

THE DEPARTDWF OF P(IJTICAL EIIXZATICN

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LUSAKA

L.C. M13113 on the Great French Revolution of 1789.

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France and progressive people everywhere will celebrate the 200th Anniversary of this 011111 historical wont an 14th of July 1989.

The 111311311. 1111-: mi: of P01 11:11:53.1 I 6111 ation has seen fit to join in the celebration

by c.1'rculls11: 1111 1111.5 scholarly pager, written by Comrade L. C. Mabasa,a Senior Research Officox in the Depal tment. He. has shown the importance of the Rex :lluticm of .1189 m the: Souih African struggle against the racist regime in Pretoria. It occupies the same kind of position in structural texms as the French mnarchy and feudal aristocracy 200 years ago.

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Let us join in the (rel ebration by :rc-doubling our effert to demolish apartheid and overthrow. 1:17.15, racist tyrarmy,

Down With R 101? 1111111 mid!

11.11;: 1-111? Who, 11131111 A: Tican Revolution!

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31st May 1989

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Secretary

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The Pherican 111.711: 013 1'rarierpehdzsha:ea also belongs to this era of._ bourgeois
Ievoliticms 111111.133 thur- undenyng principle of Liberty, the American Revolution
declared therights of r1311 (not. just Americans) , thus incorporating
'universalism. 111-7111121191, 1.11123 centinued enslavement of Blacks, amongst other
things,. underpi med rhe- diamepancy between solemn declarations, and their
practical implejrmx31:51:15, a fagea'tmre that was to Characteri se Americah
kxpurgoeis democracy 31.11 the: :iecadex 1.0 follow.
:37here is one- 1313'131101: 12".:eat...1:e winch is chirqcrieristic of these revolutions

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- ' AS Albert; Sobeul puts it, wThe revalutions of Holland, England and America
1 1 , 1 1 . .

have lhe.value 0L examgles of bomgecis lrevo'iutions, but leading to a
Congervative hmmmme, which um 31: the cover of "Bourgeois Liberty",
safeguaered fphe dcmihance of wealtn" . (5301:0111 A. Understanding the French
Revolution. Internationaj Pl 11.21.1512 .rs, 11.351 1988; p.285) .

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T1K51Flench Revel atioz'), however , 1 'as to make a clean break with this tradition
both inits prefuhdity and (:5 s- 01:13. As Pbbsbawm obserVes, "The French
Revolution 1112132 not have been. an i.gtolated phenomenon, but it was far more
fundamental 13mm any of the. (nth r cmatemporaxy ones and its consequences
. van. therefore far more p3;...1f1:111n1 ln the first place, it occurred in the
most. ETK'PJLOUE: state Of Ex. rope ilea-wing Russia aparthiu In the second
place it, was, alone uf alt the revolutions which preceded it and followed
it, a 1113? smial 3713170111 tion, and hmeasurably more radical than any comparable
LuphelaVa'l In the: th 1:2. pkac 2, alone of an the contempcmay revolutions,
11.nefxi-Tr'cs1 11th was' eeumenical. 11.3 armies set to revoluticinise the world, its
ideas actually did. so". (Hobs. awm E.J. The Age of Revolution 1789-1889,
. p.741).- fits reverhmetions 11115.:e. felt as far afielf as Turkey, lBengal and
ether far-scjfff lands. .

Our task is; to examine the 5;L.gnificance of the French Revolution for us
in South .A'Lrica who are stiu waging a. National liberation, struggle against
racistrcoional tyrami , i0; the triumph LJ 1111:? 11311321113 of equality, democracy
and freedca'n in a unitaqx 11'1-r61c111'f. 80131.12 Aiifricra. In :30 doing, we shall
. endeavour, without going .i. to details, to acquaint. ourselves with. some of
the key sues without whi-:h it would be difficult to put the importance
of; the French Revolution ix 11:0 prcper perspective. These include the
socicrnewnmic and other preconditions of the revolution, its motive forces,
51.15.1332. and main outcome.

