

**Click here to view  
current issues**  
on the Chicago Journals website.

---

Review: Revolutionary Historiography after the Cold War

Reviewed Work(s): *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*  
by Arno Mayer

Review by: Carla Hesse

Source: *The Journal of Modern History*, December 2001, Vol. 73, No. 4 (December 2001),  
pp. 897-907

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/340149>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Modern History*

JSTOR

*Review Articles:*  
*Arno Mayer on Revolutionary Violence—Two Views\**

Revolutionary Historiography after the Cold War:  
Arno Mayer's "Furies" in the French Context

Carla Hesse  
*University of California, Berkeley*

"War is an act of force," Carl von Clausewitz wrote in the aftermath of the French Revolution, "and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action is started which must lead, in theory, to extremes."<sup>1</sup> The same could be said of revolution, according to Arno Mayer. Indeed, because of its foundational nature, revolution may be the paradigmatic form of war unleashed toward its extreme. Revolution is an epochal struggle in which violence becomes the means for instituting political order, rather than being reined in by it. Mayer has written a magisterial comparative history of the French and Russian revolutions that places foundational violence at the center of the story. Why, he asks, does modern revolutionary change—in his view a manifest good—necessarily entail violent conflict to achieve its ends? His answer is that revolution engenders forces that oppose it: "There can be no revolution without counterrevolution; both as phenomenon and process, they are inseparable, like truth and falsehood" (p. 45).

In a revision of the traditional Marxian narrative, Mayer views modern European (and even global) history as a grand dialectical struggle—at once civil and international—between two civilizations: revolutionary modernity and counterrevolutionary tradition. Rather than viewing the French and Russian revolutions in historical succession, with one set of class struggles superseding the next (aristocracy vs. bourgeoisie in the French case, then bourgeoisie vs. proletariat in the Russian), Mayer sees the main lines of conflict in the two revolutions as "at bottom . . . homologous" (p. 65). They are twin engines of a single historical phenomenon, whose main axes of conflict can be enumerated as follows: democracy versus aristocracy, urban versus rural, secular versus religious. Counterrevolution in both

\* From time to time the *Journal of Modern History* commissions more than one review of a book in order to obtain complementary perspectives from historians in different fields. In the case of Arno Mayer's *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), the editors asked Carla Hesse to comment on Mayer's discussion of the French Revolution and William G. Rosenberg to examine his treatment of the Russian Revolution.

<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J., 1976), p. 77.

the Russian and French cases—by which Mayer means armed resistance to change—sets off a dialectical spiral of self-escalating vengeance and terror that Mayer calls “the furies.”

Mayer is, above all, a historian of international relations. This leads him to the hypothesis—almost wholly original—that the crucial differences between the two revolutions can be explained largely by differences in the external positioning of the two countries in the international order. France was the most economically and culturally advanced country in Europe in 1789; Russia was the most backward in 1917. France was blessed by a world order that was divided and that therefore could not unite against it; Russia was cursed with the global hegemony of the United States. These differences led, in Mayer’s view, to the “externalization” of France’s revolutionary violence in the form of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, and conversely to the “internalization” of Soviet violence in the form of Stalinist terror. Violent civil and international struggle against counterrevolution is thus the single most important factor in Mayer’s explanation of the internal dynamics of each of these revolutions. How does this externalist account square with what we know about the internal histories of these revolutions?

Let us look at the French case more closely. Historians of the French terror can be divided roughly into two camps: those who subscribe to the “thèse des circonstances” and those who uphold the “thèse de complot.” The former maintain that external circumstances, especially the threat of counterrevolution, led to both international and civil war. These military threats, in turn, led to the escalation of internal political repression from 1792 to 1794. The definitive military victory of the French Republic at Fleurus on June 20, 1794, brought an end to political repression in its wake: 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794). The “complotistes,” by contrast, see revolution as inherently violent because it is, in their view, ideologically committed to imposing an abstract, ideal order upon a real and inherently imperfect world. Terror, in the words of one recent historian of this school, is not circumstantial, it is “constitutive” with the idea of revolution itself.<sup>2</sup> Mayer is clearly of the “circumstantialist” school: terror is not metaphysically essential to revolution but is born out of the actions of its enemies.

