

More About the First American Revolution

By Jay Lovestone

LETTERS ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1774-1776, by Margaret W. Wheeler, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York—Boston.

THIS is another book which everyone interested in class struggles in the United States should not fail to examine very carefully.

In this series of select letters on the American Revolution 1774-1776 we have vivid pictures of the how and why of the preliminaries and actualities of the first revolutionary struggles in America. The letters are chosen from all sections of the population—workers, soldiers, farmers, merchants, "gentlemen," and government officials. In many instances the letters appeared in the leading British press of the day as an indispensable part of the news service.

Then such sources of information were extremely valuable from the news viewpoint. The wireless, the cable, the ocean greyhound as transmitters of news were not yet at our disposal. But at present these letters are important to us only in so far as they shed much of the welcome light which has recently been turned on some of the economic bases, the social phases of the First American Revolution.

Let us recite briefly some of the many important facts brought home in these letters.

Sympathy for Colonials in England.

First of all, on the eve and at the time of the first American revolution, there was much adverse criticism at home, in the mother country, of the government's policy towards the Thirteen Colonies. This sympathy with the colonies came primarily from the poorer, the working sections of the population in England. Much criticism of some of the government's measures also came from some of the merchants who had sold on credit to the colonies and who feared loss of payment for their goods if the relations between the mother country and the colonists reached the point of complete rupture—of armed hostilities.

The period covered by the collection of letters is from the first continental congress to the taking of New York by the British. In a sense, Wheeler is to be congratulated on the choice. It affords us an opportunity to see clearly certain phases of the first American revolution, since it was in these very days that "there was the freest expression of opinion on all sides."

We are treated to a mighty enlightening picture of the development and activities of the committees of safety of the revolution.

The letters written by the colonial partisans indicate very clearly that there was anything but unanimity in the colonies over the various issues of the day. But as the

struggle went on these committees of safety checked practically all expression of opinion by the pro-government or Tory forces. Almost invariably the mails were searched before they were placed aboard ship for England.

No Peaceful Pipe-Dream.

And the talk about force and violence in the class struggles of 1776! Tarring and feathering of pro-government forces were a common method of argument and persuasion even before the outbreak of the open, armed revolution. Then we are told about the setting fire to government ships and treating the government's property in a manner which if it were advocated by anti-capitalist-government forces of today would bring such proponents behind the bars with extreme despatch. One "Gentlemen" writing to London thus summed up events in 1774:

"It is dangerous to offer an argument in favor of the administration unless you are ambitious of wearing a suit of tar and feathers."

Every man who would not drink "destruction to his king," was Tory and liable to tar and feathers.

Role of the Workers.

As one reads many of these letters he is bound to be inspired with hope for the coming class struggles in the United States. An officer in the government's army writes from Boston on November 22, 1775:

"The workmen at Boston were so mulish that the general was obliged to send to Nova Scotia for carpenters and bricklayers to fit us barracks for our accommodations."

Such behavior by the workers of those days is all the more significant for us since they had not yet attained the slightest degree of unionization at the time.

Here is another tribute to the role of the workers in our first American revolutionary struggle. We read in a letter written by a pro-government man in the morning "Chronicle and London Advertiser" of February 25, 1775:

"A Scotch shoemaker was the head of all our mobs during the time of the Stamp Act, which pulled down the Stamp Office, demolished the lieutenant-governor's house, and broke into the secretary's, and forced him to Liberty Tree, where they swore him out of office. This person whose name is Mackintosh, has ever since continued a leading man among us."

This was in Boston.

The smaller farmers especially were likewise awake to the needs of the moment. Whenever there was to be selected any committee of inspection, the farmers laid

aside all other duties and participated to insure the election of genuine, trustworthy revolutionaries.

Particularly in the first stages of the revolution did the working and farming masses play a decisive role. Though it was plainly an open act of treason, the colonists exercised their own, the anti-government, militia every fair day. In the beginning the militia officers were elected directly by the militiamen serving under them. In some instances the government's military officers deserted to the anti-government forces and served as teachers of the revolutionary militia. In one of General Gage's regiments more than forty deserted and took with them their muskets and bayonets. There were also instances where government seamen mutinied.

Role of the Merchants.

