

T R O T S K Y
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R E V O L U T I O N

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Trotsky did not devote any of his works specifically to the French Revolution, which is a pity. However, he did study it closely. He knew the works of Alphonse Aulard, including his collection, Documents for the history of the Jacobin Society. He knew Michelet's History of France and Jean Jaures' Socialist History, for which he owned to a special admiration. Throughout the vicissitudes of his political life he did not cease to keep abreast of the latest scientific work in the field. He knew the work of Mathiez and appreciated its importance. He made use of the first of the works of Georges Lefebvre to reach the wider public. The merit for this is, of course, his, but it also belongs to the men and women who collaborated with him - for instance Denise Naville - who copied hundreds of pages for him in the libraries of Paris when he could not get the books himself.

Though he had access to abundant materials about the history of the French Revolution, Trotsky never envisaged writing about it. None the less, we can easily discern - from books that are well indexed (1) - that the French Revolution (he nearly always called it the "Great" French Revolution) was one of his most lasting points of reference and that he conceived none of his works without reference to it, at least sketching comparisons. His first important references to the French Revolution are found in his polemical pamphlet of 1904 directed against Lenin, "Our Political Tasks", which dealt with the subject of Jacobinism. He returned to the French Revolution in his "1905", as a "national", "classical" revolution. We then find elements of the same kind throughout the whole of his work, in the first place, of course, in his History of the Russian Revolution and Stalin, but also in all the polemical and programmatic works of the period of the Left Opposition and then of the Fourth International, against Stalin and the epigones. In this connection we should stress the importance of the place which his references to "Thermidor" and "Bonapartism" occupy in writings which were, to be sure, for political purposes and in specific circumstances, but also were written with that particular care on the level of the theory, which eminent critics baptise as his "sociology" - evidently failing to understand it.

All the same, we shall not find in Trotsky's writings an original analysis of the French Revolution in or for itself. We shall observe an important evolution, which led him to shift his emphasis from the bourgeoisie as a whole as the motive force for the revolution to the "sans-culottes". The reader may run the risk sometimes of feeling that Trotsky mishandles a little the categories which Marx established, and that the "proletariat" became in Trotsky's mind a somewhat extensible notion, which in his pages included those whom he called the "oppressed", the "exploited", the poorest layers of society. But does not his theme consist of those who (as Marat wrote) own no wealth other than their offspring (proles in Latin) and whom those cynical oppressors and exploiters, the Romans, called "proletarians"?

In this article we have tried to avoid the use of analysis for the purposes of theoretical or polemical discussions today. We shall return to that later. Here we are trying to extract from the general body of Trotsky's work his general vision, on the one hand, of the movement and development of the revolution and, on the other hand, of the new political forms to which it gave birth in its inevitable reflux, when, in its time, the French Revolution could not go on to its final end.

It will then be possible for us to try to make a fundamental appreciation of him. Was Trotsky, in his treatment of the French Revolution, a historian or "sociologist", a theoretician and a revolutionary militant, all at the same time, or was he, in the end, dreaming very deeply about this subject which interested him so much and which he believed he could penetrate through his own experiences?

The Analogies

At the moment when Trotsky left the territory of the Soviet Union for the last time, driven out by the decision of the party for the benefit of which he had led the victorious insurrection for power twelve years before, he declared:

"Only a hopeless sycophant would deny the world-historical significance of the Great French Revolution." (2)

He did not conceal the motives which animated him, and he strongly affirmed that the method of "analogies" is valid, not only for the historian but, above all, for revolutionary policy:

"... there are certain features common to all revolutions that do admit of analogy and, in fact, demand it, if we are to base ourselves on the lessons of the past and not to start history over from scratch at each new stage." (3)

But analogy could not be perfect. He noted in 1935 that "it would be banal pedantry to attempt to fit the different stages of the Russian Revolution to analogous events in France that occurred towards the close of the eighteenth century." (4) In fact, history unfolds itself through time. The transformations which have been won become basic data. In Trotsky's preliminary remarks to his analysis of the character of the Russian Revolution of the 20th Century, in 1909, he emphasised the original

character of the great French Revolution, or rather its double character, as "bourgeois" and "national". He wrote:

"In the heroic epoch of the history of France, we see the bourgeoisie, which did not yet take account of the contradictions of which its situation is full, take the leadership of the struggle for a new order of things, not only against the out-dated institutions of France, but even against the reactionary forces of the whole of Europe. Progressively, the bourgeoisie, represented by its fractions, considered itself the head of the nation and became it, drew the masses into the struggle, gave them a slogan and taught them a tactic of battle. Democracy introduced into the nation the link of a political ideology. The people - small bourgeois, peasants and workers - elected bourgeois as deputies, and it was in the language of the bourgeoisie that the communes wrote the instructions intended for their representatives. The bourgeoisie became aware of its role as a Messiah."(5)

The bourgeoisie drew into its struggle the other layers of the Third Estate, of which it was only the upper stratum:

"Already the powerful movement of the revolutionary struggle rejected one after another the more inert elements of the bourgeoisie from political life. No one layer was carried off before it had communicated its energy to the layers which followed it. The nation as a whole continued to struggle for the aims which it had set before itself, using methods which became more and more violent and decisive... The great French Revolution is really a national revolution. It is more than that. Here, within the national framework, the class struggle of the bourgeoisie for domination on the scale of the whole world, for power and for undisputed triumph, finds its classical expression."(6)

By 1848 the bourgeoisie had already become incapable of playing such a role, as well as the intermediary layers, the petty bourgeoisie, the peasant class and the intellectual democracy. The proletariat, for its part, was still too weak.

But it is precisely because the French Revolution unfolded according to a "classic" schema, to a schema which in a certain sense was chemically pure, like a laboratory experiment, that the observer can grasp, as it unfolded, the laws of its development and can verify them in the light of generalisations based on them but applied in very different concrete conditions.

The Revolution as an Explosion of the Contradictions

The reader will know (we hope) the amazing parallel which Trotsky drew in his History of the Russian Revolution between Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette on the one hand, and Nicholas II and the Tsarina Alexandra on the other (7). He rejected those essentially psychological explanations which distort history by masking the social forces, and he showed how insignificant are the "personalities" of the sovereigns in comparison to the accumulated social contradictions and the chain-explosions which the outbursts of the crisis at the top of society touch off. Trotsky reminds his readers that Robespierre warned his colleagues in the legislative assembly against illusions that there could be a rapid revolutionary development in Europe; he reminded them of the French experience which had by then entered their consciousness, and that it was in France that "the opposition of the nobility", which "had

roused the bourgeoisie and, after it, the masses of the people". He rejected the idea, which liberal historians have often advanced, that the king dug his own grave when he allied himself with the counter-revolution. In fact Trotsky reminds his readers that Louis XVI summoned the Gironde to power - which (as his gibe recalls) "saved neither the king nor the Girondins later on from the guillotine"!

The talent of such a writer as Trotsky was needed to demonstrate the dynamic, explosive character of these active contradictions. Some had been bearing down for years; these could result, under the weight of new contradictions, in compromises reached in a few hours - (people like Mirabeau and La Fayette became the champions of this monarchy, the authority of which they had destroyed). But there were also those contradictions which had at first not been visible, but which soon revealed themselves to be gigantic and irreconcilable, such as the contradiction between the sans-culottes and the aristocrats and the rich, comfortable bourgeoisie, or that between the peasants and the same, or between the bourgeoisie and the Church. Trotsky wrote:

"How striking is the picture - and how vilely it has been slandered! - of the efforts of the plebeian levels to raise themselves up out of the cellars of society and of the catacombs, and stand forth in that forbidden arena where people in wigs and silk breeches are settling the fate of the nation. It seemed as if the very foundation of society, trampled underfoot by the cultured bourgeoisie, was stirring and coming to life. Human heads lifted themselves above the solid mass, horny hands stretched aloft, hoarse but courageous voices shouted! The districts of Paris, bastards of the revolution, began to live a life of their own. They were recognised - it was impossible not to recognise them! - and transformed into sections. But they kept continually breaking the boundaries of legality and receiving a current of fresh blood from below, opening their ranks in spite of the law to those with no rights, the destitute Sansculottes. At the same time the rural municipalities were becoming a screen for a peasant uprising against that bourgeois legality which was defending the feudal property system. Thus from under the second nation arises a third."(9)

He hails the "energy, audacity and unanimity of that new class, which had raised itself up from the depths of the Parisian districts and found support in the most backward villages". (9)

Is there a "corruptive effect of power"?

