unnerved by the specter of proletarian upheaval in the Commune of 1871, and made it his business to expose and excoriate the revolutionary tradition which agitated France. He regarded the Revolution which began in 1789 as a very poor and unnecessary solution to the problems then confronting the nation; he emphasized the role of willful minorities, the atrocities committed by mobs and the impractical and visionary character of the revolutionary leaders. Aulard, whose principal work was done in the twenty years preceding 1914, was on the other hand a kind of official apologist for the Third Republic of his day, and saw in the Revolution a necessary stage by which the advantages of the Third Republic had been reached. He undertook to discredit Taine, to show that the Revolution of 1789 had been a substantially peaceable and sensible movement, a majestic unfolding of ideas so liberal and humane that no man of good will could decently oppose them. In Aulard's picture material motives and violence were infrequent, except on the side of the aristocracy; the revolutionists, if they resorted to force, did so for purely defensive reasons; mobs were always the "people," and generally aimed consciously at high-minded political ends. Though Aulard had no love for what he called the bourgeoisie, he was no partisan of the working class of his own day either; he made little of economic classes, but was vehemently anti-clerical, believing that the inveterate enemy of the Revolution and all it stood for was the Church. Albert Mathiez took issue with him on all points. Mathiez, who wrote for thirty years until his death in 1932, and whose sympathies were to the Left, regarded many politicians of the Third Republic of his time as too open to corruption, too inclined to beat the dead horse of the clerical menace and too slow to do anything for the

laboring classes. He detected these same weaknesses in the great Revolution, and he idealized the revolutionary leader who had fought steadfastly against corruption, who had tried to prevent the extremes of Dechristianization and who had consistently and outspokenly upheld the cause of the common man—namely, Robespierre. Robespierre's policies, thought Mathiez, were necessary to introduce an honest democracy in France. Mathiez also, after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, drew attention to the importance of economic conditions, inflated prices and class antagonisms in the events of the French Revolution, and explained the Terror as a government of war emergency not unlike those of 1914–1918. His tendency to resolve many issues of the French Revolution into the struggle of proletariat and bourgeoisie was carried farther by some of his followers.

Georges Lefebvre is a contemporary of Mathiez, born in the same year, 1874. He is not a follower of Mathiez, nor yet of Aulard, but an independent thinker on the subject in his own right, one of the few, indeed, whose writings were praised by both these academic titans while they lived. Since the quarrel of Aulard and Mathiez is famous in the annals of learned warfare, to have been eulogized by both is a virtual guarantee of great balance of judgment. Lefebvre, to be sure, is definitely within the republican school of interpretation. While he has remained apart from academic disputes, and tells us that he scarcely knew Mathiez, having seen him only three times in his life, he recognizes a deep intellectual indebtedness to the socialist historian-statesman, Jean Jaurès. The most thoroughly anti-Revolutionary writers may therefore be dissatisfied with his views, but probably even they will not easily find much with which they can differ.

For it is one of the merits of M. Lefebvre's work to offer a reasonable reconciliation of many issues that have divided

the contending schools. His judgments are based on very extensive detailed knowledge, set forth in a number of monographs which are highly prized by professional scholars. It was not, however, as a specialist in the French Revolution that he first came before the reading public. It is a curious fact, for purposes of the present preface, that forty years ago M. Lefebvre was engaged in a translation from the English, having published in 1907, in collaboration with Charles Petit-Dutaillis, a French version of Stubbs' *Constitutional History of England*. Not until reaching the age of fifty did M. Lefebvre begin to publish extensively on the French Revolution. His writings may owe much of their judicious quality and their independence to this period of waiting. His most considerable work remains the dissertation submitted for the degree of *docteur ès lettres*, consisting of two theses, as are required for that degree, and comprising four volumes, on which he worked for twenty years. They surely constitute one of the most remarkable studies ever offered in candidacy for an academic degree. The four volumes deal with what might be called the rural sociology of a single department, that of Nord, before and during the Revolution; they explore the concrete realities in the distribution of property, show how much was owned by the peasants, the nobility, the bourgeoisie and the Church; examine the operation of the manorial or seigneurial regime, and of the semicollective agriculture of the peasant village; trace the incidence upon the local population of the events of the Revolution, including the war which came in 1792, the conscription, the price controls and the requisitions, the activity of disaffected natives and of foreign agents and the way in which the Terror really imposed itself on the inhabitants of a single locality. To read in these volumes is like entering into the Revolution itself, so close are they to the daily lives of actual people. M. Lefebvre has also written shorter mono-

graphs on agrarian questions during the Terror, on the Thermidorian period, the Directory and the phenomenon known as the Great Fear of 1789. In the series under the general title of *Peuples et civilisations* he is co-author of the volume on the Revolution, and sole author of the one on the age of Napoleon; these two are at present the most definitive single-volume studies of their respective subjects. None of these works has been translated.

The small volume now presented in English is written for a more general audience than the others. Though it carries the story only to October 1789, tracing the last years of the Old Regime and the first stages of the Revolution, it incorporates and summarizes some of the best findings of the author's more specialized books. Despite its brevity, it probably gives the best-rounded picture of the Old Regime available in English since Tocqueville. On the Revolution, though it treats only its advent, it presents the issues of the whole Revolution clearly, and illustrates the dynamics by which the Revolution continued to be moved. It thus touches on most of the more general questions on which opinion has been divided, and offers answers on which all but the most stubborn dissidents can agree.

