

# THE STRANGLERED REVOLUTION

By LEON TROTSKY

The book by André Malraux, "Les Conquerants" [The Conquerors] has been sent to me from various parts and, I even believe in four copies, but unfortunately I read it after a delay of eighteen months or two years. The book is devoted to the Chinese revolution, that is, to the greatest subject of the last five years. A fine and well-knit style, the discriminating eye of an artist, original and daring observation—all confer upon the novel an exceptional importance. If we write about it here it is not because the book is a work of talent, although this is not a negligible fact, but because it offers a source of political lessons of the highest value. Do they come from Malraux? No, they flow from the racial itself unknown to the author and they go against him. This does honor to the observer and to the artist, but not to the revolutionist. However, we have the right to evaluate Malraux too from this point of view; in his own name and above all in the name of Garine, his self self, the author does not hesitate to expose his judgments on the revolution.

The book is called a novel. In fact, we have before us a romanticized chronicle of the Chinese revolution, from its first period to the period of Canton. The chronicle is not complete. Social vigor is sometimes lacking from the picture. But for that there pass before the reader not only luminous episodes of the revolution but also clear-cut silhouettes which are graven in the memory like social symbols.

## An Unforgettable Picture

By little colored touches following the method of stipplers, Malraux gives an unforgettable picture of the General strike, not, to be sure, as it is below, not as it is carried out, but as it is observed from above: the Europeans do not get their dinner, the European swelter in the heat, the Chinese have ceased to work in the kitchens and to make the ventilators work. This is not a reproach to the author: the foreign artist could undoubtedly not have dealt with his theme otherwise. But another complaint can be made which is of importance to him; the book is lacking in a congenial affinity between the writer, in spite of all he knows, understands and can do, and his heroine, the revolution.

The sympathies of the author, which are active ones, for insurgent China are unmistakable. But chance bursts upon these sympathies. They are corroded by the excesses of individualism and by aesthetic caprice. In reading the book with sustained attention one sometimes experiences a feeling of vexation, when, in the tone of the persuasive recital one perceives a note of protecting irony towards the barbarians capable of enthusiasm. That China is backward, that many of its political manifestations bear a primitive character—nobody asks that they be passed over in silence. But a correct perspective is needed which puts every object in its place. The Chinese events, on the basis of which the "novel" of Malraux unfolds itself, are incomparably more important for the future destiny of human culture than the vain and pitiful uproar of European parliaments and the mountain of literary products of stagnant civilizations. Malraux seems to feel a certain timidity to take this into account.

In the novel, there are pages, fine in their intensity which show how revolutionary hatred is born of the yoke, of ignorance, of slavery, and is tempered like steel. These pages might have entered into the Anthology of the Revolution if Malraux had approached the masses with greater freedom and intrepidity, if he had not introduced into his study a small note of blase superiority, seeming to excuse himself for his transient contact with the insurrection of the Chinese people as much perhaps before himself as before the academic mandarins in France and the traffickers in opium for the mind.

Borodin represents the Comintern in the post of high counsellor in the Canton government. Garine, the favorite of the author, is charged with propaganda. All the work is done within the framework of the Kuo Min Tang. Borodin, Garine, the Russian general Galen the Frenchman Gerard, the German Klein, constitute a primitive bureaucracy of the revolution raising itself above the insurgent people and conducting its own "revolutionary policy" instead of conducting the policy of the revolution.

The local organizations of the Kuo Min Tang are defined as follows: "Unions of a few fanatics, manifestly brave, of a few moneyed men who seek consideration or security, of numerous students, of coolies" (see pages 29 and 30). Not only do bour-

geois enter into each organization but they completely lead the party. The Communists extol the Kuo Min Tang. The workers and the peasants are persuaded to take no action that might rob the devoted friends of the bourgeoisie. "Such are the societies that we control (more or less, do not deceive yourselves about it)" (see page 29). An edifying avowal. The bureaucracy of the Comintern tried to "control" the class struggle in the economic life of the backward countries. But a revolution cannot be controlled. One can only give a political expression to its internal forces. One must know to which of these forces to link his destiny.

"The coolies are about to discover that they exist, simply that they exist" (see page 31). That's well aimed. But to feel that they exist, the coolies the industrial workers and the peasants must overthrow those who prevent them from existing. Foreign domination is indissolubly bound up with the domestic yoke. The coolies must not only drive out Baldwin or MacDonald but also overthrow the ruling classes. One cannot be accomplished without the other. Thus, the awakening of the human personality in the masses of China, who exceed ten times the population of France, is immediately transformed into the lava of the social revolution. A magnificent spectacle!

But here Borodin appears on the scene and declares: "In the revolution, the workers must do the coolie work for the bourgeoisie."\* The social enslavement from which they want to liberate themselves is found by the workers to be transposed into the sphere of politics. To whom do they owe this perfidious operation? To the bureaucracy of the Comintern. In trying to "control the Kuo Min Tang", it actually adds the bourgeoisie which seeks "consideration and security" in enslaving the coolies who want to exist.

