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978-0-521-47209-8 - Revolution and Political Conflict in the French Navy 1789–1794

William S. Cormack

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CHAPTER

1

THE FRENCH NAVY, THE REVOLUTION,
AND THE HISTORIANS

The history of the French navy during the crucial years of 1789–1794 has been largely ignored by historians of the French Revolution. While every textbook or survey of the period describes developments in the French army, discussion of the navy is limited to passing references to the loss of the Mediterranean fleet at Toulon or the sinking of *Le Vengeur*.¹ There are several detailed studies of the army which deal with the interaction between the Revolution and the troops, rather than campaigns or strategy,² but the situation of the fleet has been left to

¹ In Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From Its Origins to 1793*, trans. E. M. Evanson (1962; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) and *The French Revolution: From 1793 to 1799*, trans. J. H. Stewart and J. Friguglietti (1964; repr. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), a great number of pages are dedicated to the army of the Revolution, but almost none to the navy. Indeed, in the second volume, a section entitled “Maritime and Colonial Warfare,” pp. 17–21, concerns the British navy exclusively: the state of the French navy is given in one sentence. Similarly, Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799*, trans. A. Forest and C. Jones (Paris, 1962; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1975), contains nothing on the Revolutionary navy, while devoting much space to the army. Two recent surveys in English show similar disparity: D. M. G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815. Revolution and Counterrevolution* (London: Fontana Press, 1985); William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), has a good page on the pre-Revolutionary navy, p. 32, but little on developments after 1789. J. M. Thompson, *The French Revolution* (1943; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), is perhaps unique in featuring two entire pages on the naval situation, pp. 466–468, although he too says far more about developments in the army.

² See for example: Albert Soboul, *Les Soldats de l’an II* (Paris: le club français du livre, 1959); Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution: The Role and Development of the Line Army, 1789–1793* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–1794* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution. From Citizen-Soldiers to Instrument of Power*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Paris, 1979; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

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strictly naval history. Thus the period of the Revolutionary wars, 1793–1815, is placed within the broader context of the maritime rivalry between France and Great Britain throughout the eighteenth century, the “Second Hundred Years’ War.”³ The focus of the existing literature, therefore, is to explain the French fleet’s ineffectiveness up to its final disaster at Trafalgar, or why the French Revolutionary navy failed.

In his excellent study of the naval officer corps between the World Wars, Ronald Chalmers Hood described the burden of history which has weighed upon the French navy: “Its officers shared a generally pessimistic view of history, and they strove to prevent repeating it. At the heart of their soul searching was the quest for a way to avoid the recurring problem of losing their fleet just on the eve of some great successful venture.”⁴ This attitude has also characterized the historians who studied the French navy, most of them serving or retired naval officers themselves. Their explanations for the fleet’s failure between 1793 and 1815 have depicted the French Revolution as a catastrophe which destroyed the superb service bequeathed to France by Louis XVI. This historiographical tradition began in the nineteenth century with Jean-Pierre-Edmond Jurien de La Gravière, who wrote history while actively serving in the French fleet. Son of an Admiral who served during the Revolution, Jurien de La Gravière had a distinguished naval career which included action during the Crimean War and culminated in his promotion to Vice-Admiral in 1862.⁵ His *Guerres Maritimes sous la République et l’Empire* was the first history of the French navy during the Revolutionary period and it was written to persuade his own generation of the need to revitalize France’s naval power.⁶

³ For discussions of 1793–1815 within this context, see Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy. French Naval Policy, 1871–1904*, ed. Stephen S. Roberts (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 1–5, and Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 123–147.

⁴ Ronald Chalmers Hood, III, *Royal Republicans: The French Naval Dynasties Between the World Wars* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 7; see also pp. 7–16. The French Revolution is seen by the officers in this study as probably the worst of the successive disasters to befall the French fleet, and this view partly explains their animosity towards the Third Republic.

⁵ Etienne Taillemite, *Dictionnaire des marins français* (Paris: Editions Maritimes et d’Outre-Mer, 1982), p. 177. As well as writing history, Jurien de La Gravière published the memoirs of his father, Pierre-Roch Jurien de La Gravière, *Souvenirs d’un Amiral*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1860).

⁶ Jean-Pierre-Edmond Jurien de La Gravière, *Guerres Maritimes sous la République et l’Empire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Charpentier, 1847); see esp. II, pp. 236–292.

