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Eric Hazan, *A People's History of the French Revolution*. London and New York: Verso, 2014. 416 pp. Trans. David Fernbach. Maps, figures, notes, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78169-589-1.

Review by Paul R. Hanson, Butler University.

The title of this volume is a bit misleading, for it is not in any way “history from below.” Rather, Eric Hazan is interested in reclaiming the history of the French Revolution from its detractors. As he writes in the preface, “I do not claim that this book is objective. I hope on the contrary that it will stoke a flare of revolutionary enthusiasm, at a time when the prevailing tendency is more towards relativism and derision.” (p. 9) I have no doubt that the author was on the streets of Paris last January, carrying a *Je Suis Charlie* sign, and that he was heartened by the tens of thousands of Parisians who were there with him marching in support of the ideals of 1789.

This is in many ways a quite traditional history of the French Revolution. Hazan says that he first decided to write the book for friends, especially younger friends who do not read much history, or who have been bored by what they have encountered. So he has written a political narrative, in which he tries to capture what he sees as the most compelling issues, the most dramatic events, and the most stirring voices of the Revolution. In many ways he has succeeded in those tasks. There are other things that he says he will not do: “I have avoided any reference to the twentieth century, the Bolshevik Revolution and the various ‘totalitarianisms’” (p. 8). This is a wise choice: no need to rehearse the vituperative debates of the last decades of the twentieth century. Similarly, as a self-professed autodidact, Hazan chooses not to engage the debates among historians about the Revolution, leaving that to others. Finally, he writes, “I have tried not to show the Revolution as a chiefly Parisian phenomenon” (p. 8), this despite the fact that he has lived in Paris all of his life and clearly loves the city, to which he devoted an earlier book.[1]

What makes this book a traditional history? The narrative structure for one thing, and for the most part it works. There is a dramatic story to be told here, but events moved quickly in the revolutionary decade (of which Hazan chooses to recount only half—more on that below), and political currents could shift overnight, which will sometimes leave readers confused, especially since Hazan is not always careful about his narrative. On page 278, for example, we read about Jean-Paul Marat’s criticisms of Jacques Roux, about a dozen pages after Charlotte Corday has killed Marat in his bathtub. Historical figures are not always fully introduced at first mention, often without first names being included. Hazan rarely cites dates from the revolutionary calendar, but he does not explain what that calendar was, or how it came into use, until roughly twenty pages after the year II is first mentioned.

The book is also traditional by virtue of whom the author cites. He does not entirely ignore recent works. One will find Jean-Clément Martin, Roger Dupuy, Sophie Wahnich, Michel Biard, Françoise Brunel, Lynn Hunt and Timothy Tackett cited in the notes. Michel Vovelle and François Furet are there as well, but far and away the historians cited and quoted most often are Jules Michelet, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Alphonse Aulard. Daniel Guérin and Albert Soboul get prominent mention as well. These are venerable historians, and it is good for the current generation to be introduced to the voices of the nineteenth century, but I did find myself wondering if Jaurès and

Mathiez are really the best authorities one might cite in trying to explain the economic situation in France in 1788-89 (pp. 49-50). More grievously, perhaps, Hazan observes that the *cahiers de doléances* “form an immense treasure trove that defies any attempt at overall study” (p. 54), completely ignoring the life work of Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff.<sup>[2]</sup>

Despite his disclaimer, I do find Hazan to be generally objective in his presentation of events, but there are a number of minor errors in the text. Early on, for example, Hazan refers to the famines at the end of the reign of Louis XV, when he means Louis XIV (p. 19). He describes Jean-Lambert Tallien as “a legal clerk with journalistic ambitions, who founded a democratic newspaper in Marseille before ‘going up’ to Paris...” (p. 26). Perhaps he is thinking of Barbaroux here. Tallien spent the 1780s in Paris, working as a personal secretary to the Lameth brothers, and in 1789 took a position as a typesetter in the printing shop of the *Moniteur Universel*, which put him in the thick of things at Versailles. Hazan credits Rousseau for winning the Dijon prize for his second discourse, *On the Origins of Inequality*, when in fact it was the first discourse, *On the Arts and Sciences*, which won first prize (p. 31). He suggests that the Vendée rose in rebellion against recruitment in August/September 1792, whereas the revolt erupted in the following spring (p. 184). Condorcet’s draft of a constitution was not the basis of the Jacobin constitution adopted in June 1793. Condorcet’s draft never received a vote in the National Convention, and while some elements of that document may have survived, key points were rejected as embodying federalist tendencies (p. 269). Hazan gives the impression that slavery was abolished in all French territories in February 1794, which was not the case (p. 347). And the great painter of the Revolution is Jacques-Louis David, not Jean (p. 373). Finally, although this is more a quibble with the U.S. publisher than the author, the book jacket on this edition features a print of protesters on the barricades in Paris during the 1830 revolution. It is not just that this is the wrong revolution, but more importantly that there were no barricades on the streets of Paris during the first Revolution, a misconception that the Broadway musical *Les Misérables* has only exacerbated over the past two decades.

Hazan laments that the famous orators of the Revolution have not always been accurately presented by historians, so he quotes liberally from the speeches and writings of the revolutionaries, drawing on the *Archives Parlementaires* and the *Moniteur*, and this tends to enliven the narrative and bring the reader right into the fray of those tumultuous debates. We hear most often from figures such as Mirabeau, Robespierre, Danton and Saint-Just, but the author also quotes lesser known deputies such as Levasseur, Vadier and Billaud-Varenne. Readers are also given excerpts from revolutionary newspapers such as *Le Père Duchesne*, as well as from petitions to the National Convention from sectional assemblies and popular societies, both Parisian and provincial.

