

## AN ESSAY ON *CORIOLANUS*

BY MICHAEL CLARK

There has scarce been a century that has seen the power of the people more prevalently than the 20th century. Even before those formative years the world became witness to this power during the French, American, and later Russian Revolution. With each newly accomplished campaign towards freedom there likewise followed an equally daunting task of figuring how best to lead the people with liberty intact. In this light the 20th century became an experiment; a socio-political Petri dish to see how rule 'by-the-people' would fare against the centuries old monarchies, aristocracies, and colonial imperialists of old. The two ideologies to answer this question were socialism and capitalism, both of which, in differing ways, proclaimed to let rule-by-the-people flourish. As this 'experiment' continued the world bore witness to some of the deadliest tragedies man had ever committed while at the same time watching unprecedented improvements in overall livelihood as poverty, famine and disease were greatly diminished. This so-called 'experiment' that was the 20th century begs the question, are the people a force of good?

The play *Coriolanus*, one of Shakespeare's later and lesser known tragedies, reflects on the people, the plebeians of early Rome, as a requisite entity whose favor the protagonist, Coriolanus, must gain to become a successful councilman. Coriolanus, however, a grizzled general recently returned from quelling a revolt, is reluctant to seek this favor, and rather scorns the populace early in the play. "You common cry of curs!" His rant begins in Act 3, Scene 3, after being denounced and accused of treason by the two antagonist, Brutus and Sicinius, "whose breath I hate as reek o' th' rotten fens..." continuing to the point that he disowns Rome altogether and proceeds to attempt to conquer the city with the help of his former enemy, Aufidius. We see the necessity of having the favor of the people in this case, for although it was not by the hands of the Roman people that Coriolanus met his death, one must ask had he their favor would he have left Rome? If he had not left, then would he have been killed? Though this play may not fully demonstrate the power of the people tied together by a common cause, it does shed light on the importance of, and the necessary awareness leaders must have of the people as a powerful force.

To see examples of this power we need look no further than this past century. One of the more recent and most notorious examples of the people's power was the Bolshevik (Russian) Revolution. As is indicative of any revolution, the people unite and revolt against the ruling powers. What distinguished the Russian Revolution from other recent prior revolutions was the ideology that led the country from the point of revolution forward. What other countries like France, and America faced were stretches of tumultuous years due to the vacancy of law, order, and power that naturally arose with such a self-destructive act. France endured the Reign of Terror, which saw more executions and massacres than the prior years leading up to the revolution. America likewise saw lawlessness on it's western front, borders, and major cities for a time until order could be established. For both countries these long stretches of rough times

were just that, long stretches of time; moments in each nation's history that eventually came to an end with a democratic political system, an ideology founded upon the idea of liberty for all. Russia, however, endured decades and many generations of subjugation under the Communist political system.

The book *The Gulag Archipelago*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, details the history of Russia during this era from the Russian revolution to the beginning of its decline. In the wake of the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks seized control and the party's leader, Vladimir Lenin, led the country on a purge of all remnants of the old ruling class, bourgeois, and anything else that was determined to be in opposition to the proletariat class. What Lenin managed to do was unite the working class citizens of Russia with a hope of overthrowing an oppressive regime for a new socialist one. The working class embraced this idea and wholeheartedly followed their new leaders orders in tearing down the old regime, even going so far as to rid their own ranks of individuals and groups who seemingly opposed Lenin's new government, *"So far as we know, the gray-mustached working class approved these executions. So far as we know, from the blazing Komsomols right up to the Party leaders and the legendary army commanders, the entire vanguard waxed unanimous in approving these executions. Famous revolutionaries, theoreticians, and prophets, seven years before their own inglorious destruction, welcomed the roar of the crowd, not guessing then that their own time stood on the threshold, that soon their own names would be dragged down in that roar of "Scum!" "Filth!"*. As Solzhenitsyn describes, eventually, by orders of Lenin and later Stalin, the targets of the people changed to those who once supported the very same cause, even targeting subgroups of the wider proletariat class as well. As this self consuming act continued the people suffered immeasurably by their own hand to the point where their spirit was broken by a government and leaders that pitted one against the other, neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, and family against family. Could the leadership of communist Russia have achieved this without the support, commitment, and will-to-act of the proletariat, the die-hard revolutionaries, or the simple citizen who wanted change? Never; the first step had to be taken by the people for the people against the people. No greater example of the people as a reckonable force of power has been seen since.

This is not to say Communist countries were the only countries to experience this power. A contemporary example can be seen in America's Democratic system during the Civil Rights protests of the mid to late 20th century. There were two predominant camps protesting during this era, the first being Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ideology which practiced nonviolent protesting while establishing a unified front of both African-Americans and White Americans to push an agenda of equal rights among the races of America. The other camp was that of Malcolm X, a prominent member of the Nation of Islam community, who advocated for a more aggressive, if not, violent protest against the injustices faced by African Americans in America. Both men sought a similar goal and both needed and amassed the support of the people to accomplish their goal of a more fair and just America. Yet, when either camp took to the streets to protest there was such a drastic contrast in their actions that one would almost assume a different agenda entirely. With Dr. MLK, there were no riots, or looting, or any sort of violence

except that which was committed by local law enforcement. Through the speeches of Malcolm X (and later revolutionary leaders who were heavily influenced by Malcolm X) many radical black activists took to rioting when blatant injustices by police occurred in their communities. America watched as riots broke out in city streets such as the 1965 Watts riots of Los Angeles, California, and the Harlem and Chicago riots a year prior, where such injustices happened. Whether either camp was successful or failed in their attempts, history still showed that when striving for a similar goal the people are led as much by the leader as by the goal they seek.

What does this say of the people as a productive or destructive force? Through history and art the power of the collective people both in politics and in society can be understood. Whether they become a force of 'good' or 'bad' is quite often determined not by where they are being led but by who is leading them as can be seen in the strategic differences of Dr. MLK and Malcolm X in their approach to civil rights reform. To that end the collective masses will follow, even unto their own undoing as was witnessed in post-revolution Russia, further demonstrating the potential the people hold when called to act. Is this to say the people are a figurative sword to be wielded, and the purpose for which they serve is not theirs to determine?

The People is a group of individuals who are more often fractured in their shared opinions and beliefs than not. Given this fractured nature it comes as no surprise then that it takes a great galvanizing force to bond these many conflicting ideas, opinions, and beliefs and create a unified whole typically in the form of a strong leader. Ideally, the leader shares in the common beliefs and opinions of their people and continues to lead them down the best path for all. However, what the leader must contend with that few others do is the corrupting influence of power. History has countless examples of such incidents where leaders, drunk from their own power, diverge from what is best for their people thereby starting the slow chain of events that end with the leaders overthrowing. The unspoken dialogue between the leader and the people becomes this 1. What do the people want, 2. What will the leader provide, 3. How true is the leader to his promise, and 4. How much are the people willing to do to reach this goal? Should any of these questions not be answered sufficiently or are outright ignored, then the whole system begins to decay.

Individuals make up the whole of any group, gang, country etc. Of the individuals of a group, few will rise to the task of leading for few dare, even in their own lives, to chance the encounter with a chaotic unknown future. Those who lead are given an unprecedented amount of power to navigate their group towards stability and or success. What does success look like but a better day-to-day life and a brighter future, in any respect. This goal of seeking a better future will manifest a reality conducive to its success. Whether that manifestation is of a malicious or benevolent sort is a question given to the leader who in time will ask "How far will we go to meet this end?" For to that end, they will go. The people are not swords to be wielded without say in where they fall, nor are they clay to be molded by hands, not their own. The People are the spirit of the group they inhabit.