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Gilbert Romme, *Correspondance, 1774-1779. Vol. 1, book 1: 1774-1776. Volume 1, book 2: 1777-1779*. Edited by Anne-Marie Bourdin, Philippe Bourdin, Jean Ehrard, Hélène Roi-Tanguy and Alexandre Tchoudinov. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2006. 350 and 380 pp. Introductions, annexes, appendices, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, chronology and index. 32 € . (pb). ISBN 2-84516-309-6.

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A major question historians face when looking into the origins and course of the great French Revolution is this: why is it that some men and women became supporters of the Revolution in its different forms and stages, and why did others oppose it? One suspects that there are as many unique answers to this question as there have been historians who have attempted to answer it. This project to publish the widely scattered letters of Gilbert Romme (1750-1795), deputy to the National Legislative Assembly of 1791 and the National Convention of 1792, will give historians easy access to materials that have bearing on this question. Romme was a talented student of mathematics from Riom (in the present day department of Puy-de-Dôme) who came to Paris in 1774 to study medicine. He became a tutor to a young Russian nobleman in 1779 and traveled through Europe in this capacity, coming to live in Moscow and St. Petersburg, only to return with his young charge to Paris in November of 1788. From that point, Romme became ever more active in reform and Revolution, eventually becoming President of the Convention in late 1793 and in the end committing suicide rather than face the guillotine in June of 1795, one of the “Martyrs of Prairial.”

This first volume of Romme’s correspondence consists of two books and contains 158 letters written by and to Gilbert Romme written from 14 October 1774 to 24 August 1779, with the majority written by Romme himself. Though the letters are the star and focus of the work, they are surrounded by an impressive set of supporting materials. In addition to an historiographical note by Philippe Bourdin and an introduction by Jean Ehrard, we find a comprehensive list of the archives and libraries from which the documents have been collected (pp. 79-92), a comprehensive list of the books discussed or mentioned by Romme in these letters (pp. 99-105), a discussion of the postal system in eighteenth century France (pp. 107-113), and biographical sketches of nine of his friends and correspondents (pp. 635-686). One also finds reproductions of documents attesting Romme’s educational achievements (pp. 589-95), an inventory of his scientific apparatus and furniture from May 1779 (pp. 596-98) and Romme’s unpublished notes on the French translation of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (pp. 599-605). All of these materials, along with erudite and comprehensive annotation of the letters themselves, allow one to quickly become immersed in the life of a budding scientist in the age of high Enlightenment.

Gilbert Romme occasionally graces histories of the Revolution. Generally, he is presented as a martyr of Prairial, one of the “Plutarchians” who “stabbed themselves...hoping to make of their suicidal death an example for the wayward nation,”[1] or as a scientist who worked on the Revolutionary calendar, a move “to seize revolutionary control of the very notion of time itself,”[2] or as a Representative on Mission held prisoner by the Federalists of Caen in June-July 1793.[3] He was what we can think of as a hard working and dedicated Jacobin. He sat on the Committee of Public Instruction in the Legislative Assembly, worked with the marquis de Condorcet on a plan to reform the French education system, a system Romme continued to support long after Condorcet had been outlawed and the Brissotins scattered or killed.[4] In 1794, Romme served as a Representative on Mission entrusted with

regularizing the supply of naval guns, and he seems to have been an efficient administrator who lacked any thirst for blood.[5]

Romme returned from his mission after the fall of Robespierre in 1794 and quickly became a critic of the Thermidorian Convention. He sat with the “Crest,” a group of thirty deputies faithful to the old Jacobin project and, although he had never supported the Revolutionary Commune of Paris or the sans-culotte activism of the Terror, when a Revolutionary Parisian crowd invaded the Convention hall on 20 May 1795, Romme took to the podium, proposing “des mesures énergiques contre la misère” (p. 77). He seems to have done this out of conviction rather than as part of a conspiracy, but along with five fellow deputies from the Crest, Romme was convicted by a military tribunal of treason and sentenced to death. Rather than face the shame of public execution he and his fellow attempted suicide. Romme succeeded.[6]