According to Mayer, revolutions are not ideologically committed to vengeance and terror, but they are structurally fated to be caught within their grips because they inevitably encounter armed resistance. Indeed, ideology plays almost no role at all in Mayer’s account of the Revolution. In the construction of causal chains, beginnings are critical. Most narratives of French revolutionary violence begin with the fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, and in particular with the popular beheading of its chief military commander, de Launay, along with the ill-fated city administrator Flesselles. Popular violence thus brings down the Old Regime and saves the national assembly from dismemberment by royal troops. But Mayer wants to stress the counterrevolutionary origins of violence, and so he begins the first of his two chapters narrating the devolution of the Revolution into terror much

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent, and most subtle, statement of this view, see Patrice Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur: Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire, 1789–1794* (Paris, 2000), esp. p. 50.

later, with the king's flight to Varennes on June 20–22, 1791. The capture of the king and his return to Paris as a virtual prisoner is met with ominous warnings from counterrevolutionary émigrés that “inevitably a terror would be visited upon the population of Paris” (p. 172). The first call for terror thus comes from the counterrevolutionary camp, and it is their threats to overthrow the nascent constitutional regime with violence and to exact vengeance upon the people that precipitates the dialectical spiral of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary conflict into terror.

Whoever first used the word “terror” after 1789, it is worth observing that “terror” as a juridical and a political practice was not invented with modern revolutions. The notion of “making the terror of the sovereign felt throughout the realm” was a venerable one under the Old Regime monarchy. In an age before mass incarceration, terrorizing people was a widely used mechanism for maintaining law and public order. Although those in the revolutionary camp initially sought to repudiate what they took to be a primitive juridicopolitical practice and to reconstitute the legal order along rationalist and utilitarian lines, when faced with the realities of sedition and treason both sides in the revolutionary conflict resorted to this traditional form of intimidation as a means to restore public order.

As tendentious a beginning as Mayer's may be, he is essentially right that the political vacillation of the king and threat of foreign and counterrevolutionary military action was real enough in 1791–92 to justify the preemptive declaration of war by the legislative assembly in April of 1792. The recent attempt by the revisionist French historian Patrice Gueniffey to argue that there was no real military threat to the Revolution, and not even the subjective perception of a threat among revolutionaries, is unconvincing.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the September massacres of 1792, the organization of the revolutionary tribunals, the committee on surveillance, the purging of the Girondins, the promulgation of the law on suspects, and finally the declaration of “revolutionary government” over the course of 1793 can all be interpreted credibly as comprehensible, albeit harsh, instrumental responses by the revolutionaries to the real possibility of military defeat both at home and abroad.

In the debates between the “circumstantialist” and the “complotiste” schools, no episode of the Revolution is more critical or more telling than the civil war in the Vendée, whose main military phases occurred between March of 1793 and March of 1794 and which resulted in the loss of somewhere between 150,000 and 300,000 lives. In quantitative terms it was by far the most brutal phase of the revolutionary conflict. The Vendée is central to Mayer's account because it was there that the admixture of aristocracy, Catholicism, and peasant resistance cohered most fully into a violent counterrevolutionary threat. It was also there that vengeance and terror perpetrated by revolutionary forces reached its crescendo in Carrier's mass drownings at Nantes and Turreau's infamous “infernal columns” that scorched the earth of several rebellious communes and spared not a man, a woman, nor a child.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137–38.

