

Revolution:

FIRE IN THE MINDS OF MEN

The chaotic aftermath of the 1979 overthrow of the pro-Western Shah of Iran is the latest revolution to preoccupy Americans. Yet, in one sense, the Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine runs counter to world experience since the French Revolution of 1789. He preached a total return to Islam. He rejected the prevailing modern revolutionary vision of a manmade Utopia—a faith that has given the world Rousseau, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Fidel Castro. Here, historian James Billington takes a fresh look at how this powerful secular faith developed—and explains why it may be in decline.

by James H. Billington

Americans have great difficulty understanding the dominant world faith of our time: the belief in revolution.

The plain fact is that the militant revolutionaries we see in so many places are believers, no less committed and intense than the Christians or Muslims of an earlier era. What is new is the belief that a perfect secular order will emerge from the violent overthrow of traditional authority. This inherently implausible idea gave political dynamism to Europe during the 19th century and has become the major ideological export of the West to the world during the 20th.

This distinctly modern faith in revolution now shapes the official rhetoric of Moscow and Phnom Penh, Peking and Havana, and a host of Third World capitals. It was born and nourished during the turbulent period extending from the waning of the French Revolution in the late 18th century to the harsh beginnings of the Russian Revolution in the 20th.

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Flanked by angels of "liberty" and "equality," the revolutionary Christ is preaching "fraternity" to a world labeled "France" and crushing the vices of the old royalist regime underfoot.

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

The arena was the Europe of the early industrial age; the main stage, the cramped editorial rooms of radical journals within great European cities. At the center stood the typical 19th-century European revolutionary: not a worker or peasant bent down by toil, but a thinker lifted up by ideas. He was part of a small intellectual elite whose story must be told "from above," much as it may displease those who believe that history in general (and revolutionary history in particular) is essentially made by socioeconomic pressures "from below."

This "elite" focus does not imply indifference to the mass

human suffering that marked this era of great social and economic turmoil in Europe. But, for better or worse, it was passionate intellectuals who created, developed, and, with the help of the printing press, propagated the revolutionary faith. It is important to understand the tradition of revolutionaries no less than the process of revolution.

Starting With Rousseau

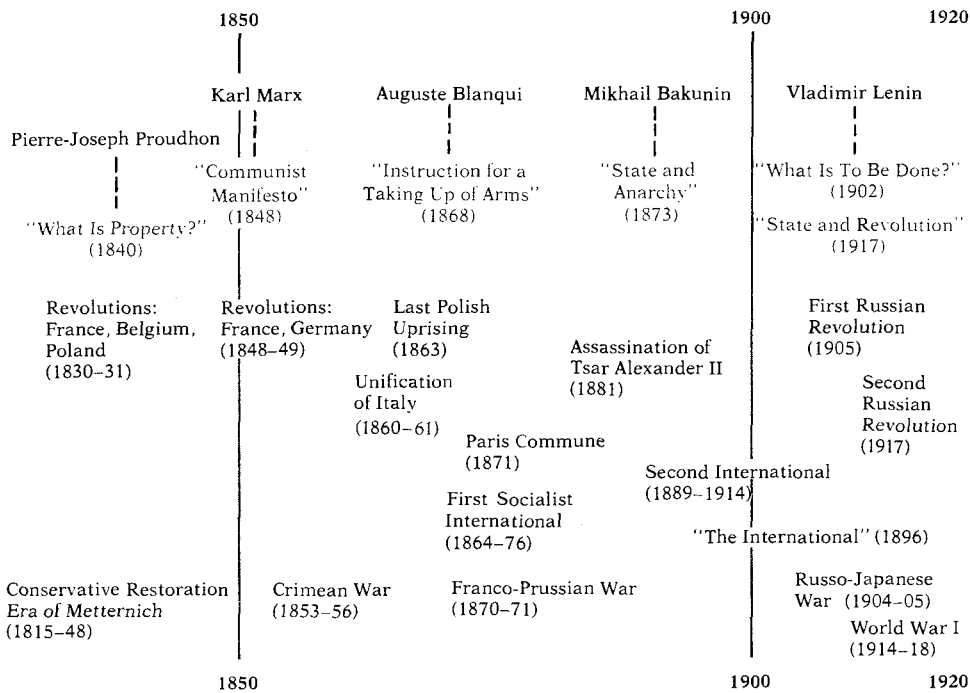
The idea that making revolution could be a full-time vocation was alien to the practical-minded leaders of the American Revolution and to the bourgeois, moderate reformers such as Lafayette who initiated the French Revolution of 1789. However, the French revolutionary government went beyond republicanism to regicide early in 1793—and thence rapidly to terror, paralysis, and retreat. During the late 1790s, the realization grew among a small number of activists that the process of revolution would not in itself bring social harmony or social justice. A new species of man emerged in France to keep the dream alive at any personal cost: the professional revolutionary. He was a youthful intellectual who had little personal stake and even less vocational experience in the Old Regime. He became a full-time militant who argued that the French Revolution was incomplete. He believed in the need for a second and final revolution to realize the promise of a perfect secular society.

