



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

THE POWDER-KEG THAT BLEW

Two hundred years ago, France, the greatest and most powerful European nation of the era, stood on the brink of collapse.

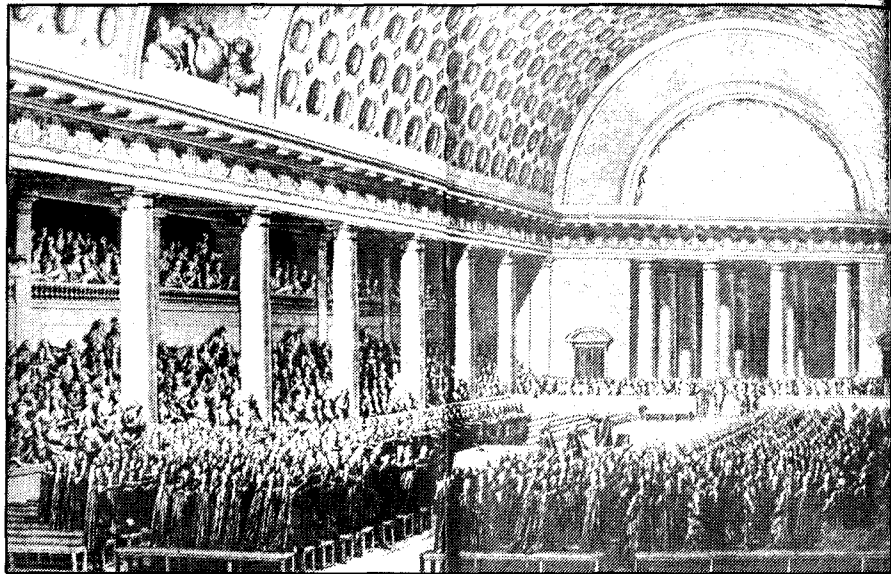
The national finances, which had never recovered from the cost of supporting the American war against England six years previously, were bankrupt. France's political institutions, such as they were in a nation so dominated by the power of the Crown, were not strong enough to reverse the crisis.

While most aristocrats and the leaders of the Church baulked at fundamental tax reform, ordinary people were going hungry, as bad harvests drove up the cost of bread to the point where, by the summer of 1789, it took 80 per cent of a Parisian artisan's wages just to pay for enough to live on.

The government of King Louis XVI was hard-pressed for money. That was why, in a final desperate throw, it had conceded the previous August that a meeting of the Estates General would have to be called – the first since 1614. The king's hope was that representatives of the three 'estates' or orders of the realm – clergy, aristocrats, and the so-called Third Estate, comprising the rest of society – would meet together to thrash out a reform of national finances. It was a calculated risk, but it did not work.

Instead, the prospect of a meeting of the Estates General, which opened at Versailles on 5 May, had become the focus for a nationwide tide of grievances against a corrupt, outdated and repressive system of government. The representatives of the Third Estate – mostly lawyers, often influenced by radical ideas, and eager for change – made the meeting unworkable by refusing to accept the king's plan that decisions should be by estates (in which the privileged first and second estates would automatically outvote the third). Six weeks later, with the confrontation still unresolved, the third estate upped the stakes. Its deputies constituted themselves the National Assembly, resolving to get on with the work of national reconstruction.

When the king shut them out of their meeting-place, the assembly adjourned to a nearby tennis court, where they swore not to disband until they had



The Estates General becomes the National Assembly, 17 June, 1789.

BY MARTIN KETTLE

drawn up a new constitution. This challenge took place against a background of rapidly worsening economic conditions. All that year, there had been civil unrest on an unprecedented scale in towns and villages all over France. Economic grievances, in particular over the price of food – the *crise des subsistances* – were its cause. Only the week before the meeting of the Estates General, royal troops shot some hundreds of Parisians workers dead, as they protested against alleged wage cuts proposed by the royal wallpaper manufacturers.

Yet, as the 19th century historian Alexis de Tocqueville was to stress, this was a time of hope as well as a time of despair. France was a corrupt society, but it was a pushy, experimental, lively society, too.

