

ISSUE 2



Was the French Revolution Worth Its Human Costs?

YES: Peter Kropotkin, from *The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793*, trans. N. F. Dryhurst (Schocken Books, 1971)

NO: *The Economist* staff writer, from "The French Revolution: Bliss Was It In That Dawn?" *The Economist* (December 24, 1988)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), a Russian prince, revolutionary, and anarchist, argues that the French Revolution eradicated both serfdom and absolutism and paved the way for France's future democratic development.

NO: An article in *The Economist* argues that the French Revolution "culminated in the guillotine and the substitution of the state for the sovereignty of the nation," leaving behind negative legacies to the modern world.

Few historical events have created the emotional responses and concomitant debates as has the French Revolution. Taking advantage of one of the largest bodies of historical data gathered, historians of the past two centuries have analyzed, synthesized, and evaluated every facet of this seminal event in the history of the Western world.

From this scholarship has come a myriad of important questions regarding the political, economic, social, religious, cultural, and intellectual aspects of the Revolution—questions involving causation, behavior, outcomes, and assessments. Each generation of historians has taken the work of its predecessors and used it to shape an understanding of the Revolution that emanates from the uncovering of new sources of information, the creation of new tools to assist in the process, and the development of new schools of historical thought, which attempt to give a more contemporary, relevant slant to this important event. As a result of this historiographical process, many major questions regarding the French Revolution have been raised, and plausible answers given.

One of the most important questions that this French Revolution scholarship has raised—a double-edged one that is both elemental and significant—

is: What were its outcomes, and were they worth the human cost that was paid to achieve them?

The debate began before anyone knew what course the Revolution would take. In a 1790 treatise entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, English statesman Edmund Burke (1729-1797) uncannily predicted the future course of the Revolution and its catastrophic consequences for both France and Europe. He also argued in favor of a slow, evolutionary style of political change that was taking place in his own country, rather than the spasmodic one that was beginning to envelop France. Burke's message was clear: The Revolution in France will be costly and counterproductive.

A year later, the French Revolution gained an articulate defender in the person of Thomas Paine (1737-1809), an English-born American citizen. In *Common Sense* (1776), a stirring call-to-arms to the American colonists to throw off the yoke of English oppression, Paine acquired a reputation as a foe of tyrannical government and a strong supporter of human freedom and equality. In Part I of his political pamphlet *The Rights of Man*, Paine argued that revolution was necessary to purge civilization of those elements that stood in the way of democratic reform. According to Paine, no price was too high to pay for the realization of those cherished goals.

As generations passed, the basic question debated by Burke and Paine faded into the background as historians began to explore other fertile areas of historical research. There was either a general acceptance of the French Revolution's importance in changing the course of history or a quiet acquiescence to its outcomes, regardless of the consequences.

Peter Alexeievich Kropotkin (1842-1921) was an early historical defender of the French Revolution. Obviously influenced by his radical, anarchistic background and his desire to see all people freed from the yoke of oppression, his view of the Revolution was somewhat simplistic and uncritical. Coming from a nineteenth century environment where revolutions were commonplace—and were viewed by many as an inevitable part of political evolution—his opinions on the French Revolution were representative for his time, and for generations to come.

Of all the books written about the French Revolution in recent years, none has been as popular as Simon Schama's *Citizens: a Chronicle of the French Revolution*. Published in the midst of the Revolution's bicentennial celebration, the book aroused much controversy for many reasons; among them was Schama's view that the French Revolution was not worth its human costs. Seeing violence as an endemic part of the revolutionary process, Schama also stated that the Revolution produced few of the tangible results it had promised. This book encouraged others to question the nature and consequences of the French Revolution.

An excerpt from Kropotkin's book and an article from *The Economist* written on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution provide not only opposing viewpoints on whether or not the French Revolution was worth its human costs, but also a clear example of how different eras can have different values, which can affect how the past is interpreted.

The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793

When one sees that terrible and powerful Convention wrecking itself in 1794-1795, that proud and strong Republic disappearing, and France, after the demoralising régime of the Directory, falling under the military yoke of a Bonaparte, one is impelled to ask: "What was the good of the Revolution if the nation had to fall back again under despotism?" In the course of the nineteenth century, this question has been constantly put, and the timid and conservative have worn it threadbare as an argument against revolutions in general.

... Those who have seen in the Revolution only a change in the Government, those who are ignorant of its economic as well as its educational work, those alone could put such a question.

The France we see during the last days of the eighteenth century, at the moment of the *coup d'état* on the 18th Brumaire, is not the France that existed before 1789. Would it have been possible for the old France, wretchedly poor and with a third of her population suffering yearly from dearth, to have maintained the Napoleonic Wars, coming so soon after the terrible wars of the Republic between 1792 and 1799, when all Europe was attacking her?

The fact is, that a new France had been constituted since 1792-1793. Scarcity still prevailed in many of the departments, and its full horrors were felt especially after the *coup d'état* of Thermidor, when the maximum price for all foodstuffs was abolished. There were still some departments which did not produce enough wheat to feed themselves, and as the war went on, and all means of transport were requisitioned for its supplies, there was scarcity in those departments. But everything tends to prove that France was even then producing much more of the necessaries of life of every kind than in 1789.

