

# ESSAYS ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Translated by WILLIAM ZAK from  
*Cahiers du Communisme 1939*

Edited and with an Introduction by  
T. A. JACKSON

LAWRENCE & WISHART LTD.  
LONDON

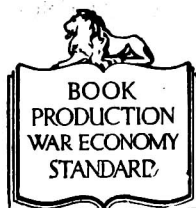
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REVOLUTION OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

*By T. A. Jackson*

France! From its grey dejection  
Make manifest the red  
Tempestuous resurrection  
Of thy most sacred head!—  
Rend thou the covering cerecloths:—  
Rise up from the dead!

SWINBURNE.

**T**HE essays which make up the body of this book were all written to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak in 1789 of the Great French Revolution.

The authors were all of them distinguished scholars and all were outstanding members of the Communist Party of France. That we should have to write "were" does not mean that any of them have flinched or fallen away. It means only that three of them at least—Gabriel Péri, Jacques Solomon, and Georges Politzer—have been murdered by the Nazi Fascists, and that others of them may, by now, also have died for the "crime" of resisting, and encouraging others to resist, the enslavement of their country.

Some of them were, we know, prisoners; the rest are, we hope, now at large. All of them wherever they are, have remained steadfast to the faith they expound with so much learning, clarity, and revolutionary conviction in the essays translated herein.

For them, the authors, this book was something more than the commemoration of a mighty occasion. It was a challenging and stimulating declaration of their faith in the inevitable triumph of Humanity.

For us, editors and publishers, it is all that and more still.

It is a tribute to our French Comrades, men of magnificent courage, and to their heroic resistance to the Nazi-Fascist enemies of mankind.

Through them it is a salute to a great and gallant nation, an acknowledgement of the immense debt the whole world owes to France. And it is a gesture of welcome in advance to the great day which will see France—militant, victorious, and self-liberated—restored to her rightful place of honour in the vanguard of the onward march of the human race.

It is to be feared that, to the ordinary Briton of to-day, the salient events and leading personalities of the Great French Revolution have become things half-forgotten, or hardly at all known. Until the Russian Revolution of November, 1917, replaced it in the minds of conservatives and reactionaries as the stock example of the evil that results once the "lower orders" are allowed to "get out of hand," there was always an incentive to refresh our memories, even if for most Englishmen this meant at most taking another glance at Carlyle's classic work.

Since the Bolshevik Revolution, however, it has no longer been necessary if one desired to follow intelligently the more fervid speeches of conservatives and reactionaries to know what a "Jacobin" was, and the sort of horrible things the Jacobins were alleged to have done. Carlyle's work, with its virtues as well as its limitations, has been left to gather dust, or to find its way into the "national effort bin," and the titanic struggle, the "Baphometic fire-baptism," which opened on July 14th, 1789, has receded from recollection until for many it has sunk wholly below the horizon.

In these circumstances it can hardly be deemed superfluous if we preface this work first of all with an outline-sketch of the French Revolution.

As contemporary Englishmen saw it, the first remarkable thing about the French Revolution was its total unexpectedness.

For well over a century the Kings of France had been "absolute." Not even the Pope seemed to sit more securely

on his throne than the King of France. The French Court had been an object of universal admiration, envy, emulation (or reprobation, according to taste) a by-word for elaborate ceremonial etiquette, and conventionalised luxury and refinement. France for a century and more had been the cultural centre and summit of civilization—her wits, her philosophers, her painters, musicians, and luxury-craftsmen seemed unsurpassable, and, all taken together, both a proof of and a reinforcement of the stability of the already unshakable Grand Monarchy and its régime.

The Dutch, the English, the Austrians, and occasionally also the Hanoverians and Prussians, might win victories over the French armies now and then, but, on the whole, there was little in it, one way or the other, when the campaign ended. Indeed, the chief point of such victories as those of Marlborough, or—when he won victories over the French—the King of Prussia lay in the fact that the Grand Monarchy of France seemed so strongly based that it could survive even such defeats as Blenheim without, seemingly, turning a hair. It was, it seemed, so strong that the greatest victory could add next to nothing to its strength and the heaviest defeat give it no more than a barely perceptible tremor.

