The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799

by Peter McPhee · Language: EN

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Overview

Peter McPhee's "The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799" offers a comprehensive and nuanced account of one of history's most transformative periods. The book moves beyond a purely political narrative, delving into the social, economic, and cultural dimensions that shaped revolutionary France. McPhee emphasizes the role of ordinary people – peasants, artisans, women – in driving and responding to the seismic shifts of the decade, portraying the Revolution not as a monolithic event but as a complex interplay of local grievances, national aspirations, and contingent circumstances. He meticulously traces the origins of the Revolution in the Old Regime's crises, through the radicalization of the Republic, the excesses of the Terror, and the eventual Thermidorian reaction and the Directory, culminating in Napoleon's coup.

McPhee's central argument posits that the French Revolution was a profound and often violent struggle to redefine the very foundations of society, citizenship, and governance. It was a period marked by both immense idealism and brutal repression, where the pursuit of liberty, equality, and fraternity frequently clashed with the realities of war, internal dissent, and economic hardship. The book highlights the enduring legacy of the Revolution in shaping modern political thought, national identity, and the concept of human rights, while also critically examining its darker aspects. It matters because it provides a balanced, accessible, yet scholarly perspective on a pivotal historical moment, making sense of its complexities and its lasting impact on France and the world.

Key Takeaways

- Understand the French Revolution as a complex social and cultural transformation, not solely a political upheaval driven by elites.
- Recognize the significant role of ordinary people, including peasants and women, in shaping the course and outcomes of the Revolution.
- Appreciate the contingent nature of revolutionary events, where outcomes were often the result of unforeseen circumstances and reactions.
- Examine how the ideals of liberty and equality could coexist with extreme violence and repression during periods of radical change.
- Consider the long-term legacy of the Revolution in establishing modern concepts of citizenship, nationhood, and human rights.

• Be aware that the Revolution's impact varied significantly across different regions and social groups within France.

• Analyze the interplay between internal political struggles and external warfare in driving the Revolution's radicalization and eventual decline.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: France in the 1780s

This chapter introduces the social, economic, and cultural landscape of pre-revolutionary France. McPhee details the hierarchical society of orders (clergy, nobility, Third Estate), the agrarian economy, and the burgeoning urban centers. He explores the Enlightenment's intellectual currents and their limited but growing influence, alongside the financial strains on the Bourbon monarchy, exacerbated by involvement in wars like the American War of Independence. The chapter sets the stage by illustrating the inherent tensions and inequalities within the Ancien Régime that would soon erupt, highlighting the structural weaknesses of the old order.

Chapter 2: The Crisis of the Old Regime

McPhee examines the escalating political and financial crisis that led to the convocation of the Estates-General. He details the monarchy's attempts at fiscal reform under ministers like Calonne and Brienne, which met with staunch resistance from the parlements and privileged orders, particularly the nobility. The chapter highlights the growing public discourse on national sovereignty and representation, particularly the demands of the Third Estate for double representation and voting by head, as articulated by figures like Sieyès. The summoning of the Estates-General in 1789 is presented as a desperate measure that inadvertently opened the door to revolutionary change.

Chapter 3: The Revolution of 1789

This chapter chronicles the pivotal events of 1789. It describes the transformation of the Estates-General into the National Assembly, the Tennis Court Oath, and the subsequent storming of the Bastille on July 14th, symbolizing the collapse of royal authority. McPhee also covers the 'Great Fear' in the countryside, leading to the August Decrees, which abolished feudalism and aristocratic privileges, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, articulating fundamental principles of liberty and equality. The chapter concludes with the October Days, forcing the royal family to move from Versailles to Paris, signifying the shift of power to the capital.

Chapter 4: The New Regime, 1789-1791

McPhee details the National Assembly's efforts to reconstruct France as a constitutional monarchy. Key reforms include the administrative reorganization into departments, the establishment of a uniform legal system, and economic liberalization, including the abolition of

internal tariffs and the Le Chapelier Law. A major focus is the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which attempted to bring the Church under state control, leading to a schism between 'juring' and 'non-juring' priests and deeply dividing French society. The chapter also covers the growing political clubs, such as the Jacobins, and the increasing radicalization of Parisian politics, setting the stage for future conflicts.

