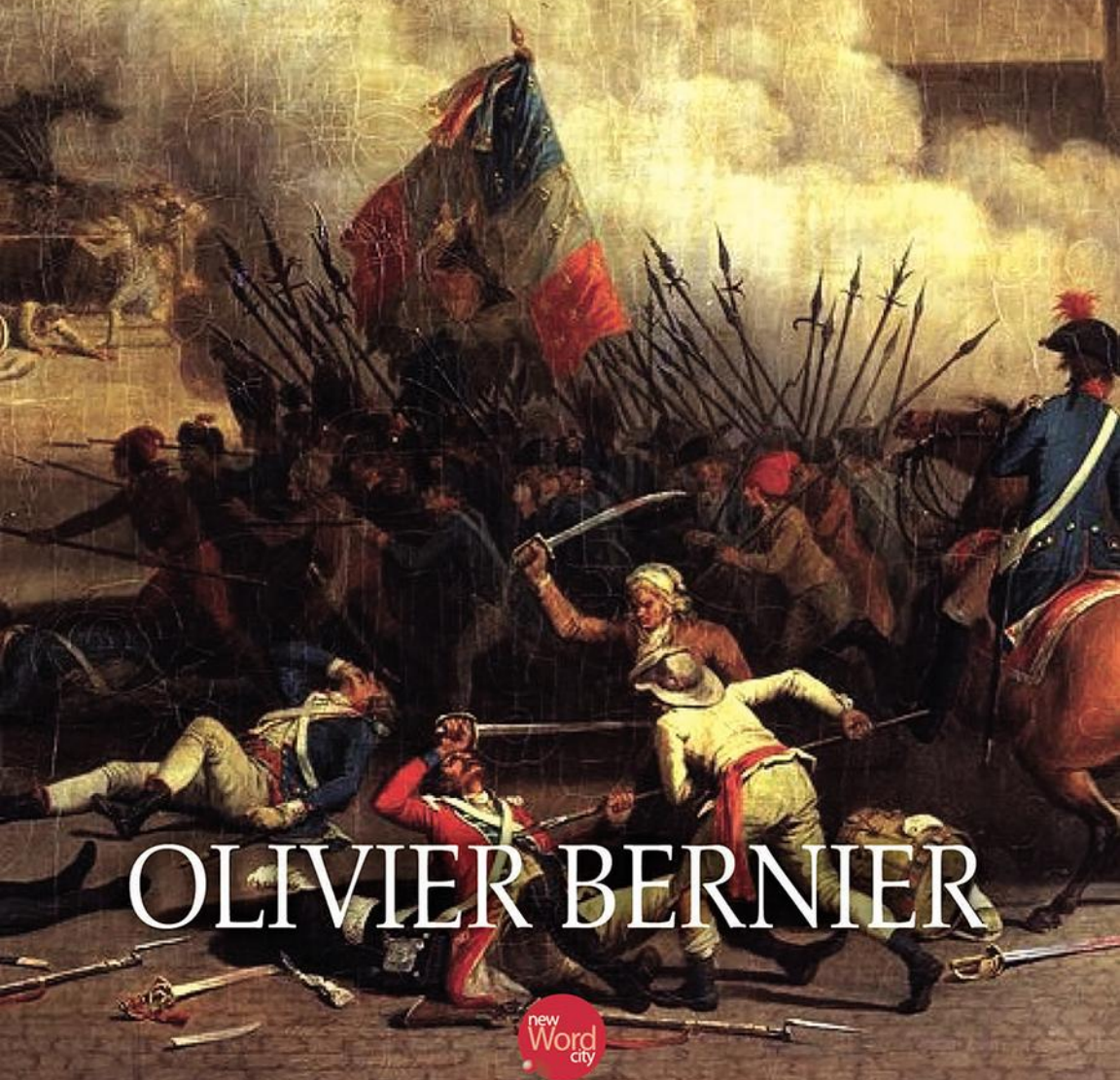


WORDS OF FIRE, DEEDS OF BLOOD

FRANCE IN REVOLUTION



OLIVIER BERNIER

WORDS OF FIRE,
DEEDS OF BLOOD
FRANCE IN REVOLUTION

OLIVIER BERNIER



PREFACE

The French Revolution, in less than four years, changed the world. From the moment Louis XVI walked up the steps of the guillotine, no other European monarch felt safe again; by the time France had given itself a constitution and a legislature, it became obvious to the peoples from Sicily to Siberia that this method was indeed the way a government should rule. The liberties the French claimed for themselves - of religion, of the press, of assembly, of thought; their right to be taxed only if their representatives had first consented; equality before the law and the end of privileges - all these startling innovations soon appeared to be the normal requirements without which no state could claim legitimacy.

That these liberties had already been won by the American people hardly seemed to matter; it was well understood that a new country like the United States was in no way comparable to the old European monarchies. It *did* matter that the results of the *French* Revolution were all a very far cry from the previous practices of the French and the other European governments. There, inequality was determined by law: Certain taxes were paid only by commoners, and certain punitive laws applied only to them; conversely, many important or lucrative positions - in the army, at court - were reserved for the nobility, while, in the Catholic countries, the Church was altogether free from the jurisdiction, financial and legal, of the state. The story of the Revolution, therefore, is to a great extent that of the fall of the monarchy and the replacement of a privileged society by one in which the ringing claim of "liberty, equality, fraternity" was at least partially implemented.

Of course, it did not happen all at once, but one of the fascinating aspects of the Revolution is the speed with which, after timid beginnings, the National Assembly claimed, for the very first time, what we have since come to think of as inalienable human rights. How the supposedly all-powerful king reacted, how his government crumbled or tried to resist, how his very conscience helped the process along is a story worth telling impartially, without the sentimentality that so often affects those historians who regret the monarchy, without the selective optimism displayed by those whose Marxist training colors their judgments.

Of course, the French Revolution had societal and economic

causes, but it was also a moment when people mattered, when cleverness or stupidity, eloquence or insensitivity could make an enormous difference. With a different cast of characters, the ancien régime might not have collapsed so fast or so completely. After the elimination of the king and queen, the Revolution continued on an increasingly wild and bloody course. Dissent became a crime, repression the order of the day. The very goals of the Revolution - liberty, equality, fraternity - were forgotten as the Republic struggled against domestic and foreign enemies, until, in yet another convulsion, Robespierre and his tyranny were overthrown.

Ever since that day, the Terror has fascinated many, and yet, spectacular though it was, it matters less than what came before. In May 1789, Louis XVI was an immensely popular monarch, and the French felt confident that they were entering a new Golden Age. Less than four years later, this revered monarch was beheaded. The real story here, the one that terrified all other European monarchs, is that of the rapid and irremediable collapse of the ancien régime. The structure of the state and the methods of government that had endured since the Middle Ages were suddenly seen to belong to another, dead, era. As for the trials and executions of the king and queen, these were vivid symbols of the new order: If the people, through their elected representatives, could sit in judgment on those who had been considered the chosen of God, then a new era had begun. When the consent of the governed replaced the obedience of the subject, a new legitimacy was defined, and the modern world was born.