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Jurien de La Gravière explained the ultimate destruction of the French navy at Trafalgar by a strategic revolution in the British navy personified by Horatio Nelson, whose papers were a major source for his history. Nelson's audacity and rejection of traditionally cautious tactics were justified because the French navy was no longer equal to the British navy, as it had been during the War of American Independence.⁷ This disequilibrium dated from 1793, according to Jurien de La Gravière, and stemmed partly from the dilapidation of naval material, but more importantly from the disorganization of personnel. The Revolution's erosion of all social bonds destroyed passive obedience and subordination in the fleet, and rebellious sailors had to be replaced by levies of fishermen and inexperienced conscripts. Worse was the imprisonment and execution of the noble officers of the *Grand Corps* during the Terror.⁸

Jurien de La Gravière was interested primarily in the maritime war with Great Britain and he gave few details on the navy's situation from 1789 to 1793. Historians who followed him, however, would stress those early years of the Revolution as the period which assured subsequent decay and defeat. Léon Guérin, in his massive maritime history of France published in the 1850s, argued that the Revolution had inherited an excellent fleet and quickly began to destroy it by unleashing popular violence against its commanders. The National Assembly's failure to punish the perpetrators of such attacks was a signal for the collapse of discipline and the dissolution of the officer corps.⁹ When insubordination became general during the mutiny at Brest in 1790, "France was already defeated at sea"¹⁰ long before the declaration of war. Yet Guérin condemned Revolutionary politicians for more than condoning destructive anarchy. While chaos prevailed in the ports, the Constituent Assembly considered proposals to reorganize the navy, and Guérin portrayed these debates as both unnecessarily divisive and utterly naive. This, he thought, was particularly true of the suggestions to assimilate the fighting navy with the merchant marine.¹¹ For Guérin,

⁷ Ibid., I, pp. 2–10; esp. p. 9.

⁸ Ibid., I, pp. 52–55.

⁹ Léon Guérin, *Histoire maritime de France*, 6 vols. (Paris: Dufour, Mulat et Boulanger, 1851–1856), V, p. 234.

¹⁰ Ibid., V, p. 268.

¹¹ Ibid., V, pp. 277–278, 281–290.

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such ideas were in direct opposition with naval realities. Indeed, he saw the Assembly's new organization of the navy as symbolizing the decline of French naval power.

Guérin's distrust and disdain for the meddling of politicians in naval affairs became a hallmark for future histories of this subject, as did his defence of naval professionalism. This theme was further developed by Troude, the successor to Guérin and Jurien de La Gravière, in his *Batailles navales de la France*.¹² Troude described the navy as an institution as well as a battle fleet. In this context, all French naval disasters were attributed to "vices of organization."¹³ If the exclusivism of the officer corps of the Old Regime had encouraged disobedience to higher authority, Troude thought the egalitarianism of the Revolution had similarly damaging effects on naval discipline. Like Guérin, Troude believed that the promotion of merchant officers to command units of the fleet by virtue of their Revolutionary *civisme* was the "height of blindness."¹⁴ The elimination of "independence," the cause of past defeats, required the organization of a professional naval officer corps which was well trained but also highly disciplined. Such a development had only begun, according to Troude, under Louis XVI and was brought to an abrupt end by Revolutionary reforms.

Naval historians who followed Troude would repeat that the Revolutionary Assemblies were in grave error when they tried to dispense with professional officers. None would state this argument more categorically than American Alfred Thayer Mahan. Where Troude stressed the need to uphold successful organization, Mahan condemned French governments during the Revolutionary period for ignoring the "immutable principles of sea power."¹⁵ The British navy and its success in the Revolutionary wars demonstrated these principles or laws of sea power, but Mahan used French history as an effective foil. Thus, Mahan argued, the attempts to replace naval professionals with merchant captains or, worse still, with elected officers could only have proved disastrous. The

¹² O. Troude, *Batailles navales de la France*, 4 vols. (Paris: Challamel, 1867–1868), II, p. 273.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 247–252.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 263.

¹⁵ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1898), I, esp. pp. 35–41, 49–64. For a discussion of Mahan's positivism, see Donald M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867–1914* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 60–82.

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application of theory by the Revolutionaries with “no appreciation of the factors conditioning efficiency at sea,”¹⁶ also extended to the Convention’s elimination of the corps of trained sea-gunners and its failure to preserve discipline among crews. Mahan certainly disapproved of the insubordination in French squadrons and ports, but his most damning criticism of the Revolution was for its amateur interference with a professional navy.

