

# **History: Napoleon Between War and Revolution**

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The French Revolution was not a simple historic event but a long and complex process in which a number of different stadia may be identified. Some of these stadia were even counterrevolutionary in nature, for example the "aristocratic revolt" at the very start. Two phases, however, were unquestionably revolutionary.

The first stage was "1789", the moderate revolution. It put an end to the "Ancien Régime" with its royal absolutism and feudalism, the power monopoly of the monarch and privileges of the nobility and the Church. The important achievements of "1789" also included the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the equality of all Frenchmen before the law, the separation of Church and state, a parliamentary system based on a limited franchise, and, last but not least, the creation of an "indivisible", centralized, and modern French state. These achievements, amounting to a major step forward in the history of France, were enshrined in a new constitution that was officially promulgated in 1791.

France's pre-1789 Ancien Régime had been intimately associated with the absolute monarchy. Under the revolutionary system of "1789", on the other hand, the king was supposed to find a comfortable role within a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. But that did not work out because of intrigues by Louis XVI, and thus arose a radically new type of French state in 1792, a republic. "1789" was made possible by the violent interventions of the Parisian "mob", the so-called "sans-culottes", but its outcome was essentially the handiwork of a moderate class of people, virtually exclusively members of the haute bourgeoisie, the upper-middle class. On the ruins of the Ancien Régime, which had served the interests of the nobility and the Church, these gentlemen erected a state that was supposed to be in the service of the well-to-do burghers.

Politically, these solid gentlemen initially found a home in the "club" or embryonic political party of the Feuillants, subsequently in that of the Girondins. The latter name reflected the place of origin of its leading element, a contingent of members of the bourgeoisie of Bordeaux, the great harbour on the banks of the Gironde estuary, whose wealth was based not only on trade in wine but also, and primarily, in slaves. In Paris, the den of the revolutionary lions, the sans-culottes, and more respectable but still radical revolutionaries known as the Jacobins, these provincial gentlemen never felt at home.

The second revolutionary stage was "1793". That was the "popular", radical, egalitarian revolution, with social rights (including the right to work) and relatively thorough social-economic reforms, reflected in a constitution promulgated in the revolutionary year I (1793), which never went into effect. In that stage, incorporated by the famous Maximilien Robespierre, the revolution was socially oriented and prepared to regulate the national economy, thus limiting individual freedom to some extent, "pour le bonheur commun", that is, for the benefit of the entire nation. Since the right to own property was rmaintained, one can describe "1793" in contemporary terminology as "social democratic", rather than truly "socialist".

"1793" was the work of Robespierre and the Jacobins, especially the most ardent Jacobins, a group known as the Montagne, the "mountain", because they occupied the highest rows of seats in the legislature. They were radical revolutionaries, predominantly of petit-bourgeois or lower-middle class background, whose principles were just as liberal as those of the haute bourgeoisie. But they also sought to satisfy the elementary needs of the Parisian plebeians, especially the artisans who constituted a majority among the sans-culottes. The sans-culottes were ordinary folks who wore long pants instead of the knickers (*culottes*) complemented by silk stockings typical of aristocrats and prosperous burghers. They were the storm troops of the revolution: the storming of the Bastille was one of their achievements. Robespierre and his radical Jacobins needed them as allies in their struggle against the Girondins, the bourgeoisie's moderate revolutionaries, but also against the aristocratic and ecclesiastical counterrevolutionaries.

The radical revolution was in many ways a Parisian phenomenon, a revolution made in, by, and for Paris. Unsurprisingly, the opposition emanated mainly from outside of Paris, more specifically, from the bourgeoisie in Bordeaux and other provincial cities, exemplified by the Girondins, and from the peasants in the countryside. With "1793", the revolution became a kind of conflict between Paris and the rest of France.

The counterrevolution – embodied by the aristocrats who had fled the country, the *émigrés*, priests, and seditious peasants in the Vendée and elsewhere in the provinces – was hostile to "1789" as well as "1793" and wanted nothing less than a return to the Ancien Régime; in the Vendée, the rebels fought for king and Church. As for the wealthy bourgeoisie, it was against "1793" but in favour of "1789". In contrast to the Parisian sans-culottes, that class had nothing to gain but a lot to lose from radical revolutionary progress in the direction indicated by the Montagnards and their constitution of 1793, promoting egalitarianism and statism, that is, state intervention in the economy. But the bourgeoisie also opposed a return to the Ancien Régime, which would have put the state back in the service of the nobility and the Church. "1789", on the other hand, resulted in a French state in the service of the bourgeoisie.