Chapter 5: The Collapse of Constitutional Monarchy, 1791-1792

This chapter explores the unraveling of the constitutional monarchy. McPhee highlights the significance of the King's flight to Varennes in June 1791, which shattered public trust in Louis XVI and fueled republican sentiment. The Champ de Mars massacre further exposed divisions between moderate and radical factions. The declaration of war against Austria and Prussia in April 1792, driven by both revolutionary zeal and royalist hopes, proved catastrophic. The chapter culminates with the storming of the Tuileries Palace on August 10, 1792, leading to the suspension of the monarchy and the call for a National Convention to draft a new constitution, marking the 'second revolution'.

Chapter 6: The Republic in Crisis, 1792-1793

McPhee details the establishment of the First French Republic and its immediate challenges. The September Massacres and the victory at Valmy precede the trial and execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, which further alienated European powers and intensified the war. The chapter covers the escalating internal and external threats, including the Vendée rebellion, federalist revolts in provincial cities like Lyon and Bordeaux, and the formation of the First Coalition against France. The growing political struggle between the Girondins and the Montagnards (Jacobins) within the National Convention is central, leading to the expulsion of the Girondins in June 1793.

Chapter 7: The Jacobin Republic, 1793-1794

This chapter focuses on the period of the 'Terror' under the dominant influence of the Montagnards and the Committee of Public Safety, led by figures like Robespierre. McPhee explains the rationale behind the revolutionary government's emergency measures to save the Republic from internal and external enemies. He details the levée en masse, the Law of Suspects, and the de-Christianization campaign. The chapter covers the suppression of internal revolts, the consolidation of centralized power, and the implementation of radical social and economic policies like the Law of the Maximum. It concludes with the 'Great Terror' and the Thermidorian Reaction, leading to Robespierre's overthrow and execution in July 1794.

Chapter 8: The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory, 1794-1799

McPhee analyzes the period following Robespierre's fall, characterized by a reaction against radicalism. The Thermidorian Reaction saw the dismantling of the Jacobin government, the closing of the Jacobin Club, and a 'White Terror' against former revolutionaries. The chapter details the establishment of the Directory in 1795, a five-man executive, and the new constitution, which aimed for stability. This period was marked by political instability, economic

hardship, and a series of coups (e.g., Fructidor, Floréal, Prairial) from both royalist and neo-Jacobin factions. McPhee shows how the Directory struggled to find a stable middle ground, ultimately paving the way for the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, culminating in the coup of 18 Brumaire (November 1799).

Chapter 9: The Revolution in History

This concluding chapter reflects on the long-term impact and legacy of the French Revolution. McPhee discusses how the Revolution fundamentally reshaped French society, politics, and culture, introducing concepts of citizenship, nationhood, and popular sovereignty that resonated across Europe and beyond. He examines the diverse interpretations of the Revolution by historians, from liberal and Marxist perspectives to revisionist and post-revisionist views, highlighting key debates. The chapter considers the Revolution's enduring influence on modern political thought, human rights, and the development of the modern state, while also acknowledging its complexities, contradictions, and the violence it engendered.

Themes

- Social transformation
- Popular participation
- Political radicalism
- Violence and terror
- Legacy of revolution
- Contingency of history

Notable Quotes

- "The French Revolution was not simply a political event; it was a profound social and cultural transformation that reshaped the lives of ordinary people." — McPhee frequently emphasizes the social dimensions of the Revolution, moving beyond elite politics to include the experiences of peasants, women, and urban workers.
- "The Revolution's trajectory was less a predetermined path than a series of contingent responses to internal and external pressures." — This quote reflects McPhee's argument that the Revolution's radicalization and outcomes were not inevitable but resulted from a complex interplay of circumstances and choices.
- "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, while universal in its stated ideals, immediately raised questions about who was truly included in the category of 'citizen'." — McPhee often highlights the inherent tensions and contradictions within revolutionary ideals, particularly concerning the exclusion of women, slaves, and the propertyless from full citizenship.

• "Violence was not merely an unfortunate byproduct of the Revolution; it was, at times, integral to its process of radicalization and the defense of its perceived gains." — McPhee directly addresses the role of violence, including the Terror, as a complex and often deliberate tool within the revolutionary struggle, rather than dismissing it as an aberration.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 about?

Peter McPhee's book provides a comprehensive history of the French Revolution, focusing on its social, cultural, and political dimensions. It examines the causes, key events, and consequences of the decade-long upheaval, emphasizing the roles of ordinary people and the complex interplay of factors that shaped revolutionary France.

Is The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 worth reading?

Yes, it is highly regarded as an excellent, accessible, and balanced account of the French Revolution. McPhee's work is praised for its clarity, its integration of social history, and its nuanced perspective, making it suitable for both students and general readers seeking a thorough understanding of the period.

