FOREWORD TO THE PRINCETON CLASSIC EDITION

PUBLISHED in 1941, *Twelve Who Ruled* has been in print ever since. In the field of French revolutionary studies, at least, such longevity is extremely rare, but the explanation is not hard to find. Long before certain prominent historians rediscovered the virtues of the strong narrative in the 1980s (narrative, or "event history," having fallen out of fashion among academic historians in the 1950s in favor of analytic studies), R. R. Palmer crafted a compelling narrative on a subject central to comprehension of the French Revolution.

In the sixty-odd years since the book's publication, I have been using it in the classroom for about half that period. I have thus read and reread the better part of this volume perhaps twenty times, and it has never paled. In turn, students without fail have responded enthusiastically. *Twelve Who Ruled* invariably wins praise not only from undergraduates new to the French Revolution, but also from sophisticated graduate students, and even (in one instance) from "life-long learners" with opinions as strong as their interest. Both its publishing history and my personal teaching experience suggest that the book's appeal has been impervious to changing historiographical fashion, political contexts, and attention spans.

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What is the veritable subject of this truly classic work? In the course of its publishing trajectory the book has appeared under two subtitles: *The Committee of Public Safety during the Terror* and *The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*. (A French translation, finally published in 1989, aptly called it *Le Gouvernement de la Terreur: l'Année du Comité de Salut Public* [The Government of the Terror: The Year of the Committee of Public Safety].) Focused on the tumultuous Year II of the French Republic (1793–94), the book recounts the creation of a revolutionary dictatorship by the National Convention elected in 1792 after the "second revolution" and the fall of the monarchy. The period is known as the

Reign of Terror because in the summer of 1793 revolutionary militants loudly insisted that "terror be placed on the order of the day." Under duress, the Convention acceded to that demand and then suspended, "until the peace," its newly enacted democratic constitution, all elections, and ordinary civil liberties—three defining elements of the Revolution in 1789.

In its fifth summer, the Revolution faced a multifaceted crisis, only in part of its own making, which threatened to overwhelm the Republic. In the five-front war being waged by its foreign enemies, most of the Republic's armies had foundered. In March a widespread rebellion had spawned a savage guerrilla war in the region of western France known as the Vendée. Severe food shortages and inflation threatened the subsistence of the towns as well as the nation's armies. This in turn stoked an escalating desperation and militance in Paris that could have potentially turned against the Convention itself. In the face of all this the Convention remained hopelessly divided, almost paralyzed by the fratricidal factionalism of "Girondins" (or "Girondists") and "Montagnards" within the revolutionary leadership.

With due attention to the complexity of this situation, Palmer understood that one problem underlay all the others—the need for a government sufficiently unified, powerful, and legitimate to master the crisis, whatever might have caused it in the first place. This stands as the leitmotif of the book. The Convention haltingly arrived at that conclusion itself when, in June 1793, it succumbed to Parisian pressure and effected "unity by partition" by purging the leading Girondin deputies. It then was free to begin putting into place draconian emergency laws that amounted to a temporary revolutionary dictatorship. While retaining nominal control, the Convention ceded much of its authority to a select committee of deputies called the Committee of Public Safety (CPS). The pivotal role of that committee has always been understood but until 1941 had never been the subject of a thorough historical study.

One needs a point of view for such an assignment, but also an open mind. R. R. Palmer's moral compass was always set in relation to liberal democracy, and his narrative accordingly depicts the revolutionary, or Jacobin, dictatorship of the Year II as at once necessary, flawed, creative, successful, and disastrous. Palmer

found much to deplore in the events that unfolded over the following year, but he recognized the plausibility of the devil's bargain that the Convention was making. The CPS wielded power commensurate with its dire responsibilities. After some initial comings and goings by its members, the CPS came to comprise the kind of men ready to make hard, morally perilous choices and, after arguing it out among themselves, ready to unite behind those decisions. Such was the unflinching leadership that the CPS provided, a model not surprisingly admired by later generations of hard-core revolutionaries.

The CPS became in effect a war cabinet vested by its colleagues with near-dictatorial powers. Palmer approached it both as a group of distinct, strong-willed individuals and as a new kind of institution in historical annals. Individually, its twelve members had widely diverse backgrounds, experience, and temperaments, especially after the final two members, Collot d'Herbois and Billaud Varenne, were co-opted in September, thereby bringing into the government two of the most extreme personalities in the Convention rather than leaving them free to snipe at the Committee from the outside. Except for that on Robespierre and Jeanbon Saint-André, the biographical scholarship on which Palmer could draw was limited, but his sketches of these twelve individuals remain incisive and evocative.

