All historians possess a mind, personality, and outlook that affect their work so that everything they write is to some degree autobiographical. Why Morris Slavin chose to study the French Revolution and how he approached it in his numerous publications is the theme of this appreciation.

Slavin's unusual background helped shape his historical outlook. Born in Kiev, Russia, in 1913, he and his family lived through World War I and the Russian Revolutions of 1917. Emigrating to the United States with his parents, brother, and sister, he came of age during the Great Depression and worked at menial jobs to support his family. Despite all obstacles, Slavin was able to complete his education in the Youngstown, Ohio, public schools and at Ohio State University. Hard working and intelligent, Slavin would soon devote himself almost entirely to studying the political and social upheaval that marked the French Revolution.

From his earliest work to his final publication Slavin explored with persistence and perception the struggles of the popular classes and their radical leaders. Slavin viewed the French Revolution through the lens of the Russian such that his own political views – he remained a loyal supporter of Leon Trotsky throughout his life – determined his perspective on the people and events that drove the "revolution from below" from 1789 onward.

This paper focuses on three aspects of his work on the French Revolution: first, the scope and quality of his research; second, his concentration on economic and social issues; and third, his belief in the Revolution as a positive force in the historical development of humanity. It is based on a careful
reading of his numerous writings as well as my memories of him, which encompass some forty years. As a close friend of Morris Slavin, I enjoyed his company as well as admired his learning. My esteem for him both as a person and a scholar inevitably colors my attitudes towards his work.

Nowhere in his writings does Slavin adequately explain the origins of his fascination with the French Revolution. But he left a clue in a brief statement that he made to the editors of *Contemporary Authors*, published in 1986. He states simply that: "I became interested in the French Revolution during my teens, while still reading the [Frank] Merriwell novels, Sinclair Lewis, and Leo Tolstoy. As a child of the Depression I also became aware of the many problems arising from social injustice. My interest in the Sans-Culottes may be traced to this early experience."1 Another account, issued in 1988 on the occasion of a dinner held in his honor, states that during his teens, Slavin "read a history of France, written by an English historian, and was 'hooked.'" 2 The identity of this English historian unfortunately remains unknown.

Whatever the origins of his devotion to the study of the French Revolution, Slavin spent virtually all his long scholarly career examining it in detail. Beginning with his M. A. thesis, devoted to the Hébertist Commune of the Year II (1952) and continuing through his final collection of essays, *The Left and the French Revolution* (1995), he centered his attention on the lower classes and their radical leaders. Slavin belonged to a cluster of scholars born about the time of World War I who shared a common interest in "history from below" and who, perhaps not by coincidence, were leftist in their politics: Walter Markov, the German historian born in 1909; George Rudé, the British historian born in 1910; Albert Soboul, the French specialist on the Parisian sans-culottes, born in 1914; and Richard Cobb, the English scholar of the lower classes, born in 1914.

1 *Contemporary Authors*, 118 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1986), 433.
2 George Beelen, "Youngstown State University. Heritage Award Dinner Honoring Dr. Morris Slavin, June 10, 1988" [seven-page brochure] (Youngstown, Ohio, 1988).
1917. With the exception of Cobb, all remained ideologically leftist, Marxist certainly, and orthodox Communists throughout their lengthy careers.

From an interview that Slavin gave in June 1987 as part of a Youngstown State University oral history project, we learn much about his development as an historian. Slavin recalled that first at Youngstown College and then at Ohio State University he double majored in history and literature. He graduated in 1938 with a B. S. in education. Originally he considered entering journalism, but soon decided that he was unsuited for it because he was "insufficiently aggressive and thick-skinned." Instead he became a high school teacher in the Youngstown public schools. After serving in the military during World War II, Slavin returned home to teach, giving classes in American history by day as well as instructing at Youngstown College by night. Beginning in 1948 Slavin began to pursue his master's degree in history at the University of Pittsburgh. Because he needed to earn a living to support his family – he had married Sophie Lockshin in 1940 and the couple had a daughter, Jeanne – he could do so only during the summer months. By 1952 he had completed his M. A. thesis, "The Hébertist Commune of the Year II." Slavin did almost all his research for it in Cleveland at the Western Reserve University library, which possessed an excellent collection of works on the Revolution.

