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Were we terrorists? History, terrorism, and the French Resistance

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Title:

Were we terrorists? History, terrorism, and the French Resistance

Abstract:

This article argues that scholars of historical terrorism should abandon the practice of

defining the phenomenon in favour of prioritising past understandings of terrorist violence.

Research into the history of terrorism often uses a definition informed by contemporary

concerns to reveal previous incidents and outbreaks of terrorism. This approach speaks more

to the concerns of the present than those of the past. We must refocus our attention on how

people in history understood terrorism, and to whom and to what they applied the term. This

approach can open avenues of investigation into neglected or sensitive subjects, with the

example of the violence of the French Resistance explored here. Historians have rejected the

use of the term 'terrorism' to describe Resistance action, preferring instead to use military or

paramilitary terminology. However, Resistance violence was understood in several ways and

the resisters' own rejection of the terrorist label was not total.

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What links the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, the Allied bombing of German cities during the Second World War, and the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001? The answer is that all three acts may be understood as terrorism, at least according to the scholarly literature on the subject. The twenty-first-century reader needs little convincing of the fact that Al-Qaeda's hijacking of several passenger jets and their subsequent use as missiles against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon was a terrorist act. To convince the reader that Caesar's assassins and the pilots of the RAF and the USAF were terrorists is a little more difficult.

Much depends on one's definition of terrorism. Violence described as terrorist has taken many forms, and has been committed around the world by an array of groups and individuals. But what *is* terrorism? The answer to this question may seem straightforward: we know terrorism when we see it.[1] However, in the scholarly literature, to arrive at a definition that speaks to all forms of terrorism, not just the most recent occurrences, has proved problematic. Walter Laqueur concluded in 1977 that the search for a definition of terrorism that could account for its many varieties would prove fruitless (Laqueur, 2012). Nevertheless, researchers from many academic disciplines have formulated at least 260 definitions of terrorism (Schmid, 2012; Schmid, 2011; Jackson, 2008). Attempts to arrive at a consensus definition have encountered difficulties. Alex P. Schmid's 2011 twelve-point, 'Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism', would doubtless prove problematic for some scholars for it allows for the state perpetration of terrorism; the capacity of states to commit terrorism is a bone of contention in the field (Schmid, 2012; Jarvis and Lister, 2014). Furthermore, as Ariel Merari points out, Schmid's analysis of definitions draws largely on the work of Western academics and policy experts; it is likely that non-Western authors have

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[1] With regard to the definition of terrorism, an oft-quoted anecdote in the literature on terrorism recounts the response of US Justice Potter Stewart when in 1964 he was asked to make a ruling based on what constituted 'pornography'. Stewart was unable to define pornography but argued, 'I know it when I see it'; (Laqueur, 2009).

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different points of view (Merari, 2016). Despite the proliferation of definitions in the

literature, few scholars continue to engage solely in the practice of conceptualising the

phenomenon (Jackson, 2008). It is more common for authors to recognise the difficulty in

defining terrorism before they appropriate a definition that they find most suitable for their

own purposes, with a few tweaks here and there.[2] Ondrej Ditrych is thus correct in his

assessment that scholars' lamentations over the difficulty of defining their object have

become a meaningless ritual (Ditrych, 2014).

Definitions of terrorism have tended to speak to the concerns of the present. Much

research in the field has stemmed from the desire of governments, policy experts, and

academics to 'solve' the problem of extremist Islamist terror that confronts us today. Yet

historians are now beginning to take a greater interest in terrorism. Martin A. Miller's 2013

The Foundations of Modern Terrorism, for example, tackles the history of the subject from

the point of view of both sub-state and state terror (Miller, 2013). The 2014 *Routledge*

History of Terrorism has become an essential starting point for any student of terrorism (Law,

2014).   The essays in this collection examine not only historical examples of terrorist

violence but also a number of conceptual challenges, too. Beyond these broad overviews of

terrorism, Richard Bach Jensen's *The Battle against Anarchist Terrorism* (2013) offers a

comprehensive international account of the campaign against anarchist violence in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Meanwhile, scholars in other fields continue to

write histories of the phenomenon: the contributors to the 2004 *Histoire du terrorisme de*

l'antiquité à Daech (translated into English in 2007 and further expanded in 2016) were

drawn from the fields of strategic and security studies, psychology, medicine, and ethnology,

as well as from history (Chaliand and Blin, 2004).

