Although the two major twentieth-century specialists in the history of the French Revolution—the Frenchman Georges Lefebvre and the American R. R. Palmer—met only twice in their long lives, they maintained a lengthy correspondence that lasted from World War II until Lefebvre's death in 1959. Begun shortly before the German invasion of France in June 1940, those letters that Lefebvre wrote to his American friend before 1947 have, unfortunately, been lost. But the twenty-three letters that Palmer retained provide a detailed record of Lefebvre's scholarship and private life that supply information unavailable elsewhere. This personal correspondence, never intended for publication, offers rare insights into the work and thought of the French historian, who remained very guarded about his private life. The letters also document how Palmer succeeded in making his friend well known on the American side of the Atlantic.

How did their close and lengthy friendship begin? Based on Palmer's own recollections, the reasonable assumption would be that Palmer had gotten into contact with Lefebvre in 1939, after he had come across a copy of Lefebvre's *Quatre-vingt-neuf*, published in Paris in July 1939. But while doing research at the Harry Ransom Center, located on the campus of the University of Texas, I came across a letter written by Palmer to the publisher Alfred A. Knopf indicating that Palmer had read


Lefebvre's two volumes in the French "Peuples et Civilisations" series, published in the 1930's. One that dealt with the Revolution had been co-authored with Raymond Guyot and Philippe Sagnac; the other was Lefebvre's magisterial study of Napoleon. In March 1940, Palmer wrote to Knopf, indicating his wish to translate one or both of them. Knopf seemed little interested in doing so.

But in April 1940 Palmer learned from his friend and fellow Revolutionary scholar, Leo Gershoy, about the appearance in July 1939 of Quatre-vingt-neuf, a study written by Lefebvre to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Revolution. By May 1940, Palmer had entered into correspondence with Lefebvre, who showed enthusiasm for the project, sending him an autographed copy of the book to work on. Within a few weeks Palmer had translated the introduction and conclusion and forwarded the manuscript to Knopf in hopes of having him publish it. Palmer considered Knopf a good choice as publisher because Knopf, who took a strong interest in translating European literature for marketing in the United States, had earlier published Albert Mathiez's The French Revolution and After Robespierre.

In his letter to Knopf in April 1940, Palmer declared that "[Lefebvre] is the greatest living authority on the French Revolution and has written a great many excellent studies of the period. I should think it would be highly desirable to have some of his work available in English. I can think of nothing more suitable than this sesquicentennial volume." A few weeks later, Palmer again wrote to Knopf extolling Lefebvre's study, describing it as "an excellent account of the origin and beginning of the Revolution," and observing that "it is better than anything
I know of in English on the causes of the Revolution." He sought to whet Knopf's interest by forwarding him a translation of the introduction and conclusion to Quatre-vingt-neuf. By then, however, the German invasion and occupation of France in June 1940, interrupted contact between Palmer and Lefebvre. Writing to Knopf on 19 June, Palmer could speak gloomily of "the impending destruction of France," but added hopefully that "we are undoubtedly on an upswing of emphasis on the foundations, historical and ideological, of democracy."

Only after the Liberation did the collaboration between Palmer and Lefebvre resume. The fact that Quatre-vingt-neuf was never copyrighted in France helped make publication overseas much easier since no fees needed to be paid to the publisher for the translation rights. With Lefebvre's "cordial cooperation," Palmer completed the translation by September 1947. Lefebvre himself remarked to Palmer that he had no financial interest in the matter and had made a gift of the manuscript to the French government in memory of the men of 1789. Whatever proceeds accumulated from the sale of the original or the translation would go to his Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française at the Sorbonne.

Princeton University Press issued the volume without the eight black-and-white plates that had appeared in the original text. These included a portrait of King Louis XVI and Jacques-Louis David's sketch for "The Tennis Court Oath." On the other hand, Palmer's version provided a detailed index of people and topics absent from the French edition. Palmer contributed a lengthy preface that introduced Lefebvre to his American readers and stressed his balanced approach to the study of the Revolution. Palmer remarked that the original "probably gives the best rounded picture of the Old Regime available in English

---

7 HRC-AAK, Palmer to Knopf, 6 June 1940.
8 HRC-AAK, Palmer to Knopf, 19 June 1940.
9 Ibid.
11 HRC-AAK, Palmer to Knopf, 10 June 1940.
since Tocqueville." He also praised Lefebvre for his deep understanding of French society, what Palmer styled his "exact perception of social classes," particularly the peasantry.

