

H-France Salon

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L'Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française

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I first set foot in the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française (IHRF) sometime in the fall of 1970. Then as now, the Institut was not particularly easy to find, and you could wander around the maze of the Sorbonne for some time before locating it. Entering from the Rue de la Sorbonne, you had to turn left along the Galerie Rollin, climb the three very long flights of Escalier C (nearly 100 steps, but no serious scholar would ever take the elevator), then make your way down a dark corridor amidst locked wooden cases and stained walls—where the rain had leaked in—before reaching the library entrance at the far end. Yet the trek was always worth the effort. The IHRF contained a wonderfully rich collection of specialized studies, local histories, journals, and reference works. It was a veritable laboratory for Revolutionary scholarship, with easy access to many books that were difficult to find elsewhere in Paris or that existed only in awkward microform versions at the Bibliothèque nationale. There was a complete set of the 100-plus volumes of the *Archives parlementaires*, along with many Revolutionary newspapers, Revolutionary periodicals, and basic reference tools such as the Tuetey, the Tourneux, the Lacroix, and the numerous *recueils* of Revolutionary acts and documents. Originally confined to a single room, it had been expanded over the years into a second work area, with bookcases, fourteen shelves high, reaching to the ceiling. In addition to the regular purchases and books offered by authors since the late 1930s, it had assimilated several complete libraries donated by scholars over the years, most recently by Michel Vovelle. One also had access to generations of masters' theses and doctoral dissertations and even to a certain number of manuscripts: the notes and correspondence of Georges Lefebvre, papers amassed during the bicentennial celebration, and a small collection of Revolutionary documents. It was here, for example, that I found the only copies of the correspondence of the Constituent deputy Pierre-Joseph Meiffrund, the originals of which had been lost.

Technically and administratively, the Institut only included the library, the ongoing publication of the *Archives Parlementaires*, and in recent years a website that publishes an electronic journal and serves to announce upcoming events and publications. But for those of us who frequented the establishment, it symbolized much more. The Chair in the French Revolution at the Sorbonne and the four *maîtres assistants* with whom he taught all had offices just across the hall. The Wednesday afternoon seminars organized by the Chair—held one floor down in the Salle Marc Bloch—regularly brought in specialists from around the world. It was also the focal point for the periodic conferences and ad hoc seminars on diverse aspects of the Revolution. Although the principal

journal for Revolutionary studies, the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, was never directly linked to the Institut, the editorial committee sometimes met in the library and the chairholder had often served as the journal's editor-in-chief.

But perhaps above all the Institut was a center for meeting and reconnecting with other Revolutionary scholars from France and from many different countries and for keeping up with new research and the latest publications. While poking around the library one often ran into unexpected colleagues and friends who worked in Paris or who were visiting to take part in the seminar or participate in a conference. I encountered several generations of Revolutionary scholars there. In the early 1970s I met Dominique Julia, who was then a young *assistant* to Albert Soboul and who soon became one of my closest friends and collaborators. Over the years, in the library or in the nearby halls, I remember meeting and chatting with Françoise Brunel, Jean-Paul Bertaud, Bernard Plongeron, Bernard Gainot, Michel Biard, Jean-Luc Chappey, Yann Fauchoix, Guillaume Mazeau, Virginie Martin, and Bettina Frederking—to name only a few—along with scholars from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Australia, Japan, and China. It was at the library photocopy machine that I first ran into the young Catalonian scholar Maria Betlem Castellà i Pujols, whom I later brought to speak at the University of California, Irvine, and who invited me and my wife to a conference in Barcelona. While I never personally met Albert Soboul, I had good relations with all four of his successors to date. Between 1986 and 2013 I spoke some eight times in the French Revolution Seminar or in conferences organized by the Chair at the Sorbonne. Michel Vovelle, Jean-Clément Martin, and Pierre Serna even generously invited me to their homes in the provinces and put me up for a night or two.

I also encouraged many of my graduate students to make contact with the Institut—among them Morag Martin, Bob Blackman, Micah Alpaugh, Lindsay Holowach-Parker, Nicolas Déplanche, Kate Marsden, and Elizabeth Andrews-Bond. A couple of them were formally attached to the Institut as part of their fellowships and several gave papers or participated in various functions there.

The complex and ongoing politics at the University of Paris, removing any legal status for the IHRF and fusing it with other research centers, will not bring an end to Revolutionary studies at the Sorbonne. The Chair on the Revolution and the weekly seminars and periodic conferences all remain, at least for the present, and significant numbers of students continue to pursue French Revolutionary studies there. In the short term the library and the librarian overseeing it are still financed by the CNRS. But such arrangements can only appear fragile for the longer term, and it remains to be seen how continuing negotiations will ultimately pan out. There is a real fear that with the programmed move of the University of Paris I to the northern suburbs, the library might be dispersed and merged with the general university library. If such a fusion were to transpire, it would truly mark the end of an era and a very sad event indeed for historical studies.

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