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[2] For example, Appelbaum writes, 'To the minimal definition of terrorism proposed by Laqueur, "the systematic use of murder, injury, and destruction, or the threat of such acts, aimed at achieving political ends', I am adding another minimal condition: criminality coupled with justifiability", (Appelbaum, 2015).

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Historical work has largely adopted the long-established method of defining the

phenomenon before looking for it in history. Even when a new definition of terrorism is not

proffered, an attempt to reduce the various definitions to a handful of essential components is

attempted, with differing results.[3] Yet if many researchers have asked 'how can we define

terrorism?', fewer have posed the question, '*should* we define terrorism?' The practice of

defining an object entails certain problems that too few scholars in the field of terrorism

studies recognise in their work. As Kevin Passmore writes, 'historians must define the

boundaries of their object of study, but they must remember that they *choose* these limits

from many possibilities. Since their object does not exist prior to studying it, it can have no

essential quality' (Passmore, 2013). Scholars of terrorism – including historians - frequently

arrive at a definition of their subject in the present and project this definition back through

history. The inherent assumption is that terrorism is an objective phenomenon that can be

observed in any time and place if only we have the right tools to do so; we in the present will

know terrorism when we see it in the past. Johannes Dillinger, for example, uses a definition

of terrorism 'widely accepted by criminologists and law enforcement agencies' to

characterise early modern arsonists as terrorists. Dillinger recognises the anachronism in his

approach but argues that it could help to reveal the 'true scope of terrorism and terrorist

scares as historical phenomena' (Dillinger, 2006). This approach prioritises presentist

notions of terrorism when the concern of historians should be to illuminate and explore the

understandings and attitudes of the past. Too few historians of terrorism recognise both the

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[3] Ariel Merari claims that, '[t]here are three common elements in the definitions [of terrorism]: (1) the use of violence; (2) political objectives; and (3) the intention of sowing fear in a target population' (Merari, 2016). On the other hand, Jussi M. Hanhimäki and Bernhard Blumenau determine that the three features of terrorism are 'a) the use or threat of violence; b) the victims of terrorist acts are often chosen at random to cause an impact; c) the intention to create psychological effects beyond the immediate targets; and d) a political change (normally by groups that lack influence or power) is expected to follow the act' (Hanhimäki and Blumenau, 2013) .

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essentialism in their definitions and the ahistorical nature of a method that perceives terrorist

history stretching far back into the mists of time, before even the word itself was first spoken.

Historians must abandon the practice of defining terrorism. To define and to label is

an act that too often permits the voice of the present to drown out that of the past and we

cannot count on the fact that people in the past recognised terrorism as we do today. We

must take our lead instead from the ways in which historical actors understood terrorism and

to whom and to what they applied the term. This approach will free us not only from

essentialism but also from the moral quandary that can obstruct historical inquiry. Such is the

power of the word 'terrorist' to undermine and delegitimise its object that to apply it to

historical groups who fought for a just cause is controversial. Consequently, acts of violence

have gone unexamined or reframed to fit a more palatable definition at the expense of

enquiry into historical understandings of terrorism. With this in mind, this article re-

examines understandings of terrorism in wartime France, when both the Occupier and the

Resistance used violence labelled 'terrorist'.

I

'Terrorism' as a term was first used – and in a positive sense - to describe the French

Revolution's *régime de la terreur* that would weed out and eliminate counter-revolutionaries.

Following the fall of Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794, the aims and methods of

terrorism were discredited. A year later, Anglo-Irish writer and politician Edmund Burke's

polemic against the Revolution and 'those Hell hounds called Terrorists' ensured that

terrorism was thenceforth understood, in English as in French, as a heinous crime (Hoffman,

2006; Laqueur, 2012; Townshend, 2002).

