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The Moral Face of the Revolution

M. Isidine

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Among all the questions that those who foresee a forthcoming and profound social transformation are currently asking themselves, there is one that is extremely painful for the consciousness of humanity: it is the question of violence, of the right of the leaders of the revolution to impose their decisions by force on the masses, of dictatorship and revolutionary terror. This question is discussed everywhere, but there is one country where it has already passed from the realm of ideas into that of realization, where experience has been made of a social revolution using dictatorship as its weapon — that is Russia.

That is why everything that can make the results of this experience known, both material and moral, deserves the greatest attention; as do all the opinions formed on this subject under the influence of life among the militants of the Russian revolution. They have infinitely more authority than what we, who did not live this experience of socialist dictatorship, can say here.

That is why we thought it would be useful to make known in France a book, recently published but written for the most

part in 1920, and whose author is a member of the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party.¹ The title of this book is *The Moral Face of the Revolution* and bears this dedication that prejudices its spirit:

To the Kronstadt sailors of 1921, who on the icy plains of the Gulf of Finland defended the October Revolution, sustained a deadly struggle, and did not dishonor it with a terror of revenge, I dedicate this book.²

The author shows us the great disillusionment that the results of the revolution brought to the workers. “Never,” he says, “has the contradiction between what the people saw in the red blaze of the revolution and the heavy weight, like lead, that now oppresses them in their daily lives, been so glaring and so visible.” Terrible misery kills the intellectual and moral life of the masses which have only just awakened; the bonds of solidarity between people are loosened, the feelings of hatred and distrust develop and paralyze all creative work. The misfortunes of the external war and the civil war, the material misery, 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 in the grip of an anguish that compromises the whole future of the revolution, because it kills faith and enthusiasm. And the cause is that the people feel outraged by the *methods* used by the leaders of this revolution in which they had put all their hopes.

¹ This party, not very numerous, but of very combative spirit, places itself ideologically between the socialist-revolutionaries and the anarchists. Its leader and spokesperson is Marie Spiridonova. At the beginning, after the October Revolution, this party collaborated with the Bolsheviks and shared power with them. It broke away after Brest-Litovsk.

² Ed: *Нравственный лик революции (The Moral Face of the Revolution)* by the Socialist Revolutionary Isaac Nachman Steinberg was published in 1923.

the ‘Red Terror,’ you condemn the revolution itself.”⁵ We must not play on words. One thing is *popular* anger, another thing is government terror. A government, no matter how scrupulously it wants to represent the people, will never represent anything but their interests, or perhaps their opinions, but never their feelings, their despair, and their anger. Whatever price we attach to human life we excuse the popular mass even in its so-called “excesses” — because of the accumulation of past sufferings. But there is no excuse for the cold, thoughtful, and calculated violence of a government.

Hence this criterion, in our opinion, is the only acceptable one: violence can only be justified at the hands of the weak, the oppressed, from those who have before them a superior armed force; in the wake of victory, it is entirely without excuse and fatal to the cause it defends.

⁵ Ed: Red Terror (1918 – 1922), a violent political campaign against perceived counterrevolutionaries but which often involved the crushing of peasant rebellions, such as the uprising at Kronstadt.

deprived of political rights, and, if he repudiates in an absolute way the death penalty, he admits that political enemies can be imprisoned or banished. Now, when will political persecution ever stop if we do not immediately address it in principle? And won't these persecutions, even if they are less ferocious, have the same demoralizing effect? To these questions, he does not and cannot give any answer. It is absolutely necessary to find a criterion that will allow us to justify or condemn this or that way of acting.

No social transformation has been achieved without struggles; no step forward has been made without sacrifices. Violence has been, in history, a necessary evil; it must be considered *as such*, and no more. What makes it necessary is that the dominant and exploiting classes have always defended their privileges with all the strength that the power of the State puts in their hands. But, once the road is cleared, once the armed domination of the old order of things is thrown down by the insurrection, violence ceases to be a *necessary* evil and becomes the very evil itself. It can exert no creative action; the best social regime, if introduced and maintained by coercion, quickly degenerates into the worst. Once it has resorted to force, it is incapable of doing without it.

Whether violence is exercised by power in the name of divine right, or of the majority, or of the working class — the result is the same. That's why we prefer not to ask "*In whose hands* lies the weapon?" but: "*Against whom* is it directed?" If it is against the armed forces, it is a right of self-defense that cannot be denied to anyone; if it is against yesterday's enemy, now disarmed, or against the adversary of ideas, we refuse to recognize any right to violence.

