

## Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Paul R. Hanson's review of David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*.

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The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no18hanson.pdf>

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1 March 2006

Norman Ravitch  
ravitchn@bellsouth.net

I have not read David Andress' book on the Terror, though I have looked at it. I find it unlikely to appeal to the general reader because general readers are not much taken with the French Revolution any more. It will probably appeal only to other scholars of the Revolution.

Prof. Hanson's review seems fair and discerning. One thing which may appeal to me in Andress' book is the general position that it was Utopianism as well as Self-Defense which led to the Terror. The self-defense angle has been presented best already by R.R. Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*. The Utopianism angle was the core of Burke's ideology but it is important to note that there are Utopianisms of the Right as well as of the Left. Utopianism of either sort is willing to kill the lukewarm in order to save them. The model for this is in the Christian battle against heresy. This could lead into a big analysis of Islamic terrorism but evidently Andress has not provided it.

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1 March 2006

Paul T Werner  
paul.werner@nyu.edu

I would suggest, Professor Ravitch, that there are varieties of Utopianism so divergent that to conjoin them for the sake of argument says more about the arguer than the events. Anne Frank's statement that "Despite everything, I still believe people are good" is as clearly Utopian as anything else. My real concern - and in view of the present political situation a justifiable one - is not with the utopias, but the anti-utopians among us.

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3 March 2006

David Andress  
[david.andress@port.ac.uk](mailto:david.andress@port.ac.uk)

An author's response, if I may?

My thanks to my friend Paul Hanson for his thoughtful and thought-provoking review. Since the opportunity is here, I would like to engage with several of his points, some of which, I think, speak to the larger difficulty of trying to write about this topic.

While his comment that I see the Terror "as necessary, though tragic" is judicious, it does expose an interesting point. One of the main themes I argue throughout the book is that the Terror, viewed broadly as the period 1792-94, was a civil war, and one which had been brewing for several years previously. Would one ask whether the English or American Civil War were "necessary"? Like any great historical events, they are all at once structurally overdetermined and the product of cascading contingencies. So at one point in the French struggles the republican side decided to use the word 'terror' out loud, and that has been adopted as a label -- it does not mean that the general circumstances of that decision provided in any sense a free existential choice, a move from pacific social relations to one-sided brutality, for they did not. Brutality, scorn and death-dealing were already entrenched long before 'the Terror'.

Prof. Hanson protests that Marat's followers were not 'bloodthirsty' -- I retort that they were, that Marat maintained persistently throughout his journalistic career that the execution of varying numbers of the people's enemies, up to the tens of thousands at times, was the sovereign cure for the Revolution's ills, and that he attracted a notably devoted following, especially in 1792-93, of people who thought he was right -- if that isn't bloodthirsty, I don't know what is. I have tried to be equally frank about the willingness of counter-revolutionaries to imagine the deaths of their adversaries.

The calendar of the Revolution in 1789-92 is also, it is fair to say, littered with episodes of the violent doing-to-death of individuals by crowds. Not every day, perhaps not even every month, but enough to be a notable concern of those who thought they might share such a fate.

Prof. Hanson sometimes seems to want a narrative history to contain only statements which are true at all times, whereas I have often tried to explain how things were at particular times. Thus when I say that "Revolutionary politics had put all sentiments of human compassion and mercy beyond consideration, and entrenched death as the only outcome of conflict", it is a sentence used to transition from the slaughter of the defeated Vendéens to the impending travesty of justice meted out to the 'factions' in spring 1794. At that particular point, it sums up exactly what was going on. If in some parts of the country the population fell under the rule of people prepared not to interpret some acts as 'conflict', lucky for them. Where 'conflict' was found (discovered, interpreted, invented), it was dealt with by death.

At another point, I see no conflict between exposing the law of 14 frimaire's legislative "vision of

... a police-state in all but name", and the reality that the most the Republic's spies could do was follow people around and try to guess who they were talking to, because they lacked the material resources of a "modern police state" -- a simple statement of fact. Noting the mild irony that The Incorruptible had been processed to his death by the same machinery that had accounted for his victims is, again, just a statement of fact: twixt Convention, Revolutionary Tribunal, Conciergerie cells and the ministering hand of the executioner, 'Thermidor' had not yet changed anything. Prof. Hanson sees political metaphor where I mean only the physical organisation. Likewise I am not sure what the problem is with his next point -- it is factual to say that petty personal feuds occasioned many individual denunciations, but also that "in the politics of the late Terror" Robespierre is central -- he engineered, with his closest colleagues, the death-dealing structures into which individuals fell for many reasons. If he is not the centre of this period's politics, why is his fall its end?

