The Spirit of Propagandism in the French Revolution

1789-1793

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INTRODUCTION

Propagandism began with the Revolution no more than the doctrines which were to be propagated. The ideas of popular sovereignty, personal liberty, and equality before the law were familiar to Frenchmen and had been transmitted to various quarters of Europe before the meeting of the States General in 1789. In England they had been practically in effect for a century, but the forms of monarchy surviving there had obscured the fact to all save a few critical observers. The speculative minds of the eighteenth century had been busy with these ideas for nearly fifty years, and among a certain intelligent class they had received a wide circulation and a considerable acceptance before the period when our study begins.

This fact explains whatever success the French had in disseminating their political faith. It explains the appearance in each of the neighboring states, at the outbreak of the Revolution, of a group of sympathizers who attempted to convert their fellow countrymen to the new régime. The intellectual movement had begun which in time was to revolutionize the political and social structure of all the European nations, a movement which in our day seems to be witnessing its final manifestation in the great empire of Russia.

The real influence of the French, then, after the outbreak of the Revolution of 1789, lay, not in implanting among their neighbors a new doctrine, but in forcibly attacking the ancient structures and in so weakening them as to give room for the ideas already implanted to find natural growth. The rude attempts of the French armies to enforce republicanism upon surrounding nations failed utterly, or, if in a few cases they succeeded, it was because the subjects were ready and willing to be enforced. But in most cases the peoples of Europe were not ready. Time was needed for the new ideas to develop. They were already there.

In the enthusiasm of their own successful Revolution the French thought they could hasten the day of regeneration for their neighbors. They permitted themselves to believe that, instead of small factions, whole populations in the foreign states were thoroughly imbued with the spirit of revolution and anxious to shake off the yoke. This view was thoroughly characteristic of the impractical and visionary minds of the revolutionists —that complete inability to appreciate the hold established custom has on mankind for which Burke denounced them so persistently. In the prevalence of this notion there appeared at an early date in the Revolution a tendency toward some active form of propagandism. This tendency obtained no very distinct headway until fears of European intervention began to arise. Then France hurled back the threat of the Propaganda. The Revolution realized that in this it possessed a unique and powerful weapon. Imagination readily suggested the idea of all the peoples of Europe rising to crush their tyrannical rulers, and of a world restored upon the theory of Rousseau, readjusting its affairs to suit the new conditions of popular sovereignty, equality, universal peace and brotherhood.

This fancy was so pleasing, the faith in its fulfillment was so strong, that, doubtless, it greatly encouraged the reckless spirit that plunged France and Europe into a twenty years' war. When the war broke out, the Propaganda, or a general insurrection of peoples against kings, was officially recognized by the French government, and was counted upon as an important part of the military resources of the Republic.

The object of this study is to note the emergence of the propagandist sentiment, the gradual development of its influence over the minds of the ruling men of France, and the subsequent decline of that influence after the first attempt at application of the theory had signally failed.

For the debates of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies I have employed the *Archives Parlementaires,* because the clear type and simple arrangement make it the most convenient work to use. But, inasmuch as the *Archives* has been severely criticized as a source by leading scholars, I have used it with great caution, comparing the passages with the more authentic reports of the *Procès-verbal* and *Moniteur,* and accepting for the most part only those speeches for which the editors have seen fit to cite the original source. I have drawn heavily upon the *Moniteur,* not only for its reports of debates in the National Assembly, but for other important material it contains, notably the letters of correspondents abroad and the published correspondence of generals in the field. My references to the *Moniteur* are to the reprint of 1840.

Of the secondary authorities bearing upon the subject I have found most useful M. Sorel's recently completed work on the external relations of the Revolution, *L'Europe et la Révolution Française,* and M. Chuquet's exhaustive treatise on the military history of the Revolution. The former speaks very suggestively on the subjective phases of the propagandist spirit, and the latter vividly describes the work of the armies and agents of the government in active propagandism. So far as I am aware, no separate study of the Propaganda has yet been published. Several monographs have appeared treating of the influence of the French Revolution in particular states of Europe, and upon these I have drawn for certain facts.

