

H-France Review Vol. 22 (January 2022), No. 5

Mette Harder and Jennifer Ngaire Heuer, eds., *Life in Revolutionary France*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 424 pp. Figures, maps, acknowledgements, notes, recommended reading, and index. \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781350077294; \$115.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781350077300.

Review by Corinne Gressang, Erskine College.

Few books fully deliver on their stated goals the way that *Life in Revolutionary France* does. Editors Mette Herder and Jennifer Ngaire Heuer demonstrate that the history of the everyday is not trivial or just anecdotal, and that the Revolution's "pervasive and radical nature" changed nearly every aspect of life (p. 2). In this edited volume, they outlined four main goals: to introduce non-specialists to the French Revolution, to explore how studying every day experiences can reveal the Revolution's power to affect people's lives, to orient readers to themes of equality, citizenship, justice and violence, and to think about space and identity, experience and emotion, helping us write about the experience of the everyday (p. 3).

These goals are at the core of each chapter. Despite the many obstacles to studying this topic, such as the fact that many of the sources dealing with the everyday are still manuscripts and have not been digitized, interest in the topic is growing.[1] Jean-Paul Bertrand's *La vie quotidienne en France au temps de la Révolution: 1789-1795* inspired a generation of historians in the 1990s and 2000s to study all aspects of ordinary life. First, the lives of women, children, the peasants, and even the slaves were integrated into histories of the Revolution.[2] Furthermore, accompanying each concise, easy-to read chapter of this volume, the authors chose a primary source and introduced readers to individual historiographies related to their topic. Therefore, it would make a perfect undergraduate introduction to the Revolution. Part one focuses on revolutionary identities and spaces. Part two explores how the Revolution's key ideas and ambitions affected daily life, radical redefinitions of rights, crimes, and justice in 1790s. Lastly, part three argues that the Revolution was a sensory, aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual event. All fourteen chapters include meticulous research and a primer on the new methodologies for telling the histories of everyday life. To help explain this point, I have summarized the major historiographical argument of each chapter.

Jill Walshaw's chapter, "Republicans and Royalists: Seeking Authentic Rural Voices in the Sources of the French Revolution," introduces readers to the challenges of finding the authentic voices among a largely illiterate rural population. Additionally, her explanation of the great diversity of opinions among members of the French countryside further complicates their story. However, despite these challenges, Walshaw wants to escape the grand narratives of peasant behavior. They were neither the *bon cultivateurs* offered in the revolutionary imagination, "nor counter-revolutionary fanatics" (p. 40). Using a wide variety of sources to tease out rural voices,

she invites readers to immediately practice these skills in a bundle of sources from the seditious trial records of a weaver in Dordogne named Thomas Bordas (p. 28). These documents help readers probe the layers that obstruct our hearing of these rural political opinions but also show how rich in context and details these documents can be.

After Walshaw demonstrates how to hear everyday voices, Laura Talamante explains where to find those voices in “Mapping Women’s Everyday Lives in Revolutionary Marseille.” By studying the landscape of the Revolution in Marseille, she argues that “women contributed to the realignment of power by modifying their existing familial, social, and economic networks” (p. 71). The primary source for this chapter was a record of the deliberation of the *dames citoyennes* from 1790, which took place in their meeting house, a geographic reminder of women’s political power. Using both traditionally female-dominated spaces but also creating new spaces of political action, women risked losing their time, resources, and even their lives to bring about revolutionary changes.

Hanna Callaway’s chapter “Emigration, Landlords, and Tenants in Revolutionary Paris” carefully maps the layers of ownership that existed in Paris to study the impact on tenants when ownership of these properties suddenly changed. Regular rents and leases were not always the norm. As the accompanying primary source revealed, many of the tenants had no lease or an expired lease and paid irregular amounts. When the revolutionaries took ownership, they eliminated these more informal relationships, sometimes forcing longstanding tenants from their homes, and regularized the use of concierges, who were the eyes and ears inside a building (p. 95). The most important outcome, that the tenants no longer knew each other and the growing social conflict between different social classes, was saved for the end of the essay. The description of the housing and rental situation in Paris occupied most of the chapter, which limited Callaway’s ability to substantiate her claims as clearly and quickly as undergraduate attention spans often demand.