*The Coming of the French Revolution* received virtually unanimous praise from scholars. Crane Brinton, reviewing the book in *The Nation*, remarked that "M. Lefebvre's book is simply the best introduction to the study of the French Revolution available in English." What made the volume a "bestseller" was the decision that Princeton University Press made to have Knopf issue a paperback version in 1957 under the Vintage imprint. (*The Coming of the French Revolution* bears a striking cover illustration drawn by the radical artist Ben Shahn depicting a prisoner breaking the bars of his prison cell.) It went through three printings between June 1958 and March 1960. In his obituary of Lefebvre, written in collaboration with Leo Gershoy and Beatrice Hyslop, Palmer revealed that since 1947 some forty thousand copies of the English translation had been published, in both hard cover and paperback editions. Between 1967, when Princeton first produced its own paperback edition, and 1971, an additional four printings occurred. These are astonishing figures for a historical text, a mark of its widespread use in college classes.

According to Palmer, after the fall of France, the reactionary Vichy regime destroyed some eight thousand copies of the original French edition. Writing in her obituary of Lefebvre, Beatrice Hyslop repeated this figure, but blamed the destruction on the Nazis. She declared that "about 200 copies were preserved from Nazi destruction." But both Palmer and Hyslop

---

12 Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, Preface, xiii
13 Ibid., xiv.
overlooked that in 1949 and again in 1957, advertisements for *Quatre-vingt-neuf* appeared on the back cover of Lefebvre's journal *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*. These were not reprints, but copies dating from the original 1939 printing. Moreover, while studying at the University of Lille in the late 1950s, I was able to purchase a copy in mint (uncut) condition at a local bookstore. So a considerable number of copies must have survived the Occupation.

Lefebvre himself was gratified that his volume had done so well in America. As he wrote to Palmer on 5 July 1948, "I've been quite pleased with the welcome that your translation has received." But he then added, "Much less has been spoken about my book in France than in the United States. One is never a prophet in one's own country . . . !."\(^{19}\) Only in 1970, long after Lefebvre's death, did his student Albert Soboul reissue the book in France, using the photo offset process to reprint the original text while adding his own preface and a postface. In effect he sandwiched his mentor's prose between his own.\(^{20}\)

As an inexpensive paperback, the volume became a frequently assigned textbook in numerous college and university history classes throughout the United States. Both Lefebvre's straightforward prose and brevity combined with the absence of scholarly footnotes—Lefebvre inserted only one to explain that the National Assembly in 1789 had no stenographers to record the exact words spoken by the deputies—and bibliography, made the work seem less forbidding. We should not forget that the original volume had been written for the general French public in 1939 to commemorate the 150\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary of the outbreak of the Revolution and not for a narrow academic audience. Moreover, Palmer's smooth translation made it readable and accessible to an undergraduate audience.

---

\(^{19}\) Georges Lefebvre to R. R. Palmer, 5 July 1948. Copies of the letters written by Georges Lefebvre to R. R. Palmer, which are quoted extensively here, are in the possession of the author.

One feature of Palmer's translation must not be overlooked, however. As early as June 1940, Palmer decided to eliminate the last two paragraphs of Lefebvre's text.\textsuperscript{21} The precise reasons for this omission are unclear. Perhaps he considered the prose far too nationalistic and emotional. Curiously, Palmer did not mention the fact in his translation. Only Beatrice Hyslop seems to have realized that they had been silently eliminated.\textsuperscript{22} Fortunately, more than a half-century since \textit{The Coming of the French Revolution} first appeared, Timothy Tackett finally restored them to their rightful place. Here is the final paragraph of Tackett's 2005 version:

Youth of 1789! The Declaration [of the Rights of Man] is also a tradition, a glorious tradition. Listen, as you read it, to the voice of your forefathers, to those who shouted "Long live the Nation!" as they fought at Valmy, at Jemappes, and at Fleurus. They gave you freedom, a noble right that, in all the universe, only mankind can enjoy. They remind you that your fate is in your hands, and that the future of society depends on you alone. Be conscious of the danger. But since danger appeals to you, it should not make you shrink back. Consider the grandeur of your task, but also the dignity that this task bestows upon you. Would you renounce such responsibilities? Your ancestors have confidence in you. It is you who will soon be the Nation. Long Live the Nation!\textsuperscript{23}

Even before \textit{The Coming of the French Revolution} appeared in print, Palmer and Lefebvre had become good friends. Palmer, realizing the Frenchman's straightened economic conditions, sent him packages of food, for which Lefebvre was enormously grateful.\textsuperscript{24} As a scholar he joined Lefebvre's Société des études robespierristes in 1945 and frequently submitted articles and copies of his writings to Lefebvre's journal. In 1946, reviewing Palmer's \textit{Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France}, originally published in 1938, Lefebvre generously

\textsuperscript{21} HRC-AAK, Palmer to Knopf, 19 June 1940.
\textsuperscript{22} See Hyslop, "Georges Lefebvre," 279.
\textsuperscript{24} Lefebvre to Palmer, 29 April 1948.
praised the work for its patient examination of so many obscure texts. Yet he was forthright enough to mention Palmer's neglect of chronological order as well as his neglect of traditional Catholic writers.25 That same year, Lefebvre analyzed Palmer's article "The National Idea in France before the Revolution," published in *The Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940.26 In later issues of his journal Lefebvre frequently included references to Palmer's articles that had appeared in American journals, bringing them to the attention of his readers. Lefebvre even mentioned the second edition of Palmer's textbook, *A History of the Modern World*, when it appeared in 1956, praising it particularly for its extensive bibliography.27 But Lefebvre was also no doubt pleased that Palmer cited *The Coming of the French Revolution* among the titles readers of the text should consult.

For his part, Lefebvre deluged Palmer with questions about English-language sources he needed to update his volume on Napoleon. In 1950, for example, he inquired about citing a volume by Thurman W. Van Metre, *Economic History of the United States*, and another by Chester W. Wright with the same title, along with H. U. Faulkner's *American Economic History* in his bibliography.28 He also inquired about books he had seen mentioned in American periodicals but was unable to locate in France.

In the 1950s Palmer began work on his substantial examination of what he styled "The Age of the Democratic Revolution." The study emerged from his and Jacques Godechot's exploration of the "Atlantic Revolution," a wide-ranging thesis that they had put forward at the 1955 meeting in

26 Ibid., 87-88.
28 Lefebvre to Palmer, 4 November 1950.
Rome of the International Congress of Historical Sciences. Palmer wrote a detailed letter to Lefebvre outlining his arguments and outlook for what would become his first volume. In response Lefebvre devoted a lengthy reply to discussing the thesis, which he appears to have approved. In it he discussed at length the meaning of the word "democracy" and described its development in France since the Revolution. Throughout most of the period since 1789, he explained to his American friend, French politics had been largely controlled by the bourgeoisie. It had used elections by two or more degrees to ensure that the "notables" rather than the people controlled the government. Even though the Third Republic was supposedly based on universal suffrage, the Senate remained conservative because it was elected in stages. Lefebvre went on to assure Palmer that he would publish his article on the social composition of the Left under the Constituent Assembly in 1791—indeed, it appeared in the Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française in 1959. Even after Lefebvre's death, the editors of his journal continued to print articles written by Palmer and to mention his English-language publications.

The close friendship and collaboration between the two scholars seems all the more remarkable despite the considerable differences in political outlook between them. Palmer never seems to have discussed his views in public. Almost the only mention of his party affiliation appears in the entry he contributed to Contemporary Authors in 1965, when, in a paragraph dealing with his education and family, he simply indicated "Democrat." As for his religion, Palmer noted: "Presbyterian." No doubt, the very title of Palmer's most

---

30 Lefebvre to Palmer, 4 May 1958.
31 Ibid.
33 See his entry in Contemporary Authors, vol. 13-14 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1965), 333.
extensive work, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America*, reflects his outlook best. And certainly, even a cursory reading of his remarkably successful textbook, *A History of the Modern World*, first published in 1950, demonstrates his passion for democracy and distaste for extremism of both right and left. For his part, Palmer's student Isser Woloch, in an obituary that reviewed his mentor's long, productive career, concluded his observations by declaring that throughout his writings "all his own character was refracted—his independence of mind, his American-style pragmatism, and his abiding respect for liberal-democratic values."\(^{34}\)