An apology may be necessary for the frequent and extended quotations from sources, especially throughout the first chapter. The reason for this lies in the nature of the subject, where, in tracing the growth of a somewhat intangible form of revolutionary enthusiasm, the exact phraseology in which it finds expression must have considerable significance.

CONTENTS

4. *Armed Propaganda.*

A study of the campaigns of the French armies in Savoy, Nice, the Rhenish States, and Belgium between September, 1792, and March, 1793, with a detailed examination of the propagandist activities of each. The methods were everywhere the same. First, the incendiary proclamation of the commanding general; then the levy of contributions on privileged and official classes, together with studied kindness to the common people; the formation of clubs and opening of correspondence with French Societies; the influx of a horde of French proselyters, deputies on mission, agents of the executive council, emissaries of clubs and others, to "fraternize" with the "liberated" people and to teach them liberty and equality; the introduction of the tricolor, the liberty tree, the liberty cap, the songs, dances, fetes and ceremonies of the Revolution.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER I.

The development of the propagandist idea has been followed from its first appearance to its decline in 1793. In recapitulating, the story might be told in six decrees which mark the successive stages of development.

1. The decree renouncing conquests. This act is representative of the early period of the Revolution when the propagandist sentiment was quiescent. This was the period when France was basking in the bright sunlight of freshly achieved Liberty, and the spirit of peace on earth, good-will toward men prevailed. The utmost desire, outside of securing her own freedom, was that other nations might benefit by the example, and also find the light.

2. The address of the Legislative Assembly to the King on November 29, 1791, urging him to warn the German princes to desist from their machinations against the Revolution or France will carry Liberty into their states. Here the propagandist spirit becomes aggressive. It is now used as a threat to the hostile powers, telling them to stand off if they wish to avoid infection. During this period the Girondist orators fan the enthusiasm in urging the nation to undertake an offensive war.

3. The declaration of war of April 20, 1792. Armed propagandism now becomes the accepted policy. The war is waged, not upon states or nations, but upon "tyrants." Their oppressed subjects are to be liberated. The successful period of the war following the retreat of Brunswick sees the climax of propagandist enthusiasm, which is expressed in—

4. The Decree of November 19, 1792, offering assistance to any peoples who desire to throw off the yoke of despotism. Almost at the same time appear the signs of the coming change. Savoy and Nice are annexed. Belgium is overrun, but refuses to change her social order for the French system of equality. The Republic needs money. It is decided to enforce the French system on

Belgium in spite of her protests, and then to invade Holland for more treasure and territory.

5. The Decree of December 15th, with later amendments, turns the war into conquest. Belgium is annexed against the will of a majority of her people. Soon afterward the doctrine of natural boundaries is openly advocated. War is declared on England and Holland and later on Spain. Then the period of disaster comes in March, 1793, and the war becomes defensive. The Convention realizes its position, sees that the Decree of November 19th was a political mistake, that armed propagandism is impracticable, and retracts by passing

6. The Decree of April 13, 1793. Here the policy of non-intervention with the internal affairs of other states is adopted. Revolutionary propagandism had already turned into conquest and territorial expansion. It is now abandoned in theory as well as in fact.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER II.

1. There was no very considerable dissemination of French pamphlets and newspapers abroad, since they were strictly prohibited in most European countries and, moreover, would have been unintelligible to the masses of the people, of whom no great proportion, save, perhaps, in the principalities close to the border, understood the French language. Knowledge of the doctrines and events of the Revolution was conveyed to these peoples by newspapers and writers of their own nationality—not by Frenchmen.

2. It was the policy of the Jacobin Society to propagate the doctrines of the Revolution solely by discussion. It sent no emissaries to incite rebellion in foreign states. Individual members may have undertaken self-appointed missions of that character, but probably in very few cases with the formal sanction of the society.

3. While the Jacobin Club held friendly correspondence with foreign patriotic societies, notably those of England, there was no regular affiliation between it and

any foreign society, except in conquered territories.

4. Wherever the armies of France penetrated in the campaigns of 1792-3 they sought to revolutionize the conquered peoples, using toward that end every possible means.

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