

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: SOME SUGGESTIVE ANALOGIES*

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AN eminent French historian once wrote: "Consider the revolutions of the Renaissance: in them you will find all the passions, all the spirit, and all the language of the French Revolution." With some reservations, one might also say that if one considers the Great French Revolution, one can find in it the passions, the spirit, and the language of the Russian Revolution. This is true to such an extent that it is absolutely necessary for the student of recent Russian history to view it every now and then through the French prism. (The student of the French Revolution, too, may gain new insights if occasionally he analyzes his subject in the light of the Russian experience.) Historical analogy by itself is, of course, only one of the many angles from which he ought to approach his subject; and it may be downright misleading if he merely contents himself with assembling the points of formal resemblance between historical situations. "History is concrete"; and this means, among other things, that every event or situation is unique, regardless of its possible similarity to other events and situations. In drawing any analogy, it is therefore important to know where the analogy ends. I hope that I shall not offend badly against this rule; and I would like to acknowledge my great debt to the eminent French historians whose works on the French Revolution have helped me to gain new insights into the Russian Revolution.

It is well known that the controversy over the "Russian Thermidor" played in its time a great role in the struggles in-

* The forthcoming publication of a French edition of *Stalin: A Political Biography* (English ed., New York and London, Oxford University Press, 1949) has given me an opportunity to comment for the benefit of the French reader on one aspect of that book, the analogies frequently drawn between the Russian and the French Revolutions. In the belief that these comments have some interest for the English reader as well, they appear here in substantially the same form as in the introduction to the French edition of *Stalin* (Paris, Gallimard).

side the Bolshevik party. Trotsky placed his thesis about the Russian Thermidor in the very center of his denunciation of the Stalinist regime. This issue was dealt with only indirectly in my political biography of Stalin. (In my view, the Russian counterparts to the Jacobin, Thermidorian, and Bonapartist phases of the revolution have in a curious way overlapped and merged in Stalinism.) A critical examination of this whole problem will be found in my forthcoming *Life of Trotsky*, where it properly belongs. For the present I will concentrate on another perspective on recent Russian history, a perspective somewhat similar to that which was drawn by Albert Sorel in relation to the French Revolution in his monumental *L'Europe et la Révolution Française*. I have in mind the reassertion of national tradition in a revolutionary society.

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was in intention a radical break with Russia's past, a break with her old social outlook, with her old methods of government, with her customs, habits, and traditions. It was a great and *pathetic* funeral of all the anachronisms inherited from centuries of backwardness, serfdom, and tyranny. The three post-revolutionary decades, however, saw a complex and contradictory development: on the one hand, Russia's advance, with gigantic strides, in industrialization and education, and a release of national energies such as only a great revolution can produce; on the other hand, an amazing resurrection of Russia's buried past, and the revenge of that past upon the present. It is as the embodiment of this contradictory development that I wish to consider Stalin. To an almost equal degree, Stalin represents the impetus given to Russia by the revolution and the triumph of the traditions of the *ancien régime* over the original spirit of the revolution. Yet, did not Napoleon I represent a similar phenomenon? Were not the revolutionary and the *Roi Soleil* blended in his personality as much as the Leninist and Ivan the Terrible (or Peter the Great) are blended in Stalin?

Those who are interested mainly in the individual psychology of historical personalities may be outraged by this comparison. Stalin, they may object, has none of the *élan*, the *esprit*, the charm, and nothing of the originality of mind and expression

with which nature so richly endowed Bonaparte. This is willingly admitted. But we are concerned here with something else, with the respective functions of the two personalities in the history of their countries; and these ought to be viewed in the light of broader, impersonal factors, of the moving forces, the motives and objectives of the two revolutions, and in the light of their different social backgrounds and national traditions. Incidentally, even the contrast between the individual characteristics of the two men fits in with and can up to a point be explained by the contrast between their national backgrounds and traditions. Napoleon, the Emperor, descended indirectly from an absolute monarchy, the chief representative of which appears, in historical idealization, as the *Roi Soleil*. The Tsar who in a sense is Stalin's political ancestor could earn, even from his apologists, no brighter epithet than *Grozny*—the Awe-inspiring. Napoleon has the clear air, bright color, and elegance of Versailles and Fontainebleau as his background; while Stalin's figure harmonizes with the grim *ambiance* of the Kremlin. Thus, even the individual temper of the two men seems to reflect something impersonal.