As might be expected from a scholar who sympathized with the Revolution and held Robespierre in high esteem, Lefebvre remained far to the left politically. According to his student Albert Soboul, Lefebvre had been a socialist ever since the party (the SFIO) was established. His loyalty to the moderate socialism of Jean Jaurès, according to Soboul, led him to examine the works of Karl Marx, and, "without adopting all of Marx's views, he stressed the richness of Marxist thought as a method of research."\(^{35}\) Moreover, thanks to the four volumes that Jaurès contributed to the *Histoire socialiste*, Lefebvre could envision the Revolution as a series of class conflicts that originated in economic and social conditions. Unlike his predecessors, Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez, however, Lefebvre preferred to scrutinize agrarian problems, as he did in his doctoral dissertation on the peasants in the Nord Department (1924) and his *Questions agraires au temps de la Terreur* (1932).

During the 1930s, when the world economic crisis began to affect France, Lefebvre grew increasingly interested in the question of social classes and class conflict. His *Quatre-vingt-

---


35 Albert Soboul, "Georges Lefebvre, historien de la Révolution française (1874-1959)," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 32, no. 159 (1960): 3.
neuf, published in 1939, demonstrates this. After World War II, no doubt influenced by the role that Communists had played in the French Resistance and the decisive victories that the Red Army had won over the Nazis in Eastern Europe, Lefebvre moved closer to the Communist Party, although he never formally joined it. For example, he served on the editorial board of La Pensée, a monthly journal to which prominent party intellectuals in all fields contributed occasionally. It is notable that when Georges Lefebvre died, the party newspaper L'Humanité published a photo of Lefebvre on its front page and a detailed account of his life and work, written by Jean Massin, a party stalwart. Lefebvre, he wrote, "was perhaps the greatest French historian of our day."36

In the same 1960 memorial issue of the Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française to which Gershoy, Hyslop and Palmer contributed, a pupil of Lefebvre, René Garmy, commented that "Lefebvre had never made any secret of his admiration for Lenin nor his sympathy for the international Communist movement." Garmy quickly added, however, that "his intelligence was too subtle, too demanding for him to yield to dogmatism, to fanaticism, to accept without reservations a doctrine no matter how seductive it was." Garmy declared that Lefebvre found Marxism a useful doctrine for analyzing social and economic questions. And his Marxist outlook convinced him that capitalism was "irrevocably doomed."37

This assertion can be confirmed by Lefebvre's occasional references in his letters to Palmer of the problem of economic crises taking place in the West. Writing to his American friend in January 1949, for example, he commented that "it's being said here . . . that the economic crisis is beginning to develop in America, by the decline in the stock market most notably. As I've told you, it's this crisis that I fear principally because the unemployed can easily be persuaded that a war would provide

37 René Garmy, "Georges Lefebvre et l'homme (Souvenirs)," Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française 32, no. 159 (1960): 83.
them with work. We too are beginning to see the number of unemployed increase and this does nothing to improve our outlook."  

As late as May 1958, Lefebvre could write: "We are also greatly preoccupied by your "recession," for a crisis in the United States would impact us and the entire world."  

It might be noted that in the obituaries that Palmer wrote on Lefebvre, he never mentioned the elderly historian's gloomy prognostications about the decline of the West. And rarely did he refer to the Marxist interpretation that Lefebvre employed in his studies on the Revolution. During these same years Lefebvre's health became increasingly precarious. Regularly in his letters to Palmer he described his various illnesses and suffering. In January 1949, for example, he spoke of his lung congestion. "Fever and sulfanilamides have plunged me into a stupor for a long time. I am beginning to recover my senses, but I still lack strength."  

Later that year he informed his American friend of an attack of bronchitis that led his doctor to order that he remain indoors. "The worst is the depression that has halted my work for two months."  

At the end of 1951 he lamented to Palmer that he had suffered from a depression "that interrupted [his] work for several weeks."  