Lazare Carnot, Bertrand Barère, and Saint-Just, among others, have since inspired excellent biographical studies—by, respectively, Marcel Reinhard, Leo Gershoy, and Bernard Vinot—which, no doubt, would have enhanced the texture of Palmer's account.[1] Still, he had a keen grasp of how the military engineer Carnot became the Committee's "organizer of victory," and readers might well infer that, of the twelve, Palmer admired Carnot the most. As for Barère, Palmer never bought into the prevailing black legend surrounding that gifted lawyer, known as "the Anacreon of the Guillotine," who often spoke for the Committee at the bar of the Convention and whom many at the time—and since—despised as a consummate opportunist. Palmer anticipated Gershoy's more balanced portrayal of Barère as "a reluctant terrorist," as he called

[1] Marcel Reinhard, *Le Grand Carnot*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1950–52); Leo Gershoy, *Bertrand Barère: A Reluctant Terrorist* (Princeton, 1962); Bernard Vinot, *Saint-Just* (Paris, 1985).

him. Saint-Just too figured prominently in Palmer's account, both as a ruthless emissary to the front and as an ideologist. A large body of scholarship has since accumulated on Saint-Just, which goes beyond Palmer's portrait, but he vividly captured both the dedication and fanaticism of this youthful revolutionary.

The institutional perspective in *Twelve Who Ruled* is just as prominent as the focus on the individuals. In the standard chronology of the French Revolution, Palmer highlighted one neglected turning point. Unlike most of the dramatic, crowd-propelled *journées* that altered the course of the Revolution, this pivotal moment occurred quietly, with the adoption by the Convention on 14 Frimaire Year II (December 4, 1793, in the new revolutionary calendar) of a law proposed by the CPS. The Law of 14 Frimaire codified and enhanced the powers of the Committee over local governments in the provinces, over other committees of the Convention, and most importantly over the Convention's deputies who served as proconsuls, or representatives-on-mission, and who until then had been virtually free from control. Palmer considered this law the functional equivalent of a charter for a new kind of authority, a centralized revolutionary dictatorship. When Alexis de Tocqueville placed the Committee of Public Safety in the same lineage as Louis XIV and Napoleon in the ineluctable growth of centralized state power in French history, this was the sort of development that bolstered his case.

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Palmer's research for his book took place entirely in the Princeton University Library. In 1939–40 access to French archives and libraries was virtually impossible for an American scholar, and in any case Palmer, in the course of his long career, was rarely drawn to archival research. Yet the book is based firmly on primary sources. Like Newton, who stood on the shoulders of those who preceded him, Palmer could not have written this book without the labors of Alphonse Aulard. The first professor of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne (a chair established by the city of Paris in 1889), Aulard extolled the Third French Republic and its revolutionary heritage. Simultaneously, he espoused the professionalization of history as a positivistic, objective discipline tethered to an ever-expanding base of primary sources. In pursuit of this mission, Aulard supervised publication of an enormous and

crucial body of source material on the French Revolution. The full title of Aulard's *Recueil* translates as *Collection of the Acts of the Committee of Public Safety and of Its Correspondence with the Representatives-on-Mission*, almost all the twenty-eight hefty volumes of which had appeared long before Palmer took pen to paper.

Aulard has been criticized for being a kind of "official historian" of the French Revolution and thus an apologist for or obfuscator of its excesses. The charge has a degree of merit, but whatever his motivation in undertaking this mammoth project, the *Recueil*, at least, stands as a monument to the constructive side of the positivist historical vision, which François Furet has incisively described as the paradoxical ambition to make history into a science of the particular. Once in print, however, such meticulously edited collections of primary sources take on a life of their own and are subject to reinterpretation. The *Recueil*'s excavation of the chronology and detail of the crisis of 1793–94 is essential for any history of the Revolution, apologetic or critical. Whatever one might say about Aulard, then, Palmer's narrative is in no way an "official history" or apologia. On the contrary, it captures the fluidity of the situation; the forces at play; and the spectrum of motives, behavior, and results. A thoughtful study that resists the stampede into a dogmatic stance of condemnation or defense, *Twelve Who Ruled* demonstrates above all the difficult and sometimes impossible choices facing the Committee's members in Paris or on mission in the departments. Palmer does not shy away from harsh judgments of the unjustifiable, such as the atrocities in Lyon and Nantes or the Law of 22 Prairial, which turned the Revolutionary Tribunal into an assembly line for executions in June 1794. But in the end he leaves readers room to draw their own larger conclusions about the Year II, which is one reason why students respond so well to the book.

