

THE ANATOMY OF REVOLUTION

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FOR more than forty years now, it has been an article of faith, ardently preached by Communists throughout the world, that Social Revolution is an inexorable necessity in all countries in which it has not already occurred. At the outset, the Russian Bolsheviks were indeed convinced that the revolution could not survive in Russia unless it was speedily followed by revolutions in other advanced capitalist countries; and even when, after the disappointment of their hopes of world revolution and their successful survival in its absence, they had given up this particular belief, they did not cease to do what they could to foment revolutionary movements in the capitalist and colonial countries. Up to 1945 they were almost uniformly unsuccessful in this: up to 1939 the successful revolutions were those which led to Fascist or similar forms of dictatorship and not to the victory of Socialism, and during the war itself social revolution went in most areas into cold storage. But the defeat of the Axis powers brought with it the triumph of revolutionary movements of the left in eastern Europe; and since 1945 Communist revolution has won its great victory in China, and there have been several successful revolutions in other parts of the world.

What, we may ask, are the conditions that chiefly make for or against actual or attempted revolutions in the world today? Revolutions do not happen, or fail to happen, without cause, and cause which can be stated with a good deal of precision. Thus, if it is asked why there has been neither actual nor attempted revolution in Western Europe since quite soon after the first world war, when what did occur ended in sheer failure, it is possible to make a fairly precise answer. There were no attempted revolutions in Great Britain or Scandinavia, or France or Italy, or other advanced countries of Western Europe because too few people wanted them, or were even prepared to tolerate them, to make the attempt worthwhile. In Great Britain and Scandinavia conditions were not bad enough to tempt enough people to try to make them better—and risk making them much worse—by revolutionary attempts; and on the whole things were getting better, save for a short time during the depression of the early 'thirties. The people were used to a considerable element of democratic parliamentary government, and pre-

ferred putting their hopes in reform by constitutional means to embarking on military coups. Even in France and at a later stage Italy, though there were strong minorities committed as Communists to revolutionary aspirations, these minorities were not strong enough to run the risk of attempting actual revolution: they knew they would be defeated if they resorted to arms and were afraid the practical result would be the destruction of such democratic liberties as they did possess and the transfer of power into the reactionary hands of the army leaders.

In the United States, though the tribulations of the 1930's were far worse than in Western Europe, there was no hint of the possibility of revolutionary action: for one thing because, amid the apparent collapse of American capitalism, there was no other active claimant to take its place. In Europe, on the other hand, there were everywhere forceful Socialist movements of long standing, professedly ready with an alternative greatly superior to capitalism; but, in practice, the Socialist Parties showed no eagerness at all to use the difficulties of capitalism as opportunities for making a forthright revolutionary attempt. The only successful left-wing revolution in Europe during the 1930's was that which set up the Spanish Republic, and within a few years the Republic was snuffed out with the armed aid of the Fascist powers, while the more democratic States showed no readiness to go to its help. Moreover, whereas left-wing revolution was victorious for a time in Spain, in other parts of Europe the tendency was all the other way—with the establishment of royal and military dictatorships in the Balkans, the triumph of Fascism in Germany and Italy and of a kind of semi-Fascism in Poland, the annexation and conquest of Austria by the Nazis, and the dismemberment and overthrow of Czechoslovakia by the same anti-democratic force.

This was not mainly because the development of modern techniques has made revolution a more difficult matter for the left, even if it has. For, if it has become easier for the military to suppress revolts, that, after all, depends on the willingness of the military to do so; and in most countries such willingness can no longer be taken for granted. Even if armed revolution stands no chance at all against the solid opposition of the armed forces, when did it ever stand any in such circumstances? It has not grown easier for an élite of officers to act regardless of the soldiers' attitude, nor can officers nowadays trust blindly that their orders will be obeyed. The real reason against revolutions

in Western Europe is that most people have not wanted them, and any attempt at them would have been met by a widespread readiness to play a part in putting them down.

However, whereas this can be confidently asserted in the case of the advanced Western countries, their case is obviously exceptional, because they enjoy some measure of democratic government, and above all of self-government, and because their peoples are for the most part relatively well off. As against this, Communist revolution succeeded ten years ago in China, when the Communists had succeeded in putting themselves at the head of a really nation-wide movement against the Japanese and against Chiang Kai-shek; and only a few months ago a popular revolution in Iraq, led by elements from the armed forces, made an end of the monarchy and slew the monarch and the most powerful statesmen of the Establishment. Why did these revolutions occur—and succeed—despite the opposition to them, not only of the friends of the Establishment in the countries concerned, but also of the United States, the most powerful capitalist country? They succeeded, in both cases, because they were well led and organized, but still more because the forces arrayed against them had lost too much support to be able to offer effective resistance. In China, the Kuomintang had ceased to be a widely supported national party, and had degenerated into an unsavoury clique; and in Iraq, Nuri and the supporters of the *status quo* had made no attempt to enforce that land-reform without which the main body of the people could not hope to reap any benefit from the pouring out of oil resources on projects of economic development; so that, as in Egypt a few years earlier, the middle ranks of the army officers had largely gone over to the side of the revolution.

