INTRODUCTION

In the years after 1789, French revolutionaries sought to remake their world on the basis of the principles of popular sovereignty, national unity and civic equality. This was an awesome challenge in a large, diverse kingdom hitherto based on absolute monarchy, entrenched privilege and provincial exemptions. Other people, both French and foreign, took up arms in an attempt to destroy a revolution seen to be inimical to established practices of social hierarchy, religious belief and authority.

Contemporaries were polarized in their assessment of what the Revolution achieved. For all of the vicissitudes of the revolutionary decade, all the strength of the reaction against revolutionary excesses both real and imagined, it left an unforgettable, durable image of the possibilities of civic emancipation. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, aged seventy-four, concluded in 1798 that

such a phenomenon in the history of the world will never be forgotten, because it has revealed at the base of human nature a possibility for moral progress which no political figure had previously suspected. Even if we must return to the Old Régime, these first hours of freedom, as a philosophical testimony, will lose nothing of their value.¹

Victoire de Froulay de Tessé, Marquise de Créquy, was twenty years older than Kant. In contrast, she was vitriolic about what she saw around her at the same time: In the towns you see only insolent or evil people. You are spoken to only in a tone which is brusque, demanding or defiant. Every face has a sinister look; even children have a hostile, depraved demeanour. One would say that there is hatred in every heart. Envy has not been satisfied, and misery is everywhere. That is the punishment for making a revolution.²

Historians, like those who lived through those years, have agreed on the unprecedented and momentous nature of the great acts of revolution in the months between May and October 1789. They have never agreed, however, about why what came to be called the *ancien régime* was overthrown with such widespread support, or about why the Revolution took its subsequent course, or about its outcomes. The consequences of the events of 1789 were so complex, violent and significant that reflection and debate on their origins and course show no signs of concluding. The Revolution continues to fascinate, perplex and inspire. Indeed, the two great waves of revolutionary change since the 1980s—the overthrow of regimes in eastern and south-eastern Europe and the 'Arab spring'—have served to revivify our interest in the world-changing upheavals of the late eighteenth century.³

The drama, successes and tragedies of the Revolution, and the scale of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, have attracted scholars to the subject for more than two centuries.⁴ By the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's seizure of power in November 1799, the first historians of the Revolution had begun to outline their narratives of these years and their judgements about the origins and consequences of revolutionary change. Why and how did an apparently stable regime collapse in 1789? Why did it prove to be so difficult to stabilize a new order? Did the political turmoil of these years disguise a more fundamental social and economic continuity? Was the French Revolution a major turning point in French—even world—history, or instead a protracted period of violent upheaval and warfare that wrecked millions of lives? This book seeks to answer those questions.

Like all major revolutions, the French Revolution had many episodes of heroism and horror, civic sacrifice and slaughter. When commenting in 1927 on peasant uprisings in Hunan province, Mao Tse-Tung famously wrote that

a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.⁵

Mao was then thirty-four years of age, the same age as a French revolutionary, Maximilien Robespierre, when he responded in November 1792 to the taunts of his political opponents that he had blood on his hands: 'Citizens, did you want a revolution without revolution?'The Parisians who had overthrown Louis XVI in August 1792 and slaughtered hundreds of his guards were, Robespierre insisted, acting for all patriots: 'to make a crime of a few apparent or real misdemeanours, inevitable during such a great upheaval, would be to punish them for their devotion'.⁶

Most general histories of the French Revolution have been written as if it was purely Parisian, and imposed on a recalcitrant, increasingly hostile, countryside. Paris made the Revolution; the provinces reacted to it.⁷ In contrast, the underlying approach of this book is that the Revolution is best understood as a process of negotiation and confrontation between governments in Paris and people across the country, in cities, towns and villages. So readers of this book will find much about how the ordinary people of town and country made, opposed and experienced revolutionary change as well as about the history of political struggle in Paris.

