

## FREEMASONRY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

This paper is translated and developed by Bro. Hans Kracke from a paper written by Bro. Gerhard Teubel, a member of the Duque de Wharton Lodge of Research I Barcelona, Spain. The theme is of general interest because of the important events it contains and their implications for Freemasonry, particularly in Europe.

More than 200 years ago, on 14th July 1789, the citizens of Paris took the Bastille, a dreaded symbol of oppression by storm. The event had far reaching consequences not only as far as the modern history of France is concerned but also for the entire European continent.

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were the battle cries sounding through all of Europe in support of a movement to abolish existing social structures, quite often by acts of extreme violence. As far as the involvement of freemasons in these events is concerned there are many records, some objective and some not. This paper will try to submit a summary of those turbulent times, based on relevant reports, books and information.

[To understand the terminology of the paper it is necessary to know how Europe thought of the State at that time. There were said to be three Estates of the Realm, or classes, the clergy, the nobles and the common people. i.e. everyone else. Unlike England, anyone remotely descended from a noble belonged to the nobility. They were exempt from tax and service, had no duties but possessed boundless privileges. In speaking of the third estate or third class, (the people), most would have considered only the better class of citizens. During the Revolution a fourth class, the workers, the poor, the soldiers, sailors and others with no power or privilege came to dominate the movement.

The Estates-General was the nearest thing in France to an English parliament. It had not met since 1614. The Parliament was quite different from parliament in England. All major Districts of France had their own Parliament but they had no legislative power. They were judicial bodies as well as a sort of public register for Royal edicts. Ed.]

### HOW DID THIS REVOLUTION COME ABOUT?

A revolution is a struggle between two powers. On one hand the established power and on the other the opposition. In 1789 the established power was a kingdom of God's grace and apparently unshakeable. However, Louis XVI was a weak sovereign. The opposition weakened the columns of his power and gradually undermined them, until they collapsed with an enormous amount of noise, blood and pain.

### WHAT WERE THE COLUMNS OF THIS ESTABLISHED POWER?

The majority of the noble class, originally the elite of the nation, noticeably degenerated under Louis XVI to courtiers and strivers for privilege. However some of them understood the situation and as a result joined the opposition.

The second column, the Catholic church, was almost totally corrupt through the system of privileges. The lower clergy and many monks at the lower end of the clerical hierarchy however, who were naturally very close to the misery of the people, also felt drawn to the opposition. The situation was similar with the army, the third column of royal power.

The last column, the public service, was already widely controlled by the third classes, the bourgeoisie, who made use of career opportunities, purchased patents of nobility and normally should have supported the royal authority. However, vast differences from the other three columns and the enormous injustice experienced from day to day stood against this. Thus, the French Revolution primarily became a fight for equality.

### FORMING THE OPPOSITION

Among the noble class, those exiled by the King or who had fallen into

disgrace formed in their castles away from Versailles circles of opposition. These circles were frequently visited by freemasons like Voltaire. The inept behavior of the King and his advisors also promoted a further influx to these disaffected groups. Within the church the lower clergy presented a strong opposition. Also the numerous groups of Protestants from the various regions of France, in their traditional hostility to the Catholic church, gradually became fanatical opponents of the monarchy. The edict of 1787, by which Louis XVI re-established the civil rights of the Protestants came too late to check this development. Henry IV had originally granted these rights by his edict of Nantes in 1598 which was revoked by Louis XIV by edict in 1685.

In the public service controlled by the third class, opposition was certainly widely spread and was to become firmly established, furthered by the intellectuals and disillusioned public servants. Strangely enough, among the fourth class, the workers, peasants, etc., there was hardly any opposition and the Revolution, at least initially, occurred without their involvement.

The philosophers undoubtedly played an important role in the development of the opposition. Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau with their anti-clericalism and their new ideas of a 'Government for the people' firmly prepared the ground for the Revolution. Voltaire was initiated into the Lodge 'Des neuf soeurs' on 7th April 1778, which leads us to the bastion of opposition, the masonic lodges.

#### THE FORMING OF FRENCH MASONIC LODGES

The first masonic lodges were formed in 1726 and developed with fluctuating success. Masonic work was often interrupted by periods of strong repression by the Crown followed by times of silent toleration. As a point of interest, two papal edicts, of Pape Klemenz XII dated 4th May, 1738 and of Pape Benedict XIV, dated 15th June, 1751, which excommunicated Catholic freemasons, remained ineffective in France because the French Parliament never registered them. At the dawn of the revolution, there were 1250 lodges in France with an estimated number of 40,000 brethren, out of a total population of 26 million people. That was a surprisingly high number, considering the fact that in those days freemasons were only recruited from the very small elite of the nation. Approximately 25% of all lodges were situated in the larger area of Paris but Masonry was spread across the whole country, with central points in Lyon, Toulouse, Nantes and Marseille.