Neither in China nor in Egypt or Iraq was the revolution mainly the work of the industrial proletariat. It could not have been; for the proletariat in all three countries was much too undeveloped to take the lead. In China, Mao's great achievement was that he realized the need to base the revolution on the peasants, and succeeded by many years of effort in building up a really solid peasant movement of revolt. In Iraq and Egypt, such a movement hardly existed; and the army played the leading role because there was no one else to play it—though both peasants and industrial workers were ready enough to accept it when it had come about. It was because they realized this that the American and British Governments finally stood back

from intervening against the revolution in Iraq. They could probably have put it down easily enough, by sheer military force; but how would they have governed the country afterwards? The British and Americans, like the French, have not shrunk from opposing revolutionary movements wherever they have seen their way, not only to suppressing them by force, but also to finding enough leaders to govern a country subsequently so as to secure their interests. But it is of no use to attempt what they cannot hope to be able to pursue. A backward country can still make a successful revolution provided it is united enough not to be governed by quislings from among its own people. But it needs to have, among its revolutionaries, the men who have the capacity to organize the revolution with success, and to take the administration of the country into their own hands when it has been made.

So far, I have been discussing conditions which apply to national revolutions directed against oppressive oligarchies of the same racial stock as those who revolt against them. Conditions may be substantially different when a people is held down by a dynasty of alien race, which keeps it excluded from all effective share in governmental power. For in such cases one may take it almost for granted that the armed forces of the State will be made up of elements on whose loyalty the oligarchs can rely, and that great care will be taken to prevent the main body of the people from possessing arms or having any experience in their use. When these things are done, violent revolution is hardly possible as long as the ruling oligarchy remains united among itself and is sufficiently resolute to keep the key positions of influence in its own hands—provided it is also ruthless enough to make effective use of its power. And of that there can be, in the light of the record, little doubt, as long as the oligarchy remains free to do as it pleases, without interference from outside. Even in such circumstances, there can be dangerous and obstructive revolutionary movements, as Mau Mau has shown in Kenya; but they are unlikely to succeed, even in bringing enough outside pressure to bear, for the very methods to which they find themselves forced to resort are liable to be such as alienate a good deal of potential outside support. I found myself hesitatingly on the side of Mau Mau against the Kenya settlers; but I could not help detesting much in the brutality and cruelty involved in it, and many potential backers of the black man's cause in Great Britain were undoubtedly driven by this into

outright opposition.

It does not, then, follow that oppression is in itself enough to generate revolution, either successful or even attempted; for revolution requires hope and a positive objective, and therefore usually calls for conscious revolutionary leadership. The Russian and Chinese Revolutions were both examples in which this leadership existed and was deliberately made ready for its task. Not that the leadership would have sufficed in the absence of a readiness to follow it among the people, any more than the people's readiness would have sufficed without the leadership. But the way for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was made ready by the collapse of government which had preceded it, and the Bolsheviks held their hands until the collapse had gone so far that there was no strong power left to resist them. Even in the case of China, Mao's victory over Chiang Kai-shek was delayed until the Kuomintang had lost most of its basis of support and could no longer administer or defend the country. Revolutions, in fact, usually occur when disintegration has already overtaken the forces to which they are opposed—or at least are seldom successful except in face of such disintegration.

Disintegration, however, may arise from more than one cause. It may be the result of a breach in the ranks of a governing élite, or it may occur, even without such a breach, if the élite is pursuing what is, in the objective conditions, an unworkable policy—as I think thoroughgoing *apartheid* is bound to be in South Africa. But revolution will follow even the pursuit of a sheerly impracticable policy only if such a policy is persisted in when it is sheerly failing to work, and the élite clings to it despite its evident failure. The best hope in South Africa is not violent revolution, in which the scales would of necessity be weighted very heavily against the Africans, but is a modification of white attitudes following on a realization of the sheer absurdity of what is being attempted at present. In the absence of such a modification black Africa will doubtless in the long run be driven into violent revolt, despite the serious difficulties in its way; but it is not likely to succeed until or unless it can get help from those parts of Africa which have been able to achieve their emancipation without violence.