

Right Answer, Wrong Label

by Clyde Wilson

**The American Counter Revolution:
A Retreat From Liberty, 1783-1800**

by Larry E. Tise

Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books;
634 pp., \$49.95



A good historian ought to make it clear where he is coming from rather than assume an impossible Olympian objectivity. Then, if he has handled his evidence honestly, he has fulfilled the demands of his craft—whether or not we agree with the interpretation he has placed upon his evidence. Ideally, interpretation should come separately from, and after, presentation of that evidence. Two historians, for instance, may agree that the New Deal was not really very radical a program. One of these may be pleased by this conclusion and the other regret it; both, however, in their honest description have done their job as historians. Their opinion *about* their finding, of course, is another question. (And as Sir Herbert Butterfield wisely warned long ago, historians' opinions can too easily become self-centered moral judgments, even preferences of taste masquerading as moral judgments.)

Larry Tise, by these criteria, is a good historian. He tells us up front (self-indulgently, alas, and at a little more length than necessary) what he is and where he is coming from: a liberal unhappy with what he considers the failed promise of the American Revolution. In the period he has under consideration, he believes that liberty (by which he means feminism and egalitarianism) was repudiated by its friends just as it was about to be realized in practice.

Tise provides us with a rich survey of evidence from America, Britain, Ireland, and France (including its colony of Santo Domingo) concerning shifts in public opinion during the French Revolution. Americans in this period, he believes, "marched from the worship of liberty to the worship of order." I would interpret what happened and why somewhat dif-

ferently, but I agree that the phenomena he describes took place. And recognizing that what Tise considers a "reaction" did indeed occur among thinking Americans advances our understanding beyond the usual superficialities and is therefore welcome, despite the problem of mislabeling.

If only the author did not assume that the natural goal and *summum bonum* of history is a feminist, multicultural, egalitarian society, then he would have it right. When one believes, however, that multicultural egalitarianism is the appointed end of all human affairs, one must assume some fault, some perverse deviation to be ferreted out to explain why utopia was not realized at that time. Why *did* Americans give themselves over to evil—that is, succumb to anti-egalitarian opinions and a preference for order after the War of Independence?

This approach depends, however, on the tacit assumption that when the American revolutionaries proclaimed the cause of liberty and the rights of man, as they certainly did, they meant the same thing by them as did an end-of-the-millennium liberal, or at least a French Jacobin. The catch, of course, is that they didn't. The "reaction" of opinion and action toward order, including an insistence on patriarchy and homogeneity of citizenship, that followed the American Revolution was not a betrayal of anything—it was merely the normal and natural expression of Americans' inheritance and experience and the consolidation of their achievements. We need only reflect on what might have ensued had Americans followed the path Tise thinks they ought to have taken: an American Terror, Napoleon, or Santo Domingo? (There was a Napoleon—Alexander Hamilton—waiting in the wings. To think such horrors could not have happened belongs to the same order of thinking as to say that communism did not fail because "true communism" was never tried.)

Americans could have taken no other path than what they chose to take and still remain themselves. They were predominantly serious Christians, and liberals have never understood the problem Christians have with the French Revolution—which itself precluded Jacobinism. Their social fabric and mores were Puritan in New England, acquisitive

bourgeois in the Middle States, and a volatile mixture of gentry and Border tribalism in the South. None of this lent itself to the kind of society prized by Professor Tise. Americans' conception of liberty arose from a solid legal and constitutional tradition and from real experience, not from speculation. It stipulated limited government of a kind not energized to pursue a feminist, multicultural utopia—a thing that it would never have occurred to them to pursue since the American people, unlike some Frenchmen, well understood that it had never existed in the history of the world, and never could exist. Americans, moreover, had a task before them—civilizing a continental wilderness—that only self-confident Anglo-Celtic males could have been expected to accomplish. It is ungrateful for a later generation, living at ease on their accomplishments, to find fault with them for not being as socially sensitive and noble as we supposedly are.

For Larry Tise, Thomas Jefferson is the greatest villain of all, "the most radical counter-revolutionary" of the period who provided the emotional and intellectual stimulus for reaction (that is, a preference for self-governing order over egalitarianism). Tise is accurate in this judgment: I salute him for identifying the Jefferson whom I have been celebrating in these pages and elsewhere for over 30 years, though in the end he mislabels the great man.

Edmund Burke had it right, as usual. Asked how he could defend the Americans and the Irish while being so adamantly against the French revolutionaries, he explained that there is a difference between the desire for liberty "which arises from Penury and irritation, from scorned loyalty, and rejected Allegiance" and that "which is Speculative in Origin." The latter, of course, is Jacobinism, then and now.

But take heart, Mr. Historian of the Counter-Revolution! The Jacobinism that the founders of American liberty so wisely rejected is fastened tightly enough upon us now, though its goals of course can never be achieved, only projected into some future when evil reaction will have been overcome. That, really, is a part of its charm.

