REVOLUTION AND THE FRENCH PEASANT

A HISTORY OF FRANCE FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES TO THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES. *By William Stearns Davis. Illustrated. 12mo. 642 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston.*

PROFESSOR DAVIS has succeeded admirably in compressing the essential facts of French political history into a volume of six hundred pages. His limited space excludes detailed interpretation of separate events, and the author is also compelled to give only the most perfunctory notice to the economic phenomena which are associated with various stages of French history. On the political side, however, the work is reasonably complete, and Professor Davis shows an excellent sense of proportion in laying special stress upon what may be called the revolutionary era of French history, the period which begins with the meeting of the States-General in 1789 and ends with the suppression of the Commune in 1871.

Throughout this period France was in a state of suspended civil war. On one side stood the bourgeoisie, the large and small investors and landowners, the classes which had gained power and wealth as a result of the overthrow of the feudal monarchy. The dominance of these elements is apparent alike in the States-General, in the Directory, in the monarchism of Louis Philippe, and in the imperialism of Louis Napoleon. Against this system of perpetual conservatism under various outward forms the working-class population of Paris, the men who had been captivated by the fierce levelling doctrines of Marat and Hebert, stood ranged in sullen discontent. Omitting riots and minor disturbances, this discontent burst out in actual fighting on four occasions: in 1793, in 1830, in 1848, and in 1871. In all these outbreaks the peasants played the decisive role. Their support carried the Revolution through to triumphant success, despite the excesses and follies of the Jacobin leaders. Their indifference thwarted the republicans who fought on the barricades in 1830. In 1848 and in 1871 the peasants actively sided with the bourgeoisie in putting down the Communists. This shift of peasant psychology from radicalism to conservatism can be understood only

by a consideration of the profound changes in the system of land-ownership which were brought about by the Revolution.

Throughout the Middle Ages the peasants in France, as elsewhere on the Continent, were a harried, miserable, and persecuted class. Their intolerable suffering sometimes found expression in futile jacqueries, which were invariably repressed with the utmost brutality. Their condition grew worse, if possible, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as a result of the growth of absentee landlordism and the heavy increases of taxation necessitated by the wars of Louis XIV. In 1789 the great majority of the French peasants had almost literally nothing to lose. Consequently they became the natural allies of the Parisian extremists. They instinctively felt that only the most drastic changes in the government could permanently improve their wretched condition.

From 1789 to 1794 the workers of Paris formed the spearhead of the Jacobin movement. The grimy mobs of the Faubourg Saint Antoine stormed the Bastille, forced the royal family to come from Versailles to Paris, urged on the execution of the King, and brought the Revolution to its last stage of radicalism by expelling the Girondists from the Convention. But Paris alone could not have made and maintained the Revolution without the more or less active cooperation of the provinces. Outside of La Vendée this cooperation was generally given. The efforts of the Girondists to rouse the departments against the capital met with total failure. The peasants responded to the *levie en masse* in sufficient numbers to beat off the invading forces of the coalition.

Had it lacked the hearty support of the peasants, the Revolution must have foundered miserably, from incompetent leadership if from no other cause. Now that the initial horror inspired by the Reign of Terror and the threat of world-wide revolution has subsided there is a general disposition to exaggerate the ability of the men who headed the French government in 1793 and 1794. Even Professor Davis, who is very far from sharing the radical views of the Jacobins, pays a high tribute to them in declaring that "they saved France." It would be more accurate to say that France was saved in spite of them. Outside of Carnot, the Revolution did not produce a single first-rate organizing genius. The restoration of the Bourbons was averted by the fierce courage and patriotism of the French people, by the lukewarmness and dissensions of the allied

powers, not by any miracles of generalship or statesmanship on the part of the leaders in Paris. While the revolutionary armies were winning victory after victory in the field, the Jacobin chiefs were largely occupied in sending each other to the guillotine. Little more than a year after its inception the Jacobin regime practically committed suicide, when Robespierre followed most of his colleagues to the scaffold. The collapse of the radical government thus came about not through pressure from without or revolt from within, but solely as a consequence of factional internal quarrels growing out of personalities rather than out of principles. And with the fall of Robespierre and the reaction under the Directory, the possibility of establishing and maintaining a radical government with the support of the majority of the French people passed away. For one of the outstanding results of the Revolution was the breaking of the alliance between the Parisian workers and the peasants.

The peasant's attitude towards the Revolution was quite simple. He was determined to secure a fair share of the seigneur's land, free from the oppressive dues and burdens of feudalism. To the conflicting political theories of royalists, constitutional monarchists, Girondists, and Jacobins he was profoundly indifferent. He was willing to support any government that would protect him in his newly acquired land and would not tax him too heavily. Hence it is easy to understand at once the tenacity with which he resisted the return of the emigres, who wished to take back the land, and the apathy which he exhibited towards the most sweeping political changes which did not affect his economic status. The Jacobins gave way to the Directory; the Directory was supplanted by Napoleon; Napoleon was succeeded by the Bourbons; but the peasant retained his land.

The deposition of Charles X in 1830 scarcely assumed the proportions of a civil war. All classes of the French people were tired of the vain, stupid, tyrannical old man; and his removal and the substitution of Louis Philippe were accomplished with little violence, although the retention of the monarchy was a sore blow to many of the ardent republicans who had fought on the barricades. It was in 1848 that the new political orientation of the peasants made itself manifest. In the fighting which raged for several days between the workers and the bourgeois guards of the National Assembly in the streets of Paris the peasants openly sided with the

latter. As Professor Davis says, the fighting of June 1848 was "a case of the working quarters of Paris against nearly all the rest of France." Reinforcements hurried up from the provinces to assist the Paris bourgeoisie in making an end of the radicals. A republican government with leanings towards communism, which demanded high taxes for the carrying out of elaborate social reforms, which was even accused of contemplating a division of the land, was altogether abhorrent to the new generation of thrifty peasants.

The final revolutionary uprising of the Parisian workers took place in 1871. The disasters and humiliations of the war with Germany contributed largely to the immediate outbreak. But the seizure of power by the Communists represented the final act in the prolonged drama of civil war. For the last time the Faubourg Saint Antoine attempted to control the destiny of France. The response of the provinces was swift and pitiless. The peasant soldiers who formed the bulk of MacMahon's army stormed Paris and gave Jacobinism its death-blow. The revolt which had lasted for almost a century came to an end; the working-class population of Paris could no longer withstand the hostility of the rest of France. The descendants of the men who had led the way in burning up title-deeds and displaying contempt for the seigneurs' property rights in the days of the Revolution proved most zealous in upholding the existing order against a new revolutionary dispensation.

So far as there is any lesson in the attitude of the peasants during the French revolutionary era, it is not favorable to the ultimate triumph of communism. The peasants remained good radicals only so long as they were quite landless and destitute. As soon as they gained secure possession of their little farms they became as respectable, as conservative, as tenacious of the rights of property as any great landowner or millionaire. A comparison between what has happened in France and what is likely to happen in Russia is necessarily vague and imperfect. But, unless the Bolsheviki prove more successful apostles of communism than the Jacobins, it seems likely that a period of private land-ownership will make the Russian moujiks as conservative as their French brethren.

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