

LOUIS XVI

and the French Revolution

1789–1792

AMBROGIO A. CAIANI



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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107026339

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First published 2012

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Caiani, Ambrogio A.

Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789–1792 / Dr. Ambrogio
A. Caiani.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-02633-9

1. Louis XVI, King of France, 1754–1793. 2. France – History –
Revolution, 1789–1799. 3. France – Kings and rulers – Biography.
I. Title.

DC137.C35 2012

944.04'1–dc23 2012018832

ISBN 978-1-107-02633-9 Hardback

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Louis XVI and the French Revolution, 1789–1792

The experience, and failure, of Louis XVI's short-lived constitutional monarchy of 1789–1792 deeply influenced the politics and course of the French Revolution. The dramatic breakdown of the political settlement of 1789 steered the French state into the decidedly stormy waters of political terror and warfare on an almost global scale. This book explores how the symbolic and political practices which underpinned traditional Bourbon kingship ultimately succumbed to the radical challenge posed by the Revolution's new 'proto-republican' culture. While most previous studies have focused on Louis XVI's real and imagined foreign counter-revolutionary plots, Ambrogio A. Caiani examines the king's hitherto neglected domestic activities in Paris. Drawing on previously unexplored archival source material, Caiani provides an alternative reading of Louis XVI in this period, arguing that the monarch's symbolic behaviour and the organisation of his daily activities and personal household were essential factors in the people's increasing alienation from the newly established constitutional monarchy.

AMBROGIO A. CAIANI is College and Departmental Lecturer at Lady Margaret Hall and the Faculty of History, University of Oxford.

For my parents

‘Mais on ne se bat pas dans l’espoir du succès!

Non! non! c’est bien plus beau lorsque c’est inutile!’

Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Act V, Scene VI

Acknowledgements

This book would never have seen the light of day without the help and support of so many friends and colleagues. It must be stressed that any errors, misinterpretations or omissions in this volume are entirely mine. My labours were greatly eased by an outstanding generation of highly original historians, who started publishing their findings on *ancien régime* and Revolutionary France in the 1970s. My greatest academic debt lies with my inspirational Ph.D. supervisor, Prof. Tim Blanning. I am not only grateful for his unwavering dedication, but also for the constructive criticisms he made to the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based. His ability to digest proofs and provide feedback within twenty-four hours, from any location on the globe, continues to be a welcome source of mystery. I am also exceedingly grateful for his continued interest and assistance in my, at times, unsteady academic career.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the AHRC for its generous three years of financial support for this project. The Cambridge European Trust also provided a bursary, for which I am grateful. The Pecorari, Arne and Epstein families, with whom I stayed in Paris, greatly facilitated my research by providing both a tranquil environment for study and stimulating dinner conversation. Michel, Véronique and Jean-Charles Arne also provided a lively forum in which to debate some of my findings. Although Michel and I differ on the supposedly harmful effects unleashed by the Orléans dynasty on French history, we are brought together by a common passion for French *savoir-vivre*.

Prof. Alan Forrest's guidance and influence continue to shape my research and thoughts on the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire. This research started roughly nine years ago in his office at the King's Manor in York; without his generous encouragement the completion of this book would have been impossible. Prof. Stuart Carroll, who had the misfortune of being my tutor for no fewer than four courses at York, was a stirring lecturer and teacher. Important contributions and thought-provoking advice were provided by Profs Derek Beales,

Rafe Blaufarb, Malcolm Crook and William Doyle. I also had the good fortune of receiving guidance from Drs Mette Harder, John Hardman, Leonhard Horowoski, Thomas E. Stammers and innumerable others. I wish to express my gratitude to Drs John Dunne and Jessica Sharkey for helping in proofreading an earlier version of this manuscript.

It is important for me to express a sincere appreciation for the way in which my two years of teaching at the Universities of York and Greenwich provided me with a welcome opportunity to gain some practical experience and collect my thoughts. My students and colleagues at these institutions may not realise it but they provided me with an essential staging ground in which to experiment with, and communicate, ideas. My thanks also go to the Principal and Fellows of Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford, where the finishing touches to this book were made. In particular thanks are due to Prof. Mike Broers for the paternal interest which he has taken in both my French and Italian academic interests.

Among my contemporaries at Cambridge I wish to thank Drs Edward and Kelcey Wilson-Lee for their friendship which was extended at a time in my life when the waters were very far from serene. I also would like to express my appreciation to Dr Antti Matikkala for providing me with a copy of his Ph.D. thesis and much information on the European Orders of Chivalry. The international dimension of my topic was inspired by some conversations with Dr Jan Hennings. I also wish to extend a word of deep gratitude to my Ph.D. examiners Prof. Munro Price and Dr Philip Mansel. Their surgical precision in dissecting my work has saved me from making many errors and has greatly improved my text. From the standpoint of archival assistance I want to express a very large thankyou to Mme Laurence Wodey for allowing me to access the manuscript collections of the Musée de la Légion d'Honneur.