A retour en arrière to the moderate bourgeois revolution of 1789 – but with a republic instead of a constitutional monarchy – was the objective and in many ways also the result of the "Thermidor", the 1794 coup d'état that put an end to the revolutionary government – and the life – of Robespierre. The "Thermidorian reaction" produced the constitution of the year III which, as the French historian Charles Morazé has written, "secured private property and liberal thought and abolished anything that seemed to push the bourgeois revolution in the direction of socialism". The Thermidorian updating of "1789" produced a state that has correctly been described as a "bourgeois republic" (république bourgeoise) or a "republic of the property owners" (république des propriétaires).

Thus originated the Directoire, an extremely authoritarian regime, camouflaged by a thin layer of democratic varnish in the shape of legislatures whose members were elected on the basis of a very limited franchise. The Directoire found it excruciatingly difficult to survive while steering between, on the right, a royalist Scylla yearning for a return to the Ancien Régime and, on the left, a Charybdis of Jacobins and sans-culottes eager to re-radicalize the revolution. Various royalist and (neo-)Jacobin rebellions erupted, and each time the Directoire had to be saved by the intervention of the army. One of these uprisings was smothered in blood by an ambitious and popular general called Napoleon Bonaparte.

The problems were finally solved by means of a coup d'état that took place on 18 Brumaire of the year VIII, November 9, 1799. To avoid losing its power to the royalists or the Jacobins, France's well-to-do bourgeoisie turned its power over to Napoleon, a military dictator who was both reliable and popular. The Corsican was expected to put the French state at the disposal of the haute bourgeoisie, and that is exactly what he did. His primordial task was the elimination of the twin threat that had bedeviled the bourgeoisie. The royalist and therefore counterrevolutionary danger was neutralized by means of the "stick" of repression but even more so by the "carrot" of reconciliation. Napoleon allowed the emigrated aristocrats to return to France, to recuperate their property, and to enjoy the privileges showered by his regime not only on the wealthy burghers but on all property owners. He also reconciled France with the Church by signing a concordat with the Pope.

To get rid of the (neo-)Jacobin threat and to prevent a new radicalization of the revolution, Napoleon relied mostly on an instrument which had already been used by the Girondins and the Directoire, namely warfare. Indeed, when we recall Napoleon's dictatorship, we do not think so much of revolutionary events in the capital, as in the years 1789 to 1794, but of an endless series of wars fought far from Paris and in many cases far beyond the borders of France. That is not a coincidence, because the so-called "revolutionary wars" were functional for the primordial objective of the champions of the moderate revolution, including Bonaparte and his sponsors: consolidating the achievements of "1789" and preventing both a return to the Ancien Régime and a repeat of "1793".

With their policy of terror, known as *la Terreur* – the Terror -, Robespierre and the Montagnards had sought not only to protect but also to radicalize the revolution. That meant that they "internalized" the revolution within France, first and foremost in the heart of France, the capital, Paris. It is not a coincidence that the guillotine, the "revolutionary razor", symbol of the radical revolution, was set up in the middle of Place de la Concorde, that is, in the middle of the square in the middle of the city in the middle of the country. To concentrate their own energy and the energy of the sans-culottes on the internalization of the revolution, Robespierre and his Jacobin comrades – in contrast to the Girondins – opposed international wars, which they considered to be a waste of revolutionary energy and a threat to the revolution. Conversely, the endless series of wars that were fought afterwards, first under the auspices of the Directoire and then Bonaparte, amounted to an externalization of the revolution, an exportation of the bourgeois revolution of 1789. Domestically, they simultaneously served to prevent a further internalization or radicalization of the revolution à la 1793.

War, international conflict, served to liquidate the revolution, domestic conflict, class conflict. This was done in two ways. First, war caused the most ardent revolutionaries to disappear from the cradle of the revolution, Paris. Initially as volunteers, but all too soon as draftees, countless young sans-culottes vanished from the capital to fight in foreign lands, all too often never to return. As a result, in Paris only a comparative handful of male fighters

remained to carry out major revolutionary actions such as the storming of the Bastille, too few to repeat the successes of the sans-culottes between 1789 and 1793; this was clearly demonstrated by the failure of the Jacobin insurrections under the Directoire. Bonaparte perpetuated the system of compulsory military service and perpetual war. "It was he", wrote the historian Henri Guillemin, "who shipped the potentially dangerous young plebeians far away from Paris and even all the way to Moscow – to the great relief of the well-to-do burghers [gens de bien]".