In his chapter “Home Fronts and Battlefields: The Army, Warfare, and the Revolutionary Experience,” Christopher Tozzi argues that warfare brought with it lasting changes for every inhabitant of France, not just soldiers (p. 103). His chapter talks about how the army was now the responsibility of all of France’s “able-bodied men,” and not just a small number of the nobility (p. 120). Not only were soldiers from every region, every socioeconomic status, every religion, and every race, but the elderly, women, and children were specifically included in the *levée en masse*. In fact, the primary sources Tozzi included in the chapter described the introduction of Jews into the military. Many of the changes to the military endured long after Napoleon landed in exile. However, the sections on the role of women and families in the military could have been improved by giving further explanation.

My momentary curiosity regarding Tozzi’s passing reference to the Legion of Americans, which was the first “all-black military unit to bear arms in Europe” was assuaged by Jennifer Heuer and Abigail Coppins chapter, “Race, Freedom, and Everyday Life: French Caribbean Prisoners of War in Britain,” which focused on the Black prisoners of war in Portsmouth prison in Britain (p. 112). In the absence of detailed written accounts from prisoners of war, Heuer and Coppins demonstrate how the history of everyday life requires historians to reimagine sources. The Transport Board, the War Office and the Colonial Office kept meticulous record of the prisoners including their ranks, ages, regiments, and date of capture (p. 130). Black soldiers formed the backbone of the French army in the Caribbean and when captured, both the French

and the British officially recognized them as citizens and not slaves. Heuer and Coppins noted the differential treatment of white and black POWs in the primary source which shows that the British gave them different food based on assumptions about their diet or disposition and believed the “west Indians” to be “indolent and careless” (p. 143). This chapter reminds readers of the instability of freedom in the revolutionary Atlantic.

Opening part two, Claire Cage in “Crime, Law, and Justice” explores how the shifting standards of justice brought together the political and the personal. She argues that “the boundaries between the common and political crimes were porous and shifting” (p. 162). Obviously building on earlier work by Lynn Hunt and Suzanne Desan on the personal and political colliding, Cage reminds her readers that nearly everyone in France probably knew someone who was imprisoned during the Terror. Cage astutely marks the West’s change in attitudes away from punishment meant to inflict pain or embarrass an offender to a system designed to remove dangerous individuals from society. In the *longue durée*, changes to the legal systems impacted the lives of everyday Frenchmen and the globe through new standards of justice. Cage’s accompanying primary source document is the Penal Code of September 25, 1791, which is abbreviated slightly to highlight the major changes in criminal procedure and justice that wiped away the *ancien régime’s* system.

Appealing to fans of whodunnits, Ralph Kingston opens “Surveillance at Work: A Theft on the Rue du Bac” with a theft and calls on historians to do the work of detectives. This brief paragraph or two would be an invaluable introduction to historical methodology courses. Kingston explains what historians do and how they can use primary sources, especially when two accounts do not agree. Kingston builds on Cage’s groundwork describing individuals taking matters of justice into their own hands, as was the case of Talleyrand secretly dismissing the alleged thief to preserve his reputation. His argument about how citizens of revolutionary France were both surveillants and surveilled meant that employees observed each other’s “place ballets,” or patterns of living (p. 183). Deviations were sufficient evidence for suspicion or conviction (p. 186). Not only does this chapter include a uniquely digestible introduction to Foucault, but Kingston’s primary source, a defense statement from the accused, invites readers to doubt revolutionary justice, which could convict a man based on circumstantial evidence of his odd work hours.