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The CPS faced the dilemma of any ostensibly liberal government under siege, and resolved it ruthlessly and without compunction. The revolutionary government, Robespierre declared, "is the despotism of liberty against tyranny. Is force made only to protect crime? We treat conspiracies like law-suits. Tyranny fights, while liberty argues." In the Year II the arguments would stop and force would prevail.

It helps to note at the outset what becomes clear in the course of Palmer's account: the Terror operated on three distinct levels. In the first place, it came down on the Revolution's veritable enemies—the "Catholic and Royalist army" in the Vendée as well as the "federalist," or anti-Jacobin, rebels in southern cities like Lyon and Marseilles, for whom the last straw had been the expulsion of the Girondins. The Terror, as a mind-set and series of tactics, translated most obviously into putting down these rebellions with draconian measures that, in the extreme, produced massacres and horrific atrocities.

Secondly, the Terror was meant to intimidate ordinary citizens into complying with unprecedented and unpopular laws on conscription, requisitions, and price controls vital to the war effort, and more generally into an outward respect for the institutions, officials, and symbols of the new Republic. As a corollary of these duties of citizenship, the Revolutionary Government used this unique opportunity to advance the Revolution's egalitarian agenda, both in symbol and substance. This produced an obvious paradox: the Year II witnessed the simultaneous expansion and contraction of democratic space. Expansion by way of unprecedented egalitarian initiatives in public welfare, public education, and military organization, for example, and a drastic contraction with the suspension of elections, curtailment of basic civil liberties, and the wholesale recourse to preventive detention and summary justice.[2]

Thirdly, the CPS used the Terror on a more rarified plane to banish dissent or challenge *within* the revolutionary leadership in Paris and the Convention, for dissent there continued to be, both on the right (e.g., Danton and other moderate "indulgents") and on the left (e.g., Hébert and other "ultra-revolutionaries"). Believing that the Revolutionary Government required "one center of opinion," the CPS orchestrated dramatic purges first of the "ultra-revolutionaries," then of the "indulgents." As with the Girondins earlier, the purges started with denunciations and ended with perfunctory trials and executions. The Revolution continued to "de-

[2] See Isser Woloch, "The Contraction and Expansion of Democratic Space during the Period of the Terror," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 4, *The Terror*, ed. K. Baker (Oxford, 1994), pp. 309–25.

vour its own children" and would eventually consume Robespierre as well.

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More than sixty years old and never revised despite successive editions, *Twelve Who Ruled* is of course dated. But how so and to what effect? Palmer began with a complete mastery of the scholarship and academic debates of his day, which he canvassed in an article for the *Journal of Modern History* and incorporated in a shorter bibliographical note in the book. While producing a book without footnotes, he made it clear that interested readers could use dates to guide them to relevant documents in the *Recueil* or Aulard's other large collection of documents on the Paris Jacobin Club. In a special edition published by Princeton University Press for the bicentennial of the Revolution in 1989, Palmer rewrote the bibliographical note to emphasize works published since 1940, but again did not revise his text.

Two types of subsequent scholarship merit particular attention, apart from the biographies of "the twelve" already mentioned. First there is the local study. When he shifted his attention from the Committee's "green room" in Paris to the provinces, Palmer emphasized how the Terror's impact was shaped by particular circumstances and especially by the character of the deputies (including certain members of the CPS itself) sent as emissaries or proconsuls to the provinces, the representatives-on-mission who were the Convention's arms and legs as well as its eyes and ears. Much has been accomplished in this area since 1941. French historiography is renowned for in-depth local studies, and the period of the Terror is no exception. To cite but one sterling example: Colin Lucas's monograph *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford, 1973). With telling detail Lucas illustrates Palmer's argument that the personality of representatives-on-mission had significant consequences. Claude Javogues, one of the most volatile and doctrinaire of these emissaries, descended with punitive zeal on the Loire department, adjacent to Lyon, an epicenter of rebellion against the Convention and therefore an area ripe with opportunities for repression. But after paying due attention to Javogues, Lucas focused on local conditions (traditional antagonisms in the region, for example, between inhabitants of the hills and of the lowlands), the ground-level insti-

tutions of repression in the department, and the local clienteles of militants who staffed them. In short, Lucas carries us deeply into the specific texture of what went on in the department of the Loire and no place else.

