

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

VOLUME 3

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

A NEW IMPRINT OF THE PAYNE EDITION

VOLUME 1

THOUGHTS ON THE CAUSE OF THE
PRESENT DISCONTENTS

THE TWO SPEECHES ON AMERICA

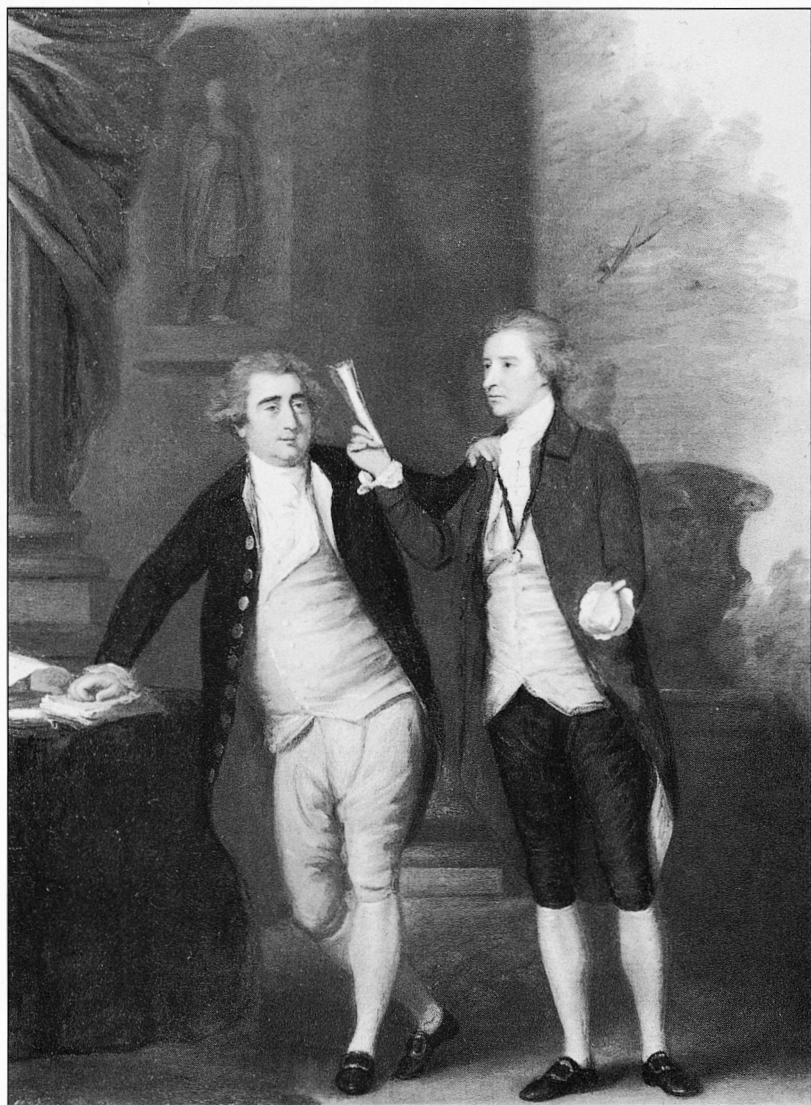
VOLUME 2

REFLECTIONS ON THE
REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

VOLUME 3

LETTERS ON A REGICIDE PEACE

MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS



EDMUND BURKE

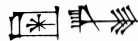
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Foreword by Francis Canavan

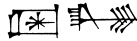
VOLUME 3

LETTERS ON A
REGICIDE PEACE



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Frontispiece is Thomas Hickey’s *Edmund Burke in Conversation with His Friend Charles James Fox*. By permission of the National Gallery of Ireland.

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

This volume includes Burke's four *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, his last published writings on the French Revolution and the policy toward it that he would have Great Britain follow. There is no need to explain here the historical circumstances in which Burke wrote these works or the details of their composition and publication, since E. J. Payne has so thoroughly done that in his Introduction. A few comments will be enough—possibly more than enough.