Never was there in France such energetic ploughing, Michelet tells us, as in 1792, when the peasant was ploughing the lands he had taken back from the lords, the convents, the churches, and was goading his oxen to the cry of "*Allons Prusse! Allons Autriche!*" Never had there been so much clearing of lands—even royalist writers admit this—as during those years of revolution. The first good harvest, in 1794, brought relief to two-thirds of France—at least in the villages, for all this time the towns were threatened with scarcity of food. Not that it was scarce in France as a whole, or that the *sans-culotte* municipalities neglected to take measures to feed those who could not find employment, but from the fact that all beasts of burden not actually used in tillage were requisitioned to carry food and ammunition to the fourteen armies of the Republic. In those days

there were no railways, and all but the main roads were in the state they are to this day in Russia—well-nigh impassable.

A new France was born during those four years of revolution. For the first time in centuries the peasant ate his fill, straightened his back and dared to speak out. Read the detailed reports concerning the return of Louis XVI. to Paris, when he was brought back a prisoner from Varennes, in June 1791, by the peasants, and say: "Could such a thing, such an interest in the public welfare, such a devotion to it, and such an independence of judgment and action have been possible before 1789?" A new nation had been born in the meantime, just as we see to-day a new nation coming into life in Russia and in Turkey.

It was owing to this new birth that France was able to maintain her wars under the Republic and Napoleon, and to carry the principles of the Great Revolution into Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and even to the borders of Russia. And when, after all those wars, after having mentally followed the French armies as far as Egypt and Moscow, we expect to find France in 1815 reduced to an appalling misery and her lands laid waste, we find, instead, that even in its eastern portions and in the Jura, the country is much more prosperous than it was at the time when Pétion, pointing out to Louis XVI. the luxuriant banks of the Marne, asked him if there was anywhere in the world a kingdom more beautiful than the one the King had not wished to keep.

The self-contained energy was such in villages regenerated by the Revolution, that in a few years France became a country of well-to-do peasants, and her enemies soon discovered that in spite of all the blood she had shed and the losses she had sustained, France, in respect of her *productivity*, was the richest country in Europe. Her wealth, indeed, is not drawn from the Indies or from her foreign commerce: it comes from her own soil, from her love of the soil, from her own skill and industry. She is the richest country, because of the subdivision of her wealth, and she is still richer because of the possibilities she offers for the future.

Such was the effect of the Revolution. And if the casual observer sees in Napoleonic France only a love of glory, the historian realises that even the wars France waged at that period were undertaken to secure the fruits of the Revolution—to keep the lands that had been retaken from the lords, the priests and the rich, and the liberties that had been won from despotism and the Court. If France was willing in those years to bleed herself to death, merely to prevent the Germans, the English, and the Russians from forcing a Louis XVIII. upon her, it was because she did not want the return of the emigrant nobles to mean that the *ci-devants* would take back the lands which had been watered already with the peasant's sweat, and the liberties which had been sanctified with the patriots' blood. And France fought so well for twenty-three years, that when she was compelled at last to admit the Bourbons, it was she who imposed conditions on them. The Bourbons might reign, but the lands were to be kept by those who had taken them from the feudal lords, so that even during the White Terror of the Bourbons they dared not touch those lands. The old régime could not be re-established.

This is what is gained by making a Revolution.

From Peter Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793*, trans. N. F. Dryhurst (Schocken books, 1971).

There are other things to be pointed out. In the history of all nations a time comes when fundamental changes are bound to take place in the whole of the national life. Royal despotism and feudalism were dying in 1789; it was impossible to keep them alive; they had to go.

But then, two ways were opened out before France: reform or revolution.

At such times there is always a moment when reform is still possible; but if advantage has not been taken of that moment, if an obstinate resistance has been opposed to the requirements of the new life, up to the point when blood has flowed in the streets, as it flowed on July 14, 1789, then there must be a Revolution. And once the Revolution has begun, it must necessarily develop to its conclusions—that is to say, to the highest point it is capable of attaining—were it only temporarily, being given a certain condition of the public mind at this particular moment.

If we represent the slow progress of a period of evolution by a line drawn on paper, we shall see this line gradually though slowly rising. Then there comes a Revolution, and the line makes a sudden leap upwards. In England the line would be represented as rising to the Puritan Republic of Cromwell; in France it rises to the *Sans-culotte* Republic of 1793. However, at this height progress cannot be maintained; all the hostile forces league together against it, and the Republic goes down. Our line, after having reached that height, drops. Reaction follows. For the political life of France the line drops very low indeed, but by degrees it rises again, and when peace is restored in 1815 in France, and in 1688 in England—both countries are found to have attained a level much higher than they were on prior to their Revolutions.

After that, evolution is resumed: our line again begins to rise slowly: but, besides taking place on a very much higher level, the rising of the line will in nearly every case be also much more rapid than before the period of disturbance.

This is a law of human progress, and also a law of individual progress. The more recent history of France confirms this very law by showing how it was necessary to pass through the Commune to arrive at the Third Republic.

The work of the French Revolution is not confined merely to what it obtained and what was retained of it in France. It is to be found also in the principles bequeathed by it to the succeeding century—in the line of direction it marked out for the future.

A reform is always a compromise with the past, but the progress accomplished by revolution is always a promise of future progress. If the Great French Revolution was the summing up of a century's evolution, it also marked out in its turn the programme of evolution to be accomplished in the course of the nineteenth century.

It is a law in the world's history that the period of a hundred or a hundred and thirty years, more or less, which passes between two great revolutions, receives its character from the revolution in which this period began. The nations endeavour to realise in their institutions the inheritance bequeathed to them by the last revolution. All that this last could not yet put into practice, all

the great thoughts which were thrown into circulation during the turmoil, and which the revolution either could not or did not know how to apply, all the attempts at sociological reconstruction, which were born during the revolution, will go to make up the substance of evolution during the epoch that follows the revolution, with the addition of those new ideas to which this evolution will give birth, when trying to put into practice the programme marked out by the last upheaval. Then, a new revolution will be brought about in some other nation, and this nation in its turn will set the problems for the following century. Such has hitherto been the trend of history.

