

An address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, delivered at the dedication of the Memorial de la Vendée in Les Lucs-sur-Boulogne, France.

September 25, 1993

Mr. President of the General Council of the Vendée, Respected Vendéans:

Two thirds of a century ago, while still a boy, I read with admiration about the courageous and desperate uprising of the Vendée. But never could I have dreamed that in my later years I would have the honor of dedicating a memorial to the heroes and victims of that uprising.

Twenty decades have now passed, and throughout that period the Vendée uprising and its bloody suppression have been viewed in ever new ways, in France and elsewhere. Indeed, historical events are never fully understood in the heat of their own time, but only at a great distance, after a cooling of passions. For all too long, we did not want to hear or admit what cried out with the voices of those who perished, or were burned alive: that the peasants of a hard-working region, driven to the extremes of oppression and humiliation by a revolution supposedly carried out for their sake-- that these peasants had risen up against the revolution!

That revolution brings out instincts of primordial barbarism, the sinister forces of envy, greed and hatred--this even its contemporaries could see all too well. They paid a terrible enough price for the mass psychosis of the day, when merely moderate behavior, or even the perception of such, already appeared to be a crime. But the twentieth century has done especially much to tarnish the romantic luster of revolution, which still prevailed in the eighteenth century. As half-centuries and centuries have passed, people have learned from their own misfortunes that revolutions demolish the organic structures of society, disrupt the natural flow of life, destroy the best elements of the population and give free rein to the worst; that a revolution never brings prosperity to a nation, but benefits only a few shameless opportunists, while to the country as a whole it heralds countless deaths, widespread impoverishment, and, in the gravest cases, a long-lasting degeneration of the people

It is now better and better understood that the social improvements which we all so passionately desire can be achieved through normal evolutionary development--with immeasurably fewer losses and without all-encompassing decay. We must be able to improve, patiently, that which we have in any given "today."

It would be vain to hope that revolution can improve human nature, yet your revolution, and especially our Russian Revolution, hoped for this very effect. The French Revolution unfolded under the banner of a self-contradictory and unrealizable slogan, "liberty, equality, fraternity." But in the life of society, liberty, and equality are mutually exclusive, even hostile concepts. Liberty, by its very nature, undermines social equality, and equality suppresses liberty--for how else could it be attained? Fraternity, meanwhile,

is of entirely different stock; in this instance it is merely a catchy addition to the slogan. True fraternity is achieved by means not social but spiritual. Furthermore, the ominous words "or death!" were added to the threefold slogan, effectively destroying its meaning. I would not wish a "great revolution" upon any nation. Only the arrival of Thermidor prevented the eighteenth-century revolution from destroying France. But the revolution in Russia was not restrained by any Thermidor as it drove our people on the straight path to a bitter end, to an abyss, to the depths of ruin.

One might have thought that the experience of the French revolution would have provided enough of a lesson for the rationalist builders of "the people's happiness" in Russia. But no, the events in Russia were grimmer yet, and incomparably more enormous in scale. Lenin's Communism and International Socialists studiously reenacted on the body of Russia many of the French revolution's cruelest methods--only they possessed a much greater a more systematic level of organizational control than the Jacobins. We had no Thermidor, but to our spiritual credit we did have our Vendée, in fact more than one. These were the large peasant uprisings: Tambov (1920-21), western Siberia (1921). We know of the following episode: Crowds of peasants in handmade shoes, armed with clubs and pitchforks, converged on Tambov, summoned by church bells in the surrounding villages-- and were cut down by machine-gun fire. For eleven months the Tambov uprising held out, despite the Communists' effort to crush it with armored trucks, armored trains, and airplanes, as well as by taking families of the rebels hostage. They were even preparing to use poison gas. The Cossacks, too--from the Ural, the Don, the Kuban, the Terek--met Bolshevism with intransigent resistance that finally drowned in the blood of genocide.

And so, in dedicating this memorial to your heroic Vendée, I see double in my mind's eye--for I can also visualize the memorials which will one day rise in Russia, monuments to our Russian resistance against the onslaught of Communism and its atrocities. We have all lived through the twentieth century, a century of terror, the chilling culmination of that Progress about which so many dreamed in the eighteenth century. And now, I think, more and more citizens of France, with increasing understanding and pride, will remember and value the resistance and the sacrifice of the Vendee.