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Robert J. Alderson, Jr., *This Bright Era of Happy Revolutions: French Consul Michel-Ange-Bernard Mangourit and International Republicanism in Charleston, 1792-1794*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xiii + 273 pp. Illustration, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-1-57003-745-0.

Review by Marsha Frey, Kansas State University, and Linda Frey, University of Montana.

All too often a title reveals a great deal about the book; "This bright era of happy revolutions" was a glib statement made by Joseph Clay Jr. Not all contemporaries would have concurred that the era was bright. The slaughters—often of innocents—in the Vendée, the September massacres, the butchering of the Swiss Guards, the execution of many of France's most talented people, including the king's defender, the Reign of Terror, as well as the almost continuous warfare with and pillaging of other countries, do not a "happy" picture paint. Alderson makes clear, however, that he is referring to a period of cooperation "in the name of republicanism" that barely lasted two years (p.ix). After reading about the difficulties both Genet and Mangourit encountered, this thesis seems dubious at best. Did it even last two years? Relations between the United States and France were not at all "happy;" both Genet and Mangourit were recalled. Nor were relations with other republics "happy." The French turned the ancient republic of Venice over to Austria and invaded Switzerland, yet another republic. It is equally doubtful that Mangourit was more successful than Genet (p. xi). Mangourit's successor was instructed to repudiate all his policies, and the generally pro-French Monroe opposed Mangourit's second appointment to the United States as *chargé d'affaires* in 1796. Tellingly, Alderson later acknowledges that France repudiated "international republicanism" (p. 180).

Alderson organizes his book chronologically and begins with background chapters on the context of Mangourit's mission and the lives of both Genet, the minister plenipotentiary, and Mangourit, the consul in Charleston, before analyzing the problems Mangourit confronted and his eventual recall. Alderson's attempt to impose Habermas' paradigm of the public sphere on both Franco- American relations and Genet's and Mangourit's missions fails as a viable construct because it is predicated on a misunderstanding of the significance of both representatives. Too often Alderson takes their rhetoric at face value and ignores Furet's injunction that "any conceptualization of the history of the Revolution must begin with a critique of the idea of revolution as experienced and perceived by its actors." [1] It strains credulity to believe that Genet's mission hinged on overturning "the Americans' interpretation of their own constitution" (p. 25). There was no real constitutional crisis in the U.S. (p. 28) as he maintains. Undoubtedly, the French government would have liked a more pro-French administration, the ability to outfit privateers in American ports, and the repayment of the loan extended to American revolutionaries, but the various French administrations did not instruct Genet to overturn the American constitution. Equally dubious is Alderson's statement that "The popular acclaim showered on Genet caused the Washington administration to see him as a threat to their control of domestic affairs" (p. 21). Both representatives were undoubtedly nuisances, but their public challenging of the authority of the president and their often blatant violation of the rules of neutrality undermined their credibility and weakened their support even among Francophiles. In analyzing Jefferson's relationship with Genet and his early support of the irascible diplomat, Alderson never mentions Jefferson's generally pro-French stance or his mission to France. Such an explanation would have provided new understanding of the

depth of Jefferson's disillusionment with Genet. As Alderson himself notes, Jefferson found Genet "absolutely incorrigible" (p. 28) and was forced to quit "a wreck which could not but sink all who should cling to it" (p. 29).

To make more explicable both Genet's and Mangourit's actions, such as their flaunting of diplomatic conventions and violating international law, Alderson could have looked at works on revolutionary diplomacy.<sup>[2]</sup> Such an examination would have shown that tactics such as discarding treaties and publishing diplomatic correspondence were often resorted to by French revolutionary diplomats who rejected the "old diplomacy." The behavior indulged in by French revolutionary representatives such as Genet and Mangourit was not atypical. Alderson's contention that Mangourit was more tactful than Genet is also difficult to credit if one looks at his career, not only in the United States but also in Spain, and his critique of Americans and their administration. For him, American liberty was a sham and the American presidency a monarchy (p. 166): "The Americans talk endlessly about Liberty and have no idea what it is" (p. 166).

Some statements are simply puzzling. Why does the author dub Charleston, South Carolina "the Holy City" (chapter four)? When the author talks about British privateers seizing American vessels he remarks that "French vessels fared no better" (p. 113). But why, one wonders, should French ships be spared when France was at war with Great Britain? He mentions that arming French privateers in American ports was a right "merely implied" in the treaty (p. 24). Treaties are often open to interpretation but how can a right be implied? One cannot but doubt his statement that "signs were strong that a French invasion of Spanish territory would have succeeded" (p. xi). Had Alderson read more widely in the literature, he would have been able to explain why "character assassination seemed to be something of a sport among French diplomatic officials" (p. 39), French revolutionaries inherently distrusted diplomacy and diplomats, often planting informers in embassies and consulates to spy on French officials.

In many cases the author needs to analyze further. He notes, for example, that the American Revolution Society's support for France "became increasingly qualified" (p. 58) and still later that the elites' support for the Revolution "waned" (p. 79). Why was that? Alderson never notes how events in France impacted public opinion in the United States. How did the flight to Varennes, the invasion of the Tuileries and the killing of the Swiss Guards, the execution of the king, or the reign of terror impact American views of France? Just as Genet's earlier mission to Russia presaged his difficulties in the United States, so too Mangourit's mission to the United States foretold his problems later in Spain. Alderson argues (p. 20) that Genet was expelled from Russia for his republican views. This statement is true, but merits more qualification. Genet's predecessor, Ségur, also harbored republican views but was a great favorite of the empress while Genet was not. Genet, unlike Ségur, was tactless and confrontational—as was Mangourit. When Alderson mentions Mangourit's position in Spain, he merely notes that Mangourit hindered the negotiations and returned home. But what he does not explain is why Mangourit remained only seven months in Madrid. Just as in the United States, in Spain Mangourit insulted the host government. He urged the planting of a liberty tree (a symbol of revolution) in the courtyard of the embassy, vilified the queen, and publicly predicted that the reigning king would be the last. Considering their missions in the United States in the context of their longer careers would have enhanced this study and added to our understanding of two individuals imbued with revolutionary ideology.