I have tried to leave some questions for the discernment of the reader -- thus, in explaining as far as I can exactly what happened in the September Massacres, and why, I have not felt it necessary to use too many 'bad words' about how horrible it all was: with the result that some (a few) reviewers have accused me of downplaying the nastiness. Prof. Hanson is perhaps the first to suggest that I am less than fair to the perpetrators and their milieu... ;-)

On the question of how far 'ideology' governed actions, I would not have wanted to give a definitive answer, for it would have involved presuming to open windows into the souls of far too many people. I have literally no idea what Saint-Just really thought, I only know what he wrote and said (though I will confess, in the last few pages of the conclusion, to allowing myself to speculate a little on those words). For the dozens of representatives-on-mission, there is evidence of a wide variety of practice in different circumstances, but clearly of an overarching commitment to asserting a set of republican values that at once laud unity and 'liberty', and threaten dire consequences for dissent, resistance and opposition. If that is 'ideology', then it is clearly an historical reality. Whether it was embraced pragmatically or dogmatically, fearfully or joyfully, beyond outward manifestations, who can say?

One last point, and the rest is silence. Prof. Hanson discerns a tendency "to reify the Revolution and the Terror" -- which I think means that I sometimes use those words as convenient labels in descriptive passages. But I hope that the general effect of offering a detailed narrative of 'the Terror' is to precisely 'de-reify' it. To go back to my opening point, to be able to show that summing 'it' up as good/bad, necessary/tragic, circumstances/ideology, is futile because there is no distinct object called 'the Terror' available to be so judged, there is a historical period, a time and place and many, many overlapping processes. I would never go so far as to say that tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner, but tout comprendre would be a start, compared to most writing aimed at the fabled 'general reader'.

And one last, last point, to Norman Ravitch's kind thought on the sales prospects of my work: Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries! Afficionados of Monty Python will be able to supply the rest of that line.

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3 March 2006

Paul Sonnino  
[sonnino@history.ucsb.edu](mailto:sonnino@history.ucsb.edu)

I am afraid I have missed out on Professor Ravitch's remarks on Mr. Andress' book. For some reason they did not appear on my screen, even though I am an attentive follower of the debates on H-France and I particularly relish Professor Ravitch's stabs against the idées the most reçues. Taking a leaf from his iconoclasm, however, may I venture to throw in my two cents worth on the French revolution, which, since I, along with David Hume, do not believe in causation, I am quite ready to evaluate for what they are worth, namely two cents.

Still, after years of recapitulating to sleeping students the tragic course of French history from the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI to the payback time of Napoleon, and considering the great expostulators, Burke, Marx, Tocqueville, and now Mr. Andress (whose book I am looking forward to assigning) who seem to have made of the revolution a grand social phenomenon, I wonder why it has not occurred to anyone (or perhaps it has) that the whole thing was caused by the total ineptitude of one man, Louis Capet. Starting with the inconceivable lunacy of hiring Turgot AND recalling the parlements, failing, at every turn of his pre-revolutionary reign, to stick by any one policy, trying to con everyone by doubling the third and alienating everyone in the process, continuing to vacillate, becoming the sole support of the very trouble makers who had contributed the most to bring the monarchy to a standstill, running away, and then leading the country into a war, I can only conclude that cyanide tablets might have provided him with a quicker, but certainly no more certain path to extinction. Tocqueville was certainly right in wondering why the revolution had taken such a violent form only in France, and he blamed this on the policy of a long line of kings, but I suspect that he, like most historians, failed to appreciate the extent to which one man can mess things up for everybody.

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7 March 2006

Chris Guthrie  
[cguthri@tarleton.edu](mailto:cguthri@tarleton.edu)

I would like to thank Professor Sonnino for making my job a lot easier. Instead of trying to explain to my students how a complex variety of intellectual, cultural, social, economic, and political factors interacted to produce a revolutionary situation in France during the late 18th century, I can now, thanks to his insight, just say that Louis XVI produced the French Revolution. This will save me a lot of time and effort; time and effort that I can now devote to telling my students about the lives and loves of famous men. The world is much simpler and more understandable now.

Thanks again, Professor Sonnino!

