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of the American Revolution,
Compared with
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of the French Revolution

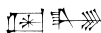


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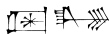
FRIEDRICH GENTZ

Translated by
John Quincy Adams
Edited and with an Introduction by
Peter Koslowski



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Introduction

by Peter Koslowski

There may be no other two historical events that are of greater impact than the American and the French revolutions. The first gave birth to a new nation that was to develop into the leading power in the world a century and a half later. The second gave birth within a generation to the greatest power in Europe for about twenty years, changing all its neighbor states forever.

Friedrich Gentz (after being ennobled, Friedrich von Gentz) was born on 2 May 1764 at Breslau, Silesia (then Prussia, today Wrocław, Poland), and died on 9 June 1832 at Weinhaus, near Vienna, Austria. Gentz's mother belonged to a Huguenot family that had fled France for Prussia and was related to the Prussian minister Friedrich Ancillon. Gentz spoke English and French very well, a fact that eased his career as a diplomat. His letters to the British Foreign Office are written in elegant French, the diplomatic language of Gentz's time.

The editor's notes follow the text. See p. 95.

Napoleon, the heir of the French Revolution, set out to rule all Europe until he was defeated by an alliance of all the major powers of Europe.

It is, however, not only power but ideas that changed as the result of the two revolutions and their revolutionary ideas. "The Ideas of 1776," of the American Revolution and of American independence, shaped Western constitutionalism and representative democracy; "the Ideas of 1789," the ideas of the French Revolution, led to a new civil law of the continental European states, to a new understanding of government and the relationships of state and church, and to realization of democratic government based on the concept of popular sovereignty. The French Revolution also gave birth to the spirit of revolution, to the idea that a nation can change itself by a total overthrow of its past and inherited character into an entirely new social body. This spirit of revolution has influenced all radical revolutions since then, especially the Russian Revolution of 1917. A comparison of the French and American revolutions is not only a study of world history, a study of the hour of the births of the American and the French Republic; it is also a study of the birth of the ideas that shaped all Western nations and all countries of the world searching for a constitution of liberty and democracy.

Friedrich Gentz is one of the first observers of both revolutions. Most of his continental contemporaries concentrated their attention on the French Revolution, which lay closer and had revolutionized the leading European countries. The United States of America

was literally on the other side of the world from Europe. Those who had immigrated to America from Europe usually did not have the means to return. Gentz was prescient about the importance of the United States in its infancy, whereas his compatriots still looked at the United States as a half-civilized, distant land of little importance, considering Europe and the world to be shaped, as Leopold Ranke later put it, by the five Great Powers: Austria, Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. It is a paradox that the nation that sent the greatest number of people to the United States of America knew the least of all Western European nations about the United States. The German inability to grasp the potential of the United States, to which Gentz is the notable exception, had consequences well into the centuries. In both world wars, the German governments had no adequate perception of the economic and military power of the United States, yet Gentz was predicting this over a century earlier.

Although becoming more powerful in the eighteenth century, Britain was a maritime power, being at the same time inside and outside of Europe. France, not Britain, was the first continental power in the perception of Europeans. France had ended the Holy Roman Empire and had defeated Austria again and again. Gentz wrote about the subsidies paid to the Holy Roman Emperor by Britain. Finally, Napoleon divided Germany, just as Prussia, Russia, and Austria had divided Poland, remarking that he did to the Germans only what they had done to the Poles, although Russia got the largest share of Poland. Gentz

brought all his powers of argument and persuasion to bear against Napoleon's attempt to legitimize the expansion of the French Revolution. Gentz conceded that the partition of Poland of 1792 was unjust, as was every partition of any European nation. Although he had been born in Prussia, he also believed that even the Germans' self-partition into Prussia and Austria was wrong, that it had been furthered by the French Revolution's attempt to break away Prussia and other German states from the old Holy Roman Empire. With Edmund Burke, Gentz agreed that European nations had no right to divide a European nation.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Britain was looked upon with suspicion on the Continent. Britain's colonial expansion seemed to contradict the doctrine of the balance of power. In Europe, the British continued to insist on this balance of power, even though in the greater world there was no balance of power any more. Britannia ruled the waves, and she did nothing to restore the balance of power except by driving the North American colonies into rebellion.

Gentz was one of the few intellectuals who defended Great Britain, arguing that it had become great by superiority in trade and industry and not by doing evil. It was not Britain's and America's machinations, but their commercial courage and genius that had given them their economic superiority over the Continent, Gentz wrote. The European nations are free to imitate Britain in that, and all European nations could and should do so. However, Gentz found hard to reconcile with free

trade the British Navigation Act, which permitted only British ships to transport goods to Britain. America, he was aware, was following Britain in trade and industry. Gentz received a lot of criticism for his defense of Britain and America; he was even called an Anglo-maniac. The British Foreign Office paid him a generous monthly allowance for his reports to London.

Gentz was, however, never a British agent. When he was working for Prince Metternich later, the Austrian foreign minister and driving force at the Vienna Congress in 1815, Gentz insisted to the British that Metternich needed to be able to read all of Gentz's reports to and correspondence with the British government.