As Clausewitz noted, in any conflict the measure of pain necessary to achieve victory is a difficult thing to calibrate, and nowhere more so than in a civil war where visceral passions cloud tactical judgment. Here Mayer's analysis is both subtle and judicious. The extremity of Carrier's actions, Mayer argues, can be explained by the overwhelming circumstances in which he found himself. These were desperate and brutal measures, to be sure, but they occurred at the height of the conflict and at a moment when Carrier had few other options if he was to prevail. By contrast, Turreau's conduct—as Mayer concedes—cannot be explained instrumentally. His merciless and indiscriminate destruction of an entire population and its territory came well after the Republican victory over the rebels. It was punitive and savage. And this is the only point in Mayer's narrative when the explanation of Republican violence cannot be justified by circumstances or primitive vengeance, and Mayer comes close to the “complotiste” view that Turreau's campaign was “an expression of ideologically charged avenging terror” (p. 340). One can mitigate the responsibility of the revolutionary government by observing that Turreau was acting without prior authorization, but still no explanation other than ideological fervor can account for this dark moment in the Revolution's history.

In general, however, Mayer's insistence that military circumstance rather than ideological difference determined the dynamic of revolutionary violence leads to significant distortions in his account of the revolutionary conflict in both urban and rural France. His assertion of the essentially counterrevolutionary character of the peasantry leads him to concentrate centrally upon the Vendée, rather than, for example, upon the uprising in Lyon. Mayer clearly shares Marx's disdain for peasants, citing, as he does, the famous passage of the *German Ideology* in which they are described as “mired in the muck of ages” (p. 58). The peasantry of the Vendée, however, must be seen, in light of the larger historical record, as exceptional. Peasant uprisings were crucial in bringing down the feudal regime in August of 1789.<sup>4</sup> And peasants were critical in the further radicalization of the Revolution straight up through 1793, when the last vestiges of feudalism were finally abolished.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Timothy Tackett and Suzanne Desan have shown, the peasant world was not, as a whole, faithfully united behind traditional Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

French peasants gained enormously from the Revolution, economically, politically, and socially, and most of them supported the Revolution even at the deepest moment of crisis.<sup>7</sup> If the pattern of revolutionary repression can be used as an

<sup>4</sup> Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1947).

<sup>5</sup> John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa., 1996); Florence Gauthier, *La voie paysanne dans la Révolution: L'exemple de la Picardie* (Paris, 1977); Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en révolution: Terre, pouvoir et jacquerie, 1789–1794* (Paris, 1996); Peter McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France, 1780–1830: Peasants, Lords and Murder in the Corbières* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, N.J., 1986); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Georges Lefebvre, *Les Paysans du Nord pendant la Révolution française* (Paris, 1924); Albert Soboul, ed., *Contribution à l'histoire paysanne de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1977); P. M.

index of social resistance to the Revolution, and I think it can, then it becomes clear that counterrevolution was largely an affair of elites. As Donald Greer writes in his classic study of the incidence of the Terror, “there were 23,000,000 peasants and working people in France, and the proportion of these implicated in sedition, treason, conspiracy, or espionage was very small.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, within the popular classes, it was urban artisans rather than peasants who were most likely to offer political resistance to the Revolution and who formed the largest percentage of nonaristocratic victims of the Terror.<sup>9</sup> Despite the variations and divisions within it, the French peasantry cannot, as a whole, be characterized as a politically regressive class.

Similarly, the urban world was far more deeply divided by the Revolution than Mayer acknowledges. Lynn Hunt and Ted Margadant have given us a clear picture of the social and political tensions that animated revolutionary politics in the major provincial cities.<sup>10</sup> And even within the cities, as Lynn Hunt has shown, it was a very particular set of key players within different social groups who formed the vanguard of revolutionary activism.<sup>11</sup> The Federalist revolts against the Convention were largely an urban-based phenomenon. In Lyon and Bordeaux, social and political tensions between urban classes became so acute that they escalated into full-blown warfare.<sup>12</sup> More generally, it cannot be said that Terror was simply something perpetrated upon the countryside by Jacobins in Paris. Terror welled up from complex local struggles, and its key participants were of local origin.<sup>13</sup> Mayer’s assertion that the key axis of political conflict was between a reactionary countryside and revolutionary cities is simply not sustained by the historical record. Lynn Hunt’s hypothesis that politicization along revolutionary lines took place within the cultural infrastructure of a wide variety of social groups (local professionals who read newspapers, innkeepers, schoolteachers, merchants, and literate artisans) offers a more convincing explanation of both the sociological and the geographical patterns of political mobilization.<sup>14</sup>

