

## **The French Revolution and Early European Revolutionary Terrorism**

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Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice...It is less a special principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most pressing needs.<sup>1</sup>

On 5 February 1794, Maximilien Robespierre chillingly defined what he meant by 'terror'. It was not a political programme or an ideology, but a means to an end: the triumph of republican democracy over its many enemies. The revolutionaries only used the precise terms 'terrorist', 'terrorism' or 'the Terror' later, in a hostile, retrospective way as they distanced themselves from the system as it had functioned in France in 1793-94.<sup>2</sup> The word 'terror' already had many uses, emotional, religious, military and judicial,<sup>3</sup> but the idea that France had endured a 'system of terror' was first expressed by the repentant Jacobin, Bertrand Barère, on 29 July 1794 – the day after his erstwhile colleague Robespierre had been guillotined.<sup>4</sup> The *Académie française* dictionary in 1798 defined *terrorisme* as a 'system, or regime of terror' and *terroriste* as 'an agent or partisan of the Terror that arose through the abuse of revolutionary measures'.<sup>5</sup> 'Terrorism', the surviving revolutionaries hoped, was an aberration, not a practice that might be employed in other times or places. Yet the dark memories of 1793-4 have imprinted themselves on revolutions ever since. This chapter falls into five sections. The first considers the Terror's antecedents; the second and third discuss the two main forms of French revolutionary terror: state-imposed coercion and popular violence. The fourth explores the revolutionaries' attempts to use terror for 'regeneration',

and the final part traces the impact of the French Revolution on the practices of terror up to 1848.

### *Antecedents*

Medieval and early modern states used violence (and the threat of it) to overawe their subjects and opponents, but the relationship between these earlier practices and those of the French Revolution are ambiguous. There were two ways in which the early state might have used terror: coercive violence to impose policy and a demonstration of the sovereign's punitive might. The organised persecution of religious dissent, such as the Albigensian Crusade, the medieval and the Spanish Inquisitions and the system imposed on Tudor England by Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's minister, when he enforced the Protestant Reformation, all foreshadowed later forms of state-imposed terror, although the militantly secular French revolutionaries would have denied any inspiration from these confessional models.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the revolutionaries used the memory of the Saint Bartholomew's day massacre of 1572, when French Protestants were slaughtered on royal orders during the Wars of Religion, as a fearful example of what, in vain, they wanted to avoid. Equally, the revolutionaries knew about the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. The sixteenth-century Florentine outlined the political uses of fear in *The Prince*: a prince should not worry about being thought cruel if that kept his subjects united and obedient. Ideally a ruler would want to be both loved and feared, but since these two qualities did not easily co-exist, it was better to be feared than to be loved. The French revolutionaries believed they were forging a new, transparent political order based on citizenship, so they explicitly shunned Machiavelli as a model, but he did make one pragmatic observation that would resonate, if unacknowledged, in revolutionary France: 'he who quells disorder by a very few signal examples will in the

end be more merciful than he who from too great leniency permits things to take their course and so to result in rapine and bloodshed'.<sup>7</sup>

Machiavelli thus justified terror as demonstrative violence, which can be found in the torture and execution of state enemies, such as (to cite two French examples, of which the revolutionaries were well aware) Henri IV's assassin François Ravallac in 1610 and François Damiens, who had lightly wounded King Louis XV with a dagger in 1757. Such publicly-inflicted agonies went beyond the punishment of an individual and demonstrated the punitive might of the sovereign. Michel Foucault argued that such demonstrative, penal violence was eventually supplanted as a means of disciplining subjects. Punishment became less a public spectacle, chastising the victim's mind and disciplining the body through more routinized forms of penalty, such as the prison.<sup>8</sup>

The French Revolution was part of this transition in the uses of terror. On the one hand, it asserted sovereignty through punitive violence, a process whose ultimate expression lay in the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793. Having inverted the old order's location of sovereignty (it was no longer in the body of the King, but vested in the 'nation'), executing Louis aimed not only at vindicating the republic, but (as Robespierre argued) to 'nourish in the spirit of tyrants, a salutary terror of the justice of the people'.<sup>9</sup> Robespierre thereby turned the 'logic' behind Damiens' agonies against the dethroned monarch on behalf of the new sovereign, the people itself. On the other hand, the Revolution 'routinized' political oppression. Executions were just one part of a web of daily practices of coercion, surveillance and mobilization. The 'people' were no longer meant to be only awestruck spectators, but active citizens cooperating with the machinery of terror.