Clyde Plumauzelle encourages readers to expand their definitions of labor to include Parisian prostitutes, whom she calls “essential components of the makeshift economy” in “Sex as Work: Public Women in Revolutionary Paris” (p. 199). Prostitution served as “a financial resource, form of resistance, and subversive strategy of survival” (p. 201). Plumazelle’s argument hinges on the economics of the time, which made it nearly impossible for a young single woman of the lower class to survive on regular wages. In police records, prostitutes asserted their rights as French citizens and invoked new revolutionary expressions in their defense. Plumazelle reconceptualizes prostitutes as day workers who were, in some ways, neglected by the revolutionaries, but nonetheless were able to survive through their economic resourcefulness (p. 212). The primary source bundle for this chapter includes five letters from Marie-Antionette Barthelemy from the Year III of the Republic that show the economic realities for women.

Part two ends with Sean M. Quinlan’s “Doctor’s Radicalism and the Right to Health: Three Visions from the French Revolution” which argues for the absolute novelty of the French Revolution’s transformation of ideas about health. Quinlan’s introduction, however,

overemphasizes the “torrent of change” (p. 221). These changes were rooted in long processes over the course of the eighteenth century. When Quinlan discusses Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers, these longer processes become clearer. This chapter is carefully woven together through the writings and lives of three revolutionary doctors: Jean-Paul Marat, Amédée Doppet, and François-Xavier Lanthenas. All three were physicians who turned to radical politics because of their medical experience and argued that good health could alleviate social ills. The accompanying primary source document, written by Lanthenas, perfectly demonstrates Quinlan’s argument about the link between medicine and politics.

E. C. Spary’s chapter “Tasting Liberty: Food and Revolution” is misnamed. The chapter is more concerned with the symbolism and politics of food than its taste. Spary argues that “the language of meat,” or calling the revolutionaries butchers or cannibals, appears in both popular histories and in contemporary sources to emphasize the alleged violence and barbarism of the French Revolution (p. 250-51). This political mudslinging ended up changing the diet as meat-eating came to be associated with “moral insensibility” and many revolutionaries turned to vegetarianism (p. 253). Furthermore, the symbol of the king as the provider for his people in the *ancien régime* changed to the image of a greedy pig that would soon be led to slaughter (pp. 254-255). The final contribution of Spary’s chapter emphasizes that ideas about what foods were necessities stemmed from politics. Spary’s primary source for her chapter is not a written document, but a political cartoon from the period through which students can use her lens of “butchery” to understand how politically powerful *L’Hydre aristocratique* could be in 1789.

Ashli White’s focus on wax renderings of two scenes of revolutionary turmoil demonstrates how people in Britain and the United States interacted with representations of violent revolutionary episodes. Her title “Spectacles of French Revolutionary Violence in the Atlantic World” suggests a wider reach, but White focuses on the United States, Britain, and France. This medium of consuming political news was popular, entertaining, and widely available to the population. Thus, the ensuing conversations about desacralizing the monarch or the role of women in political or violent actions became widely available. The two scenes, the decapitation of Louis XVI and Charlotte Corday stabbing Marat summoned uncontrollable emotions from viewers and invited interaction with political and moral debates. White’s use of advertisements, one of which she included to use as the primary source, illuminates the gendered language and political narratives provided by the exhibition. White’s most persuasive evidence comes from the descriptions from attendees of the effect of the wax figures on them.

The theme of popular politics continues with Jonathan Smyth’s “Practice and Belief: Religion in the Revolution,” which highlights the role of religion throughout the Revolution. He explains “why religion did not completely disappear after 1789” and cites novels as evidence of the popular misunderstanding that give “a clear impression that religion disappeared” (pp. 295-296). While it was certainly true that materialist historians have ignored or downplayed the role of religion, especially after 1790, they would not have agreed that there was a complete absence of religion or any significant religious influence in France. [3] Nonetheless, Smyth’s concise synthesis of the religious movements in France help us to better understand how inseparable religious practice was from daily routines. His insistence that believers and their daily practice of faith are what helped the church survive every effort to remove it is persuasive and well-argued. This chapter’s primary source, Robespierre’s speech on Freedom of Worship, reinforces Smyth’s second point, that the most enduring legacy concerning faith during the Revolution was the ability of all faiths to practice in France.