Then, to the amazement of all but a tiny few with special facilities for knowing, the French monarchy in August, 1788, confessed itself in financial difficulties—and that those were so great that there was nothing for it but to summon a meeting of the *States-General*, which had not been convoked since 1614.

In a sense the summoning of the *States-General* was tantamount to a revolution in itself. In England, the first Stuart kings had tried to do without Parliaments and had made a mess of the attempt. Not a little of the suspicion and anger directed against the Stuarts came from the knowledge that they might succeed as the French kings had done if they were not restricted desperately. That, after all these years, the French king should admit his inability to

manage without the French equivalent of the Houses of Parliament was news of an importance so great that it was almost impossible to overestimate. English Whigs and Constitutionals hoped for the utmost and saw no reason to conceal their delight. English Tories tempered mild satisfaction with misgivings: their French equivalents feared the worst at once.

Yet there was nothing else for it. The State was insolvent. Interest on accumulated debt gobbled up a huge slice of the revenue; and raising fresh revenue by the established mode left over from the Middle Ages was out of the question. As Jacques Solomon shows in the essay on *Finance*, hereinafter, the fiscal system of the *ancien régime* was both scandalously oppressive and ludicrously wasteful. A new source of taxation had to be found, and, in one way or another this meant that the bourgeoisie, who, despite the cramping limitations of the old order, were growing rich and powerful, would have to "pay the piper." Naturally, they could be relied upon to insist on "calling the tune."

If there had been any sort of revolutionary republican movement in France in 1788, the confession of failure involved in the summoning of the *States-General* would have been tantamount to an abdication. But that is precisely the point—there was no such movement. In those historical circumstances, such a thing was inconceivable. It is doubtful whether there were so many as a dozen speculative republicans in all France, and most of these were members of the cultured aristocracy, sceptical about the *ancien régime*, but interested, personally, in keeping it going as long as possible.

That established the issue: the Monarchy could not manage without the bourgeoisie and the money the bourgeoisie could be induced to part with; the bourgeoisie, even if it had ceased to believe with the ignorant and superstitious, that kings ruled by "right divine," still regarded the Monarchy as irreplaceable. Thus the lines of struggle were set: for the King and the Court on the one

side and the bourgeoisie on the other the problem was the same, to get as much as could be got and give in return only so much as they must. The Monarchy needed cash; the bourgeoisie needed reforms; the history of the opening stages of the revolution is a record of their process of bargaining—and of the complications which arose from the fact that there were other people in France as well as the court clique on the one side and the bourgeoisie on the other.

In a way the Monarchy itself complicated the issue by a stroke which seemed highly diplomatic when made. It invited all the non-privileged "Third Estate" (called hereinafter the *Tiers*) that is, everybody not included in the other two "Estates" the clergy and the nobility, to draw up for the information of the King's ministers, and, with a view to redress, a statement of all the grievances they suffered with suggestions for reform. The discussions in all parts of France preparatory to drawing up these statements of grievances (*Cahiers de Doléances*) constituted in fact an intensive school of political education, which, prolonged for three-quarters of a year, transformed the outlook of everybody in France. They dissipated apathy and awakened hopes, many of them extravagant and foredoomed to disappointment, many of them just and capable of immediate satisfaction, but all springs of agitation and political effort. Corresponding to the hopes of some were the fears of others. Out of the discussions which gave birth to the *Cahiers de Doléances* began to emerge the political groupings and parties which expressed the truth that when a social system becomes ripe for transformation "men fight out the issue as a 'class' struggle, conscious of their opposing interests."

