

French Revolution

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE

French Revolution

Second Edition

William Doyle

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Preface to the Second Edition

No preface seemed necessary when this book first appeared. That was perhaps a mistake. Little in history is self-evident, much less the intentions of those who attempt to write it. A more explicit statement of what I was trying, and not trying, to achieve might have given readers a better idea of what to expect—for better or worse. A second edition provides the opportunity to rectify the omission, and to explain any changes now incorporated.

It is a history of the French Revolution and not simply of the Revolution in France. Seldom has an upheaval in one country had such widespread repercussions beyond its borders; and the Revolution in turn was deeply affected by how foreigners reacted to it. The wider dimension therefore appeared to me an essential part of the story. Written to appear for the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, as an Oxford History the book was conceived as a narrative for general readers rather than the student textbook it has nevertheless largely become. In deference to that fate, however, I have now expanded the short bibliography of the first edition into a wider introduction to the historiography of the subject—although it remains an appendix which less utilitarian readers can bypass as they prefer. Otherwise I have taken the opportunity to rectify errors, update information where necessary, and occasionally expand on topics which perhaps received less emphasis than they deserved in the first edition. The general shape and interpretation, however, remain much as they were. The story still ends in 1802, when Napoleon's power was secure, reflecting my belief that the safest definition of the Revolution is as a series of tumultuous events and uncertainties which only he found the key to terminating. His own tenure of power brought about a new series, but that forms a different (though related) story. Finally, I have not wavered from my judgement that the Revolution was a tragedy. Some readers have interpreted this as a hostile verdict. But to call something tragic is not necessarily to condemn it. It is to lament wasted promise. There are still few periods in history when so many benevolent intentions led to so much unintended chaos and destruction, vitiating into the bargain all later attempts to realize them. Napoleon, once again, saw the fruitlessness of condemning the revolutionary past, even while its embers were still glowing. 'We must avoid', he wrote,¹ at the very moment when he was preparing to dethrone the last ruling Bourbon king, 'all reaction in speaking of the

Revolution. No man could oppose it. Blame lies neither with those who perished nor with those who have survived. There was no individual force capable of changing its elements or of preventing events which arose from the nature of things and from circumstances.' The tragedy is that of all the human beings caught up in such an inexorable process.

W.I

Bath, 2002

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Le mal de changer est-il toujours moins grand que le mal de souffrir? Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, bk. xxix, ch. xviii

La Révolution, en dépit de toutes ses horreurs, n'en avait pas moins été la vraie cause de la régénération de nos mœurs.

Napoleon (Las Cases, *Mémorial de Saint-Hélène*, 27 octobre 1816)

Progress is not an illusion, it happens, but it is slow and invariably disappointing.

George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens' (1939), in *Collected Essays* (1961), 47

France under Louis XVI

THE king of France needed no coronation. He reigned by the grace of God from the moment his predecessor breathed his last, and a coronation was purely customary. So the argument was heard, even in the highest circles, that the elaborate consecration of Louis XVI, arranged for 11 June 1775 in the traditional setting of Rheims cathedral, was a waste of public money. A month beforehand, the countryside around Paris, and many districts of the city, had been shaken by rioting against high flour and bread prices. The disturbances led to talk of postponing the ceremony, and the approaches to Rheims were ringed with precautionary troops. And far fewer people than expected made the journey to the capital of Champagne to witness the historic spectacle. Innkeepers complained of unlet rooms, and caterers of wasted supplies. But when, that brilliant morning, the cathedral doors were flung open to reveal the young monarch crowned and enthroned in glory, invested with the sceptre of Charlemagne and anointed with the holy oil of Clovis, men broke down and wept despite themselves.