Albert Sorel describes how heavily tradition weighed upon the revolution: "Events hurled them [the members of the Convention] abruptly into power: if they had had a taste for liberty, they would have had no spare time to serve an apprenticeship in it."¹ The leaders of the Russian Soviets had just as little spare time in which to serve an apprenticeship in liberty as had the leaders of the Convention. "At the beginning of the Revolution, the minds of men rushed toward the ideal: everything was destroyed, everything was renewed; France was recreated, so to speak, after having been annihilated. . . . Disorder, anarchy, civil war ensued. Foreign war was added. The Revolution was threatened, France invaded. The Republicans had to defend at one and the same time the independence of the nation, the territory of the homeland, the principles of the Revolution, the supremacy of their party, even their own lives. . . . With pure

¹ Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution Française*, 3rd ed., Paris, 1893, Part 1, p. 224. (This and following passages from the French are the editor's translation.)

reason confounded, they fell back brutally on empiricism: they turned from instinct to custom, to routine, to precedents: none were for liberty, countless numbers were for despotism. Thus all the processes of government of the *ancien régime* were seen to insinuate themselves, in the name of expedience, into the Revolution. Once having regained their place, they remained there as masters. All the theoreticians' art consisted of nothing more than masking and disguising them."² How admirably these words suit the fortunes of the Russian Revolution as well!

Yet, while it is right to point to this reassertion of tradition, a reassertion that some may regard as natural and sound and others may view as a distortion of the revolution, it would be wrong to see in the post-revolutionary regime nothing but a prolongation of the *ancien régime*. Under the Empire, French history did not merely pick up the threads that had been violently snapped by the Convention; it wove the pattern of a new France and it worked the threads of tradition into that new pattern. The same may be said of Stalinist Russia. She may feel the revenge of the past on herself, but she does not revert to that past. The Bourbon monarchy could never have produced anything like the Napoleonic Code, that legal-philosophical mirror of a bourgeois society. Similarly, planned economy could never have come into existence within the framework of the old Russia. To make it possible, nothing less than the October Revolution was needed; and in it, in the principle and the practice of the planned economy, the October Revolution has survived and developed, despite the insinuation of "all the processes of government of the *ancien régime*."

In the case of the Russian Revolution, it would be even more unrealistic than in that of the French to deny or overlook what is essentially new and epoch-making in its achievement. There may have been some justification for Sorel's view that if the French Revolution had not taken place, the *ancien régime* would, in the course of time, have done some of the work that was accomplished only after its overthrow.³ The point is that within

² *Ibid.*, pp. 224-25.

³ This idea was, of course, developed before Sorel by Alexis de Tocqueville in his *L'Ancien Régime*.

the shell of France's *ancien régime* the elements of a modern bourgeois society had achieved a relatively high degree of maturity; the revolution merely broke the shell and thereby facilitated and speeded up the organic growth and development of those elements. Even so, historians like Michelet, Jaurès, and others, who stressed the essentially new and creative work of the revolution, seem nearer the truth than Sorel, whose emphasis on historical continuity, so original and illuminating in many respects, appears in others to be exaggerated and essentially conservative. In the case of Russia, the limits within which the law of historical continuity operates are undoubtedly much narrower. The elements of the present collectivist society, with its planned economy—let us leave aside whether this society deserves to be called socialist or not—hardly existed under the surface of Russia's *ancien régime*. They are largely the conscious creation of the revolution and of the post-revolutionary government. As a builder of a new economy and a pioneer of new social techniques, Stalin, for all his limitations and vices—the limitations of an empiricist and the vices of a despot—is likely to leave deeper marks on history than any single French revolutionary leader. Here perhaps is the point at which the difference in the very nature of the two revolutions tends to make further comparisons misleading.