Along the way, Trotsky settles accounts with the coffee-house wisdom which vulgarisers and even certain specialists continue to serve up today. He is obviously dealing with such fatalistic formulations as "revolution devours its children" or "power corrupts". The reality is that circumstances change with historic development; men and political groups then can only submit to the results of these changes, which Trotsky calls "a failure of correspondence between subjective and objective". He wrote:

"People and parties are heroic or comic not in themselves but in their relation to circumstances."(10)

After Trotsky had paid particular attention to the discredit which struck one group after another of the courageous revolutionaries who had been the heroes of the first stages of the revolution, he observed:

"When the French Revolution entered its decisive stage the most eminent of the Girondins became pitiful and ludicrous beside the rank and file Jacobin."(10)

So it was that someone like Roland, a supporter of Brissot, as people then used to say, and the inspector of manufactures, which meant exceptional technical and scientific qualifications for the period, a "respected figure", could appear at a given moment like "a living caricature against the background of 1792".

Trotsky went on to attack a phenomenon which had already been observed in ancient times, because the Romans expressed it in terms of destiny - "Quos vult perdere, Jupiter dementat" (whom Jupiter wishes to destroy, he makes mad). He undertook the explanation:

"At a certain moment of the Revolution, the Girondin leaders completely lost their bearings. Despite their popularity and their intelligence, all that they committed were mistakes and blunders. They seemed to be taking an active part in their own destruction. Later it was the turn of Danton and his friends. Historians and biographers never cease to wonder at the disorganised, passive, puerile behaviour of Danton in the last months of his life. It was the same with Robespierre and his people; disorientation, passivity and incoherence at the most critical moment. The explanation is evident. By a given moment, each of these groups had exhausted its political possibilities, and could no longer go forward against the power of reality, internal economic conditions, international pressure and new currents among the masses which were their consequences, etc. In these conditions, each step began to produce results contrary to what was hoped for. But political abstention was hardly more fortunate."(11)

It is evident that Trotsky was considering the revolutionary development from the angle of the permanent revolution (though he did not use the term), which takes account of political development, including the grandeur and the decadence of men, of social and political forces, of clubs and of parties. He develops this thought in "The Revolution Betrayed":

"The consecutive stages of the great French Revolution, during its rise and fall alike, demonstrate no less convincingly that the strength of the "leaders" and "heroes" that replaced each other consisted primarily in their correspondence to the character of those classes and strata which supported them. Only this correspondence, and not any irrelevant superiorities whatever, permitted each of them to place the impress of his personality upon a certain historic period. In the successive supremacy of Mirabeau, Brissot, Robespierre, Barras and Bonaparte, there is no obedience to objective law incomparably more effective than the special traits of the historic protagonists themselves."(12)

He goes on:

"It is sufficiently well known that every revolution up to this time has been followed by a reaction, or even a counter-revolution. This, to be sure, has never thrown the nation all the way back to its starting point, but it has always taken from the people the lion's share of their conquests. The victims of the first reactionary wave have been, as a general rule, those pioneers, initiators and instigators, who stood at the head of the masses in the period of the re-

volutionary offensive. In their stead people of the second line, in league with the former enemies of the revolution, have been advanced to the front. Beneath this dramatic duel of 'coryphees' on the open political scene, shifts have taken place in the relations between classes, and, no less important, profound changes in the psychology of the recently revolutionary masses."(12)

Can one make a revolution by halves?

The same explanation is valid for that other phenomenon, observed by Saint-Just and explained by him as a law of the development of revolutions, according to which "those who make revolutions by halves do nothing but dig their own graves". To be sure, no one could deny that Mirabeau was at a particular time the flamboyant spokesman of the revolution in its rise. Nor would anyone deny that he disappeared ingloriously after trying to reconcile the revolution with the monarchy, that is, to stop the revolution when it had only just started and was far from having exhausted its sources of energy, which were constantly renewed by the mobilisation of new layers. La Fayette was less brilliant a speaker and writer, but had the advantage of a solid, prestigious legend. He was no less "the hero of the two worlds" to the French - until he deserted to the camp of the foreign army. Trotsky provides an explanation:

"On July 17, 1791, on the Champ de Mars, La Fayette fired on a peaceful demonstration of republicans attempting to bring a petition to the National Assembly, which was engaged in screening the treachery of the monarchical power, just as the Russian Compromisers one hundred and twenty-six years later were screening the treachery of the Liberals. The royalist bourgeoisie hoped with a timely bath of blood to settle accounts with the party of the revolution for ever. The republican leaders, still not feeling strong enough for victory, declined the battle - and that was entirely reasonable. They even hastened to separate themselves from the petitioners - and that was, to say the least, unworthy and a mistaken policy. The regime of the bourgeois terror compelled the Jacobins to quiet down for several months. Robespierre took shelter with the carpenter Duplay. Desmoulins went into hiding. Danton spent several weeks in England. But the Royalist provocation nevertheless failed..."(13)

In passing, Trotsky places in relief one aspect of the development of revolutions: any attempt to stop the revolution in the middle is, independently of the intentions of its instigators and its authors, the beginning of a counter-revolutionary enterprise, by way of the struggle against the revolution which is still going on.

In reality it was the social forces which dictated this continuity of the revolution in France from 1789 onwards and which was finally to produce a society in France which was more advanced at the end of the 18th Century than Germany on the eve of the revolution of 1918 in its social transformation, or than Spain immediately after April 1931, the monarchs having, in both cases, taken the road to Varennes and had the good fortune not to be arrested by a Drouet.

In fact, the French Revolution was the resultant of a lasting, objective alliance between the mass of country people, who rose up against the "aristos" and the old feudal regime, with the sans-culottes of the cities and especially on Paris. It was not the country people themselves who began the systematic struggle against the aristocracy and its privileges in the countryside - though they had not ceased for centuries, in one form or another, to carry that struggle on. But it was the bourgeoisie who started off the real process of liberation. Trotsky writes:

"In France the struggle with royal absolutism, the aristocracy and the princes of the Church, compelled the bourgeoisie in various of its layers, and in several instalments, to achieve a radical agrarian revolution at the end of the 18th century. For long after that an independent peasantry constituted the support of the bourgeois order".(14)

The concrete development, however, led Trotsky to make some refinements and extra touches to this general picture, in the pages of the same book. It was in fact in the struggle against stopping the revolution half-way, against the rise of the counter-revolution, that the alliance was formed which permitted the revolution to go to the end on the social battlefield and to destroy the Old Regime:

"Throughout five years the French peasantry rose at every critical moment of the revolution, preventing a deal between the feudal and bourgeois property-holders. The Parisian Sans-culottes, pouring out their blood for the republic, liberated the peasant from his feudal chains."(15)

Fundamentally, then, "the pressure of the peasants on the landowners guaranteed the creation of the republic, clearing the ground of feudal rubbish on its behalf".(16) But, at the same time, this peasant pressure could acquire its full meaning only because the sans-culottes, at the gates of state-power in Paris, fighting for the republic, offered them a political regime which defended them from attempts at restoration (counter-revolution).