The French revolutionaries found examples in their classical education, particularly the Roman *delatores* (who brought evidence in prosecutions) and *censores* (who watched over

the morality of citizens).<sup>10</sup> They did not use such Latin terms, but the name of the most powerful of all the Terror's central organs, the Committee of Public Safety, deliberately recalled Cicero's dictum that *salus populi suprema lex est* – the supreme law is the security of the people.<sup>11</sup> Yet there was no historical blueprint for the Terror of 1793-94, which emerged erratically as the revolutionaries thrashed about in the complex interaction between, on the one hand, the intense circumstances of the moment and, on the other hand, the ideology and cultural inheritance through which they interpreted these circumstances and which shaped their responses. That terror was a practice rather than a principle is illustrated by the fact that it was used by political actors on both left and right. Just as there was a 'Red' (Jacobin) Terror in 1793-94, so there were outbreaks of a countervailing 'White' (Royalist) Terror in the later 1790s and in 1815.

Robespierre and his later detractors agreed that 'terror' in the context of 1793-94 was 'fear-generating, coercive political violence', rather than the 'conspiratorial practice' of violence for the purposes of psychological shock and propaganda – two of the forms discussed by Alex Schmid.<sup>12</sup> Conspiratorial violence directed *against* the regime certainly existed, but was more prevalent among nineteenth-century revolutionaries, some of whom regarded themselves as the legatees of the French Revolution.

The Terror was purportedly directed *against* counter-revolutionary conspiracy, which was held to be the very antithesis of the republican transparency to which the revolutionaries aspired. The practitioners of 1793-94 imposed what is now called 'state terror' (Arno Mayer calls it 'top-down' or 'enforcement' terror)<sup>13</sup> against the country's own citizens. While this anticipated twentieth-century practices,<sup>14</sup> it was also rooted in the past, for other forms of terror co-existed and interacted with it. For one, there was 'tyrannicide', which had precedents going back to ancient Rome and Greece: Cicero argued that a tyrant was no different from an enemy soldier or criminal, so could be legitimately killed.<sup>15</sup> When the

French revolutionaries put Louis XVI on trial, they alluded to such precedents. Deploying rhetoric foreshadowing the language of the Terror proper, some Jacobins argued that Louis was an enemy of the nation from the very fact that he was a King: ‘no man can reign innocently’, declared Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, ‘...every king is a rebel and a usurper’. If, he argued, the would-be tyrant Caesar could be slain in the midst of the Senate for challenging Roman liberty, then Louis, who posed no less a threat to the French Republic, could also be killed.<sup>16</sup>

Yet ‘tyrannicide’ cut both ways. Louis-Michel Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, a Jacobin deputy, was knifed by an ex-noble in January 1793 for voting for the King’s death. On 13 June that year, Charlotte Corday stabbed another Jacobin deputy, Jean-Paul Marat, and there were alleged attempts on Robespierre and Collot d’Herbois, his colleague on the Committee of Public Safety, in May 1794. Corday’s assassination of Marat showed just how contested the meaning of ‘tyrannicide’ was. For Corday, the revolution had been derailed when the Jacobins had purged their bitter opponents, the Girondins, from the Convention on 2 June. Marat, bloodthirsty and demagogic, seemed to represent the worst Jacobin traits. Corday’s act represented a throwback to older ideas that the killing of an individual tyrant could remedy the ills that afflicted the entire body politic. Yet, as Randall Law has argued, the French Revolution helped to forge modern conceptions of how ‘tyranny’ should be overthrown: tyranny was embedded within an entire political system, which had to be revolutionised.<sup>17</sup> No one pretended that the decapitation of Louis XVI alone would secure the Republic. Even royalists saw assassination as merely the prelude to a wider (counter-revolutionary) transformation. In December 1800, an attempt was made to blow up Napoleon Bonaparte with a carriage laden with explosives. The elimination of the First Consul would have been the first step in the restoration of the monarchy, but this still left wide open the question as to how far the clock would be turned back towards the old regime. In this vein the Jacobins

interpreted Marat's assassination as a blow not aimed not just at one deputy, but against their entire order, which in turn strengthened their impulses towards political coercion.