In the spring of 1954, the depression that followed his daughter's death and his own overwork led Lefebvre's doctor to confine him to bed to have "absolute rest." This regime meant no visitors, no letter writing, and (perhaps worst of all for a scholar) no reading. He was required to take oral medication as well as injections. This restrictive treatment lasted some three months. As part of his treatment Lefebvre spent several days in a sanatorium in southern France.  

In early 1956, the elderly

---

38 Lefebvre to Palmer, 18 June 1949.  
39 Lefebvre to Palmer, 4 May 1958.  
40 Lefebvre to Palmer, 23 January 1949.  
41 Lefebvre to Palmer, 20 October 1949.  
42 Lefebvre to Palmer, 26 December 1951.  
43 Lefebvre to Palmer, 1 June 1954.
A month before he died, Lefebvre wrote his final—and saddest—letter to Palmer. The letter was a reply to Palmer's request for information concerning his personal life and academic career. (Palmer was gathering information for an article he was preparing.) Suffering from a variety of ailments which had gravely weakened him, Lefebvre declared: "[My] strength has disappeared and work is impossible for me." He commented that it had taken him two days to prepare a detailed two-page missive to his American friend. The eighty-five-year-old concluded by saying that he could not write any more because he lacked the physical strength to continue.

Much of the material that Lefebvre had transmitted to Palmer appeared in an article "Georges Lefebvre: The Peasants and the French Revolution," published in The Journal of Modern History in December 1959. What had begun as a discussion of Lefebvre's work on the peasantry became an extensive obituary. Palmer reviewed Lefebvre's academic career and his long, slow rise to eminence as an historian of the Revolution. He then both summarized his French colleague's work in agrarian history and provided a lengthy, detailed analysis of Les Paysans du Nord, Lefebvre's massive doctoral dissertation published in 1924 and reissued in 1959 in an abbreviated version. Palmer warmly praised him for his extensive and meticulous research as well as his extensive insights into the class structure of Northern France and the peasants' outlook toward the land, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie. As Palmer concluded, Lefebvre "idealizes neither the peasantry nor the Revolution, nor does he suppose that the Revolution was altogether successful." On the other hand, according to Palmer, Lefebvre firmly believed that the Revolution "did destroy the seigneurial and aristocratic order"

---

44 Lefebvre to Palmer, 6 February 1956
45 Lefebvre to Palmer, 1 July 1959
47 Ibid.
and "introduced a more liberal and modern form of society." Palmer seemed genuinely awed by Lefebvre's achievements as a specialist in agrarian history. As he explained, his article served not only as a "tribute to [Lefebvre's] career and work," but also as a "memorial" to the man.48

In 1960 Palmer, along with his colleagues Leo Gershoy and Beatrice Hyslop, contributed a short obituary of Lefebvre to the commemorative issue of the *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*. The three historians recalled their various contacts with the French historian and summarized his extensive influence among numerous other American scholars. "Among professional historians," they stated, "numerous are those [who] recognized their debt to him." And through them, many undergraduates, who read his *Coming of the French Revolution* were also influenced. They spoke of the graduate students who went on to work in Revolutionary history and made their way to his home, which was always open to them."49 For his part, Palmer recalled that he had written *Twelve Who Ruled*, his account of the Committee of Public Safety, under the influence of Lefebvre.50 The trio of specialists ended their eulogy by declaring that Lefebvre had attracted the attention and earned the affection of numerous American historians. "The scholarly world has lost a master, and many among them a much-loved friend."51

Certainly the friendship between Palmer and Lefebvre proved mutually beneficial. Lefebvre's works inspired Palmer's own historical production, while his editorship of the *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* helped to bring Palmer's writings to the attention of an international audience. Palmer's translation of *Quatre-vingt-neuf* introduced the little-known French scholar to a wide Anglo-American audience. It also made him a familiar name among students in the United States. On a more personal level, Palmer provided valued food and information to the elderly historian after the war as well as

48 Ibid., 329.
50 Ibid., 105.
51 Ibid., 108.
offered him comfort at a time when his physical decline and personal problems were growing. Though they met only twice during their long professional lives, their correspondence demonstrates how their scholarly careers became permanently entwined.