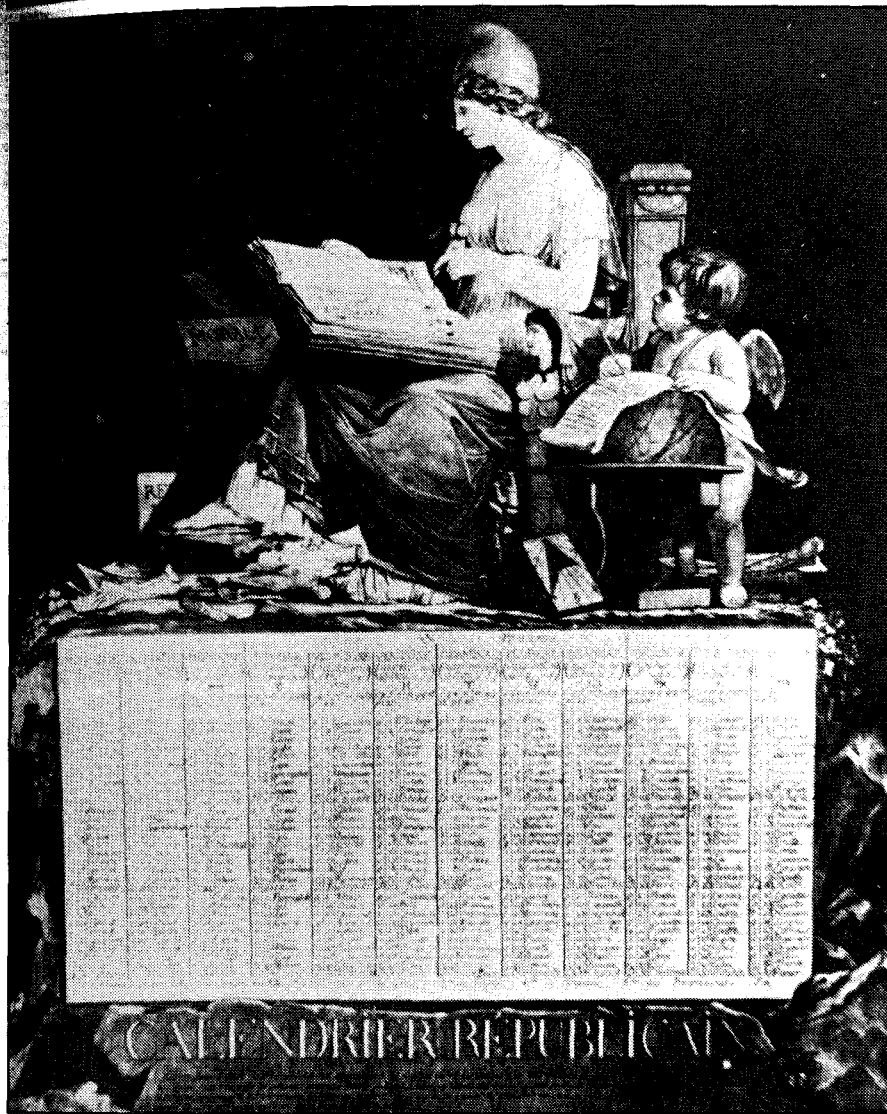
Long before 14 July, 1789, ancien régime France – including many aristocrats and churchmen – was bursting with new, modern ideas and ambitions. As Tocqueville, writing in 1856, put it, 1789 was 'a time of inexperience no doubt, but also of generosity, enthusiasm and virility.'

Now the king pushed the situation finally beyond his own control. In the face of the assembly's defiance, he sacked the ministers who were associated with the reforming strategy and strengthened the army around Versailles and Paris. The result was a rising in Paris, starting on 12 July. Demonstrations centred on the Palais-Royal. Royal troops, sent to restore order, were forced to retreat. Gunsmiths were looted, customs-posts were burned down, theatres and the stock exchange were forced to close as a sign of mourning for the dismissed ministers.