The French Revolution also linked the past with the future in another fundamental way: in the role played by the revolutionary crowd, which formed the second form of French revolutionary terror. The collective revolutionary violence began with the murderous retribution inflicted on authority figures in July 1789, through the horrifying blood-letting of the September Massacres in 1792, to such acts of violence as the decapitation of the deputy Jean-Bertrand Féraud during the Prairial uprising of May 1795. Mayer calls this violence 'bottom-up', 'spontaneous', or 'primitive' terror,<sup>18</sup> meaning a throwback to earlier upheavals, in which crowd action sought vengeance, redress of grievances, the elimination of foes, or the defence of traditional ways of life. Such violence haunted contemporaries and the generations that followed.

### *'Top-Down' or State Terror*

'State terror' in 1793-94 consisted of a network of formal institutions that were developed in an *ad hoc* way as the hydra-like crisis of 1793 developed. Yet the French Revolution had opened with emancipating promise. The absolute monarchy of the Bourbons had collapsed under the weight of a fiscal, political and economic crisis in the summer of 1789. The monarchy did not survive the subsequent struggle to establish a new constitutional order. The reluctance of Louis XVI to share power with an elected National Assembly (among other grievances) led to his attempt to flee in June 1791, stirring a republican movement which, although suppressed temporarily, gained momentum after the outbreak of war against Austria and Prussia in the spring of 1792. As invading armies converged on the capital, the Revolution was radicalised, the popular movement in Paris mobilized and the provinces

galvanised in defence of the new order. The monarchy was overthrown on 10 August 1792 and a republic was proclaimed on 22 September. Power now lay with the newly elected assembly in France, the National Convention, based on a broad (though not quite universal) male suffrage. After a bruising political trial, the Convention found Louis guilty of treason and he was guillotined on 21 January 1793 – a sentence that bitterly split the republicans between hard-line Jacobins and their Girondin opponents, who wanted clemency, a schism that aggravated revolutionary politics in their descent into terror.

The nascent Republic had turned the tide in the conflict, but the French invasion of the Low Countries, the Rhineland, as well as Nice and Savoy, combined with the diplomatic furore over the regicide, set France onto a collision course with every major European power in Western Europe. By the spring of 1793, the Republic was at war against Austria, Prussia, the rest of Germany (the Holy Roman Empire), Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and the northern Italian state of Piedmont-Sardinia. Russia was making ominous noises in support of this coalition. France was being invaded on every frontier, but there was also a crisis within, which took many faces, including a peasant counter-revolution in the west of the country (the Vendée, Brittany and Normandy), sparked by the imposition of conscription, but also against the Revolution's secularizing attack on the Catholic Church and led by royalist nobles. There was a desperate economic crisis that brought the threat of insurrection from the Parisian popular movement, the *sans-culottes*. These were the radicalized men and women of the capital's working population: artisans, craft-workers, retailers, journeymen, apprentices, and labourers who sought to defend their place in the republic's emerging democratic politics, to defend their economic independence against the pressures of larger-scale business, and to seek radical, redistributive economic controls to weather the social crisis. It was with *sans-culotte* support that the Jacobins ousted the Girondins from the Convention and government on 2 June 1793, thereby provoking a civil war, called the 'federalist revolt' because of its

provincial base (it was mainly concentrated around the cities like Marseille, Toulon, Lyon, Bordeaux, Caen). The disasters of 1793 are at the source of debate as to why the French Revolution fell into terror. Traditionally, historians such as Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul claimed that these circumstances forced extraordinary measures onto the Revolution. More recently, ‘revisionists’ such as François Furet, Lynn Hunt and Keith Baker have suggested that terror was an integral part of the Revolution from the very start, that it was ‘scripted’ or inherent within revolutionary rhetoric and ideology from 1789.<sup>19</sup>