Let us now try to investigate how far the analogy holds good in a different field—in the French Revolution's foreign policy, in its impact on the world and the world's impact on it. Sorel, who surveyed this vast field with the greatest thoroughness and understanding, tells us that "To come to terms with the French Revolution, the old Europe abdicated its principles; to come to terms with the old Europe, the French Revolution falsified its own. France had solemnly renounced conquests. . . . Victory made the Revolution bellicose. The war, begun for the defense of French territory, continued for the invasion of neighboring territories. After having conquered in order to liberate, France partitioned in order to retain."⁴ Reading this, one cannot help thinking of Yalta and Potsdam, where by acquiescing in the ex-

⁴ Sorel, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

pansion of Stalinist Russia, the statesmen of the capitalist West so clearly abdicated their principles, while Stalinist Russia, by insisting on strategic frontiers and on the absorption of most of the neighboring lands which had once been conquered by the Tsars, so flagrantly falsified its own. Is it really true that history does not repeat itself? Or that in the repetition the original drama becomes a farce? Is it not rather that in its Russian repetition the French tragedy appears magnified and intensified, projected as it is from the European to the global scale and from an epoch preceding the steam engine to the age of atomic energy?

Let us once again compare the original with the repetition: "Not being able to destroy all the monarchies, she [the Revolution] was forced to come to terms with the monarchs. She vanquished her enemies, she pursued them on their own territory, she effected magnificent conquests; but to keep them at peace, it was necessary to treat; to treat, it was necessary to negotiate, and to negotiate was to return to custom. The *ancien régime* and the Revolution compromised not on principles which were irreconcilable, but on frontiers which were changeable. There existed only one idea in common on which the old Europe and Republican France could understand each other and come to an agreement: it was *raison d'état*. It ruled their treaties. The territories not having changed their places, and the ambitions of states remaining what they were, all the traditions of the old statecraft were reborn in the negotiations. These traditions accorded only too well with the designs of the revolutionaries. . . . they placed at the service of the victorious Revolution the processes of the *ancien régime*."⁵ While from the angle of the internal development of the revolution it may be said that all the phases which correspond to Jacobinism, Thermidorianism, and Bonapartism have merged in Stalinism, in its foreign policy during World War II victorious Stalinism simply put to its service the processes of the *ancien régime*. I have described in my book how at Potsdam and Yalta Stalin's "conduct, aspirations, methods of action, even his gestures and caprices vividly

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 544-45.

resembled the behavior, the aspirations and gestures of Tsar Alexander I at the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars.”⁶ And what was Stalin’s conception of the preponderance of the Great Powers and of the division between them of spheres of influence if not that old *raison d’état*, the only idea which he held in common with Churchill and Roosevelt? That this *raison d’état* agreed, in a way, with a revolutionary design subsequent events were to reveal.

Russia, like France before her, has carried her revolution abroad. It was not, let us note, in the Jacobin and Republican period that Europe caught the revolutionary infection from France. And it was not in the heroic, Leninist period that the Bolshevik Revolution spread beyond Russian frontiers. The two revolutions were carried abroad by rulers who had first tamed those revolutions at home. “The Revolution was arrested in France and in a way congealed in military despotism; but, by the very action of that despotism, it continued to propagate itself in Europe. Conquest spread it among the peoples. Although greatly degenerated, it retained enough appeal to excite them. . . .”⁷ And again: “It was in that form that the Revolution appeared to have arrested itself and fixed itself in France; it was in that form that Europe understood it and imitated it.”⁸ It is in its Stalinist, and not in its Leninist and Trotskyist form that the revolution has come to a halt and has fixed itself in Russia, and it is in this form that it has spread, to the amazement of disillusioned ex-Communists who have difficulty understanding how a revolution so greatly degenerated has been able to retain so much appeal.⁹

Like Bonapartist France, Stalinist Russia has created a whole system of satellites. In this Stalin might find a grave warning to himself. It was the revolt of its own satellites that contributed so signally to the downfall of the Bonapartist empire. Two of these satellites, Prussia and Italy, inflicted on France some of its most severe setbacks. It was an Italian patriot who wrote in 1814

⁶ *Stalin*, p. 530.