Lastly I owe my parents an incommensurable debt of gratitude, not merely for twenty-nine years of (very) patient nurture, but for having generously accepted that I inflict my historical interests on them at invariably inopportune moments. Despite an innate dislike for my subject, born of his school days, my father accepted not only to proofread the entire dissertation but also, which was far from reasonable, to help with the proofs for the book. Despite protests to the contrary he seems to be developing a genuine interest, not to mention expertise, in French Revolutionary history.

Note on translations

Unless otherwise stated all translations present in this volume are my own. I have tended in general to opt in favour of a simple translation into modern English rather a literal rendition of the original, and somewhat antiquated, French expressions used by eighteenth-century writers. I hope that the resultant loss in authenticity will be compensated by comprehensibility.

Abbreviations

AN	Archives Nationales, Paris
Anselme	Père Anselme de Sainte-Marie, <i>Histoire Généalogique et Chronologique de la Maison Royale de France, des Pairs, Grands Offices de la Couronne et de la Maison du Roi</i> , 12 vols, 3 edn (1726–1733)
AP	<i>Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860</i> , 1st series, ed. M. J. Madival and M. E. Laurant, 89 vols (Paris, 1867–1896)
ASGe	Archivio di Stato di Genova
ASMo	Archivio di Stato di Modena
ASPr	Archivio di Stato di Parma
ASTo	Archivio di Stato di Torino
ASVe	Archivio di Stato di Venezia
BA	Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris
Bio Uni	<i>Biographie Universelle ancienne et moderne</i> , ed. J. Fr. Michaud, 45 vols (Paris, 1988)
BnF	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
FO	Foreign Office
MLH	Musée de Légion d'Honneur
Ms.fr.	Manuscripts Français
NAF	Nouvelles Acquisitions Français
Saint-Allais	<i>Nobiliaire universel de France, ou, Recueil général des généalogies historiques des maisons nobles de ce royaume</i> , ed. Nicolas Viton de Saint-Allais, 21 vols (Paris, 1872–1877)
SHAT	Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (Archives de la Guerre, Château de Vincennes)
TNA	The National Archives, London

- Tr.Drts. *Traité des Droits, Fonctions, Franchises, Exemptions, Prérogatives et Privilèges Annexés en France à chaque dignité, à chaque Office, à chaque État, soit Civil, soit Militaire, soit Ecclésiastique*, ed. Joseph-Nicolas Guyot and Philippe-Antoine Merlin, 4 vols (Paris, 1786)

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Introduction: Louis XVI, a constitutional monarch?

'He that you call a king, we call a tyrant'¹

Some time after the insurrection of 10 August 1792, the abbé Jean-Louis Soulavie travelled to the Comité de Surveillance of the Tuileries district to present an odd request.² He pleaded for permission to consult the papers of the deposed Louis XVI which were still stored in the royal palaces. François Chabot, the head of the committee and formerly a Capuchin monk, could not contain his amazement.³ There was nothing intrinsically wrong with the abbé's desire to write a history of Louis XVI's reign. However, the question which deeply troubled Chabot was on which side of the scales of historical bias Soulavie's writings would lean.

I think that among these scribbles and scraps of paper you will find the writings of Turgot, Necker and Malesherbes, and that you will become biased in favour of Capet, like one member of [our] committee whom we surprised crying like an idiot over a letter sent by [Madame] Elisabeth to her brother Capet ... Is it among these [papers] that you can find the majesty of our revolution, the insurrection of the people, their resounding triumph over the crowned ogres who sought to devour them[?]. Do you not have the means at your disposal of making history more inspiring, more imposing, more interesting than the miserable court intrigues that you wish to examine? Beware lest your work makes you forget yourself and, that will inevitably happen, if you feel pity for Capet.⁴

By toppling the House of Bourbon the Revolutionary government had sought to consign it to historical oblivion. Soulavie's rather disingenuous

¹ Jean-Louis Soulavie, *Mémoires Historiques et Politiques du Règne de Louis XVI, depuis son mariage jusqu'à sa mort. Ouvrages composés sur des pièces authentiques fournies à l'auteur avant la révolution, par plusieurs ministres et hommes d'état et sur les pièces justificatives recueillies après le 10 août dans les cabinets de Louis XVI à Versailles et au château des Tuileries*, 6 vols (Paris, 1801), I, xcii.

² Ibid.

³ August Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels* (Paris, 1973), 121–4; and Bio Uni, VII, 384–5.