As Payne says, there were contemporaries of Burke, "chiefly among the Foxite Whigs, who saw in the 'Reflections' the beginnings of a distorted view of things which in the 'Regicide Peace' letters culminated and amounted to lunacy." It is a criticism that has often been repeated since then: Burke's attack on the Revolution became simply hysterical. But Payne thinks otherwise and holds that in the letters Burke expressed "a far bolder, wider, more accurate view" than that expressed in the *Reflections* and wrote "as a statesman, a scholar, and a historical critic." The *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, he concludes, are entitled "to rank even before the 'Reflections,' and to be called the writer's masterpiece."¹

Nonetheless, Payne maintains that, although Burke was substantially right in his judgment of the French Republic under the Directory, he was wrong in his defense of the ancien régime as it existed not only in France but also throughout Europe. "That political system of Europe," he says, "which Burke loved so much, was rotten to the heart; and it was the destiny of French republicanism to begin the

1. Pp. 56-57.

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

long task of breaking it up, crumbling it to dust, and scattering it to the winds. This is clear as the day to us.”² Without nostalgia for that political system, however, we may once again note a touch of nineteenth-century optimism in Payne’s remark. For one could also point to the difficulty France has had in establishing a stable democratic regime. One might also agree that the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the following years destroyed a system that was rotten to the heart and deserved to perish. But are we willing to assign a historical destiny to Leninism and Stalinism? Our experience with revolutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries suggests that we should maintain a certain caution about historical destiny and the ideologies that foster belief in it.

John Gray, a Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, has warned us not to neglect “the oldest lesson of history, which is that no form of government is ever secure or final.” The liberal democratic regime, he believes, suffers from a weakness that derives from “the cultural sources of liberal self-deception that emerged from the French Revolution,” which in turn was a product of the Enlightenment. But he wonders whether “the Enlightenment cultures of the West can shed these disabling utopias without undergoing a traumatic loss of self-confidence.” It would be highly optimistic, he believes, to hope for “Enlightenment without illusions.”³

It was the illusion of a secular utopia, proclaimed by such of his contemporaries as the Marquis de Condorcet and Joseph Priestley, that Burke feared in the Revolution. As the French political scientist Bertrand de Jouvenel was to say in the twentieth century, “there is a tyranny in the womb of every Utopia.”⁴ Burke was right in pointing out the dan-

2. P. 55.

3. *National Review* 48 (April 8, 1996): 53–54.

4. *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1997), p. 12.

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

ger of political utopianism. His mistake was to tie the causes of civilization and Christendom too closely to the political regime of monarchy and aristocracy that existed in his time. The flaw in the democratic revolution that began at that time was that it justified itself with a political theory rooted in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Today it would seem that the future of democracy depends on developing and adopting a sounder political philosophy than one based on what is, to an increasing degree, an intellectually and morally bankrupt liberalism. To that project Burke, for all his devotion to a social and political order that was dying as he wrote, can make a valuable contribution.

FRANCIS CANAVAN

Fordham University

EDITOR'S NOTE

In this volume, the pagination of E. J. Payne's edition is indicated by bracketed page numbers embedded in the text. Cross references have been changed to reflect the pagination of the current edition. Burke's and Payne's spellings, capitalizations, and use of italics have been retained, strange as they may seem to modern eyes. The use of double punctuation (e.g., ,—) has been eliminated except in quoted material. In the present volume, footnotes in Letters 1, 2, and 4 are Burke's. Footnotes in Letter 3 are explained in the two advertisements preceding Letter 3.

All references to Burke's *Correspondence* are to the 1844 edition.

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

VOLUME 3

LETTERS ON A REGICIDE PEACE

INTRODUCTION

BY E. J. PAYNE

THE AUTUMN OF 1795 OPENED A NEW SCENE in the great drama of French affairs. It witnessed the establishment of the Directory. Five years had now passed since Burke had published his famous denunciation of the French Revolution. Those five years had witnessed portents and convulsions transcending all living experience. The Revolution still existed: but it had passed through strange transformations. The monarchy had perished in attempting to compromise with the Revolution. The dethroned King had been tried and executed as a traitor. The Queen and the Princess Elizabeth had met the same fate. The Dauphin, a mere boy, had been slowly murdered in a prison. The King's brothers, with the remnant of the anti-Revolutionary party, had fled from French soil to spread terror and indignation through Europe. Meanwhile, the destinies of France had been shaped by successive groups of eager and unscrupulous politicians. Those whom Burke had early denounced had long disappeared. Necker was in exile: Mirabeau was dead: Lafayette was in an Austrian dungeon: Barnave and Bailly had perished on the scaffold. To their idle schemes of constitutional monarchy had succeeded the unmixed democracy of the Convention: and to themselves that fierce and desperate race in whom the spirit of the Revolution dwelt in all its fulness, and in whom posterity will ever regard it as personified—the Dantons, the Héberts, the Marats, the Talliens, the Saint-Justs, the Santerres, and the Robespierres. The terrible story of the Convention is summed up in a few words. The Gironde and the