It is true that Paris was the epicentre of revolution, but only approximately one French person in forty—about 650,000 of more than 28 million—lived in Paris in the 1780s. This was a land of villages and small towns. The men who governed France through a decade of revolution were overwhelmingly of provincial origin and brought to their nation-building the perspectives that their constituents communicated to them in waves of correspondence. The book will investigate the ways in which the lived experience of legislative, cultural and social change in France from 1789 to 1799 challenged and transformed assumptions about power and authority across provincial society. How did rural and small-town men and women adopt, adapt to and resist change from Paris? The results are surprising.

As a turbulent, violent crisis in a predominantly visual and oral culture, the Revolution generated a vast quantity of visual representations designed to make sense of what had happened and to pour vituperation or mockery on one's enemies. It also produced a mass of ephemera: objects such as entry cards for political clubs, cartoons, or the revolutionary banknotes

known as *assignats*. It certainly generated extensive plans to memorialize what it had achieved in monumental architecture, but these were never realized in a context of instability, war and privation. Few physical vestiges remain of a revolution that has shaped contemporary France.⁸

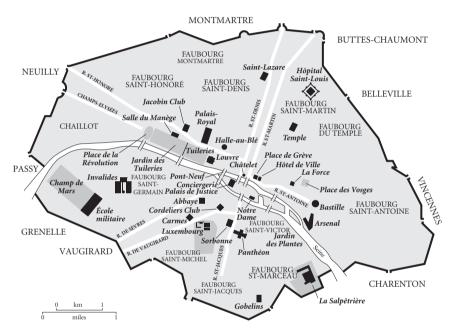
In identifying some of the few signs that survive in the built environment, I received particular assistance from Bernard Richard, who shared his vast knowledge of the physical objects commemorating the Revolution, such as the Bastille stone in the village of Saint-Julien-du-Sault. I have benefited directly from conversations over many years with fine historians, among them David Andress, Michel Biard, Stephen Clay, Ian Coller, Suzanne Desan, Alan Forrest, Paul Hanson, Lynn Hunt, Colin Jones, Peter Jones, Hervé Leuwers, Marisa Linton, Jean-Clément Martin, John Merriman, Noelle Plack, Timothy Tackett, Charles Walton, and generations of my students. Heather McCallum, Candida Brazil and Rachael Lonsdale of Yale University Press and their readers have offered encouragement and wisdom; Richard Mason and Samantha Cross applied their professional expertise to copy-editing and design respectively. Mira Adler-Gillies helped me locate some of the illustrations that are so important to this volume, while Julie Johnson produced the index. Other specific assistance was offered by Juliet Flesch, Kit McPhee, Jeremy Teow and Aurore Mulkens. Most important, I am deeply grateful to my partner Charlotte Allen for her engaged, insightful readings of drafts.

A book of this type inevitably owes a profound debt of scholarship, in this case to the many hundreds of historians who have probed questions about the French Revolution over the past 225 years. For all the polemics that divide them, they have made the quality of research and writing about the Revolution one of the jewels in the crown of historical scholarship, as befits an historical period of such profound importance. The service provided by the staff of French archival repositories has underlined my good fortune in being the historian of a country of great archival guardianship. When the Archives Départementales in Nancy were closed for refurbishment, its staff went so far as to open them solely to enable me to work there.

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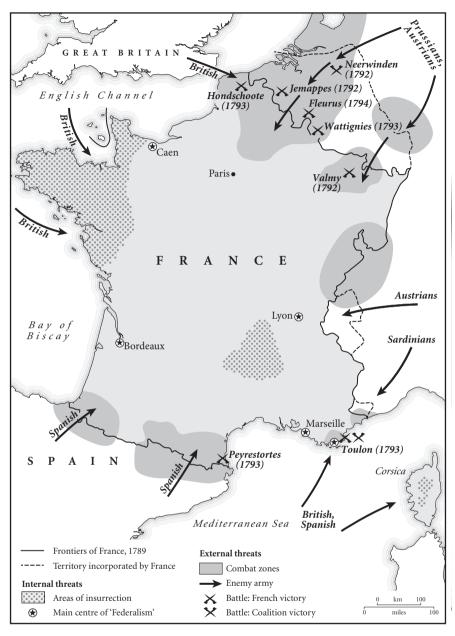
1 French provinces in the eighteenth century.