Borodin, who remains in the background all the time characterizes himself in the novel as a "man of action", as a "professional revolutionist", as a living incarnation of Bolshevism on the soil of China. Nothing is further from the truth! Here is the political biography of Borodin: in 1903, at the age of 19, he emigrated to America; in 1918, he returned to Moscow where, thanks to his knowledge of English, he "insured contact with the foreign parties"; he was arrested in Glasgow in 1922 then he was delegated to China as representative of the Comintern. Having quit Russia before the first revolution and having returned there after the third, Borodin appeared as the consummate representative of that bureaucracy of the state and of the party which recognized the revolution only after its victory. When it is a question of young people, it is sometimes nothing more than a matter of chronology. With people of the age of 40 or 50, it is already a political characterization. If Borodin rallied brilliantly to the victorious revolution in Russia, it does not in the least signify that he was called upon to assure the victory of the revolution in China. People of this type assimilate without difficulty the gestures and intonations of "professional revolutionists". Many of them, by their protective coloration, not only deceive others but most frequently themselves. The audacious inflexibility of the Bolshevik is metamorphosed with them into that cynicism of the functionary ready for anything. Ah! to have a mandate from the Central Committee! This sacrosanct safeguard Borodin always had in his pocket.

## Garine's False Radicalism

Garine is not a functionary, he is more original than Borodin and perhaps even closer to the revolutionary type. But he is deprived of the indispensable formation; dilettante and transient sentry, he gets hopelessly entangled in the great events and this is revealed at every step. With regard to the slogans of the Chinese revolution, he expresses himself thus: "... democratic prattling, rights of the people, etc." (see page 36). This has a radical ring but it is a false radicalism. The slogans of democracy are execrable prattling in the mouth of Poincare Herriot, Leon Blum, sleight-of-hand artists of France and jailors of Indo-China, of Algeria and of Morocco. But when the Chinese rebel in the name of the "rights of the people", this has as little to do with prattling as the slogans of the French revolution in the eighteenth century. At Hongkong, the Bri-

\* See the letter of Tchen Du-Hsiu to the Chinese Communists in the Militant last year.

tish birds of prey threatened, during the strike, to re-establish corporal punishment. "The rights of man and of the citizen" meant at Hongkong the right of the Chinese not to be flogged by the British whip. To unmask the democratic rottenness of the imperialists is to serve the revolution; to call the slogans of the insurrection of the oppressed "prattling", is to aid involuntarily the imperialists.

A good inoculation of Marxism would have preserved the author from fatal contempt of this order. But Garine in general, considers that revolutionary doctrine is "doctrinary rubbish". He is, you see, one of those for whom the revolution is only a definite "state of affairs". Isn't this astonishing? But it is just because the revolution is a "state of affairs", that is, a stage in the development of society conditioned by objective causes and subjected to definite laws, that a scientific mind can foresee the general direction of processes. Only the study of the anatomy of society and of its physiology permits one to react to the course of events by basing oneself upon scientific foresight and not upon the conjunctures of a dilettante. The revolutionist who "despises" revolutionary doctrine is worth no more than the healer who despises medical doctrine which he does not know or than the engineer who challenges technology. People who, without the aid of science try to rectify this "state of affairs" which is a disease, are called sorcerers or charlatans and are prosecuted in conformity with law. Had there existed a tribunal to judge the sorcerers of the revolution, it is probable that Borodin, like his Muscovite inspirers, would have been severely condemned. I am afraid that Garine himself would not have issued unscathed from the affair.

## Tcheng Dai and Hong

Two figures are opposed to each other in the novel, like the two poles of the national revolution: old Tcheng Dai, the spiritual authority of the Right wing of the Kuo Min Tang, the prophet and the saint of the bourgeoisie and Hong, the young leader of the terrorists. Both are depicted with great force. Tcheng Dai embodies the old Chinese culture translated into the language of European culture; by this exquisite garment, he "ennobles" the interests of all the ruling classes of China. To be sure, Tcheng Dai wants national liberation, but he dreads the masses more than the imperialists; he hates the revolution more than the yoke placed upon the nation. If he marches ahead of it, it is only to pacify it, to subdue it, to exhaust it. He conducts a policy of resistance on two fronts, against imperialism and against the revolution, the policy of Gandhi in India, the policy which, in definite periods and in one form or another, the bourgeoisie has conducted at every longitude and latitude. Passive resistance is born of the tendency of the bourgeoisie to canalize the movement of the masses and to forfeit it.

When Garine says that Tcheng Dai's influence rises above politics, one can only shrug one's shoulders. The masked policy of the "upright man" in China as in India expresses in the sublime and abstractly moralizing form the conservative interests of the possessors. The personal disinterestedness of Tcheng Dai is in no sense in opposition to his political function: the exploiters need "upright men" like the ecclesiastical hierarchy needs saints.