There are a number of what we might call sidebars sprinkled throughout the book (Hazan labels each an *Excursus*), and these bring flavor and analysis to the text. Most are devoted to people (Mirabeau and Sieyès, Marat, Robespierre), while others address themes or questions (“Did the Convention represent the people?” and “The Notion of Terror”). His sidebars on the Terror and on Robespierre are particularly thoughtful (pp. 301-303, 375-378). They are not, however, listed in the Table of Contents, which makes them hard to find again after first reading. The same is true of the various maps and figures scattered throughout the text.

How well does the author succeed in his aim to explore the Revolution outside of Paris? Better than most, perhaps, but not as well as one might hope. The brief discussion of the Great Fear, for example, might have been enhanced with more attention to what was actually happening on the ground. Hazan cites Timothy Tackett’s work on the king’s flight, but fails to draw on the rich material Tackett presents on the confrontation in Varennes or the crowds gathered along the route when the king and his family returned to Paris.<sup>[3]</sup> Given that this is a “People’s History,” why not spend a bit more time with the Marseillais on their march to Paris and their reception in the capital? Who put them up during the weeks between their arrival and the assault on the Tuileries palace? I suspect that Hazan knows the answer to that question. We are given some discussion of local politics in Marseille and Lyon on the eve

of the federalist revolt, but this could have more depth. Why not introduce the reader to Joseph Chalier, the firebrand of Lyon who joined Marat in July 1793 as one of the martyrs of the Revolution? Given the plethora of local studies that were published at the time of the Bicentennial, there is no dearth of material to draw on about the revolutionary experience in the provinces.

Hazan does address the Law of 14 Frimaire, which has generally been interpreted as a move to curb the popular movement and centralize political power in the National Convention, now controlled by the Jacobins and the Committee of Public Safety, an interpretation with which the author largely agrees. He notes that the law brought an end to local elections and increased the authority of district administrations, while reducing that of departmental administrations. He does not explain, however, that this was done in large part because so many departmental councils had protested the proscription of the Girondin deputies on June 2, 1793 and taken the lead in the federalist revolt that followed.

This book does offer a number of fascinating details about the Revolution with which many readers will be unfamiliar, including these: the use of *vous* had largely disappeared from the floor of the National Convention by the fall of 1793 (p. 315); one way in which ordinary people played a role in the Revolution was in the galleries of the several national assemblies, and through the letters from provincial administrations and clubs that were read at the beginning of sessions of the National Convention as well as the Legislative Assembly (pp. 196-97); three thousand towns and villages changed their names during the Year II (p. 312); Robespierre never set foot south of the Loire River, and the majority of the members of the Committee of General Security, which played a crucial role in the drama leading up to 9 Thermidor, were from departments of the Midi (p. 388).

Hazan does not entirely fulfill his pledge to avoid reference to the twentieth century, or contemporary political issues. I would take issue with his characterization of the remonstrances of the Parlements in the decades leading up to the Revolution as “an interesting sample of the democratic thought of that time” (p. 41). The *parlementaires* may have been critics of the monarchy, but they were scarcely advocates of democracy. Indeed, few revolutionaries were until after the flight to Varennes. Hazan does not wade into the debate about the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, but he does write at one point, “Was the Revolution bourgeois or not? That is a question I refuse to ask, as it basically has no meaning” (p. 83). Ironically, this observation comes in a sidebar with the heading, “Was the French Revolution a Bourgeois Revolution?”, so he has effectively asked the question twice. His answer to that non-question seems essentially to adopt the position put forward some years ago by Sarah Maza, although he does not cite her book.[4]

Although Hazan eschews a class analysis of the French Revolution, he does make reference at numerous points to the “possessor class.” The phrase does not appear in the index, so I cannot offer an estimate of the number of times it appears in the text. Perhaps the first instance is when he observes that most members of the Constituent Assembly “belonged to—or represented—the possessor class...” and that they were committed “to keep the people well away from major decisions and the distribution of wealth” (p. 104). Although he is careful to note that there was little social distinction between Montagnards and Girondins, he does see the latter as defending the interests of the “possessor class” in opposition to the Parisian sans-culottes. He quotes Morris Slavin, who described the Hébertistes as striving to “limit the power of the possessors” (p. 331), so perhaps it is from him that he borrows this phrase.[5] I wonder if it might not also be an unconscious reference to the Occupy movement of recent years, and its denunciation of the one percent, today’s possessor class.

Hazan ends his history with 9 Thermidor, another aspect of the book that makes it rather traditional. The longest section of the book, in fact, is devoted to the two months leading up to the fall of Robespierre. In making this choice, I would argue, Hazan falls prey to what he recognizes as the Thermidorian strategy of making the Terror, if not indeed the radical revolution, all about Robespierre. That is not Hazan’s intention, but it does end up making Robespierre very much the focal point of this

history. It also leaves out of the picture a great deal of recent work by historians on both sides of the Atlantic devoted to the last year of the National Convention and the period of the Directory. Hazan offers a number of reasons for framing his history in this way, but the most important for him is that 9 Thermidor marked an end to “the incandescent phase of the Revolution” (p. 416). It is that incandescence that Hazan hopes to reignite in today’s generation, so that they will carry on the fight for the dispossessed, for equality, and for the common happiness, an altogether laudable aspiration.

## NOTES

- [1] Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris: A History in Footsteps* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).
- [2] Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- [3] Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- [4] Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- [5] Morris Slavin, *The Hébertistes to the Guillotine* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

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