Second, the news of great victories generated patriotic pride among the sans-culottes who had stayed at home, a pride that was to compensate for the dwindling revolutionary enthusiasm. With a little help form the god of war, Mars, therevolutionary energy of the sans-culottes and the French people in general could thus be directed into other channels, less radical in revolutionary terms. This reflected a displacement process whereby the French people, including the Parisian sans-culottes, gradually lost its enthusiasm for the revolution and the ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity not only among Frenchmen but with other nations; instead, the French increasingly worshipped the golden calf of French chauvinism, territorial expansion to their country's supposedly "natural" borders such as the Rhine, and the international glory of the "great nation" and – after 18 Brumaire – of its great leader, soon to be emperor: Bonaparte.

Thus we can also understand the ambivalent reaction of foreigners to the French wars and conquests of that era. While some – e.g. the Ancien Régime elites and the peasants – rejected the French Revolution *in toto* and others – above all local Jacobins such as the Dutch "patriots" – warmly welcomed it, many people wavered between admiration for the ideas and achievements of the French Revolution and revulsion for the militarism, the boundless chauvinism, and the ruthless imperialism of France after Thermidor, during the Directoire, and under Napoleon.

Many non-French struggled with simultaneous admiration and aversion for the French Revolution. In others, initial enthusiasm gave way sooner or later to disillusion. The British, for example, welcomed "1789" because they interpreted the moderate revolution as the importation into France of the kind of constitutional and parliamentary monarchy they themselves had adopted a century earlier at the time of their so-called Glorious Revolution. William Wordsworth evoked that feeling with the following lines:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very heaven!

After "1793" and the Terror associated with it, however, most British observed the events on the other side of the Channel with revulsion. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* – published in November 1790 – became the counterrevolutionary Bible not only in England but all over the world. In the mid-20th century, George Orwell was to write that "to the average Englishman, the French Revolution means no more than a pyramid of severed heads". The same thing could be said about virtually all non-French (and many French) to this day.

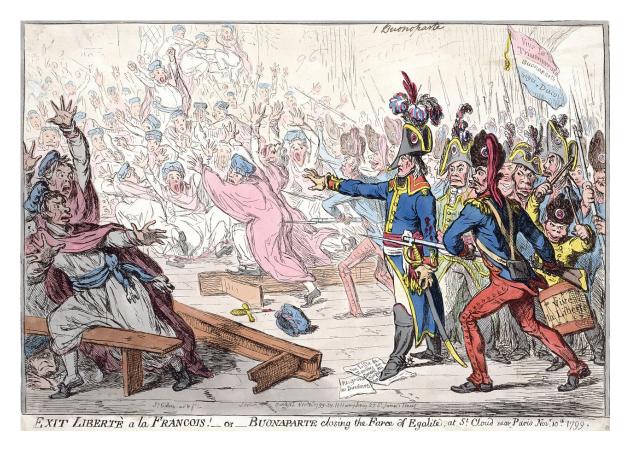
It was to put an end to the revolution in France itself, then, that Napoleon abducted it from Paris and exported it to the rest of Europe. In order to prevent the mighty revolutionary

current from excavating and deepening its own channel – Paris and the rest of France – first the Thermidorians and later Napoleon caused its troubled waters to overflow the borders of France, inundate all of Europe, thus becoming vast, but shallow and calm.

To take the revolution away from its Parisian cradle, to put an end to what was in many ways a project of the petit-bourgeois Jacobins and sans-culottes of the capital, and conversely, to consolidate the moderate revolution dear to bourgeois hearts, Napoleon Bonaparte was the perfect choice, even symbolically. He was born in Ajaccio, the French provincial city that happened to be the farthest from Paris. Moreover, he was "a child of the Corsican gentry [gentilhommerie corse]", that is, the scion of a family that could be equally described as being haut-bourgeoise but with aristocratic pretensions, or else as lesser nobility but with a bourgeois lifestyle.