Two great conquests, in fact, characterise the century which has passed since 1789–1793. Both owe their origin to the French Revolution, which had carried on the work of the English Revolution while enlarging and invigorating it with all the progress that had been made since the English middle classes beheaded their King and transferred his power to the Parliament. These two great triumphs are: the abolition of serfdom and the abolition of absolutism, by which personal liberties have been conferred upon the individual, undreamt of by the serf of the lord and the subject of the absolute king, while at the same time they have brought about the development of the middle classes and the capitalist *régime*.

These two achievements represent the principal work of the nineteenth century, begun in France in 1789 and slowly spread over Europe in the course of that century.

The work of enfranchisement, begun by the French peasants in 1789, was continued in Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria by the armies of the *sans-culottes*. Unfortunately, this work hardly penetrated into Poland and did not reach Russia at all.

The abolition of serfdom in Europe would have been already completed in the first half of the nineteenth century if the French *bourgeoisie*, coming into power in 1794 over the dead bodies of Anarchists, Cordeliers, and Jacobins, had not checked the revolutionary impulse, restored monarchy, and handed over France to the imperial juggler, the first Napoleon. This *ex-sans-culotte*, now a general of the *sans-culottes*, speedily began to prop up aristocracy; but the impulsion had been given, the institution of serfdom had already received a mortal blow. It was abolished in Spain and Italy in spite of the temporary triumph of reaction. It was closely pressed in Germany after 1811, and disappeared in that country definitively in 1848. In 1861, Russia was compelled to emancipate her serfs, and the war of 1878 put an end to serfdom in the Balkan peninsula.

The cycle is now complete. The right of the lord over the person of the peasant no longer exists in Europe, even in those countries where the feudal dues have still to be redeemed.

This fact is not sufficiently appreciated by historians. Absorbed as they are in political questions, they do not perceive the importance of the abolition of serfdom, which is, however, the essential feature of the nineteenth century. The rivalries between nations and the wars resulting from them, the policies of the Great Powers which occupy so much of the historian's atten-

tion, have all sprung from that one great fact—the abolition of serfdom and the development of the wage-system which has taken its place.

The French peasant, in revolting a hundred and twenty years ago against the lord who made him beat the ponds lest croaking frogs should disturb his master's sleep, has thus freed the peasants of all Europe. In four years, by burning the documents which registered his subjection, by setting fire to the chateaux, and by executing the owners of them who refused to recognise his rights as a human being, the French peasant so stirred up all Europe that it is today altogether free from the degradation of serfdom.

On the other hand, the abolition of absolute power has also taken a little over a hundred years to make the tour of Europe. Attacked in England in 1648, and vanquished in France in 1789, royal authority based on divine right is no longer exercised save in Russia, but there, too, it is at its last gasp. Even the little Balkan States and Turkey have now their representative assemblies, and Russia is entering the same cycle.

In this respect the Revolution of 1789–1793 has also accomplished its work. Equality before the law and representative government have now their place in almost all the codes of Europe. In theory, at least, the law makes no distinctions between men, and every one has the right to participate, more or less, in the government.



The absolute monarch—master of his subjects—and the lord—master of the soil and the peasants, by right of birth—have both disappeared. The middle classes now govern Europe.

But at the same time the Great Revolution has bequeathed to us some other principles of an infinitely higher import; the principles of communism. We have seen how all through the Great Revolution the communist idea kept coming to the front, and how after the fall of the Girondins numerous attempts and sometimes great attempts were made in this direction. Fourierism descends in a direct line from L'Ange on one side and from Chaliier on the other. Babeuf is the direct descendant of ideas which stirred the masses to enthusiasm in 1793; he, Buonarrotti, and Sylvain Maréchal have only systematised them a little or even merely put them into literary form. But the secret societies organized by Babeuf and Buonarrotti were the origin of the *communistes matérialistes* secret societies through which Blanqui and Barb'ès conspired under the *bourgeois* monarchy of Louis-Philippe. Later on, in 1866, the International Working Men's Association appeared in the direct line of descent from these societies. As to "socialism" we know now that this term came into vogue to avoid the term "communism," which at one time was dangerous because the secret communist societies became societies for action, and were rigorously suppressed by the *bourgeoisie* then in power.

There is, therefore, a direct filiation from the *Enragés* of 1793 and the Babeuf conspiracy of 1795 to the International Working Men's Association of 1866–1878.

There is also a direct descent of ideas. Up till now, modern socialism has added absolutely nothing to the ideas which were circulating among the French people between 1789 and 1794 and which it was tried to put into practice in the Year II. of the Republic. Modern socialism has only systematised those ideas and found arguments in their favour, either by turning against the middle-class economists certain of their own definitions, or by generalising certain facts noticed in the development of industrial capitalism, in the course of the nineteenth century.

But I permit myself to maintain also that, however vague it may have been, however little support it endeavoured to draw from arguments dressed in a scientific garb, and however little use it made of the pseudo-scientific slang of the middle-class economists, the popular communism of the first two years of the Republic saw clearer, and went much deeper in its analyses, than modern socialism.