However, scholars have determined that the history of terrorism – or what *they*

consider to be terrorism – stretches back further than 1793. Andrew Sinclair perceives

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terrorism in the mythical stories of Achilles and Hector (Sinclair, 2003). Randall D. Law's

2009 *Terrorism: A History* is more specific: the first act of historical terrorism occurred in

647 BCE when Assyrian emperor Assurnasirpla II terrorised the city of Susa. The Assyrians'

brutal murder of the Susa rebels was, according to Law, the 'first time in recorded history'

that violence had been used to send a message; the communicative function of this violence

thus marks it out as terrorist (Law, 2009). Steven Pinker, on the other hand, locates the

origins of terrorism some 700 years later in the murderous campaign of the Sicarii assassins

in Judea (Pinker, 2011). Other scholars are less specific with their dating of terrorism: for

Pamala L. Griset and Sue Mahan, 'to study the history of terrorism is to study the history of

human civilization', while Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin determine that terrorism 'is

probably as old as war itself' (Griset and Mahan, 2003; Chaliand and Blin, 2016).

From these beginnings, scholars have identified terrorism during the ancient,

medieval, and early modern periods. Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries the Thugs

went on a murderous rampage, inspired by a reinterpretation of Hinduism and killing

hundreds of thousands of people through strangulation. Meanwhile, the Assassins posed a

threat to the Turkish Seljuk empire in Peria and Syria between 1090 and 1275 (Hoffman,

2006; Rapoport, 2012 (Chaliand and Blion, 2016). The lay reader may be struck by the

discovery that familiar instances of violence were in fact acts of terrorism; the 1605

Gunpowder Plot was an instance of 'religious terrorism' (Griset and Mahan, 2003).

The problem with the examples given above is that contemporaries could not possibly

have conceived of such violence as terrorism for the simple fact that the concept, not to

mention the word, did not exist. Only through imposing our own understandings of terrorism

onto the past can we distinguish these 'terrorists before the letter' or, to put it another way,

the terrorists-without-knowing-it. This approach is ahistorical and can lead to instances of

tortuous reasoning. Robert Appelbaum's study of what he defines as terrorism in early

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modern England, Scotland, and France, explains how terrorism could exist before its name:

'If you can think terrorism, with or without a word to identify it, then you can think about and

with it and at the same time support, revile, or defy it; you can do it or defend against it or

stand aghast at what it has done; you can speculate about it and morally respond to its

intrusions into the political life of a society' (Appelbaum, 2015).

To claim that terrorism can be identified in history before the coining of the term is to

deny the political and cultural significance and impact of the word. To label an act of

violence, a group, or an individual 'terrorist' is a political act designed to influence the

audience. The labelling relies on a framework of ideas, values, and meanings associated with

the term at a given moment in time. Consequently, terrorism is not as old as civilisation

itself; it is as old as the discourse that invented it and from which it draws its meaning

(Ditrych, 2014). This discourse is not fixed; it is multifaceted and subject to prevalent

national and international influences. The discourse of terrorism may therefore change but

the phenomenon of terrorism cannot exist without it; there is no 'terrorism before the letter'.

Study of terrorism in the modern era has not escaped the presentism of its ancient,

medieval, and early modern counterparts. Michael Burleigh's 2008 cultural history of

terrorist violence begins in 1858 with the establishment of the Irish Fenians, the first of

several groups that Burleigh identifies as most relevant to understanding contemporary

terrorism (Burleigh, 2008). Meanwhile, John Merriman's 2009 *The Dynamite Club* explains

how French anarchist Emile Henry, 'ignited the age of modern terror', with his 1894

bombing of a Parisian restaurant (Merriman, 2009). Conversely, Bruce Hoffman dates

'modern, international terrorism', to 22 July 1968, when gunmen from the Popular Front for

the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an El Al passenger flight from Rome to Tel Aviv. From

that moment, Hoffman claims, terrorists operated beyond the borders of a particular state,

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seeking to strike their enemy's assets, installations, and populations wherever they were around the world (Hoffman, 2006).

Since the attacks in New York City on 11 September 2001, the notion of a 'new' terrorism has emerged. Peter R. Neumann argues that terrorism after 9/11 assumed a novel form because it was perpetrated by transnational networks, inspired by religion, and seeking 'mass-casualty attacks against civilians' with 'excessive violence'. Its 'old' counterpart – which was committed by nationalist or Marxist groups against 'legitimate targets' according to the 'rules of engagement' – was less terrifying (Neumann, 2009). Texts that do not refer explicitly to new terrorism betray the influence of the concept, implying that today's terrorism is more deadly than its antecedents. The timeline at the beginning of Rosemary HT O'Kane's 2007 *Terrorism* lists thirteen incidents of terrorism committed around the globe in 2006 alone, compared to just one terrorist act during the 1890s (anarchist Emile Henry's 1894 bombing of the Café Terminus in Paris). O'Kane, however, does not include in the chronology the numerous anarchist attacks committed throughout Europe during the 1880s and 1890s, nor does it include the 1886 Chicago Haymarket bombing or the 1901 assassination of US President William McKinley, all of which were doubtless terrifying to contemporaries (O'Kane, 2007).

