

## PREFACE TO THE BICENTENNIAL EDITION

WRITTEN about fifty years ago, this book has aged less than its author. It has always been in print, and now in 1989, in recognition of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, it is being reissued in both a British and an American edition, and for the first time is to appear also in a French translation. The text remains as in the first edition of 1941. I have made a few minor alterations, and written a new and updated bibliographical note.

The alterations are to remove allusions to what was on everyone's mind when the book was written, that is, the coming of the Second World War, the National Socialism of Germany, and the fall of France and collapse of its Third Republic. These allusions were only parenthetical, and their deletion does nothing to affect the tone of the book. The bibliographical note, after reviewing the principal printed collections of sources, adds a number of items published since 1940 that were not available at the time of writing.

The book is a narrative, a story of one climactic year, and so hardly reflects the new departures in the writing of history in the past half-century, which has seen the use of quantitative methods and more attention to demography, local history, women's history, psychohistory, popular culture, and the history "from below" of the inarticulate common people. Little of all this appears in the following pages. While the common people were hardly inarticulate in 1793 and 1794, and are not overlooked here, the book sees the French Revolution mainly "from above." It presents the twelve strangely assorted men who were set up as a committee by the National Convention—the Committee of Public Safety—and who attempted to govern France in the turmoil of revolution, war, civil war, breakdown and foreign invasion.

The year of the Committee was the year of the Terror and the guillotine. It was the year of the first recognizably modern revolutionary dictatorship. But it was also the year in which many democratic ideas, though not realized, were at least defined and launched into the world. It was the French Revolutionaries in 1793 and 1794 who first used the word democracy in a favorable

sense to describe the kind of society that they wanted. Robespierre explicitly offered a program of representative democracy to counter the direct democracy demanded by the popular activists. The regime of the Committee of Public Safety arose in alliance with these popular activists, and it fell when it lost their support.

I am mindful of acknowledgments made in earlier prefaces, but most of those concerned are no longer in need of thanks; and in any case I wish to thank all those at the Princeton University Press and elsewhere who have given this book a wider diffusion than any of us at first expected.

R. R. PALMER

*Princeton, N.J.*  
*January 1989*