All this culminated, two days later, in the storming of the Bastille fortress in eastern Paris by crowds determined to secure supplies of gunpowder held inside. At first, the besiegers from the impoverished Faubourg St Antoine were thrust back, losing many dead. But when two detachments of guards defected to the crowd, bringing with them cannon from the Invalides, the Bastille became indefensible. The governor surrendered and was massacred with his men. The storming of the Bastille did not overthrow anything in itself, but it was the climax of a phase of mounting tension. July 14 was immediately regarded as the emblematic revolutionary and French national day, which it

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The Republican Calendar.

has remained ever since.

On the evening of July, King Louis XVI opened his daily diary and wrote: *Rien*. Historians have always found this funny, and have used it to argue that the king was hopelessly out of touch with events. In fact, the explanation is more banal. Louis was a passionate huntsman, and he used his diary to record his kills. On 14 July, he had no time to hunt.

Three days later, the king bowed to events. He came to Paris to try to make terms with the capital and with those whose revolution had now destroyed the possibility of continued absolute monarchy in France. It was the beginning of a two year period during which, without great enthusiasm on the king's part, politicians from the social élite attempted to stabilise the revolution and create a constitutional monarchy. They failed, and their failure launched France into a period of unforgettable fear and ecstasy, desperation and sublimity, which imprinted itself on the European world and beyond for generations.

When the Bastille fell, the people of 1789 knew it was an important event. And, unlike some of today's over-clever historians who think they know better,

they knew it was a revolution. All over the world, but most of all in France, contemporaries recognised, most of them astonishingly quickly, that the French Revolution of July, 1789, was a turning-point in human history. In neighbouring nations, it immediately provoked intense enthusiasm. It was, said Charles James Fox, simply the greatest event in the history of the world. It was so wonderful, wrote George Washington, that it was hard to register the fact of what had happened. And as William Wordsworth put it, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive; to be young was very heaven.'

It is said that the habits of the philosopher Immanuel Kant were so regular that the citizens of the small Prussian town of Koenigsberg would set their watches by the meticulous predictability of the great man's afternoon constitutional. When Kant failed to take his customary stroll through the town, the Koenigsbergers knew that something quite world-shattering must have happened. They were right. That morning, news had arrived from Paris of the fall of the Bastille.

Historians two centuries later are

preoccupied with disputing what exactly it was that changed, and some of them occasionally lurch into the belief that, beneath the surface drama, nothing fundamental really shifted. That was not what people thought at the time. Even Edmund Burke, who hated what had happened, wrote his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* precisely because he feared that civilisation as he imagined it was in danger of disappearing into the chasm opened up by the fall of the Bastille.

In July, 1789, standing considerably closer to events, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt had turned to King Louis XVI at the Palace of Versailles and said: 'Sire, this is not a riot, it is a revolution.' His judgement echoed down through the minds of future generations of Frenchmen, so much so that when, 41 years later, in 1830, the restored Charles X asked the military commander of Paris, Marshal Marmont, how seriously they should take the fresh rising in the capital, Marmont replied with those self-same words of de Liancourt. Charles took the hint, and fled abroad. Louis XVI was not so perspicacious.

The French Revolution dominated the politics of the 19th century, rather as the Russian Revolution has dominated the 20th. It gave the world an example of the transforming power of ideas and people which affected all subsequent French history, as well as most of Europe and much of the world far beyond. When the late premier of China, Zhou en-lai, was asked what he thought was the importance of the French Revolution, he replied: 'It is too soon to say.'

France provided the ideals, the vocabulary and the mythology of liberal and revolutionary politics for generations. Sometimes, these were conflicting ideals. The constitution of 1791, for instance, was a much less democratic document than the Jacobin constitution of 1793, and neither of them gave the vote to women at all. The French Revolution was therefore a bit of a bran-tub for posterity, out of which it was able to pick the principles and the characters it liked best, sometimes without too much regard for consistency. That process started early, and is nowhere better exemplified than in the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte, who embodied both the revolution and its suppression.

From the start, the French Revolution was ecumenical. It offered itself to the world as a dethroner of kings and tyrants everywhere. In so doing, it unleashed the forces of progressive nationalism upon every continent of the world. Since then, every people yearning to be free has looked to the democratic principles and popular icons of the French Revolution for the basis of their own.