A dangerous confusion is often made here. We are told: "The revolution is not made without bloodshed; it is impossible to prevent acts of revenge by the oppressed. By condemning

The author's assessment of this is in complete agreement with everything we have always said about the distinctions made by the programs of the various parties between "political revolution" and "economic revolution," between the "minimum program" and our "final goal." Like us, he sees the *popular* revolution as a phenomenon that cannot be dissected in this way. Revolution is obviously the result of material suffering, but it is more than that. The people bring to it their need for *justice*, their own *moral* ideals — admittedly vague and imprecise, but tending to a *new* life, absolutely different from the old one. This is why its revolutionary action extends to all areas of life and spirit: the political and economic regime, religious and moral conceptions, and family life. And if, instead of realizing justice, revolutionary practice proves to be unjust, immoral, and oppressive, the people become troubled and end up losing interest in the revolution. This is precisely what happened when, in 1918, systematic violence and terror entered into the revolutionary mores and became so well-entrenched that its contagion now reaches almost all revolutionary circles in other countries.

In his critique of Bolshevik terror, Steinberg does not take a purely moral standpoint, repudiating all violence; he admits violence in certain cases and within certain limits. But he criticizes the system of terror because of the damage it causes to the very goal it pursues. Socialism, he says (and in this we agree with him once again), is not only an economic idea; it aims at a certain organization of production, but also at a more just way of life for humanity. It must therefore choose its means. The Marxists, following the Jesuits and the Jacobins, say: the end justifies the means. This may be true when one considers only *external* success, but this success does not prove that the goal has been reached; for it to be *truly* reached, it requires certain means, to the exclusion of others.

Socialism wants the happiness not of an abstract "humanity," but of the real, concrete individual, and no formula justi-

fies the crushing of this individual. “We fight, not for the proletarian or the peasant, but for the oppressed person. We fight, therefore, not the landowner or the bourgeois, but the regime of exploitation.”

And what were the consequences of forgetting these truths? Governmental centralization and political oppression have made it so that “everywhere the popular masses have remained indifferent; the workers *do not create*: they carry out drudgery.” This is why nothing succeeds for the government: all its measures, economic and political, fail.³ The productivity of labor depends not only on economic but also on moral reasons; the system of terror has dealt it a mortal blow. Instead of emulation in work, it gives rise to fear, fraud, and egoism. “Not one of the millions of inhabitants cares to create anything socially useful or valuable in the long-term.” To the extent that a revolutionary power is allowed to appeal to self-interest, it must show the advantages of solidarity and understanding; otherwise, misery provokes the struggle of each against all, which is the most deplorable of economic systems and conflicts between the various categories of the dispossessed.

In the moral domain, the same failure occurs. Systematic terror leads to police rule, provokes perpetual revolts, and makes people hate the government. And if reaction has failed in Russia, despite all the armies raised with the help of the Allies, it is thanks to the hostility of the people in the countryside and in the cities to everything that tries to restore the old regime, and purely thanks to terror.

To defend the revolutionary terror, various arguments are put forward which the Russian author refutes one by one. We will stop and focus on only one: the allegation that this is the will of the popular masses themselves. First of all, even if it were the case, it still would not be binding for us, but it is

³ The “NEP,” the New Economic Policy admitting private capital again, is an admission of this bankruptcy.

in fact false. At the beginning of the Russian revolution, from February–March 1917, and also after October, there were acts of popular violence directed against representatives of the old regime: policemen, gendarmes, and officers. But this popular anger was short-lived and, as soon as the people felt their oppressors were well-defeated, they had only contempt or pity for them. If the ruling party had taken advantage of this little resentment in the popular soul to direct the revolution in the way of concord, the events would have taken another turn. But instead, it saw fit to stir up hatred, to set an example by way of reprisals; from 1918 on, terror became an official system with its Cheka, its shootings, its armed expeditions against the peasants, etc.⁴ From then on, terror came only from *above*, while the workers more than once showed feelings of humanity (for example when they acted as judges in the People’s Courts). It is therefore slander to blame the Russian people for so much bloodshed.

Up to now we have agreed completely with this Russian author. But there is a weak point in his argumentation: it is impossible for him to find a criterion to differentiate between acceptable and non-acceptable violence. He admits it himself. As long as it is a question of civil war or barricade fighting, violence is justified by the fact that the two armed opponents are fighting as equals. The same is true of the terrorist act against a representative of power: not to mention the fact that revolutionaries only ever resort to this means when pushed to the limit; the very fact that the murderer, in killing, deliberately gives his life means that we do not allow any comparison between him and the executioner. But there are other cases. Steinberg’s faction does not refuse to use power and does not deny governmental violence, while at the same time placing quite strict limits on it. Thus our author accepts that the bourgeois be

⁴ Ed: The secret police of the Soviet Union who were primarily responsible for the Red Terror.