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The Moral Face of the Revolution

Marie Isidine

1925

Among all the questions currently in the minds of those who predict coming deep social change, there is one which is extremely painful for human consciousness: the issue of violence, of the rightfulness, for the leaders of the revolution, to impose their decisions by force onto the masses, of revolutionary dictatorship and terror. This issue is discussed everywhere; but there is one country where it has already passed from the realm of ideas into the realm of realisations, where a social revolution using dictatorship as a weapon has already taken place – that is Russia.

That is why anything which can tell us about the material and moral results of this experiment deserves our fullest attention, such as also all the opinions expressed on this subject, under the influence of living among the militants of the Russian revolution. They have infinitely more authority than anything we could say here, as we have never lived through this experiment with a Socialist dictatorship.

That is why we believed it useful to advertise in France a recently published book, but written for the most part in 1920, the

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author of which is a member of the Left Socialist Revolutionary party¹, I. Steinberg. This book's title is *The Moral Face Of The Revolution* and its dedication indicates its sympathies: "To the Kronstadt sailors of 1921, who, on the icy plains of the Finnish Gulf, defended the October revolution, engaged in a mortal combat and did not dishonour it by a terror of revenge, – I dedicate this book."

The author shows us the great disillusionment which the revolution brought the workers. "Never," he writes, "was the contradiction between what the people had perceived in the red blaze of the revolution, and this heavy, leaden weight which now oppresses them in their daily lives, been so obvious and so dire." This atrocious misery kills the intellectual and moral life of the masses, who have only just awakened; the bonds of solidarity between people are loosened, the feelings of hatred and mistrust develop and paralyse any creative work. The horrors of the foreign war and the civil war, the material poverty are not enough to explain this state of affairs: there is a deeper, moral cause. "The soul of the revolutionary people is seriously ill"; it is prey to an anguish which compromises the whole future of the revolution, as it kills faith and enthusiasm. And the cause of it is that the people feel outraged by the methods used by the leaders of this revolution in which they had put all their hopes.

The author gives on this issue an analysis which completely agrees with what we never stopped saying about the distinctions made in the programmes of different political parties between "political revolution" and "economic revolution", between "minimum programme" and "final goal". Like us, he considers the popular revolution as a phenomenon which cannot be dissected like this. The revolution is of course the result of material conditions, but it represents something else. The people bring to it their need for justice, their moral ideal, – certainly vague and imprecise, but striving towards a new life, absolutely different from the old one. This is why their

tion; the best social regime, if it is introduced and maintained by coercion, rapidly degenerates and becomes the worst. Once it used force, it becomes unable to stop using it.

Whether violence is exerted by power in the name of god-given rights, or of majority rule, or of the working-class – the result is the same. That is why we'd rather not wonder: in whose hands is the weapon? But: against whom is it pointing?

If it is against armed forces, there is a right to self-defence which cannot be denied to anyone; if it is against yesterday's enemy, now disarmed, or against an opponent of ideas, we refuse to recognise any right to violence.

A dangerous confusion often arises here. We are told: "Revolution cannot be made without bloodshed; you cannot prevent acts of revenge by the oppressed. By condemning "red terror", you condemn the revolution itself". We shouldn't play on words. Popular anger is one thing, government terror another. A government, as scrupulously as it wishes to represent the people, will only ever represent its interests, or maybe its opinions, but never its feelings, its despair, its anger. Whatever the price we place on human life, we excuse the popular mass in what is called its "excesses" – because of accumulated past sufferings among its ranks. But there is no excuse for the cold, well-thought-out, calculated violence of a government.

From this we find this criterion, the only acceptable one in our opinion: violence can only ever be justified in the hands of the weak, of the oppressed, of those who are facing superior armed forces; it has no excuse and is detrimental to the cause it serves the day after the victory.

revolutionary action extends to every domain of life and spirit: political and economic regimes, religious and moral ideas, family life. And if, instead of making justice real, revolutionary practices reveal themselves to be unjust, immoral, oppressive, the people feel troubled and lose interest in the revolution. This is precisely what happened when, in 1918, systematic violence, which we can call terror, entered the revolutionary habits and anchored itself there so well that its contagion is now reaching almost every revolutionary milieu in other countries.