The son of St Louis, the Most Christian King of France and Navarre, had sworn that day to uphold the peace of the Church, prevent disorder, impose justice, exterminate heretics, maintain forever the prerogatives of the Order of the Holy Spirit, and pardon no duellist. Three days later, in the summer heat, he ritually touched 2,400 stinking sufferers from scrofula, the disfiguring disease believed by countless generations to be curable through the miraculous touch of an anointed king. And all this still left him time to write letters to his 74-year-old chief minister, who had remained at Versailles; and to resist the attempts of an empty-headed queen to have her favourites given office. Court intrigues could not be expected to stop merely because the king was being crowned. And so the ceremonies that Louis XVI observed that week, the motions he went through, were a strange blend of momentous and trivial, significant, and purely formal, meaningful and empty. The powers he exercised, the promises he made, the regalia he wore, all resulted from a long, tortuous, and often haphazard evolution. Few knew or remembered why things had to be the way they were. And this was typical of the kingdom over which he had ruled since 10 May 1774.

The domains of the king of France in the 1770s, excluding overseas territories in the Americas and east of the Cape, covered some 277,200 square miles and had over 27 million inhabitants. By 1789 there would be a million more. These realms had been built up since the early Middle Ages by a process of conquest and dynastic accident or design, and during the last century of the monarchy they were still being added to. In 1678 Louis XIV acquired Franche Comté, in 1766 Louis XV inherited Lorraine, and in 1768 he took over Corsica. But deep inside French territory Avignon and its surrounding district still belonged to the Pope, and in Alsace there were islands of territory nominally under the sovereignty of German princes and an independent city-state at Mulhouse. Nobody thought such enclaves anomalous for they were well established by law, prescription, and international consensus. In any case they were only extreme examples of the variety which prevailed within the kingdom itself.

Its most ancient division was into provinces. Originating as independent feudal domains that had been progressively swallowed up by the kings of France, they varied enormously in size. Vast regions like Languedoc, Dauphiné, or Brittany counted as provinces alongside tiny Pyrenean counties like Foix or narrow frontier strips like Flanders or Roussillon. Even the precise number of provinces was uncertain, for historical traditions were often far from explicit, but in 1776, 39 provincial governorships were recognized. The functions of governors were largely honorific, however, since for most administrative purposes the kingdom was divided into 36 generalities, each presided over by an intendant. The origin of the generalities was much less ancient, and it was still only a century since intendants had become established everywhere. But these administrative units were far more uniform in size than the old provinces, and consequently their boundaries seldom coincided. Closer to provinces in this respect were the *ressorts* or jurisdictional areas of the parlements, the 13 sovereign courts of appeal. That of Paris, for example, covered a third of the kingdom, whereas those of Pau or Douai were scarcely larger than the smallest provinces. The parlements had their origins in the supreme courts of the great feudal rulers of medieval times. When their lands fell to the king of France, he tended to accept or adapt the institutions he found there rather than impose his own. Normans still called the parlement of Rouen the Exchequer 500 years after the English king had ceased to be their duke and hold court there; and the last parlement was established at Nancy in succession to the old ducal court of Lorraine only in 1775. But inevitably most *ressorts* took in all or part of several provinces and generalities, a rich source of conflicts of jurisdiction. And the Church,

meanwhile, divided up the kingdom in its own way, into 18 archiepiscopal provinces and 13 dioceses. The majority were in the south, where dioceses were much smaller and older. But many bishops enjoyed enclaves of jurisdiction in dioceses other than their own: the bishop of Dol in Brittany had no less than 33. Such uneven, illogical patterns of organization were repeated in a thousand different ways at the more local levels of town and village.



MAP I. Pre-revolutionary France: principal administrative, judicial, and fiscal subdivisions
Source: W. Doyle, The Old European Order (Oxford, 1978).