The Contradictions and the Duality of Power

The main characteristic of revolutionary development which Trotsky brought to light in relation to the French Revolution probably followed from his own observation and experience of the Russian Revolution, in which he played his part - and what a part! It is his observation that the social contradictions in the development of the revolution stabilise or de-stabilise themselves in the form of situations of "dual power", in a curve which rises at first and then descends. In each case the question of hegemony between the two conflicting powers is decided by force or, if you prefer, by a "civil war", however short it may be.

Let us leave it almost exclusively to Trotsky himself to speak on this matter:

"In the great French Revolution, the Constituent Assembly, the backbone of which was the upper levels of the Third Estate, concentrated the power in its hands - without however fully annulling the prerogatives of the king. The period of the Constituent Assembly is a clearly-marked period of dual power, which ends

with the flight of the king to Varennes, and is formally liquidated with the founding of the Republic.

The first French constitution (1791), based upon the fiction of a complete independence of the legislative and executive powers, in reality concealed from the people, or tried to conceal, a double sovereignty; that of the bourgeoisie, firmly entrenched in the National Assembly after the capture by the people of the Bastille, and that of the old monarchy still relying upon the upper circles of the priesthood, the clergy, the bureaucracy and the military, to say nothing of their hopes of foreign intervention. In this self-contradictory regime lay the germs of its inevitable destruction. A way out could be found only in the abolition of bourgeois representation by the powers of European reaction, or in the guillotine for the king and the monarchy. Paris and Coblenz must measure their forces." (16a)

In fact, a second duality of powers was arising even before the war and the fall of the king:

"But before it comes to war and the guillotine, the Paris Commune enters the scene - supported by the lowest city layers of the Third Estate - and with increasing boldness contests the power with the official representatives of the national bourgeoisie. A new double sovereignty is thus inaugurated, the first manifestation of which we observe as early as 1790, when the big and medium bourgeoisie is still firmly fixed in the administration and in the municipalities....

The Parisian sections at first stood opposed to the Commune, which was still dominated by the respectable bourgeoisie. In the bold outbreak of August 10, 1792, the sections gained control of the Commune. From then on the revolutionary Commune opposed the Legislative Assembly, and subsequently the Convention, which failed to keep up with the problems and progress of the revolution - registering its events but not performing them..."(17)

It is by way of this advance of the duality of power that Trotsky goes on from it to the Terror and to the dictatorship of the Committee of Public Safety:

"The exploiters have so landed the vehicle of society in a morass that, in order to get it out, tremendous energy and really revolutionary efforts are needed, of which the Jacobins gave us a formidable example, a hundred and fifty years ago. It is the poor, the small people, the exploited, who created the government of the Mountain, the strongest which France has ever known, and it was this government which saved France in the most tragic circumstances."(18)

The law of revolutionary development through dualities of power did not cease to operate; Trotsky goes on:

"... the demand for a dictatorship results from the intolerable contradictions of the double sovereignty. The transition from one of its forms to the other is accomplished through civil war. The great stages of a revolution - that is, the passing of power to new layers or classes - do not at all coincide in this process with the succession of representative institutions, which march along after the dynamic of the revolution like a belated shadow. In the long run, to be sure, the revolutionary dictatorship of the Sansculottes unites with the dictatorship of the Convention. But with what Convention? A Convention purged of the Girondins who yesterday ruled it with the hand of the error - a Convention abridged and adapted to the dominion of new social forces."(19)

But we are dealing with what is indeed a general law of development of the revolution and of the counter-revolution. Trotsky concludes:

"Thus by the steps of the dual power the French Revolution rises in the course of four years to its culmination. After the 9th Thermidor it begins - again by the steps of the dual power - to descend. And again civil war precedes every downward step, just as before it had accompanied every rise."(20)

The Jacobin Dictatorship and the Terror

We can understand, in these conditions, that Trotsky could not have been by any means an admirer of the Jacobins, able though he was to pay to them the homage which they deserved in his eyes. For him, the merit of Robespierre and his people lay in their proclamation of revolutionary principle and in desperately defending it against feudal Europe. But Trotsky wholly shares the appreciation which Engels expressed to Kautsky in his letter of February 20, 1887 - a matter on which Marx agreed with him. Here Engels explains that the Terror had no meaning except as a war-measure:

"Once the frontiers had been safeguarded, thanks to the military victories, and a after the frenzied Commune, which sought to carry liberty to other peoples at the point of bayonets, had been destroyed, terror out-lived itself as a weapon of the revolution. Robespierre, it is true, was at the height of his power, but, says Engels, henceforth terror became a means of self-preservation for him, and thus it was reduced to an absurdity."(21)

In Trotsky's polemic against Lenin, who, as we know, had tried to associate "Jacobinism" with "socialism" in a celebrated passage in his pamphlet, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back", the former painted a devastating picture of "Jacobinism" as an out-dated historical phenomenon. He never returned to the question, even though he recognised that he had been fundamentally wrong in the polemic against Lenin - and doubtless never had any reason to do so. Behind the ardour and the powerful formulations of the polemic within the socialist movement, which went beyond what was necessary, there lies concealed an analysis, which we present as follows:

"Lenin writes that Jacobinism is the highest point of the tension of revolutionary energy in the period of the self-liberation of bourgeois society. It is the maximum radicalisation which bourgeois society could produce, not by the development of its internal contradictions, but by their being forced back and stifled: in theory, the appeal to the Rights of Man, abstract, of the citizen, abstract - and, in practice, the guillotine."(22)

Here too the Jacobins do not behave in virtue of abstract principles, even though they proclaim them, but they behave like people caught in a blind alley, because the economic and social context of their period provided no basis for the endurance of their rule. Unleashing the Terror was, for them, a method by which to violate the laws of History to which they must submit:

"History was expected to stop so that the Jacobins would be able to hold on to

power, because any forward movement was bound to bring into opposition to each other the diverse elements which actively or passively supported the Jacobins, and thus would, by their internal friction, weaken the revolutionary will at the head of which stood the Mountain. The Jacobins did not, and could not, believe that their truth - the Truth - would always convince people's souls as time wore on. The facts demonstrated the contrary. On every side, from all the fissures of society, there were emerging intriguers, hypocrites, 'aristocrats' and 'moderates'... The tactic which the Jacobins' instinct of political self-preservation dictated to them was to maintain revolutionary energy at its height by instituting a 'state of siege' and by deciding lines of demarcation by the blade of the guillotine."(23)

In the hour of supreme danger the Jacobins were able to "inflame" the 'sans-culottes' and to mobilise the masses in defence of the "nation", by means of the "patriotism" which they created on the basis of revolutionary principles and of defence against the foreign invader at all costs. But they did not have a programme which could fit the reality of their times:

"The Jacobins were utopians. They set themselves the task of 'founding a republic on the basis of reason and equality. They wanted an egalitarian republic on the basis of private property, and a republic of reason and virtue within the framework of the exploitation of one class by another. Their methods of struggle merely followed from their revolutionary utopianism. When they faced having to resolve gigantic contradictions, they called on the solution of the guillotine.'" (24)

Trotsky then showed how their objective situation closed every political way out to the Jacobins and cut the ground from under their feet, despite all their voluntarist declamations, which could founder into the blackest pessimism:

"The Jacobins were pure idealists... They believed in the absolute force of the idea of the Truth, and they considered that no amount of human sacrifice would be wasted in building the pedestal for this truth. Everything that departed from the principles of universal morality which they proclaimed was the fruit of vice and hypocrisy. 'I know only two parties', said Maximilien Robespierre in one of his last great speeches, the celebrated speech of 8th Thermidor, 'the party of the good citizens and the party of the bad'.

