

H-France Review Vol. 3 (November 2003), No. 133

Bailey Stone, *Reinterpreting the French Revolution: A Global-historical Perspective*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. viii + 292 pp. Notes and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-81147-3.

Review by D.M.G. Sutherland, University of Maryland.

With *Reinterpreting the French Revolution*, Bailey Stone extends a number of themes he first introduced in his earlier *Genesis of the French Revolution*.^[1] These are the imperatives of state formation and the decisive importance of war on the state. He reminds us that France, even revolutionary France, had to survive in a brutally competitive system of rivalries with other states. Moreover, war and diplomatic conflict often limited domestic policy choices and frequently had an enormous effect on competition among politicians at home for power and influence. This is certainly entirely plausible; indeed, one might say that the book is altogether too modest in its claims about the importance of war in the revolutionary period and that Stone might have been more daring in exploring the ramifications of these assertions in the vicious and extravagant politics of the revolutionary era.

Stone argues that the revolutionary epoch was not a break in the development of the French state or the assertion of French power in Europe. Instead, after the difficulties and humiliations of the later part of the old regime, France reasserted itself in the revolutionary era, stronger, better organized, better financed, and better led than ever before. Fair enough. But Stone misses out on how difficult and parlous this process was and on how important it is to go beyond other historians who say this very thing.

Stone adopts a top-down, legislative history approach to his themes, and he assumes throughout that the description of a given piece of legislation actually describes how it was implemented or what its impact on the ground was. Thus the reforms of the Constituent Assembly in local administration and the Law of 14 frimaire An II (December 5, 1793) on the relations of the National Convention and its committees to local government are described as “centralizing.” Yet these measures were not particularly effective even if centralization was the intent. At first, departments, districts, and communes were in the hands of unpaid elected enthusiasts who frequently made their own judgments about policy, especially on issues relating to the refractory clergy and the *émigrés*, despite the royal vetoes of 1791-2. Later, the Committee of Public Safety may have made the administration more responsive, but threatening local officials with arrest and death for non-performance was hardly a long-term solution to the problem of an ineffective bureaucracy. Indeed, the risk of being purged and instantly dismissed produced what one might expect: totally anodyne reports about slaying the hydra of superstition, the regeneration of *esprit public*, the zealous collection of church plate and saltpetre, the joy at learning of the latest unmasking of traitors in the Convention, and all the other banalities of uninspired terrorist jargon. After Thermidor in any case, administration collapsed under assaults from murder gangs, *muscadins*, *chouans*, *brigands royaux*, *barbets*, *chevaliers de Jésus*, *chevaliers du Soleil*, *égorgeurs*, and so on. As a result, as Howard Brown has shown, the Directory and even the Consulate were forced to put many departments and large cities under military rule. Moreover, exceptional tribunals with expedited

procedures and no appeal did not end with the Terror. They continued long after, throughout the Directory and well into the Consulate.[2]

In other words, the construction, or rather the reconstruction, of the state came late in the Revolution. It was the work of the Second Directory and of the regime of Napoleon Bonaparte. And, as everyone knows, this state relied upon appointment, not election, as the only method of choosing important officials. This state then ran counter to the aspirations of the Constituent Assembly, of an administration run by its citizens.

For all that historians of the Revolution must observe due obeisance to Tocqueville's thesis of continuity with the old regime, it is the rupture and the reconstruction of the state that is the real story for this period. How a noble experiment in self-governance disintegrated and how it was rebuilt on harsh and authoritarian lines is a major theme of the period that Stone could have developed. It certainly would have fit into his argument about the importance of state building.