Nor did complexity end there. Apart from royal edicts on certain general issues, the king's domains were subject to no law and no administrative practice common to them all without exception. Southern provinces regulated their affairs by written, Roman law; but even there, in isolated regions like the Pyrenees, local customs were more important. In northern France

they were all-important. Here nearly all law was customary, and at least 65 general customs and 300 local ones were observed. This meant that the law relating to marriage, inheritance, and tenure of property could differ in important respects from one district to another; and those who had property in several might hold it on widely differing terms. Every district, too, had its own range of weights and measures, and the same term often meant different values in different places. In these circumstances fraud, or fear of it, bedevilled all exchanges and provided endless business for the hundreds of petty courts and jurisdictions on the lower slopes of the judicial pyramid. So did taxation, where again there was no uniformity. Northern and central France notoriously bore a heavier tax-burden than the south, or the periphery of the kingdom in general. The main direct tax, the *taille*, was levied on persons in central provinces, but on land in peripheral ones like Languedoc. The salt tax, the notorious *gabelle*, was levied at six different rates according to area, while six other specially privileged districts, including Brittany, were exempt. And the whole country was criss-crossed with innumerable internal customs barriers, whether at the gates of towns, along rivers, or between provinces, where excises, tolls, and tariffs could be collected—again at a bewildering series of rates, on a limitless range of items. Goods shipped down the Saône and Rhône from Franche Comté to the Mediterranean, for example, paid duty at 36 separate customs barriers, some public and some private, on the way. To rational observers such complexities appear, and appeared, an arbitrary shambles; the product of routine and meaningless historical traditions. But these traditions were often as not rooted in geography, climate, culture, and economic necessity, as any traveller could readily testify.

* * *

The kingdom of France had originated, and first expanded, in the rolling, open country of the Paris basin where communications were easy. The river systems of the Seine and the Loire were navigable, or easily made so, and gave ready access to the sea. Paris stood at the centre of overland routes that were little diverted by natural obstacles for miles on end; and by the late eighteenth century the main roads were constructed to a standard unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, and the wonder of foreigners. With a temperate climate, fertile soils, and ready access to markets, the agriculture of the Paris basin, especially north of the capital and towards the Flemish lowlands, was the most advanced and commercialized in the kingdom.

sustained not only the 650,000 inhabitants of Paris itself, but also the most densely concentrated population in France, along the Channel coast. Rouen, the capital of Normandy drew on these abundant reserves of manpower to work the expanding cotton industry, which made it, as all English travellers agreed, the Manchester of France. Rich in resources and tightly organized, the Paris basin was a metropolitan area, easily dominated by central authority. More people could read and write there than in any other part of the kingdom, and all spoke recognizable French. But none of this could be taken for granted more than 150 miles from the capital.

In western Normandy and on the borders of the rocky Breton peninsula, the open spaces gave way to a landscape of small fields divided by high mounds and tree-strewn hedges, scattered farmsteads and deep sunken roads—the *bocage*. Further west still, the peasantry spoke Breton, not French, and dressed in a distinctive local costume. Arthur Young, the English traveller famous for his minute observations of the French scene in the late 1780s, was appalled by the poverty-stricken air of this region: ‘Brittany, Maine and Anjou have the appearance of deserts.’¹ Yet Brittany at least was heavily populated, lightly taxed, and from the 1760s well served by good main roads. Bretons were proud of their distinctive character. Through their truculent parlement and tumultuous estates meeting in Rennes every year they enjoyed more self-government than most provinces. And they were linked to a world beyond France by the sea. In Brest, they boasted France’s principal Atlantic naval port; Lorient was the main gateway to French interests in the Indian Ocean; while booming Nantes was the capital of the French slave-trade and second only to Bordeaux in commerce with the West Indies. South of the Loire there was more *bocage* country in the low hills of the Vendée, with characteristic isolated farmsteads or hamlets but few larger settlements. But the lack of ports along its low, marshy coastline meant the Vendée was bypassed by all major lines of communication, and so intensely inward-looking; an area of subsistence agriculture supplemented here and there by low-grade textile production exported through Nantes.