The revolutionary faith originated with Jean Jacques Rousseau, the father of romanticism, who wanted to replace inherited tradition with the primitive simplicities of nature. He idealized the unspoiled People as the source of authority for a radical reconstruction of society. His message particularly appealed to his fellow Swiss and to Germans resentful of the domination of French aristocratic culture. Rousseau-ism became revolutionary through the wild growth of occult fraternities and mystical higher Masonic orders, which spread back from Germany into France on the eve of the 1789 revolution and provided the first models for the secret, hierarchical organizations that

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sonal and dynamic machine—the driving force within the factory, which was transforming the hitherto static societies of Germany and Russia with such devastating effect in the late 19th century.

No less fateful than the schism between national and social revolutionaries was the conflict among social revolutionaries that began in the 1840s between Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The former's focus on destroying the capitalist economic system clashed with the latter's war on the centralized bureaucratic state. Proudhon, a rough-hewn native of Besançon, advocated old-fashioned rural virtues and local autonomy against Marx's "materialist centralism." Marx, in turn, denounced Proudhon for his "petit bourgeois" indifference to industrial realities and to Marx's own intellectual authority. The conflict continued between the heirs of Marx (principally in



Vladimir Lenin's small Bolshevik Party played almost no role in destroying tsardom in February 1917 but was able to overthrow the fragile democratic provisional government by October.



Germany and Russia) and of Proudhon (among Latin and Slavic anarchists, syndicalists, and populists). But the increasing power of industrial organization and of intellectuals gave a growing advantage to the Marxists.

The word *intelligentsia* and the thirst for ideology migrated east from Poland to Russia (and from a national to a social revolutionary cause) through the Russian student radicals of the 1860s, who developed a new type of terrorism that was more impersonal, calculating, and dangerous than that of the heroically suicidal Poles. Later, Lenin drew both on this Russian penchant for disciplined violence and on German concepts of machine organization to create the Bolshevism that eventually brought the European revolutionary tradition out of the wilderness and into power in the October Revolution of 1917, amidst the devastation of World War I.

It is important to realize that the revolutionary faith developed in 19th-century Europe only within those societies that had not previously (a) legitimized ideological dissent by breaking with medieval forms of religious authority, and (b) modified monarchical power by accepting some form of organized political opposition. In northern Europe and North America, where these conditions were met by Protestantism and parliamentary traditions, the revolutionary faith attracted almost no indigenous adherents.

Thus, the revolutionary tradition can be seen as a form of political-ideological opposition that arose first against authoritarian Catholicism (in France, Italy, and Poland) and then

against other religiously based autocracies (in Lutheran Prussia, Orthodox Russia). The most dedicated and professional social revolutionaries—from Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal, author of the “Manifesto of Equals” in 1796, through Blanqui, Marx, and Marx’s anarchist rival, Mikhail Bakunin, to Lenin—came from such societies. And each tended to become that rarest of all forms of true believer: a militant atheist.