Jacobins like Robespierre certainly developed sophisticated theories of terror as they defended their policies, drawing on the ideological and cultural resources that had informed the Revolution since 1789: these rested not just on the rights of the individual (proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in August 1789), but also on national sovereignty. The revisionist argument suggests that, in rhetorically transferring sovereignty from the King to the ‘nation’ in 1789, the Revolution replaced one form of absolutism with another. If, as the revolutionaries claimed, political legitimacy rested only in the nation, then they could only ever claim to speak for it, rather than for specific social interests, which left no room for political pluralism or the concept of a ‘loyal’ opposition. Robespierre, Saint-Just and Barère, among others, argued that the Terror was ‘revolutionary’, by which they meant that it was not so much illegal as extra-legal, not unconstitutional but applicable in circumstances where normal constitutional rule was dangerous to the very survival of the nascent Republic. When, on 10 October 1793, Saint-Just persuaded the Convention to declare the government ‘revolutionary until the peace’, he explained that ‘in the light of the situation confronting the Republic, the constitution cannot be put into effect: it would be used to destroy itself’.<sup>20</sup>

Terror was, in other words, temporary, but open-ended, since no one could tell for sure when it would be safe to return to regular forms of law and government. The Jacobins were well



aware that ‘revolution’ is an extra-legal transformation in the political and social order. For as long as the new civic order was endangered, so the revolutionary process – the struggle of a free people to protect its liberties against its enemies – had to continue. Terror was the means of waging that struggle: there could be no middle ground in the combat between ‘liberty’ and ‘despotism’. ‘Social protection’, argued Robespierre, ‘is due only to peaceful citizens’, adding that ‘there are no citizens in the Republic but the republicans’.<sup>21</sup> Such arguments were one of the French Revolution’s dark gifts to later revolutionary terrorism, which denies the legitimacy of opposition and punishes it accordingly.

Yet ideology does not provide the only explanation for the Terror, which in 1793 seems primarily to have aimed at confronting the crisis, explaining why its apparatus developed piecemeal between March and September 1793. To create a strong, fast-reacting executive, the Convention elected two Committees, of Public Safety (CPS) and of General Security (CGS). The former was to supervise the war effort, foreign policy, the armies and the government ministries, while the latter was to control internal security and policing. These two committees would emerge as the central political authority of the Terror, albeit one answerable to the Convention. A Revolutionary Tribunal was established to try traitors without appeal. Rebels caught bearing arms were to be summarily executed. ‘Representatives on mission’ – deputies from the Convention – fanned out across the provinces to mobilise society for the war effort and to suppress counter-revolution. The *levée en masse* introduced universal conscription and requisitioned France’s resources. Committees of surveillance were established in every urban section and every rural commune. Reporting to the CGS, they were charged with watching foreigners, arresting ‘suspects’ and with issuing the *certificats de civisme*, identity papers that attested to the holder’s patriotism and without which no citizen could hold public office, travel around the country and find work.<sup>22</sup> ‘Suspects’ were expansively defined by the ‘Law of Suspects’ on 17 September 1793 as ‘those who, by their

conduct, relations, utterances or writings have shown themselves to be partisans of tyranny, of federalism, and enemies of liberty', as well as a variety of other groups, including former nobles and their families 'who have not constantly demonstrated their attachment to the Revolution'.<sup>23</sup> The economic crisis was attacked by the imposition of economic controls. The death penalty was imposed on food hoarders; a forced loan was imposed on the rich; public granaries were established; 'revolutionary armies' of *sans-culottes* were created to requisition grain in the countryside; a 'General Maximum' law fixed both prices and wages and the whole system was capped off by a Subsistence Commission to oversee the controlled economy.<sup>24</sup>

