

The french revolution



The French Revolution Revolution in general acts as the locomotive of history. This profound observation of Leon Trotsky applies not just to the development of the productive forces but equally to that of culture in its most general sense. The French Revolution was a fundamental turning point in world history. Like a heavy stone dropped into a silent lake, it caused waves that disturbed the most distant shores. No aspect of life remained untouched: military, economic, political, philosophical or literary.

The minds of men and women were changed forever and in a most fundamental way. The hidden wellsprings of human energy that lie dormant in the masses are released by revolution. It reveals powers of creativity the existence of which are unsuspected by the dominant classes and their intellectual eunuchs. A revolution stirs up society to the depths, arousing a new spirit of freedom in the most downtrodden layers of society. In every revolution, ordinary men and women discover their sense of dignity and pride in themselves; they begin to see themselves as human beings, not slaves. This revolutionary spirit was what enabled France to stand against the whole of monarchist Europe and defeat it. The French Revolution reached its flood tide in 1793 with the plebeian dictatorship of Robespierre and the Jacobins, the most revolutionary section of the middle class who leaned on the semi-proletarian masses of Paris for support. But by this time the Revolution had already exhausted all its possibilities as a bourgeois revolution.

Inevitably, reaction began to set in, as the bourgeoisie became frightened of the “excesses” of the masses and began to call for “Order”. After the Thermidorean counter-revolution, the pendulum swung steadily to the right.

Having lost confidence in itself, the bourgeoisie took refuge first in the Directorate and then in the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. The French revolution had stirred up the whole of Europe.

It challenged the old, rotten stagnant order and shook it to its foundations. The new ideas that sprang from the Revolution were a source of inspiration for all that was alive and vibrant in European society. They attracted the best of the intellectuals, artists, writers, philosophers and composers: Kant and Hegel, Beethoven and Shelley, Clausewitz and Goethe – all were, in different ways, children of the French Revolution. When the Revolution exhausted itself and began to sink back under the weight of tradition, habit and routine, disillusionment set in. In the period of its ascent, it inspired enthusiasm for the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

But under the regime of Thermidor, followed by the Directorate, the Consulate and finally the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte, its appeal began to wane. The bourgeois values of Barras and Sieyes could not provide much inspiration to anyone. Even when the original ideals of the Revolution were sinking under the leaden rump of bourgeois-Bonapartist reaction, however, the waves that emanated from the events of 1789-93 continued to roll across Europe, even unsettling the autocratic regime of tsarist Russia.

It was as if a whole generation had awoken from the slumbers of centuries, opened their eyes, stretched their limbs and began to speak out.