So France gave the world its constitutional models, its modern codification of laws, its metric systems of measurement and its administrative structures. In seeking to create a new



world, based on nature, reason and classical ideals, it sometimes stretched too far ahead of popular tolerance. Its attempts to recast the calendar and to eradicate the influence of the church failed. But its legacy is vast, in terms of big ideas and in terms of their everyday representation in things like tricolour national flags, words like left and right and, for France, the most famous national anthem in the world, Rouget de Lisle's Marseillaise.

It was not just one revolution among many. At various times, historians have tried to 'place' it in convenient categories like 'democratic revolutions,' along with, notably, the American Revolution of 1776-83. But this is to deny the French Revolution its place as the detonator and inspiration of other movements and, most important, to underestimate the vast importance of the violent social upheavals in France ushered in by 1789. Though much of it was retrieved by the counter-revolution of 1795-9 and by Napoleon, the French Revolution blew great holes in the boundaries of the politically possible.

Yet who revolted and against whom or what? What did the French Revolution achieve for France and its people? It is easy to see parts of the answer, but much less easy to give an authoritative profit and loss account.

Absolute monarchy was certainly overthrown in 1789. The monarchy itself was abolished three years later, and Louis XVI was executed in January, 1793. Yet monarchy was not replaced by democracy, let alone by democracy in any modern, one-person-one-vote sense. Nobody, after all, was more absolutist than Bonaparte; meanwhile France had a king again in 1815, and neither republicanism nor manhood suffrage was secured in France until 1870.

Many of the powers of the Church were swept away too. Its lands were nationalised and then auctioned off. Its taxation powers were abolished. Freedom of religion was declared and first Protestants and then Jews were given civic and religious equality. Much education was secularised. Under the Jacobin republic, attempts were made to establish a state cult of reason and, in many parts of France, a wave of 'dechristianisation' was encouraged.

Yet it didn't last. In large parts of the south and west of France, the Church had anyway never been dislodged.

Under Napoleon it was re-established, and under the restored Bourbons the Church became one of the most powerful reactionary institutions in the nation. True, the Revolution bequeathed secular and anti-clerical traditions to the French left which it has never lost (the political left/right map of France today still bears its imprint) and one of its most important legacies was the institutionalisation of the local schoolteacher as the republican enemy of the local priest. But again this process

had to wait for the Third Republic to bring it to fruition.

Yet it is hard to pin one convenient label on the jumble of conflicting economic, social, and political interests which survived. The Revolution certainly did not transform France into either a capitalist economy or into a society dominated by the industrial bourgeoisie. If it saw the emergence on to the historical stage of the poor and low-born, the *menu peuple*, as temporarily equal political players - which it did - this is not the same thing as the historical debut of the 'working-class' in the late 19th century sense. The Revolution, even in its most radical phase, banned trades unions (under the 1791 loi le Chapelier). The Revolution was a mass experience, but it was the experience of a nation, or people, rather than a class, refracted through very individual, familial and parochial preoccupations. Indeed, the legacy of the Revolution on the land, where feudal power was based, was of a mass of often quite wealthy small peasant proprietors, with consequences for French and European Community politics that can be seen to this day.

When people think about the French Revolution today, they think either of the events of July, 1789 or, more likely, of the period known by historians as the Republic of the Year II.

This was the most intense phase of the Revolution, and it lasted from the introduction of the radical constitution of June, 1793, until the overthrow of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor of Year II (in the revolutionary calendar, July 1794). It is the phase which is still most frequently perceived in the way that conservatives have always presented it, as the era of the Jacobin Terror. In this version of these climactic months, a doctrinaire Revolution, blinded by blood, devoured itself and its finest sons, notably the supposedly moderate Danton, to the accompaniment of the ever more frequent hiss of the guillotine. A fanatical clique, directed by the repellent, sanctimonious figures of Robespierre and Saint-Just, destroyed the ideals of the Revolution when they abolished justice in the Law of 22 Prairial, Year II. Thermidor was therefore the inevitable and desirable response to the Terror. The Year II is a parable on the dangers of revolution.

