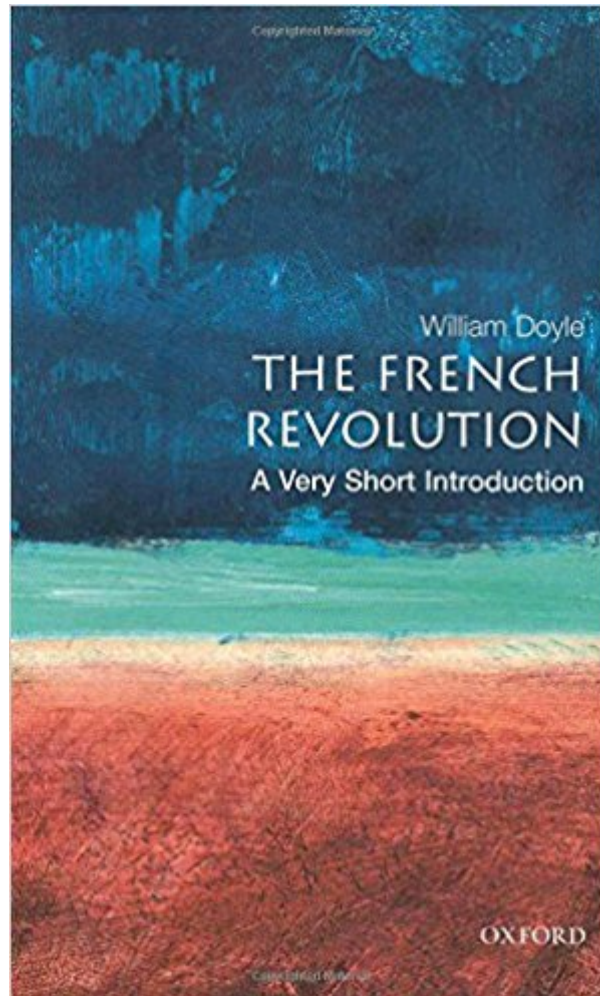


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The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Beginning with a discussion of familiar images of the French Revolution, garnered from Dickens, Baroness Orczy, and Tolstoy, as well as the legends of let them eat cake, and tricolours, Doyle leads the reader to the realization that we are still living with developments and consequences of the French Revolution such as decimalization, and the whole ideology of human rights. Continuing with a brief survey of the old regime and how it collapsed, Doyle continues to elucidate how the revolution happened: why did the revolutionaries quarrel with the king, the church and the rest of Europe, why this produced Terror, and finally how it accomplished rule by a general. The revolution destroyed the age-old cultural, institutional and social structures in France and beyond. This book looks at how the ancien regime became ancien as well as examining cases in which achievement failed to match ambition. Doyle explores the legacy of the revolution in the form of rationality in public affairs and responsible government, and finishes his examination of the revolution with a discussion of why it has been so controversial. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

"[Doyle] writes on the French Revolution with more understanding, balance and clarity than any other historian, living or dead."--Tim Blanning, University of Cambridge

William Doyle is Professor of History at the University of Bristol. His publications include *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (1990), *Origins of the French Revolution* (1999), *The Old European Order 1660-1800* (1992), and forthcoming from OUP, *Old Regime France* (2001).

Beyond any doubt, the French Revolution was a crucial event. It was important in political philosophy (the Revolution had significant ideological underpinnings). It exerts lasting influence (it has been cited by, amongst others, Russian revolutionists of both the Bolshevik and Menshevik persuasions). It serves as a cautionary tale (the unintended consequences, such as the Terror). Unsurprisingly, many have devoted their careers to the study of this seminal event and, as a result, there are legions of books on the topic. Perhaps the best overview of the Revolution is William Doyle's *"The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction"*. Doyle's book is a masterpiece of concision and exposition. It stands as a model of intellectual clarity. As expected, it provides a chronology of important events (and helpfully summarizes them in a time-line at the end of the book). Importantly, Doyle gives the Revolution context: "Why it happened", "How it happened", "What it ended", "What it started" and "Where it stands" are chapter headings and the author delivers authoritatively, trenchantly and succinctly in each category. Arguably, without the French Revolution, Western forms of governance would have evolved much differently than they did. Doyle notes, "Before 1789 there was no such thing as a revolutionary. Nobody believed that an established order could be so comprehensively overthrown. But once it was shown to be possible, the history of France in the 1790s became the classic episode of modern history, whether as an inspiration or warning, a model for all sides of what to do or what to avoid." Enlightenment ideals clearly influenced both the American Founders and those of Revolutionary France, but their expression took different forms in each case. Both shared goals of liberty, toleration and parliamentary government. France honed them to a sharper point and overthrew an entrenched order (nobility, clergy), attempting to re-organize an entire society based on rational ideas. This was implemented in a more abstract and possibly inchoate form in the US, but the situation in America was tangibly different than it was in 1787 Europe. One consequence of that difference was a concerted counter-revolutionary effort undertaken by reactionary elements of the ancien regime in Europe. The counter-revolution was met with the Terror: an expected development. As Doyle points out, the baleful influences of powerful and entrenched wealth, religion, habit, superstition and self-interest lead progressively to the unseating of the Jacobins (admittedly due, in part, to their own excesses) and the Thermidoreans. The Estates were supplanted by the National Assembly, the