Who gravitate around Tcheng Dai? The novel replies with meritorious precision: a world "of old mandarins, smugglers of opium or of photographs, men of letters who have become merchants, lawyers from the faculty of Paris, intellectuals of all sorts" (page 125). Behind them stands a solid bourgeoisie bound up with England, and which arms General Tang against the revolution. In the expectation of victory, Tang prepares to make Tcheng Dai the head of the government. Both of them, Tcheng Dai and Tang, nevertheless continue to be members of the Kuo Min Tang which Borodin and Garine serve.

When Tang has a village attacked by his armies, and when he prepares to butcher the revolutionists, beginning with Borodin and Garine, his party comrades, the latter with the aid of Hong, mobilize and arm the unemployed. But after the victory won over Tang, the leaders do not seek to change a thing that existed before. They cannot break the party which is doubly connected with Tcheng Dai because they have no confidence in the workers, the coolies, the revolutionary masses, they are themselves contaminated with the prejudices of Tcheng Dai whose chosen arm they are.

In order not to rebuff the bourgeoisie they are forced to enter into struggle with Hong. Who is he and where does he come from? "From misery" (page 41). He is of those who are making the revolution and not of those who rally to it when it is victorious. Having come to the idea of killing the English governor of Hongkong, Hong is concerned with only one thing: "When I am condemned to capital punishment, the young people will have to be told to imitate me" (page 40). To Hong a clear program must be given: to raise the workers, to assemble them, to arm them and to oppose them to Tcheng Dai as to an enemy. But the bureaucracy of the Comintern looks for Tcheng Dai's friendship, repulses Hong and exasperates him. Hong exterminates bankers and merchants one after another, the very ones who "support" the Kuo Min Tang, Hong kills missionaries: "those who teach people to support misery must be punished, Christian priests or others . . ." (page 274). If Hong does not find the right road, it is the fault of Borodin and Garine who have placed the revolution in the tow of the bankers and the merchants. Hong reflects the mass which is already rising but which has not yet rubbed its eyes or softened its hands. He tries by the revolver and the knife to act for the masses whom the agents of the Comintern are paralyzing. That is, frankly, the truth about the Chinese revolution.

Nevertheless, the Canton government "vacillates while seeking not to fall from Borodin and Garine who hold the police and the trade unions to Tcheng Dai who holds nothing at all but nevertheless exists" (page 72). We have an almost perfect picture of the duality of power. The representatives of the Comintern have in their hands the trade unions of Canton, the police, the cadet school of Whampoa, the sympathy of the masses, the aid of the Soviet Union. Tcheng Dai as a "moral" authority, that is, the prestige of the mortally distracted possessors. The friends of Tcheng Dai sit in a powerless benevolent government supported by the conciliators. But is that not the regime of the February revolution, the Kerenskyist system, with the sole difference that the role of the Mensheviks is played by the pseudo-Bolsheviks? Borodin has no doubt of it even though he is made up as a Bolshevik and takes his make-up seriously.

The ruling thought of Garine and of Borodin is to prohibit Chinese and foreign boats, cruising towards the port of Canton, from putting in at Hongkong. These people, who consider themselves realistic revolutionists, hope, by the commercial blockade to shatter English domination in southern China. They never deem it necessary first of all to overthrow the government of the Canton bourgeoisie which only waits for the moment to surrender the revolution to England. No, Borodin and Garine knock every day at the door of the "government", and hat in hand, ask that the saving decree be promulgated. One of them reminds Garine that at bottom the government is a phantom. Garine is not disconcerted. Phantom or not, he replies, let it go ahead while we need it. That is the way the priest needs relic which he himself fabricates with wax and cotton. What is concealed behind this policy which weakens and debases the revolution? The consideration entertained by a revolutionist from the petty bourgeoisie for a bourgeois with a solid conservatism. It is thus that the reddest of the French radicals is always ready to fall on his knees before Poincare.

## The Weakness of the Masses

But perhaps the masses of Canton are not yet mature enough to overthrow the government of the bourgeoisie? From this whole atmosphere, the conviction arises that without the opposition of the Comintern, the phantom government would long before have been overthrown under the pressure of the masses. Let us admit that the Cantonese workers were still too weak to establish their own power. What, generally speaking, is the weak spot of the masses? Their inclination to follow the exploiters. In this case, the first duty of revolutionists is to help the workers liberate themselves from servile confidence. Nevertheless, the work done by the bureaucracy of the Comintern was diametrically opposed to this. It inculcated in the masses the notion of the necessity to submit to the bourgeoisie and it declared that the enemies of the bourgeoisie were their own enemies.

Not to rebuff Tcheng Dai? But if Tcheng Dai moves off in spite of that, which is inevitable, it would not mean that

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