Sophie Mathiesson's chapter "Facing the Unknown: The Private Lives of Miniatures in the French Revolutionary Prison" argues that miniature portraits helped owners to "assist or negotiate their [...] loss" during the Revolution (p. 319). One of the ways to gauge the uncertainty and fears of couples, families, and loved ones was to commission portraits. Miniatures accompanied owners wherever they went and acted as a stand-in for the person they depicted, sometimes giving owners, "a sense of guardianship and surveillance" to protect them (p. 322). With the intensification of the Terror, the prison-made portrait came into vogue despite the uncertainty of how long the prison artists might stay before they were whisked themselves to the guillotine (p. 332). The demand for portraits also created openings for women artists outside prisons. These portraits, which serve as the primary sources for this chapter, capture the emotional life of those who experienced the Terror.[4]

Lastly, Siân Reynolds, in "Revolutionary Parents and Children: Everyday Lives in Times of Stress" humorously begins the chapter with the *cahiers des bambins* or toddlers' grievances. Despite the difficulties in capturing the experiences of children during the Revolution, Reynolds is looking for the generational impact on the well-being of children who lost one or both of their parents during the Terror. The list of parents and children serve as the accompanying primary source for the chapter. Her subjects crossed political factions but only had limited variation in their socio-economic background (p. 344). Reynolds, however, lacks the evidence and memories necessary to conclude that later in the children's lives, their difficulties stemmed from their revolutionary experiences.

I have never seen such an edited volume before. Every chapter offers original scholarship and new methodological approaches, which could help any student of history read their sources with fresh eyes. This book not only teaches social and cultural history but also instructs students how to become better historians. I can offer no greater praise than the fact that I am excited to use this book in my French Revolution classes, and it also helped me to reframe my own research projects.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Jill Walshaw, "Republicans and Royalists: Seeking Authentic Rural Voices in the Sources of the French Revolution"

Laura Talamante, "Mapping Women's Everyday Lives in Revolutionary Marseille"

Hanna Callaway, "Emigration, Landlords, and Tenants in Revolutionary Paris"

Christopher Tozzi, "Home Fronts and Battlefields: The Army, Warfare, and the Revolutionary Experience"

Jennifer Heuer and Abigail Coppins, "Race, Freedom, and Everyday Life: French Caribbean Prisoners of War in Britain"

Claire Cage, "Crime, Law, and Justice"

Ralph Kingston, "Surveillance at Work: A Theft on the Rue du Bac"

Clyde Plumauzelle, "Sex as Work: Public Women in Revolutionary Paris"

Sean M. Quinlan, "Doctor's Radicalism and the Right to Health: Three Visions from the French Revolution"

E. C. Spary, "Tasting Liberty: Food and Revolution"

Ashli White, "Spectacles of French Revolutionary Violence in the Atlantic World"

Jonathan Smyth, "Practice and Belief: Religion in the Revolution"

Sophie Mathiesson, "Facing the Unknown: The Private Lives of Miniatures in the French Revolutionary Prison"

Siân Reynolds, "Revolutionary Parents and Children: Everyday Lives in Times of Stress"

NOTES

[1] James M. Anderson, *Daily Life in the French Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007); David Andress, *The French Revolution and the People* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004); Peter McPhee, *Living the French Revolution* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French national Assembly and the Emergence of Revolutionary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Michel Vovelle, *Religion et Révolution : La déchristianisation en l'an II* (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

[2] Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2004; Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1992.

[3] In recent scholarship, the role of religion in the Revolution seems to be increasing rather than decreasing, which Smyth notes in his footnote 9.

[4] Although I understand that color prints might make the book prohibitively expensive for undergraduate classrooms, these paintings deserved to be in color, even if that meant including a digital appendix.

Corinne Gressang
Erskine College
gressang@erskine.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for

French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172