Yet another puzzling section in *This Bright Era* is devoted to the "wedding" of two women, one French, one American (p. 75). But how typical were such unions? Was this union merely a social aberration and what does it really tell us about the transatlantic community? Alderson mentions that Mangourit recruited American backwoodsmen outside of South Carolina to avoid any violation of neutrality (p. 130). This statement demands clarification. Would not recruiting *any* Americans have been a violation of neutrality? In the separate chapter on Genet, there is no mention of a crucial aspect of his mission,

the repayment of the American debt to France, a contentious issue that embittered relations. In analyzing why democratic-republican societies had for the most part "ceased to exist" by 1796 (p. 175), Alderson correctly states that the ties that bound America and France were broken. He does not note that these societies declined because of the erosion of popular support for France. As the revolution became more radical and violent, many who initially welcomed it no longer did so. Moreover, as the French increasingly violated American neutrality, relations chilled.

Other statements are simply wrong. Alderson argues that when Louis XVI came to the throne he ruled "over what was arguably the most powerful nation on earth" (p. 6). France was in decline in the eighteenth century and was not even arguably the most powerful nation in Europe; Great Britain was. France had been eclipsed on the European scene, as Orville Murphy has noted, and that decline led to an erosion of the king's authority. French military and diplomatic defeats in the eighteenth century only underscored France's eclipse.<sup>[3]</sup> The author notes that the 1792 elections "were the first in history based on universal manhood suffrage" (p. 9), but servants and the unemployed had no vote and less than 6 percent of those who were eligible did vote. Moreover, the men were indirectly elected. Yet again, his statement that "The Mountain blamed the Girondins for everything that had gone wrong in France" overstates the case (p. 30). The Mountain blamed many. Alderson needs to explain why Robespierre regarded the Girondins as traitors. The more egalitarian titles used in France were citizen and citizeness not *citess* (p. 37).

Alderson's text is, for the most part, blessedly free of incomprehensible postmodern jargon but is studded with colloquial expressions such as: "hand on the tiller of the ship of state" (p. 3); "the goings-on" (pp. 3, 65); "the last straw" (p. 3); "squared off against each other" (p. 12); "carry the day" (p. 17); "seemed to hit it off" (p. 49); "up in the air" (p. 131). Although there are some excessively long quotations that could be cut (e.g., pp. 94, 105-6, 113), the author has the gift of uncovering the telling *aperçu*. For example, on the value of food as a social lubricant, Mangourit noted that "during dessert one lifts up the veil of reserve" (p. 61). When some aristocrats sought to return to Saint-Domingue, Mangourit referred to their "coupe <sup>[sic]</sup> de l'ingratitude" (p. 67) and later labeled them as "scoundrels with full pockets and empty hearts" (p. 73).

Mangourit's mission is not without interest. Alderson notes how Mangourit manipulated the crowd by limiting access to many revolutionary celebrations in the United States through the issuance of tickets (p. 151). Alderson understands that ideology often served as a mask for self-interest, for example in the planned invasion of Florida, but all too often uncritically accepts Genet and Mangourit's viewpoints. For example, Alderson says nothing about Mangourit urging Genet to return to France. This position was criminally naive. Such a return would have been tantamount to a death sentence. Only later does Alderson acknowledge that Robespierre's timely demise had saved Mangourit from the fate of many.

Alderson, an associate professor of history at Georgia Perimeter College, has mined material from the Archives des Affaires Étrangères (much of which is available in the Library of Congress), the Archives Nationales, and records in South Carolina, but he has not consulted the relevant materials in the National Archives (Washington D.C.). An examination of the papers of the British representative, George Hammond, would have provided a different perspective and greater depth to his study. Alderson also looked at the critical secondary literature, but again the book would have been more valuable had he set the mission within a wider context and consulted, for example, Sorel's classic multi-volume work on international relations.<sup>[4]</sup> In discussing the slave revolts, he consulted some, but not all, of the seminal works.<sup>[5]</sup> When he mentions the Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce of 1778, he never cites the standard work on treaties, edited by Parry.<sup>[6]</sup> The appended bibliography is useful, as is the index, which cites subjects in both the text and the notes. The notes, though, too often all lumped together at the end of a paragraph, are not always easy to unravel. In some cases it is impossible to uncover the source of a direct quotation (e.g., fn 38, p.73). This work may provide

insights into local issues, such as South Carolinian politics, but the author needs to set his work in the larger context of revolutionary diplomacy.

## NOTES

[1] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* trans., Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 14.

[2] Felix Gilbert, *The 'New Diplomacy' of the Eighteenth Century* (Indianapolis, IND.: Bobbs Merrill, 1951; Linda and Marsha Frey, " 'The Reign of the Charlatans is Over': The French Revolutionary Attack on Diplomatic Practice," *Journal of Modern History* 65 (December 1993): 706-744.

[3] Orville T. Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat of France and Public Opinion on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1783-1789* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

[4] Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la révolution française*. 8 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1897-1904).

[5] David Barry Gaspar and David P. Geggus, ed., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); David P. Geggus, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) and *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Santo Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989);

[6] Clive Parry, ed., *The Consolidated Treaty Series* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1969).

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