To their absolute faith in the metaphysical idea corresponded an absolute mistrust of real people. 'Suspicion' was inevitably the method by which to serve the Truth, at the same time as it was the supreme duty of the 'true patriot'. No understanding of the class struggle, of the social mechanism which determines 'the clash of opinions and ideas', and, therefore, no historical perspective, no certitude that certain contradictions in the domain of opinions and ideas would inevitably grow deeper, while others would become attenuated to the extent that the struggle developed of the forces liberated by the revolution."(25)

Trotsky's verdict on the heroic activity of the Jacobins is as severe as that, according to him, of History:

"History was supposed to stop, so that the Jacobins could hold on to their positions. But it did not stop. Nothing remained for them but to fight pitilessly against the natural movement until they were totally exhausted. Any pause, any concession, however slight, meant death.

This historic tragedy, this feeling of the irreparable, infused the speech which Robespierre delivered before the Convention on 8th Thermidor and which he repeated the same evening at the Jacobin Club. 'In our present situation, to stop before we reach the end means to perish; we have shamefully retreated. You ordained

that certain wretches shall be punished. They dare to resist the justice of the nation, and we sacrifice the destinies of the motherland and of humanity to them. So are we to wait for all the plagues which factions, acting with impunity, can bring down on us?... Let go the reins of the revolution for one moment, and you will see military despotism lay hold on it and the chiefs of the factions overthrow the civilian national representation. A century of civil wars and calamities will devastate our country. We shall perish because we did not wish to seize a moment which has been marked in the history of mankind to establish liberty. We shall hand our country over to a century of calamities. The curses of the people will attach to our memories, which should be dear to the human race'".(26)

Finally, it is to Trotsky that we owe one of the most severe descriptions of terrorist stubbornness in power:

"The Jacobins brought the blade of the guillotine down between themselves and the supporters of moderation. The logic of the class movement was going against them, and they made haste to behead it. Madness! This hydra always has more heads, and heads devoted to the ideals of virtue and truth were daily becoming more rare. The Jacobins 'purged' themselves by weakening themselves. The guillotine was only the mechanical instrument of their political suicide, but the suicide itself was the inevitable way out of their hopeless historical situation, a situation in which the spokesmen of equality on the basis of private property, the prophets of universal morality within the framework of class exploitation, found themselves.

'Great crises are needed to purify a gangrened body. To save the body, limbs have to be amputated. As long as we have bad leaders, we can be led astray, but when we know who the real Jacobins are, they will be our guides, we shall rally to Danton and Robespierre and shall save the state'. A year and a half later, when Danton and many others from among the 'authentic Jacobins' had been guillotined like limbs infected with gangrene, another Jacobin was to speak, again and again, about 'purging', in the same club and in almost the same words: 'If we purge, it is because we have the right to purge France. We shall leave no alien body in the Republic. Let the enemies of liberty tremble, for the hammer is raised and the Convention will bring it down. Our enemies are fewer than some would have us believe. Soon they will be revealed, and will appear in the theatre of the guillotine. People say that we want to disarm the Convention. No! It shall remain intact. But we wish to prune the dead branches from this great tree. The great measures which we are taking are like gusts of wind, which bring down the poisoned fruits and leave the good fruit on the tree. Then you will be able to pluck what remains. They will be ripe and full of flavour. They will put life into the Republic. What does it matter to me that branches be numerous if they are rotten? It is better that a lesser number remain, if they are green and vigorous'".(27)

The Limits of the Great Revolution

Trotsky liked quoting Jean-Paul Marat, a lucid analyst of the revolution which developed in front of him and with him. Trotsky believed that Marat has been "so powerfully slandered by the official historians" - which he still is to a great extent - because he expressed the "cruel social change for the worse" of social revolutions. He quotes approximately from memory what he wrote in July 1792:

"The revolution is achieved and supported only by the lower classes of the population, by those wronged beings whom insolent wealth treats as the rabble... After certain successes at the beginning, the movement is finally defeated. It always lacks knowledge, cunning, resources, arms, leaders and a plan of action. It remains defenceless against the conspirators who have experience, cleverness and guile."(28)

No one will dispute that, at the end of the 18th century, "the oppressed classes" had neither knowledge nor experience nor leaderships which could take them to victory. Yet, when the danger was greatest, they could band all their energies together in support of half-perceived aims - but such an effort, for an individual as for hundreds of thousands collectively, is strictly limited in time; it gives place to a relaxation or a retreat, to disappointment that its results are so meagre and to apathy in the absence of or confusion about perspectives. It was in such a context that Robespierre tried to maintain the power of what was left of the Jacobin party, and failed. Moreover Trotsky stresses that the causes also of what we can call the "impotence" of Jacobinism are to be sought, not only in the realm of the subjectivity of the masses, but also in the objectivity of the social relations. He writes:

"The victory of the Thermidoreans over the Jacobins in the 18th century was also aided by the weariness of the masses and the demoralisation of the leading cadres, but beneath these essentially incidental phenomena a deep organic process was taking place. The Jacobins rested upon the lower petty bourgeoisie lifted by the great wave. The revolution of the eighteenth century, however, corresponded to the course of development of the productive forces and could not but bring the great bourgeoisie to political ascendancy in the long run."(29)

Some years earlier he had expressed the same idea in a slightly different and perhaps more detailed form, when he wrote:

"The fall of the Jacobins was pre-determined by the lack of maturity of the social relationships: the left (ruined artisans and merchants) deprived of the possibility of economic development, could not be a firm support for the revolution; the right (bourgeoisie) grew irresistibly: finally, Europe, economically and politically more backward, prevented the revolution from spreading beyond the limits of France."(30)

Then followed his real verdict on the balance-sheet of Robespierre and his people:

"... in France, even the most clairvoyant policy of the Jacobins would have been powerless to alter radically the course of events."(31)

In reality, when the danger outside and within had passed, the essential task of the revolution being assured, the bourgeoisie, which had been driven out of power for a moment by the pressure of the sans-culottes could not fail to surge forward anew. In order to "inflamm" the sans-culottes, it would have been necessary to meet their most pressing demands, and to ensure, in a very significant word, their "subsistence". But the economic measures, "the Jacobin bourgeois equality", (Trotsky wrote), "which adopted the form of control of maximum prices, restricted the development of and the extension of bourgeois well-being. The bourgeoisie aspired to this social well-being. The fall of Robespierre on 9th Thermidor was, in one sense, the revenge of the bourgeoisie, whose aspirations had been restricted in the name of political necessity:

"Thermidor rested on a social foundation. It was a matter of bread, meat, living quarters, surplus, if possible, luxury. Bourgeois Jacobin equality, which assumed the form of the regulation of the maximum, restricted the development of bourgeois economy and the growth of bourgeois well-being. On this point the

Thermidoreans were perfectly well aware and clearly understood what they wanted. In the declaration of rights they worked out, they excluded the essential paragraph, "People are born and remain free and equal in their rights". To those who proposed the restoration of this important Jacobin paragraph, the Thermidoreans replied that it was equivocal and therefore dangerous; people were of course equal in their rights, but not in their capabilities and not in their possessions. The Thermidor was a direct protest against the Spartan temper and against the striving for equality."(32)

Thermidor

Evidently Trotsky devoted the most important reflexions and analyses in his study of the French Revolution to the phenomenon of Thermidor. These inevitably formed his analogical reference point, but also his working hypothesis, as to the origin of the privileged bureaucracy, the "new Red aristocracy", born of the conquests of the October Revolution and the power of the Soviet workers' state. There is no lack of documents and studies - and no doubt the blow of Mercader's ice-pick deprived us of the developments which his first reflexions on "The Thermidoreans" by Georges Lefebvre, in his un-finished "Stalin", promised.