Nor was the Parisian revolutionary movement a united front. Critical to any explanation of the dynamics of violence within the capital itself are the divisions among social groups and political factions within the revolutionary camp. Perhaps

---

Jones, *The Peasantry of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988); Association pour la célébration du bicentenaire, ed., *Les Paysans et la Révolution en pays de France: Actes du colloque de Tremblay-lès-Gonesse, 15–16 Octobre, 1988* (Tremblay-lès-Gonesse, 1989); Michel Vovelle, ed., *La Révolution française et le monde rurale: Actes du colloque tenu en Sorbonne* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165–66.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Revolution and Urban Politics in Provincial France* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), and Ted Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Albert Champdor, *Lyon pendant la Révolution: 1789–1793* (Lyon, 1983); and W. D. Edmonds, *Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon, 1789–1793* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, esp. pt. 2.

the oddest omission from Mayer's narrative is thus any discussion of factional strife. The purging of the Girondins from the Convention is barely mentioned in passing (p. 199). There is no account of the elimination of the Hébertists in 1794. In 695 pages Danton's trial is not even mentioned. Most tellingly for a book devoted to the problem of violence and terror, the "Great Terror" that ensued from the draconian Prairial laws of June 22, 1794, and led to the execution of approximately 1,200 people in a mere five weeks is only mentioned parenthetically. Finally, 9 Thermidor, the fall of Robespierre and the dismantling of the state apparatus of repression, is seen merely as a "bridge" rather than a break in the course of the revolutionary movement (p. 209). Why all of these elisions? The answer can only be that to introduce these episodes would require Mayer to concede that the *internal* political and ideological dynamics of the Revolution, as opposed to the war against its external opponents, played some role, and after Prairial a critical role, in shaping the outcome of the revolutionary struggle.

In order to explain the escalation, rather than the diminishment, of violent repression after the French victory at Fleurus on June 20, 1794 (which put the country out of danger), Mayer would have to abandon the circumstantial and instrumental logic that governs his analysis and concede that at least after Prairial ideas, and ideals, did come to matter in the patterning of violent repression and the emergence of resistance to it. This does not mean that the seeds of Prairial are to be found in the purported illiberal ideology of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* and the Constitution of 1791, as the revisionist position suggests.<sup>15</sup> But it does mean that the contest of ideas, and the contested attempts to put them into practice, are the stuff of revolutionary change, and it does matter what the nature of those political ideas were and whether or not they were successfully realized.

It is impossible for Mayer to address the question of the political differences within the Revolution, and thus to account for their role in generating violent conflict, because he views the revolutionary movement, above all, from the outside—that is, from the perspective of its opponents: counterrevolutionaries. The Revolution thus appears, as the French would say, as "un bloc," a unified front of democracy and enlightenment materialism pitted against the Church, the monarchy, and the "feudal classes." Missing from this counterrevolutionary perspective is almost everything that modern French politics has been about: the nature of representative government, the limits of individual liberty, and the demands for social justice. These were the topics that divided Feuillants from Jacobins, Jacobins from Girondins, Jacobins from sans-culottes, and, finally, Napoleon from the ideologues. In Mayer's narrative of revolutionary war, politics is left by the wayside. But, as Clausewitz noted, war is, at bottom, nothing but politics by other means; and it was, finally, politics, rather than the inexorable logic of warlike "furies," that brought down Robespierre and led to the rise of Napoleon.

This brings us to the heart of the matter: it is only by evacuating revolutionary violence of its political content that Mayer is able to make the French and Russian

<sup>15</sup> François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978); Marcel Gauchet, *La Révolution des droits de l'homme* (Paris, 1989); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990); and Gueniffey (n. 2 above).