⁷ Sorel, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 548.

⁹ The reader will find a more detailed discussion of this point in *Stalin*, Chapters XIII and XIV.

the following significant words: "It is painful for me to say it, for no one feels more than I the gratitude which we owe Napoleon; no one appreciates better than I the value of each drop of that generous French blood which watered the Italian soil and redeemed it; but I must be permitted to say it, for it is the truth: to see the French depart was an immense, an ineffable joy." We have heard Tito uttering similar words about the Russians, and who knows how many Eastern European Communists would be happy to utter them if they could? To Bonaparte, and many of his compatriots, the behavior of Italy and Prussia looked like the height of ingratitude. So does the behavior of Tito to Stalin. But what is it that gives rise to that "ingratitude"?

Neither of these systems of satellites has lacked redeeming features. "In the countries which France united with her territory or constituted in her image," says Sorel, "she proclaimed her principles, destroyed the feudal system and introduced her laws. After the inevitable disorders of war and the first excesses of conquest, this revolution constituted an immense benefit to the peoples. This is why the conquests of the Republic could not be confused with the conquests of the *ancien régime*. They differed in the essential characteristic that, despite the abuse of principles and the deviations of ideas, the work of France was accomplished for the nations."¹⁰ Without repeating here my analysis of our contemporary counterpart to this phenomenon, I shall only say that I do not believe that the verdict of history on the Stalinist system of satellites will in this respect be more severe than it has been on the Bonapartist system.¹¹ However, the French system of satellites was not saved by its redeeming features. It would be difficult to find a more brilliant and more convincing explanation of this fact than the one offered by Sorel:

"The French Republicans believed themselves to be cosmopolitans, they were that only in their speeches; they felt, they thought, they acted, they interpreted their universal ideas and

¹⁰ Sorel, *op. cit.*, p. 547.

¹¹ I was brought up in Poland, one of Napoleon's satellite countries, where even in my day the Napoleonic legend was so strongly alive that, as a schoolboy, I wept bitter tears over Napoleon's downfall, as nearly every Polish child did. And now I live in England, where most schoolchildren, I am sure, still rejoice over the story of the defeat of Napoleon, that villain of the English traditionalist historians.

their abstract principles in accordance with the traditions of a conquering monarchy. . . . They identified humanity with their homeland, their national cause with the cause of all the nations. Consequently and entirely naturally, they confused the propagation of new doctrines with the extension of French power, the emancipation of humanity with the grandeur of the Republic, the reign of reason with that of France, the liberation of peoples with the conquest of states, the European revolution with the domination of the French Revolution in Europe. . . . they established subservient and subordinate republics which they held in a sort of tutelage. . . . The Revolution degenerated into an armed propaganda, then into conquest. . . .¹² In the same way, the Russian Stalinists think of themselves as internationalists, but they feel, think, and act with the tradition of a conquering monarchy behind them; and so they, too, confuse the emancipation of mankind with the grandeur of their republic and the reign of reason with the rule of Russia. No wonder that the reaction of the satellite peoples tends to take a familiar form: "The peoples easily understood this language [of emancipation spoken by the revolution]. . . . What they did not understand at all was that, using this language, . . . she [France] aimed at enslaving them and exploited them. They made no distinction, moreover, between her and the man who governed her; they did not investigate the phases through which the French Revolution had passed, and how the Republic had transformed itself into an empire; they knew the Revolution only in the form of conquest. . . . and it was in that form that, even by virtue of its principles, they came to abhor it. They rose against its domination."¹³ We are not prophesying here a rising of the peoples against Stalinist domination. But there can be little doubt that the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe, who might have understood well the language of social emancipation spoken by Russia, cannot understand why they should become subordinate to Russia; that they, and others, make no distinction now between the Russian Revolution and "the man who governs"; that they are not interested in the stages by which the Republic of the Work-

