

Goethe and the French Revolution

The French Revolution continues to provoke debate. Was it as a triumph for ‘progressive’ values, and the birth of political modernity, or merely a bout of violence which failed to realise its high ideals? The French Revolutionaries promised to remake France, and the world. Under the maxim ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’, they sought to create a free, equal, and democratic society, based on popular sovereignty. Most European intellectuals greeted at least the outbreak of the Revolution with optimism. Yet a titan of German culture, the poet and ducal privy councillor, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), did not. Denouncing the Revolution from the outset, Goethe later reflected on it as ‘the most terrible of events’. Why?

By closely analysing Goethe’s fictional literary writings from before and after 1789, this work seeks recurrent themes, patterns, inconsistencies, shifts of emphasis, and even contradictions in the political messages they present. This approach allows for the examination of ideas that the author may have been reluctant to utter in an official capacity, contributing to a deeper understanding not only of the nature of Goethe’s response to the Revolution, but also of his broader politics. Far from marking a watershed in his beliefs, it argues that the Revolution reinforced Goethe’s longstanding commitment to the Enlightenment. Goethe did not reject the Revolution because aristocratic patronage had turned a once open-minded liberal into a conformist reactionary, but because he feared that it was resurrecting the zealotry, intolerance, and brutality which had driven the religious conflicts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. A work for enthusiasts of history, politics, and literature alike, *Goethe and the French Revolution* illuminates how a major thinker of Western civilisation grappled with arguably the greatest event in human history, and invites renewed assessment of the latter’s legacy.