

Lewis on Hunt and Censer (2017)

Hunt, Lynn, and Jack R. Censer. *The French Revolution and Napoleon: Crucible of the Modern World*. Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. xiii + 236, ISBN 978-1-4742-1371-4

Erik Braeden Lewis, Florida State University

Lynn Hunt and Jack R. Censer's *The French Revolution and Napoleon: Crucible of the Modern World* redefines the scope and parameters of the Revolutionary era. It evaluates historians' investigations of these events while establishing a new framework for teaching and training historians of the French Revolution. Hunt and Censer simultaneously address events on the European continent, in the colonies, and in various post-French Revolution independence movements. This approach permits the authors to foreground issues of slavery, modernity, and Latin American independence as staple components of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic historical narrative.

In the preface, the authors interact with foundational historical texts written by Alexis de Tocqueville, Georges Lefebvre, and François Furet. However, Hunt and Censer also rely heavily on English-language secondary publications to facilitate undergraduate teaching in the Anglophone world. The first chapter provides an overview of the Old Regime and the numerous circumstances surrounding the Revolution, including debt servicing, the Catholic Church, the American Revolution, and the spread of democratic ideas. The chapter ends with the calling of the Estates General, the creation of the National Assembly, monetary inflation, and food shortages.

The second and third chapters trace the role of the people from 1789 to 1794 and evoke their tempestuous struggle for sovereignty, influenced by radicalism born in France. The authors highlight the monumental debates of the initial Revolution that led to the rebuilding of nation and government: individual rights, seizing Church lands, the *assignat* crisis, the abolition of nobility, and the king's execution. Afterwards, they address the rise of Maximilien de Robespierre, the Terror, and the war in the Vendée. Hunt and Censer then fuse the cultural to the political, showing the government's use of parades and festivals to create a new Egyptian and Roman-based civil culture that promoted Republicanism, hastened de-Christianization, and tightened citizenship restrictions. Critically, the authors include slave revolts, Francisco de Miranda's actions in Venezuela, and the spread of French Revolutionary ideas to the Spanish colonies, suggesting that events in the Atlantic World greatly impacted the trajectory of war between France and the European Coalitions.

The fourth chapter addresses the Thermidorian Reaction, contemporary military successes, and the Directory's "political stalemate" from 1794–99 (122). Hunt and Censer argue that military success was critical to the survival of the new regime, using the Treaty of Campoformio to introduce Napoleon Bonaparte causally into the narrative. The theme of liberation—including Wolfe Tone's Irish Rebellion—is central. The authors suggest that the *levée-en-masse* and French expansion blurred the line between liberation and occupation. Military success was only possible because of reform, including advancement based on military amalgamation and merit. The role of the military on the continent—and in the Egyptian campaign—always returns to the forefront. The authors suggest that Bonaparte's ability to control the narrative of the Egyptian campaign—largely associated with the plunder of cultural artifacts—created the circumstances permitting "the first military coup in modern history," the 18 Brumaire (142).

The final chapters, set between 1800 and 1815, affix Napoleonic historiography to that of the French Revolution, addressing an arbitrary tendency to separate the two. They investigate Bonaparte's consolidation and rapid loss of power across Europe. His military successes allowed him to divert energy to governing France. Appeasing landowners, financial elites, Catholics, and former nobles, Napoleon abandoned Revolutionary ideology—highlighted by the Code Napoléon—in a compromise that secured his position as France's leader. Using the new *Grande Armée* to secure victory at the Battle of Austerlitz, "he had accomplished military goals that the French kings could not have dared to imagine," but he was only successful until Coalition states decided to work together instead of appeasing their own national interests (174).

Bonaparte's success never guaranteed the stability of the Empire. The authors suggest that his main problem derived from management: his inability to appear simultaneously on the frontline and in Paris. The Peninsular War serves as an example: British involvement in Portugal and guerilla resistance in Spain ensured that neither Jerome nor Napoleon could effectively consolidate power in the Iberian Peninsula. This military fiasco contributed to Latin American independence movements through the nineteenth century and created the environment for Prussia and Austria to modernize and rearm. Meanwhile, Russia profited from a weak alliance with France. Bonaparte became too decentralized to stifle dissent in his police state. Bonaparte's empire unraveled due to the Russian campaign and the subsequent Sixth and Seventh Coalitions, which banished

Bonaparte and restored the Bourbons to the French throne.

Over the course of twenty-six years, Europe and the world changed dramatically. The authors suggest that subsequent peace processes thereafter attempted to “cobble together” the Old Regime with new ideas of liberty and democracy (203). They suggest that this—along with military reform and the police state—was a prerequisite to modern political systems. The impact of the French Revolution on the world remains immeasurable, yet constructs like nationalism, military dominance, and wars of extermination provide clear evidence that the Revolution’s legacy continues.

This survey is exceptional, yet there remains one area for improvement, namely focus on transitions between various Revolutionary governments. The chronological incorporation of global, cultural, revolutionary, and imperial history fragments internal political history. An additional timeline, similar to the others, detailing governmental transitions might have provided more clarity. Despite this minor critique, the book exemplifies how historians, academics, and instructors should envision not only the Revolutionary era, but also the general conceptualization of history as a whole. Furthermore, the inclusion of primary source documents with guiding questions at the end of each chapter makes this an effective pedagogical tool. The seamless incorporation of multiple historiographies, numerous causal factors, and the expanding entanglement of domestic actions with global repercussions ensures the success of this work as required reading for undergraduate courses on the French Revolution.

Volume: 47.3–4

Year:

- 2019