As to the significance of Thermidor, the bases for the analysis by Trotsky have been pointed out above, in reference to the impotence of the Spartan dictatorship and of the efforts of the Jacobins to achieve equality. Trotsky wrote:

"The first stage on the road of reaction was Thermidor. The new officials and the new property owners wanted to enjoy the fruits of the revolution in peace. The old Jacobin intransigents were an obstacle to them. The new propertied layers did not yet dare to appear under their own banner. They needed a cover from within the Jacobin milieu itself. They sought out some leaders for the short term in the persons of certain Jacobins of the second and third rank."(33)

He establishes that the 9th Thermidor was conceived, organised and carried through to success by "Left Jacobins", who opposed the terror which also threatened a number of rascals in the Convention. He quotes Georges Lefebvre to show "that the task of the Thermidoreans consisted in representing 9th Thermidor as a secondary episode, a mere purge of hostile elements in order to preserve the fundamental nucleus of the Jacobins and to follow their traditional policy". He even points out, still following Georges Lefebvre, that "in the first period of Thermidor, the attack was not directed against the Jacobins as a whole, but only against terrorists".

"The Jacobins were not destroyed as Jacobins, but as Terrorists, as Robespierrists and the like."(34)

He adds that Barere declared at the Convention, on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety, that nothing really important had happened on 9th Thermidor.

Perhaps the actors in the event understood it in this way. No doubt the event and its consequences did not correspond concretely with what was expected. But they were to be overtaken very quickly by the reaction, which in reality they had not provoked but had represented:

"The French Thermidor, started by Left Wing Jacobins, turned in the end into reaction against all Jacobins. 'Terrorists', 'Montagnards', 'Jacobins' became terms of abuse. In the provinces the trees of liberty were chopped down the tricolour cockade was trampled underfoot."(35)

The Thermidoreans themselves attacked the history of the past. As Auland has already noted, they did not content themselves with "having killed Robespierre and his friends", but slandered them, by presenting them to the eyes of France as royalists and traitors sold to the foreigner, as "agents of Pitt and Cobourg". "The fear of criticism", wrote Trotsky, "is the fear of the masses".

Was Thermidor no more than a "reaction"? If so, within what limits? Or was it the first stage of the "counter-revolution"? Trotsky gave a definite reply to this second question:

"Was Thermidor counter-revolutionary? The answer to this question depends on how wide a significance we attach, in a given case, to the concept of "counter-revolution". The social overturn of 1789 to 1793 was bourgeois in character. In essence it reduced itself to the replacement of fixed feudal property by 'free' bourgeois property. The counter-revolution 'corresponding' to this revolution would have had to attain the re-establishment of feudal property. But Thermidor did not even make an attempt in this direction. Robespierre sought his support among the artisans, the Directory among the middle bourgeoisie. Bonaparte allied himself with the banks. All these shifts - which had, of course, not only a political but also a social significance - occurred, however, on the basis of the new bourgeois society and state."(36)

Trotsky made the point even more clearly in another passage:

"The overturn of the Ninth Thermidor did not liquidate the basic conquests of the bourgeois revolution, but it did transfer the power into the hands of the more moderate and conservative Jacobins, the better-to-do elements of bourgeois society".(37)

What Thermidor ultimately is about is "the sharing-out of the benefits of the new regime between the different fractions of the victorious "Third Estate" - and this sharing-out was done to the detriment of the most deprived layers, whose agency had carried through and deepened the revolution, of those whom Jean-Paul Marat called "the oppressed classes". In this sense, as in the sense of political democracy, Thermidor did constitute a deep reaction.

On the forms of this reaction, Trotsky wrote, in the last pages of his "Stalin":

"The Jacobins held on chiefly through the pressure of the street upon the Convention. The Thermidoreans, i.e. the deserting Jacobins, strived for the same method, but from the opposite ends. They began to organise well-dressed sons of the bourgeoisie, from among the sans-culottes. These gilded youths, or simply 'young men', as they were indulgently called by the conservative press, became such an important factor in national politics that as the Jacobins were expelled from all administrative posts the 'young men' took their places....

The Thermidorean bourgeoisie was characterised by profound hatred towards the Montagnards. The bourgeoisie and with it the Thermidoreans were above all afraid of a new outbreak of the popular movement. It was precisely during this period that the class consciousness of the French bourgeoisie fully formed itself. It detested the Jacobins and the semi-Jacobins with a mad hatred - as

betrayers of its most sacred interests, as deserters to the enemy, as renegades. The source of the hatred of the Soviet bureaucracy for the Trotskyists has the same social character."(38)

Finally, what limits did Trotsky assign to Thermidor in the past?

"'Thermidor' is the reaction after the revolution, but a reaction which does not succeed in changing the social basis of the new order."(39)

Bonapartism

From the viewpoint of the fundamental tendencies, it is not easy to distinguish what Trotsky wrote about "Thermidor" from what he wrote about "Bonapartism" each time that the question was only raised superficially. The fact is that the one emerged from the other with so little disturbance that, in the end, the coup d'etat of 18th Brumaire - which, as we know, was completely successful - presents all the characteristics of a coup d'etat that failed.... Trotsky wrote about this continuity that it could be appreciated in the first place through individual people:

"Many Thermidoreans emerged in their day from the circle of the Jacobins. Bonaparte himself belonged to this circle in his early years, and subsequently it was from among former Jacobins that the First Consul and the Emperor of France selected his most faithful servants."(40)

In reality the situation which the initiative of the Thermidoreans opened up was, in the given conditions, the launching-pad from which Bonapartism could install itself. Political instability threatened the new social regime from both sides. The dictatorship of the sabre was the remedy, and provided the desired stability.

"In order that the little Corsican might lift himself above a young bourgeois nation, it was necessary that the revolution should already have accomplished its fundamental task - the transfer of land to the peasants - and that a victorious army should have been created on the new social foundations. In the 18th century a revolution had no farther to go; it could only from that point recoil and go backward. In this recoil, however, its fundamental conquests were in danger. They must be defended at any cost. The deepening but still very immature antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat kept the nation, shaken as it was to its foundations, in a state of extreme tension. A national 'judge' was in those conditions indispensable. Napoleon guaranteed to the big bourgeoisie the possibility to get rich, to the peasants their pieces of land and to the sons of peasants and the hoboos a chance of looting in the wars. The judge held a sword in his hand and himself also fulfilled the duties of bailiff. The Bonapartism of the first Bonaparte was solidly founded."(41)

None the less we should not think up a false idea of the "role as arbitrator" of the Bonaparte "reconciling" divergent interests. He reconciled only those which rested on the same social base, and, consequently, he directed his violence and his most concentrated power against the most oppressed layers. Trotsky writes:

"Carrying the policies of Thermidor further, Napoleon waged a struggle not only against the feudal world but also against the 'rabble' and the democratic circle of the petty and middle bourgeoisie; in this way he concentrated the fruits of the regime born out of the revolution in the hands of the new bourgeois aristocracy."(41)

In one of his dazzling formulations - particularly well translated here by Maurice

Parijanine - he rounds off by demonstrating the real concentration of power of the individual who claims to be the "arbiter":

"The wa hman does not now stand at the gate, but sits on the roof of the house, yet his function is the same. The independence of Bonapartism is to an enormous degree external, decorative, a matter of show. Its appropriate symbol was the mantle of the emperor."(43)

But with the imperial mantle there ended also the history of the great French Revolution.

Some interesting opinions

Reading or re-reading passages writings which touch in passing on the French Revolution revives our regret that there is no specific work devoted to it by him. Let us remark, incidentally, how this lack enables us to judge how short-sighted were the publishers in the 1930's who failed to commission a work from him about it after they read the History of the Russian Revolution. Page after page, remarks that strike like lightning or bubble with humour, or miniatures, show what we have lost.

