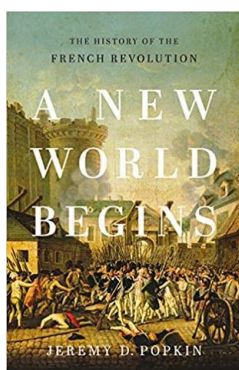


Jeremy D. POPKIN. *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 2019, pp. 627. ISBN: 978-0465096664.

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“The history of the secularization of modern culture is yet to be written,” so wrote Christopher Dawson in 1972. Doubtful is that he could say that today. The latest attempt to write that history is that of Jeremy D. Popkin, whose *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* was published in late 2019. In several essays, Dawson had addressed the intellectual revolution he believed had taken place in France decades before the political one. He followed a minority movement composed of philosophers and literary intellectuals that gradually claimed wider circles, until its adherents won key positions of social and intellectual influence. Popkin confirms Dawson’s supposition with historical detail and vivid portraits of the principals.

Jeremy Popkin began his studies in history at Harvard and, in 1977, earned a PhD in history from The University of California at Berkeley. Over his long and celebrated career he has authored more than a dozen books and numerous articles. He has been honored by prestigious lectureships in North America and Europe. Popkin’s recent works include *From Herodotus to H-Net*, *The Story of Historiography and Revolutionary News*, and *The Press in France, 1789–1799*. He presently holds the William T. Bryan Chair of History at the University of Kentucky.

As Popkin’s narrative develops, names run by: Diderot, d’Alembert, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Danton, Robespierre, Carnot. Duchene, Montaigne, and Saint-Just. Most were contributors to the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772). They comprised a generation of thinkers who rejected much of the political and religious assumptions of their day. In Popkin’s words: “The subversive originality of the *Encyclopedie* was to present the ideas of the great minds of eighteenth century French letters as if they were simply common sense.” Additionally, Voltaire campaigned against revealed reli-

gion, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* challenged the established political order, and Jacoban leader Joseph Fouche typified those who wished to de-Christianize France.

Popkin offers a sympathetic portrait of Louis XVI and his efforts to maintain a tradition that he believed was his sacred duty to preserve against the claim that "everything must change." With the Royal Treasury in bankruptcy, the monarchy was on the verge of collapse. On the advice of Charles Alexander Calonne, in 1786, the King consented to call an Assembly of Notables. Calonne offered tax paying land owners a vote in decision making. They would be allowed to participate in the deliberative process and on their own elect provincial assemblies. The Notables at that time included seven princes of the blood who stood in the line of royal succession, fourteen prelates, and an impressive contingent of dukes and peers representing the military, and marquis, including the young Lafayette.

When Calonne proposed new taxes, the Notables were wary. His sweeping proposals threatened the special interests of the privileged groups from which the Notables were drawn. It would require the Estates General to approve new taxes. Given the stubborn opposition to Calonne's proposed reforms, the King dismissed the Assembly.

The organization of a Third Estate soon followed. The Third Estate represented commoners and the lower clergy and met in defiance of the King's orders to disperse. On the tennis courts of Versailles, deputies attending took an oath not to disband until a new French Constitution had been adopted. The Third Estate declared itself to be the National Assembly. Louis recognized the legitimacy the National Assembly, but then surrounded Versailles with troops and dismissed Jacques Necker, a popular minister of state who was a leader of the reform movement. In response Parisians stormed the Bastille, thus setting the revolution in motion.

Popkin writes, "Virtually all historians agree that [the Revolution] resulted from frustrations of a rising bourgeois class determined to challenge a feudal order that stood in the way of political and economic progress." He goes on to identify three stages of the revolution: (1) the session of June 17 when the deputies named themselves the "National Assembly," and asserted the right to make the nation's laws; (2) the revolution of July 14 when the population of Paris stormed the Bastille and symbolically destroyed the authority of the King; and (3) August 4, when the National Assembly abolished the feudal system.

On December 25th, 1793, Robespierre delivered a speech to the Committee on Public Safety laying out the principles of revolutionary government. What Popkin calls "The Arc of Terror," followed from January 1793 to July 1794. The King was judged guilty of foreign entanglements and executed on January 21. Marie Antoinette was executed nine months later.

In 1794, the Convention delegated authority to the Committee on Public Safety. The Paris tribunal sent 1,300 to their deaths, including public figures such as Malesherbes (who had volunteered to defend Louis XVI at his trial) and intellectuals such

as the chemist Antoine Lavoisier; Andre Chenier, the era's leading poet; and Paris Archbishop, Jean Baptiste Gobel.

No citizen could be sure whether he would be alive the next day. The terror had turned into an irrational and uncontrollable bloodbath. Any trace of opposition to the regime was considered to evidence of conspiracy.

Popkin writes, "Even in hindsight it is difficult to say the basic achievements of the Revolution could have been preserved in 1793 without something representing revolutionary dictatorship." The stage was set for Napoleon, a story which Popkin tells with authority, but one too long to capture in this brief review.

Given its historical detail and vivid portraits, difficult to see is how Jeremy Popkin's *A New World Begins: A History of the French Revolution*, is likely to be surpassed. If the book has one flaw, it is Popkin's propensity to write in the light of twentieth century political conflicts.

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