Gentz recognized that the founding of the French Republic in 1792 had led to escalating warfare, culminating in 1795 when the French army conquered the Netherlands and founded the Batavian Republic, trying to turn the proud trade power into a department of France. After the radical Directory had seized the supreme power in September 1795, external warfare increased even further when the revolutionary army attacked Germany, Austria, and Italy and marched on Vienna and Milan in 1796. The French Revolution continued the expansion that King Louis XIV had started. France had made large conquests in the Spanish Netherlands (Belgium) and in German lands on the left bank of the Rhine, particularly in Habsburg Alsace. But Louis XIV had not succeeded in realizing his ambition to extend France's eastern border all along the left bank of the Rhine, as the French Revolu-

tionary War succeeded in doing in 1796. The French Revolution brought back to France the power and expansionism that the ancien régime of the monarchy had lost, particularly during the Seven Years' War of 1756 to 1763, known as the French and Indian War in North America.

Winston Churchill called this the first world war, a war fought not in one part of the world but in both hemispheres. It was fought between the European powers over territorial gains in the colonies and over predominance in Europe.

France's support for the American Revolution in the aftermath of this war between 1763 and 1788 produced mixed results for France herself, even though it helped to bring about the separation of the colonies from the British motherland. In spite of securing American independence, France was unable to extract considerable material gains from the American War of Independence. Rather the costs of fighting damaged the French national finances and contributed to the coming of the French Revolution.

Gentz writes at the end of his essay that he had set himself the goal of investigating the two world revolutions according to four principal points of view, "with regard to the lawfulness of the origin, character of conduct, quality of the object, and compass of resistance." (p. 93)

Can we judge unique historical events, such as these great revolutions, on the basis of general principles? *Revolution* is a generic term. Revolutions follow a scheme of actions of the same type. To revolutionize

is to follow a pattern of action and to respond at the same time to the particular historical situation. Like any actions, revolutions must be judged by the circumstances preceding their beginning, by their origin. They must be judged by the character and quality in which they are conducted and carried through, by the conduct of the revolutionaries. They must further be judged by the quality of their goals, that is, by the revolutionary intention, and they must finally be judged by the extent of resistance or support they receive from the nation. In every action, the goal or intention is the beginning, and the realization of the goal is the consummation of the action. An action must be judged by the circumstances that set it in motion, by its origin. It must further be judged by how the action is conducted, and finally by its success or failure. Revolutions are, of course, not only intentional actions but also events in which the acting persons are often driven by dynamics outside of their control. But revolutions are also political actions that can be judged as such. Gentz intended to judge the two revolutions as political actions and as historical events.

The North American colonies found themselves in an odd position when the conflict with Britain started, both inside and outside their motherland. They were required to pay taxes, but they had no voice in how those taxes were used. They were subjects of the British crown, yet had no seats in the British Parliament. They had to accept a British monopoly in trade with the colonies but could not export their own products to Britain.

Gentz points out the paradox of an American tax revenue to be paid for use only in Britain. This resembles the inconsistency of restricting the North American colonies to buying only British wares. Gentz compares Britain's trade monopoly in the colonies to a tax levied on North America, and he quotes the Second Continental Congress of the United States, which called the monopoly "the heaviest of all contributions." Gentz emphasizes the link between the impulse toward political control over a colony and the impulse to market control, limiting access to the market only to the motherland. It is inherent to being a colony that the motherland has a monopoly of trade and that the colony wishes to change this situation. Gentz clearly perceives the limits to the legitimacy of the colonial relationship: "The relation between a colony and the mother country is one of those, which will not bear a strong elucidation." (p. 19) The American Revolution brought to an end a strained and, from a natural-right point of view, an awkward relationship. Since there was little explicit legal definition of the relationship between the colonies and the motherland, the American Revolution did not have to break many laws. The colonies just applied to themselves such constitutional principles as parliamentary representation, which the motherland had applied to itself only.

The French Revolution acted within an elaborate, valid system of law under a king who was willing to enact constitutional reform. The revolution broke the law and killed the king. The French breach of law was far more extensive and serious than the colonial breach of

law. In the end, the two revolutions are judged according to which broke more “real right.” It is a breach of real right if one counters resistance to political action by violence that is out of proportion to that resistance. Violence must be minimized in political action. The French Revolution (and to an even greater extent the Russian Revolution) required an enormous degree of violence, with many victims. (It is an interesting question whether the National Socialist movement in Nazi Germany was a revolutionary movement, in this sense.) If a revolution needs to kill so many people to overcome the population’s resistance, then by these lights, it cannot be legitimate, since its means are out of proportion with its goals. Gentz’s criteria for judging eighteenth-century revolutions are even more applicable to the revolutions of the twentieth century.

The latest revolutions of our time, in the Czech Republic and East Germany in 1989, two hundred years after the French Revolution, have been called the Velvet Revolution and the Peaceful Revolution, respectively. Were they revolutions? Some have claimed that they were not true revolutions but rather implosions of two states of the former Warsaw Pact. Rosenstock-Huessy called revolutions like that semirevolutions (*Halbrevolutionen*).¹

Gentz is a conservative and classical liberal. Like other conservatives, he does not like revolutions and does not believe in them, since he is convinced that the social world requires continuity and tradition. Conservatives also abhor the use of political violence for radical social change. In the end, Gentz comes to