2 Revolutionary Paris.



3 Départements of France, 1800.



4 Zones of conflict, 1793-94.



1. Antoine-François Callet, Louis XVI, c.1778. Callet's formal portrait of the king in his coronation robes was used as a 'prime version' for later copies used as gifts.



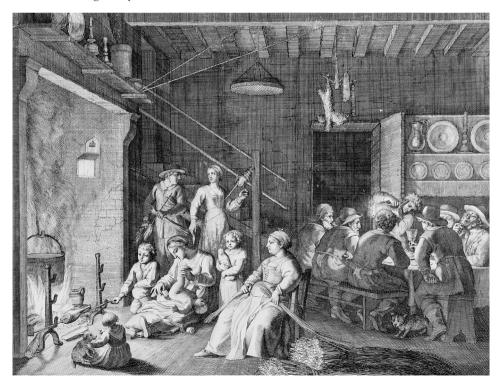
2. The Place Royale, Bordeaux, was completed c.1755. The stock exchange at its apex symbolized the wealth and confidence of the city's mercantile élite. A statue of Louis XV in the centre was melted down during the Revolution.



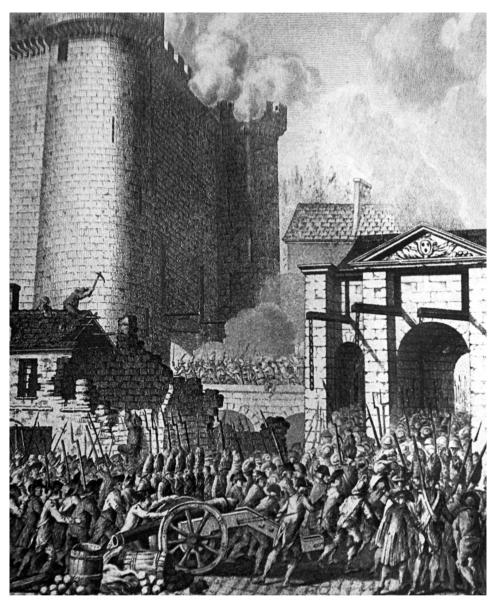
3. The young Louis-Léopold Boilly (b.1761) painted this portrait of the barrister Maximilien Robespierre in 1783 while studying in Arras. Robespierre, aged twenty-five, seems be flushed with his first major court success. He always enjoyed the companionship offered by dogs.



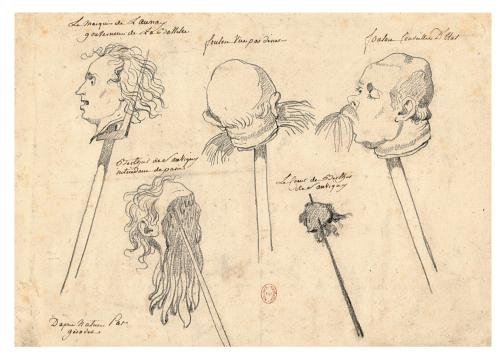
4. This is one of the bas-reliefs on the thirty-metre obelisk erected in 1783 in the Mediterranean town of Port-Vendres to commemorate major port works commissioned by Louis XVI. This one shows Louis assisting American independence; the others lauded him for abolition of serfdom, free trade and a stronger navy.



5. While completed more than a century before the Revolution, Jacques de Stella's *La Veillée à la ferme pendant l'hiver* captures the ambiance of comfortable peasant households gathered for an evening in winter.



6. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 is here captured by one of the most talented of the revolutionary artists, Jean-Louis Prieur, who contributed 67 of the 144 quasi-official 'Tableaux historiques' series. Prieur, a juror on the Revolutionary Tribunal, was guillotined with Fouquier-Tinville in May 1795, the day after the death of his father.