In many ways, the Bonapartes belonged to the haute bourgeoisie, the class that, in all of France, had managed to achieve its ambitions thanks to "1789", and later, in the face of threats from the left as well as the right, attempted to consolidate this triumph via a military dictatorship. Napoleon embodied the *provincial* haute bourgeoisie which, following the example of the Girondins, wanted a moderate revolution, crystallized in a state, democratic if possible but authoritarian if necessary, that would permit itself to maximize its wealth and power. The experiences of the Directoire had revealed the shortcomings in this respect of a republic with relatively democratic institutions, and it was for that reason that the bourgeoisie finally sought salvation in a dictatorship.

The military dictatorship that replaced the post-Thermidorian "bourgeois republic" appeared on the scene like a *deus ex machina* in Saint-Cloud, a village just outside Paris, on "18 Brumaire of the year VIII", that is, 9 November 1799. This decisive political step in the liquidation of the revolution was simultaneously a geographic step away from Paris, away from the hotbed of the revolution, away from the lions' den of revolutionary Jacobins and sans-culottes. In addition, the transfer to Saint-Cloud was a small but symbolically significant step in the direction of the far less revolutionary, if not counterrevolutionary countryside. Saint-Cloud happens to be on the way from Paris to Versailles, the residence of the absolutist monarchs of the pre-revolutionary era. The fact that a coup d'état yielding an authoritarian regime took place there was the topographic reflection of the historic fact that France, after the democratic experiment of the revolution, found itself back on the road towards a new absolutist system similar to the one of which Versailles had been the "sun". But this time the destination was an absolutist system presided over by a Bonaparte rather than a Bourbon and – much more importantly – an absolutist system in the service of the bourgeoisie rather than the nobility.



The coup d'état of Saint-Cloud on a British caricature by James Gillray (Public Domain)

With respect to the revolution, Bonaparte's dictatorship was ambivalent. With his advent to power, the revolution was ended, even liquidated, at least in the sense that there would be nor more egalitarian experiments (as in "1793") and no more efforts to maintain a republican-democratic façade (as in "1789"). On the other hand, the essential achievements of "1789" were maintained and even enshrined.

So, was Napoleon a revolutionary or not? He was *for* the revolution in the sense that he was against the royalist counterrevolution, and since two negatives cancel each other, a counter-counterrevolutionary is automatically a revolutionary, *n'est-ce pas*? But one can also say that Napoleon was simultaneously *against* the revolution: he favoured the moderate, bourgeois revolution of 1789, associated with the Feuillants, Girondins, and Thermidorians, but was against the radical revolution of 1793, handiwork of the Jacobins and sans-culottes. In her book *La Révolution, une exception française?*, the French historian Annie Jourdan quotes a contemporary German commentator who realized that Bonaparte "was never anything other than the personification of one of the different stages of the revolution", as he wrote in 1815. That stage was the bourgeois, moderate revolution, "1789", the revolution Napoleon was not only to consolidate within France but also to export to the rest of Europe.

Napoleon eliminated the royalist as well as Jacobin threats, but he rendered another important service to the bourgeoisie. He arranged for the right to own property, cornerstone of the liberal ideology so dear to bourgeois hearts, to be legally enshrined. And he showed his devotion to this principle by reintroducing slavery, still widely regarded as a legitimate form of property. France had actually been the first country to abolish slavery, namely at the time of the radical revolution, under Robespierre's auspices. He had done so despite the opposition of his antagonists, the Girondns, supposedly moderate gentlemen, precursors of Bonaparte as champions of the cause of the bourgeoisie and of its liberal ideology, glorifying

liberty – but not for slaves.

"In Napoleon", wrote the historian Georges Dupeux, "the bourgeoisie found a protector as well as a master". The Corsican was unquestionably a protector and even a great champion of the cause of the well-to-do burghers, but he was never their master. In reality, from the beginning to the end of his "dictatorial" career he was a subordinate of the nation's captains of industry and finance, the same gentlemen who already controlled France at the time of the Directoire, the "république des propriétaires", and who had entrusted him with the management of the country on their behalf.

Financially, not only Napoleon but the entire French state were made dependent on an institution that was — and has remained until the present time — the property of the country's elite, even though that reality was obfuscated by the application of a label that created the impression that it was a state enterprise, the Banque de France, the national bank. Its bankers raised money from the moneyed bourgeoisie and made it available, at relatively high interest rates, to Napoleon, who used it to govern and arm France, to wage endless war, and of course to play emperor with lots of pomp and circumstance.

Napoleon was nothing other than the figurehead of a regime, a dictatorship of the haute bourgeoisie, a regime that knew how to dissimulate itself behind a lavish choreography in the style of ancient Rome, conjuring up first, rather modestly, a consulate and subsequently a boastful empire.