His thesis, which became the foundation for virtually all his later writings on the Revolution, reveals that his historical focus and methodology had already taken shape. They would remain largely the same over the next half century of his career. First, the thesis centered on Paris and on the popular agitation that marked the initial years of the Revolution, especially the

---

4 Ibid., 11.
5 Ibid., 12.
turbulent Year II. Slavin concentrated on the growing agitation of the Parisian sans-culottes for increased political, economic, and social concessions from the national government and on the role that popular agitators played in organizing the unrest. Second, he carefully examined the Enragés, then the Hébertists, discussing their social composition and goals as well as their eventual liquidation by the National Convention. Slavin traced the rise and fall of the radical Paris Commune, which asserted the will of the lower classes before it was brought to heel by the Convention in 1794. In his introduction to the thesis, he clearly presented his view of the Revolution as "seen from below":

The French sans-culottes saved the nation. They did so by means of their popular organs, the communes, the popular clubs, the revolutionary committees, the sections. If one speaks of the high point of a revolution as one where the masses exercise most pressures by their support of those individuals, parties, or programs which they think best represent their demands and requirements of the moment, then that point was reached when the Paris Commune together with the sections and the popular societies imposed its will on the Convention.

He added that "when the Commune became another governmental agency under the jurisdiction of the Committee of Public Safety, the Revolution, so far as the masses of France were concerned, was ended."7

Once he had received his master's degree, Slavin determined to pursue his graduate education. Having already done considerable research at Western Reserve University, he chose to enter its doctoral program. There Slavin worked under the direction of John Hall Stewart, a specialist in the French Revolution. For his dissertation, entitled "Left of the Mountain: The Enragés and the French Revolution," Slavin examined the Parisian radicals whom he had previously studied for his M. A. In chapter three of the master's thesis, "The Enragés and the Social Question," he had briefly touched upon the careers of

7 Ibid., 2.
three of their leaders: Jean Varlet, Jacques Roux, and Théophile Leclerc. Apart from the work of the French Trotskyist Daniel Guérin, whose two-volume study *La Lutte de classes sous la première république: Bourgeois et "bras nus"* appeared in 1946, very little of substance had been written concerning these radical agitators. Now Slavin devoted most of his 368-page dissertation not only to discussing in detail the careers of Varlet, Roux, and Leclerc, but also to the women activists Claire Lacombe and Pauline Léon, each of whom received a separate chapter. Unable to travel overseas because of costs, Slavin augmented his numerous sources by acquiring microfilm copies of numerous primary sources from the Archives Nationales and Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Library in London and the John Rylands Library in Manchester. These additional materials considerably broadened his knowledge and enabled him to deepen his understanding of the personalities and doctrines of the Enragés. Slavin also corresponded with such foreign scholars as Albert Soboul, Walter Markov, R. B. Rose and the Russian J. M. Zacher to obtain additional material as well as knowledgeable advice.

In his dissertation Slavin again concentrated on the Parisian sans-culottes, those small shopkeepers, artisans, and laborers whose willingness to resort to violence in order to eliminate their political enemies propelled the Revolution toward greater radicalism between 1789 and 1793. This social grouping – following Soboul he insisted that the sans-culottes did not constitute a well-defined social class – sought to impose direct democracy, assure a secure food supply, and stabilize the price of basic commodities. During the Terror they also pursued a policy of dechristianization that included the destruction of the authority of the Catholic Church, transforming Notre Dame cathedral into the Temple of Reason. In 1793, when food shortage and inflationary prices mounted sharply, their leaders

---

8 Ibid., 58-81.
9 On his sources, see the preface and bibliography of his "Left of the Mountain: The Enragés and the French Revolution" (Ph. D. diss., Western Reserve University, 1961).
the Enragés planned to resolve the problem by compelling the Convention to enact a limited Maximum on grain, flour, and bread, the staple of the sans-culotte diet. The Enragés also denounced speculators, profiteers, and hoarders whom they blamed for severe shortages and high prices. Slavin showed that the Enragé leaders also promoted direct democracy and considered deputies as mere commissioners whose responsibility lay in executing the will of the people. Matters of policy were debated in sectional societies and clubs, notably the radical Cordeliers, which began to rival the middle-class Jacobin club where individuals such as Robespierre held forth.