Revolutions appear to be commensurable—or, as he puts it, “homologous”—events. Mayer takes up the view that, if comparison between revolutions is to be made, Russia, rather than America, is France’s appropriate analogue. The American War of Independence, he argues, was not really a revolution, because insofar as there was an “old regime” in America, the War of Independence consolidated rather than overthrew it. Indeed, according to Mayer, the American Revolution was no revolution at all. “The Rebels never intended to bring about major changes in the colonies’ moral, social or economic values and institutions” (p. 26). The American Revolution thus did not set a dialectical spiral of political violence into motion. In France and in Russia it was otherwise. The French and Russian revolutions “were made by self-conscious revolutionaries open or sworn to new ideas” (p. 27). These revolutionaries confronted an old regime with a new one and thus triggered the violent social, political, and religious struggles that resulted in unprecedented carnage.

Each of these claims is open to question, and taken as a whole will not sustain the weight Mayer needs to put upon them. In order to disassociate the French from the American Revolution, Mayer is forced to understate the radicalism of the American revolutionaries’ objectives—that is, the foundation of a republic rooted in the belief in universal natural rights rather than historical precedent or theology. He also misses the violence that ultimately issued from that radicalism, that is, the American Civil War of 1861–65, which ultimately brought down America’s “old regime” and through the Thirteenth Amendment brought the nation a good deal more closely in line with its founding ideals. Finally, he is forced to ignore the direct intellectual and political links between American and French revolutionaries and the shared aims they sought to achieve: the institution of liberal democratic republics rooted in the sanctity of property rights, civil equality, separation of powers, and representative government. It was a long process, to be sure, longer and bloodier than either Jefferson or Condorcet might have hoped, but by the 1870s both nations had largely achieved these aims.

Conversely, in order to make the French and Russian revolutions analogous, Mayer has to disregard altogether the role of ideology in shaping their dynamics, as well as the divergences in their respective aims and their respective outcomes. As worldviews, Bolshevik and especially Stalinist communism and Jacobin republicanism had very little in common. In order to avoid this obvious conceptual difficulty Mayer is forced into questionable rhetorical maneuvers, and nowhere more tellingly than in his description of Marxism as a “second Enlightenment,” which he seamlessly analogizes to the “first Enlightenment” on the grounds that both were efforts to overthrow old regimes and bring about a vaguely defined “Western-style development” (p. 15), by which he seems at bottom to mean nothing more than secular industrialization. The fact that the French regime attempted to achieve these ends through parliamentary government and laissez-faire capitalism, while the Soviets pursued this end through nationalization and single-party rule, is apparently incidental.

Mayer’s analysis is so deeply structuralist that the intentions of political actors matter little as well. Whatever their differences in motives or ideas, Jacobins and



Bolsheviks were caught up in analogous historical experiences. It thus matters little to Mayer that Robespierre was a die-hard proponent of the sanctity of private property even if he did impose emergency economic measures, or that Stalin, in his struggle against potential Russian “thermidorians,” would write in 1949 that “the October Revolution is neither the continuation nor the fulfillment of the great French Revolution.”<sup>16</sup> This leads to a narrative of revolutionary political conflict that is more Machiavellian than Marxist. Evacuated of all but the most broadly sketched ideological content (secularism vs. religion, hierarchy vs. equality, urban vs. rural, industry vs. agriculture), the conflict between the two revolutions and their respective counterrevolutions can only be rendered as a struggle for power in the most abstract terms.

Even if we accept, as I do, Mayer’s premise (taken from Hannah Arendt) that foundational violence and its attendant self-escalation is an essential feature of revolutionary struggle, that does not mean that we cannot discriminate between the different forms that violence takes within the two revolutionary conflicts, nor the ways in which the political differences between Jacobinism and Bolshevism shaped it. In order to establish a commensurate scale for the violence in the two revolutions, Mayer extends the French revolutionary chronology to include the Napoleonic wars. It thereby becomes possible to bring the number of casualties in the French and Russian conflicts into some plausible comparison. But war and civil war are manifestly not the same kind of phenomena. There is a difference between killing one’s own people and killing strangers. And there is a difference, as Arendt observed, between a conflict between two organized political regimes and a conflict over the nature of the regime itself. There are rules of war that obtain in international conflicts that are simply not present in civil ones. Moreover, the lion’s share of the casualties in the Napoleonic conflicts were soldiers, not civilians. The same cannot be said of the Stalinist atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s.