The contrast with the basin of the Garonne, which with its provinces of Aunis, Saintonge, Guyenne, and Gascony stretched to the foothills of the Pyrenees, could scarcely have been greater. This was another zone of navigable rivers and good communications. Apart from the sandy heaths of the *Landes*, to the south of the Gironde, it was a fertile region whose warm, damp climate favoured great agricultural diversity. Even the stony gravels around Bordeaux were perfect for growing what were already acknowledged to be the best wines in the world.

and on the upper Garonne and the Pyrenean foothills the introduction of maize in the late seventeenth century had transformed the face of the country and the rural economy. But south-western agriculture was not as commercialized as that of the northern plains. Southwards from the Loire stretched a region of petty cultivation (*petite culture*) carried on by a mixture of small peasant proprietors and share-croppers leasing from landlords who plainly did not expect high profits. Centuries of English rule during the Middle Ages had bequeathed no profound sense of separate identity comparable to that of Brittany. Basque and Béarnais were spoken in the extreme south, but the nasal Gascon accent of much of the south-west was recognizably the *langue d'oil* of northern France. Only Bordeaux, the undisputed regional capital, which had revolted twice against the Crown in the previous century, remained suspicious of authorities still five or six days distant. They were thought all too likely to interfere damagingly with the surging commercial prosperity which had created Europe's second busiest port and boosted the city's population from 45,000 to 111,000 since the beginning of the century.

Apart from the monotonous plains of the Beauce, to the south of Paris, the landscape of northern and western France was very varied, with many hilly regions. But hardly anywhere did the land rise much above 600 feet. South and east of a line running roughly from Bayonne in the south to Sedan in the north, however, all the land was higher except for the valley floors of the Rhône and the upper Garonne, and the Mediterranean littoral around the Gulf of Lyons. Mediterranean France, the Midi, was largely cut off from the northern lowlands by the impenetrable plateau of the Massif Central, a remote, mountainous region whose poverty-stricken economy only survived thanks to large-scale seasonal migrations of manpower to more favoured lowland regions, often as far away as Catalonia. There certainly were fertile valleys in the Massif, and on the higher lands many of the peasants owned their plots; but they were subsistence farmers, and were relying increasingly on chestnuts rather than grain to feed the burgeoning population. The southern Massif fell within the vast province of Languedoc, which derived its name from the distinctive strain of French spoken in the south. In Provence, the accent of the Midi almost became a separate language; it certainly marked all southerners out as closer cousins of the Italians or Spaniards than their fellow subjects north of the Massif. So did the climate, with its dry, searing summers and short winters, so suitable for vines, olives, and mulberries on almost any soil, with hillsides often terraced to the top in order to take them. Languedoc was the home of a quarter of a million Protestants

largely concentrated in and around Nîmes, Montauban, and the Cévennes mountains which formed the southern wall of the Massif. Since 1685 they had enjoyed no toleration, and the bitter and savage uprising of fanatical Bible-bred peasants in the Cévennes, the Camisards, during the first decade of the century had inflamed sectarian antagonisms and suspicions that though abating, were far from dead by the day Louis XVI swore to extirpate heresy. However reluctant central authority might be, as time went by, to invoke the full rigour of the law against dissent, its power was limited in a province with strong autonomous traditions. The estates of Languedoc, meeting annually in Montpellier, were run by bishops, and since 1762 the bigotry of the parlement of Toulouse had been notorious thanks to Voltaire's vilification of them as judicial murderers of the Protestant Jean Calas.*

Provence shared Languedoc's autonomous traditions, although uniquely, at Aix, its parlement was presided over by the intendant. Taxation was raised by the Assembly of the Communities, a stopgap for estates that had not met since 1639. Most of the province was wild and rocky country, of no great prosperity; but isolated on its southern tip was Toulon, a bustling naval base and penal colony. Further west lay Marseilles, a major port commanding the mouth of the Rhône, whose valley was the main corridor between northern and southern France. Marseilles virtually monopolized France's Mediterranean and Levant trade, but had important outlets to the Atlantic, too. Devastated by the last great outbreak of plague in France in 1720, two generations later the population had recovered buoyantly. 'The common people', wrote an English visitor,² 'have a brutality and rudeness of manners more characteristic of a republican than a monarchical state.' Many northerners would have found this true of most inhabitants of the Midi.