⁴ Soulavie, *Mémoires Historiques*, I, xciii.

claim that he wished merely to seek out the truth cannot have been reassuring to the politicians of the future National Convention. In a somewhat Thucydidian dialogue, the abbé proved to the hot-headed Chabot that historical interpretation was relativistic in nature. After all, had not the king's public image varied considerably throughout the entire reign? In a strange turn of events, Soulavie managed to induce the Committee to approve the intellectual validity of his enterprise. He was granted permission to access the documents he required.⁵ It was an adventure which would take him to Versailles, where he was to be among the last to see the palace in a furnished state before its contents were publicly auctioned.⁶ He was also shown around Louis XVI's *petit cabinet* by the locksmith Gamin, the man who revealed the existence of the *armoire de fer* to the National Convention.⁷ The abbé worked in an environment where time had been suspended. These unique circumstances endowed his research with an originality which has been difficult for his successors to equal.⁸

It was an endeavour which was going to take Soulavie the better part of a decade to accomplish. Naturally, other events were to distract him from his academic task. In 1793 he was appointed French Résident at Geneva for two years.⁹ It was only in 1801 that he published the fruit of his labours in six volumes. In spite of asserting a complete impartiality, the finished article was suspiciously laudatory of the Napoleonic Consulate as the successful end-product of the Revolution.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., I, cv–cvi; and *Avis Aux Amateurs de Beaux Meubles à Paris le 25 octobre 1792*. 'Through a succession of decrees issued by the National Convention one has proceeded to the sale of the goods, castles, townhouses and homes of our émigrés ... But nowhere will you find items more precious than those furnishings which will be auctioned as part of the contents of the palaces of Versailles, Saint-Cloud, Rambouillet, Compiègne, Fontainebleau and Bellevue. These items of furniture were commissioned no later than the time of Louis XV, and everything will be sold immediately to the highest bidder. Now considering that the number of items on sale is too vast to be purchased entirely by the richer inhabitants of Paris, whose homes are already richly furnished, it is safe to assume that valuable objects will be sold for very reasonable prices, as a result we have the honour of inviting Gentlemen from abroad to consider this unique circumstance ... Interested parties who wish to make purchases are asked to address their orders, at the earliest opportunity, to Citizen Eberts in Paris, no 19 rue Saint-Thomas at the Louvre, who after many years of dealing with this sort of commission and whose fine taste for the arts is accompanied by a most exacting sense of probity, assures his customers that their orders will be fulfilled with the utmost care.' *Revue de l'Histoire de Versailles et de Seine et Oise*, 30 (1928), 83–4.

⁷ Ibid., I, cv.

⁸ John Hardman, *Louis XVI, The Silent King* (London, 2000), 23–7.

⁹ *Bio Uni*, XXXIX, 675–7.

¹⁰ Soulavie, *Mémoires Historiques*, VI, 527, 549; and see also the large table entitled 'on the mechanics of the French Revolution, representing its forward march towards the

Nevertheless, Soulavie produced a history that was both sophisticated and exhaustive in its scope. It divided the reign into nine *époques*, each of which chronicled the miscalculations and policy failures of Louis XVI's monarchy.¹¹ Particularly innovative was the second half of his third volume, which analysed the impact of international affairs on the course of events in France.¹² Although not a globalist, by current standards, the abbé certainly recognised that Louis XVI's failure to keep up with the pace of international competition was to have devastating consequences. In particular, Soulavie argued that the inability to thwart the ambitions of Austrian foreign policy and the king's decision to disband the *secret du roi* did much to undermine the diplomatic efforts of the Bourbon monarchy.¹³ In relation to domestic matters, a narrative was constructed which was to become the traditional view of a monarch unable to control public spending and forced to resort to a myriad of expedients in order to put a stop to the downward spiral.¹⁴ The interpretative balance of this complex, and at times contorted, history is difficult to gauge with precision. At certain moments the author alluded to the structural defects present in the *ancien régime* system of government; at other times he argued for the primacy of human agency in unleashing the Revolution.

It is not until the sixth volume that the abbé unequivocally states that the: 'fleeting and uncertain character of Louis XVI, is the primary cause of the collapse of the ancient monarchy and also of the fall of the constitutional monarchy'.¹⁵ Although sympathetic to Louis XVI, as a scrupulous and morally unimpeachable individual, Soulavie saw him as unsuited to the role of leader of a country in crisis. The central character flaw of the monarch was an inability to pursue and sustain policy decisions when faced with determined opposition or the threat of popular unrest. This portrait of the last *ancien régime* Bourbon monarch has come to embody the revised and sympathetic interpretation of Louis XVI. The king was deemed unable to choose between the opposing poles of asserting the royal will and following the common good as expressed by public opinion.

The abbé's successors have also been thorough in their investigations into the pre-Revolutionary reign. Research into Louis XVI, as both an individual and as a label for a specific historical period, has expanded

Consulate as [the culmination in] the restoration of an efficient administration, the reorganisation of good government and the reestablishment of order and security both within and without the borders of France', in the same volume.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, i–ii. ¹² *Ibid.*, III, 205–338.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III, 268–90 and 324–34; and IV, 335–41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 15–23, 265–73; and VI, 113–19 and 265–356. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 379.