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Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death. The French Revolution*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016. xviii + 454. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-3001-8993-3.

Review by Jeremy Hayhoe, Université de Moncton.

*Liberty or Death* is a fascinating general history of the French Revolution that places the experiences and influence of ordinary people at the heart of the analysis. McPhee's goal is to understand how "rural and small-town men and women adopt, adapt to and resist change from Paris" (p. xii). And while the book is a general survey of the Revolution, it is based on extensive research in primary sources, including manuscript sources in twelve departmental archives and thorough work in journals, memoirs, letters, and diaries from the period. It manages admirably to convey the lived experiences of ordinary people and the debates, discussions, and conflicts that united and divided communities and families all over France.

The first three chapters of the book present the social and institutional structures of the ancien régime and the causes of the Revolution. McPhee emphasizes that the Revolution was caused both by a crisis of the regime engendered by the costs of empire, the financing of the American War of Independence, and political and cultural changes that were delegitimizing the monarchy and the aristocracy as well as by changes in French society, including the Enlightenment. McPhee places more emphasis on social causes of the Revolution than most historians have in the last few decades. While he acknowledges that there was no self-identifying bourgeois class and notes that the bourgeois sought access to the aristocratic classes, he argues that they subverted the nobility and the social system simply by claiming status based on wealth. The section on the elections for the Estates-General and the *cahiers de doléances* is particularly good. McPhee shows a kingdom already yearning for change where even relatively isolated villages could criticize the injustices of the seigneurial system and call for national regeneration, tax reform, and political representation. McPhee emphasizes the significant divergences between the *cahiers* of the Third Estate and those of the privileged orders. The discussion of the Great Fear emphasizes its revolutionary character and the extent to which it influenced discussions and decisions in Paris.

Two chapters on the period 1789-1790 do an excellent job of capturing the sense of optimism that spread throughout the nation as well as the depth of popular participation in a new kind of political culture. At the same time, forces of tension were already visible: popular disappointment in some rural areas at the failure thoroughly to abolish feudalism, anxiety about popular military invasion, and uncertainty about the king's acceptance of the new constitutional arrangements. By 1791 the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the flight of the king and queen, and increasing frustration by some farmers in the west over a lack of concrete gains all contributed to the instability.

The hundred pages or so dedicated to the period from the September Massacres to the end of the Convention are particularly well-written, especially chapter ten, "Liberty or Death: Choosing Sides in Violent Times, 1793." The strong point of the discussion is the analysis of the ways that the nation, communities, and even families were divided by events that forced people to choose sides based on their beliefs, experiences, solidarities, and material advantages gained or lost. McPhee takes the counter-

revolution seriously and does not downplay the extent of opposition to the Revolution, particularly in the west and parts of the south. He explicitly rejects the notion that the Terror had its roots in simple paranoia or that violence was predetermined by revolutionary ideology. He describes the Terror as “a period of sweeping governmental measures to win a civil and foreign war,” adding that the “Jacobins were...republicans applying exceptional laws in extraordinary circumstances as they grappled both to create a republican society and to defend it against its enemies” (p. 209-10). As the book’s title might indicate, his explanation of the Terror at times seems close to the classic “thesis of circumstances,” although he does see a significant role for both circumstances (real internal and external threats to the existence of the Revolution) and convictions (the belief in the self-evidence of revolutionary virtues) that together led to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that created support for the suspension of the constitution (p. 272-73).

Three chapters follow on the Thermidorian Reaction, the Directory, and Napoleon’s rise to power. The main challenge after Thermidor was, of course, how to safeguard the regime against both royalism and the radicalism of the Terror. The solution attempted by the Directory was giving a voice in politics only to wealthy, educated men with a stake in society and sapping the energy from local political life. Conscription remained a flashpoint for popular resistance to the regime, especially with the official acceptance of the doctrine of natural frontiers in 1795. McPhee’s account of the Revolution ends in 1799 after the coup of Brumaire and the beginning of the Consulate. This makes as much sense as choosing to end in 1804 or 1815, and was no doubt imposed in part by the fact that this narrative history of the revolutionary decade had already reached 370 pages. I found myself wishing for a more explicit discussion of the reasons behind the interpretative choice linked to this chronology. He justifies his choice by arguing that the Revolution was over, and with it fear of privation, violence, and insecurity, but enough historians have argued for a more complex relationship between Napoleon and the Revolution that the issue seems to me to merit more analysis.

The book ends with a thirty-page chapter on the significance of the Revolution that emphasizes the magnitude of the changes brought about in the lives of ordinary people and the centrality of the Revolution in a struggle for individual liberty and the right of self-representation that is still not complete today. McPhee discusses the changes experienced by women (largely but not exclusively negative), the mixed record of the Revolution with respect to Caribbean slaves and the changes with respect to the authority of the church and the role of religion. As befits a historian who has contributed so much to the history of country-dwellers in the Revolution, he devotes considerable space to the impact of the Revolution on rural people, emphasizing above all the significance of the abolition of feudalism, although the results were different for tenants than they were for landowners and could vary by region. He also emphasizes the extent to which the Revolution was a world-historical event, not only in having its origins in the global crisis of the imperial system, but also in its immediate effects throughout Europe and in Egypt and the Caribbean and as an inspiration to revolutionary traditions over two centuries.

*Liberty or Death* makes several claims to originality. One is that it presents a global history of the revolutionary decade. The colonial context, slavery, the Haitian Revolution, and the war are all dealt with in some detail, although the focus remains on events in France. The most significant contribution of the book is undoubtedly its emphasis on the experiences of ordinary men and women. While the book is primarily driven by narrative rather than argument, a central thread is that “every individual had a tale to tell, not just the well-known” (p. 365). The select bibliography contains references to at least fifty journals, memoirs, diaries, and collections of correspondence from men and women representing a variety of social backgrounds, and many more are cited in the notes. Examples such as Nicolas Delahaye’s description of the trip made by the voters from Silly-en-Multien to vote in the elections in the spring of 1790 (p. 110) or the comments of the priest Joseph Sicre on his departures and returns to serve his parishioners in the Pyrenean town of Saint-Laurent-de-Cerdans (p. 308) provide more than just anecdotal color. Taken together they make a powerful and convincing argument concerning the politicization of ordinary people, the extent of their participation in the events of this revolutionary decade (including in

the counter-revolution and as federalists) and the extent to which their lives were transformed over the period.

While *Liberty or Death* is an extraordinarily well-written book that represents a lifetime of research and learning, there is virtually no explicit engagement with the historiography, including on issues such as the causes of the Revolution, the importance of the counter-revolution and the origins of the Terror. Other than in the acknowledgments, not a single historian is named in the entire book. This clearly stems from a deliberate choice made by the author, although it seems unfortunate that he does not explain this decision in the book. Because so little place is devoted to the historiography, in the rare places where it comes up, it is dealt with so briefly that it can seem close to caricature, as when he argues that “most general histories of the French Revolution have been written as if it was purely Parisian, and imposed on a recalcitrant, increasingly hostile countryside” (p. xii), or when he says that the Terror “has often been caricatured as a dictatorial, even totalitarian regime imposed by ideologues” (p. 209-10, see also p. 257). [1] That said, there is no doubt that *Liberty or Death* is an important book that represents a lifetime of archival research on the lives and experiences of ordinary people throughout the revolutionary decade.

#### NOTE

[1] His previous general history of the Revolution contains a more thorough presentation of the arguments and interpretations of historians: Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution, 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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