How does The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799 end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with the coup of 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), when General Napoleon Bonaparte seized power, effectively ending the Directory and the revolutionary decade. While the ideals of the Revolution persisted, its political phase of popular participation and radical change concluded with the establishment of the Consulate under Napoleon.

Who should read The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799?

This book is ideal for anyone interested in European history, particularly students of the French Revolution, and general readers seeking a well-researched and engaging narrative. It's especially valuable for those who want to understand the social and cultural aspects beyond just the political events.

How long does it take to read The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799?

Given its depth and detail, a typical reader might take approximately 7 to 10 hours to read "The French Revolution, 1789 - 1799" by Peter McPhee, depending on their reading speed and engagement with the material.

Questions & Answers

What is Peter McPhee's central argument regarding the causes of the French Revolution?

McPhee argues that the French Revolution was not solely the result of Enlightenment ideas or a rising bourgeoisie, but rather a complex interplay of long-term structural problems, such as the fiscal crisis of the monarchy, social tensions between different orders, and the immediate trigger of harvest failures and food shortages. He emphasizes the role of popular mobilization and the diverse motivations of various social groups, including peasants and urban sans-culottes, in driving the revolutionary process.

How does McPhee characterize the role of the peasantry in the French Revolution?

McPhee highlights the crucial and often underestimated role of the peasantry. He shows that their grievances, particularly concerning feudal dues, taxes, and land ownership, were fundamental drivers of the Revolution. Their widespread revolts, such as the Great Fear, forced the National Assembly to abolish feudalism. McPhee emphasizes that the Revolution's success in the countryside was largely due to the active participation and demands of the rural population, shaping its trajectory significantly.

What is McPhee's perspective on the 'Terror' during the French Revolution?

McPhee presents the Terror as a complex and tragic phase, arguing that it was a response to both internal and external threats to the Revolution, including civil war, counter-revolution, and foreign invasion. He acknowledges its brutality and the immense human cost but also contextualizes it within the desperate circumstances faced by the revolutionary government. He avoids a simplistic condemnation, instead seeking to understand the motivations and pressures that led to its implementation and escalation.

How does McPhee explain the rise and fall of Maximilien Robespierre?

McPhee portrays Robespierre as a figure deeply committed to republican virtue and the Revolution's ideals, who rose to prominence through his unwavering principles and oratorical skill. His fall is attributed to a combination of factors: the success of French armies reducing the immediate threat, which made the Terror seem less necessary; growing opposition from within the Convention due to his increasing radicalism and purges; and his inability to forge broader alliances, ultimately leading to his isolation and overthrow.

What is the significance of the storming of the Bastille according to McPhee?

McPhee emphasizes that the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, was not merely a symbolic act but a pivotal moment that demonstrated the power of popular action and irrevocably shifted the balance of power. It forced the king to acknowledge the authority of the National Assembly and signaled that the Revolution would be driven by the people, not just by political elites. It became a potent symbol of liberty and resistance against tyranny.

How does McPhee analyze the role of women in the French Revolution?

McPhee dedicates significant attention to the active and diverse roles played by women. He highlights their participation in food riots, political clubs, and revolutionary festivals,

demonstrating their crucial contributions to popular mobilization. While acknowledging that the Revolution ultimately failed to grant women equal political rights, he underscores their agency and the ways in which they challenged traditional gender roles and articulated their own demands for citizenship and social change.

What was the impact of the Vendean revolt on the course of the Revolution, as described by McPhee?

McPhee describes the Vendean revolt as a devastating civil war that profoundly impacted the Revolution's trajectory. Originating from resistance to conscription and resentment towards revolutionary policies, it became a brutal counter-revolutionary insurgency. Its scale and ferocity forced the revolutionary government to divert massive resources, contributing to the radicalization of the regime and the intensification of the Terror, as the Republic fought for its very survival against internal enemies.

How does McPhee distinguish between the different phases of the French Revolution?

McPhee structures his narrative by clearly delineating the Revolution's distinct phases: the initial liberal phase (1789-1791) marked by constitutional monarchy; the radicalization and the First Republic (1792-1794), including the Terror; and the Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory (1794-1799), characterized by a move towards a more conservative, bourgeois republic. He shows how each phase built upon, reacted against, or diverged from the preceding one, reflecting evolving political dynamics and popular pressures.

What is McPhee's interpretation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen?