### *'Bottom-Up' or Popular Terror*

The economic measures and the surveillance committees formed the juncture between the state terror and the 'bottom-up' terror from the *sans-culottes*. Indeed, the two overlapped, even as the Jacobins in the Convention and the popular movement pressed their own, separate agendas. The former wanted to preserve the Republic and forge a civic order based on republican citizenship and virtue, while the latter sought a more direct form of democracy and to defend the economic interests of the capital's working population. Despite these differences, the revolutionary leadership harnessed popular violence for its own purposes – either by justifying it retrospectively or by directing it against their own opponents, as the purge of the Girondins had shown. David Andress has argued that, far from being an external force exerted on the state terror, popular violence was a fundamental, constituent part of the process, serving the purposes of the revolutionary elites as much as it did the *sans-culottes*. There was therefore a symbiotic, if fraught, interrelationship between the 'state' and the 'popular' terrors, each finding in the other a political use, encouraging popular action and at

the same time ratcheting up the scale of state violence.<sup>25</sup> While the more draconian economic measures, such as the death penalty for hoarders and even the Maximum, were driven primarily by insurrectionary pressure on the Convention, ultimately the controls helped the government to stabilise the economy, ease the social crisis and keep the armies supplied. When the Jacobin Georges Danton proposed the creation of the Revolutionary Tribunal in the Convention on 10 March 1793, he argued that it would prevent a repeat of the mob violence in the September Massacres in the previous year, when a murderous crowd, directed by some of the more radical Parisian revolutionary leadership, slaughtered hundreds of imprisoned, counter-revolutionary suspects. 'Let *us* be terrible', Danton roared, 'to prevent the people from being terrible themselves'.<sup>26</sup> The furies of the September Massacres justified the strengthening of the revolutionary state's coercive arm. The intermeshing of 'state' with 'popular' terror was formally structured in local institutions, especially the surveillance committees. In Paris, where they were called 'revolutionary committees', they had in fact been spontaneously created by popular militants in August 1792 and they remained the hotbeds of *sans-culotte* activism, but after September 1793 they reported directly to the CGS and were salaried by the government, whereby they were effectively co-opted as an arm of the 'state terror'.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, private citizens also had a part to play, not least in offering denunciations and information on 'suspects'. The revolutionaries made a subtle distinction between 'informing', which they saw as an old regime practice, and 'denunciation' which was a civic act. For the revolutionaries, 'informing' was done in secrecy and so could be driven by personal motives, but 'denunciation' was the duty of all good citizens, an expression of their vigilance for the public good, and, since it was done in public, the very publicity guaranteed against abuses. Yet with the creation of the committees of surveillance, denunciations were now made to a small group of men behind closed doors, where 'public opinion' was no protection against

false accusations. This change, in fact, reinforced the role of the committees as an arm of state repression: since they also had powers of arrest, they became the first staging-post of a victim's tortuous journey to imprisonment, trial and, for the unfortunate, the guillotine.<sup>28</sup>

A similar shift occurred in the Terror as it unfolded in the provinces. The Convention's 'representatives on mission' were legally vested with the full authority of the 'nation' and so became, in effect, local dictators, issuing edicts 'by virtue of the unlimited powers invested in [them] by the National Convention'.<sup>29</sup> While many of these representatives managed to mobilise their departments without resorting to bloodletting,<sup>30</sup> others committed horrifying atrocities, the worst in areas afflicted by civil war or counter-revolution, most infamously in Lyon (where captives were mown down by grapeshot), Nantes (where hog-tied prisoners were drowned *en masse*) and the Vendée.<sup>31</sup> Two points arise from this 'anarchic' Terror, as it is commonly remembered by historians. One is that, in the strict legal sense, it was not 'anarchic' at all: the powers that these representatives exploited were devolved to them by the Convention and they used them in defence of the state, not against it.<sup>32</sup> This is especially true in the Vendée, where an estimated 200,000 people may have perished. The other is that, just like the 'popular terror', it served the purposes of the revolutionary state, even if, ultimately, the Jacobins reined it in. Like the violence of the 'bottom-up' terror, the 'anarchic terror' was legitimized by the rhetoric and orders of the Convention until the threat of civil war and counter-revolution was contained. By December, Robespierre and his closest associates had come to consider the 'anarchic' Terror to be more of a liability than a help, and, by the law of 14 Frimaire (4 December), the government centralised control of the Terror and scaled back the powers of the representatives on mission, recalling the most extreme to Paris to account for their actions. Yet by then the 'anarchic Terror' had done most of the work of ending the civil war and containing the counter-revolution.

