On July 14, 1789, a Parisian mob stormed the infamous Bastille, effectively marking the beginning of one of the most significant periods in history. The French Revolution brought about sweeping changes as citizens overthrew the House of Bourbon and established the First Republic. The Revolution also provided men such as Napoleon Bonaparte with the means to advance according to their virtues and talents, ultimately resulting in the collapse of the ancient, monarchical structure of Europe. But what was the cause of the French Revolution? The answer to this question has been debated among historians for many years. In Origins of the French Revolution, Professor William Doyle summarizes past theories on this subject, while also attempting to explain how recent research has altered how many historians view the Revolution.

Doyle divides his book into two parts: an examination of the writings on the origins of the French Revolution since 1939, and an explanation of what historians now view as the causes of the breakdown of the ancien régime. Doyle states that although the two parts are meant to complement each other, those more interested in one part should have no problem in bypassing the other.

Part one of Doyle’s book appears to offer more appeal to scholars and students interested in the historiography of the French Revolution during the past one hundred years. Doyle asserts that by the 1940s, a general consensus had emerged among historians in regard to the causes of the French Revolution. In 1939, Georges Lefebvre, a Marxist and the leading authority on the Revolution, published his most influential book entitled Quatre-Vingt-Neuf. Lefebvre asserted that the main cause of the Revolution was the rise of the bourgeoisie, a view that would become widely accepted among French historians. Doyle states that although historians in France were largely content with Lefebvre’s interpretation, scholars outside the francophone world soon challenged his view and offered alternative explanations. During the 1960s, the research of Alfred Cobban uncovered additional problems with Lefebvre’s theory, causing many scholars to reinvestigate the origins of the French Revolution. As a result, the consensus eventually collapsed, and historians were left with a new body of research from which to form their own conclusions.

In the second part of Doyle’s book, he summarizes this research and provides his own interpretation of it. Doyle describes every aspect of French political structure prior to the Revolution, while also describing how events in the years leading to 1789 provided the ideal climate for social and political reform. The financial crisis of the French monarchy, caused by numerous wars and general mismanagement of the government, was undoubtedly the most significant event leading to the Revolution. Doyle asserts that the strain on the finances, coupled with the unwillingness of French government officials to attempt any sort of structural reforms, made the fall of the old regime inevitable. According to Doyle, the ideology of the French Revolution, expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, was by no means new and had existed long before the Enlightenment. The collapse of the old regime created a “vacuum of power” as well as the need for a new system of government, and the revolutionaries were merely reacting to problems that had long needed to be addressed. Thus, according to Doyle, “The
French Revolution had not been made by revolutionaries. It would be truer to say that the revolutionaries had been created by the Revolution” (213).

Doyle does an excellent job of presenting the various views concerning the origins of the French Revolution. While he also offers his own analysis, he welcomes criticism and acknowledges that future research will undoubtedly reveal flaws in his view. *Origins of the French Revolution* is extremely well written and is worth reading for anyone interested in modern European history.

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