As they warred against the existing order, revolutionary movements tended to become more internationalist and visionary whenever women played a leading role, as with Flora Tristán, the French founder of the first international proletarian organization, the *Union ouvrière*, in the 1840s. They became more parochial and pragmatic whenever workers were in command, as in England during the 1890s where trade-union activism led to the reformist Labor Party rather than to a revolutionary movement.

The flame of revolutionary faith began its migrations during the 1770s, when some European thinkers followed the king of France’s cousin, Philip of Orleans, in transferring their lighted candles from Christian altars to Masonic lodges. The flame of occult alchemists, which had promised to turn dross into gold, soon reappeared at the center of occult new circles seeking to recreate a lost golden age of brotherhood and equality: Bavarian Illuminists conspiring against the Jesuits in the 1780s, French Philadelphians against Napoleon in 1805–12, Italian “charcoal burners” (Carbonari) against the Hapsburgs in 1812–20. Their campaigns all failed, but they left behind an aroused belief among bright young students throughout Europe in the possibility that a small “microcosm” of purified intellectuals might transform the “macrocosm” of the suffering world.

Operas and Guillotines

In the course of his attempt to overthrow Napoleon in 1812, General Claude-François de Malet was ridiculed for attempting “to use as a lever something which is only a match.” But Malet replied that “with a match one has no need of a lever; one does not lift up the world, one burns it.” Malet’s Italian ally, Luigi Angeloni, whose related conspiracy came closer to succeeding in Italy, subsequently noted after the fall of Napoleon that “the Italian flame” was spreading “the fire of freedom to the most frozen land of Petersburg.” There a group of idealistic officers who had served in the West staged an ill-fated uprising against Tsarist absolutism in December 1825.

The slogan of these first Russian revolutionaries (“From the

spark comes the flame!") had been originated by the first man to predict an egalitarian social revolution in the 18th century (Maréchal) and was to be revived by the first man to realize such a revolution in the 20th (Lenin, who used it as the epigram for his underground journal, *The Spark*).

A recurrent mythic model for revolutionaries—early romantics in Italy and France, the young Marx, the Russians of Lenin's time—was Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods for the use of mankind. The Promethean faith of revolutionaries resembled in many respects the general belief that science would lead men out of darkness into light.

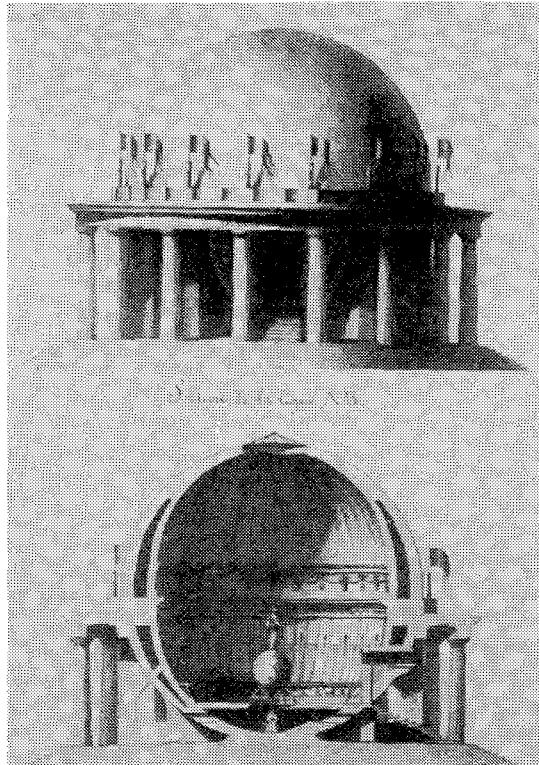
But there was also a more visionary millennial assumption that, on the new day that was dawning, the sun would never set. Early during the French upheaval of 1789 was born what the cultural historian Jean Starobinski has called the "solar myth of revolution." This belief that the sun was rising on a new era in which darkness would vanish forever became implanted "at a level of consciousness that simultaneously interpreted something real and produced a new reality."