Philippe Bourdin reminds us that within two years of Romme’s death, a patriotic myth had grown up around his memory, indicating that “Romme figurait alors bel et bien parmi les figures politiques emblématiques des riches heures de la Révolution, tant comme compatriote auvergnat que comme responsable nationale” (p. 9). Nevertheless, according to Bourdin, Romme only appears “furtivement” in the great histories of the nineteenth century, and where he does appear, he is portrayed either as a man of great integrity or, as Hippolyte Taine put it, one of “les derniers des vrais fanatiques” (pp. 14, 20). It was not until the 1950s that a proper modern biography was written—in Italian, by Alessandro Galante Garrone (pp. 29-30).[7] One reason for this long delay was that Romme’s papers had become scattered between Paris, Milan, Berlin, Moscow and St. Petersburg, with some papers in private collections and others missing entirely (pp. 27-29).

Local interest in Puy-de-Dôme about Romme led to a colloquium in 1965 organized by Jean Ehrard and Albert Soboul, both then teaching at the University of Clermont, and Ehrard continued to support interest in Riom’s famous son, organizing a second colloquium in 1995 and pursuing the publication of this volume itself (pp. 32-36).[8] This collection of Romme’s letters, Bourdin writes, offers “aux chercheurs le matériau le plus exhaustif possible non seulement pour avoir toutes les pièces du « dossier » Romme et éventuellement préciser tel ou tel point du biographie, mais aussi pour embrasser plus concrètement la République des lettres depuis l’Ancien Régime jusqu’à son éradication ou sa transfiguration révolutionnaire” (p. 36).

Jean Ehrard begins his introduction with a description of Riom in the reign of Louis XVI and goes on to discuss Romme’s life up to his decision in 1779 to become the tutor of young Paul Strogonov. Riom was a pleasant but small provincial capital in the second half of the eighteenth century, a city of courts and supporting businesses, with a theater, a “maison de l’astronome” and a literary society (p. 43). Romme and his correspondents were, Ehrard writes, “représentants de la petite ou moyenne bourgeoisie” (p. 49). Thus, his letters offer us a chance to see inside a world of educated and modestly successful men, “la vie intellectuelle contemporaine” (p. 56) and lay open to view the Republic of Letters accessible to men of modest backgrounds who had minds that were not, we may surmise, entirely of the first rank (p. 58). Romme, who came from a petty Robe family that had fallen on hard times, went to Paris to study medicine on the advice of his friends and family. It was a way to make an honorable living and to work toward rebuilding his family’s fortunes (p. 59).

Although Romme had come to Paris to study medicine, he continued to pursue his interest in mathematics and physics, becoming a part-time tutor in order to pay for his medical studies and living expenses (See letter 5, p. 151). This ongoing interest in mathematics allowed him to become part of a group of men and women, a “petite société éclairé” in which he mingled with scientists, writers and men of society (p. 51). It was through these contacts that Romme got his chance to move up in the world, first by offers to assume formal teaching posts (which he rejected—see letters 9, 40, 41 and 44) and finally, through his friendship with the Russian count Alexander Alexandrovitch Golovkine, who helped

Romme to become tutor and companion (*gouverneur*) to Paul Strogonov, the young son of count Alexander Sergeiovitch Strogonov (1738-1811) (see letters 136 and 138).

Romme's interest in education, influenced by his friendship with Golovkine, was Rousseauian in nature, though it was a weak kind of Rousseauianism, one of *La Nouvelle Heloise* and not of *The Social Contract* (p. 68) (see letters 27 and 100). Nevertheless, his sense of the importance of education comes through clearly in his letters. Romme takes the role of *gouverneur* quite seriously, noting that he wished to make a man of Paul (letter 136).^[9] In this post, Romme would have the opportunity to live more or less nobly and dedicate himself to the task of raising a good man who could have an effect on reform efforts in Russia.^[10] In addition to intellectual matters and the occasional appearance of Jansenism (for an example, see letter 34), Romme and his correspondents show a healthy interest in French politics and in the goings on of the Académie française (see, among others, letters 13 and 48). As such, according to Ehrard, the letters "peuvent donc se lire en particulier comme une chroniques des événements saillants qui marquent, au-delà de la seule vie de Cour, les premières années du nouveau règne" of Louis XVI (p. 52).