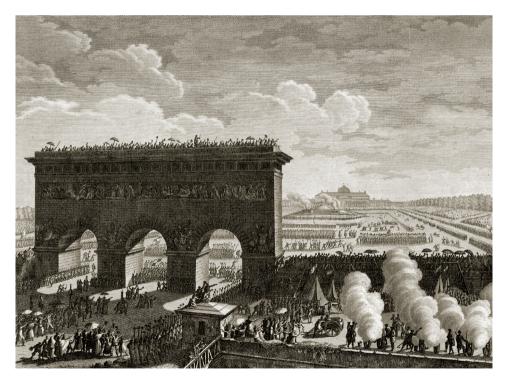
7. Anne-Louis Girodet, a twenty-two-year-old student of Jacques-Louis David, captured his horror at the killings of the royal officials Launay, Foulon and Bertier de Sauvigny in July 1789 before leaving to take up an artistic residency in Rome.



8. There are few visual representations of the Great Fear of July–August 1789. In fact, physical intimidation of seigneurs or their estate managers, and destruction of feudal registers was far more common than the burning of châteaux.



9. The value of the revolutionary banknotes (assignats) was backed by the nationalized property of the Church. The later flood of assignats and consequent inflation was resented across much of the country.



10. Pierre Gabriel Berthault here captures the scale of the celebrations in Paris for the first anniversary of the seizure of the Bastille. The Festival of Federation of July 1790 was the high point of revolutionary unity and optimism.



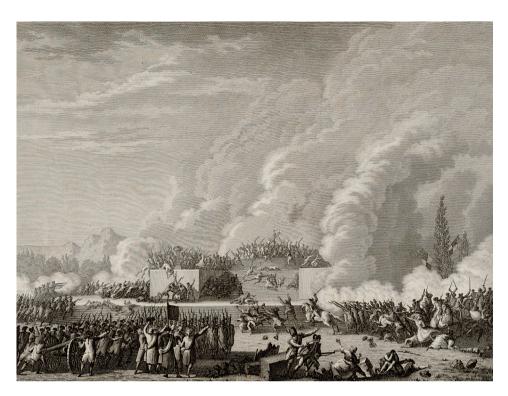
11. This barely surviving plane tree was probably planted in the tiny village of Tamniès, north of Sarlat, to mark the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. It grows in front of the parish church, from where it was photographed. It is now probably the only living 'liberty tree' from that point of the Revolution.

12. In the tiny southern village of Campssur-l'Agly, on the frontier of Languedoc and Roussillon, one Occitan-speaking family decided to mark the significance of the great year by placing a carved stone image of the Bastille as the lintel over their door, and it remains there today.





13. After the building entrepreneur Pierre-François Palloy was contracted to demolish the Bastille, he sent carvings of it made from its foundation stones to the eighty-three new departments. This stone was acquired in 1790 by the village of Saint-Julien-du-Sault in Burgundy on 'Liberty Square'. It remains there today. Palloy's certification of authenticity is just discernible along the bottom.





14. The proclamation of martial law at the Champ de Mars on 17 July 1791, here captured by Jean-Louis Prieur, and the subsequent killing of people signing a petition calling for Louis to abdicate, was a violent rupture in revolutionary unity.

15. François Bonneville's 1796 portrait of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the 'moderate' republican leader and advocate of war executed in October 1793.



16. The capture of the Tuileries Palace in Paris on 10 August 1792 as seen by Jacques Bertaux.



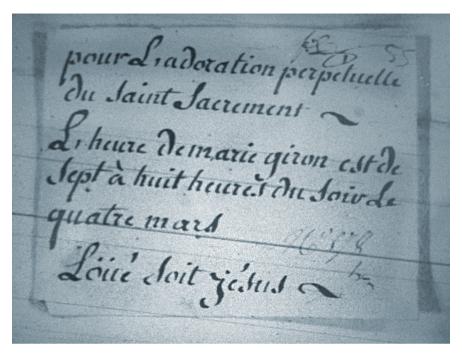
17. The Revolution changed the material objects of daily life, as with this plate marking the nation's unity and resolve in 1792. Household crockery was a particularly common choice for symbolizing support for the Revolution.