¹² Sorel, *op. cit.*, pp. 541-42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

ers' and Peasants' Councils has become transformed into something like an empire; and that they know the Russian Revolution largely in the form of conquest.

Having indulged in these comparisons, I cannot but point out where and why this broad historical analogy ceases to apply. I shall not dwell on the obvious differences—in some respects important, in others irrelevant—between two revolutions, one of which was bourgeois in character and the other proletarian, at least in origin. Nor shall I expatiate on the major differences between the international scene as it looks now and as it looked a century and a half ago. But a few words ought perhaps to be said on one important development—the Chinese Revolution—which has come to light only very recently.

The lightning collapse of the Kuomintang and the absolute victory of the Communist armies have clearly altered the international balance of power. In the long run, the Chinese Revolution must also have its repercussions inside Russia. This revolution obviously deserves to be placed in a different category than the "revolutions from above" that took place in Eastern and Central Europe in the years 1945-1948. The latter were merely the by-products of Russia's military victory: "Although the local communist parties were its immediate agents and executors, the great party of the revolution, which remained in the background, was the Red Army."¹⁴ In contrast to this, even though it may have drawn moral inspiration from Russia, Chinese Communism can rightly claim that its revolution has been its own work and its own achievement. The very magnitude of the Chinese Revolution and its intrinsic momentum have been such that it is ludicrous to consider it as anybody's puppet creation. This is not a satellite of the Russian Revolution, but another great upheaval in its own right. For this phenomenon we find no parallel in the epoch of the French Revolution. To its very end the French Revolution stood alone. One can only think of an imaginary analogy: one may wonder what Europe would look like if, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Germany, then disunited and backward, had carried out

¹⁴ *Stalin*, p. 554.

more or less independently its own version of the French Revolution. A combination of a Jacobin or Bonapartist France with a unified, Jacobin Germany might have given history a direction different from that which France alone could impart to it. Perhaps there would have been no Waterloo. Or perhaps the anti-revolutionary forces of Europe would have joined hands much earlier and more resolutely than they did against France alone.

Both Stalinists and anti-Stalinists have recently begun to foster the legend that Stalin has been the actual inspirer of the Chinese Revolution. How is this to be reconciled with his role in the events in China in 1925-1927? How is this to be squared with Stalin's own statement at Potsdam that "the Kuomintang is the only political force capable of ruling China"?¹⁵ It may be argued that at Potsdam he was ostensibly disavowing the Chinese Communists only to trick his Western allies. But this was hardly the case. The version of events which seems much nearer to the truth is that until very late in the day Stalin had a low opinion of the ability of the Communist Party to bring China under its control, and that he went so far as to attempt, even in 1948, to dissuade Mao Tse-tung from launching the series of offensives which was to bring victory to Chinese Communism. A letter from Stalin to Mao to this effect was apparently read at the Conference of the Chinese Communist Party that took place shortly before the opening of the offensive; but the Conference rejected Stalin's advice.¹⁶

In his untimely skepticism about the Chinese Revolution, Stalin appears true to character. He made a similar miscalculation in the middle 1920's, before Chiang Kai-shek started his great march to the north. In March 1926, the Russian Politburo

¹⁵ For instance, see James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly*, New York, 1947, p. 228.