Stone intends to underline the importance of war and how it affected national political life. On this level too, he could have gone further. Stone's politics is the high politics of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies and of the National Convention. His presentation, or as he frequently calls it, his "analysis," often covers the familiar ground of debates and factional struggles. He tends to treat the war as a backdrop to national politics, but the war deserves a more focused treatment in itself. He does discuss familiar reforms in the army and navy, but once again the real story is more than the legislative enactments. Conscription, twice in 1793 and again in 1798, failed to produce anything like a full complement of young men. Apart from the inability of the government to provide boots, uniforms, food, pay, and equipment, conscription was politically unpopular to say the least. No wonder young men preferred to roam the ancient smugglers' trails along the Pyrenees, the rugged uplands and gorges of the Midi, and the *bocage* of the west, preying on travellers, on soldiers going home on leave, on stagecoaches, on shipments of tax money, and so on. As with local government, fixing military recruitment was a Napoleonic achievement, not a revolutionary one.

Finally, there is nothing on how the war was financed, although one might have expected more on this topic in light of Stone's claim that the period was one of "total war." In effect, as François Crouzet has shown in a compelling and totally unappreciated book, the financing of the war was amazingly fragile. The gap between expenditure and revenue was growing all the time, state assets were much smaller than many appreciated,[3] *assignats* eroded public and private wealth, and price controls and requisitions warped the economy.[4] Despite the incredible efforts of local people to muddle their way through the chaotic problems of supply and accessibility in the Year II,[5] the consequence was that all revolutionary governments wrote off the well being of huge numbers of people in the interior. Beside this, the ad-hoc welfare schemes of well meaning Montagnard deputies on mission did not amount to much.[6]

But Stone repeats a common conventional wisdom that the Montagnards and the Terror saved the Revolution. This remark, too, needs further definition and discussion. The "economic terror" may have helped to stabilize the *assignat* until it began its irreversible fall after January 1794. But it also created real shortages and a huge black market. Worse still, it shrank the agricultural base and so aggravated the problems of financing the war.[7] In a sense, it may have prolonged the war while making its prosecution more difficult. Furthermore, one wonders how the Revolution was "saved" when over 16,000 people were guillotined, shot, drowned, and mowed down with cannon fire under the expedited justice of the revolutionary tribunals. They were, after all, prisoners, and so no one needed saving from them.

In the end, Stone needed to reflect more on the nature of the war and its origins. He is enormously dependent on secondary sources and overwhelmingly so on English language sources whose authors

have general readers in mind, not specialists. These works necessarily compress a lot of material or even sometimes get it wrong. For example, Stone's source for the outbreak of the war is T.C.W. Blanning's *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*,^[8] which asserts that Brissot believed that France was the victim of a vast conspiracy on the part of the European powers that only war could shatter. Stone approves of this assertion and goes on to claim, with Blanning, that belligerent nationalism lay behind the war. From that he concludes the existence of a genuine continuity between the aggressive wars of the eighteenth century and those of the Revolution.

The problem is that Brissot did not claim a conspiracy of monarchies existed against France until his fifth major speech on war. This was quite late, less than a month before observers expected the war to start. On January 17, 1792, Brissot declared the Emperor had demonstrated his bad faith one last time by promising to support the Elector of Trier after he broke his word to disperse the *émigrés* and their avowedly counter-revolutionary armies.^[9] Surely, this was a reasonable position. Old Europe was hostile to the Revolution.

Actually, Brissot's thinking evolved, but it had as a constant the question of what the Legislative Assembly proposed to do about the *émigré* armies encamped in Belgium and the German states. These men were often officers who had deserted the French army and who now proposed to re-conquer the country. Brissot called them rebels, which they certainly were. The German princes, and by extension the Emperor, protected these rebel armies. The King's brothers, who were given shelter in these states, were also at the head of plots that aimed to subvert the constitution altogether (This suspicion was, in fact, accurate).

