

Letter to the Pittsfield *Eagle*

Communications

Says Modern Critics May Be Wrong, Too

Rev. Earl Davis Compares French Revolution with Russian One

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To the Editor of *The Eagle*:

The word "Revolution" seems to be in the air. I suppose that is why I have been reading a great deal during the past year concerning the French revolution. I have found out many interesting and comforting things. When my long-faced friend solemnly tells of the terrible things that are in store for us, and with as great solemnity quotes learned men and statesmen of the great peril that is spreading all over the world, destroying property, government, business, and people as well, I comfort my soul by recalling what some equally able and influential statesmen said about the French revolution.

Of course I realize that it is perfectly proper and safe to speak of the French revolution. It happened in 1789. The great symbolic day to the French people is Bastille day, July 14. We celebrated Bastille day in this country last July. It was celebrated in all the allied countries. There was even talk of making it an international holiday for the purpose of celebrating the dawn of democracy in Europe. That interested me deeply, for I have always liked the idea of international democracy. It seemed quite wonderful to me to think that all the world might sing the Marseillaise with a common meaning.

But I was curious to know what people thought of the French revolution in the days of its youth, before it had become respectable through age. So I began reading. I found that there was a great difference of opinion both in France and in Europe, as well as in the United States. Some people gave their lives for it. Other lives were sacrificed to crush it. Some people were indifferent to it. Others were

afraid of it. About everything was said about it then that is said about the Russian revolution today. Some people passionately espoused it. In England there was a revolution society that was intimately connected with the leaders of the French revolution. They carried on what the critics were pleased to call "propagandism." Joseph Priestly, the great theologian and scientist, whose descendent lives in Pittsfield, was one of the propagandists. So furious were the people of the town where he lived, that they gathered a mob, burned his house and the chapel where he preached. He was driven to London for safety, and later came to America.

It quickly became a great political issue. Edmund Burke, the great Whig statesman, was one of the leaders among those who saw nothing but evil in the great French revolution. His "Reflections on the French Revolution" is a document well worth reading in these days. But in "A Letter to a Noble Lord" one finds a choice bit of vituperative writing that may be read with relish today. He is discussing the relative merits of "reform" and "revolution" as methods of progress. He enlightens us as follows:

All this, in effect, I think, but am not sure. I have said elsewhere. It cannot at this time be too often repeated; line upon line; precept upon precept; until it comes into the currency of a proverb, to innovate is not to reform. The French revolutionists complained of everything; they refused to reform anything; and they left nothing, no, nothing at all unchanged. The consequences are before us—not in remote history; not in future prognostication; they are about us; they are upon us. They shake the public security; they menace private enjoyment. They dwarf the growth of the young; they break the quiet of the old. If we travel they stop our way. They infest us in town; they pursue us to the country. Our business is interrupted; our repose is troubled; our pleasures are saddened; our very studies are poisoned and perverted, and knowledge is rendered worse than ignorance, by the enormous evils of this dreadful innovation. The revolution harpies of France sprung from night and hell, or from that chaotic anarchy, which generates equivocally "all monstrous, all prodigious things," cuckoo-like, adulterously lay their eggs, and brood over, and hatch them in the nest of every neighboring

state. These obscene harpies who deck themselves in I know not what divine attributes, but are in reality foul and ravenous birds of prey, (both mothers and daughters), flutter over our heads, and souse down upon our tables, and leave nothing unrent, unrifled, unravaged, or un-polluted with the slime of their filthy offal.¹

This is what the great Edmund Burke thought of the French revolution, the very same French revolution which all the world celebrated July 14th last. Either Burke was wrong in his estimate or we are fools to celebrate a thing which to Burke was the essence of all evil. May not our uncritical critics of the Russian revolution be mistaken in their estimate of what is really going on in Russia? May it not be possible that some day, perhaps a hundred or so years hence, people will be celebrating the Russian revolution as we have celebrated the French revolution? At least it is worth noting that in this case at least a great statesman was in error.

Anyhow when people tell me that the Russian revolution is all bad, and that the whole world is going to the damnation-bow-wows because of the spread of the insidious Russian propaganda I recall that great individuals and great nations thought the same about France one hundred and twenty or more years ago. A hundred and twenty years later the entire world, less a few monarchial nations, responded to the call of a war to defend the very principles that Burke denounced as the abomination of desolation. There is a chance that our modern "Burkes" may be wrong.

Yours truly,

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, Mass., April 8. 1919.

¹ Edmund Burke, *A Letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, To A Noble Lord, on the Attacks Made Upon Him and His Pension, in the House of Lords, by The Duke of Bedford and the Earl of Lauderdale, early in the present Sessions of Parliament. 1796*, pp. 20-1. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was an Irish-born British statesman, economist and philosopher.