These major themes regarding the Revolution’s impact on the navy were reiterated throughout the nineteenth century and, taken together, characterize a pattern of interpretation. This is not to say that the naval historians who followed, and drew heavily upon, Jurien de La Gravière, Guérin and Troude did not vary in their approach to the subject or their emphasis on certain aspects. Charles Rouvier was far more sympathetic to the Republican regime than his predecessors. The avowed purpose of his *Histoire des marins français sous la République* was not to lay blame for disaster, but to exonerate those sailors, officers and Revolutionary administrators who made heroic efforts under difficult circumstances.¹⁷ Edouard Chevalier, however, had little sympathy for the Revolutionaries in his *Histoire de la marine française sous la première République*, which is perhaps the standard work on this subject. Chevalier’s main concern was naval operations, but he argued that political struggles in the ports and the activities of the Jacobin Clubs affected the situation of the fleet profoundly.¹⁸ Maurice Loir wrote several essays on the navy during the Revolution and contributed a valuable work on the state of the French navy in 1789.¹⁹ Many of these writers shared an unfortunate predilection to blame supposed English espionage and treachery for contributing to the disintegration, rather than defeat, of the French fleet: “Perfidious Albion” was denounced with particular vehemence in relation to the disaster at Toulon in 1793.²⁰ French naval historians were united fundamentally, however, in

¹⁶ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, I, p. 37.

¹⁷ Charles Rouvier, *Histoire des marins français sous la République (de 1789 à 1803)* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1868), esp. pp. 1–3.

¹⁸ Edouard Chevalier, *Histoire de la marine française sous la première République* (Paris: Hachette, 1886), see esp. pp. 66–72, 95–108.

¹⁹ Maurice Loir, *Etudes d’histoire maritime. Révolution – Restauration – Empire* (Paris and Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1901); *La Marine royale en 1789* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1892). The latter study fits the larger interpretative pattern by describing the superb fleet on the eve of its destruction.

²⁰ For general hostility and suspicion towards the English enemy, see, for example: Guérin, V, pp. 218, 237, 273, 327; Rouvier, pp. 25, 100–102, 113–114. Regarding

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their indictment of the Revolution for interfering with naval organization, stimulating insubordination, and for persecuting professional sea officers.

What is particularly striking about this interpretation is its resiliency. Although the pattern was formulated in the mid-nineteenth century, more recent French studies of the Revolutionary navy have, in general, restated the traditional position. Joannès Tramond's maritime history of France, published in 1916 under the direction of the *Service historique de l'Etat-Major de la Marine*, included a scholarly and thoughtful section on the Revolution, but one which was hardly new in its explanation of the fall of French naval power.²¹ René Jouan's history of the French navy, which appeared in 1950, conformed even more closely to the views of nineteenth-century naval historians.²² Jouan's repetition of old arguments was hardly surprising given his reliance upon secondary sources. The same certainly cannot be said of Etienne Taillemite's recent publication, *L'Histoire ignorée de la marine française*. Taillemite, former Inspector-General of the French Archives, has unmatched knowledge of the Marine Series and this excellent survey was grounded firmly upon those collections. The book argued that French governments and society have been historically ignorant of maritime affairs and their importance, and it discussed the Revolution's effect on the navy in this context.²³ Taillemite's interpretation showed a sophisticated understanding of economic forces, social conditions, and the structures of naval organization, yet in the end his conclusions were those of his prede-

Toulon, Paul Cottin, *Toulon et les Anglais en 1793* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1898), esp. pp. 397–410, shows how the nationalist "Perfidious Albion" theme could encompass both pro-Revolutionary sentiment and sympathy for French rebels at the same time: the English are damned for gaining control of Toulon by treachery and for their cruelty in abandoning their French allies. The constant was the supposedly implacable English hostility to the French navy. For a recent example of this view, see Jacques Ferrier, "L'événement de Toulon du 28 août 1793," *Bulletin de l'Académie du Var* (1985), esp. pp. 150, 170–171. The theme is also important in the historiography of Counter-Revolution. Maurice Hutt, *Chouannerie and Counter-Revolution. Puisaye, the Princes and the British Government in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 325 notes that the disastrous Quiberon landing of 1795 is seen by some French writers as a sequel to Toulon in England's plot to cripple France and mutilate her navy.

²¹ Joannès Tramond, *Manuel d'histoire maritime de la France des origines à 1815* (Paris, 1916; repr. Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1947), pp. 549–580.

²² René Jouan, *Histoire de la marine française* (Paris: Payot, 1950), pp. 173–236.