¹⁶ In *The Times* of London, a Special Correspondent wrote on his return from Peking: ". . . there is much evidence to suggest that the Kremlin did not anticipate the sweeping victory which Chinese Communism was so soon to gain. . . . As late as July, 1948, the Russians neither expected nor desired an immediate Communist victory in China. In that month the Chinese Communist Party held a conference to discuss plans for the coming autumn campaign. The advice from Russia was to continue guerrilla warfare for the coming year in order to weaken America, who was expected to continue to pour arms into China in support of the Kuomintang. Russia opposed any plan to end the civil war by taking the large cities. Russian advice was rejected by this conference, the contrary policy was adopted. . . ." *The Times*, June 27, 1950. Similar reports have appeared in many other papers.

discussed whether it should encourage Chiang (then still Moscow's ally and honorary member of the Executive of the Comintern) in his plans for the conquest of the whole of China. Stalin insisted that Chiang be advised to content himself with the area in the south, where he was in actual control, and to seek a *modus vivendi* with Chang Tso-lin's government which still controlled the north. Chiang disregarded this advice and shortly thereafter established his control over all of China. More than two decades later, Stalin again seems to have overrated the stability of an old and decaying regime and underrated the revolutionary forces opposed to it. With much more justification than Tito, Mao Tse-tung might therefore say that not only did his regime owe little or nothing to Russian arms, but that he secured its triumph against Moscow's explicit advice.

Whatever the truth about Stalin's role in these events, the Chinese Revolution is likely to affect strongly the fortunes of Stalinism. In my book, Stalinism was shown to be primarily the product of the isolation of Russian Bolshevism in a capitalist world and of the mutual assimilation of the isolated revolution with the Russian tradition. The victory of Chinese Communism marks the end of that isolation; and does so much more decisively than did the spread of Stalinism in Eastern Europe. Thus, one major precondition for the emergence of Stalinism now belongs to the past. This should stimulate processes inside Russia, tending to overcome that strange ideology and frame of mind which formed themselves in the period of isolation. Yet we know how often in history effects do outlast causes; and for how long they do so!

While in one of its repercussions the Chinese Revolution tends to deprive Stalinism of its *raison d'être*, in another it tends to strengthen and consolidate it. Stalinism has not only been the product of isolated Bolshevism; it has also reflected the ascendancy of the oriental, semi-Asiatic and Asiatic, over the European element in Russia, and consequently in the revolution. Mao Tse-tung's victory enhances that element and imparts to it immense additional weight. How much more real must his own *Ex Oriente Lux* sound to Stalin himself now than it did in 1918,

when he published it! So much indeed has the oriental element come to predominate in the whole international Communist movement that the struggle between Communism and anti-Communism is more and more becoming identified, not only geographically, with the antagonism between East and West. The fact that Communism is in its origin a Western idea *par excellence* and that the West exported it to Russia is almost forgotten. Having conquered the East and absorbed its climate and traditions, Communism in its Stalinist form not only fails to understand the West, but itself becomes more and more incomprehensible to the West. In Russia, the Greek Orthodox and Byzantine tradition has refracted itself in the revolution. Will the Confucian tradition now similarly refract itself through Chinese Communism?

The political history of Stalin is a tale not lacking in grimness and cruelty, but one ought perhaps to be cautioned against drawing from it a moral of disillusionment or despair, for the story is not yet finished. Nearly every great revolution has destroyed as many hopes as it has fulfilled; every revolution therefore has left behind it an aftermath of frustration and cynicism. As a rule, men have been able to do full justice to the whole experience only from a long perspective of time. "What do we know, after all?" Louis Blanc once wrote in a similar context. "In order that progress be realized, perhaps it is necessary that all evil alternatives be exhausted. The life of mankind is very long, and the number of possible solutions very limited. All revolution is useful, in this sense at least, that every revolution takes care of one dangerous alternative. Because from an unfortunate state of affairs societies sometimes tumble into a worse state, let us not hasten to conclude that progress is a chimera."¹⁷ Let us not hasten to do so.

¹⁷ Louis Blanc, *Histoire de Dix Ans*, 10th ed., Paris, n.d., I, 135.