'New' terrorism has proved a difficult theory to dislodge given that media and government alike have presented the threat of twenty-first century terrorism as unprecedented in its scale, brutality, and evil (Duyvestyn, 2012). There has been an 'avalanche of studies' on Islamic terrorism during 2000-2007 at the expense of work on the manifestations of the phenomenon prior to the 1960s; only one in 50 articles published examined historical acts of terrorism (Silke, 2009; Ranstorp, 2009). Even works on historical terrorism can suffer from short-sightedness, perceiving the object of their research as somehow less dangerous than the 'hyperterrorists' of today (Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite, 2010).

To write the history of terrorism – and avoid the problems inherent to the definitional process - we must refocus our attention on historical discourses of terrorism. In this respect, Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass's 1996 *Terror and Taboo* is salutary. In this book, Zulaika and Douglass deconstruct the discourse of terrorism that emerged in the West during the 1970s, arguing that it, 'becomes more relevant to examine the nature of the behaviour labelled "terrorism", as well as the labelling process itself, rather than to focus upon the ostensible "face value" of particular terrorist events and episodes' (Zulaika and Douglass, 1996). Their method may be applied to other periods and subjects in the field of terrorism studies. Several recent works have taken this path. Lisa Stampnitzky's excellent 2013 *Disciplining Terror* examines the 'invention' of the terrorism expert and terrorism studies as an academic discipline after the 1970s. While Stampnitzky's focus is not on historical terrorism, historians should pay attention to her argument that 'the concept of terrorism is socially constructed'(Stampnitzky, 2013). The search for its 'true meaning' is not her concern and nor should it be the historian's.

Ondrej Ditrych's 2014 *Tracing the Discourses of Terrorism* rejects the exercise of defining terrorism, '[which endows] it with a certain essential and eternal substance'. Working on the basis that '[t]here is no terrorism beyond the discourse of terrorism', Ditrych examines how states constructed this discourse and its real-world effects on global politics (Ditrych, 2014). We should add that non-state actors also produce a discourse of terrorism that is constructed according to a political, social, and cultural context, thus contributing to historical understandings. Ditrych's approach might be attributed to what Richard Jackson has called the 'literary turn' in terrorism studies. Accordingly, 'terrorism' is a 'cultural construct' and a 'social fact', an 'empty signifier' that can be understood only according to 'the way in which it is discursively constructed through language and social practices', in a given context (Jackson, 2015). The method used in Jackson's 2007 article on the

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construction of Islamic terrorism in the press and academia is instructive (Jackson, 2007).

Analysis of how the word was understood and deployed can reveal much about a society

precisely because 'terrorism' is so bound up with temporal political and cultural meaning; it

is a repository for a diverse set of concerns and 'a fable of the sinister times in which we live'

(Zulaika and Douglass, 1996).

II

In the history of terrorism, the Second World War presents something of a lacuna. Histories

generally make only cursory references to the wartime 'terrorism' of the Nazi state and

resistance groups (for example see Laqueur, 2012; Miller, 2013; Chaliand and Blin, 2016).

On the other hand, Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Klaus Weinhauer's essay on terrorism

incorporates the partisans of the Second World War into a discussion of anti-colonial

terrorism between the 1920s and the 1990s. Haupt and Weinhauer suggest that wartime

resistance practices exerted a major influence on post-war forms of political violence,

particularly in blurring the boundary between civilian and combatant (Haupt and Weinhauer,

2011).

It is usual to exclude wartime resistance movements from histories of terrorism both

on scientific grounds – they do not conform to such-or-such a definition of terrorism – and on

moral grounds – the justness of anti-Nazi violence cannot be compared to the unjust and

illegitimate violence of terrorism (Pedersen and Holm, 1998). Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid has

thus termed the subject of terrorism during wartime 'vexatious'. Dháibhéid is aware of the

potential for controversy with her inclusion of French resister Jean Garcin's memoir, *We

Were Terrorists*, in her 2017 collection of biographies, *Terrorist Histories*. Such is her

concern that Dháibhéid explains away Garcin's terrorism with the fact that his actions (and

those of the French Resistance) have since 'accrued something of a degree of acceptability,

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whether by virtue of the passage of time or the perceived justification of the motivation'.

