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Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution*. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008. v + 287 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0742534117.

Review by Stephen Auerbach, Georgia College and State University.

Sylvia Neely's *A Concise History* is a welcome addition to the growing number of short textbook treatments of the French Revolution. Instructors offering undergraduate courses on the subject will want to consider adopting this text for the classroom. It is a serious effort to concisely summarize a complex historical event. The text presupposes no prior knowledge of the French Revolution, is written in clear, approachable prose, and is enhanced by easily readable grayscale maps, refreshingly new images, and a detailed timeline.

Neely articulates two goals for her text. The first is to introduce students to "the most important events, the most prominent people, and the essential terms" of the French Revolution (p. xvi). Here the text succeeds admirably. *A Concise History* is nearly three hundred pages long, more than twice as long as its main competitors.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet, Neely covers less narrative ground than do similar texts. The book is divided into nine chapters, each arranged chronologically. The first two chapters focus on the Old Regime and the pre-Revolution; the last chapter covers the period from the Thermidorian Reaction to Napoleon's coup of 18 Brumaire. The six middle chapters focus sharply on the years from 1789 to 1794. The strength of the book is Neely's ability to provide a detailed and balanced narrative of the liberal and radical phases of the Revolution.

Though the book offers no new information or interpretations, it does reflect recent scholarly trends. There are, for example, lengthy and valuable sections on women's participation in the Revolution. Neely argues that underlying both the vitriol aimed at Marie Antoinette and the final proscription of women from political life during the Revolution resulted from misogyny and fear of women leaders. In addition to the importance of gender, scholars have only recently begun to focus much needed attention on metropole-colonial relations during the French revolution. Neely provides detailed discussions of the Haitian Revolution, the abolition of slavery in 1794, and its reimposition under Napoleon.

Neely's second goal is to introduce readers to the major interpretations of the French Revolution. Here the book is less successful. The French Revolution has been one of the most debated and debatable events in history, producing a robust historiography. Unfortunately, readers may very well come away from this text with a sense that the French Revolution was an event that happened in the past and has had no afterlife in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Providing readers with some sense of the rich historiographical traditions would not only give readers a sense of the importance of the French Revolution as a world event, but also would supply them with interpretive models to better understand the historical narrative.

A more serious shortcoming of *A Concise History* is that it does not place the French Revolution in its larger historical framework. A concluding chapter on the legacy or heritage of the French Revolution would have done much to help fix that weakness. Neely sums up the significance of the French

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Revolution by noting that it hindered economic development while at the same time exacerbating social and religious conflicts in France (p. 248).

Neely's conclusions are debatable and do not begin to hint at the legacy of the French Revolution. The Revolution was a watershed moment in the history of the west, and indeed the world. The ideals of individual rights, constitutional government and national sovereignty have reverberated over the centuries. At the same time, the French Revolution has, Janus-like, provided a model for modern totalitarianism.

No single textbook on the French Revolution can be all things to all instructors. Obviously this text like all other short treatments on the subject will need to be supplemented by other works including the growing number of primary source readers such as Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo's *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, or Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt's excellent website *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*.<sup>[2]</sup> Assigning *A Concise History* will help ensure that students gain a thorough familiarity with the events of the French Revolution to 1794. They will not, alas, likely understand the legacy of the subject they are studying.

#### NOTES

[1] See, for example, Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2005); William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo, eds., *The French Revolution: A Document Collection* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999); Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>

Stephen Auerbach  
Georgia College and State University  
[stephen.auerbach@gcsu.edu](mailto:stephen.auerbach@gcsu.edu)

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