There is a quite different way of looking at the Year II, less fashionable in counter-revolutionary Britain, but enormously influential in France to this day. In this alternative version, the Jacobin Republic is the heroic and terrible first attempt to create a people's republic. It is a phase of desperate sacrifice and heavenly aspiration whose gains among them the democratic Constitution of 1793, the Law of the Maximum, the redistributive Laws of Ventose, and the freeing of the colonial slaves are the agenda of the people everywhere. It is the era in which the

ordinary people, in the shape of militant *sans-culottes* of the Paris section first take the modern political stage. The defence of the Revolution was the supreme necessity, justifying the Terror, least in principle. Thermidor was therefore a catastrophe, ushering in the wreaking of revenge every bit as cruel as the Terror itself.

War revolutionised the Revolution, had started in 1792, but it reached its greatest intensity as and because the Jacobins became supreme. The attempt to roll back the military forces of the counter-revolutionary alliance of the crowned heads of Europe was the Revolution's greatest challenge. It was achieved through a super-human 'total war' effort by a citizen army which flung back every attack made by the professional soldiery of England, Austria, and the German principalities.

But it also triumphed because the Republic retained popular support until late in the most testing hours. It had, after all, no other legitimacy that this. The Jacobins brought efficiency, a steady currency and, by means of price and wage controls, economic stability - all in sharp contrast to the regimes which preceded and succeeded them. 'In Robespierre's time,' a carpenter named Richer reminisced in 1795, 'the blood flowed and there were no bread shortages.'

This achievement seared European history for a generation. 'Do you know what kind of government was victorious?' asked Jeanbon St André in 1813 as the German armies closed on Napoleon's exhausted nation. 'A government of passionate Jacobins in red bonnets, wearing rough woollen clothing, wooden shoes, who lived on simple bread and bad beer and went to sleep on a mattresses laid on the floor of their meeting-halls, when they were too tired to deliberate further. That is the kind of men who saved France.'

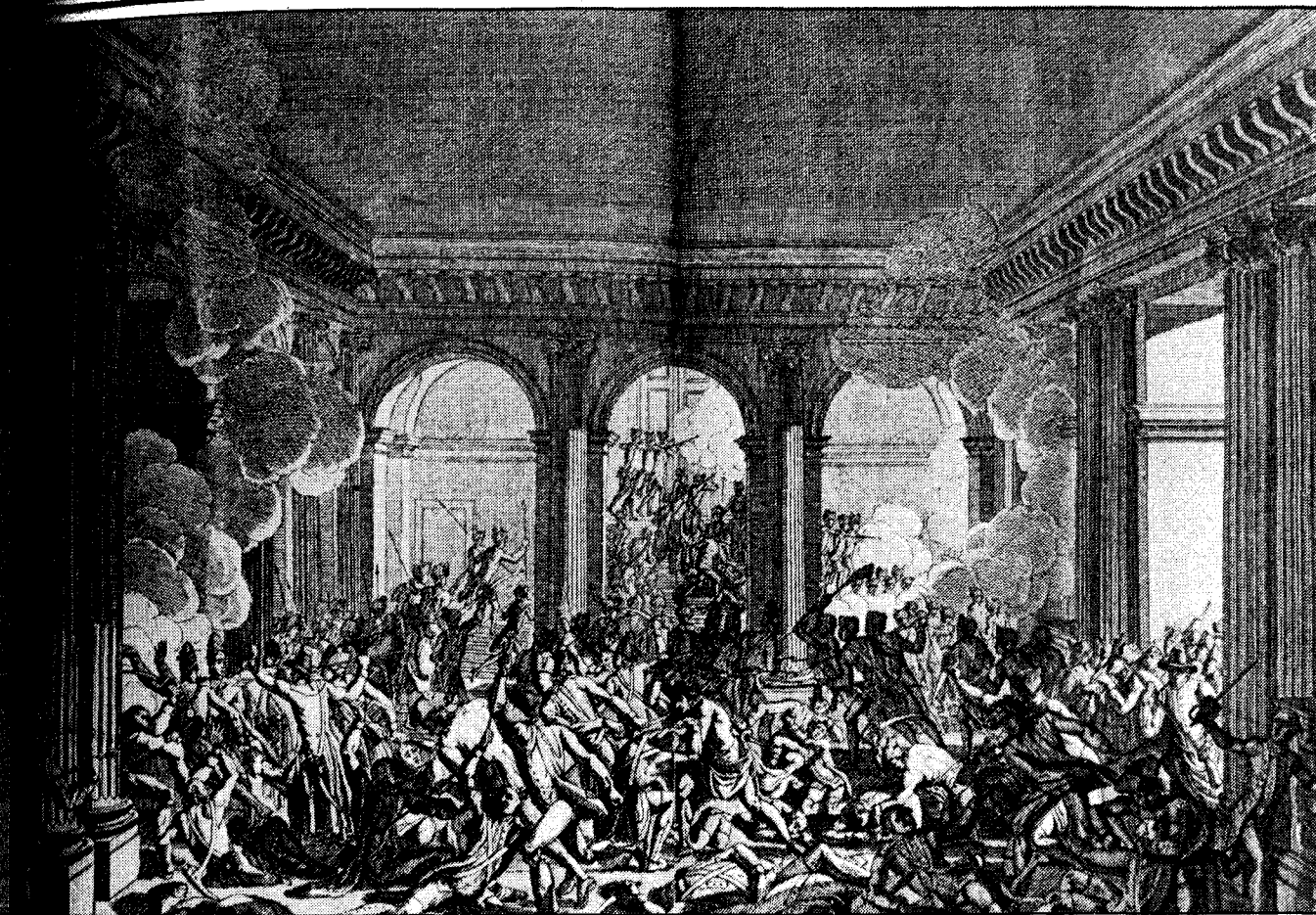
It was a violent age and the price of salvation, the Jacobins agreed, was the Terror. But Thermidor did not put an end to violence; on the contrary. In provincial France, the horrors perpetrated by the revolutionaries before Thermidor in the Vendée were matched by the horrors perpetrated by the counter-revolutionaries up and down the Rhone valley after it. Throughout France, the loyalties, treacheries and enmities of the Year II echoed long into the nineteenth century.

