The Jacobin Ancestry of Soviet Communism

By William Henry Chamberlin

A bit of ideological genealogy which has received insufficient attention is the close kinship between the Jacobins, who dominated France from the spring of 1793 until the downfall of Robespierre in July, 1794, and the Russian Bolsheviks, or Communists. This is only the most salient and perhaps the most important of many parallels between the French and Russian revolutions.

The many similarities between these two vast upheavals could be the theme of a long historical essay. The way for both revolutions was prepared by a ferment among the intellectuals, many of whom were ironically, perhaps justly, swept away by the torrent which they helped to unloose and then were unable to control, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice of Goethe's poem.

France in 1789, and Russia in the spring of 1917 experienced an early "honeymoon" period, when people were embracing each other and hailing the dawn of a new day. The French nobles divested themselves of their privileges; the Russian Provisional Government rapidly swept away, with successive strokes of the pen, all the repressive and discriminatory legislation on the statute books of the Russian Empire.

But the honeymoon did not last long; the Bolsheviks, with their agitation, were quick to stir up all the latent class hatred for the *boorzhui,* to set the poor and ignorant majority of the population, the soldiers, the industrial workers, the peasants, against the well-to-do educated minority. The same prevailed in France; there was no lack of revolutionary "patriots" to direct the hatred of the masses against the "aristocrats" and "counter-revolutionaries."

Growing hunger and financial and economic chaos greatly strengthened the spirit of class war in both countries. The more

moderate revolutionary groups in France, of which the Girondists were the strongest, were the equivalent of the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia and in the fierce ordeal of civil war these moderates were ground to pieces, rejected and persecuted by the extremists on both sides.

The internal course of revolutionary struggle was complicated by foreign war and intervention; and this served as an excuse and psychological stimulus to extreme terrorism. The Committees of Public Safety and Public Welfare in France, the Cheka in Russia, worked day and night breaking up real or imaginary plots, seizing and executing suspects in larger and larger batches.

The Cossack areas of southeastern Russia, the valleys of the Don and Kuban, were the fighting center of resistance to the revolutionary innovations and thereby resembled La Vendée, the area of western and northwestern France where the majority of the people, out of considerations of religion and loyalty to feudal lords and the monarchy, fought against the armies of the Revolution.

The Jacobins in France, like the Communists in Russia, were the organizers of victory; their fierce energy and fanatical devotion tipped the scales of a bitter and bloody struggle. Lenin, Trotsky, and other leaders of the Communists were fully conscious of their position as heirs of the Jacobins in the French Revolution; they even imitated Jacobin gestures, such as successively expelling opposition parties from the Soviets and branding their members as "enemies of the people."

In short the whole sanguinary drama of the Russian Revolution and civil war was played out in advance in France, with the difference that in France there was more articulate eloquence. The victims of the guillotine, chief weapon of extermination in France, had one advantage that was denied to the larger number of martyrs of the Russian Revolution who were shot in the cellars of the Cheka. They were, in most cases, executed publicly and were able to pronounce last messages. There is no record of a Russian Mme. Roland crying: "Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name."

The members of the Russian Imperial family were simply

massacred in gangster fashion, without any theatrical trappings of trial and judgment. And there is no legend about the slaughter in the Ipatiev House, where the Tsar, the Tsarina and their children were mowed down, comparable with the story that a priest greeted Louis XVI, at the time of his execution, with the words:

"Son of St. Louis, ascend into Heaven."

There was also a substantial difference in the duration of the dictatorships. The Jacobins were in power for a little over a year, from the time when, with the aid of the Paris mob, they expelled their principal rivals, the Girondists, from the Convention and executed many of them, to the overthrow of Robespierre and the elimination of the hardcore Jacobin leadership in July, 1794.

The Soviet regime last year celebrated the fortieth anniversary of its establishment. During this period there have been many violent purges and shifts of power within the leadership of the ruling Communist Party. But the Party, as an apparatus of control, has remained. Certain basic principles of government have not changed: the exclusion of opposition parties, the state monoply of basic economic enterprise and also of all means of instruction, information and entertainment, press, radio, schools, publishing houses, theatres, etc.

The strongest and most obvious link between French Jacobins and Soviet Communists is a common philosophy of utopian perfectionism, very similar to what may be found in certain fanatical religious creeds. Both Robespierre and Lenin, on different theoretical grounds, were convinced that the means existed to bring mankind to unheard of heights of happiness and well-being.

Robespierre's thinking was shaped mainly by Rousseau and to some extent by less well-known apostles of the French Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Helvetius and Holbach, Mably and Morelly. These men believed that human nature is essentially good, that poverty, inequality and vice are the results of ignorance and bad institutions, that if only educators and legislators are wise enough they can mold virtuous men who will, in turn, create a social order without any of the

blemishes associated with monarchy, feudalism and the "old regime" in general. To quote the author who has made the most searching and penetrating survey of the ideology of French Jacobinism:[1]

> Helvetius, Holbach, Mably, the Physiocrats and others, in the same way as Rousseau himself, believed that ultimately man was nothing but the product of the laws of the State, and that there was nothing a government was incapable of doing in the art of forming man . . . Rousseau's adored Legislator is nothing but the great Educator . . .
>
> It is the task of the Legislator to bring about social harmony, that is to say, reconcile the personal good with the general good. It is for the Legislator, as Helvetius put it, to discover means of placing men under the necessity of being virtuous. This can be achieved with the help of institutions, laws, education and a proper system of rewards and punishments . . .
>
> Helvetius and Holbach taught that the temporal interest alone, if handled cleverly, was sufficient to form virtuous men. Good laws alone make virtuous men. This being so, vice in society is not the outcome of the corruption of human nature, but the fault of the Legislator.