The civil conflict in France lasted for approximately fourteen months, from the organization of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committee on Public Safety in March–April 1793 to the fall of Robespierre in July of 1794. The government that organized the Terror was, though a purged rump of its former self, nonetheless a parliamentary body that had been elected by universal male suffrage. The measures it took were legislated as “emergency measures” that had to be renewed by the National Convention every six months, not permanent powers delegated to the executive. And, indeed, once the Convention perceived itself to be out of danger (in late June of 1794) and began to fear the increasingly dictatorial maneuvers of its Committee on Public Safety, it moved rapidly and successfully to dismantle the emergency government and to reinstitute constitutional rule.

In Russia there were no elections. Party rule was not constrained by any limits on executive power and the terror was not a series of exceptional laws passed in order to survive a moment of national emergency. Terror *was* the system of government, and it lasted for over thirty years. If in France it was possible to speak

<sup>16</sup> I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia* [Works], vol. 13 (Moscow, 1949), p. 123. I would like to thank Eleonory Gilburd for this reference.

of revolutionary government and the Terror as a necessary means to achieve the institution of a parliamentary constitutional republic (and this is certainly the way all of the Jacobins, including Robespierre and St. Just, thought of it), the same cannot be said of the Soviet system. Dictatorship was not a means to bring about a constitutional regime; it *was* the regime.

Mayer is aware of Hannah Arendt's distinction between "instrumental" and "absolute" terror. The former is contingent upon the circumstances that bring a new regime into being (emergency law), while the latter is intrinsic to the thing being born (totalitarian rule).<sup>17</sup> Arendt thus distinguishes between the French Terror and that of Stalin as two incommensurable forms of political violence. Mayer's response is to argue that due to international hostility the Soviet regime was, in effect, in a continuous state of emergency for the entire seventy years of its existence. I leave this question to be resolved by those more expert in the period than I. He does not challenge Arendt's characterization of the French case. Nor would I, although revisionist historians of the French Revolution have done so in recent years.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

The exercise of comparing the French and Russian revolutions is not a new one. It began with the Bolsheviks in 1917. But the French Revolution of 1789 came to play a peculiarly central role in historical debates about revolutionary traditions during the Cold War era. Gaullist politics of nonalignment, on the one hand, and the electoral strength of the French Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s, on the other hand, meant that France's allegiances, and especially the allegiances of its intellectual and academic elite, remained up for grabs after the Iron Curtain descended. This political tension shaped the study of comparative revolutions in both the East and the West, and it still haunts Mayer's book.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the study of the French Revolution in French universities was dominated by scholars of communist sympathies, most notably Albert Soboul, who held the chair of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne throughout much of this period. Soboul had lively contacts with Russian scholars and their fellow travelers in other countries, and it was through their work that the myth of a single revolutionary tradition, driven by the Marxian logic of successive class struggles, developed into its full-blown form. By this analysis the French Revolution overthrew the aristocratic Old Regime and inaugurated the era of bourgeois rule. At the same time, the dynamic of revolutionary politics brought forth a new class conflict, between proletariat and bourgeois, which could be detected in the struggle between the Parisian sans-culottes and the bourgeois deputies in the National Convention. Successfully suppressed in its incipient stages (the execution of the Hébertists in 1794 and the Babeuf trial of 1796 being the most notorious episodes), this new conflict became full blown in the nineteenth century, and the proletariat ultimately triumphed in Russia in 1917. The Bolsheviks were

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, 1970), p. 55, and *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), pp. 95–96.

