

TURGOT THE GREAT FRENCHMAN

The Physiocrat as Reformer

A sympathetic and informing review of Mr Douglas Dakin's book, *Turgot and the Ancien Régime in France* (Methuen, 15s.) appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 8th July. We give the following extracts, with our obligations to the journal as well as to Mr Dakin and to his reviewer.

So much attention has been directed to the misgovernment and corruption which brought disaster upon the House of Capet that few who have not made a special study of French history in the eighteenth century realize the immense amount of ability and good will shown by the best men of the period in their constant endeavours to achieve reform or, failing that, to work the administrative machine in the interests of those whom it was crushing into misery and rebellion.

Among these men Turgot stood supreme. His career as Intendant of Limoges was a model of devoted public service, a constant struggle to find remedies against extortion, injustice and waste. As Intendant he carried the jurisdiction of the King into every corner of his province, and from this jurisdiction exercised by prescription or accepted as a personal responsibility, no department of public or private life was exempt. Turgot was exceptional by reason of his great personal gifts and the fame to which he afterwards attained as Minister; but, to get a fair picture of eighteenth-century France, we must remember that men, every whit as honest and, within their range, every whit as competent as he, were working with the same zeal to the same ends in every corner of the land. In no period of history anywhere in the world has so much capacity and devotion been expended to so little purpose.

The explanation of the failure of these men to avert the ruin which some of them so clearly foresaw lay in the complicated system of graft which, beginning with the privileges and exemptions enjoyed by the nobility, spread down to every class and to every corner of the land where men might profit by collecting or by evading the collection of public money. The good Intendant stood between a central Government, run in the interests of a class which opposed any attempt to reform a system under which the poor man paid for all, and the local speculators whose livelihood depended on their ability to work the system with profit to themselves. Turgot dealt bravely with the enemy on both fronts. He created in his province a veritable civil service which he inspired with his own selfless zeal and devotion.

When in 1774 Louis XVI appointed Turgot a Minister of State there was joy among the philosophers and satisfaction among the few who did not fear an honest man. But it was a bitter blow to the people of his province. When a little later he was called to the Ministry of Finance he had no illusions about the tasks which awaited him. He accepted the office on the understanding that he had, and would always retain, the confidence and support of the King in the application of principles laid down clearly in advance. These included no bankruptcy, either avowed or disguised by arbitrary reductions of interest on public stock, no increase of taxation and no borrowing.

These principles could only be successfully applied by a reduction of expenditure and an elimination of middlemen's profits in the collection of revenue. Such a programme committed him to a struggle in which he never really hoped to succeed:—

I foresee that I shall be alone in fighting against abuses of every kind, against those who profit by them, against the many prejudiced

persons who, opposed to all reforms, are such powerful instruments in the hands of vested interests intent on perpetuating the existing disorder. I shall have to battle even against the natural goodness and generosity of Your Majesty and of persons who are most dear to you. I shall be feared, hated even, by nearly all at Court, by all who solicit favours; they will attribute refusals to me; they will call me a hard man because I advise Your Majesty not to enrich even those you love at the loss of your people's sustenance. And these very subjects, for whom I shall sacrifice myself, are so easily deceived that perhaps I shall arouse their hatred of the very pleasures I take to save them from exactions. Appearances being against me, I shall be subject to calumny, the aim being to deprive me of Your Majesty's confidence.

Within a few months of his taking office 20,000 men had been deprived of employment as unnecessary manipulators or receivers of taxes. Nor was he content with suppressing the small fry. He declared war on the hundred families of France, who then, as now, controlled a considerable portion of the finances of the country. They included a company of sixty contractors-in-chief who every six years made an agreement with the Comptroller-General to farm the hundred-and-one rights, tolls, taxes, dues and monopolies which formed part of the vast intricate tangle of graft which, in the end, only the guillotine could cut successfully. Turgot could not abolish the system of indirect taxation on which these persons thrived, but he could reform it in certain particulars and set limits to abuses. Direct taxation was an even more formidable problem, for here was the stronghold of privilege and there could be no real reform till the men of estate consented to bear their share of the burden.

Turgot's reforms as Minister of Finance or Comptroller-General culminated after many vicissitudes in the six famous Edicts of 1775. The four lesser Edicts suppressed certain dues or restraints upon trade in grain, cereals, pulses, meat and suet. They were Turgot's last of many efforts to secure free trade in essential commodities. Of the two major Edicts, which aimed at securing similar freedom in respect of labour, the first abolished the guild monopolies which were driving the unprivileged French artificers abroad for a livelihood, while the second suppressed the *corvées*, or labour battalions, in the provinces. These six Edicts mobilized against him all those who had suffered from his reforms, and they were opposed at every stage; in Committee of the Council, in the Parlement, in remonstrances addressed to the King. Louis stood firm, though all his Ministers except Turgot and Malesherbes urged him to give way. He held a *lit de justice* and the Edicts were registered. Louis declared: "You have heard the Edicts which my love for my subjects has led me to promulgate, I expect them to be obeyed." Paris that night was illuminated, while in the provinces, relieved of the hateful *corvées*, the peasants sang:—

Je n'irons plus aux chemins,
Comme à la galère,
Travailler soir et matin
Sans aucun salaire.

Within a few months, however, Turgot and Malesherbes had been dismissed and within a year Turgot's work had been destroyed. The old fiscal abuses were re-established, free trade in grain was abolished, forced labour and the guilds restored.

"It is a satisfying experience to settle down to a book of this calibre," writes the reviewer, "... and it is a pleasure to realize that there are still people in the world who care for truth, who are not yet broken to a world of fronts and slogans, who do not yet wear, so to speak, a shirt in the soul."