

T R O T S K Y
A N D T H E
F R E N C H
R E V O L U T I O N

b y P i e r r e B r o u e

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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