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Jeremy D. Popkin, *A New World Begins. The History of the French Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 2019. viii + 629 pp. Maps, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-465-09666-4.

Review by William Doyle, University of Bristol.

Jeremy Popkin's *Short History of the French Revolution* has become, over the years since its first publication in 1994, a well-established and regularly updated introduction to the subject. Now he offers us a *long* history, although, unlike its predecessor, it ends in 1804 rather than 1815. It comprises a detailed narrative of events, with sources generously footnoted, some unusual illustrations, and a number of very clear and useful maps. Popkin established his reputation in the field with studies of the eighteenth-century French language press, and welcome insights into the revolutionary importance of newspapers are found throughout the new survey. Over the period between writing his two accounts of the French Revolution, he went on to become an authority on the revolution in Haiti. So it is no surprise to find informed discussions at every stage in the story of how the issue of slavery kept recurring in revolutionary politics. It is doubly appropriate, then, to end in 1804, when, as Napoleon finally closed down the revolution in France by becoming a monarch, the former slaves of Haiti finally consolidated their freedom and independence from his rule.

The Caribbean, however, is the one area outside France to get sustained treatment. Apart from regions invaded by the French once war broke out, the seismic impact of French events on the rest of Europe receives very little attention, and when it does it is mainly in military terms. Hardly any foreign friend of France merits a mention, and even Tom Paine, who deservedly pops up in June 1791 and December 1792, is never credited with his best-selling defence of the Revolution, *Rights of Man*. Burke's hostility, to which Paine was replying, does receive some analysis, but the Revolution's greatest foreign enemy, Pope Pius VI, remains a shadowy figure. We are not even reminded (as we are with Toussaint Louverture) that he died in French captivity. This is symptomatic of perhaps the main weakness in Popkin's approach: his fragmented portrayal of the religious question. It was not just one more episodic issue among many. It was the earliest, deepest, and most persistent divide opened up by the Revolution, and, as Napoleon acknowledged, the most difficult to close. It was the longest running and widespread source of anti-revolutionary resistance. It fueled the greatest armed rebellions and more persistent low-intensity resistance, against the authority of successive legislatures. And it is surprising, in a text which repeatedly highlights the Revolution's modern legacies in French life, that the religious troubles of the 1790s are not pinpointed as the ancestors of the fraught contemporary question of *laïcité*.

Religious commitment to the nonjuror cause also produced the most obdurate passive rejection of the Revolution from women. Wherever he can, Popkin notes the role played by revolutionary women, from all the well-known episodes from the October Days to the closure of the Revolutionary Womens' club in 1793, and the *journée* of Prairial Year III. Olympe de Gouges and the other notorious revolutionary amazons also make their obligatory appearance. But the traditional attention they have attracted and continue to receive obscures their basic marginality, compared with the massive support that women throughout the country gave to refractory clergy who rejected the Revolution's work.

Written with less fire but more coherence than its most recent rival, Peter McPhee's *Liberty or Death, A New World Begins* is a broadly reliable account of complex events.^[1] Inevitably, however, there are judgements with which a reviewer might disagree. Did the *cahiers* really call for more government intervention across the board (p. 43)? Surely only to stop change rather than promote it? As with the recent referendum in Britain, ostensible radicalism was really a deeply conservative reflex. And were the Montagnards actually "more radical" than the Girondins (p. 299)? They were certainly more ruthless, but that is a different thing. Vergniaud was outraged when he and his friends were called moderates.

If there is a second edition, as there surely ought to be, it will provide an opportunity to correct a number of factual errors. Most French nobles did not have titles (pp. 11-12); Bossuet was never a cardinal (p. 33); France was not alone in having the Salic Law (p. 37): (why else was the Pragmatic Sanction needed?); Lorraine was annexed in 1766, not 1760 (p. 48); the pre-revolutionary Church is now estimated to have owned a sixth rather than a tenth of French real-estate (p. 188); Louis XIV's statue in the Place des Victoires (unlike the present one) was not equestrian (p. 283); and 'whiff of grapeshot' was Thomas Carlyle's description of the defeat of the Vendémiaire insurrection, not Napoleon's (p. 454). More seriously, certain events of fundamental importance go unmentioned, notably the abrogation of binding mandates on July 7th, 1789, without which all the reforms that followed could not have occurred; or the formal suspension of the 1793 constitution as soon as it was finished. And whereas excellent and vivid use is made of contemporary eyewitnesses such as that irresistible artisan memoirist Jacques-Louis Ménétra, or the hitherto neglected Prairial martyr Jean-Marie Goujon, it might have been wiser not to recur so frequently to the publisher Nicolas Ruault. We have all used Ruault on occasion: he has something sharp to say about every significant episode of the Revolution. But that in itself provokes suspicion. Is he just too good to be true? Most contemporary sources from any period are disappointingly silent on at least some of the things on which a historian might hope for a juicy quote. Ruault never is. When his famous *Gazette* was first published in 1976, in fact, not all reviewers were convinced of its authenticity. If they were right, he is best avoided.

NOTE

[1] Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

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