EPILOGUE:
THE RECESSION OF MAISTRE’S CONSIDERATIONS SUR LA FRANCE

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a panoramic view of the use made of Joseph de Maistre’s most famous pamphlet, the Considérations sur la France, in the historiography of the French Revolution. More precisely, we intend to gather evidence of the echoes left by the Considérations in later interpretations of the French Revolution, beginning with Germaine de Stæel’s Considérations sur la Révolution française, published in 1818.

Stæel’s pamphlet has been chosen as the starting point for our research because it represents a keystone book for historiography in general and for liberal historiography in particular, providing the first interpretation in which the French Revolution is seen as a whole, as an historical event at once already closed, having its roots in the past, and at the same time as an event which inaugurates a new epoch in history. However, another reason for choosing Stæel’s book is the fact that, although we find no mention of Maistre’s name in the work, the title as much as the moment of its publication made obligatory the reference to the Savoyard’s book, which was first published on French soil in 1814.¹

As for other important interpretations of the French Revolution produced during the Restoration—such as the works of Thiers, Mignet, Thierry, and Guizot—we found mention of Maistre and his Considérations only in Mignet’s Histoire de la Révolution française (1824), which reproduced the following passage from the second chapter of the Considérations: “But our descendants, who will worry very little about our sufferings and will dance on our graves, will laugh at our present ignorance; they will easily console themselves for the excesses

¹ Nevertheless, according to Jacques Godechot it is possible that Maistre’s Considérations may have served as inspiration for the title of Stæel’s pamphlet. See Jacques Godechot, Introduction to Considérations sur la Révolution française (1818) (Paris: Tallandier, 1983), 25.
that we have seen and that will have preserved the integrity of the most beautiful realm after that of heaven.”

On the conservative side, the plot theory—hinted at by Burke in his famous Reflections (1790) and further developed by Augustin Barruel in his Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme (1797)—prevailed as the most common and clearest response to the liberal interpretation of the French Revolution. Read as a conspiracy, the French Revolution appears as a violation of French history, something perpetrated by a few, but well-organized people, against a satisfied nation. This thesis, as Amos Hofman recalled, allowed the conservatives to deny both their share of guilt and the historical necessity of the Revolution.

This fact, allied with the susceptibilities aroused by the Considérations—for it advanced a circumstantial theory for the Terror—was responsible for the relatively scant attention the pamphlet received in the period that in theory should have welcomed it the most: during the Restoration, there were only four editions (1814, 1821, 1828, 1829) of the work. Nevertheless, it obtained great publicity during the rest of the nineteenth century, with twenty-two editions between 1834 and 1882.

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