This position leads to the problematic conclusion that Garcin's acts were 'political violence',

defined as 'terrorism that has "worked"' (Dháibhéid, 2017).

The violence of the French resistance is a blind spot in the historiography of the Dark

Years. Research has taken two paths. Firstly, work has focused on violence perpetrated

against resisters, rather than violence inflicted *by* resisters (Piketty, 2008). To some extent,

this focus stems from the quality and content of the available sources. The difficulty with

which some former resisters related acts of violence means that their testimonies and

memoirs tend either to exclude such happenings or to recount them in a perfunctory or

euphemistic manner. Furthermore, some post-war interviews with resisters who referred to

violent incidents were redacted and possibly even destroyed (Piketty, 2008; René-Bazin,

2010). Conversely, the desires of certain individuals and groups to shore up morale during the

war (not to mention their own resistance credentials after it) prompted exaggeration of

violence and even its invention (Liaigre, 2015). In his 2015 *Fighters in the Shadows*, Robert

Gildea recounts an incident from the archives of resistance fighter Albert Ouzoulias in which

a communist commando attacked 'a German parade goose-stepping along the Champs-

Elysées'. However, Roger Bourderon finds no evidence to corroborate Ouzoulias's story

(Gildea, 2015; Bourderon, 2012). Franck Liaigre, author of an excellent 2015 study of the

communist Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP), is therefore wary of resistance testimonies,

hitherto considered 'sacred' and 'incontestable', for he finds them to be 'often vague, even

wrong, guided by political or ideological considerations or the desire to honour the memory

of lost resisters' (Liaigre, 2015). Liaigre's study instead draws on the archives of Vichy's

police forces, the richness of which he attributes to the unfortunate reality that, once caught,

resisters talked.

Secondly, historians have tended to classify the resistance's armed struggle according to military or paramilitary categories such as 'urban guerrilla', 'partisan warfare', 'subversive warfare', and 'civil war'. The use of the term terrorism to describe resistance violence is rejected out of hand because this violence was neither indiscriminate nor directed at civilians (Marco *et al*, 2006; Wieviorka, 2005; Bédarida, 1996). Olivier Wieviorka goes so far as to describe the resistance strategy as 'counterterrorism' against the terrorist regimes of Vichy and the Nazi occupier (Wieviorka, 2016). Ultimately, it is difficult to escape the moral question inherent to examining the resistance and its violence. Historians have thus sought to use any label but 'terrorism' (Merari, 2016).

Both the Vichy regime and the Nazis denounced resisters as terrorists. While we could dismiss this label as propaganda (which it surely was), in doing so we would fail to consider contemporary understandings of wartime terrorism and what they may reveal to us. It was under the Vichy regime that the term "terrorism" first appeared in French law. On 5 June 1943, Marshall Pétain's regime established special sections within appeal courts for the trial of crimes that promoted or encouraged, "terrorism, communism, anarchy, social or national subversion," or, "rebellion against the established social order", punishable by forced labour or death ("Loi no. 318 du 5 juin 1943," 1943). Vichy's Minister of Justice Maurice Gabode stated that in the context of growing resistance violence the threat of civil war was real; he thus sought to ensure that magistrates came down hard on "terrorists" (Sansico, 2016). In January 1944, the crimes of assassination, murder, attempted assassination and attempted murder, and acts that would "promote terrorist activities" were rendered liable for court martial ("Loi no. 38 du 20 janvier 1944," 1944). The law now provided for the immediate execution of people caught in the process of committing such a crime or in cases where the culpability of the suspect was plain. Vichy's laws did not define terrorism and the application of the term remained at the discretion of the authorities.

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One perceives in the collaborationist press an understanding of terrorism as an un-French act committed at the behest of a hostile foreign government. In December 1941, Paul Marion's General Secretariat for Information, argued that terrorism threatened peace, the internal unity of the country, and the rebirth of France. The counter-terrorist struggle was thus framed as the patriotic duty of all French against foreigners and traitors directed from Moscow or London ("Pour sauvegarder l'avenir de la France," 1941). Nevertheless, collaborators understood resistance terrorism in complex ways. In March 1944, a senior official in Vichy's paramilitary police force, the Milice, noted with some dissatisfaction that officers tended to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists; the former were likely Gaullists, the latter communists (Azéma, 1990).