Doubtless they were not well prepared for meeting this alien world by their journey down the narrow Rhône valley, swept at alarming speed along the fast-flowing stream and shooting through the perilous arches of the bridge at Pont Saint-Esprit, or plodding along the narrow trunk road at 24 miles a day, from Lyons, 200 to the north. The Alpine fastnesses of Dauphiné, to the east, certainly did not tempt them to stray off, with their high, cold valleys and largely pastoral economy. Dauphiné had once governed itself through estates, and memories of this lost autonomy lingered on in a region of isolated valleys where the authority of central government was seldom felt. Everybody in the lowlands was familiar, however, with the mountain men of Dauphiné, who descended every winter to the valleys in search of work, leaving their womenfolk no competitors for strictly limited stocks of food.

One of the most obvious magnets for such migrants was Lyons, France's second city, with 146,000 inhabitants. Standing at the crossroads of routes where Rhône and Saône meet, Lyons was a city of commerce, and industry, proud to be unencumbered by the swarming lawyers who plagued the seats of parlements. Economic life was dominated by the fortunes of the silk trade, in which over 60,000 earned their living, and which in the mid-1770s was on the crest of a wave of prosperity that was about to break.

Though as far from the capital as Bordeaux, Lyons was within the jurisdiction of the parlement of Paris, whereas the province of Burgundy, to the north, had its own parlement at Dijon, and indeed its own estates. Much damaged in the wars of the early seventeenth century, Burgundy ceased to be a frontier province when Franche Comté was annexed, and this brought a peace which facilitated the redevelopment of its famous vineyards straddling the main routes from Paris to the south. The good communications of Burgundy also favoured the establishment of industry, and around the coal and iron deposits of Le Creusot the 1780s were to witness the foundation of the most advanced industrial complex in Europe, producing munitions, hardware, and glass with coke-smelting techniques borrowed from England. The real centres of French metallurgy, however, lay north-west of Burgundy, in the wooded hills of Lorraine, where smelting still relied for heat on traditional charcoal, and enterprises were still small-scale. Lorraine had only just become French, but in reality it had been under French control since 1738, and surrounded by French territory for much longer. For beyond lay Franche Comté and Alsace, frontier provinces bounded by the Jura mountains and the Rhine. After its annexation from the Spaniards, Franche Comté slumbered throughout the eighteenth century undisturbed by international conflict, largely preoccupied with its own affairs. The chief focus of interest in the province was the bitter infighting between factions within the parlement of Besançon; and the most noteworthy feature of its social structure was the presence of most of France's 140,000 remaining serfs, whose land was technically forfeit to their lords when they died. Spanish rule had left the Comtois with a reputation for extreme piety and orthodoxy, in marked contrast to the Alsatians to the north of them. There, 200,000 Protestants, Lutherans distinct from the Calvinists of Languedoc, and almost a third of the population, enjoyed religious toleration under the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 that had made the province French. There were also some 30,000 Jews, spilling over into neighbouring Lorraine. Cut off from the Paris basin by the steep, wooded ridges of the Vosges, Alsace looked towards Germany, most of its inhabitants were German-speaking, and its economic

life was dominated by its position along the great commercial artery of the Rhine. From the Germans its peasants had learned to cultivate, and like, potatoes, and the agriculture of the fertile Rhine valley was, as Arthur Young put it, 'one of the richest scenes of soil and cultivation to be met with in France'.³