First of all, it was communism in the consumption of the necessities of life—not in production only; it was the communalisation and the nationalisation of what economists know as consumption—to which the stern republicans of 1793 turned, above all, their attention, when they tried to establish their stores of grain and provisions in every commune, when they set on foot a gigantic inquiry to find and fix the true value of the objects of prime and secondary necessity, and when they inspired Robespierre to declare that *only the superfluity of food stuffs should become articles of commerce, and that what was necessary belonged to all.*

Born out of the pressing necessities of those troublous years, the communism of 1793, with its affirmation of the right of all to sustenance and to the land for its production, its denial of the right of any one to hold more land than he and his family could cultivate—that is, more than a farm of 120 acres—and its attempt to communalise all trade and industry—this communism went straighter to the heart of things than all the minimum programmes of our own time, and even all the maximum preambles of such programmes.

In any case, what we learn today from the study of the Great Revolution is, that it was the source of origin of all the present communist, anarchist, and socialist conceptions. We have but badly understood our common mother, but now we have found her again in the midst of the *sans-culottes*, and we see what we have to learn from her.

Humanity advances by stages and these stages have been marked for several hundred years by great revolutions. After the Netherlands came England with her revolution in 1648–1657, and then it was the turn of France. Each great revolution has in it, besides, something special and original. England and France both abolished royal absolutism. But in doing so England was chiefly interested in the personal rights of the individual, particularly in matters of religion, as well as the local rights of every parish and every community. As to France, she turned her chief attention to the land question, and in striking a mortal blow at the feudal system she struck also at the great fortunes, and sent forth into the world the idea of nationalising the soil, and of socialising commerce and the chief industries.

Which of the nations will take upon herself the terrible but glorious task of the next great revolution? One may have thought for a time that it would be Russia. But if she should push her revolution further than the mere limitation of the imperial power; if she touches the land question in a revolutionary spirit—how far will she go? Will she know how to avoid the mistake made by the French Assemblies, and will she socialise the land and give it only to those who want to cultivate it with their own hands? We know not: any answer to this question would belong to the domain of prophecy.

The one thing certain is, that whatsoever nation enters on the path of revolution in our own day, it will be heir to all our forefathers have done in France. The blood they shed was shed for humanity—the sufferings they endured were borne for the entire human race; their struggles, the ideas they gave to the world, the shock of those ideas, are all included in the heritage of mankind. All have borne fruit and will bear more, still finer, as we advance towards those wide horizons opening out before us, where, like some great beacon to point the way, flame the words—LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY.



NO

The Economist Staff Writer

The French Revolution: Bliss Was It In That Dawn?

Historians have always been the supreme street-sweepers and organisers of the past; revolutions are fascinating because they are so untidy. The Marxist historical filofax dictated that the bourgeois revolution of 1789 in France led to repeated revolutionary outbursts in nineteenth-century Europe. Bourgeois gave way to proletarian revolution in France in June 1848 and March 1871. The French experience gave birth to a world-wide socialist and communist movement witnessed first in the Paris Commune of 1871, then in the October revolution of 1917 in Russia, in China in 1949 and subsequently in a range of states from Cuba to Ethiopia. This Marxist model of revolution was marketed by France's academic historical hierarchy until recent years. It carried such conviction that a scrap of a Communard red flag was taken up to the moon by a Russian expedition.

But the Marxist-socialist millenarian vision of man on an escalator of progress—from the triumph of an industrial bourgeoisie in France in 1789 towards a classless society—was dismembered by the experience of "socialism" in action from the Stalinist purges of the 1930s onwards. From the 1950s historians in Britain and France, led by Alfred Cobban, revealed that even the Marxist model of 1789 itself was misconceived. The revolution delayed, rather than accelerated, the rise of an industrial middle class in France. 1789 was just an attempt by a traditional office-holding and professional bourgeoisie to hold on to their position in society and advance their claims to be consulted in a more modern and rational political framework.

The stature of 1789 has also been reduced by stressing the "Atlantic" impetus to revolution. Chronologically and spritually, the American revolution stole the show, and in Europe's response the French experience was only one element. What then was left of 1789 as an example to the world? Apparently little enough. After all, Alexis de Tocqueville had begun the undressing of Marianne in the 1850s when he noted that the much-vaunted administrative and other institutional restructuring of the years of revolution and of Napoleon were part of a continuum begun under the ancien regime.

In the early 1980s, when the French socialist government realised that decorum would dictate the celebration of a bicentenary, senior French academics travelled the world to arouse interest in the event. The British were

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astounded to discover that they were expected to celebrate the impact of 1789 on these islands, and the French recoiled in disbelief at the claim by the British that they might dare to celebrate what happened in France. In a recent survey of the importance of the revolution, the president of the official 1789 committee admitted that 1789 has meaning for other countries today only where a link is discerned with their own history. Thus Australia, currently recalling its own birth as a nation, finds an echo in 1789 as the birth of nation-state France. The big controversial ideological claims have gone.

What remains? Politics and political culture, which are once more respectable areas for study by historians of 1789. Foreigners may delight in recalling the embarrassingly prolonged moments of bloody conflict during the Terror and of the substitution of the military dictatorship of Napoleon for the will o' the wisp of political freedom in 1799; but the French are now remembering the positive achievements of 1789, and the rest of the world might do likewise.

The 1790s were uniquely and uncomfortably for the French a decade of political experiment and radical institutional change. France's many European neighbours that were absorbed into the Consulate and Empire witnessed, to varying degrees, a similar reshaping of administrative, judicial and other institutions, together with the introduction of the new French codes covering all aspects of law. Napoleon governed an Empire larger than any since the Roman one. The map of pre-revolutionary Europe could never be rewritten. Many of the new institutions and codes were retained after Napoleon's fall, even though the idea of 1789 was anathema to conservatives in the first half of the nineteenth century.