Let us return to the role of the endless series of wars waged by Napoleon, military adventures undertaken for the glory of the "grande nation" and its ruler. We already know that these conflicts served first and foremost to liquidate the radical revolution in France itself. But they also enabled the bourgeoisie to accumulate capital as never before. Supplying the army with weapons, uniforms, food, etc., huge profits were realized by industrialists, merchants, and bankers. The wars were great for business, and the victories yielded territories that contained valuable raw materials or could serve as markets for the finished products of France's industry. This benefited the French economy in general, but primarily its industry, whose development was thus accelerated considerably. Consequently, industrialists (and their partners in banking) were able to play an increasingly important role within the bourgeoisie.

Under Napoleon, *industrial* capitalism, poised to become typical of the 19th century, started to overtake *commercial*capitalism, economic trendsetter during the previous two centuries. It is worth noting that the accumulation of commercial capital in France had been possible above all thanks to the slave trade, while the accumulation of industrial capital had a lot to do with the virtually uninterrupted string of wars fought first by the Directoire and then by Napoleon. In this sense, Balzac was right when he wrote that "behind every great fortune with no apparent source there lies a forgotten crime".

Napoleon's wars stimulated the development of the industrial system of production. Simultaneously, they sounded the death knell for the ancient, small-scale, artisanal system in which craftsmen laboured in the traditional, unmechanized manner. Via warfare, the Bonapartist bourgeoisie not only made the sans-culottes – predominantly artisans, shopkeepers, etc. – disappear physically from Paris, it also caused them to vanish from the social-economic landscape. In the drama of the revolution, the sans-culottes had played a major role. Because of the wars that liquidated the (radical) revolution, they, the storm troops of revolutionary radicalism, exited the stage of history.

Thanks to Napoleon, France's bourgeoisie thus managed to rid itself of its class enemy. But that turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory. Why? The economic future belonged not to the workshops and the craftsmen who laboured "independently", owned some property, if only their tools, and were therefore petit-bourgeois, but to the factories, their owners, the industrialists, but also their labourers, the wage-earning and typically very poorly paid factory workers. This "proletariat" was to reveal itself to the bourgeoisie as a much more dangerous class enemy than the sans-culottes and other craftsmen had ever been. Moreover, the proletarians aimed to bring about a much more radical revolution than Robespierre's "1793". But this was to be a concern for the bourgeois regimes that were to succeed that of the supposedly "great" Napoleon, including that of his nephew, Napoleon III, denigrated by Victor Hugo as "Napoleon le Petit".

There are many people inside and outside of France, including politicians and historians, who despise and denounce Robespierre, the Jacobins, and the sans-culottes because of the bloodshed associated with their radical, "popular" revolution of 1793. The same folks often display a great deal of admiration for Napoleon, restorer of "law and order" and saviour of the moderate, bourgeois revolution of 1789. They condemn the internalization of the French Revolution because it was accompanied by the Terror, which in France, especially in Paris, made many thousands of victims, and for this they blame the Jacobin "ideology" and/or the presumably innate bloodthirstiness of the "populace". They appear not to realize – or do not want to realize – that the externalization of the revolution by the Thermidorians and by Napoleon, accompanied by international wars that dragged on for almost twenty years, cost the lives of many millions of people throughout Europe, including countless Frenchmen. Those wars amounted to a much greater and bloodier form of terror than the *Terreur* orchestrated by Robespierre had ever been.

That terror-regime is estimated to have cost the lives of approximately 50,000 people, representing more or less 0.2 percent of France's population. Is that a lot or a little, asks the historian Michel Vovelle, who cites these figures in one of his books. In comparison with the number of victims of the wars fought for the temporary territorial expansion of the *grande nation* and for the glory of Bonaparte, it is very little. The Battle of Waterloo alone, the final battle of Napoleon's presumably glorious career, including its prelude, the mere "skirmishes" of Ligny and Quatre Bras, caused between 80,000 and 90,000 casualties. Worst of all, many hundreds of thousands of men never returned from his disastrous campaigns in Russia. Terrible, *n'est-ce pas*? But nobody ever seems to talk about a Bonapartist "terror", and Paris and the rest of France are full of monuments, streets and squares that commemorate the presumably heroic and glorious deeds of the most famous of all Corsicans.