To Slavin the Enragés spoke for the lower classes of the French capital and seemed heroic figures. As radical democrats they attempted to carry the work of the Revolution beyond the limits that the middle-class deputies had set. In his words: "They made an important contribution to social and economic thought, not because they were profound theorists, but because they attempted to apply a program which was meant to benefit the great mass of the common people of Paris."¹⁰ Their radical demands and capacity to employ both verbal and physical violence led the threatened Convention to rein them in, arresting and eliminating them as leaders of the popular classes. By the end of 1793, Slavin concluded, "Roux was dead; Leclerc and Léon silenced; Claire Lacombe crushed, and Varlet neutralized. The Enragé movement had passed into history."¹¹ In the conclusion to his dissertation, Slavin commented that "The Enragé leaders were devoted to the Revolution in both thought and deed. At no time did they hesitate to risk their lives, their freedom, or their reputation. This implied not only an idealism which permeated their public and private life, but a consistent courage far above an ephemeral act of boldness. They persevered in their ideal to the very end."¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., abstract, 4.
¹¹ Ibid., 326.
¹² Ibid., 338.
"Left of the Mountain" demonstrated that Slavin had mastered a multiplicity of sources, both primary and secondary, and forged them into a coherent and forceful work. His methodology followed traditional form, with the all available evidence carefully weighed and conclusions drawn logically from the facts. The English historian William Doyle would later describe Slavin as an "old-fashioned empiricist," an accurate description as any.13

Slavin published three important books on the French Revolution, all completed after he had retired from Youngstown University in 1981. They all studied the Revolution "from below," providing detailed examinations of the popular classes, their organization, aims, and agitation during the first years of the period. Each dealt with the initial successes and eventual failure of the Parisian sans-culottes to secure their demands for democracy and economic controls.

In *The French Revolution in Miniature: Section Droits-de-l'Homme, 1789-1795* (1984) Slavin examined a section of central Paris in considerable detail. He probably chose it from among the forty-eight sections of the capital because the Enragé leader Jean Varlet lived there. Slavin for the first time traveled to France to conduct research at the Archives Nationales, Archives de Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, and Bibliothèque Nationale. He placed under the microscope the lives of the ordinary individuals who inhabited what today is still known as the Marais; he examined how they advanced the cause of the Revolution by their agitation in various journées and were, in turn, affected by its course. In particular he investigated the various political bodies that controlled the section as well as the growing economic distress that its inhabitants suffered in 1793-94. Notably Slavin provided brief biographies of the various officials (sectionnaires) who directed its daily affairs. Besides thoroughly inspecting the archival sources, he walked every

---

street, alley, and cul-de-sac of the former section so as to know it intimately. No doubt the book with its four hundred pages of text contains excessive detail, too many statistics, and an overabundance of personal names. But as the considerable number of footnotes and extensive bibliography prove, he wished to produce as thorough a study as Albert Soboul had done in his doctoral dissertation on the sans-culottes of Paris.

Slavin's *Making of an Insurrection: Parisian Sections and the Girondins* (1986) investigated why and how the *journées* of 31 May-1 June 1793, which ousted the moderate deputies from the Convention, were organized. He explained how the middle-class Montagnards won the sans-culottes over to their cause in order to eliminate their Girondin rivals. The book represents an expansion of the first two chapters of his M. A. thesis written some thirty-five years earlier and includes material borrowed from his doctoral dissertation, particularly information concerning the Enragés. But Slavin considerably deepened his knowledge by incorporating sources that he uncovered in the archives and libraries of Paris. Slavin repudiated efforts made by the "revisionist" historians François Furet and Denis Richet to minimize the importance of the popular insurrection. He concluded that the removal of the Girondins from power "may have saved the Revolution."14

His third major monograph, *The Hébertistes to the Guillotine: Anatomy of a "Conspiracy" in Revolutionary France* (1994), focused on the rise and fall of the radical leader Jacques René Hébert, editor of the scabrous *Le Père Duchesne*. It reworked chapters of his M. A. thesis, incorporating considerable fresh material gathered in the Paris archives as well as a host of secondary works. In particular it expanded both on the career of Hébert and on the Convention's destruction of Hébert and his followers in March 1794. Through his newspaper Hébert became the spokesman for the lower classes during the Terror, thereby challenging the authority of the Convention. Slavin insisted that

---

to destroy Hébert and his colleagues the Convention first slandered them, then organized a "farcical" trial, one that "amalgamated" a variety of individuals unconnected with each other to destroy them, allowing the accused no opportunity to defend themselves. As Slavin declared in his conclusion: "The condemnation and execution of the Hébertistes and those amalgamated with them ended the popular phase of the French Revolution . . . . The Revolution became a bureaucratic affair, led into safe channels that excluded the initiative from below." But by cutting off their popular base, the Jacobins prepared their own downfall a short while later in Thermidor.