²³ Etienne Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée de la marine française* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1988), pp. 279–291.

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cessors: the Revolution destroyed the French navy at its apogee by sanctioning indiscipline, alienating professional officers, and by overturning the existing institutions. The publication of Taillemite's survey was followed closely by the appearance of Joseph Martray's *La destruction de la marine française par la Révolution*. This work was not one of research but, in the author's words, one of "reflection": it is highly derivative of Taillemite, although lacking his depth and accuracy. Martray's major argument was that ideological sectarianism destroyed the navy, yet he provided no real analysis of Revolutionary ideology and its impact on naval personnel.²⁴ Martray may have aspired to provocative reinterpretation, but, in reality, he has merely reiterated nineteenth-century wisdom.

A notable exception to this pattern is *Marines et Révolution*, by Martine Acerra and Jean Meyer, which goes far beyond the restatement of traditional arguments. In the preface, the authors presented their naval history as one which does not focus on battles, but on the relatively unknown human, financial, and logistical factors.²⁵ They placed the Revolutionary naval war in an international perspective, not only as the turning point in the "Second Hundred Years' War" but as the culmination of a European naval arms race during the 1780s. Considerable technological progress accompanied this rearmament phenomenon, which stemmed largely from rivalry over international commerce.²⁶ Despite discussion of all European naval powers, however, the book is primarily an examination of the French navy during the Revolutionary period. Acerra and Meyer broke with previous studies by arguing that the navy in 1789 suffered from important structural weaknesses. These included tensions within the officer corps, an inadequate reserve of trained seamen, insufficient supplies of timber and other primary resources, and the French state's financial weakness.²⁷ These structural problems made the Revolutionary navy terribly fragile. Acerra and Meyer emphasized that the larger financial and economic situations following 1789 affected naval construction and mobilization profoundly.²⁸ Similarly the authors examined radicalization of the naval ports, which

²⁴ Joseph Martray, *La destruction de la marine française par la Révolution* (Paris: Editions France Empire, 1988), see esp. pp. 12–17, 57–71, 231–243.

²⁵ Martine Acerra and Jean Meyer, *Marines et Révolution* (Rennes: Editions Ouest-France, 1988), p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, see esp. pp. 11–27, 55–80, 134–139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, see esp. pp. 90–93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, see esp. pp. 152–154, 165–169.

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influenced insubordination and officer emigration, in the light of the most recent social and demographic studies.²⁹ *Marines et Révolution*, unlike traditional treatments of this subject, does not remove the navy from its social and economic context. Acerra and Meyer suggested that the Battle of the Nile in 1798, not Trafalgar, was the disaster from which the French navy could not recover, and the central theme of the book is to explain the underlying factors which led to this defeat. Thus, despite the authors' novel examination of the topic, this valuable study reiterates the question which dominates naval histories: why did the French Revolutionary navy fail?

A recent article by Jonathan Dull exposed the problematic assumptions underlying this standard question.³⁰ The French navy's defeats between 1793 and 1815 were in keeping with the pattern of the entire eighteenth century, with the exception of the American War of Independence. French maritime success in that conflict, Dull argued, can be attributed to alliances which enabled France to overcome British superiority in number of ships and overall naval resources. In February 1793, however, the French navy faced its stronger British opponent without allies and the quantitative obstacles became insurmountable after the loss of the Mediterranean fleet: according to Dull, the effects of the Revolution on the officer corps or naval organization were largely irrelevant to the question of the navy's failure. Moreover, the concept of failure is itself misleading. Naval war is too often seen only in terms of ship losses incurred in battle, rather than in terms of the state's greater interests. Dull argued that the French navy did, in fact, contribute to the achievement of France's major war aims between 1793 and 1801, chiefly by enduring. By continuing to pose a threat, the French fleet forced Britain to expend energy and resources, creating enormous expenses which helped prevent a conclusion to the war reflective of the British navy's triumphs in battle.

One might also argue that a victorious navy was simply not essential to French national survival in the way it was to Great Britain's, and that the demands and expectations placed upon the two fleets were markedly different. The question of the French navy's relative success or failure during this period is thus more complicated than some historians have suggested. These complex issues of naval strategy and

²⁹ *Ibid.*, see esp. pp. 104–113, 120–126, 132–133.

³⁰ Jonathan R. Dull, "Why did the French Revolutionary Navy Fail?," *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850. Proceedings* 18: 2 (1989), 121–137.