Antoine Wiertz, "Une scène de l'enfer", Wiertz Museum, Brussels

By substituting permanent warfare for permanent revolution within France, and above all in Paris, noted Marx and Engels, the Thermidorians and their successors "perfected" the strategy of terror, in other words, caused much more blood to flow than at the time of Robespierre's policy of terror. In any event, the exportation or externalization, by means of war, of the Thermidorian, (haut) bourgeois revolution, update of "1789", claimed many more victims than the Jacobin attempt to radicalize or internalize the revolution within France by means of *la Terreur*.

Like our politicians and media, most historians still consider warfare to be a perfectly legitimate state activity anda source of glory and pride for the victors and, even for *our* inevitably "heroic" losers. Conversely, the tens or hundreds of thousands, and even millions of victims of warfare – now mainly carried out as bombings from the air and therefore really one-sided massacres, rather than wars – never receive the same attention and sympathy as the far less numerous victims of "terror", a form of violence that is not sponsored, at least not overtly, by a state and is therefore branded as illegitimate.

The present "war on terror" comes to mind. As far as the never-ceasing-to-wage-war superpower is concerned, this is a form of permanent and ubiquitous warfare that stimulates unthinking, flag-waving chauvinism among ordinary Americans – the American "sansculottes"! – while providing the poorest among them with jobs in the marines. To the great advantage of American industry, this perpetual warfare gives US corporations access to important raw materials such as petroleum, and for weapons manufacturers and many other firms, especially those with friends in the halls of power in Washington, it functions as a cornucopia of sky-high profits. The similarities to Napoleon's wars are obvious. How do the French say it again? "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose".



Statue of Napoleon in Waterloo (Photo by J. Pauwels)

With Napoleon Bonaparte, the revolution ended where it was supposed to end, at least as far as the French bourgeoisie was concerned. With his arrival on the scene, the bourgeoisie triumphed. It is not a coincidence that in French cities members of the social elite, known as *les notables*, meaning businessmen, bankers, lawyers and other representatives of the haute bourgeoisie, like to congregate in cafés and restaurants that are named after Bonaparte, as the brilliant sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has observed.

The haute bourgeoisie has always remained grateful to Napoleon for the eminent services he rendered to their class. The most prominent of these services was the liquidation of the radical revolution, of "1793", which threatened the considerable advantages the bourgeoisie had acquired, thanks to "1789", at the expense of the nobility and the Church. Conversely, the bourgeoisie's hatred of Robespierre, figurehead of "1793", explains the almost total absence of statues and other monuments, names of streets and squares, that honour his memory – even though his abolition of slavery amounted to one of the greatest achievements in the history of democracy worldwide.

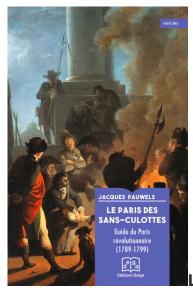
Napoleon is also venerated beyond the borders of France, in Belgium, Italy, Germany, etc., mostly by the well-to-do bourgeoisie. The reason for this is undoubtedly that all those countries were still feudal, quasi-medieval societies, where his conquests made it possible to liquidate their own Ancien Régimes and introduce the moderate revolution, wellspring, as it had already been in France, of considerable improvements for the entire population (except nobility and clergy, of course) but also of special privileges for the bourgeoisie. That probably also explains why, in Waterloo today, not Wellington but Napoleon is the undisputed star of the tourist show, so that tourists who do not know better might get the impression that it was he who won the battle!

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Le Paris des sans-culottes: Guide du Paris

révolutionnaire 1789-1799

#### By Dr. Jacques R. Pauwels

Tel un guide touristique, Jacques Pauwels emmène le lecteur dans un voyage à travers les années sans doute les plus orageuses de l'histoire de la capitale française. Dans un style alerte et avec le souci du détail, il sait attirer l'attention sur les événements décisifs qui bouleversèrent la France et le monde. Le déroulement historique de la Révolution devient ainsi une promenade à travers le Paris de l'époque comme celui d'aujourd'hui.

JACQUES PAUWELS, né à Gand en 1946, il réside au Canada depuis 1969. Il a enseigné dans différentes universités ontariennes, notamment aux universités de Toronto, de Waterloo et de Guelph. Outre La Grande Guerre des classes (première édition, Aden, 2014, deuxième édition mise à jour Delga 2016), on lui doit également Le Mythe de la bonne guerre (Aden, 2005) et Big Business avec Hitler (Aden, 2013), Les Mythes de l'histoire moderne (Investig'action, 2019).

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