#### WHO WERE THE BRETHREN OF THE LAST DECADE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY?

First a start, Jews, actors, employees, workers and servants were excluded. Our rule accepting 'A free man of good report' was at that time in France handled far more restrictively and apparently other criteria also applied. It is a surprising fact that the clergy were represented in relatively high numbers. Actually, some lodges consisted exclusively of catholic clergymen, e.g. the Lodge 'La Vertu' in Clervaux. The noble class was also obviously attracted to Freemasonry. An example would be the Duke of Orleans, himself a member of the royal family. The bourgeoisie however made up the largest number of members of masonic lodges. Especially among these, the motto of equality motivated ambitious and progressive minded bourgeois people to join Freemasonry.

#### THE EVE OF THE REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was certainly not a spontaneous uprising, ignited by some particular event. A multitude of mistakes and the ineptitude of the monarchy led to a situation which finally developed its own dynamics. On 15th August 1787, the Parliament is exiled to Troyes. On 7th June, 1788, the famous day of the Roof Tiles [a journee de tuiles], the royal troops are received in Grenoble and expelled again. The troops are commanded by a freemason, the then unknown petty officer Bernadotte. A few years later he will become one of Napoleon's famous generals and then King of Sweden. In

Brittany also, the disregard of Parliament leads to rebellion. The army units in charge act very cautiously because most of their officers are freemasons and thus understand and support the opposition. The various often contradicting elements joined forces for a short time on the eve of the Revolution. At this point it is quite strange to notice the self-destructing enthusiasm of part of the noble class, who with open eyes walked towards their own annihilation. The masonic lodges were the only disciplined and organized force.

Minister Necker, probably a Freemason as well, develops a law for the election of the Estates-General. This provides, particularly for the third class, a rather complicated method via delegates and percentages. Election committees are set up all over the country, involving freemasons as a leading force. In Paris it is the famous lodge 'Societe des trentes', where among others the committed freemason and Franco-American hero of liberty, La Fayette, plays an active roll. The center of activity however is obviously the Duke of Orleans, Grand Master of the Grand Orient. The Duke, driven by his hatred of his cousin the King, and of Queen Marie Antoinette, already sees himself as the head of a constitutional monarchy. However, his dream will only be realized by his son, when he becomes Louis XVII. Two supportive groups of freemasons are close to him. There are those who want to assist hm to gain the throne and those using Freemasonry as a means to an end, wanting to realize their ideals and seeing the Duke as a symbol only.

#### WHO IS THE MANIPULATOR AND WHO IS BEING MANIPULATED?

In summary it can be safely assumed, that the direct influence of Freemasonry was very strong as far as the noble class and the bourgeoisie were concerned. The influence on the clergy was rather limited. However, even there, the lower clergymen had a strong tendency towards equality, which again brought them closer to the freemasons. When finally the constitutional National Assembly was formed, out of the 1336 delegates to the Estates-General, there were at least 320 brethren, i.e. approximately 24% - a considerable share. The lower clergy were also well represented, with 200 delegates. These two groups were just the right allies to enable the third class to change the system into a constitutional monarchy, with more freedom and equality. Freemasons played a crucial part in the opposition in the first phase. Most of them were men of good will and of high integrity. They fought for the victory of their party and for their ideals. Recognition of that honorable role should never be denied them.

On 23rd June, 1789, the meeting of the Estates-General finally takes place in the assembly hall 'Des Menus Plaisirs'. The King grants a few concessions but decidedly rejects a direct voting system (i.e. one vote per person). He then dissolves the assembly. The noblemen and the clergy leave the hall as ordered. The delegates of the people however remain, in an agitated mood. Micabeau addresses the Marquis de Dreux-Breze, also a freemason, with his famous challenge: 'Go, and tell those who sent you, that we are here by the will of the people. We will only leave by the force of bayonets.' To this provocation, the King replied indifferently 'Eh bien qu'ils restent.', freely translated, 'Well, let them stay then.'

With this statement he lost face and actually his crown. At that moment the opposition had already won. All following events virtually developed automatically and beyond control. on 24th June the majority of the clergy approves the direct voting system, contrary to the King's orders. On 25th June the remainder of the clergy and 47 delegates of the noble class, practically all freemasons connected to the Duke of Orleans, return to the Assembly of the Estates-General again. On the 27th the King himself requests the hesitant remainder of the noble class to participate. Thus this Assembly becomes the first true National Assembly of France. The direct voting system is introduced as binding. With confidence, the third class has won this fight, yet credit has to be given to the freemasons who to a large extent helped win it. They succeeded in assembling, guiding and motivating the 600

simple citizens. Imagine those shy citizens, who never had dealt in politics before, when they first moved into the Assembly of the Estates-General in their dark suits, in contrast to the colorful appearance and behavior of the clergy and the noble-classes. On 7th July, 1789 the National Assembly declares itself a Constituting National Assembly. A committee is formed to develop a constitution. All delegates agree to form a constitutional monarchy and confirm the King's rightful position. On 11th July Bro. La Fayette presents his Declaration of Human Rights.

Continued in full in part 2.