

## [Hackett on Blackman, '1789: The French Revolution Begins'](#)

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**Robert H. Blackman.** *1789: The French Revolution Begins*. New Studies in European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 297 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-49244-7.

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In *1789: The French Revolution Begins*, Robert H. Blackman focuses on the initial months of the French Revolution, devoting particular attention to the ways the deputies elected to the Estates General and its subsequent iterations established a new political culture and constitutional order. Though his decision to highlight the period from May to November 1789 overlaps heavily with the chronological focus of foundational works like Georges Lefebvre's *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1947), Blackman departs from the traditional path as he details the transformation of the Estates General from a purely consultative body into a modern, actionable, and representative assembly. While he is not the first to focus on the Revolution's early stages, Blackman's approach to sources brings new light to this period.

Blackman's sources reflect the personal and political motivations of the deputies of France's early revolutionary bodies; this approach, he argues, reveals their desire to form "a consensus around a modern political system based in freedom and representation" (p. 3). The deputies' individual deliberations, motivations, thoughts, and worries feature heavily in this book, because, to Blackman, they are the key to understanding how the deputies came to see themselves as powerful and capable of action and reform. Blackman taps into the deputies' perspectives by complementing the oft-cited yet problematic Archives Parlementaires with contemporary accounts of events and debates. Through his use of this expanded resource base, which includes newspapers, journals, memoirs, and correspondence, Blackman offers a new precedent for historians who wish to reconsider relying on the same sets of archival sources if they wish to further the historiographic narrative.

The recalibration of existing narratives of the early Revolution represents Blackman's major historiographical intervention in *1789*. Through this revision, he demonstrates that while radicalism certainly existed, it did not completely drive the agenda of the Estates General and eventual National Assembly. In Blackman's view, the reality of the situation was more complex, involving an interplay between radical, moderate, and conservative influences. Indeed, the importance of moderate thought in these early debates is a through line of the book, and Blackman's decision to emphasize the continued influence of moderation is noteworthy. Moderates, to Blackman, were crucial to the constitutional project, and their actions and words contributed to a careful compromise that, had it survived, might have sidestepped the more violent and volatile revolutionary events to come. However, despite the attempts to preserve order and balance, the rising political awareness and activism of ordinary Parisians upset the stability that these deputies had carefully crafted and continually worked to protect.

Noteworthy events like the Storming of the Bastille and the October Days disrupted the fragile but practical relationship between political deputies, the nation, and the king. On the historical record, these popular uprisings have overshadowed what Blackman has worked to uncover: months of attempts by moderate and center-right deputies to avoid violence and create mechanisms for peaceful resolution of disagreements. All the while, many deputies remained loyal to the desires of their constituents who voiced their grievances in the *cahiers de doléances* (lists of grievances), demonstrating that they had not allowed radicalism to detract from their original obligations. Many of these *cahiers* expressed the desire for a constitutional monarchy, not a radical republic. Blackman demonstrates how many deputies translated this desire into the goal of reworking political representation while still preserving much of the power and authority of the monarch. Again, the insistence on the influence of moderation as a pushback against the accepted narrative is undeniable throughout this book. Delegates did not arrive at Versailles wishing to remove Louis XVI; his demise was a result of his own undoing. Blackman shows that many who desired political change in France wished for innovation that would give some powers to an elected body that would regularly meet and perform some legislative function; otherwise, there was little consensus among those desiring reform. Certainly, the *cahiers* and those deputies bound to represent their constituents who expressed these grievances were not uniformly represented by Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès's radical views (*What Is the Third Estate?* [1789]), though he has been portrayed as representing the wishes of the Third Estate at large.

At the heart of 1789 is the tension between outside and inside forces. The deputies of the Estates General and later the National Assembly may have been operating in a mostly pragmatic fashion, but there were uncontrollable variables to contend with, such as an incapable monarch and a rowdy population. These outside forces undoubtedly shaped the direction of the political deputies. When King Louis XVI failed to lead, the Third Estate took action and declared itself the National Assembly. When faced with the threat of popular disorder, anarchy, and the possibility of future incompetent monarchs, the assembly incorporated fail-safes into the constitution. Though there was no shortage of political debate or disagreement, Blackman depicts a body of delegates who were at once logical and responsive to the world around them. During these early months of the Revolution, as they crafted the law and responded to France's dynamic political situation, these delegates evolved from the ashes of a long-defunct formality to a truly representative, powerful, and influential body. By fall of 1789, the National Assembly could, and did, take serious actions, including eliminating extraneous institutions and erecting new ones that they believed would serve the public good.

Overall, the major takeaway from *1789: The French Revolution Begins* is that the influence of radicalism on early revolutionary legislative bodies has been overblown. The sway of moderate deputies like Jean-Joseph Mounier, Pierre-Victor Malouet, Stanislas-Marie-Adélaïde Clermont-Tonnerre, Trophime-Gérard Lally-Tollendal, and Jacques-Guillaume Thouret played a more central role in the debates and decisions of the early Revolution than the standing record suggests. The token radical decisions made during this time were not unanimous; for example, many deputies openly opposed the seizure of church property. Most of the "radical" actions taken by the Estates General and National Assembly faced moderate and conservative opposition. This suggests that this beginning period of the Revolution could have been much more radical had these moderate braking mechanisms not existed. Blackman explains that these deputies did help transform society, but not in a way that made radical terror inevitable. An incompetent king and a paranoid, hungry Parisian crowd worked to unhinge the foundations of peace, but these factors were out of the deputies'

control. The king betrayed the assembly, effectively dismantling the “charade of cooperation” that had hitherto existed between the two entities (p. 267). As a result, the cooperation between center-right and center-left deputies similarly dissolved as royalists fled France and former moderates shifted to the extreme right. France was hurling head-first into a crisis, but it was not caused by the radicalism of the National Assembly. Rather, Blackman suggests that we should blame an inadequate monarch, the hollowing out of the center-right, and a provoked Parisian population for the ensuing disorder. To Blackman, no revolutionary event was inevitable, and the political decisions of 1789 did not set the events of the Terror into motion. This excellent book provokes the reader to wonder “what if” the delegates’ fail-safes had worked, if moderate voices continued to place a check on radicalism, and terror did not eventually become the order of the day.

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