He looses his lively wit with special success on the spokesmen of classes or groups which seek the cause of their out defeats in the wickedness or dishonesty of those whom they regard as their adversaries, and who always see their hand as that of the Evil One. He can wax ironic at the expense of the Girondins who held the Jacobins to blame for the September massacres, for the disappearance of mattresses in the barracks and for the campaign for an agrarian law.(44) Likewise, he can philosophise about the necessity felt by classes which feel threatened, to find an explanation within the range of their consciousness: M. Fersen, confidently declaring that Prussian money was flowing in to the Jacobins, which explained how they could "buy" the rabble and mobilise them in street demonstrations.(45)

A fine analysis of the conditions in which the insurrection of August 10, 1792 was prepared led him to observe that here indeed we have an insurrection the date of which was fixed in advance by - the logic of circumstances. He quotes, to fit the occasion, a phrase of Jean Jaures, the great relevance of which he emphasises:

"... (the) handing-over of the question by the sections to the consideration of the Legislative Assembly was by no means a 'constitutional illusion'. It was merely a method of preparing an insurrection, and therewith a legal cover for it. The sections, as is well known, rose in support of their position at the signal of the fire-gong, with arms in their hands."(46)

At another moment, he observes the contrast between the French Revolution and the English Revolution which preceded it. He indicates that, in France, the "Catholic Church as a State Church managed to survive up to the revolution" and that the revolution found "expression and justification", not "in biblical texts but in democratic abstractions", because France had "leapt over the Reformation". On the

other hand we shall be cautious about taking up his side-swipe at the employers in the French Third Republic, right or left, when he was writing the History of the Russian Revolution:

"Whatever the hatred of the present rulers of France for Jacobinism, the fact is that only thanks to the austere labours of Robespierre are they still able to cover their conservative rulership with those formulae with the help of which the old society was exploded."(47)

And it is at the point of this mockery of the rulers of the Third Republic that we shall now try to answer the question which was posed at the beginning of this study.

Trotsky as a Historian of the French Revolution?

On August 22, 1917., Trotsky criticised the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary "conciliationists, in Proletary, and, in doing so, produced this striking little picture:

"At the end of the 18th century, there was in France a revolution, which is known correctly as the 'great revolution'. It was a bourgeois revolution. In the course of one of its phases, the power fell into the hands of the Jacobins, who had the support of the 'sans-culottes', that is, of the semi-proletarian workers in the cities, and who interposed between themselves and the Girondins, the liberal party of the bourgeoisie (the Kadets of that period) the sharp rectangle of the guillotine. Nothing but the dictatorship of the Jacobins gives to the French Revolution the importance which makes it the 'great revolution'. Yet this dictatorship was put into power, not only without the bourgeoisie, but against it and in spite of it. Robespierre, to whom it was not vouchsafed to anticipate Plekhanov's ideas, turned all the laws of sociology on their heads; instead of shaking the hand of the Girondin, he cut off his head. No doubt this was a cruel thing to do. But the cruelty has not prevented the French Revolution from becoming 'great' within the limits of its bourgeois character. Marx said... that the French Terror was as a whole no more than a plebeian way of finishing off the enemies of the bourgeoisie. As the bourgeoisie feared these plebeian methods of finishing off the enemies of the people, the Jacobins not only drove the bourgeoisie out of power but, moreover, applied a law of iron and blood to them every time they made any attempt to stop or to 'moderate' the Jacobins' work. Consequently it is clear that the Jacobins carried through a bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie."

Despite his brilliant lessons, we still cannot answer the question whether Trotsky was formally a historian of the French Revolution, as he was of the Russian Revolution. This negative response, however, contributes nothing to our knowledge either of Trotsky or of the French Revolution.

We are interested, on the other hand, in knowing whether Trotsky did the work of a historian in his dealings with the history of the 'great French Revolution' as an element of comparison in a number of writings about other subjects. Did he contribute to our understanding of this dominating historical phenomenon at the dawn of the contemporary epoch? For the rest, we know - as we have already said - that he never treated the subject in itself, and that the information which he used was already available to anyone in books and in collections of documents. This makes his work what the University agrees to call "second-hand", which we would rather call "interpretative".

From this point of view, we need not take up time with a lengthy discussion of the criticism which Louis Gottschalk published in the American Journal of Sociology on Trotsky and "the natural history of revolutions", (48) - nor of his statement that in Trotsky there is a conflict between the historian and the sociologist, which can be discerned from his frequent recourse to what the American historian of the French Revolution calls "objective necessity". In fact Gottschalk believed that historians should not give in to the temptation to play at being sociologists, that is, at generalising, because their concern is with truly "unique" events. The professor at Chicago University observes the rule about dividing up academic activities and keeping them separate. He plays his allotted role as a reviewer in a specialist journal. We would comment merely that he relied essentially for his severe admonition on Trotsky's use of historical analogies, and especially in references to the French Revolution, some of which, he thought, were particularly far-fetched.

Isaac Deutscher's criticism appears to be very similar. He made himself the biographer in turn of Stalin and of Trotsky, not hesitating to express retrospective admonitions to both alike. He judged particularly that the analogy with the Thermidor of the French Revolution is completely "obscure". (49) Still more, he carried his criticism straight to the heart of our subject; he declared that, as often happens when "a historical analogy becomes a political slogan none of those who debated about it had a clear idea of the precedent to which they referred". (50) He also assured his readers that Trotsky had to "revise his interpretation" several times, when it was not his interpretation of the French Thermidor that Trotsky formally revised, but that of the Soviet Thermidor! This brilliant journalist appointed himself school-master, on behalf of science and of the struggle against obscurantism ("the dead man seizes the living") and vigorously blamed Trotsky for causing such awful confusion. But this admonition does not lead anywhere, because Deutscher did not take the trouble to show his readers in what respect Trotsky's idea of the French Thermidor was wrong. And while we are considering that taste for correction which Deutscher displayed here, we should add that a very serious piece of academic work (regrettably un-published) has closely studied Deutscher's critique of what Trotsky said about Thermidor: this correctly concludes:

"In reality, Deutscher did not reject Trotsky's interpretation of the Soviet Thermidor because of any historical mistakes in it. He opposed it because it forms part of a general political position with which he did not agree." (51)

The Israeli professor Baruch Knei-Paz does not aim as high as Gottschalk or Deutscher. He refrains as completely as they from criticising "errors of history", and confines himself, for example, to declaring that the qualities of the History of the Russian Revolution, as pure history are "minor, to say the least" (52). At the same time, he pays a striking tribute to its imaginative power, its evocation of scenes, atmosphere and drama. But his conclusion leaves the reader unsatisfied:

"(Trotsky) identifies himself with the History and in this dramatic sense he identifies history with himself."(53)

But what about the French Revolution?

Let us seek within ourselves the resources with which to qualify and to characterise the historical notes about the French Revolution which Trotsky broadcast through his work, now that his most determined critics have avoided the subject. We have been aware in the passages which we have re-read of the instances of courage which his sparkling pen describes. We know how he searched into the atmosphere of revolution, his best source of inspiration. We know the urgent concern of his capacity to understand and to explain, his liking and gift for the large canvas and for the movement, for what he calls "historical development". Evidently such people as Knei-Paz and Deutscher havenot completely failed to recognise in Trotsky the great writer, the lyricist.

But besides there is Trotsky the revolutionary, not a "sociologist", to use Gottschalk's term; the man who reflects, within a historical perspective, the man who seeks precedents in history, who wants to uncover and to check in practical action the the laws of historical development, of the movement - this movement which gives life to the picture and is called revolution. This is the man who compares, identifies, distinguishes, evaluates and extra-polates, because he does not want "eternally to begin History all over again at its starting point". Trotsky wanted, through study of the past, to make history an instrument for understanding the present in order to change it. It is probably for this that he is blamed by those critics who devote themselves to representing a "unique event", and for whom, no doubt, the practice of history is merely the way they earn their living.