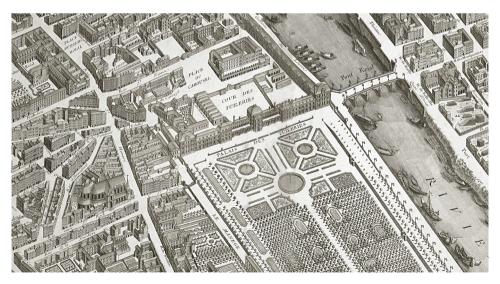
18. Charlotte Corday was born in 1768 into a minor noble family at this farm of Les Champeaux, near Écorches in Normandy. A committed Girondin republican, she murdered Jean-Paul Marat on 13 July 1793. She was executed four days later.



19. Jacques-Louis David's brilliant work of political deification, commemorating Jean-Paul Marat, assassinated by Charlotte Corday in July 1793.



20. In 1793 Revolutionary administrators in Nantes found this note, a call to celebration of the 'holy sacraments', referring also to the role of Marie Giron. The commitment of women to the 'traditional' church was at the heart of the rejection of revolutionary change in the west.



21. Political life after 1789 centred on a small area between the Jacobin Club (lower left), the Rue St-Honoré, where Robespierre and other deputies lived, and the National Convention, housed until 10 May 1793 in the Manège (bottom), then in a theatre within the Tuileries Palace (top). The Committee of Public Safety met on the left-hand side of the Tuileries. Robespierre's life ended on the Place de la Révolution at lower right.



22. A meeting of a 'popular society' or political club in Paris in 1793, by Louis René Boquet, foregrounds a *sans-culottes*, distinguished by his full-length work trousers rather than the culottes of the well-to-do.



23. Members of the Jacobin Club (Société des amis de la constitution) of Mont-Égalité, thirty miles east of Paris, celebrated the credo, 'Unity, indivisibility, fraternity or death', on their membership cards. The village was formerly known as Faremoutiers and known chiefly for its seventh-century Benedictine abbey founded by St Fara.



24. The painter Chérieux expresses his horror of a women's club, perhaps the Revolutionary Republican Citizenesses, meeting in a former church in 1793. There were about sixty women's clubs in Paris and the provinces before their forced closure in October 1793.



25. The physical destruction of religious statuary during the 'dechristianization' of late 1793 is still visible on many churches today, as here at Moulins.



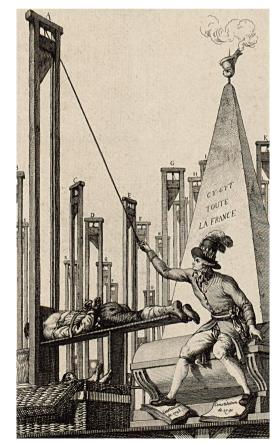
26. The parish church of Houdan, forty miles west of Paris, still carries above its doorway the inscription from the 1794 Cult of the Supreme Being: 'The French People recognize the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul.'



27. Nicolas Henri Jeaurat de Bertry's allegory, c.1794, is replete with symbols of the new political culture under the watchful gaze of Rousseau and the all-seeing eye of revolutionary vigilance.



28. This powerful sketch was made of Robespierre during the tumult of 9 Thermidor by François-Auguste de Parseval-Grandmaison, a former student of David.



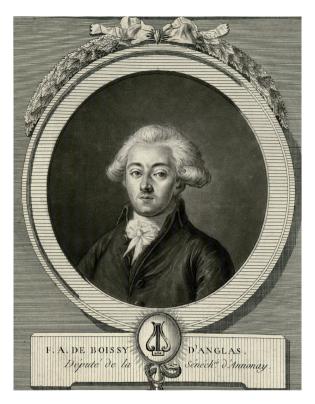
29. The image of Robespierre having to guillotine the executioner because everyone else was dead quickly became a common Thermidorian cliché. Robespierre is here shown trampling underfoot the constitutions of 1791 and 1793. The caption identifies separate guillotines for all groups in French society, from Girondins, nobles and priests to 'the elderly, women and children'.