It is important to remember that the lines of demarcation between the "Estates" which the *ancien régime* had inherited from Mediæval feudalism no longer corresponded to the actual economic and social relations between men in French society. In the Middle Ages, when

the overwhelming majority lived outside the towns in direct dependence upon the produce of the soil, it was quite reasonable, for example, to exempt the nobility from cash contributions to the State Exchequer. They had in fact, relatively little cash at command. They drew most of their revenues in kind, and for long could do nothing with these revenues but literally eat them and drink them, and wear them on their backs. They could contribute to the Exchequer in kind—by inviting the King to come and take his fill of the eating and drinking—and could and did supply what in those days money could not buy, the armed forces for the King's wars. The clergy had more money, and in theory paid more; but they could supply what was then indispensable, the Church's blessing and its prayers; and these counted heavily as a set off against the contributions of the lords. The town burghers for their part, had cash in relative plenty, and were glad to pay, in reason, to escape the burden of military service. The towns were, in general, assessed as corporate entities which paid dues to the State, generally out of the town funds—and recovered the money by local arrangements satisfactory to the citizens.

The arrangement was, in Mediæval circumstances, simple and natural; and it worked so well that it was perpetuated from habit, sanctified by age, long after the conditions which gave it birth had changed beyond recognition.

In 1788 real wealth no longer consisted in the lordship of land. The nobility no longer provided, at the head of their vassals, the armed might of the State. They still collected their dues from the peasantry, often in kind. But they no longer ate them and drank them. They sold them to cover part of the cost of living in Paris, pulling wires to obtain a Court appointment or a commission in the Army or Navy. They had become a parasite class, with no social function at all beyond dancing attendance upon the King and Court.

The town burghers had changed too. The incorporated

towns were still limited to those which had received official recognition in the Middle Ages. Some had shrunk to nothing; others had grown in fact, but were still officially limited to the areas they occupied at any rate before 1614. It is to a modern, bewildering to find that the Saint Antoine quarter, for example, into which one steps straight out of the very centre of Paris, was in 1789 still officially a "faubourg"—that is, a "suburb." The bourgeoisie and the town population had in fact grown absolutely, but had grown still more relatively in proportion to the population. But since it was domiciled for the greater part "outside" the town limits as these had stood in the Middle Ages, their assessment for taxation was an insoluble riddle. They could not be brought under the taxes originally agreed to by the burghers without straining legal interpretation to the limit. They could not be subjected to rural taxes without arbitrariness promoting endless disputes. In short, the situation was, from the point of view of the Exchequer, quite impossible.

And again; in the Middle Ages the distinction between the nobility, the clergy, and the townspeople had been one of fact and practice. As categories they were then functionally distinct, and within each order conditions were much of a parity. Not so in 1788-9. The rich nobles no longer functioned as feudal *seigneurs*. They were often State functionaries, and often also financiers, speculators, merchant-capitalists, and bourgeois landlords. The poorer nobility were either professional soldiers or plain spongers and parasites. Many were glad to get rid of the "nobility that obliges" and secure freedom to take their chance to become good bourgeois through trade or the professions.

A similar cleavage existed among the clergy between the wealthy members of the Church Hierarchy—who were usually connected with the aristocracy—and the poor and hard-working parish priests, who were usually of humble origin.

But the disparity was widest of all in the ranks of the *Tiers*—since this category now included everything from

cottagers and farm-labourers to wealthy but untitled financiers. Naturally, the bourgeoisie, and next to them the professional classes, especially the lawyers, took the lead in voicing the demands of the *Tiers*. They were the best equipped for the task, either as the most wealthy and best organized or as the best equipped by training for political advocacy. And, naturally, while the whole *Tiers* was united in a common revolt against the *ancien régime* and a common resentment of the arrogance and exploitation of the parasitic aristocracy, the bourgeoisie and their professional allies earned all the plaudits they gained as champions of the common cause.

It is, at the same time, self-evident that once the *ancien régime* had been overthrown, and the privileges of the aristocracy had been abolished, the common tie which bound all the discordant elements in the *Tiers* into a revolutionary unity was severed. Thenceforward, financiers and speculators, merchant-capitalists and contractors, industrial-capitalists, artisan-craftsmen and labourers, stock-farmers, vine-growers, smallholders, cultivators, rural labourers, shopkeepers, innkeepers, landlords, and professional men—each and all of them would be faced with an objective necessity to “fight out the issue as a class struggle conscious of their conflicting and opposing interests.”