No historical event has generated as much literature as the French Revolution. The subject remains central to the way that the French people see themselves, and many of France's greatest historical and political writers have been drawn to write on it.

Interest abroad has been scarcely less intense. From contemporaries like Edmund Burke and Tom Paine, through Thomas Carlyle, Bronterre O'Brien, Charles Dickens, and Lord Acton in the

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The overthrow of the monarchy, 10 August, 1792.

19th century, to Jacob Talmon, Richard Cobb, Alfred Cobban, and Simon Schama in our own time, some of the most important writings on the Revolution have been in English.

The dominant view of the Revolution which emerged down the years, especially in France, was that it was a social revolution in which, broadly speaking, the urban bourgeoisie overthrew the feudal powers of the landed aristocracy. A growing 19th century tradition believed that this marked it out from the more limited political or constitutional revolutions of seventeenth century England and eighteenth century America.

The central figure in this process was Jules Michelet, author of the adulatory and almost religious (though it is highly anti-clerical) *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. Michelet saw the Revolution as the catharsis of French, and therefore, human history. In Michelet's view, writes the English historian Norman Hampson, 'Revolutionary conflicts were Manichean battles between the representatives of total good and absolute evil, that transcended history itself; the history of the Revolution became a kind of Paradise Lost'.

With the rise of French socialism and, eventually, with the Russian Revolution of 1917, the tradition of Michelet hardened into something much more precise. Taking Marxism and French nationalism as its twin inspirations, this

new phase of the tradition insisted more than ever on the social class conflict of the Revolution.

Stretching from Albert Mathiez at the start of the century, through Georges Lefebvre in the mid-century, to Albert Soboul in the 1960s, it was particularly associated with the rise and fall of French communism. Inevitably, it became increasingly partisan on behalf of the Jacobins in general and of Robespierre in particular, and it pioneered research into the *sans-culottes* and the concerns of the revolutionary crowd, whom it identified as a kind of embryonic working-class movement. Like the French communists, the Lefebvre tradition reached its greatest point of influence in the 1940s and 1950s and, again like them, it continued to dominate progressive French thinking until it cracked under the libertarian and iconoclastic strains of 1968.

