

(February 5, 1915.)

The French Revolution and Modern Europe

BY MR. CECIL CHESTERTON.*

AT a special luncheon of the Club, held on the 5th February, Mr. Chesterton said:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen.—The subject which has been chosen—I will not say I have chosen, because in a sense it has been chosen for me—the subject of my address to-day is, The French Revolution and Modern Europe. And I think, on the whole, that this subject is particularly well worth thinking about and discussing at the present time.

We have all seen within the last four or five years, and still more acutely of course within the last four or five months, the great and happy event, in spite of all the tragedy that may accompany it, of the firm union of the peoples of Great Britain and France. (Applause.) Many of the old historic quarrels have of late been buried, and an alliance has been formed, necessary to the security of European peace and European liberties, an alliance which will continue to be necessary after this war is over, an alliance which will provide the basis, I think, for a reconstruction of Europe upon new and juster principles. And for that reason, because it is so vital that that alliance should not be a mere temporary expedient, but that the same friendship between two great nations of Western Europe should endure and grow stronger in the future, it becomes very important that the people of the two countries—and under that term of course I include the peoples of our great colonial Federations—should clearly understand each other and know each other's history, and should be able to comprehend each other's points of view. And for that reason it is at this moment extremely desirable that Englishmen and Canadians and all those who owe allegiance to the English flag and the English Crown should understand that much misunderstood episode in the history of our neighbors

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and allies which is my subject this afternoon. For of that incident of the French Revolution the new France has been built, and on its indirect effects a new Europe is now in the building, and it is essential to us if we are to comprehend at all what the French people stand for in Europe, and if we are to make an enduring sympathy and understanding between us and them, it is essential that we should understand what that episode really meant and for what it stood.

Now, the first thing to remember about the French Revolution is that it was fundamentally doctrinal, and incidentally of course economic and social. There was excessive taxation, but it was a matter of bad distribution, falling too much on the peasantry and too little on the rich. And there were the privileges of the nobility, once having relation to religion, but long since practically divorced from religious affairs. All these economic and social causes contributed to make the Revolution possible, but ultimately the Revolution preached a doctrine and fought for a doctrine. You can define in a few words what was the central principle upon which the Revolution was based. That principle was called by those who preached it the doctrine of the Rights of Man. It affirmed that men as men had equal rights, and that the secular moral authority of the State rested upon the consent of the popular will. That was the doctrine on which the Revolution rested. And that doctrine is true. (Hear, hear.) Whatever confusions and perplexities there were, and whatever fundamentally irrelevant quarrels—and there were many of them in subsequent history—the doctrine on behalf of which the Revolution was conducted is a true doctrine, and is the only possible sound basis for a State. (Applause.)

Now, of late years especially—especially, for reasons which I shall presently suggest, since the year 1870—there has been a strong disposition to ridicule and represent as fantastic the doctrines of the Revolution, especially that important doctrine of the Equal Rights of Man. The attack on it has taken the form of assuming that the French Revolutionists were babyish lunatics, who could not see facts which stared them in the face, and then elaborately disproving a doctrine which no thinking, not to say sane, man ever held; for example, that men develop in all sorts of ways and with all sorts of talents; as if that were not as obvious to Rousseau and Danton as to us; as if Rousseau had the impression that all must be of the same height, or have equally big noses! (Laughter.) Of course the Revolutionists knew that some men have talents which others have not. But what they affirmed, you will see

in a moment, was that all these differences in character and quality did not affect the rights of men. A man who is short has the same rights as a tall man, an apparently stupid man the same rights as one who is apparently clever. There are not two different kinds of men, for whom two different rights are required. And the affirmation of that law proves that the State must be based upon the things common to all men, not upon those in which they differ.

In the same way cheap ridicule is thrown upon that other doctrine of the French Revolution which Rousseau called the Social Contract. Rousseau is represented as saying—of course he didn't—that at a certain period in the history of the world certain men came together to make a contract as the basis of the State. People who talk thus entirely misunderstand what Rousseau said. The Social Contract is not something that happened at a particular period in the world's history, but it is always happening, as the basis of the State. The doctrine of the Social Contract is that the moral authority by which the rulers are entitled to coerce the citizens of a State and make them obey the law is due to the fact that those rulers are not commanding for themselves but for the common good of all the citizens, to which end all the citizens have surrendered some of their personal rights. That is the doctrine of the Social Contract. And, again, it is a sound doctrine. (Hear, hear.)

To take an example of what I mean: suppose I go along the streets of this town, and some man takes me by the shoulder, and violently forces me to walk with him in a certain direction. He has no right to do this, and I have a right to resist him, even if he is a better and wiser man, and even though he be actuated by the purest possible motives for my good (laughter) nevertheless I have the right to resist him, and I shall resist him, because I as a citizen have that right. But if he be a policeman, though he may be much less pure and wise than I (laughter), and though his motives may be much mixed, he has the right to make me walk with him. *Prima facie* he has the right,—I may dispute his right afterwards—the moral right of that policeman lies in the fact that he is acting as an instrument of the general will. That principle, the working out of that principle, and its conflict with the forces that are more or less opposed to it, makes the whole history of every revolution and its fate.