Lenin's prescription for human salvation was simpler, narrower and more specific. It was the violent overthrow of the existing political, economic and social order throughout the world and the establishment, through the "dictatorship of the proletariat," of a Communist system in accordance with the teachings of Karl Marx. Lenin reduced every moral issue to the simple question: does it, or does it not, promote this end?

Lenin never attempted to give a very detailed or elaborate picture of what life under Communism would be like, what new problems it would raise. He merely assumed, on the basis of his unquestioning faith in Marx, that the achievement of this worldwide revolution would usher in an era of unprecedented wellbeing, in which all injustices and tensions would be swept away and humanity, free from the evils of war and "capitalist oppression" would march to new heights of progress.

To dream of an ideal social order, to work out blueprints for such an order, along the lines of Thomas More's *Utopia* or Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* is harmless, perhaps beneficial. But when revolutionary leaders who have acquired

[1]Cf. J. L. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 31-33.

absolute power over the lives of their countrymen try to put such dreams into practice the consequences are likely to be extremely formidable, and very different from what the soft-hearted humanitarians who conceived the original dream expected.

For it is a very short step from the belief that a perfect social order is possible to the conviction that bad people must be responsible for its nonrealization. And it is an equally short step to the conviction that the punishment and even "liquidation" of these bad people is a very small and negligible price to pay for the Utopia that is just around the corner. The fanatical perfectionist is always ready to succumb to the fallacy that the end justifies the means.

Among many points of similarity between French Jacobins of the late eighteenth century and Russian, Chinese and other Communists in the twentieth the following are perhaps most significant: fanatical faith in the saving grace of revolution; arbitrary identification of the will and interest of a single party with the will and interest of the entire people; belief that a new type of man can be molded by state indoctrination. In his use of the word democracy Lenin could understand Robespierre and Robespierre could have understood Lenin; whereas both are incomprehensible to one who thinks in the Western tradition of limited government and ordered liberty.

Lenin spoke of "the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry" and a Marxist phrase, "the dictatorship of the proletariat," has been a key slogan of Communist rule everywhere, and is identified with a higher form of democracy in Communist propaganda. With the same cast of thought Robespierre proclaimed: "The Government of the Revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny."

"Democratic dictatorship," "despotism of liberty." To most people in countries where free institutions prevail these phrases would seem self-contradictory, if not downright incomprehensible. But they are full of meaning to revolutionary leaders.

In the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat Lenin set up a political police more cruel in its methods and far more extensive in its operations than the *Okrana* of the Tsars. In the

name of the "despotism of liberty" Robespierre carried out a slaughter of real or imagined counter-revolutionaries (including many of the most prominent figures in the first phase of the movement) for which there is no parallel in the annals of the absolute Bourbon rulers.

The words of Burke, the great British political theorist, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* remains a masterpiece of argument against doctrinaire utopianism, were proved right twice, in France and in Russia. Writing before France had entered the phase of extreme terrorism, Burke said, of the ideologues of the French Revolution:

"In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows."

Burke's reputation for a time was under a cloud (he is now experiencing a rehabilitation) because of a rather lazy intellectual impression that the French Revolution, after all, worked out for the best. This made it easy to cast Burke in the role of a reactionary, excessively preoccupied with the trappings and pageantry of a monarchy and an aristocracy that were doomed to perish. But this overlooks the very real threat which Jacobin philosophy and methods of organization and propaganda posed to ordered liberty, not only in France, but in Europe. To quote Talmon again:[2]

> Inside the (Jacobin) clubs there was going on an unceasing process of self-cleansing and purification, entailing denunciations, confessions, excommunications and expulsions. The dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety was thus no mere tyranny of a handful of men clinging to power and in possession of all the means of coercion, no mere police system in a beleaguered fortress. It rested on closely knit and highly disciplined cells and nuclei in every town and village, from the central artery of Paris to the smallest hamlet in the mountains.

It is not only in internal organization that an amazing similarity may be found between French and Russian revolutionary institutions. William Pitt the Younger, in a speech with a strangely modern ring which he delivered before the House of Commons on February 1, 1793, brought this indictment against the "indirect aggression" of the French revolutionary regime:

[2]Talmon, *op cit.*, p. 127.

> Under the name of liberty they have resolved to make every country, in substance if not in form, a province dependent on themselves, through the despotism of Jacobin societies. This has given a more fatal blow to the liberties of mankind than any they have suffered, even from the boldest attempt of the most aspiring monarch . . . Unless she is stopped in her career, all Europe must soon learn their ideas of justice — law of nations — models of government — and principles of liberty from the mouth of the French cannon.

The French got rid of Robespierre before he had killed more than a small fraction of the number of people who perished at the hands of Lenin and Stalin. But Jacobinism, the belief in the moral right of a revolutionary élite to impose its will, as that of the people, did not perish with its authors. As Professor M. M. Karpovich has shown, it influenced very much the Russian revolutionary thinker Tkachev, who, in turn, probably influenced Lenin. Jacobinism experienced a rebirth in many of the ideas and methods of Soviet Communism. And in France itself the Jacobin tradition has helped to induce "advanced" workers and intellectuals to accept the similar doctrine of Communism.