In his critique of Bolshevik terror, Steinberg does not take a purely moral view which would condemn any violence; he accepts violence in some cases and in certain limits. But he criticises the system of terror because of the prejudice it causes to the goal for which it strives. Socialism, he says (and in this we once again agree with him), is not only an economic idea; it aims at a certain organisation of production, but also at a fairer mode of existence for humankind. It must choose the means it uses in consequence. Marxists, following Jesuits and Jacobins, say the end justifies the means. This might be true when we only think about exterior victory, but this victory in no way proves that the goal was reached; for it to be truly reached, it demands certain means, and the exclusion of others.

Socialism wants the happiness not of an abstract "humanity", but of real, concrete people, and no formula can justify crushing those individual people. "We are fighting, not for the proletarian or the peasant, but for oppressed people. We are fighting, in consequence, not the land owner or the bourgeois, but the regime of exploitation."

And what were the consequences of forgetting these truths? Government centralisation and political oppression ensured that "everywhere the people's masses have remained indifferent; the workers don't create: they do their chores". That is why nothing works for the government: all its economic and political measures fail.

Labour productivity depends on both economic and moral causes; the system of terror dealt it a fatal blow. Instead of an emulation at work, it feeds fear, fraud, selfishness. "Not one among the millions of inhabitants is interested in creating in the long-term something socially useful or precious". In the measure that it is allowed for a revolutionary power to call on personal interest, it must show the advantages of solidarity and cooperation; if not, misery causes the fight of everyone against everyone, which is the most deplorable economic system; and conflicts between the different categories of unfortunates.

On the moral level, the same failure is seen. Systematic terror leads to the reign of the police, provokes perpetual revolts, make people hate the government. And if the reaction failed in Russia despite all the armies raised with the help of the Allies, it is thanks to the hostility of the people in cities and in the countryside to everything which tended to restore the old regime, especially purely thanks to terror.

To defend revolutionary terror, several arguments are put forward, which the author refutes one by one. People invoke the will of the people's masses themselves. First of all, even if it were the case, it wouldn't be an obligation for us, but it is actually false. At the start of the Russian revolution, as early as February-March 1917, and also after October, there were some acts of popular violence directed against the representatives of the old regime: police officers, gendarmes, army officers. But this popular anger was short-lived and, as soon as the people felt their oppressors were vanquished for good, they only showed them contempt or pity. If the ruling party had used this lack of vengefulness in the people's soul to direct the revolution towards concordance, the events would have unfolded differently. But it thought good, on the contrary, to stir up hatred, to give the example of acts of revenge; as early as 1918, terror became an official system with its Cheka, its shootings, its armed expeditions against peasants, etc. From then on, terror only came from the top, while workers more than once showed

their humanity (for example when they were judges in Popular Trials). Making them responsible for so much bloodshed is to slander the Russian people.

Until this point we were fully in agreement with the Russian author. But there is a weak point in his argument: he fails to find any criterion to distinguish acceptable violence from non-acceptable violence. He admits so himself. As long as there is proper civil war or barricade fighting, violence is justified by the fact that both enemies, armed, fight as equals. It's the same thing for a terrorist act against a representative of the regime: even without taking into account that revolutionaries only ever use this means as a last resort, the fact that the murderer, by killing, gives deliberately their life, does not allow us to draw any comparison at all between them and the executioner. But there are other cases. Steinberg's party does not refuse the use of power and doesn't deny governmental violence, while imposing on it rather strict limits. That is how the author accepts that the bourgeois be denied political rights, and, if he absolutely opposes the death penalty, he accepts that political enemies can be imprisoned or banished. However, where will we stop in political repression, if we don't oppose it all in principle? And wouldn't these persecutions, while less ferocious, have the same demoralising effect? He doesn't and can't answer these questions. Yet it is absolutely necessary to find a criterion which allows us to justify or condemn this or that method of action.

No social change was obtained without a fight; no step forward was made without sacrifices. Violence had been, in history, a necessary evil; it must be considered as such, and nothing more. What makes it necessary is that the ruling and exploiting classes have always defended their privileges with all the might which the power of the state granted them. But, once the road cleared, once the armed domination of the old order of things is destroyed by insurrection, violence ceases to be a necessary evil and becomes just evil. It can exert no creative ac-