Young was not often moved to such praise on his journeyings round France. In general he found French agriculture backward and unenterprising and few historians since have disagreed. Productivity was low, technology conservative, and methods wasteful. Throughout the middle years of the century a small group of writers energetically advocated the adoption of new methods, largely copied from England. The government lent them its support, and tried to foster greater public discussion of agricultural questions. But none of this activity had the slightest effect on everyday agriculture or the peasants who carried it on. The root of the problem, in Young's view, lay in the morcellation of rural property. All the legal systems of France stipulated one form or another of partible inheritance. Property was divided up between heirs each generation. Entails, which kept vast estates together down the generations in most other European countries, were either unknown or weak and limited, and in any case peasants could not afford them. So even the largest French estates were not enormous by international standards, only property owned by the Church escaped regular redistribution, and there were no fewer than four million small owner-occupiers. Between them, the tiny plots of these peasants made up perhaps a quarter of the kingdom's surface area. Much of the rest was not owned in compact units either, and leasing it out piecemeal to small tenants was the only practicable way of managing it. Perhaps three-quarters of the rented land in France was leased to peasants on share-cropping contracts (*métayage*) under which the lessee undertook to work the land and provide implements, and the lessor provided seed and received in return half or some other agreed proportion of the crop. Such leases recognized that the yield of small plots was too unpredictable to produce a regular fixed rent. In fact the yield of most peasant plots, whether owned or leased, was seldom enough by itself to keep a peasant family, let alone produce a marketable surplus. It was notorious, and the lament of agrarian improvers, that all French peasants seemed to care about was producing enough grain to feed their own families. Their ambitions seldom went beyond having just enough land to supply these needs.

Obsession with grain growing sprang, of course, from an age-old but well-justified fear of

famine. But it also prevented the diversification which might have made harvest failure less catastrophic. It is true that in some areas a breakthrough had been made into high-yield crops. In the southwest peasants lived on maize and sold their wheat. In Alsace and Lorraine potatoes were widely cultivated. In both cases the new crops only took hold after catastrophic harvest failures—in the 1690s in the south-west, and between 1737 and 1741 in the east. But maize would not grow in northern France, and potatoes were still thought of by most peasants as fit only for animals. In any case, both crops required far more fertilizer than grain, and manure was already in short supply. This was because pasture was normally sacrificed to arable, and livestock was left to graze on commons or fallow land. In competition with human beings for what the land produced, flocks and herds were neither numerous enough nor well enough nourished to provide adequate manure. The very fallow they grazed on was a colossal waste of resources, as Arthur Young never ceased to proclaim. In northern provinces, land was customarily rested every third year, while in the south every second year was more usual; so a huge proportion of the country's cultivable land lay unproductive at any one time. Only in Flanders and a few contiguous districts was grain rotated with soil-restoring fodder crops, such as clover, lucerne, and sainfoin, and fallow thus eliminated. It was no coincidence that crop yields in these extreme northern districts were the highest in the kingdom, and had been for centuries.

These advances had come about in Flanders in response to demand for food from the most highly urbanized region of early modern Europe. A substantial and accessible market had prompted productive innovation. Similar demands, this time from Paris and the densely populated northern coasts, had produced the only large-scale farming to be found in France, in the open country of the Paris basin. Here the profits to be made from supplying insatiable urban markets made it worthwhile for landlords to lease out their estates in big units, and for enterprising tenants (*gros fermiers*) to take on the spiralling rents they demanded. Farming more than a handful of acres was expensive. Ploughs, teams to draw them, and semiskilled labour to work them were all costly. This was why, in a rural world where most cultivators relied on spades and hoes, the term *laboureur* (ploughman) denoted a person of some means. But *gros fermiers* were seldom popular figures in the rural community, where they tended to accumulate the best land, turned arable into pasture, enclosed fields hitherto open, and spurned ancient communal rights such as gleaning and free grazing. They were a disturbing element in a rural society where neither landlord nor peasant showed much interest in profit.

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