That is the clue to the culminating phases of the revolution, and to its final outcome.

When the Court resolved to summon the *States-General* it presented itself with a problem—the problem of etiquette and procedure. How *did a States-General* do its business?

There were no handbooks; and the eyewitnesses were all dead and mouldered to dust long since.

A procedure had to be improvised. The Nobles and the Clergy were directed to meet in various regional centres and choose their delegations, an equal total from each *Estate*. So much was easy: but what about the *Tiers*? There were very many more of them, and, with an eye to the

empty Exchequer, it was important to keep them in a good humour. It was decided, therefore, to give them as many representatives as the other two *Estates* put together.

At the same time, to give the well-to-do bourgeoisie and the lawyer-theoreticians a salutary notion of the dimensions of the difficulty facing the administrators, it was decided to make the election *indirect*, and use the occasion to obtain the *Cahiers de Doléances* already mentioned. All the inhabitants (male) in a parish met, discussed grievances, and chose delegates to a county meeting. The county meeting chose "electors," who met in the regional centre to make the final choice of deputies for the region.

If the Court imagined that when they had emerged from this ordeal the deputies would be suitably chastened and in a mood to see the problem as the administrative authorities saw it, the Court made a bad guess. The deputies of the *Tiers*, when they assembled at *Versailles* at the beginning of May, 1789, did so with a keen consciousness of responsibility, *not* to the Court clique and the administrators whose self-confessed failure had made the summoning of the *States-General* imperative, but to themselves as men of probity and understanding, and to the people, who at various stages had participated in their election—the people, who were looking to them, not merely to restore the State finances, and to take the appropriate steps to ensure that they would not fall into the same condition of chaos again, but still more to secure the redress of grievances and, above all, to provide the nation with a *Constitution*.

In a word, the artful devices adopted by the Court to ensure the awed docility and pliability of the *Tiers* acted *boomerang fashion*. They ensured the reverse: the *Tiers* assembled in a mood and temper which, however little they knew it, was as *revolutionary* as was the mood of the English Commons in 1640, at the opening of the Long Parliament.

The issue was joined promptly, on the question whether the three *Estates* should meet, deliberate, and decide as

separate "Houses" of Parliament, or whether they should, on the contrary, constitute a single Assembly. The Court was all for separate "Houses" as were the Nobles and the Church Hierarchy; but until the *States-General* was actually assembled they had deemed it expedient to say nothing about this delicate point.

It was self-evident that if the *Estates* met and voted separately, the *Tiers* ran the risk of being permanently in a minority. If all the deputies, regardless of *Estate*, met and decided as a single chamber, the *Tiers* with as many deputies as the other two together had only to gain a few adherents from the poorer clergy, and the more progressive nobles to be permanently in a majority.

Therefore the *Tiers* at once commenced their struggle for a *single* assembly, with the King, the Court, the Nobles, and the Hierarchy all doing what they could to force upon them *separate* meetings as an accomplished fact.

The *Tiers* won—but only because they were resolute and determined, and stuck to their point obstinately for weeks.

It was this opening struggle which provided two, at least, of the great moments of the Revolution.

Shut out from their customary place of meeting by Court officials on a specious pretext, the *Tiers* assembled in a convenient Tennis Court and there took a solemn oath never to disperse or to allow themselves to be dispersed until they had given the Nation a Constitution. That oath of the Tennis Court (*Jeu de Paume*) was, deservedly, a first-favourite subject for painters, engravers, and print-sellers, especially in England where the analogy with the first decision of the Long Parliament—the Act making it illegal for the King to dissolve it without the consent of both Houses—was noted with satisfaction or misgiving according to the observer's political bias.

Similarly, when the King convoked a meeting to lecture the *Tiers* on their "mutinous" behaviour, and to order the *Estates* to meet *separately*, the *Tiers* obstinately kept their seats after the King and the Court had departed and the