The relationship between resisters and terrorism was complex, too. In a 2003 interview, former resister Raymond Aubrac asked the questions, "Were the resisters terrorists because they fought in illegality? Was their combat legitimate because it was illegal?" The interview took place in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, at a time when "terrorism" had taken on a renewed sense of illegitimacy. However, Aubrac, who understood a clear difference between the indiscriminate violence of the Occupier and the guerrilla of the resistance movements, did not reject the term: "I am proud to have been baptised a 'terrorist' by my enemies" (Aubrac, 2003).

During the Dark Years, few resisters accepted the term as readily as Aubrac did in 2003. One finds in the clandestine press a concerted campaign to combat Vichy's accusation of terrorism against the resistance movements. Resisters understood the power of the word to smear its target. Vichy's propaganda was "an evil all the more contagious for it plays above all *with words*" ("Pour le maquis… contre le terrorisme," n.d). It was feared that Vichy's campaign was gaining traction with members of the public. With details of "terrorist" crimes published daily in the press, "terrorism" was a frightening spectre about which everyone was

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speaking, whether they had witnessed an incident of violence or not ("Pour le maquis," n.d).

The Conseil National de la Résistance (CNR) was concerned enough to issue a statement

denying that resistance actions constituted terrorism ("La campagne contre le 'terrorisme',"

1943).

Given the perceived potency of Vichy's propaganda resistance groups sought to

combat the regime's rhetoric. A group in Marseille urged readers to challenge Vichy's

terrorism discourse wherever they encountered it, "in conversations, on the train, in queues,

at the cinema, etc" (*L'aube de la Liberté*, 1944). The underground press threw the enemy's

words back at him, labelling the actions of both the *Etat français* and the German Occupier as

terrorist (*Coup d'oeil sur la presse libre*, 1944). Such discourse perhaps reflected the fact

that some movements rejected the use of violence. Even the communist party, which would

later endorse guerrilla warfare against the Occupier, did not admit responsibility for its

attacks until summer 1942. Until that point the party had described certain acts of violent

resistance (such as the August 1941 killing of German soldier Moser by Pierre Georges in a

Parisian Metro station) as either a response to German provocation or the result of internecine

conflict between collaborators (Wieviorka, 2013; Liaigre, 2015). Resistance groups worked

to reframe their own violence in a more palatable fashion, as military operations. Attacks

were described as "*authentic acts of war*" committed by an elite of soldiers and "all French

worthy of the name" ("Le fait de la résistance,"1943; "Nous, les terroristes.," 1943).

According to the CNR's statement in November 1943, resisters were not terrorists but

"courageous patriots who harass the Occupier's troops, destroy his munitions dumps, obstruct

his war production and punish his accomplices" ("La campagne contre le 'terrorisme',"

1943). Emma Kathryn Kuby has suggested that the effort to frame resistance violence as a

'combat operation', was rooted in a male desire to reclaim a semblance of masculinity after

the defeat of 1940. Extra-legal violence took on an aura of legitimacy as long as it was

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committed in the name of masculine values such as justice, rather than the feminised passions

of hatred and rage (Kuby, 2011). A gendered history of resistance violence awaits to be

written. At this point, however, we may point to similar gendered understandings of

acceptable and unacceptable violence in interwar France and earlier (Millington, 2014).

Contrary to Vichy's portrayal of the resisters as bandits operating in the shadows, the groups

attempted to legitimise their violence by framing it as precise and surgical, aimed solely at

the Nazis and their French lackeys.