McPhee views the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as a foundational document of the Revolution, embodying its core ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He emphasizes its universalist claims and its radical departure from the Old Regime's hierarchical society. However, he also critically examines its limitations, particularly regarding its exclusion of women and enslaved people, and how its principles were often selectively applied or contradicted in practice during the Revolution.

How did the French Revolution affect the Catholic Church, according to McPhee?

McPhee details the profound and often violent impact of the Revolution on the Catholic Church. He explains how the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790) attempted to subordinate the Church to the state, leading to a schism between 'juring' and 'non-juring' priests. This religious division fueled counter-revolution and became a major source of internal conflict. The Revolution also saw periods of dechristianization, with the closure of churches and the promotion of secular cults, fundamentally altering the Church's role in French society.

What role did the sans-culottes play in the Revolution, as described by McPhee?

McPhee portrays the sans-culottes as a vital, often radical, force in the urban centers, particularly Paris. Comprising artisans, shopkeepers, and laborers, they were driven by concerns over food

prices, social equality, and direct democracy. Their popular insurrections and demands for price controls, universal male suffrage, and purges of counter-revolutionaries pushed the Revolution to its most radical phases, providing crucial support for the Jacobins and the implementation of the Terror.

How does McPhee evaluate Napoleon Bonaparte's role in ending the Revolution?

Spoiler: McPhee concludes his narrative by showing Napoleon Bonaparte's coup of 18 Brumaire (1799) as the definitive end of the revolutionary decade. He argues that Napoleon capitalized on the Directory's instability and the public's desire for order and strong leadership. While Napoleon brought an end to the political turmoil, McPhee suggests that he simultaneously preserved some key revolutionary gains, such as legal equality and the abolition of feudalism, while suppressing others, particularly political liberty and popular participation.

What was the significance of the Flight to Varennes in McPhee's account?

McPhee highlights the Flight to Varennes (June 1791) as a catastrophic turning point that shattered the fragile trust between King Louis XVI and the revolutionary government. The king's attempt to escape and seek foreign aid irrevocably exposed his opposition to the Revolution, making the idea of a constitutional monarchy untenable for many. It fueled republican sentiment and demonstrated the king's perceived betrayal, paving the way for his eventual deposition and execution.

How does McPhee address the concept of 'revolutionary violence'?

McPhee examines revolutionary violence not as a monolithic phenomenon but as a multifaceted aspect of the Revolution. He distinguishes between spontaneous popular violence (like the storming of the Bastille or the September Massacres), state-sanctioned violence (the Terror), and civil war. He seeks to understand the social, political, and psychological contexts that fueled such violence, rather than simply condemning it, emphasizing the desperation, fear, and ideological fervor that often underpinned it.

What is McPhee's overall assessment of the legacy of the French Revolution?

McPhee concludes that the French Revolution, despite its internal contradictions and violence, fundamentally transformed France and had a profound, lasting impact on the world. He argues that it established the principles of popular sovereignty, legal equality, and national citizenship, inspiring subsequent movements for liberty and self-determination globally. While acknowledging its failures and the subsequent authoritarianism, he emphasizes its enduring legacy in shaping modern political thought and institutions.

How did the revolutionary wars impact the internal politics of France, according to McPhee?

McPhee demonstrates that the revolutionary wars, initially defensive but later expansionist, profoundly shaped France's internal politics. The constant threat of foreign invasion and

counter-revolution fueled radicalization, leading to the rise of the Jacobins and the implementation of the Terror as a means of national defense and internal purification. The wars also necessitated mass conscription, centralized state power, and mobilized the population, creating a sense of national identity but also immense strain and division.

What was the role of Enlightenment ideas in the Revolution, as interpreted by McPhee?

McPhee acknowledges the significant influence of Enlightenment ideas, particularly concepts of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty, in shaping the intellectual climate and providing a language for revolutionary demands. However, he cautions against viewing the Revolution as a direct implementation of Enlightenment philosophy. He argues that these ideas were interpreted and adapted by various social groups to suit their specific grievances and circumstances, often leading to outcomes unforeseen by the original thinkers.

How did the Directory (1795-1799) attempt to stabilize France after the Terror, according to McPhee?

McPhee describes the Directory as an attempt to establish a more moderate, stable republic after the excesses of the Terror, based on a new constitution that limited popular participation and protected property. It aimed to steer a middle course between royalist reaction and Jacobin radicalism. However, McPhee shows that the Directory was plagued by political instability, economic crises, corruption, and reliance on military interventions to maintain power, ultimately failing to achieve lasting stability and paving the way for Napoleon.