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foreign policy will not be discussed in depth, however, because they lie outside the specific focus of this study. The history of the navy during the Revolution need not be restricted to strictly military concerns. In an article on the Constituent Assembly's Marine Committee, Norman Hampson stated:

There is a sense in which all naval history is general history, since the structure and preoccupations of a state influence both the services which it demands of its fleets and the type of naval organization appropriate to their performance. This relationship is most obvious in periods of social and political revolution when the navy, like other institutions, finds itself out of harmony with the principles of the new order.³¹

As Hampson argued, navies reflect the states which build them and the societies which surround them. The value of examining the interaction between fleets and revolutionary upheavals has been demonstrated by studies such as Norman Saul's insightful discussion of the Russian Baltic Fleet in 1917, or Bernard Capp's recent history of the English navy from 1648 to 1660.³² Thus the history of the French navy between 1789 and 1794 has significance far beyond battles and strategy; it could shed light on the fundamental nature of the Revolution itself.

This survey began with the suggestion that historians of the Revolution have shown little interest in the navy. Three important exceptions to this rule should be noted which belong outside the edifice of naval history discussed above. Unlike those whose primary concern was the navy, for whom the Revolution was only important as its destroyer, these historians were interested chiefly in the Revolutionary struggle and used naval affairs as illustrations of the larger issues at stake. While the French naval historians often wished to influence contemporary naval policy, Oscar Havard and Léon Lévy-Schneider were deeply concerned with the uncertain French politics of their own day and, although of diametrically opposing views, both used history to support political positions bearing on the future of the Third Republic.

³¹ Norman Hampson, "The 'Comité de Marine' of the Constituent Assembly," *The Historical Journal*, 2 (1959), 130.

³² Norman Saul, *Sailors in Revolt: The Russian Baltic Fleet in 1917* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Bernard Capp, *Cromwell's Navy: The Fleet and the English Revolution 1648–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). See also: Daniel Horn, *Mutiny on the High Seas: The Imperial German Naval Mutinies of World War One* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1973); Hood, *Royal Republicans*, esp. pp. 148–183.

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Havard's *Histoire de la Révolution dans les ports de guerre* is a unique study of the events of the Revolution which occurred in the naval ports: one volume concerned Toulon and the second the Atlantic ports, principally Brest. Although published in 1911–1913, Havard's work remains useful as a source of otherwise unpublished documentary material. The study was, however, the product of strong political prejudice and the analysis of the naval situation was subordinated to a vitriolic condemnation of every aspect of the Revolution. Havard was a ferocious defender of "Throne and Altar" and his interpretation can best be termed ultra-royalist. He viewed the Revolution's changes to naval organization as only part of a deadly and unjust assault on the institution of the monarchy, and he linked the persecution of naval officers led by popular societies in the ports to a vast masonic and anti-French conspiracy.³³ His evaluation of Jeanbon Saint-André, the Revolutionary leader most closely associated with the fate of the navy, illustrates the extremity of Havard's interpretation. This bizarre portrayal brought together Havard's antipathy for Protestants and his profound suspicion of the English. Havard, relying upon dubious evidence, claimed that Jeanbon plotted to deliver Brest to the British: while he concealed the true motives for his severity against the officer corps behind a mask of fierce Republicanism, Jeanbon, the former Huguenot pastor, sought to destroy the navy as personal revenge against Catholic France.³⁴

Lévy-Schneider's massive biography of Jeanbon Saint-André countered this image of an insidious conspirator effectively. This study depicted the *conventionnel* as a patriotic and dedicated servant of France and the Republic, particularly because of his heroic efforts to revitalize the fleet during his missions to Brest.³⁵ Jeanbon, member of the Committee of Public Safety, was the Montagnards' naval expert and his biographer was much concerned with the changing situation of the navy throughout the Revolution. The book was based upon thorough and painstaking primary research and has been the best source for the

³³ Oscar Havard, *Histoire de la Révolution dans les ports de guerre*, 2 vols. (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1911–1913), II, pp. 52–59, 82, 164, *passim*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 292–303, 307–308, 311–314. Havard's only evidence of Jeanbon's plot is the *mémoires* of Lieutenant Louis Besson, a naval officer who speculated that only a treacherous arrangement with the British could explain the persecution and dismissal of talented commanders, and a quotation by Admiral Truguet in a 1797 issue of *Républicain français*.

³⁵ Léon Lévy-Schneider, *Le conventionnel Jeanbon Saint-André*, 2 vols. (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1901), I, pp. 476–581, 623–661; II, pp. 705–794.