The new reality that modern professional revolutionaries sought was radically secular and stridently simple. The ideal was not the balanced complexity of the new American federation, with its separation of constitutional powers, but the occult simplicity of its great seal: an all-seeing eye atop a pyramid over the words *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. In search of primal, natural truths, revolutionaries looked back to pre-Christian antiquity—adopting pagan names like "Anaxagoras" and "Anacharsis," and, of course, "Spartacus." They idealized above all the semimythic Pythagoras as the model intellect-turned-revolutionary and the Pythagorean belief in prime numbers, geometric forms, and the higher harmonies of music.

Indeed, many of the same Strasbourg musicians who first played the revolutionary "Marseillaise" in 1792 had introduced Mozart's *Magic Flute* to French audiences in the same city only a few months earlier. The last solo words of that opera seemed to explain the fuller meaning of the *jour de gloire* that Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle's anthem had proclaimed:

The rays of the sun have vanquished the night,
The powers of darkness have yielded to light.

The first guillotine was made by a piano-maker named Schmidt from the same city of Strasbourg. His guillotine was first used at almost exactly the same time that Rouget de Lisle was compos-



This design for a "Temple of Equality" was drawn by Jean-Jacques Lequeu during the Reign of Terror in 1793 and illustrates the revolutionary passion for simple, often circular forms.

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

ing the stirring but bloodthirsty words to his anthem, also in Strasbourg.

Philosopher-kings did not create the slogans and catchwords of revolution. *Communism*, the label Lenin finally adopted, was first used in print in 1785, not by the great Rousseau, but by a *Rousseau du ruisseau* (Rousseau of the gutter): an indulgent fetishist, author of fantasies, and nocturnal street-walker in prerevolutionary Paris, Restif de la Bretonne. Thus, the revolutionary label that now controls the destiny of more than 1 billion people in the contemporary world sprang from the erotic imagination of an obscure, eccentric French writer. Like other key words of the revolutionary tradition, it first appeared as the rough ideograph of a language in the making: a road sign pointing to the future.

From the beginning, revolutionaries were linguistic magicians. They used old words (*democracy, nation, revolution*, and



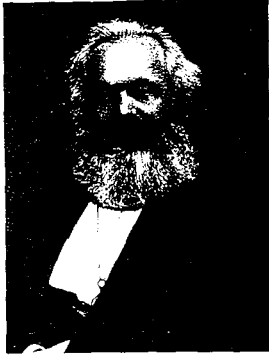
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Courtesy of Editions Jules Tallandier.

liberal) in new ways and invented altogether new words like *socialist* and *communist*. Their new vocabulary was so appealing that it was taken over for nonrevolutionary usage—as in the adoption of *republican* and *democrat* for competing political parties in postrevolutionary America, or in the conservative co-optation of *nation*, *liberal*, and even *radical* in late 19th-century Europe. Revolutionaries also originated other key phrases used by nonrevolutionary social theorists in our own century: *cybernetics*, *intelligentsia*. Even speculation about “the year 2000” began not with the futurology of the 1960s but with a dramatic work written in the 1780s by Restif, the figure who gave us *communism*.

The revolutionary faith was built more by ideological innovators than by political leaders. Professionalism and dedication was provided largely by intellectuals who lacked political experience but saw in revolution an object of faith and a source of vocation, a channel for sublimated emotion and sublime ambition. If traditional religion is to be described as “the opium of the people,” the new revolutionary faith might well be called the amphetamine of the intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But such characterizations are neither fair to the believer nor helpful to the historian. The wellsprings of this faith are deep and have sustained men and women on the way to the scaffold of the executioner as well as to the platform of power. The youthful intellectuals who were the prophets and priests of this new secular religion were largely crying in the wilderness throughout the 19th century, struggling in Germany, in Poland, in Russia against overwhelming odds for revolutions that they saw coming mainly with the eyes of faith. It was not self-indulgent pity that caused one of the most militant of early revolutionaries—the Italian pioneer of guerrilla warfare, Carlo



Courtesy of Progress Publishers, Moscow.



Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

*Left to right:
feminist Flora
Tristán;
visionaries
Pierre-Sylvain
Maréchal and
Restif de la Bre-
tonne; rivals
Karl Marx and
Pierre-Joseph
Proudhon.*

Bianco—to compare his wandering life of exile to an eternal purgatory of “suffering without end and without hope”:

I no longer have a friend . . . no relatives, no old colleagues . . . no one writes me or thinks about me any more . . . I have become a foreigner in my own country, and I am a foreigner among foreigners. The earth itself refuses to adopt me.

At a deep and often subconscious level, the revolutionary faith was shaped by the Christian faith it attempted to replace. Most revolutionaries, from Louis de Saint-Just to Lenin, viewed history prophetically as a kind of unfolding morality play. The present was hell, and revolution a collective purgatory leading to a future earthly paradise. The French Revolution was the Incarnation of hope, but was betrayed by Judases within the revolutionary camp and crucified by the Pilates in power. The future revolution would be a kind of Second Coming in which the Just would be vindicated. History itself would provide the final judgment, and a new community beyond all kingdoms would come on earth as it never could in heaven.

A contemporary statement of this belief lies in the 1953 founding manifesto of Fidel Castro’s revolutionary movement, *History Will Absolve Me*. He represented his own original revolutionary assault on the Moncada Barracks as a kind of Incarnation. The subsequent torture and martyrdom of his virile fellow revolutionaries was the Passion and Crucifixion; and Castro’s trial by Batista was Christ before Pilate. The Cuban people were promised corporate Resurrection; and their revolutionary apostles, Pentecostal power. The coming revolution would fulfill all the Laws (the five “revolutionary laws” of the Moncada raiders)



Barricades in Vienna in 1848 marked a high point of Europe's romantic "revolution of the intellectuals."

Courtesy of Dietz Verlag, Berlin.

and the Prophets (Cuba's 19th-century rebel, José Martí).

Such total belief in secular salvation is uniquely modern: It is the sublime creation of the age of political religion ushered in by the American and French Revolutions. Previous political upheavals were in essence either spontaneous revolts or religious revivals. These events were often called revolutions, but then the word meant a re-revolution back to some idealized past. The American—and even more the French—Revolution proclaimed a totally new, essentially manmade order. When the French shunned the characteristic American references to the Creator, the modern revolutionary tradition received its distinct—and distinctly non-American—stamp of antireligious militancy. With the French Revolution, as critic Michel de Certeau observed, "a new era opens, that of beginnings without return."

The era is far from over. Indeed, the revolutionary faith

seemed to revive among some Western intellectuals during the 1960s. Revolutionary prophecy at that time was often shrill and rarely heeded. Most people in the West remained attached to either their material possessions or their spiritual heritage. However, within overdeveloped universities even more than underdeveloped economies, there was often a kind of fascination—compounded sometimes by fear and/or secret delight—with the perceived reappearance of a political species long thought to be nearing extinction.

Yet the perspective of history seemed strangely missing among the West's revolutionaries, antirevolutionaries, and voyeurs of the '60s and early '70s. Activists seemed largely uninterested in the substantial academic literature that had already accumulated by the mid-'60s, and new writing often seemed unusually narrow or polemically preoccupied with immediate issues. In America, there also seemed to be deeper cultural reasons for continued historical ignorance of the revolutionary tradition.

Narcotic Highs and Sexual Lows

There was, first of all, the voracious overuse of the word *revolutionary* in a generally nonrevolutionary society. The word was abused not only by advertisers to announce the most trivial innovations in taste and technology, but also by social commentators anxious to contend that a "revolution" was occurring in the politically conservative America of the early '70s. The new "revolutionaries" were variously identified as drifting but saintly flower children (by Charles Reich), as the technological innovators whom they rejected (by Jacques Revel), or as humanistic capitalists who presumably had little in common with either (by J. D. Rockefeller).*

Such confusion flowed in part from what various commentators have identified as the general modern tendency to attach a "magical, binding and unique meaning," "a positive light," to the word *revolution*—even as it is "emptied of all meaning" by constant use.

