

WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS
TO EUROPEAN HISTORY



A COMPANION TO
THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION

EDITED BY
Peter McPhee

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Edited by

Peter McPhee

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For Lynn Hunt

*whose innovative research and generous scholarship
pervade this collection*

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Abbreviations

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>AHRF</i>	<i>Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française</i> (<i>AHRF</i> changed from volumes to individual issue numbers in 1977)
<i>Annales</i>	<i>Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales</i>
CNRS	Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques
CTHS	Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques
ÉHÉSS	École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales
<i>HER</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>FH</i>	<i>French History</i>
<i>FHS</i>	<i>French Historical Studies</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
PUF	Presses Universitaires de France
<i>RÉ</i>	<i>Revue Économique</i>
<i>RF</i>	<i>Révolution Française</i>
<i>RHMC</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</i>
SÉR	Société des Études Robespierriéristes

Introduction

PETER MCPHEE

In the years after 1789 French revolutionaries sought to remake their society on the basis of the principles of popular sovereignty and civic equality. This was an awesome challenge in a large, diverse kingdom hitherto structured on custom, corporate and provincial privileges, and exemptions. Others, both French and foreign, took up arms in an attempt to destroy a revolution seen to be inimical to established practices of social hierarchy, religious belief, and authority.

In June 1789 commoner deputies to the Estates-General in Versailles vowed to achieve constitutional government; on 14 July several thousand armed Parisians seized the Bastille fortress in eastern Paris. Ever since, people have debated the origins and meaning of what had happened. By the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in December 1799, the first historians of the Revolution had begun to outline their narratives of these years and their judgments about the consequences of revolutionary change. Why was there a Revolution in 1789? Why had it proved so difficult to stabilize a new regime based on representation and rights? Why did the Revolution take its particular course? What were the consequences of a decade of revolutionary change?

The drama, successes, and tragedies of the Revolution, and the scale of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, have attracted scholars to it for more than two centuries.¹ Historians, like those who lived through those years, have agreed on the unprecedented and momentous nature of these and other acts of revolution in the months between

May and October 1789. They have never agreed, however, on why what came to be called the *ancien régime* was overthrown with such widespread support, nor on why the Revolution took its subsequent course or on its outcomes.

The bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989 coincided with a new wave of revolutions, this time against Soviet hegemony in eastern Europe. Celebrations of the bicentenary in Paris occurred in the aftermath of the crushing of student protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Since the dominant historical interpretation of the French Revolution had been within a Marxist paradigm of explanation – that this was essentially a triumph for urban bourgeois and landholding peasants which accelerated the transition from feudalism to capitalism – historians and journalists hostile to the Revolution rushed to proclaim that the lesson of contemporary rebellion against communist regimes was that Marxism was “dead” both as a tool for historical understanding and as a guide to a better future. The French Revolution was “over.”²

Such claims were no more than wishful thinking. The consequences of the events of 1789 were so complex and significant that reflection and debate on their origins and course show no signs of concluding. The Revolution continues to fascinate, perplex, and inspire. The two great waves of revolutionary change since the 1980s – the overthrow of regimes in eastern and southeastern Europe and the “Arab spring” – have served to revivify our interest in the world-changing upheavals of the late eighteenth century. In the decades since 1989, however, a more supple and critical use of materialist explanations has been paralleled – and challenged – by the insights of discursive analysis and other forms of cultural history and by more probing application of categories drawn from histories of gender and race, often within a trans-Atlantic or even global context.³

This *Companion* showcases the ways in which historians now respond to the most fundamental questions about the French Revolution. Why and how did an apparently stable regime collapse in 1789? Why did it prove to be so difficult to stabilize a new order? Did the political instability of these years disguise a more fundamental social and economic continuity? Was the French Revolution a major turning-point in French - even world - history, or instead a protracted period of violent upheaval and warfare which wrecked millions of lives? The collection draws on the expertise of many of those historians whose fresh approaches to the era of the French Revolution both exemplify the great richness of current historical writing on these questions and point the way to future directions in revolutionary historiography. The twenty-nine contributions - from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia - have all been written specifically for this volume.⁴ Approaches vary from wide-ranging reflections about key concepts, such as rights, gender, and terror, to cutting-edge archive-based research. None of the authors would claim that theirs is the final word: like all fine historical writing, their chapters pose questions while advancing our understanding.

One of the most fundamental and difficult questions about the French Revolution has always been how to explain its origins. France was apparently the most stable kingdom in western Europe, so how might one best explain why and how revolution occurred in 1789? Historians have long debated whether there were deep-seated, long-term causes of the political friction which erupted in 1787, and whether there were clear lines of social antagonism. Some have insisted that political conflict was short-term and avoidable: the royal state may have been under critical financial pressure, but its collapse was the outcome of a contingent