For our part, with all due modesty and without disrespect for professional historians - among whom we are - who have to hunt for and to discover documents and testimonies, and to explain unique or connected events, mentalities and life-styles, we cannot fail to notice how alive is the picture of the French Revolution which Trotsky in passing gives us. Perhaps we should add that this immense period of the history of humanity which he called the "great French Revolution" controbuted elements from which, as a Russian revolutionary, he could understand the battles which he joined, won and lost. There is at least one domain in which this question can easily be solved; it is that of the Red Army. As to what Trotsky learned from the history of the French Revolution and its wars, the volumes of his Military Writings indeed enable us to understand that the founder and head of the Red Army between 1918 and the end of the Civil War had the examples of the soldiers of 1793 always before his eyes. Whether it was "political commissars" on the model of the "representatives 'en mission'", or the employment on a large scale of professionally-trained officers - who therefore had to be former servants of the Old Regime - and punishing them with death if they were defeated, or the combination of

election with promotion of young leaders who showed that they could lead men, or, finally, galvanising the morale of the fighters by the flamboyant rhetoric of the "pact with death", the direct, conscious link between the two revolutions is clear. This discovery will not be enough to win posthumously for Trotsky membership of the Academy of Historical Sciences, but it will have at any rate the merit of stressing the importance of written history to those who are ambitious to make history and nothing more.

A P P E N D I X

C h r i s t i a n R a k o v s k y a n d t h e A n a l o g y o f T h e r m i d o r

It is not just to make the record - though the record should be made - that we decided to refer here to the well-known letter which Rakovsky wrote to Valentinov, from Astrakhan, where he had been deported on August 2, 1928. This document was published in the second part, No. 18, of the two issues, No.s 17 and 18, which we devoted to Rakovsky in June 1984, of the "Cahiers Leon Trotsky". Moreover, Jacques Caillose, whose 1972 work we quoted, began his work by studying this document, which he rightly believed to have been one of the sources from which Trotsky derived inspiration for his analogy between the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution.

Rakovsky lived in France for many years, first as student and later as a doctor, and finally as Russian Ambassador in Paris. There can be no doubt that Rakovsky also was familiar with the problems of the history of the great French Revolution. On June 1922, L'Humanite published an interview which he had given to it in Rome during the May. This was head-lined, "The French Revolution and the right of property". In the course of this polemic with "Professor Aulard", he successively relied on Brissot (whom he called, with a certain ostentation, "Jean-Pierre Brissot de Warville), the forced conversions of the French debt in 1793 and 1797 (9 Vendemiaire Year VI) and the law of March 21, 1802. In passing he corrected an error in a date, and reminded the rulers of the French Republic of "a certain Duke of Brunswick" and of "a war of coalitions".(54) In the discussion which preceded the 16th Congress of the party, he mentioned a book which Sokolnikov had lent him, the work by Lenotre on Robespierre and the Mother of God.(55) He wrote from Astrakhan that he had read with considerable interest Alphonse Aulard's Political History of the French Revolution, which the author had offered to him, that he had found much of the documentation interesting, but also that the struggle during the Revolution and the Consulate was explained in the book in a "very naive" way.(56)

Rakovsky's letter of 1928, which is our concern here, was published in French under

the not-entirely suitable title, The Professional Dangers of Power. It starts from the state of things in the Soviet Union in 1928, the scandals, the abuses of power, the lying and the process of differentiation, of which the bourgeoisie was aware but which the proletariat was in the process of experiencing. He went on:

"In a general way, the history of the Third Estate, which triumphed in 1789, is extremely instructive. To begin with, this Third Estate was itself very much of a mixture. It included everyone who was not part of the nobility or of the clergy. It included all varieties of the bourgeoisie, but also the wretched workers and peasants. It was only little by little, after a long struggle, and after several-times repeated armed interventions, that in 1792 the legal possibility was reached for the Third Estate as a whole to take part in administering the country. The political reaction, which was already beginning before Thermidor, consisted in the fact that power began to pass, formally and in fact, into the hands of a more and more restricted number of citizens. The popular masses were driven little by little out of the government of the country, first in fact and then, likewise, in law.

It is true that here the pressure of reaction made itself felt all along the cleavages and joins holding the class elements together which went to make up the Third Estate. It is no less true that, if we examine one of the distinct groupings within the bourgeoisie, it does not present class-contours as precise as those which, for example, separate the bourgeoisie from the proletariat, that is, two classes which play a different role in production. But equally, in the course of the French Revolution, during the period of its decline, the power did not act merely by separating the groups, which so recently were still marching together, united by the same shared revolutionary aim, along the lines of joins or cleavage. It also threw the more or less homogeneous social masses into disarray. Specialisation in administration - the class in question produced and brought forth from within itself higher classes of state-administrators - developed from the fissures, which became deep crevasses under the pressure of the counter-revolution. The result of this was that, in the course of the struggle, contradictions were born within the dominant class itself."(37)

Rakovsky took pains then to reveal the reasons which favoured the degeneration of the "Jacobin party", as he called it, and we cannot fail to observe how precise was the information which this man in Central Asian exile possessed and how well he knew revolutionary history. He wrote:

"More than once Robespierre warned his supporters against the consequences which intoxication with power. He warned them that, when they had power, they should not be too assuming, should not (as he said) 'get puffed-up', or as we would say today, let themselves be carried away with 'Jacobin vanity'.

But, as we shall see later, Robespierre himself contributed a great deal to making power slip from the hands of the small bourgeoisie supported by the workers of Paris.... Let us indicate a curious but well-known fact: the opinion of Baboeuf, who believed that the fall of the Jacobins was made very much easier by the noble ladies with whom they fell in love. He addressed the Jacobins with these words: "What are you cowardly plebeians doing? Today they embrace you, but tomorrow they will strangle you!"....

However, what played the most important role in isolating Robespierre and the Jacobin Club, which sharply cut off the masses (workers and small bourgeoisie) from them, as well as the liquidation of all the elements of the left, beginning with the "Extremists" (Enrages), the Hebertists and the Chaumettists (in general all the Commune of Paris), which meant the liquidation gradually of the elective principle and substitution for it of the principle of nominations.

Sending commissars to the armies or to cities where the counter-revolution was raising its head was not only legitimate but indispensable. But, when Robespierre began little by little to replace the judges and the commissars of the different districts in Paris, who had until then been elected on the same basis as the judges; when he began to nominate the chairmen of the revolutionary committees and ended up by substituting functionaries for the entire leadership of the Commune, he could in this way achieve nothing but strengthening the bureaucracy and killing popular initiative.

Thus Robespierre's regime, instead of injecting new spirit into the activity of the masses, which was already impaired by the economic crisis and especially by crisis of the food supply, made things worse and strengthened anti-democratic forces. Dumas, the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal, complained to Robespierre that he could no longer get people to serve on the juries of this tribunal, because nobody wanted the job."(58)

Christian Rakovsky then deals with the events of 9th Thermidor and what followed them:

"But Robespierre in his turn had a proof on a personal level of the indifference of the Paris masses. On 10th Thermidor, wounded and bleeding, he was taken on foot through the streets of Paris, without any fear of an intervention by the mass of the people on behalf of the dictator of yesterday.

It would obviously be ridiculous to attribute the fall of Robespierre as well as the defeat of the revolutionary democracy to the principle of nominations. But without any doubt this was to accelerate the action of the other factors. Among them the decisive role was played by the difficulties of the food supply. These were due partly to two years' bad harvests (as well as to the disturbances related to the transfer of the large agrarian properties of the nobles to the small-scale exploitation of lands by the peasants), partly by the incessant rises in the price of bread and of meat and partly by the fact that the Jacobins did not want,

at first, to interfere with the rich peasants and the speculators. But when in the end the Jacobins decided to introduce the law fixing maximum prices, under the pressure of the masses, which was violent, the law functioned in the framework of the free market and of capitalist production, and could be only a palliative."(59)

At the end of his document, and after a close examination of the problems of the Soviet party, Rakovsky mentions that there was real pessimism among many of his comrades, and returns to the French Revolution:

"When Babeuf came out of the Abbaye prison, he looked around him and began to ask himself what the people of Paris had become, the workers of the faubourg Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marceau, those who took the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and the Tuileries Palace on August 10, 1792, and who besieged the Convention on May 30, 1793 - without speaking of their numerous other armed interventions. He summed up what he saw in a single phrase into which the revolutionary's bitterness found its way: 'It is more difficult to re-educate the people in attachment to Liberty than to conquer Liberty'.