That the Revolution was necessary M. Lefebvre does not doubt: the old government simply failed to function, and its officials either would not or could not take the measures necessary to maintain political life. He grants that opinion may differ on whether it was necessary for the Revolution to go so far. He holds, however, that if the desideratum was to create a regime at all democratic, avoiding an aristocratic order either like the Old Regime in France or like the regime then prevailing in England, it was probably necessary for the movement to work itself out about as it did. On the debated question of who "started" the Revolution, whose provocation it was which justified the subsequent tumult, he answers that all

classes were in one way or another responsible; that the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the urban masses and the peasants, each independently and for reasons of its own, initiated revolutionary action. On the charge that the Revolution was pushed forward by small, determined minorities, little anonymous societies of extremists or committees of correspondence, he declares that this is in fact so, that all political movements require leaders and that in any case such highhanded methods were first used by the aristocracy. He thus disarms those critics, mainly upper-class Frenchmen, who have given the impression that the Revolution was something unleashed on the nation by little bands of irresponsible middle-class radicals. On the matter of mob violence and atrocities, M. Lefebvre admits freely that they occurred. He points out, unlike Aulard, that popular fury impelled statesmen onward, and that mobs aiming at short-run material ends helped to force acceptance of far-reaching ideas which they did not understand. He concedes to Taine that disreputable and murderous characters filtered into the insurgent crowds, but he does not think that such characters affected the course of the Revolution. He somewhat resembles Taine in dwelling on violence, but he insists that it was by resorting to violence that the French people freed themselves of many ancient burdens. He somewhat resembles Aulard in insisting that the use of violence by the revolutionaries was fundamentally defensive, arising as early as July 1789 from fear of an "aristocratic conspiracy" against the Third Estate.

It is perhaps in his exact perception of social classes that M. Lefebvre is at his best. His exhaustive knowledge of the French peasantry of the eighteenth century makes him a sure guide into the society of the time, for four-fifths of the people were peasants, most wealth was in land and most income derived from it, and the social position of the aristocracy, the

bourgeoisie and the town laboring classes was defined largely by their relation to the rural population. Antagonisms between nobles and bourgeois, and between bourgeoisie and proletariat, are for Lefebvre only part of a much larger and more complicated structure. He shows that among the peasants themselves there were all sorts of class divisions, and that peasant opinion would have prevented a systematic redistribution of property or full social revolution. He notes that when the Revolution began the bourgeoisie probably owned as much rural land in France as did the nobility, a fact singularly awkward to a purely materialist theory of class conflict. He observes that between bourgeoisie and wage-earning class there was no sharp dividing line, and adds that, if there had been, the French Revolution as we know it could not have occurred, since the bourgeoisie would have been afraid to accept the support of the lower classes, and would probably have come to terms with the titled aristocracy instead, as, he says, later happened in Germany. But he shows too that the bourgeoisie and the masses obtained very different benefits from the Revolution; that the masses of city workers and poorer peasants wished to perpetuate the old controlled and regulated economy, with collective rights for the peasant communities, rather than to accept the regime of economic individualism and commercial freedom with which the Revolution presented them, in this respect continuing the tendency of the monarchy.

The different interests of social classes in the Revolution are nowhere more clearly and succinctly set forth than in this book. Yet it is not the struggle of classes that occupies the author, so much as their potential fusion. M. Lefebvre shows how all classes combined, under the leadership of the aristocracy, to overthrow the absolutist Bourbon regime and demand a constitutional order guaranteeing individual rights. Division thereafter took place, for the aristocracy, being only human,

hesitated to surrender all the privileges of its position. The bourgeoisie came to the fore, taking advantage of popular insurrection in town and country. But the regime introduced by the bourgeoisie was not an instrument of class domination; it had something to offer to everybody, and indeed postulated that no such things as fixed classes existed. Within the bourgeois order, because of the liberties which it gave, could arise eventually a new order aiming at a fuller realization of social justice. This was because of the great flexibility and high level of abstraction of the philosophy of natural rights as expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which M. Lefebvre analyzes at some length. It was in this way, he seems to feel, that the philosophy of the eighteenth century influenced the Revolution. The writings of Rousseau, Voltaire and others like them did not "cause" the Revolution, which arose from a perfectly definite series of concrete political events; but the Revolution, once started, expressed itself in the broad conceptions of eighteenth century thought, in which "man" was the fundamental reality, with all classes, nations and races of merely secondary importance. Thus the Revolution addressed itself to all men alike, as did the Christian religion; and, seeing the similarity, M. Lefebvre is both firmly republican and not at all anticlerical or antireligious. In general, it is obviously a source of great pride to him that the French Revolution of 1789 knew no pariah classes, races or nations, but presented a universal philosophy in which, were it only accepted, all human beings could at least in principle live at peace, equal in dignity and treating one another as equals.

The translation has benefited from the correction by M. Lefebvre of a few slight errors that had crept into the original. I am indebted to him for his cordial cooperation throughout, but he has not seen the translation or the translator's preface,

for which the responsibility is mine. All footnotes except the one on page 88 are by me, added in the hope of assisting the English-speaking reader. I have tried to find English equivalents for French terms so far as possible, believing that the use of such terms as *gabelle*, *lettre de cachet*, etc., though familiar to English-speaking readers versed in the subject, may not be clear to those approaching it for the first time, and in any case that it confirms a stereotyped impression of French society in the eighteenth century, making it seem unduly distant from us today, and more unlike other societies of the past and present than seems to me to be justified.

R. R. PALMER

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