It used to be claimed that subsequent revolutionary liberal and national movements in these territories were directly inspired by the French example, however illogical it might appear. It has been suggested that the experience of the revolutionary years in Italy and Germany threw up a new bourgeois ruling elite, an echo of the Marxist analysis of 1789 in France. But empirical investigation into the Napoleonic Empire in recent years has shown that the revolution did no more to create a middle-class elite outside France than in and that the rationalisation of government began before the French armies arrived.

To appreciate the significance of 1789 for other peoples, yet another idol of the past must be challenged—Tocqueville. It was politically convenient and expedient for his theories to stress the continuity of *ancien régime* and revolution; but today, with 1789 stripped of the weight of its formerly assumed social and economic content, it is the huge scope of both the political experiment and the institutional innovation that is more striking. The *ancien régime* may have fiddled with the notions of the philosophes on rational government, but the revolutionaries in France created the institutional framework of a modern state, which France retains in essence today and which was to be a model for others.

The political heritage of 1789 was ambiguous, to put the matter politely. But the setting-up of a constitutional monarchy in 1814 (although it had echoes of the British system) launched a French brand of constitutionalism much copied in nineteenth-century Europe. The ideals of the revolution as

expressed in the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" may have been swamped by political limitations; but a statement was made by the French, as by the Americans before them, which has a validity that should not be ignored today.

The myth of a Marxist 1789 will be long a-dying among more nostalgic socialists, but the growing gap between rich and poor in all societies will perhaps create the groundswell for new forms of social upheaval in which the ideas of Babeuf and others in the 1790s may find a new audience. Peasants and artisans who fought in the 1790s were trying to hold on to old forms of communal organisation which offered them some protection from misery. Newly privatised modern states risk creating similar dispossessed elements. At present 1789 may be regarded in France and the world as a toothless model—but for how much longer?

Writers' Block

One of the curious facts of literary history is the almost complete absence of outstanding works of literature in France during the revolution and for the following two decades. Mention of 1789 is more likely to bring to mind works that immediately precede the revolution and which are commonly thought to herald its arrival. There is a disquieting *fin de siècle* spirit in, for example, Lados's novel "Les Liaisons dangereuses" and Beaumarchais's play "Le Mariage de Figaro".

The turbulent period from 1789 to 1794 conjures up deeds and images rather than words: the figure of the young Andre Chenier about to be guillotined (his revolutionary poems were not known until 1819), the marquis de Sade being released by the revolutionaries from prison (not the Bastille but the asylum at Charenton), and a host of amigres like Chateaubriand and Madame de Stael, off to discover more exotic vistas in America and Germany. The most "memorable" products of the revolution are the patriotic songs, the often tiresome pamphlets and the hectoring speeches: the Marseillaise (its composer thereby escaping complete oblivion), Marat's vitriolic journalism, Saint just's impassioned rhetoric. The same frantic activity is to be seen in the theatre of the day—1,000 plays in ten years, hardly one of any merit.

Paradoxically, it was not until the restoration of the monarchy that the revolution began to make a serious impact on French literature. This kind of delayed effect was foreseen by Diderot some 20 years before the revolution; he looked forward to a time when poets might be born again, a time which would come only after a period of cataclysmic events. In the 1820s Stendhal corroborates this view, offering an explanation. He pointed out that between 1792 and 1800 Frenchmen were simply preoccupied with the defence of their territory; and that from 1800 to 1814 the censorship of the Napoleonic régime did not allow the revolution to extend itself to literature.

Stendhal himself is a perfect example of this delayed literary renewal. His novels are full of the sense that what has happened in his time is an extension, under the impetus of the French revolution, of democratic feeling and a more realistic way of looking at the world. The hero of "Le Rouge et le Noir",

Julien Sorel, combines a peasant realism with an inspired revolutionary romanticism. This upstart who falls in love with and seduces (but with a purity of feeling) women far above his own station cannot be confused with the philandering Don Juan of ancien régime literature. A reversal of social circumstances has taken place. There are new dreams of happiness on an altogether more egalitarian basis than ever before.

The issue of emancipation from the past is one taken up by English writers in the early years of the revolution. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive", as Wordsworth wrote of the fall of the Bastille. After the Terror and the revolutionary wars, many of the same generation of poets were disenchanted. Only Blake and Shelley remained staunch supporters. For Shelley, the revolution was "the master theme of the epoch in which we live". For Blake, it was a portent of the Apocalypse. A similar messianism glows in the poetry of his German contemporaries, Holderlin and Schiller, with their images of fire and sun, dawn and spring.

For others, once the first wave of enthusiasm had passed, the revolution introduced egalitarianism into literature. Hazlitt writes of Wordsworth's "levelling Muse" which "proceeds on a principle of equality". The revolution unleashed common human hopes. At the same time, the common man—and all that was ordinary—became infused with grandeur. This is what lies behind such apparent simplicities as Wordsworth's "Simon Lee", where the poet assists an old man trying to sever a tree-root in the wastes of the moors. But the levelling and unleashing could go too far; for Carlyle, writing later, the revolution represents the tyranny of "King Mob", the ultimate outburst of destructive fury.