And why did many of the colonial merchants enter the non-importation agreements against the government? Said a Philadelphia merchant in 1774:

"You cannot blame us for entering into this agreement—we are already head over ears in debt, and from the restrictions laid on our trade we have no prospect of being able to pay you.

"... Our province still groans under a burden of debt contracted during the late war, which, though a successful one, produced advantages in which we were by no means the most considerable sharers."

The late war referred to above is the Seven Years' War. Too many of our American historians have overlooked the relations between the economic consequences of that war and the subsequent First American Revolution.

But a letter from a wealthy New Yorker, written about the same time shows that—especially in the early stages of the struggle—the men of property were very timid and feared the possible development of a revolutionary upheaval.

"Most sensible people here, people of property, whom I should suppose interested as much in the matter, are of this opinion, and say that one master is better than a thousand, and that they would rather be oppressed by a king than by a rascally mob. 'Tis not only reducing everybody to a level, but it is entirely reversing the matter, and making the mob their masters."

Another pro-government letter declares:

"All their leaders are poor miscreants, who could not live in affluence but in times of commotion; having nothing to lose by the disturbance, they exert themselves to keep up and increase them. . . I do not know one man of real property who is in earnest in this rebellious cause."

True Character of the Revolution.

Familiar prattle, eh? How often have we in recent days heard such gems of wisdom from the defenders of the existing ruling class?

Soon the Loyalists began to form their own associations, as for example, under General Ruggles, to combat the revolutionary committees.

Let no one be mistaken. The first American revolution was not a proletarian revolution. It was a revolution

removing certain economic barriers to and laying the political basis for the development of a native, American national bourgeoisie.

On the whole, those property owners in the colonies whose economic interests depended on the maintenance of British government powers lined up with the government. These merchants burdened with debts, the early American manufacturers, the native shipping men competing with British under the handicap of increasing adverse laws and government regulations, on the whole, were with the revolution and against the government.

It is precisely this latter class of supporters of the revolution who soon wrested all leadership from the masses in the revolution. It is this class that imprinted an indelible aristocratic stamp on the first American revolution—who very soon perpetrated the counter-revolution—who immediately thereafter organized themselves into the Federalist Party and established a centralized government to cheat and defraud the working and farming masses who fought the battles and suffered untold miseries in the field on all fronts of the revolution.

The mass insurrections against this new government following on the heels of the struggle against the old government were only the last efforts of workers and impoverished farmers to retain some of the advantages they won in the first period of the revolutionary class war against their British exploiters and oppressors.

Yet, in these very days when we celebrate the tenth year of the victorious proletarian revolution of our Russian brothers—in these very days when American imperialism appears so invulnerable in the eyes of the superficial—when our working class is on the whole so politically under-developed, it is rather appropriate to draw and living, inspiring picture of a real American revolution—made in America.

"Gentlemen" writing to his friend in England on May 1, 1775, tells us:

"The news of the attack at Boston reached New York on Sunday the 23rd., and that very day the populace seized the city arms, and unloaded two provision vessels bounded for the troops at Boston. In the course of the week they formed themselves into companies under officers of their own choosing, distributed the arms, called a provincial congress, demanded the keys of the custom house, and shut up the port, trained their men publicly, convened the citizens by beat of drum, drew the cannon into the interior country and formed an association of defense in perfect league with the rest of the continent, which is signing by all ranks, professions and orders."

This on the streets of New York! Not in Berlin. Not in Moscow. But in our own proud and patriotic New York when it was far nearer being one hundred per cent American, fully native, than it has been ever since, is today, or will be in a very long time to come!

Such a picture of the first American revolution in action is a timely reminder of our present-day American ruling class—the bourgeoisie. It is simultaneously a source of light and inspiration to the American workers

who are still in the dark as to the true nature of the present government and its role in the class war of today.

A Stimulating Book.

Margaret Wheeler has done really well a very necessary job. Her collection of letters is of permanent value to the historian in many ways. But for the American working class this book is exceptionally worth while in two special respects.

1. The book tends to imbue the American workers with the idea that they, like the French, the German, the Russian, the English and other workers also have some revolutionary traditions and know how to fight as revolutionists—for revolutionary objectives, decisively and victoriously against exploiters and oppressors.