<sup>18</sup> For the most extreme revisionist interpretation, see Gueniffey (n. 2 above).

thus the rightful heirs to the Jacobin mantle of leadership in the world-historical struggle for human freedom.

At the very same moment that Soboul published his important study, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes* (Paris, 1958), an alternative narrative of the French revolutionary tradition was being reanimated by Anglo-American scholars of the postwar period, most notably Robert R. Palmer, whose *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* was published by Princeton University Press in 1959. Palmer's aim was to secure the place of the French Revolution, and France more generally, within the liberal democratic trajectory of the Atlantic world. Finding shared intellectual roots in the Enlightenment, Palmer and others argued that France and America gave birth to "sister Republics" whose diplomatic and military ties were as deeply rooted as their shared political and civic ideals. From Palmer forward, most Anglo-American researchers sought to refute or at least to attenuate the French Marxist orthodoxy and thus distance the French Revolution from the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century. Even Hannah Arendt, who negatively contrasted the social violence of the French revolutionary experience with the more peaceful trajectory of the revolution in the new world (*On Revolution* [New York, 1963]), nonetheless viewed France as firmly lodged within the western democratic tradition, which she contrasted to the totalitarian regimes in central and eastern Europe (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* [New York, 1951]). Only one non-Marxist scholar of the immediate postwar period, Jacob Lieb Talmon, in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952), associated the French Republican tradition with the rise of "totalitarian regimes" in Europe.

The Anglo-American response to Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution—a lineage that descends from Palmer (or, even more accurately, from Crane Brinton) in the United States and Alfred Cobban in England down to George V. Taylor, Isser Woloch, Lynn Hunt, Timothy Tackett, William Doyle, and Colin Lucas—came to be known as the "revisionist" school. But as the Cold War heightened in the 1970s and 1980s, Anglo-American revisionism took a decidedly conservative turn. Scholars such as Keith Baker and Simon Schama began to argue that the French Revolution was inherently illiberal, antipluralist, and terror-prone. It therefore diverged sharply from the American revolutionary tradition and afforded a precedent for Bolshevik single-party rule.

By the 1970s the conservative American revisionists began finding allies in a younger, post-Communist generation in France. The most brilliant of these French scholars was the late François Furet, whose *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978) dealt an all but fatal blow to the Marxist school of interpretation. By the time of the bicentennial of the Revolution in 1989—which converged uncannily with the collapse of the Soviet Union—French revisionists were triumphant in both academic and political circles. In 1989 the leading Communist scholar of the Revolution, Michel Vovelle, was thus compelled good-heartedly to dub Furet the "King of the Bicentennial."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the politics of the bicentennial, see Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: The Historians' Feud: France 1789/1989* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995).

French revisionists, and some of their American colleagues, stressed the illiberalism of French Jacobinism. Ironically, like the Communist scholars before them, they saw a clear line of descent from the Jacobin ideology of the first French Republic to the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Following the collapse of the Marxist paradigm, revisionism thus divided into two camps: a “hard camp” with an essentially negative assessment of the French Revolution, one that sees in its illiberal ideological tendencies a precedent for Bolshevik terror, and a “soft camp” that continues to insist on the greater similarities of the French and American traditions and their shared liberal ideals.

Arno Mayer has added yet another brilliant twist to this story of Cold War politics by enlisting the French revolutionary experience in an attempt to assimilate the Soviet experiment into the history of what he calls “Western-style development.” In so doing he hopes to shift some of the burden of responsibility for Stalin’s disastrous regime onto the Western powers and to indict their politics of “containment.” But perhaps, now that the Cold War is over, it is time to free the history of the French Revolution from the ideological agendas of either the United States or Russia and to study as well as celebrate the Revolution for the unique social-democratic institutions and traditions that it inaugurated. The French Revolution, because of its protean political possibilities, will no doubt continue to be a mirror into which all modern nations look in order to measure their image. But the history of France belongs neither to the East nor the West. It belongs right where it is—in the heart of a new Europe.