

The French Revolution

G.Lefebvre

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A financial crisis precipitated the convention of the General-Estates, a first time since 1614. Two major concessions were wrought from the orders of the nobility and the clergy, namely that the third estate should have as many representatives as the first two combined, and that voting should not be by order, but by individual vote. The latter was obviously crucial, as many of the nobility as well as the clergy harboured sympathies for the third estate.

Through a process of boot-strapping the elective body achieved legality and power, curtailing the actual power of the King. One may argue why the King officially conceded, one being that the resource to military power turned out to be brittle and that the authority of the royal exercise thereof was compromised by the storming of the Bastille, an event which was symbolical, but as such had great psychological impact, manifesting the power of the mob and its contempt of authority.

The ideas that drove the work of the general assembly and its busy sub-committees had of course been around for quite some time propagated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and being finally turned into flesh. Thus the events were seen all over Europe with sympathy and excitement by the liberal intelligentsia and the economically rising class of merchants. Among the crowned heads of the continent, most of them related by dynastic ties, the situation was viewed with some degree of alarm.

The King initially only demoted from an absolute monarch to a constitutional one suffered a progressive deterioration of his situation. Already in the fall of 1789 a march of female hungerprotesters descended on Versailles and brought the Royal family, under the protection of Lafayette and the National Guard to Paris where they were installed in the Tuilleries. An attempt to escape the following summer was foiled in Varennes close to the border and the King was ignominiously brought back and suspended as a Monarch. The following year saw a war of France against Austria and Prussia, a war which was willed by a majority of the Assembly, and encouraged by the King who foresaw a French defeat and a reinstatement of his royal prerogatives. However, the foreign invasion, in spite of some initial successes foundered. In September the Royal apartments were invaded by a mob, and the Swiss guard was massacred. The King and the Queen had to seek protection in the general Assembly where they were forced to reside in the backstage cage reserved for stenographers. The division between Royalists and Republicans became pronounced and the latter carried the day. As the high-treasonal activities of the King and his queen were inevitably unearthed demands for their execution were raised. It is generally reported that the advocates of imposing the death sentence on the King carried a majority of only one vote (one of which was the opportunistic cousin of the King, the duke d'Orleans), but Lefebvre reports a somewhat more comfortable majority for the decision. With the execution of the King in January 1793 the book ends, although for many the start of the real radical revolution started with the decision to behead the King and from which the

new calendar commenced. Consequently of the reign of Terror there is nothing.

The book starts with a survey of the economical situation in Europe and spends quite a lot of time on the contemporary political scene. Among the main powers that were considering a invention were Austria, Prussia, Russia and also Spain and Sweden, the King Gustavus III of the latter being the most vocal and enthusiastic, but also the most ineffectual. With his assassination in March 1791 his mostly theatrical influence became moot (although Lefebvre treats him with respect). Russia, Prussia and Austria were vacillating, involved as they were with what would later turn out to be the final partitions of Poland. None of them wanted to take the lead and refered initiative to the others. A war did eventually come into being, but the effect of it was to galvanize the French nation and consolidate the Revolution.

The slogan of the Revolution was liberty, equality and fraternity, of which the last two were only reinforcements of each other. It made an appeal to patriotism, in which France was seen as a nation with the notion of natural boundaries (with symptomatically the Rhine being one part). The patriotism had its period of glory during Napoleon, the heir of the revolution, and has since then defined France as a nation, constantly finding itself short of living up to its days of fame. Otherwise its legacy was the abolition of feodualism, the dismantling of the power of the church, tapping its riches in a way reminiscent of the reformation in northern Europe. The role of society was rethought from scratch along the ideas of the Enlightenment, in particular imposing a rational structure, trivially exemplified with the normalization of measures. Although not lacking in precedents in upheavals and depositions, it nevertheless epitomizes the idea of a political revolution ever since, in its systematic and orderly progress as opposed to impulsive and erratic outbursts.

The book is very dry and presents the facts with little structure save that of a vague Marxist perspective.

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