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The Past as Prologue

by Jacob Neusner

**A People Apart: The Jews in Europe,
1789-1939**

by David Vital

Oxford: Oxford University Press;

941 pp., \$45.00



David Vital describes his work as a political history, whose subject is the exercise of legitimate violence. He recounts how the Jews of Europe addressed the political crisis that overtook them between the end of the *ancien regime* in 1789 and the collapse of their rebuilt social order in Europe in 1939: His subject is nothing less than the political evolution of the Jewish people.

Beginning with an account of Jewish politics over the long centuries of Christian rule in Europe, Vital proceeds to an analysis of “integration and fragmentation.” Having demonstrated how Enlightenment thinkers in England, France, the Germanys, Poland, and Russia all defined the Jews “as an encumbrance to be dealt with,” he considers early responses, fearful as well as positive, to political emancipation before turning to the formulation of “the Jewish Question”—that is to say, the re-characterization and re-demonization of the Jews. The second part of his account describes “movement” (pogroms, poverty, migration, decline, and the focus on Eastern European Jewry as “the question”), then moves on to “auto-emancipation” (the Jews’ reconsideration of themselves as a political entity, foreshadowing Zionism), and, finally, to “crystallization,” the crisis of the final third of the 19th century in which antisemitism emerged as a violent political movement.

Part III embraces World War I and Zionism; “Bolshevik Russia and the binding of its Jews,” “the great slaughter” of the period of the Bolshevik wars; the nation-state as grindstone and ancient frictions in the new Poland; Polish equivocation and Jewish ambivalence; the crushing of the German Jews; and, lastly, “denouement,” which describes Jewish political organization and the aims of Zionism, the needs of the Jews, pragmatism and honor, the final rejection, and—as epilogue—a couple of pages on

the culmination of a century and a half of Jewish history, amounting to the mass murder of more than five-and-a-half million Jews.

A sad story, but also a tale that has been told many times; the challenge presented by its dramatic power and form have proved irresistible to historians over the centuries. Indeed, just as the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. led to the formation of the Pentateuch and the authorized history from Genesis through Kings, so, quite naturally, have historians sought to identify, organize, and explain the events that led directly from 1789 to 1939. The particular perspective of Zionism, with its interest in the Jews’ taking control of their own destiny and acting on their own initiative, certainly compels a hearing, since many identify the creation of the state of Israel in 1948—not the destruction of European Jewry—as the proper epilogue to the tragedy.

Given the importance and massive complexity of the subject and the obvious control exhibited by Vital over his material, I wish I could report that the book is a success and deserves a wide reading. Alas, if within this ungainly sprawl of 900 pages there is a 300-page book waiting to emerge, Oxford’s editors have not helped to discover it. (The publisher’s slipshod approach is elsewhere apparent: a glued, not sewn, binding for a book of nearly 1,000 pages!) To put matters bluntly: *A People Apart* is not so much a weighty work of thought as a ponderous, heavy-handed cobbling together of little narratives into a single big, tedious, only occasionally coherent story.

Part of the problem is stylistic. Vital writes verbose, endless sentences strung out in paragraphs sometimes running for a page and a half. This in addition to truckloads of infelicitous word choices, acres of prose lacking any sense of rhythm or music, to say nothing of simple mistakes in grammar missed by the copy editor. There are sentences in the book that, reread three and four times, still prove beyond comprehension. Some are simply awkward, the product of a tin ear for language, as in the following passage:

And everything in the invertebrate and increasingly fragmented structure of Jewish society continues as before to militate against ideas, reflections, and programs being pulled together as a basis for coherent and co-ordinated action or even

the very simple declarations of common purpose and intention on which the least of political acts is necessarily contingent.

What can Vital possibly mean by that sentence? Imagine reading 940 pages of such soggy, clunky prose! Readers discovering for themselves that a random sampling yields still more appalling assaults on the English language will share my curiosity: Where were Lord Bullock’s and Sir William Deaken’s minds when this book came their way, and how could the editors at Oxford University Press be so utterly distracted as not to have noticed that this book is only marginally intelligible?

If Vital’s prose utterly lacks grace and music, his narrative is a match for it, being as ponderous, slow-witted, and heavy-handed as the language. Vital seems generally to have outlined his topics and constructed his paragraphs accordingly, resorting to transitions of a facile character for what he must have hoped would make for a sustained presentation. But history should be narrative, and, in the hands of a master, it is. Because Vital fails to compose a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, he fails to inform readers of what they need to know when he introduces a given subject, necessary to his outline but not logically called for by the narrative strategy he has adopted. The logic of his book is not a narrative logic, and so what coherence *A People Apart* has owes nothing to the traditional historical method which insists on presenting a well-shaped story with urgency and energy. As an historian, Vital appears to be competing for a Nobel Prize in Boredom.

Still, if the book is dull, the topic is not. The real problem is its heuristic assumption: The Jews, having long constituted a nation among other nations, in the 19th century faced the problem of finding a place for themselves within other nations as the old order, which had accommodated their particular nationality on its own terms, gave way. In response to this crisis, Zionism amounted to the re-nationalization of the Jewish nation. Presented in this way, the story of the Jews in Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries becomes the story of antisemitism and the Jewish response to it. Vital hands the antisemites a victory they did not earn: the power to define what matters about the Jews and their history. But this reading, by politicizing and externalizing “the