However, the resistance's rejection of the terrorist label was not total; several groups

were unafraid to publicise the violence of their action. *Libération* was willing to claim

responsibility for "terrorist" attacks: "[Vichy's] publicity does not displease us. In

"terrorism", there is terror: [the terror] that we inspire." Nevertheless, the newspaper was

still careful to frame the violence as "legal," and part of an "underground war" for liberation

("'Terrorisme' et insurrection nationale," 1943). According to the founder of *Défense de la

France*, Philippe Viannay, in 1943 the desperation of the hour presented a choice for all

French: to fight or to desert one's duty as a Frenchman. "Against those who refuse to fight,"

he continued, "we will use, if necessary, TERROR." This terror involved the assassination of

collaborators and police officers. As for the *mouchards* (informers), "A FRENCHMAN

WHO SELLS OUT ANOTHER FRENCHMAN DESERVES TO BE TORTURED"

(Indomitus [Philippe Viannay], 1943). *Combat* followed a similar line. The so-called

"terrorists" were nothing of the sort; in fact, legality rested with them as the "upholders of the

law." Those who were executed in "terrorist" attacks were simply paying for their crimes

against France ("Terroristes? Non: Justiciers!," 1943). Terrorism was thus understood as a

crime visited upon France from abroad. It was both the violence of French traitors in the pay

of Moscow or London, and French traitors operating at the behest of Vichy and Berlin.

Whichever side one was on, war could be waged in the name of France; terrorism could not.

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This may have significant implications for the framing of the terrorist threat in the post-war

years, not to mention current French debates about citizenship, immigration, and terrorism.

There are grounds, therefore, to revisit the subject of terrorism in wartime France.

We must do so not from the starting point of a definition of terrorism. We must analyse the

use of the term in its context, the meanings and representations that it signified, and the

contest over its application as a label. To do so is not to brand the resistance as terrorist but

to take seriously the attitudes and beliefs of contemporaries and to seek to explain these. This

is even more important given that Vichy's propaganda campaign was to some extent

successful: twenty-five years after the Liberation former resisters complained that their

neighbours considered them still to be little better than bandits and terrorists (Johnston,

1975). To ascribe a military character to resistance violence is to believe only the self-

representation of resisters. In fact, their violence was understood in a multitude of ways. For

some French, the resistance did indeed practice terrorism.

III

To write the history of terrorism is to reconstruct the representations and meanings of the

phenomenon in the past. Past understandings of terrorism are evident in the official

documents of states and the private and public discussions of cabinets and law-making

bodies; all reveal implicit and explicit knowledge of what terrorism was thought to be at the

time. The historic press is an invaluable source because, as today, newspapers spilled much

ink over terrorism (Jackson *et al*, 2011). The media recreated terrorist acts for public

consumption, placing the event in its perceived historical context (usually as the latest in a

series of supposedly linked attacks) and explaining it according to prevailing attitudes to, and

understandings of, terrorism and other attendant matters (Mannoni and Bonardi, 2003).

Cultural productions such as novels and films further help to reconstruct popular attitudes to

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terrorism (Laqueur, 1977). Each text must be 'examined for the labels, assumptions,

narratives, predicates, metaphors, inferences and arguments they deployed and the kinds of

existing cultural-political narratives and pre-existing texts they drew upon' (Jackson, 2007).

To whom, to what, and to what end did people in the past apply the terms terrorism and

terrorist? Which groups or individuals escaped the label? What values and assumptions did

the term contain? In what contexts was it deployed? These are but a few questions that

historians may begin with. We must be prepared for the disappointing discovery that past

societies disagreed as much as our own over the definition of terrorism. This was as true of

the instruments of state as of individual citizens (Saul, 2006). The sites and the stakes of

such contests must be examined.

Two problems may arise from the approach to historical terrorism outlined above.

Firstly, we must confront the contentious matter of state terrorism. To foreground past

understandings is to appreciate that state violence may be understood as terrorist only when

historical actors perceived it to be such. The results may disappoint those scholars who

desire to reveal the hypocrisy of Western states whose use of the term terrorism is founded on

politics and ideology. However, historians can investigate, too, how states have controlled

the discourse of terrorism and against whom they employed it.

Secondly, we may encounter terrorism where we do not wish to see it. As Dháibhéid

writes, 'the term "terrorist" has accrued a nigh-inescapable value judgement'; to use it is to

blacken, to tarnish, and to undermine (Dháibhéid, 2017). The power of the state to influence

perceptions of terrorism means that people in the past may have applied the term to groups

which, today, we would not consider (nor dare consider) to be terrorist. The historian may

escape such value judgements with a focus on historic discourses of the phenomenon; this

approach opens avenues of investigation that may previously have been left unexamined. We

cannot of course escape the understandings of terrorism of the age in which we live (the

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'know it when we see it' factor). However, we should remember that historical actors

likewise knew terrorism when they saw it.

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