We have seen why the people of Paris had un-learned the attraction of Liberty. Famine, unemployment, the elimination of the revolutionary cadres (many had been guillotined) and the exclusion of the masses from the management of the country. All this led to such a powerful wearing out, physically and morally, of the mass, that the people of Paris and of the rest of France needed thirty-seven years of rest before they could begin a new revolution.

Babeuf formulated his programme in two words (I speak here of his 1794 programme): 'Liberty and an Elected Commune'."(60)

Rakovsky did not enjoy any further chance to make known what he thought about the history of the French Revolution. We do not know whether he read Dommanget's Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals, which was published in Moscow in 1925, whether he knew the works of Mathiez, of whose name he could not possibly have been ignorant, and whose books he should have read, because the three volumes of the History of the French Revolution appeared when published by Colin between 1921 and 1927. We know that he held firmly to the "French" analogy, because he continued to assert, in the declaration of April 12, 1930, which cost him exile in Barnaul (in the middle of Siberia):

"The Thermidors and the Brumaires break in through the doors of the political indifference of the masses. We have always put our faith in the revolutionary initiative of the masses and not in the apparatus. We therefore believe in what is offered as an enlightened bureaucracy no more than our revolutionary bourgeois predecessors at the end of the 18th century believed in what was presented as an 'enlightened despotism'".(61)

We know that the French Revolution had, in this militant intellectual of exceptional quality, a connoisseur and an admirer, whose high-quality writings, confiscated over half a century ago, remain today in the hands of the policy of a regime which, like Thermidor, ever fears criticism, because it fears the masses.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) We wish here to offer our apologies for the striking mediocrity of the indexing in volumes 7 - 18 of "Leon Trotsky: Oeuvres". We have been punished for our irresponsibility in tolerating such disrespect for our readers by the discovery that, if we are to believe whoever made the indexes, Trotsky did not allude to the French Revolution, or even to the revolution as such over a period of several years!
- (2) "Where is the Soviet Republic Going?", dated February 25, 1929, in "Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1929", Pathfinder Press N.Y., p. 50.
- (3) Ibid., p. 51.
- (4) "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism", dated February 1, 1935, in "Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1934 - 35", Pathfinder, p. 175
- (5) L. Trotsky, "1905", Pelican Books ed. London, 1973, p. 68.
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) L. Trotsky, "History of the Russian Revolution", Gollancz, London, Vol. I, 1932, pp. 110 - 113.
- (8) Ibid., p. 118.
- (9) Ibid., p. 225.
- (10) L. Trotsky, "History of the Russian Revolution", Gollancz, London, Vol. 2, 1933, p. 12.
- (11) Letter from Trotsky to Denis Naville and Jean Roux, dated May 10, 1938. It is in the Trotsky (formerly Closed) Archive at Harvard, and was originally written in English. The quotation here is from a re-translation from the French text headed "The Individual and the Environment" in "Oeuvres", Vol. 17, p. 225.
- (12) L. Trotsky, "The Revolution Betrayed", Pioneer Publishers NY, p. 87.
- (13) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 2, p. 89.
- (14) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 1, p. 69.
- (15) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 3, p. 7.
- (16) Ibid. p. 8.
- (16a) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol 1, p. 224.
- (17) Ibid., pp. 224 - 225.
- (18) Leon Trotsky, "For a Programme of Action", in "Oeuvres", Vol. 17, 1934, p. 94.

- (19) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 1, p. 226.
- (20) Ibid.
- (21) L. Trotsky, "The Terror of Bureaucratic Self-Preservation", dated September 6, 1935, in "Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1935 - 36", Pathfinder NY, p. 119.
- (22) "Our Political Tasks", New Park, p. 122.
- (23) Ibid.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Ibid.
- (27) Ibid., pp. 123 - 4.
- (28) Quoted in "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 1, p. 254.
- (29) "The Revolution Betrayed", Pioneer Publ. ed., p. 105.
- (30) "The New Course", New Park ed., p. 37.
- (31) Ibid.
- (32) Trotsky, "Stalin", Hollis and Carter, London, 1947, p. 410.
- (33) "Where is the Soviet Republic Going?", in "Writings" 1929, p. 50.
- (34) "Stalin", p. 401.
- (35) Ibid., p. 407.
- (36) "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism", in "Writings: 1934 - 35", p. 168.
- (37) Ibid., pp. 173 - 4.
- (38) "Stalin", p. 409.
- (39) "The Case of Leon Trotsky", Martin Secker & Warburg, London, 1937, p. 122.
- (40) "The Revolution Betrayed", p. 98.
- (41) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 2, p. 164.
- (42) "The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism", op. cit., p. 181.
- (43) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 2, p. 166.
- (44) Ibid., p. 70
- (45) Ibid., p. 120.
- (46) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 3, p. 354.
- (47) "History of the Russian Revolution", Vol. 1, p. 34.
- (48) American Journal of Sociology, November 1938, pp. 338, - 354.
- (49) Isaac Deutscher, "The Prophet Outcast", p. 313.

- (50) Deutscher, "The Prophet Unarmed", p. 311. In reality, Trotsky did display rather important oscillations in his analysis of the French Thermidor.
- The most extreme example, which contradicts the texts which preceded it as well as those which followed it, is in "The Defence of the USSR and the Opposition", written in 1929, where he said that Thermidor "indicates a transfer of power to the hands of another class". Moreover, when Trotsky understood what confusion results from his insufficiently rigorous definition, he corrected his aim in 1935, and said that Thermidor had already taken place, but that, for the revolutionary class to recover power, a political revolution, but not a social revolution, would be necessary.
- (51) Jacques Caillose, "The Question of the Soviet Thermidor in the Political Thought of Leon Trotsky", doctorate in Political Science, Rennes, 1972, p. 60.
- (52) Baruch Knei-Paz, "The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky", p. 511.
- (53) Ibid., p. 512.
- (54) "La Revolution Francaise et le droit de propriete", in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", No. 17, March 1984, pp. 79 - 83.
- (55) "Opposition et Troisieme Force", dated November 8, 1927, a speech which Rakovsky drafted but was not able to deliver, a copy of the text of which is in the exile papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard (bMRuss 13 t 1042). The text was re-published in French in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", No. 18, June 1984, pp. 29 - 37, see p. 32.
- (56) The "Letters from Astrakhan" from Rakovsky to Trotsky (who at the time was in internal exile at Alma Ata in Chinese Turkestan, are published in French in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", No. 18, June 1984. The originals are in the Houghton Library (in the series bMSRuss 13). This quotation comes from a letter dated February 17, 1928 (T 1128).
- (57) Rakovsky's letter to Valentinov, dated August 2, 1928, first appeared in French in "Contre Le Courant", No. 27 - 28, April 12, 1929, and later in the Bulletin of the Opposition, No. 6, October 1929. The quotation here is from a revised French text in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", No. 18, pp. 81 - 95.
- (58) Ibid., p. 85.
- (59) Ibid., p. 87.
- (60) Ibid., pp. 91 - 92.
- (61) Rakovsky's "Declaration of April 12, 1930" is re-published in French in "Cahiers Leon Trotsky", No. 6, 1980, pp. 96 - 97.