One might mistakenly conclude that such a wealth of local detail, multiplied many times over, could inhibit a broad narrative like Palmer's. As high-quality local studies have accumulated, the task of writing any kind of national overview of the French Revolution has indeed been bedeviled by the need to sort through the contrasting local detail. Yet in the final analysis such studies are essential building blocks for advances in our understanding. In another register, Palmer's focus on the representatives-on-mission has been taken up by Michel Biard, who, with the aid of an informal *équipe* of student researchers, has published a comprehensive study and prosopography, which provides a new benchmark on this subject.[3]

A second area of scholarship since 1941 has greatly deepened our understanding of the relation between the Convention and the Parisian militants who helped propel the Republic into the Reign of Terror. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Albert Soboul and Richard Cobb, among others, put "the popular movement" in Paris on the basic map of revolutionary studies. A fierce exemplar of the Marxist and Jacobin traditions in French revolutionary historiography, Soboul examined the political history of the forty-eight wards or sections of Paris during the Year II. His monumental thesis on the Paris sans-culottes at once chronicled Parisian militance in 1793–94 and analyzed its composition, institutions, attitudes, and programs. Meanwhile Cobb completed his equally grand study of the sans-culottes' paramilitary battalions known as the *Armées Révolutionnaires* (not to be confused with the regular armies of the Republic). "Instruments of the terror" (as he called them) in the Paris region and in various provincial towns—"the people armed for the people"—they put muscle behind the demands of revolutionary militants, and carried them into the hinterlands of urban centers, there to confront hostile peasants and local notables. While Cobb's work comes from an entirely differ-

[3] Michel Biard, *Missionaires de la République: les représentants du peuple en mission, 1793–1795* (Paris, 2002).

ent perspective than Soboul's (populist and anarchist in spirit, resolutely non-Marxist in methodology) both bodies of work converged to illuminate the character, autonomy, power, and fragility of *sans-culottisme*. In Palmer's account there is much talk of ultra-left-wing pressure on the CPS from "Hébertists." But after the works of Soboul and Cobb, that term lost currency, as the six thousand or so "militant minority" of activist Parisian sans-culottes of the sections and paramilitary units came into focus in their own right.[4]

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Finally, what about Maximilien Robespierre, whose presence looms over Palmer's volume? Along with Barère, Robespierre figured prominently in the Revolution from the beginning. As a deputy to the National Assembly of 1789, he stood out for his precociously democratic and egalitarian sentiments, and for his zeal against royalists and counterrevolutionaries. But his veritable impact dates from the Convention and especially from the beginning of his role as the lead strategist and ideological guide for the CPS. Robespierre was a polarizing figure then and ever since. By the time he was ousted in Thermidor (July 1794), he had come to personify for many all that was malign in the Revolution's second phase. By the same token the left-wing revolutionary tradition generally incorporated him as a hero right from the start. For over two hundred years a cyclical and repetitive debate has raged over Robespierre. For all his defense of the Revolution as a "bloc," for all his enthusiasm about the "second revolution" of 1792 that truly launched France on its destiny as a democratic republic, Aulard disliked Robespierre and instead made Danton the heroic figure. Conversely, Albert Mathiez, a socialist who succeeded to Aulard's chair, spent his professional life exalting Robespierre as the embodiment of the Revolution's ideals and travails. (Mathiez founded the scholarly society devoted to the study of the French Revolution, which to this day is known as the Société des Etudes Robespierristes, even while the revisionist school of historiography led by François Furet in the 1980s pilloried Robespierre as an ex-

[4] See especially Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution, 1793–4*, trans. Gwynne Lewis (Oxford, 1964), and Richard Cobb, *The People's Armies*, trans. Marianne Elliott (New Haven, Conn., 1987).

emplar of what went wrong in the revolutionary project, not only in 1793 but in 1789.)

By 1941 the Aulard-Mathiez conflict had receded, and since then Robespierre has been written about time and again, usually from a strongly negative or positive perspective, but without changing the terms of debate very much and without unearthing major new sources.[5] Understandably, this revolutionary ascetic has come to personify the many paradoxes and contradictions of the Terror. Palmer's portrait, neither an indictment nor an apologia but a kind of internal dialogue, remains unsurpassed in evoking these paradoxes with insight and balance. Readers might well find themselves eager to know more about Robespierre, to turn to biographies old or new, to wrestle with the difficult persona of this central figure in the revolutionary drama. Palmer's account will send them off with the orientation best calculated to guide that journey.

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[5] See, for example, George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (London, 1975) in the adulatory tradition, and Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974), which is more balanced but essentially in the critical tradition.