30. The Swiss painter Jean-François Sablet was a member of the Revolutionary Commune des Arts in 1793. He painted this portrait of Daniel Kervégan (Christophe-Clair Danyel de Kervégan) in 1794, when the former mayor of Nantes in 1789–91 may have just been released from prison. Kervégan, who had made his fortune from colonial commerce and the slave trade, had enjoyed very strong support from 'active' citizens. He was mayor again briefly in 1797, and made a brilliant career under the First Empire.



31. Jean-Baptiste Regnault had begun *The Genius of France between Liberty and Death* in 1793 but its message was reviled when exhibited in 1795, when memories were potent of a year in which liberty and death had been companions rather than alternatives. The Genius of France, with tricolour wings, here gestures to Liberty, with her symbols of equality, the red cap of liberty and the fasces from classical Rome indicating unity.



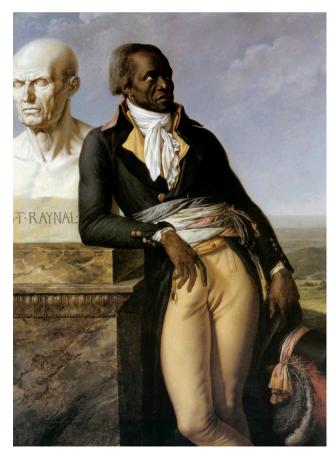
32. The Protestant lawyer François-Antoine Boissy d'Anglas was a key participant in post-Thermidor politics and the articulation of the principles embedded in the Constitution of 1795.



33. Joseph Sicre, the non-juring priest of the frontier community of Saint-Laurent-de-Cerdans, used this tiny chapel of Saint-Cornélis, just across the River Muga in Spain, to baptize and marry hundreds of the faithful from 1796.



34. Despite the wars which swept through the town of Thionville on the Moselle near the Luxembourg border, and repeated enemy occupations, the town has kept its 'altar of the fatherland' at which civic ceremonies were conducted. It was probably erected for the fourth anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic, in 1796, and is the only complete one in existence.

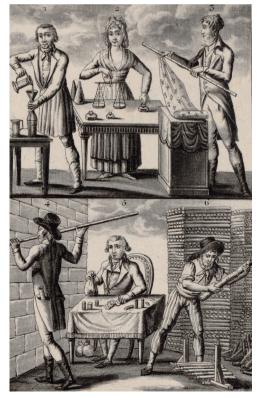


35. Anne-Louis Girodet, who returned to France in 1795, painted this luminous portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley, the Sénégal-born former slave, elected to the Convention and Council of Five Hundred, but who lost his seat in 1797. The anti-slavery *philosophe* Raynal, who had died in 1796, is also commemorated.



36. André-François Miot (b.1762) was Minister of Foreign Affairs in November 1794, then, after the peace treaty with Tuscany, was appointed Plenipotentiary Minister in Florence in 1795–96. Here Miot is pictured in the colours of the Republic, standing apart from his brother, his wife and his children. Miot is pictured beside a bust of Lucius Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic. In the background is Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and the arts.





37. Probably from the period of the Directory is a plate proclaiming its owner to be 'Jaque Guillon', from Faremoutiers (Fig. 23), 'a good farmer and a good republican' – the ideal social backbone of the new France.

38. Some of France's most distinguished scientists were involved in the long process, completed in 1799, of designing an exact, decimal set of measures for weight, size, distance, volume and coinage.



39. In 1792 French forces occupied Savoy in the Alps, then part of the Kingdom of Sardinia. The Jacobin former mayor of Montmartre, Félix Desportes, was sent to Geneva as the official resident and in 1796 he commissioned the erection of a hospice and a 'Temple de la Nature' near Sallanches, still commanding breathtaking views of the Mer de Glace on Mont Blanc today. It was restored in 1923.



40. *La Maraîchère*, an arresting portrait of a peasant woman or market-gardener by an unknown artist, c.1795, exemplifies the radical shift in the subjects of portraiture.



41. Noël Pinot, the non-juring parish priest of Le Louroux, west of Angers, went into hiding after 1791. He was arrested in 1794. This fresco in the parish church of Saint-Aubin shows his execution in Angers, and was probably completed to mark his beatification in 1926.