In the course of its development, it came into a quarrel with a good many human institutions, some good, some bad, some partly good and partly bad. But in nearly every case,

until very late cases, which I am going to examine at the end of this discussion, the challenge which it threw out was based upon the broad principles of the Social Contract, not upon the immediate principle upon which it was fought.

The first quarrel of the French Revolution was of course with the French monarchy. It is important to notice that the Revolutionary doctrine did not necessarily imply the abolition of the French monarchy. The States General of France affirmed the doctrine of the Rights of Man, this creed of a positive democracy as conceived by Rousseau, and applied it to a hundred conditions of French life, the ownership of property, the rights of the leaders and the nobility, the claims of the Church, and other things, for at least two or three years while still retaining the monarchy. And the theory upon which it did that was the perfectly logical one that the King was to be regarded, as they called it, as a hereditary representative. They acknowledged that the King's authority could only be derived from the popular will, but they rightly said, as Rousseau said before them, that the popular will was not the same thing as the machinery of government. Every man was chosen not because he was the tallest man in the country, or on any other ground than that he acted as the mouthpiece of the general will, so his position was quite consistent with the doctrine of the French Revolution. The reason why the monarchy was overthrown in France was not at all because the monarchy was essentially incompatible with the doctrine of the French Revolution any more than that in England or other countries; the reason why it was overthrown was because the monarchy became anti-national.

It is an historical fact, that the monarchy was not overthrown, was not even seriously threatened in France, until, somewhat angry at the loss of certain privileges which had been taken from it as a result of the movement, it began to intrigue with foreigners against France. That the Court committed that deplorable error—crime, I would call it—was largely due to the fact that the Queen was an Austrian, and was not in sympathy with France. She regarded the whole question from a personal point of view. The King, if left to himself, would no doubt have acted in a more national fashion. As a matter of fact, the King, at the request of his wife, began to act. At the request of Marie Antoinette was issued the famous manifesto of the Duke of Brunswick. In June the determination was to oppose the popular will. That manifesto was issued at the beginning of August, or the end of July, 1792, reaching Paris in the first days of August,

1792; that brought the insurrection of the 12th of August, and that was the overthrow of the monarchy.

That quarrel was not absolutely essential to the doctrine of the French Revolution, but naturally following on its development in which the French Revolutionists got engaged came the quarrel with the monarchy, in which the Revolutionists were victorious.

Then followed the quarrel with the Christian Church, as organized in France at that time, the Catholic Church. That also was incidental. Mr. Belloc, who is a Catholic and also a Republican, and a sympathizer with the Revolution, said in his little book, which I would advise every one who wants to understand the Revolution to read, that it was impossible for any Catholic to deem any part of the Revolutionary doctrine as heretical, or any part of it, thrown into the republican form of common doctrine, to be contrary to the Catholic Church. The two things do not really conflict in point of fundamentals. Wherever there is a conflict,—as to spiritual quality of men before their Creator, there is identity. From the point of absence of conflict, the matter is entirely indifferent to Christian doctrine as Christian doctrine. It was indifferent to the secular aims of the French Revolutionary movement. Nevertheless the conflict which developed claims to be the whole history of the struggle between the French Revolution and the Church, because it must be found, as in other cases, a historical accident in which the people were involved. First of all you must remember that all the other people were Catholic. And just before the Revolution Christianity was about at the lowest ebb it had ever reached. In Protestant England, for example,—of course it was the age of the Erastian Bishops, and they were not concerned with attending to their duties as Christian pastors, but enjoying themselves and dabbling in politics. (Laughter.) In France, the people avowedly scoffed at the teachers of the Church. The intelligent and well read, both Catholic and Protestant, were almost entirely free-thinkers. Religion was at its lowest ebb, and the consequence was that the men who conducted the Revolution were like their neighbors, like their parents, like the men who opposed the Revolution, for the most part, quite indifferent to religion, and in reconstituting French society, they assumed that the Christian religion was dead or dying. That, of course, was a grave error on their part, and was afterwards proved to be entirely false. But it looked like it for the moment, and they took it for granted, and made arrangements for the future of the Church of France which looked excellent,

quite tolerable and reasonable. If the Christian religion, as they supposed, as the pagan religion of Europe in the third and fourth centuries with its superstition, was dying or in a decadent close, clung to by a few ignorant peasant families, their plan would have worked. But it didn't work. In consequence it had to face the organized antagonism of Christianity in the countries where it took root.