Slavin obviously displayed considerable sympathy for the Enragés and Hébertists who led the common people. This compassion stems from his long-held political ideology. A Marxist in his historical outlook, he naturally displayed throughout his writings an affinity for the lower classes and their struggle to attain popular democracy and economic justice. Slavin always remained committed to the doctrines of Leon Trotsky, like himself a Jew born in the Ukraine. Trotsky's name appeared frequently, especially when Slavin discovered parallels between the French and the Russian Revolutions. As Slavin had already declared in the introduction of his M. A. thesis,

Only the Russian Revolution of 1917 is as wide sweeping in its effects on society and man [as the French Revolution of 1789]. Both revolutions were mass movements directed against the privileged groups in their respective countries. Both ended feudal property relations. Both began with a relatively mild program of reforms, gradually shifting to the left . . . . Both had to struggle against foreign intervention and to put down the counterrevolution by means of terror.

He then added significantly,

---

16 "The Hébertist Commune of the Year II," 1.
The Russian Revolution had its period of Thermidor when the Left Opposition of Trotsky was destroyed and the system of Stalin imposed. During the period of the supremacy of Robespierre one is tempted to ask whether the Great State had not made its appearance . . . . The transformation of the Russian Revolution into its monstrous totalitarianism has revealed the meaning of the Great State . . . . A revolution that shackles the masses in the process of revolt is a revolution which has ceased to live.  

Thus the defeat and execution of Hébert by Robespierre and the Jacobins in 1794 can be seen as a legitimate parallel with Stalin's elimination of Trotsky during the 1920s and the purge trial of his partisans in 1936. In his M. A. thesis Slavin called the trial of the followers of the Père Duchesne a "farce," one organized by the Convention to remove the popular radicals who appeared to threaten it. When he produced his book on Hébert forty-two years later, Slavin devoted an entire chapter to this "farce" of a trial and declared that the "analogy between the [Moscow] trials and the frame-up of the Hébertistes is striking." He noted that there were the same absurd charges, the same "amalgamation" of disparate individuals, the same slanders, and the same preordained outcome. During his long life, Slavin never wavered in his commitment to the cause of Trotsky or ever forgave Stalin for his tyranny and cruelties.

As attacks on the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution mounted during the 1970s and 1980s, Slavin remained loyal to the "orthodox" school of Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, and Albert Soboul. He clung to the traditional view that the desire of the ruling classes to protect their interests against demands from the middle and lower classes for a greater role in society and government led to the Revolution. He recapitulated the popular uprisings that took place during the French  

---

17 Ibid., 18.  
18 The Hébertistes to the Guillotine, 208.  
Revolution, from the capture of the Bastille to the Hebertists' abortive attempts at insurrection in 1794. "Movements from below," he observed, "constitute spontaneous revolutions that catch future Jacobins and Bolsheviks by surprise." 20

Slavin derided the revisionists and their emphasis on "political culture." He considered the term too imprecise to be useful, but he also believed that it was intended to replace the Marxist approach, thereby eliminating historical materialism and class conflict as explanations for the origins of the Revolution. Slavin never abandoned his faith in the actions of "anonymous men and women," the menu people who made the Revolution possible and successful. It was the "new revolutionary bureaucrats embodied in the Jacobin Club," he concluded, who finally broke the power of the people in 1794. 21

Although he always remained an enthusiast of revolution, Slavin never displayed a violent temperament. Rather, he always remained a warm, outgoing, and good-natured individual, hospitable and generous to his friends. Nor was he ever slovenly in his dress or coarse in his language like Père Duchesne. He remained an intellectual, a serious thinker who read widely and deeply. In his writings Slavin was as likely to quote Shakespeare as he was Marx. He lived surrounded by books and was usually immersed in one. Probably the question that he asked me most frequently whenever we met was: "Have you read . . .?" He followed up his query by providing a cogent analysis, whether positive or negative, of the volume in question. Nor was he merely a voracious reader. Until his final days he remained a scholar, preparing a book, article, or review for publication. His long life enabled him to produce works that much younger researchers might well envy. His sustained energy and enthusiasm for those who made revolutions possible marked all his output.

20 Ibid., 28.
Whatever else can be said about Morris Slavin, he remained an optimist about the future of humanity and persisted in his belief that revolutions, the French in particular, retained the power to inspire future generations. In concluding a harsh review of Simon Schama's *Citizens*, Slavin wrote: "[H]umanity continues to dream and strive for liberty, equality and fraternity. These noble ideals of the French Revolution will continue to inspire men and women everywhere. In this respect the Revolution lives on."  