The Counter-Revolution in
France
1787–1830

THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 1787–1830

James Roberts

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Preface

The Counter-Revolution is no longer regarded as an awkward footnote to the history of the Revolution itself. The most recent general work on the Revolution, for example, by D. M. G. Sutherland, is titled *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*. This, of course, is a much more accurate label for a period which is not fully comprehensible except in terms of the conflict between the two movements. It is a conflict which also forms in many ways the central theme of much of the recent past: the history of both France and Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reflects the counter-revolutionary as much as the revolutionary tradition. The Counter-Revolution was more than simply the rejection of the Revolution although it was, of course, that which largely motivated it in the first place. It presented as it developed an alternative concept of a social and political order, one which had a strong appeal to a wide section of European society, not only to its fading elites.

In recent years there has been a great deal of research on the Counter-Revolution, more especially on its popular bases, which has helped in the process of understanding its origins and producing a more sympathetic approach, once confined largely to 'conservative' historians. The production of books covering aspects of the Counter-Revolution probably now approaches that of the more conventionally 'revolutionary' subjects. Much of this work is inaccessible to school sixth forms and, now that it is impossible to expect history undergraduates to have a reading knowledge of French, to university students as well. This book is intended to be a work of synthesis which will make some of this material more widely available. Although its framework is a narrative, it is also intended to indicate the main themes of the Counter-Revolution, its ideas, its practice, the conflicts and dilemmas within it, as well as its more lasting features. I have therefore made an attempt from time to time to stand back from the factual narrative in

order to set the events in their wider context. That context included the rest of Europe, much of which at some time or other was occupied by the French. I have consequently departed briefly, at one point, from being concerned with France alone in order to look at the reaction to the Revolution elsewhere.

The book can make no pretension to be comprehensive either factually or in interpretation. That would require a much longer work, which might miss the readership at which it is aimed. Moreover, new material is appearing at such a pace that any judgement must be temporary. More detailed works are listed in the bibliography, although this has been confined to those available in English for the reason mentioned above. It is, therefore, necessarily very selective but provides enough guidance for readers who wish to pursue the subject further.

Because 'Counter-Revolution' was so widely and loosely defined, and even now is capable of many interpretations, I have been fairly selective. I have largely considered the Counter-Revolution in terms of the ideas and activities of the émigré princes and aristocracy, and of the popular insurrections which broke out from time to time within France. Many historians would now suggest that 'Anti-Revolution' is a better term for those rebellions, certainly in their earlier phases, but since the two strands were so interconnected I have stuck to the conventional usage.

The date at which to end a book is almost always a problem for historians and none more so than in the case of the Revolution and Counter-Revolution. They are both, as the expression is, 'permanent'. However, as in all things, a line must be drawn somewhere. 1830 makes more sense than, say, 1814 or 1799, because it was the point at which the original opponents of the Revolution made their last attempt from a position of power to check and reverse the revolutionary legacy and failed. The attempt was not abandoned: it was to be made by their successors but in increasingly forlorn circumstances.

Because this is a work of synthesis the debt is too vast to be individually acknowledged. It is to the historians on whose work I have drawn.

JAMES ROBERTS

Maps

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- 1 The provinces of France in 1789
 - 2 Main areas of counter-revolutionary activity

Map 1 The provinces of France in 1789
(Source: P.M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*)

Map 2 Main areas of counter-revolutionary activity
(Source: P.M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*)