Since then, the hegemony of this analysis, sometimes parodied as the 'authorised version' has been seriously challenged. A different tradition, deriving in part from basically anti-Jacobin writers like Burke, Tocqueville, and Taine has come to the fore, disputing the sharp categorisations of the pre-Jacobin tradition, challenging the assumptions of the apologists for the Year II, demanding a new vocabulary to replace abused terms like 'bourgeois', emphasising the vigour of ancien régime France and the continuities of French history.

Writers like Jacob Talmon and Alfred Cobban have gradually gained in influence as the old traditionalists have declined. Both in France and Britain, where Richard Cobb has been particularly influential, historians have concentrated more on the local and specific aspects of the revolution, concentrating on ordinary experience and 'mentatités'.

'The French Revolution is over', wrote the influential historian François Furet in 1978. He meant that the old need endlessly to refight the political battles of the past has ended.

This year, though, France has been full of such revivals, with Vendéens refusing to participate in celebrations which ignore the massacres of their ancestors, with the communist mayor of Thionville creating a storm with his proposal to erect France's first statue of Robespierre and, not least, endless skirmishing by the political parties over the form of this year's events. As it approaches the start of its third century, the volcanic French Revolution has lost little of its power to shake and inflame.

Three words emblazoned on public buildings throughout France – Liberty, Equality, Fraternity – embody the ideals of the French Revolution.

Or do they? Different supporters of the Revolution believed different things at different times and the period from 1789-99 was a period of dizzying changes in the forms and principles of French



'To the guillotine'.

government. Liberty, equality, and fraternity may have been generally endorsed words, but the revolutionary decade remained a battleground of ideas.

The earliest important statement of the Revolution's 'beliefs' was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly as early as 26 August, 1789.

The declaration claimed to be 'for all mankind, for all time, for all countries, for an example to all the world'. The historian Michelet described it as 'the credo of the new age.'

Today, it is often still regarded as a great statement of principle, but it was the product of horse-trading, haggling, and compromise. Obviously influenced by the declaratory principles of the American Revolution, it combined universal principles with a sharp-eyed attention to the rights of the kind of people who made up the National Assembly itself – lawyers, merchants, government office-holders, and landed proprietors.

The declaration sets out a series of 'man's natural rights'. These include liberty, property (which it calls 'a sacred and inviolable right'), security, and freedom from oppression. It also lays down the rights of the individual to equality before the law, religious toleration, freedom of conscience, and equality of taxation.

But these are not unrestricted freedoms. It says little about economic rights. It does not mention slavery, which still existed. And it upholds other freedoms only 'provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order.' It does not endorse full equality and it is not a republican document.

Much of the thinking behind the declaration was to be incorporated into the Constitution of 1791, which established France as a constitutional monarchy, based on a Legislative Assembly.

The 1791 constitution divided the male population into 'active citizens' (of whom there were approximately 4.3 million) who had the vote as well as the Rights of Man, and 'passive citizens' (approximately 2.7 million) who merely had the rights.

Active citizens had to pass a property qualification, and servants, slaves and (initially) Jews were excluded. Women were completely excluded from all rights.

The 1791 constitution was gradually modified as the Revolution continued. After the overthrow of the monarchy in August, 1792, it became unworkable, and was replaced by the more radical Jacobin constitution of 1793 or Year I.

However, even the 1793 constitution was never fully implemented; war meant that it was delayed until peace. Even before peace came, the 1793 constitution

was overturned in favour of the more restrictive 1795 constitution, a sort of republican version of 1791.

Nevertheless, the 1793 Constitution remains the high water mark of the ideals of the Revolution. It provided for both a democratic and a republican France, with universal male (but not female) suffrage, annual elections, and an extended declaration of rights. The aim of society was to be 'common happiness'.

Equality was made explicit. Slavery was abolished. Freedom of religion was guaranteed for all. A right to insurrection was declared, when and if the government violated the people's rights. In Paris, militants regularly demonstrated under the slogan 'Bread and the Constitution of 1793'.

In fact, the insurrection that came was against the Jacobins and their Constitution that had never been implemented.

After Thermidor, the democratic, egalitarian and insurrectionary rights of 1793 were abolished, and the more cautious 1795 version ultimately became the model by which the French Revolution was exported to the newly rapidly multiplying nations of 19th century Europe.

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