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10 March 2006

Robin Briggs

[robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk)

I've only just picked up Paul Sonnino's posting, which had got buried about sixty messages back in my inbox, where it was located by its date. I hope others have not missed it for that reason, because it is surprising that no-one has responded (that I have seen). This is a version of my first law of revolutions, as expounded by me to generations of students, that in monarchies there must be an adult goon on the throne - Charles I, Louis XVI, Nicholas II. None of them exactly stupid, all quite well-meaning, but equally politically hopeless.

On the other hand, personal inadequacy is not incompatible with systems failure, and I think in this case they went together. Bourbon France created a structure that positively magnified the defects of hereditary monarchy, because it almost required the king to be a political superman, who could hold together a fractured polity. The one thing of which you can be certain is that no dynasty will produce a sequence of rulers who match up to such a challenge. Genetics apart, how could these young men acquire the necessary skills in the course of their bizarre upbringing? Their position from birth onwards deprived them of most normal forms of human intercourse, so that they must have seen the world through a series of distorting glasses, from which they could never liberate themselves. To me the surprise is that Louis XIV - probably not the most naturally gifted of the five pre-1789 Bourbons - did so relatively well in these respects. Since Paul has done so much to elucidate the context in which the Sun King operated, it would be interesting to hear his opinions on this.

In the specific case of Louis XVI, one has a deadly mixture of personal timidity and inexperience, rigid ideas about how government should be conducted, and inability to form close bonds with any of his ministers. Joined up government was impossible when the king insisted that ministers could only communicate through him, yet failed to perform the role as arbitrator which this made imperative. The ultimate expression of this was seen after 1783, when several ministers were conducting what amounted to separate and incompatible foreign policies, while there was no serious attempt to impose budgetary control. Both Necker and Vergennes had tried and failed to achieve the latter, undermined by royal passivity. As a result the navy minister, the Marquis de Castries, spent money like water to build up a great fleet which France would not have been able to man, and which her bankrupt finances made it impossible to think of using. In 1787 Calonne rightly told the Notables that this was one of the great black holes into which hundreds of millions had disappeared - but for the previous four years he himself had kept his position by pretending that he could find money for everything.

Perhaps we don't always insist enough on the truism that it was the government which brought the revolutionary crisis into being, because when historians have been saying this ever since Tocqueville 150 years back it seems almost pointless to add to the chorus. One might almost claim that the absolute monarchy collapsed from within, shattered by its own inner contradictions, before anyone else laid a hand on it in anger. Did anyone at the centre, whether it was the king or any of his ministers, have the faintest idea what they wanted the Estates-General

to do, beyond voting them some money? Of course John Hardman may well be right in supposing that Louis had some kind of breakdown in 1787, which created a complete void at the centre of affairs, but he was pretty useless even before that.

So I agree with Paul that Louis XVI was a disaster, but think that he was a predictable, perhaps even inevitable disaster, when the monarchy had evolved into a perverse form of negative absolutism that seemed resistant to any meaningful change or development. Most eighteenth-century critics were incapable of seeing beyond the personal issues, blaming all the repeated failures on court and ministerial factions. Although they too had a point, this approach allowed them to avoid thinking about the much more fundamental systemic questions. Voltaire, for instance, was unusual in having real knowledge about and admiration for the English way of doing things, yet back in France his preference was for enlightened despotism . . . At this level the Enlightenment did remarkably little to challenge the ideological hegemony of a monarchy that could never live up to its own pretensions, or to prepare the French for the task of either remaking or replacing it. The Roman and republican virtues on which Robespierre and other modeled themselves were a pretty catastrophic alternative, as it turned out; a shallow and anachronistic rhetoric of freedom all too readily becomes a pathway to chaos and tyranny. As some Neocons seem belatedly to be realizing!

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10 March 2006

Alan Kahan  
[alansarah@hotmail.com](mailto:alansarah@hotmail.com)

The sarcasm of Guthrie's response to Sonnino proves Tocqueville right once again - in a democratic age, it is almost inconceivable for historians to imagine that it was a single individual whose influence on events was decisive. Is it really completely out of the question that with a different individual on the throne, all those "intellectual, cultural, social, economic, and political factors" might NOT have produced a Revolution? This question is at least as fair as asking Prof. Sonnino why it was that incompetent rulers in other times and places may have suffered eclipse or overthrow, but not a revolution that abolished monarchy.

Modern historiography tends to look at other things than individual influence, for all the reasons Tocqueville suggests in the Democracy and some he didn't think of, but that doesn't mean they aren't there.

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14 March 2006

Robin Briggs  
[robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk)

[NOTE FROM THE LISTEDITOR: Professor Briggs wrote an extensive response to Professor Sonnino's posting on Louis XVI, but then sent a second message in the belief that the first had

not been received. I'm posting the second response because it is likely to be of interest to listmembers despite some duplication of content.]