In France the revolution continued to reverberate throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Above all, the events of 1789 were felt to be unfinished business. They had given rise to certain expectations and these had not been fulfilled. In 1830, 1848 and 1870 complacency was again broken by outbursts of discontent. In the writings of the time, fantastic visions of a better world are continually being juxtaposed with bitter disillusionment. Musset's "Lorenzaccio" ends with the counter-productive murder of a tyrant; Vigny's "Chatterton", with capitalism sacrificing both poet and proletariat. Baudelaire, in spite of his kinship with the downtrodden, retreats into the same type of political defeatism.

Romantic idealism is finally cut to pieces by Flaubert's 'L'Education sentimentale' in which the revolutionaries of the 1840s are viewed with caustic scepticism, as they dream of glorious times and model themselves on Saint Just, Danton, Marat or Robespierre. Yet the myth of violence, disorder and even stupidity associated with the revolution is never so strong as to efface the legend of fraternity and equality. A strain of heroic endeavour pervades the work of more than one nineteenth-century writer. The revolutionary masses ("the people") are celebrated in Michelet's history, and they are still there in Zola's "Germinal".

It has been said that revolutions in France never repeat themselves: every one since 1789 has been made by different groups of dissidents. But literature does not see it that way. Each surge of protest finds an expression that harks

back to the drama of the revolution. It is true that the students of 1968 did not dance the carmagnole; but in the same decade Peter Brook's "Marat/Sade" and Ariane Mnouchkine's "1789" played to packed houses in Paris, London and New York. "Is the French revolution still worth talking about?" wrote Pieter Geyl in a famous article in 1956. The answer lies with the authors who continue to draw inspiration from it.

Popular Myths

The revolutionaries believed that art should have a dual purpose: to instill patriotic and republican feelings into Frenchmen, and to strike fear into their enemies. On both counts, Jacques-Louis David was the outstanding painter of the revolution.

A contemporary pamphleteer declared that David's "Oath of the Horatii", exhibited at the salon of 1785, "had inflamed more souls for liberty than the best books." It was the painting's moral message that struck home: the swearing of an oath by the three Horatii before their father to defend republican Rome against its enemies. In the background the swooning womenfolk symbolise the gentler family feelings that have been sacrificed to public duty. It is easy to see why this work was understood after 1789 to indict an effete monarchy; harder to understand why such an exemplum virtutis, more suited to the mores of the revolutionaries than of the monarchy, should have been executed by one of the King's own painters and purchased for the royal collection.

At least part of the answer lies in the monarchy's attempt, through its minister for the arts, the comte d'Angiviller, to swim with the incipient republican tide. The painting, which was one of many harbingers of the revolution, would soon become its talisman. It was re-exhibited frequently during the revolution, when it was protected by David's pupils in the uniform of the National Guard. The work was also to reach a still wider audience by being re-enacted as a tableau on the stage, that influential school of contemporary patriotism. David was commissioned too by the National Convention to draw cartoons for use as propaganda against the Republic's enemies abroad; in his robustly scatological "Le Gouvernement anglais"....

Artistic propaganda, pushed by the French revolutionaries further than ever before, achieved expression in what was virtually a new art form, the revolutionary festival. In place of the staid processions of Church and monarchy or the innocent gambolling of peasants round their May Trees, the festivals featured the people as active agents of a cause which was their own. They brought together all the main art forms—architecture, sculpture, painting, music, singing, dancing and dress. Royalists affected to scorn them, but that in itself was testimony to their effectiveness. Most contemporary observers were deeply impressed by the vast and orderly crowds, by their commitment, and not least by the beauty of the dream-like processions, conjured up by contemporary imaginations from the antique, with the women draped in the flowing white robes de, signed—once again—by David.

If David's art and the revolutionary festivals tended to show the revolution from above, the grass-roots version is to be seen in popular paintings and

prints. It would be hard to find a clearer example of popular art than Cholat's "Fall of the Bastille". In view of the faulty perspective and childlike draughtsmanship, it is not surprising to discover that Cholat was not an artist by profession at all, but a wine-seller. He explains in a pamphlet, where he shows himself no more expert with the pen than with the brush, that he had felt impelled to depict the events as they had really happened. That "reality" is, of course, distorted by the charged imagination of a patriotic revolutionary; the Bastille is known to have surrendered with scarcely a struggle, still less one involving the siege of heroic dimensions depicted here. Yet it was precisely the myths created by Cholat and other popular artists that were to efface often humdrum realities and to endow the revolution with so much of its continuing appeal to oppressed peoples everywhere....

Goya's "Third of May" (1809) marks both an end and a new beginning for the art of the French revolution. An end, because the automata-like soldiers of the French firing squad show what had happened to the ideals of the revolution after France and much of Europe had fallen under the military dictatorship of Bonaparte. The new beginning is manifest in the farouche defiance of the insurgent with outstretched arms, as he kneels supported by his suffering compatriots. The revolutionaries, having first sought their champions among the privileged heroes of antiquity, had finally entrusted their cause to the oppressed peoples of their own time.

Women's Travails

On October 3 1789 a group of women took up flails and marched to Versailles. Ostensibly their purpose was to secure cheaper bread and a better supply of it to the Paris market. But the movement took on a new dimension. It ended with the King, "the chief baker", and his family accompanying the women and the National Guard back to the capital. The isolation of Louis XVI in the court of Versailles was ended; he was exposed to the demands of a critical city. No more significant journey was enacted in the annals of the revolution.

Astonished Victorian historians could not believe that women could achieve so much. They tried to insist that the participants were men "dressed up as women", but the working women of Paris knew exactly what they had achieved. The march on Versailles converted them at a blow into revolutionaries in their own right and architects of a new order.