Beginning my research on this subject as a university-based historian during the late '60s, I was repeatedly struck in the depths of libraries by the precedents for almost everything that

*It was only marginally more absurd for a bizarre drifter who called himself Rasputin in 1975 to characterize his sexually indulgent, communal cult of affluent youth near Washington, D.C., as "revolutionary"—and to invent the verb *to revolute*. Said he: "Let the people do what they want . . . keep them revolting. Revolution, constantly changing, going on to the next thing. . . ."

was daily being hailed as a novelty from the rooftops outside.

I came to know figures like Thomas (Ismail) Urbain, a Black Muslim of the 1830s unknown to those of today. He adopted Islam and Algerian nationalism a century before the same pattern was followed by Frantz Fanon, another black revolutionary from the same West Indies. Flora Tristán anticipated today's radical feminism by invading the all-male House of Lords in London of the late 1830s and removing her disguise as a male Turk to dramatize her cause. The struggle between the old and the new Left in America during the 1960s was in many ways another *reprise* on the Marx-Proudhon conflict of the 1840s.

An End to Politics as Religion?

The concept of a revolution along generational lines was already fully developed in *Gerontocracy* (1828) by the Swiss revolutionary James Fazy. Germany had produced even earlier the prototypical "modern" student counterculture: rakish dress, long hair, narcotic highs, and sexual lows. Out of this radical subculture came strident calls for a "propaganda of the deed" long before the theatrical violence of today's terrorists. The anti-traditional musical theater of the early 19th century inspired real revolution in a way that rock festivals of the recent past only vowed to do.

Since revolutionaries are intense people at war with accepted social conventions, they have become favorite subjects in America for psychological explanations. Aside from the recognized difficulties of retroactive psychoanalysis, the fact is that most of the important early revolutionaries seem surprisingly free of unusual personal characteristics. One of the best studies of the emotional side of the original French revolutionaries points out that "the future revolutionaries were almost all docile pupils of Jesuits and Oratorians." Like most other French children of their time, they were fond of their mothers, of their native regions, and of mildly sentimental, apolitical literature. The revolutionaries' use of violence was often reluctant and it was invariably seen by them as the violence-to-end-all-violence.

The fascinating fact is that, during the 19th century, most revolutionaries sought the simple, almost banal aims of modern secular man: material satisfaction and rational simplicity. What was unique was their intensity and commitment. This faith and dedication made the revolutionary trailblazers bigger than life—and deeply controversial. Their progress represented, for some, humanity emerging on wings from its cocoon; for others, a malignancy attacking civilization itself.

Most communists and many Third World leaders still profess to believe in salvation-through-revolution; in America, others fear that this idea still has the power to dazzle intellectuals in the West, who as Peter Berger puts it, lack "the experience of living in a society where that myth has been politically elevated to the status of official doctrine." Yet others see this secular faith fading away as a "post-industrial society" moves "beyond ideology" into a "technetronic" era. Others suggest that belief in revolution was only a political flash fire of the European industrial era that is burning itself out on the periphery of the Third World. The reality may be that the industrial West has itself moved from an expansive age of energy into a lingering twilight of entropy.

I am inclined to think that the end may be approaching for political religions—particularly for that religion which saw in revolution the sunrise of a perfect society. Political authority throughout the world is now largely based on the authority of some kind of revolution. But most of that authority has now lost its initial luster, and the practical problems of people everywhere are proving ever more untouched by the arrogant simplicity of the revolutionary faith. Simply to survive, humanity may have to find ways of evolving beyond revolution and even beyond politics.

Therefore, I wonder if the secular revolutionary creed, which arose in Judeo-Christian culture, may not ultimately prove to be only a stage in the continuing metamorphosis of older forms of faith. Perhaps the belief in secular revolution, which has legitimized so much authoritarianism and oppression in the 20th century, may prefigure some rediscovery of religious evolution to revalidate democracy during the 21st.