Like Alan Kahan, I think Paul is quite entitled to raise these questions; any reader of his work will know that he does not reduce complex historical problems to mere issues of personality. In personal monarchies, however, inadequate kings can indeed cause havoc. His comments are a version of my first law of revolutions, as also expounded to generations of undergraduates, that the first requirement is an adult goon on the throne. Explicitly Charles I, Louis XVI, Nicholas II ^ three rulers who took the job seriously, were not wholly stupid, behaved very respectably, and yet were wholly unsuited to the position they had inherited.

At the same time I think we must recognize that there was a systems failure, which magnified the personal deficiencies of Louis XVI, but also helped to create them. One of the serious drawbacks of hereditary succession was the likelihood of minorities or very young kings; at nineteen Louis XVI was the only new king between 1610 and 1774 who did not need a regent. How were these very young men, with their bizarre upbringing, to acquire any normal understanding of the world around them? They must have seen everything through a series of distorting lenses, of which they could never rid themselves. Perhaps the really odd case is Louis XIV, who seems to have survived unusually well ^ since Paul has done so much to reconstruct his relationship to the political world around him, it would be interesting to have his comments on the Sun King in this respect.

My own hypothesis is that Louis XIV made life much harder for his successors, by developing a style of personal rule which made exceptional demands on the king; in a curious fashion this was a very defensive posture, designed to prevent any minister becoming too influential, or any group of ministers from making common cause. Louis XV and Louis XVI were both educated to believe that this was the only way to rule France; what no-one seems to have recognized was that there was hardly an infinitesimal chance that either would be the superman the job now demanded. So it was completely predictable that they would fall short as absolute rulers, with the result that from the entry into war in 1741 and Fleury's death soon afterwards French policy became chaotic and damagingly unsuccessful. The negative despotism of 1771-4 was a forewarning of the political bankruptcy of the monarchy ^ although it made it easier for Louis XVI to gain temporary popularity at his accession, it also damaged the crown in more lasting respects.

Even so, Louis XVI was a tragically miscast actor on the scene; intelligent and dutiful, but irresolute, utterly uncharismatic, and incapable of forming a solid relationship with any of his ministers. The mysterious choice of Maurepas as the elder statesman of the new reign was a first major error, then things got worse later when the king insisted that the ministers only communicated with one another through him. Since he provided no leadership this left a void at the centre of government. Both Necker and Vergennes tried to impose some kind of budgetary control and failed, then after 1783 different parts of the government were pursuing at least three incompatible foreign policies. Meanwhile Calonne was exacerbating the financial disaster of the American war, by failing to tackle the debt problem or confront the spending ministers. The worst of these was the Marquis de Castries as naval minister, spending hundreds of millions on credit to build a great fleet which France could hardly have manned, for a war she could no

longer afford to fight.

All this was in the logic of the system, but it was also an astonishingly feeble performance by the king, which must go far to explain why it was at this specific moment that the absolute monarchy virtually disintegrated from within, before anyone else laid a hand on it. While John Hardman may well be right to think that Louis suffered some kind of nervous breakdown in 1787, honest contemplation of his own record would have been enough to provoke this. In the last phase, whatever the theoretical merits of Mirabeau's vision of the Revolution as a great opportunity for the monarchy, the mere thought of Louis XVI as the man of destiny is surely risible.

One final comment. It is curious how successfully the monarchy had persuaded everyone else that it was the uniting force in a fissiparous society, when even Voltaire, who had genuinely admired so much in England, thought that enlightened despotism was the solution for France. So had one of the later Bourbons most improbably wanted to liberalize the monarchy, where would they have found a model? Critics almost always went for court faction or personal defects as the explanation for failure, rather than seeing the problems with the system.

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17 March 2006

Peter Campbell  
[p.r.campbell@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:p.r.campbell@sussex.ac.uk)