These women were the wives of artisans whose incomes invariably lagged behind prices. They believed they had the right to defend the consumer interests of their families. And as legatees of an old West European tradition of direct female action in the market place, they also believed themselves endowed with the power to riot with impunity if they respected one rule: the sanctity of property. In the absence of their husbands, whose job it was to restrain them, justice would not pursue them.

This heady glimpse of power was almost unique. Few of the great revolutionary journeys, such as the fall of the Bastille or the attacks on the Tuileries in 1792, involved many women. After October 1789 the most conspicuous intrusion of women en masse was in the great riots of Germinal and Prairial of

the year III (April-June 1795) when the women of the poor quarters of Paris again demonstrated tumultuously before the Convention to secure bread at a controlled price. This final act of the people's revolution was a dismal failure. After the fall of Robespierre, the politicians did not cede to the demands of Paris. Rather, they proceeded to strip the working populace of its weaponry, including the great cannon of the Faubourg Saint Antoine. The housewives of the quartier were particularly reluctant to give up the cannon, sensing it was the last vestige of their power.

The maitresse is Revolution was without doubt the Parisian sans culotte's wife. Like him, she believed in popular sovereignty to guarantee the people's interests: chiefly, controlled food prices, a war on hoarders and death to traitors at home and abroad. Apparently indifferent to whether or not women might exercise the vote, her job—as she saw it—was to make sure that the policies of the Terror worked. While her husband laboured to support the family and her son fought for the Republic at the front, she sat before the guillotine knitting stockings for the war effort and watching the execution of traitors. She imagined she dwelt in the middle of a vast conspiracy orchestrated by Pitt and Cobourg, aristocrats and fanatical priests, which threatened at any moment to undermine her revolution.

She had little contact, if any, with the women's clubs which emerged in Paris and some of the larger cities and which, with perhaps one exception, had an overtly bourgeois recruitment. The Societe Fraternelle des Patriotes de l'un et l'autre Sexe, for example, under the direction of Olympe de Gouges and Theroigne de Mericourt, demanded citizenship for middle-class women. When war came in the spring of 1792, de Mericourt, to the delight of caricaturists, exhorted women to form legions of Amazons to defend the revolution. By taking up arms, she argued, women demonstrated their right to citizenship.

This was something less than a new dawn in the struggle for women's rights. The women of the bourgeois clubs were, like Mary Wollstonecraft, terrified of the masses. They hoped for recognition from the Legislative Assembly and from the Girondist politicians in particular; association with the latter meant that they were loathed by the women of the Paris quarters. On May 25 1793 de Maricourt narrowly avoided being lynched by a group of Parisian working women. Six months later de Gouges was guillotined amid popular derision. Once the Jacobins had consolidated their hold, all the women's clubs were closed down. The Comite de Salut Public did not want extremely radical women calling for an acceleration of the Terror. Jacobins believed such women should stay at home.

In provincial France the scene was quite different. Women's attitudes to revolution varied considerably according to class, place and local circumstances. The revolution brought downturn in luxury-textile production, in which thousands were employed; the war brought food shortages; and the doctrinaire religious policies of successive revolutionary governments were locally enforced by over-zealous, over-ambitious patriots. In the provinces, it was the campaign to "de-Christianise" France that most enraged women. Priest-sheltering and clandestine masses were organised mostly by spinsters.

In the aftermath of Thermidor, when freedom of worship was allowed as long as it used no "exterior signs", it was women who forced priests out of hiding to serve their churches. They threw out the revolutionary calendar, reinstated Sunday and religious festivals and hence reconstructed much of the framework of life as it had been. Napoleon in the Concordat had only to recognise a fait accompli.

The French revolution is a goldmine for historians of women, but no golden age. In Paris, some women were agents of change. In the provinces, more were guardians of tradition. Still denied citizenship and certainly far from liberated, they nonetheless played as large a part as they could.

What Price Liberty?

The French naturally see their revolution as the great founding act of modern political culture. In their view it provided the model for the process of revolution; it explored the principles central to modern political concepts; its institutional experiments left a framework for others to build on. As liberal and democratic thought and practice emerged in continental Europe—especially in the German, Italian and Spanish lands occupied under Napoleon—it was the revolution that informed them.

Of course, the English-speaking world does not see things in this light. Indeed, this is one of the main sources of the endless misunderstandings between Anglo-Saxons and the French. The English and the Americans had already had their revolutions. The celebrated debate between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine over revolutions and the rights of man was conducted almost entirely in terms of English practices and values. Burke did not understand the French (even those who opposed the revolution). Poor Tom Paine was completely at sea when he was elected to the French Convention assembly in 1792.

What cut the revolutionaries off from any common ground with England was their repudiation of history. The debate about historic rights and the constitution in France foundered in early 1789 on the competing claims of the three Estates and in the quagmire of privilege. The revolutionaries escaped from the impasse by preaching a new beginning, upon new first principles. The completeness of their repudiation of the past henceforth distinguished them from the reformers.

From the often contradictory messages of the eighteenth-century philosophers, the revolutionaries had picked out at least one principle. That was universalism—the idea that something is true only if it is universally so. This meant for them that there was only one set of principles upon which a society could be constructed and governed; and this sense of a single correct and permanent solution was part of the reason that the revolutionaries did terrible things to each other and their fellow citizens.

The "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" in 1789 was the first theoretical expression of this perceived universal truth. The first article has echoes of Rousseau: "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights". Here, of course, uniformity was the essence of universality. Indeed, it was the

most striking characteristic of the revolutionaries' practical work—uniformity of laws, institutions and, for a time, the political behaviour of the population.