2. This fortunate collection of letters deals a telling blow to a fallacious and promiscuous theory new being peddled amongst our workers by reactionary labor leaders, social democrats, bourgeois professors, statesmen

REVIEWS

NAPOLÉON'S CAMPAIGN OF 1812 AND THE RETREAT FROM MOSCOW. By Hilaire Belloc. Harper and Brothers, New York.

HERE is a vivid popular story of the campaign which wiped out the Grand Army and crippled Napoleon's military career. The army, 430,000 strong, with 150,000 horses, crossed the Niemen on June 23, 1812. The advance had been delayed to give time for the grass to grow to feed the horses. It must be remembered that all food, supplies and ammunition depended on the teams. The Grand Army was half French; the rest were Poles, Italians, Germans, Swiss and Dutch. The weather was hostile from the first. There were three days of soaking rain which turned the country tracks into swamps—and the hardships killed the horses in thousands. This broke up the supply columns and caused much suffering and hunger. The two Russian armies, about half as strong as Napoleon's forces, retreated before him for 650 miles, a nine-weeks' trek. There was more heavy rain early in September, and on the 7th the Russians turned at bay at Borodino. Each side had 130,000 men and 600 guns. After 15 hours' struggle in which the Russians lost 42,000, the French 31,000, the Russians retreated in good order and on September 15, Napoleon occupied Moscow. The city was empty and the next night was set on fire. Napoleon kidded himself that the Czar would make peace now that his capital was taken. The Russians made no hostile move and the French fancied they were safe. The French discipline was wholly relaxed—they looted and loafed. They were 720 miles from the border, and tho they had furs and silks, wine and bonbons in plenty, they lacked bread, shoes, clothing, ammunition and horses. On October 19 they marched out, already disorganized.

It is necessary to grasp the fact that on any long march, with good weather and supplies, there will be wastage—the sick, lame and lazy fall out and the army

and other capitalist hangers-on. We are referring to the "theory" so feverishly propagated in our social-democratic academies, in our bourgeois universities and in our black labor journals that "gradualism," strictly peaceful methods, absolutely within the framework of the ossified bourgeois legal structure, are an innate feature of social movements, of class struggles waged among Anglo-Saxons.

These "theoreticians" would have us believe that the American workers fighting in the class struggle are immune from the laws of class warfare.

Of course, our bourgeoisie already know otherwise and better. Our workers are more and more learning that such non-existent Anglo-Saxon virtues are just that much and more balderdash palmed off as the absolute, abstract truth to serve as a sort of a devastating boll-weevil to destroy the growing class consciousness of the American proletariat—the menacing challenge to our presently dominant capitalist class.

marches on. On the march to Moscow, Napoleon's center started with 301,000 men, made two twelve-day halts—yet in the eight weeks' march to Smolensk 105,000 men were missing, not counting battle casualties. The Russian army that chased the French home started 120,000 strong and seven weeks later numbered 30,000. This fact explains the disappearance of the Grand Army.

The French started disorganized, hungry, short of supplies and horses. They were headed off from Kaluga, where were depots which would have victualled them. The weather was fine and warm, and tho they were pestered by swarms of irregular cavalry, Cossacks, the main Russian army was twenty miles behind, too far away to hurt. On November 5 came the cold. It was such cold as Americans know well—zero weather and below. Such cold is easy to bear for a few hours, if a man has enough food and a warm place to sleep. Workers who have hoboed in winter remember how the cold wakes one about midnight and how he shivers in bitter pain until after sunrise next day. The French, after such nights, had to drag themselves ten or twelve miles thru a howling blizzard, with empty stomachs—and then shiver thru another night. This hell lasted 38 days. They died in thousands of hunger and cold or fell out and were lanced by the Cossacks. On November 26 some 20,000 French reached the Beresina River. They were followed by an equal number of unarmed stragglers, who had thrown away their guns and fallen out. This rabble was, of course, a useless burden. Three Russian armies outnumbering the French five to one surrounded them—one army being squarely across their path. The French eluded them and struggled on another 200 miles. On December 13 about 20,000 all told crossed the Niemen for the second time to safety.

Belloc has written a very readable book and included excellent maps and sketches. He served as a conscript in the French artillery forty years ago and he