Mountain had wrestled fiercely for power: and the victory had fallen to the least moderate of the two. The ascendancy [vi] of the Mountain in the Convention had produced the domination of Robespierre. The fall of Robespierre had been followed by the Thermidorian reaction, and the White Terror: and the Convention, rapidly becoming more and more odious to the people, had at length dissolved, bequeathing to France as the result of its labours the constitution of the Directory. In the midst of all these changes France had been assailed by all Europe in arms. Yet she had shown no signal of distress. Neither the ferocious contests of her leaders, nor their deadly revenges, nor their gross follies, nor their reckless policy, had wasted her elastic powers. On the contrary, France was animated with a new life. That liberty which she had purchased with so many crimes and sacrifices she had proved herself able to defend. Nor was this all. In vindicating that liberty, she had wrested from her assailants trophies which threw into the shade the conquests of the Grand Monarque himself. In less than three years she had become actual mistress of nearly all that lay between the Rhine, the Alps, the Pyrenees, and the ocean, and potentially mistress of all the rest. She had attained a position, which, if maintained, would prove the destruction of the old balance of power in Europe.

In the eyes of outsiders, the establishment of the Directory was the most important incident since the abolition of the monarchy. It confirmed the republican form of government: and its filiation with the Convention justified the transfer to it of the epithet Regicide. The execution of Louis XVI, though of small importance in the internal politics of France, had been the turning point in the relations of the Republic to the European world. But European intervention, in a feeble and undecided form, had commenced long before the tragedy of January 1793. The King's treason had been the breach of his sworn fidelity to the new order of things, followed by an attempted flight to the camp of a general who

was plotting the destruction of the Revolution by arms. Two months after that attempt, the Emperor and the King of Prussia had held the meeting of Pilnitz: in the following year the forces of the Armed Coalition were on the soil of France. The capture of Longwy struck terror into none save those who were profoundly ignorant of the state of the opposing elements. The invasion of Champagne, if such it can be called, acted on France like an electric stroke. [vii] Longwy was taken on the 23rd of August, 1792. Before the end of the year, the generals of France had not only hurled the Germans back on the Rhine, but had sprung in all its parts that deep mine which was destined to shatter the ancient fabric of Europe. They had seized Spire, Worms, and Mentz. They had levied contributions on the rich city of Frankfort: they had incorporated Savoy with France, by the name of the Department of Mont Blanc: they had annexed the county of Nice. On the northern frontier they had been even more successful. A few years before, the Austrian throne had been occupied by a sovereign whose head was full of modern ideas. Joseph the Second was a man of progress and enlightenment. Relying on the alliance with France which had been cemented by the marriage of the French king with an Austrian princess, he had ordered the demolition of all the Austrian fortresses on the Flemish frontier, and transferred his military strength to the frontiers of Bavaria and Turkey. The consequences, as soon as France became an enemy, were obvious. The single fight of Gemappe laid Austrian Flanders prostrate. Mons, Tournay, Nieuport, Ostend, Bruges, and finally Brussels itself, threw open their gates to Dumouriez and Miranda: and the Convention, in defiance of the feeble Dutch, had decreed the invasion of Holland and the opening of the Scheldt. The forces of the Armed Coalition, consisting of Austria and Prussia alone, were scattered by the Republican armies like chaff before the wind.