Dear Colleagues,

I have been interested to see the postings on the relationship between Louis XVI and the origins of the revolution. I agree with much of what Robin Briggs has to say, but I'd like to draw your attention to some of the chapters in the book just out, edited by me, *The origins of the French Revolution* (Palgrave 2006). The chapters by John Hardman, Joël Félix and myself are particularly relevant to the discussion of the relationship between the fiscal problems, state failure and decision-making. Other chapters deal with wider or different issues. First though, I think we ought to make a distinction between the state failure and the revolution, because state failure in 1648-52 did not lead to revolution, largely because there was no alternative ideology found attractive by enough people to make an alternative regime possible - so they rebuilt the old one and learned some lessons. In 1789 they chose not to. The long-term state structures, going back well before Louis XIV (surely Robin), were inadequate to the later eighteenth century world. That said, the court society in which decision-making took place did need careful management, and balancing, and Louis XVI was very poor at that (as Daniel Wick argued). He was actually too 'absolute' in outlook, it seems, being the king most deluded about the extent of royal power. No doubt the lack of internal threats led ministers and the king to underrate the need for the careful management of provincial parlements and estates, and their resistance got out of hand in the context of failures in patronage, bluff and negotiation. The problem with Louis XVI was that he actually believed the education he was given about monarchy, and was a combination of the indecisive and the overdecisive (as John Hardman suggests in his chapter).

Was political management one of the key elements? I think so, and that is my argument in the Introduction and my chapter on the Paris parlement. The failure of political management, not just by Louis but especially by Calonne, and more so by Brienne and Lamoignon, then Necker's failure to promote a clear programme, all contributed massively to the development of the crisis. But, having worked a lot Fleury's governance of the system after Louis XIV (with the aim of throwing light on the changes perhaps not made under Louis XIV, when Fleury was on his way up), I think it could be argued that choosing a good first minister and letting him get on with it, was always a possibility in the post-Louis XIV system.

The image of Louis XIV as a strong king in the eighteenth century was probably as difficult to deal with as the actual system, in that the image of such a powerful king tied the hands of successors, perhaps making Louis XVI think he had to be more autocratic than he did. The later kings and their ministers after Fleury actually perhaps felt too secure in their state power, failing to see the fragility of the system and its need for constant management. Louis XIV in decision-making was actually more flexible, more prone to listen to counsel, than Louis XVI, who did not consult all his ministers about the reform plans, only three of them. Louis XIV seems always to have decided on the basis of the majority in council. Louis XIV bluffed hard, even used force, but basically worked out a compromise between the royal state and the elites which still held in the later period. In terms of political management neither Louis XVI nor his ministers seem to have thought of alternative strategies, suitable half-way houses in which loans and taxes could be raised in the short term without so much confrontation. so they let the crisis snowball until the system's possibilities of management were over stretched. I also want to argue that crisis has a transformative effect upon the situation and perceptions, rather than being a precipitant of some reified revolution. Even so, collapse did not have to lead to revolution, there was a kind of cultural choice made, and the 'despotic government' seemed too anachronistic to go back to. Of course individuals in crucial positions of power influence things, but far more than that made the Estates General in a kind of 'moment of choice' choose to make a revolution out of a crisis.

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18 March 2006

Robin Briggs

[robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:robin.briggs@all-souls.oxford.ac.uk)

Peter Campbell's posting is very perceptive, and I agree with just about every word. I won't respond at length, because if one took up every new point we'd end up with an impromptu political history of Bourbon France, and bore everyone else silly. In my earlier comments I'd kept fairly closely to the role of the king in bringing about the crisis of 1787-9, which of course did not have to turn into a revolution, and a far wider set of explanations is needed. In objective terms the crown was in a far worse position in 1648, as Peter hints, but apart from anything else a boy-king was pretty much invulnerable (except to microbes). His point about Louis XVI believing what he was taught strikes me as crucial, as is the myth of Louis XIV on which that teaching was largely based. And yes, I suspect they did feel too secure. They thought the army was the ultimate safeguard, but a supreme example of combined clumsy action and indecision in

July 1789 saw it crumble in the king's hand.

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18 March 2006

Rache Ammann  
[courriel@earthlink.net](mailto:courriel@earthlink.net)

Je vous ecris en anglais, n'ayant pas des accents en de moment sur mon clavier..

I have followed all of the posts on this subject with great interest. All have spurred my thought processes.... I will refer you to one of Dr. Briggs' pithy earlier posts

"His comments are a version of my first law of revolutions, as also expounded to generations of undergraduates, that the first requirement is an adult goon on the throne. Explicitly Charles I, Louis XVI, Nicholas II three rulers who took the job seriously, were not wholly stupid, behaved very respectably, and yet were wholly unsuited to the position they had inherited."

I have wondered for a few days whether or not Henri III fit into these equations. He took the job seriously, was not totally stupid and behaved moderately well (modulo ridiculous rumors propagated in later generations). He was despised, Paris threw up barricades against him, yet there was no revolution.

Did his murder save the crown ? Or did he not fit the equation ?

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