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Historical materialism teaches that the further an event moves into the 'past the more significant it beams in the eyes not only of its contemporaries, but even more in the eyes of posterity. This is all the more evident vis-a-vis the 'so-called epochal events. Among these we should definitely include the Great French Bourgeois Revolution. This revolution has earned itself an honourable place in the annals of universal history, in the same manner as has the Great October Socialist Revolution of 1917 in Russia. But, whereas the French Revolution replaced one exploitative socio-economic order (feudalism) with another equally, if not more unjust and exploitative system (capitalism), the October Revolution signalled the beginning of the end of the unchallenged rule of capital over labour, facilitating a global transition from capitalism to socialism. To order to fully appreciate the historical and universal significance of the French Revolution, we should approach it in the context of its historical parameters, as one - albeit the most radical - in a series of bourgeois revolutions spanning a period of about three centuries.

The era of bourgeois revolutions was 'opened' by the Dutch at the end of the 16th century. The Dutch Revolution took place in the framework of the war for independence. The founding of the Dutch India Company in 1602 and the opening of the Amsterdam Stock Exchange in 1613 - the first of its kind in history - coupled with the dominance of 'Dutch maritime commerce and colonial exploitation of other peoples (including our people) facilitated the rise of the Dutch bourgeoisie as the most powerful in the world. Dutch hegemony, however, was not to last forever. The fall of the Batavian Republic and the British annexation of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795 sealed the decline of the Netherlands as a world power and the rise of British imperialism.

England experienced two bourgeois revolutions in the 17th century - the first between 1642-1649 and the second in 1688-1689. The English revolutions ended in the "great compromise", whereby power was shared between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. This compromise persists to this day in the form of the British Constitutional Monarchy - though one may add more in form than in essence.

Revolutions, as we know, are: the outcome of irreconcilable contradictions between the productive forces on the one hand and the relations of production on the other. late eighteenth century France was a country ridden with socio-economic, political and other contradictions. The basic contradiction of the French society of the day was one between an outmoded feudal and aristocratic superstructure and the new burgeoning capitalist productive forces, whose continued growth was hindered by archaic relations of production, characteristic of the Old Regime. The nobility and the Clergy - the two most privileged classes of France - were not producers of great wealth, though they amassed colossal amounts of it. This was made possible by the superexploitation of the peasants which constituted over 80% of the population - and the other labouring classes. The parasitic lifestyle of the nobility and the clergy sapped the resources of the state. The situation was compounded by the involvement of France in the American War of Independence on the side of the American colonies, which worsened the financial crisis that France was experiencing. By the end of 1788 the budget deficit had reached 20% of the total sum of revenues. In an attempt to cover up this huge budget deficit taxes were increased and the price of bread - the staple food of the poor masses - was hiked. This triggered mass discontent, and, in some areas, like Paris for instance, there were numerous bread riots. The socio-economic crisis was accompanied by an equally serious political crisis. The bourgeoisie, the peasantry and the toiling masses all wanted a say in the running of the country. Political power rested in the monarch. Parliament had not met since 1614. In an attempt to stem the tide of revolution the King decided in 1789 to convene the States-General (Parliament) .. This became the turning point in the life of the feudal regime. The Third Estate - a Chamber of Parliament for the representatives of the masses - pressed for the conversion of the States-General into a Constituent Assembly which was to draw up a new democratic constitution for France. The question on the agenda was one of the transfer of power from the monarchy to the coalition of class forces opposed to it. The storming of the Bastille (a prison-fort where most opposition leaders and activists were incarcerated) on the 14th of July 1789 marked the beginning of the revolution. It continued - going through various stages of rise and fall - until the coup d'état on November 9, 1799 led by Napoleon Bonaparte. Though led by the bourgeoisie, which by then was revolutionary in its political outlook, the revolution was shaped by the active participation of the popular masses.

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The French Revolution was bourgeois democratic in as far as its tasks were concerned, i.e. the liquidation of feudal property relations and the political and ideological superstructure, represented by the Ancien Régime. But unlike other bourgeois revolutions before it, the French Revolution was the one revolution in which the popular masses took an active part. It was a revolution from below and not from above. "The destruction of feudalism by the French Revolution and the advent of the bourgeois regime was made possible only by the cooperation of the popular masses" (Understanding the French Revolution, p.101). To that extent it can safely be said that the French Revolution was a revolution in the true sense of the word; The French Declaration of Human Rights had an imprint of participation by the popular masses. The basic principles of "Liberty, Fraternity and Equality" which were the cornerstone of this declaration, were to act as a lodestar for future revolutions. To this day the relevance of these principles to all those who are engaged in struggle for freedom and social progress cannot be overemphasised. They are important to us in South Africa. There are no more important rights than the right to self-determination, freedom and equality! South African revolutionaries, in their struggle against the Apartheid regime, draw inspiration from the principles articulated by the French 200 years ago.