The year 1793 opened a new phase of the struggle. France

was no longer the helpless object of intervention and plunder. France had braced herself for resistance: she had proved her strength. Europe began to dread as well as to hate her. Meanwhile a fiercer element was added to the ferment. The dark days of December had witnessed the trial of Louis at the bar of the Convention: the 21st of January witnessed his execution. The attitude of England had for above two years been one of utter carelessness. Burke's voice had been raised almost alone in tones of alarm: and Burke had been unani- mously laughed down. The English nation were not unlike the Spanish Admiral Don Alonzo del Campo, with his fleet peaceably riding at anchor in the lake of Maracaibo. Two days before the redoubtable Morgan destroyed that fleet, a negro, says the chronicler, came on board, telling him, "Sir, be pleased to have great [viii] care of yourself: for the English have prepared a fire-ship, with design to burn your fleet." But Don Alonzo, not believing this, answered: "How can that be? Have they peradventure wit enough to build a fire-ship? Or what instruments have they to do it withal?" The English parliament gave as little attention to the alarms of Burke. But as the year 1792 wore on, more and more came to light of the intrigues between French revolutionists and English sympathizers. English representatives now presented themselves in the Convention. The deepest anxiety filled those who feared the effect in England of the Revolutionary example: and some thought a civil war, in which France would be the ally of a revolutionary element, to be at hand. Without going beyond the actual, the system of plunder which the French pursued in Belgium excited English indignation: and when Holland was invaded and the Scheldt declared to be open, the unprincipled and reckless aims of the Convention became clear. They were boldly avowed by Danton: France intended to grasp all that lay within her natural boundaries, the Ocean, the Rhine, the Alps, and the Pyrenees. Since the abolition of the Monarchy, England had held no regu-

lar communication with the French government. The French Minister, however, remained in London: and through him, though unofficially, the English ministry endeavoured to recall the politicians of France to peace and moderation. But there was in truth no common ground of negotiation. Crediting the reports of English sympathizers, the Parisian politicians believed the English Monarchy to be on the verge of a dissolution as complete as that which had befallen their own. They showed no respect to Grenville's remonstrances: and by the middle of January war was known by diplomatists to be a certainty. The execution of the French King precipitated it. George III then broke off all negotiation with the French Minister, and ordered him to quit England in eight days. England was at war with France, and the Armed Coalition was thus reinforced by all the wealth, power and authority of the leading nation in Europe. The rest of Europe soon followed. Before the summer of 1793 Austria, Prussia, England, Holland, Russia, Spain, and all Italy except the Republics of Venice and Genoa, were at war with the French Republic.

Pitted against such a Coalition France might well expect [ix] reverses. She could hardly expect to keep her bold and reckless conquests: she might well have been content to purchase the right to choose her own government with the loss of a considerable part of her own territory. Austria and Prussia were bent on dismembering her: England coveted her rich possessions beyond seas. Disaster after disaster befell the armies of the Revolution. The Austrian generals, better skilled in tactics and in command of veteran soldiers, quickly rescued Flanders from the undisciplined levies of the French. At Neerwinden the French were totally defeated: and before the end of March they were driven to their own soil. The Armed Coalition now seemed to have its way made plain before its face. The second invasion of France was a different matter to the desultory irruption of the preceding summer. The task, if achieved, was certain to accomplish its end: but it

was no easy one. The famous Iron Frontier had to be forced. Condé and Valenciennes were invested: and the capture of Condé was the first-fruits of the invasion. On the 28th of July, 1793, Valenciennes was taken by the Duke of York. In every quarter the prospects of the Republic darkened. Mentz was retaken. From the lower Loire came the news of the formidable and famous insurrection of La Vendée. Toulon was occupied by Lord Hood, in the name of Louis XVII. British ships seized the French islands in the West Indies, and did not even spare the petty fishing stations of St. Pierre and Miquelon, which were all that remained to the French of their vast and rich titular empire in North America. British troops seized the poor remains of the once brilliant French empire in India. Greater ills than the loss of Tobago and Pondicherry were menacing at home. Famine stalked through the people. Bankruptcy threatened the treasury. In that dark hour France drew strength from her perils. Throughout the departments the people cheerfully gave up their all to the imperious necessities of the public cause. France became one vast camp. The cathedrals were turned into barracks: the church bells were cast into cannon. The decree went forth that all Frenchmen should be in permanent readiness for military service. Custine, the general who had surrendered Mentz, was executed. Meanwhile, the Duke of York was besieging Dunkirk; and the existence of the Republic depended on the defence of the Iron Frontier. On all sides, indeed, the defence of France aroused [x] all the energy and ingenuity of the French character. The French were now no longer in the hands of generals who hesitated between the Dauphin, the Duke of Orleans, and the Assembly: who had not decided whether to play the part of a Cromwell or of a Monk. They were led by stout and earnest republicans: by Carnot, Moreau, and Jourdan; Pichegru and Hoche defended the Rhine: Davoust and Labourdonnaye the Pyrenees: Kellermann and Massena the Alps. Before the end of the year, La Vendée was paci-