Yet the declaration left much unsaid. What was the nature of "liberty" and "rights"? How could those notions be expressed and defended? And how could they be reconciled with that other awkward concept, the sovereignty of the nation? In a nation of men uniformly free and exactly equal in rights, no one part could exercise sovereignty for or over the other. Rousseau had solved the problem with the General Will: the emergence of a single purpose expressing the indivisibility of a society of equal men. Yet even he recognised that, in a large society, it could not work. Hence one of the revolutionaries' greatest legacies to nineteenth-century European liberalism: the idea of representation.

Representation resolved the issue by stating that, although sovereignty could be neither divided nor delegated, the power to represent it could be delegated. Political activity therefore became a function, not a right. The inalienable rights, in which all men were equal, were essentially civil rights—with each member of the sovereign nation equally represented, but not necessarily choosing or being a representative.

In the early years this meant in practice a property-owners' paradise, with a tax-defined electorate and an even more restricted qualification for deputy. It was war which brought this edifice crashing down: first in 1792, with the destruction of the monarchy and then in 1793 with the Terror. Yet failure was also inherent in the idea. The reason monarchy had disappeared was because a monarch's possession of some ill-defined portion of sovereignty was incompatible with the singleness of the sovereign nation.

More than that, Jacobin radicals and popular militants alike pointed up the absurdity of replacing an aristocracy of birth with an aristocracy of wealth. Political rights were not separable from other rights. Besides, the social right to protection included protection from poverty, hunger, exploitation and ignorance. This was what republic, as opposed to monarchy, meant. And here lay the foundation of another powerful tradition for the next 200 years.

Yet, unlike popular militants, Jacobins did not see political rights in terms of direct democracy. On the contrary, *La République une et indivisible* was the true political form of the indivisible sovereign nation. It was expressed in the increasingly centralised government of the committee of the Convention. Of course, this centralisation and the coercive measures that went with it to constitute the Terror were made imperative by war. Yet there was more than that to Jacobinism and the Terror. The Jacobins were the last of the revolutionaries to try to build a new society from first principles. Faced with the failure of the French to be regenerated by revolution, they tried to exclude from society the irredeemable and instil in the others what Robespierre called virtue—the civic virtue of men who devoted themselves not to their own interests, but to the public good.

The revolution's high ideal of a regenerated man in a regenerated society culminated in the guillotine and the substitution of the state for the sovereignty of the nation. This tragedy also was not without import for the next 200 years.



POSTSCRIPT

Was the French Revolution Worth Its Human Costs?

The bicentennial celebration of France's revolution in 1989 was somewhat muted in nature. While credit for it was duly given, in the background was a sense of caution and concern, perhaps brought on by reminders of the Revolution's violent dark side, which had been noted by some historians and commentators. It certainly bore little resemblance to our own bicentennial celebration on July 4, 1976.

The most controversial feature of the French Revolution was the infamous Reign of Terror, and it is a subject that all toilers in the garden of the Revolution have to explain. The horrors of the twentieth century (some committed in the name of revolution) demand that the Terror gets the fullest treatment possible. Only then can the question as to whether or not the Revolution was worth its human cost be answered.

Issue 4 in this volume contains an analysis of Japan's nineteenth century Meiji Restoration, and whether it was a revolution in the classical sense. To examine this question, we suggest a comparison of the Meiji movement with other revolutions (including the French) by using the model established by Crane Brinton in *The Anatomy of Revolution* (Random House, 1966). A comparison of the Meiji Japan and French revolutionary experiences would be a tool that could be used to learn about the nature of revolutions.

To list all of the major sources on the French Revolution is daunting, but two general accounts, readable and perfect for the beginning student would be, William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1989), and Donald M.G. Sutherland, *France, 1879-1815: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1986). As always, much can be learned from Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, first published in the 1850s, could be a useful starting point for a study of the causes and effects of the French Revolution from one of that century's keenest observers.

Finally, two films whose visuals would provide an understanding of the French Revolution would be "La Nuit de Varennes," for its study of the chaotic nature of French Revolutionary society before the Reign of Terror, and "Danton, for the horror that the Terror would become.

ISSUE 3



Did British Policy Decisions Cause the Mass Emigration and Land Reforms That Followed the Irish Potato Famine?

YES: Christine Kinealy, from *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Roberts Rinehart, 1995)

NO: Hasia R. Diner, from *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Christine Kinealy, fellow of the University of Liverpool, argues that the British government's response to the Irish potato famine was deliberately inadequate. The British government's "hidden agenda" of long-term economic, social, and agrarian reform was accelerated by the famine, and mass emigration was a consequence of these changes.

NO: Historian Hasia R. Diner documents large-scale emigration both before and after the Irish potato famine. Diner credits the Irish people with learning from their famine experiences that the reliance of the poor on the potato and the excessive subdivision of land within families were no longer in their own best interests.

Beginning in 1845 a fungal disease repeatedly struck the potato crop of Ireland and was not eradicated until the early 1850s. The failure of the potato harvest in a country with a population of eight million people caused the death of approximately one million and the emigration of another million. On the eve of the famine, two-thirds of the population earned their living by working the land—for the most part land that they did not own. Still, Ireland was able to feed its own people and also to export food to feed two million Britons. During these years, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, which also included England and Scotland.

Initially the British government responded to the failure of the Irish potato crop by purchasing and storing Indian corn from America, which it