

**THE REVOLUTIONARY
SPIRIT PRECEDING THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION**

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The revolutionary spirit preceding the French revolution by Félix Rocquain & J. D. Hunting

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PRECEDING

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY

FÉLIX ROCQUAIN

CONDENSED AND TRANSLATED BY

J. D. HUNTING

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY PROFESSOR HUXLEY



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
INTRODUCTION BY PROFESSOR HUXLEY	vii
AUTHOR'S PREFACE	xi
I. THE REGENCY (1715-1723)	1
II. MINISTRY OF THE DUC DE BOURBON AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE FLEURY MINISTRY (1724-1733)	19
III. SECOND HALF OF THE FLEURY MINISTRY (1733-1743)	35
IV. GOVERNMENT OF LOUIS XV. (1743-1751)	45
V. GOVERNMENT OF LOUIS XV. (1752-1754)	58
VI. GOVERNMENT OF LOUIS XV. (1754-1762)	72
VII. GOVERNMENT OF LOUIS XV. (1762-1770)	89
VIII. END OF THE GOVERNMENT OF LOUIS XV. (1770-1774)	105
IX. REIGN OF LOUIS XVI.—THE TURGOT MINISTRY (1774-1776)	120
X. REIGN OF LOUIS XVI.—THE NECKER MINISTRY (1776-1781)	135
XI. REIGN OF LOUIS XVI.—THE JOLY DE FLEURY, D'ORMESSON, AND CALONNE MINISTRIES (1781-1786)	148
XII. THE ASSEMBLY OF NOTABLES AND THE CONVOCATION OF THE STATES-GENERAL (1787-1789)	161

INTRODUCTION.

THE interval between the fall of the Bourbon despotism and the rise of that of Napoleon, during which the social and political foundations of old France were swept away, forms an epoch in the history of the modern world, the importance of which looms the larger the farther the stream of Time carries us away from it. Far-reaching as were the moral and political consequences of the great events of the sixteenth century, they begin to look small beside those of the later age; and even the speculative controversies of the Reformation dwindle down to mere theological squabbles in face of the issues tried at the great popular assize of the Revolution, when every authority, whether its pretensions were human or divine, was called upon to make them good before the tribunal of reason.

And, while the questions debated with so much rancour and fought over at the cost of so much bloodshed, between Papists and Protestants, are rapidly losing their interest, in view of the sense of the insecurity of the ground upon which both combatants take their stand, which is rapidly growing among thinking men; the grave political and social problems which press for solution, at the present day, are the same as those which offered themselves a hundred years ago.

In the Draft of a Constitution, which Robespierre drew up and presented to the Convention in 1793, I fail to discover any article which goes beyond the requirements of liberal politicians among ourselves, who would be shocked to

be considered extremists. Moreover, the *à priori* method of the *Philosophes*, who, ignoring the conditions of scientific method, settled the most difficult problems of practical politics by fine-drawn deductions from axiomatic assumptions about natural rights, is as much in favour at the end of the nineteenth, as it was in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Under these circumstances, it should be needless to commend the scientific study of the phenomena of the revolutionary epoch to all thoughtful men. Histories of the French Revolution abound; but too many of them are elaborate pleadings for one or other of the parties concerned in the struggle, not without an eye to the illustration and enforcement of the writer's own principles; or they are vivid pictures drawn by literary artists, which may enable the reader to see, but do not greatly help him to understand, the Revolution. Most of us, however, can be trusted to bring a goodly store of both partizanship and imagination to the study of the past; what most lack is the scientific temper which aims only at accuracy in matters of fact, and logical impartiality in drawing conclusions therefrom.

Goethe has somewhere said that the most valuable result of the study of history is the enthusiasm which it creates; and it may be true that such is the best to be got out of ordinary histories. But the enthusiasms thus begotten have so often turned out to be mistaken; the "verdict of history" has been so often upset on appeal; and experience drives home to every man so strongly the extreme difficulty of arriving at just judgments about the conduct of others, even when he has ample means of knowing the circumstances, that there is great room for historians who will renounce the enthusiasm and verdict business and be content with

devoting their best efforts to the exposition of the bare cold-blooded truth.

I am disposed to think that the conception of the nature and the causes of the French Revolution, which is most widely prevalent among us (students of De Tocqueville and of Taine, of course, excepted), departs widely from this ideal standard. Its causes are popularly sought in the decay of religion and morality consequent upon the diffusion of the teachings of a handful of sceptical and levelling Philosophers; and its nature is defined as an outbreak of the covetous ferocity of the mob let loose, when the bonds of society had been destroyed by these same terrible *Philosophes*. Even the question, whether the Revolution was perhaps the result of a whole nation going mad, has not seemed inconsistent with the sanity of the querist. And yet, when the facts of history are fully and impartially set forth, the wonder is rather that sane men put up with the chaotic imbecility, the hideous injustices, the shameless scandals, of the *Ancien Régime*, in the earlier half of the century, many years before the political *Philosophes* wrote a line,—why the Revolution did not break out in 1754 or 1757, as it was on the brink of doing, instead of being delayed, by the patient endurance of the people, for another generation.

It can hardly be doubted that the Revolution of '89 owed many of its worst features to the violence of a populace degraded to the level of the beasts by the effect of the institutions under which they herded together and starved; and that the work of reconstruction which it attempted was to carry into practice the speculations of Mably and of Rousseau. But, just as little, does it seem open to question that, neither the writhings of the dregs of the populace in their misery, nor the speculative demonstrations of the

Philosophers, would have come to much, except for the revolutionary movement which had been going on ever since the beginning of the century. The deeper source of this lay in the just and profound griefs of at least 95 per cent. of the population, comprising all its most valuable elements, from the agricultural peasants to the merchants and the men of letters and science, against the system by which they were crushed, or annoyed, whichever way they turned. But the surface-current was impelled by the official defenders of the *Ancien Régime* themselves. It was the Court, the Church, the Parliaments, and, above all, the Jesuits, acting in the interests of the despotism of the Papacy, who, in the first half of the eighteenth century, effectually undermined all respect for authority, whether civil or religious, and justified the worst that was or could be said by the *Philosophes* later on.

These important truths appeared to me to be so clearly set forth and demonstrated in M. Rocquain's "*L'Esprit révolutionnaire avant la Revolution*," when I fell in with the book some years ago, that I ventured to speak of its merits, forgetting at the time the commendation of the work by Mr. Lecky in the fifth volume of his "*History of the Eighteenth Century in England*," which it would have been much more to the purpose to quote.

However, I may congratulate myself on having done some service by suggesting the translation of M. Rocquain's work. The hint has been carried into effect; and the English version which has been prepared by Miss Hunting, with the author's sanction, though abridged, in deference to practical needs, appears to me to present a clear and adequate view of the scope and substance of the original.

T. H. HUXLEY.