Brissot argued that the European powers were unlikely to attack, though they were hostile to regenerated France—and this showed in innumerable diplomatic insults. He seems to have expected the powers to organize an armed mediation that would intimidate the Legislative Assembly into accepting a revision to the Constitution of 1791 (as the Declaration of Pillnitz seemed to promise) that would enhance the rights of the monarchy. Later, as the Emperor showed his intransigence, Brissot believed an Austrian attack more likely and so argued for a pre-emptive strike and, later still, for a war of liberation. It is not surprising that Brissot and many other deputies found the implicit claim to meddle with the French constitution insulting and unacceptable to a free people. Certainly these arguments deserve better than the terse dismissal they usually get. One can understand why the long winded refutations of Robespierre (who shared many of Brissot's assumptions, by the way), with their obsessive statements about the interior enemy and their self-referential remarks about who loved the people more, did not carry the day.

In the end, no one's predictions about the war and the nature of the internal and external counter-revolution turned out to be correct. But for Stone, no matter how it turned out, this war was much like earlier ones. It was not. Even Brissot's minimalist war to defend the constitution against domestic enemies and against Leopold II's monarchical international was unprecedented. The actual war of liberation that he also called for was even more so. Once France began to expand relentlessly after the summer of 1794, she herself had been transformed by the year of the Terror and so exported a revolutionary, not a constitutional, regime: tribunals of expedited justice, class warfare, indemnities, requisitions, dechristianization, anti-feudalism, and much else. She stripped the church of its privileges and property, rooted out ancient legal customs, and transformed political and administrative institutions. It was a war that brought the ruptures of 1789 and 1793 to almost the whole of western Europe; and as in France itself, these measures were profoundly disturbing. No wonder there were anti-French and anti-revolutionary insurrections everywhere. People would have been dumbfounded had Stone told them that all this was more of the same.

NOTES

[1] Bailey Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution: A Global-historical Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[2] Howard G. Brown, "From Organic Society to Security State: The War on Brigandage in France, 1797-1802," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (December 1997): 661-695.

[3] Lavoisier made this point well before anyone anticipated the war: Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, *Réflexions sur les assignats et sur la liquidation de la dette exigible ou arriérée lue à la Société de 1789, le 29 août 1790* (Paris: impr. Clousier, 1790). *Biens nationaux* were less of an asset than anyone has believed until recently for other reasons: the church owned far less property than contemporaries and historians believed (see Bernard Bodinier, "La vente des biens nationaux: essai de synthèse," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, No. 3 (1999): 7-19).

[4] François Crouzet, *La grande inflation: la monnaie en France de Louis XVI à Napoléon* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

[5] Margaret H. Darrow, "Economic Terror in the City: the General Maximum in Montauban," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn 1991): 498-525. Judith A. Miller, *Mastering the Market: The State and the Grain Trade in Northern France, 1700-1860* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 150-62.

[6] Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[7] Francis d' Ivernois, *État des finances et des ressources de la république française au 1er Janvier, 1796* (Londres: W. & C. Spilsbury, 1796). T.J.A. Le Goff and D.M.G. Sutherland, "La Révolution française et l'économie rurale, 1789-1815," *Histoire et mesure*, xiv (1999): 79-120.

[8] T. C. W. Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London and New York: Longman, 1986). [9] Speeches to the Legislative Assembly of October 20, 1791 in J. E. Mavidal, *et al* (eds.), *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860. Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres françaises* (Paris: Librairie administrative puis Centre National de la Recherche scientifique, 1867), xxxiv, pp. 309-17; of December 29, 1791 in *ibid.*, xxxvi, pp. 600-12; of January 17, 1792 in *ibid.*, xxxvii, pp. 464-71. *Patriote français*, January 1, 1792. Speeches to the Jacobin Club of December 30, 1792 in *Patriote français*, January 12, 1792; of January 20, 1792 in *ibid.*, February 2, 1792; of January 5, 1792 in Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez and P. C. Roux, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française, ou, Journal des assemblées nationales, depuis 1789 jusqu'en 1815* (Paris: Paulin, 1834), xiii, p. 14. See also Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville; a study in the history of the French Revolution* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), pp. 227-42 for a more hostile interpretation of these speeches.

D.M.G. Sutherland
University of Maryland
ds79@umail.umd.edu

See also Bailey Stone's response to this review.

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172