Convention and finally, with the demise of the Revolution itself in the 1799 "Eighteenth Brumaire" of Napoleon I. Doyle helpfully picks up the trail with the Bourbon Restoration, the unseating of Charles X and highlights from subsequent developments up to the modern era. These include the use of levée en masse and ideologically-based international conflicts with their resulting mass casualties (Doyle cites over 5 million European deaths in the wars undertaken against the old regime between 1792-1815) and revolutionary terror. As Churchill noted in another context, "Wars between peoples will be worse than those between kings" and it probably follows that ideological-theological wars will be worse still. A major criticism of the Revolution is, of course, the Terror. Doyle addresses that point this way: "The (French) Revolution symbolized the assertion of political will against the constraints of history, circumstance, and vested interest. Revolutionaries soon found themselves learning the hard lesson that will alone is not enough to destroy the old regime. It fought back, and it is the strength and determination of resistance and counter-revolution that largely explains the ferocity of the terror...many of the things that revolutionaries had sought to destroy in and after 1789 were still there or had rapidly re-emerged." Events in the early 21st century appear to be closing the circle. As Doyle states, "What has defeated the revolutionary impulse in the long term is the persistence of cultural diversity. Rationalizing ideologies...have never succeeded in effacing the importance of less rational sources of identity in habits, traditions, religious beliefs, regional and local loyalties, or distinct languages." Perhaps that's the most important lesson of the Revolution, as it seems to have played out that way in just about every instance (look not only to the failures of the Communist enterprise, but also to the demise of the "Arab Spring"). Looking forward, Doyle concludes that, "It (the Revolution) was a portent of many other failure of reason in the face of human resistance or indifference. And with the collapse since the mid-1980s of most of the world's regimes of Communist universalism, these forces have re-emerged with renewed vigor...As the bicentenary of 1989 recedes, what was intended as a celebration of enduring values launched by the Revolution begins to seem more like their funeral." And perhaps this 2001 book was prescient: look no farther than home, where religion now intrudes into the public sphere; where corporations and other entrenched, moneyed interests are seemingly all powerful; and where the surveillance-police state, with its modern equivalent of royal lettres de cachet, secret courts and general warrants are perceived as acceptable. History never repeats itself; people always do.

This very short book does what it sets out to do - to introduce the reader to this vast and broad topic, the French Revolution. The author is one of the most prominent scholars of the French Revolution and has authored a more extended version of this book, in addition to others on this

topic. Here, his chief objective is to cover a very broad range of material on the French Revolution, which he does fairly successfully. The author's task is to touch upon most of the important aspects, issues and concepts on the French Revolution. It includes the economic, political and ideological origins and causes; a brief narrative of major events and the most significant figures involved; the consequences of the revolution; and the schools of thought and interpretive frameworks that have emerged over the years to explain the event and its aftermath. The author only touches upon the issues, and provides only brief overviews of each subject. There is a timeline of events at the end of the book, and the author also provides a good reference at the end of the book for further reading or research. One should not expect a narrative of the French Revolution in a book just over 100 pages long. This is merely a primer, a good starting point for further reading. But nothing more. The reason for 4 stars, rather than 5, is because the book is intellectually dense and heavy at times, and is not a fluid read. While 120 pages is not intimidating, the language the author uses, and the concepts he discusses could be challenging and difficult. Reading slowly is recommended.

I was looking for a brief refresher on the Revolution, and this was exactly what I needed. I will warn any potential readers that this is a small book. It can easily be read cover to cover in a single sitting. That said, the commentary is fairly good and good sources and other works are mentioned or alluded to in the descriptions.

I highly recommend this volume to anyone who wants to know about the French revolution but doesn't have a lot of time to spend on it. I read it while waiting between flights. Doyle is an excellent writer and the volume is very engrossing (good enough that I have subsequently checked out his full treatment of the revolution). He does a good job of covering all of the basics of the French revolution and warning readers where the shortfalls are in the book because it is a brief treatment. But what I really liked about the volume is his discussion where he looks at the French revolution as it is treated today and the 200th anniversary that occurred just under a decade ago. I highly recommend it.

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