Then, finally, a third thing happened in the Revolution. As soon as it became clear that the new doctrine had triumphed, and that it had determined on the reconstruction of society on a basis of its new doctrine,—as soon as it was apparent to all men, the forces of privilege in Europe began to attack the Revolution in France. They did so because they rightly felt that the fundamental reconstruction of that country from which nearly all the culture of Europe had spread, and which was, as it is to-day, the battle ground of ideas in Europe, was what they found in practice to be incompatible with the reconstruction of the rest of Europe on the basis of that doctrine. As a result France found herself at war, first with one nation, then with another, and ultimately with most of Europe combined. If France had been made up of ordinary people, they would have been snowed under. But the French are a people who have, beyond almost any other people in the world, an extraordinary capacity for reconstruction on a military basis. (Applause.) Not only can they fight bravely under leaders and in discipline, but they have extraordinary capacity for providing new leaders and discipline at a moment's notice. That saved them; they turned themselves into an armed camp, a military State, beat back all Europe, and ultimately conquered all Europe. It is in the light of that great military capacity to organize itself as a military nation, that you must read all the history of the Revolution.

For example, what people call "the Terror" was simply martial law—undoubtedly harsh, as all military law must at times be, but you don't understand it if you interpret it, as most do, as merely hatred against the privileged classes. The effect on France that all the big kings were arrayed against her was that it became necessary to call anybody a suspect. The whole system of the "Terror" was really a system of military discipline and necessity. It came into existence when the military danger was at its worst, and all the principles of the most violent form coincided. When the extreme danger passed away, "the Terror" passed away with it. Of course it left France a military country. Of course always, in a sense, every Frenchman was a soldier. The result, still following

up the principle of the Revolution, the expression of the general popular will, was that the French people found it more convenient to follow the soldier life than take refuge in representative institutions, so you naturally get the Empire and the rule of Napoleon, and the victorious advance of Napoleon, during the period that followed the Revolution, and brought the Revolution into its third great conflict, its conflict with the old traditional nationalities of Europe. In that struggle its great leader was necessarily broken.

Of course we always think especially, and rightly, of the part played by our own country, England, which had the effect we first note in the impulse of the privileged classes and the dislocating of democratic ideas after the battle of advance in national ideas. Spain did the same, and many other nations, which had hardly known themselves as nations before, became nations under the stress of that great advance.

So we come to the close of the Revolution, to its apparent defeat, and the reconstruction in France and the general reaction throughout Europe. But that reaction was apparent, it was not a real thing. The French armies had carried through Europe the democratic ideas upon which the Revolution was originally based. These ideas did not perish. Men then asserted themselves instead of the power of the privileged rulers, and in England, Russia, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Italy, you find continual movement, the original French impulse trying to reconstruct Europe upon the basis of democracy and recognition of the rights of the individual.

I have said the French Revolution got into quarrels. These quarrels remained naturally. The greatest thing we can say of this dark era in which we have met, is that these quarrels are being healed, by reason of events of which we have no control,—but to my mind most significant,—and the accidental enemies of the last generation are coming together, because they have seen something dominant and apparently omnipotent at one moment in Europe, which they hated more than they hated each other. And they were right! (Applause.)

For that thing, which has challenged Europe to-day, and which is now challenging Europe, is what none other of the attacks on the Revolution were; this challenge with its supreme dogma, its denial of the rights of man—I am not merely saying that as a matter of fact or criticism of current events, but it is true. From the days when Berlin set out to make the King of Prussia the ruler of the world, (laughter) from that day came the denial that men have any rights, by

Frederick the Great, who called treaties "pretty flagree work"; by Bismarck, who told Emperor William the First that all his predecessors had taken territory and he ought to too; by the present Chancellor, who called the treaty with Belgium "a mere scrap of paper." The whole tendency of Prussia has been to deny that men have equal rights, and to affirm the rights and prerogatives of the "Super-man"—the Prussians, that is,—(laughter) or some Prussians,—because I am afraid that a great many Prussians, poor devils, have little enough rights (laughter), but that most men are entitled to nothing except to be used for so strong, beautiful, powerful beings, giving obedience, not getting rights. You will find that affirmed by the great men continually, by Treitschke and Nietzsche. Nietzsche, of course, was a Pole, not a Prussian, otherwise he would not have had the brains, (laughter) but he placed those brains at the disposal of Prussia, so he produced a more lucid expression than they would likely have produced for themselves. Still the fact remains that the essential fact behind Prussia's philosophy is the effect, whether you like it or not, the tendency of military victory is to make people imitate the victor. This is seen sometimes to a farcical extent, as when some British regiments began to wear spiked helmets, apparently on the assumption that the Prussians won the battle of Gravelotte by batting with their heads! (Laughter.)

Much more so was this the case ever since 1870, when a cloud was hanging over Europe. For the French Revolutionary doctrine would finally dispose of all war. Even if or whether it be proved that a State organized on the Prussian principle was great and effective for the purpose of warfare.

Now, what I am hoping is going to come out of this war, is the sure conviction on the part of men that that is false! (Hear, hear and applause.) The victory of Prussia in 1870 was an accidental victory, owing to superiority of artillery and other technical things, over a corrupt French Government. But it did not mean that the idea for which France stands and will always stand in Europe had been defeated. They have not been defeated! They are winning to-day, and we are glad! (Long applause.)