Robert Darnton famously argued that a generation of men felt that the Old Regime was rigged against men of talent, noting the failures and frustrations of Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Jean Paul Marat, and comparing them to the easy success of the non-entity Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard.^[11] Romme, too, came to Paris a young and eager man, interested in medicine and science like Marat and in education like Brissot. Ehrard does not, however, see Romme as fitting into Darnton's schema, as Romme could hardly be said to be a failure: "Encore plus problématique serait de lui prêter l'état d'esprit d'autres jeunes gens de sa génération, poussés dans leur refus d'une société qui n'a pas de place pour leurs talents de la révolte à la Révolution" (p. 72).

Ehrard argues briefly that Romme's decision to abandon his medical studies and leave Paris in 1779 were not like Brissot's reluctant move to London or his miserable failures there. Ehrard also notes that there is no evidence that Romme had found the problems of the Old Regime beyond solution within the existing system. Indeed, Ehrard argues that Romme had found an opportunity to live a life far beyond his own means. He had not failed—he had refused to take the life Paris offered him, and "Après la maturation parisienne l'expérience russe promet à sa curiosité intellectuelle un immense horizon...." Moreover, "Les conditions financières de cet exil temporaire sont par ailleurs des plus avantageuses, et pour l'immédiat, et pour l'avenir" (p. 72). Romme had become a tutor to a young nobleman, and while I think Ehrard exaggerates perhaps the status that comes along with such a position, Romme was to be no mere servant (p. 73).

While this collection does an admirable job of giving us access to the mental world of a future Jacobin, it leaves unsolved the question of how Romme went from being a promising mathematician and physician-in-training to become a Montagnard, a dechristianizer and in the end a martyr of Prairial. Access to these letters does give us more insight into Romme's interests and goals and allows us to see perhaps why he would choose the role of *gouverneur* over that of physician or teacher of mathematics. This decision seems key to understanding Romme's later transformation: Garonne argued that the Revolution itself acted to radicalize Romme, noting that Romme's stint as tutor ended only in 1790, when Catherine II ordered young Paul Strogonov to return to Russia, and forbade Romme to accompany him.^[12] From that point, Romme became ever more involved in the Revolution and, as Garrone put it, "La séparation de Paul Strogonov le marqua aussi: elle accrut son courroux envers les despotes et les aristocrates, l'aigrit, le rendit plus amer, inflexible, trancha le dernier lien qui le retenait encore de se consacrer tout entier à la Révolution."^[13] However, that important event falls well outside of the scope of these letters. One hopes that the following volumes—promising to bring us an additional thousand letters—will provide more insight into the mind of this very interesting Revolutionary to be.

NOTES

[1] Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins During the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 63.

[2] David Address, *The Terror* (London: Little, Brown, 2005), p. 219; Alessandro Galante Garrone, *Gilbert Romme, histoire d'un révolutionnaire, 1750-1795*, trans. Anne and Claude Manceron (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), [originally published as *Gilbert Romme: Storia di un Rivoluzionario* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1959)], p. 326-338. See also Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 158-166.

[3] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 307-17.

[4] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 318-326; Higonnet, *Goodness*, p. 208.

[5] Address, *The Terror*, p. 297-8.

[6] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 397-400.

[7] Garrone, op. cit.

[8] The proceedings of both colloquia were subsequently published. See Albert Soboul and Jean Ehrard, eds., *Gilbert Romme et son temps (1750-1795)* (Paris: PUF 1965); and Jean Ehrard, ed., *Gilbert Romme (1750-1795)* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1996).

[9] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 56-7; see also Dominique Julia, "Gilbert Romme, Gouverneur (1779-1790)," in Ehrard, ed., *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 43-78.

[10] Romme had some indirect influence on the course of Russian educational reforms. According to R. Palmer, Paul Strogonov was a member of the Jacobin club in Paris in 1790, who after his return to Russia eventually became an advisor to Tsar Alexander I. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution. Vol. II: The Struggle* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 143; Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, pp. 255-61.

[11] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[12] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, p. 342.

[13] Garrone, *Gilbert Romme*, p. 264.

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