

Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present

David A. Bell

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The contradiction of Americans' simultaneous love and hatred of France is placed in proper historical context.

With *Shadows of Revolution*, historian and journalist David A. Bell shares a boundless enthusiasm for all things French, with particular expertise on two defining eras in French history, the Revolution and the Nazi-collaborationist regime of Vichy in World War II. In this new collection of essays and book reviews, many of which appeared in the *New Republic*, *London Review of Books*, and elsewhere, Bell proves to be a demanding critic of other historians' work and a highly knowledgeable guide to France's past and present.

Americans, he notes, have a contradictory view of the French: "When we need a frivolous, effeminate, weaselly antagonist to highlight our supposed simple and manly virtues, we call on them. Yet when we search for an ideal of refined, worldly sophistication to place above our own more rough-hewn tastes, they also fit the bill." This complicated attitude isn't surprising, given the centuries-spanning political influence of the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte's unshakable place in world history, and the enduring legacy of French collaborators under Nazi rule.

The French have made a disproportionately high contribution to world culture and ideas of liberty and justice, but at the same time, their long, troubled history (particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) offers many areas of dispute and conflict. Bell aims to clarify scholarly and popular misconceptions about France, and to pave the way toward a better understanding of this key European nation's profound role in history.

To the end, Bell generously praises academics who, in his opinion, get things right, while scolding other historians who "boil away the complexity and flavor, leaving nothing but an insipid textbook broth of familiar facts." In his view, "identifying with individuals in the past is central to the writing of good history, and to the experience of reading it."

Shadows of Revolution will make compelling reading for anyone interested in the French Revolution, Napoleon, the notorious Dreyfus Affair, Vichy, and more recent turbulent events in France (the author also includes reflections on the January 2015 terrorist attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*). Nonetheless, scholarly readers who come armed with an in-depth knowledge of French history likely constitute the ideal audience for this book.

LEE POLEVOI (Spring 2016)

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