One other lesson to be drawn from the French experience concerns measures to be taken to ensure that a revolutionary government addresses itself to the needs of the people. The methods adopted by the Jacobins, such as the banning of the export of capital, control of the banks, the levying of progressive taxes helped to secure the independence of the French Republic. These measures compare very well with the economic clauses of the Freedom Charter, especially those on the nationalisation of monopoly industry, the redistribution of land among those who work it.

Political independence without economic emancipation - declares the ANC STRATEGY AND TACTICS - will be meaningless. If we are to redress the awesome imbalance in the distribution of wealth in our country, the people have to be in command of the commanding heights of the South African economy. In this way the state shall be in a position to direct the process of generating the wealth necessary to eradicate mass poverty, landlessness, unemployment and hunger so that all South Africans shall enjoy equal standards of living.

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This was not the experience of the French Revolution. Its fruits were plucked by the upper classes, but it taught the value of consistency, loyalty to the revolution, revolutionary steadfastness, so much articulated by the words of Danton, one of the foremost French revolutionaries, "AUDACITY, AND AUDACITY, ALWAYS AND ALWAYS" i

Another area of interest concerns the need to defend revolutionary gains against external aggression. In our day this has become an axiom, but it suffices, for the purposes of this paper, to mention that it was the French Revolution of 1789, which put this ideal into the realm of practical politics. As we engage our immediate enemy in battle, so too must we build up such forces as will enable us to defend our revolution in the event not only of external aggression, but also of internal counterrevolution, As Lenin put it; only that revolution which can defend itself is worthy of the name. The world revolutionary movement provides us with ample examples of numerous occasions whereby imperialist sponsored plots aimed at undermining their revolutionary gains of various peoples were hatched. Angola, Nicaragua and Mozambique are cases in point. It would be folly on our part to struggle at so much cost only to witness, idly, our efforts undermined.

The most important thing to always bear in mind is that Our struggle is not taking place in a vacuum, but in the era of National Liberation, socialist and other revolutions. It is taking place in the epoch of a general transition from capitalism to socialism on a worldwide scale. Therefore our revolutionary movement does of necessity bear the imprint of this process. That being the case, and since the Movement is part of the forces of National Liberation, for democracy, freedom and social progress, we have to be receptive to other people's ideas and experiences in the process of enriching our own revolutionary theory and practice. Needless to say that in so doing we shall not be aping our friends and comrades, but taking from them that which, in our opinion, is good for us and our people. But we can only make Our choice provided we know what is in the package. Herein lies the importance of observing the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

Lastly, it should be borne in mind that revolutions are not made to order, but rather are the results of objective processes that flow independently, 'OUI wishes notwithstanding. On the other hand, the existence and activeness of subjective factors does necessarily influence the tide of events. One of the starkest features of the French Revolution, as with the revolutions of the early centuries, was the absence of political parties or movements, with coherent programmes, strategies and tactics. Perhaps one could argue that political organisation of society was not as sophisticated as it is today. Nonetheless, the absence of such parties and movements then, seen in the light of present-day struggles, underlines the importance of a political party or movement that will be charged with responsibility of directing the struggle and leading the masses in a conscious and decisive way. In South Africa we have such an organisation in the form of the African National Congress. The present task of the ANC, as was amply clarified in the January 8, 1989 Statement of its National Executive Committee, is to build an all-embracing, broadly-based coalition of all anti-apartheid forces. There are no obstacles insurmountable enough to prevent these who are genuinely interested in the downfall of the apartheid regime from uniting in action against the common enemy. Unity of the revolutionary forces plus their links with, and leadership of, the masses is essential if victory is to be achieved. '

L. C. Mabasa

31st May 1989