The relationship between the politicians and the popular movement was fraught with friction, and slowly, erratically and opportunistically, the Jacobin dictatorship asserted itself and steered the Terror unambiguously towards the needs of the state. In September 1793, the *Enragés* (literally, the ‘madmen’), who provided some of the most radical leadership of the Parisian popular movement, were arrested. In December 1793, the Convention put a stop to the *sans-culotte* assault on the Church – a full-blown campaign of ‘dechristianization’ which closed down churches and destroyed religious images – citing as a motive ‘the maintenance of public tranquillity’.

Underlying these conflicts was a struggle over the direction of the Terror itself. The *sans-culottes*, seeing in it a means of defending their social interests and their Hébertist spokesmen, a motley group of radicals around the journalist Jacques-René Hébert, wanted to intensify it. Other voices, particularly those of Georges-Jacques Danton and Camille Desmoulins, alarmed that good patriots were now threatened by terror, had demanded clemency. After some wavering, the government struck down the middle: the Hébertists were guillotined on 24 March 1794, decapitating the popular movement (literally), but the Dantonists followed them twelve days later. The ‘revolutionary armies’ were abolished and the seats of militant power, including the war ministry, the Paris Commune and *sections* (the Parisian districts) were purged. That spring, local administrations that had shown too much initiative were closed down or replaced; a police bureau was established to scrutinize the conduct of public officials, answering to the CPS; all political prisoners held in the provinces were to be transported to Paris and tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal there and all government ministries were subjected to CPS supervision.<sup>33</sup>

*Terror as ‘Regeneration’*

From now on, the Terror certainly went beyond a defensive response to the crisis to an ideologically-driven attempt to 'regenerate' French society as a 'Republic of Virtue'. The programme aimed to create citizens whose moral universe had expunged the habits of the old order and was devoted to self-sacrificing, republican egalitarianism of the new. The process had begun earlier: a new revolutionary calendar, for example, was introduced to the Convention in September 1793. Yet now such a transformation meant changing the way people thought and how they behaved. It therefore demanded not just political conformity and obedience, but active commitment to the Jacobin vision of the future. This involved a 'cultural revolution' that anticipated Stalin's *Homo Sovieticus* (a new breed of human being immersed in Communist values and culture).<sup>34</sup> Political and moral messages were transmitted to the public through symbols, festivals, the theatre, the press, the arts and the Jacobin clubs. There was a plan for a national system of education, inspired by the Spartan example. Place and personal names were changed: religious and royal terms were dropped or replaced by impeccably republican ones, such as 'Marat' and 'Libre' ('free'). The polite form of address – 'vous' – was dropped in favour of the egalitarian 'tu' - *tutoiement*: there was to be no deference among equal citizens.<sup>35</sup>

The Terror became a means of enforcing a more rigid form of political orthodoxy and of suppressing all dissent. Thus the last months of the Terror are the most controversial because they witnessed a quickening pace of the killing even as the Republic's external and domestic situation was improving. The Law of 22 Prairial (10 June 1794) accelerated the work of the Revolutionary Tribunal: defendants were stripped of legal counsel, the definition of crimes against the Republic was expanded dramatically, the jury could convict on the grounds of 'moral proof' if there was no hard evidence of guilt and the only sentence available was death. Together, these measures routinized the Jacobins' hazardously narrow conception of 'virtuous' citizenship. The tempo of executions sped up: in the fifteen months since March

1793, the Tribunal acquitted roughly half of the accused, but passed 1,251 death sentences, with an average of three people a day being guillotined. After 10 June, in the six weeks remembered as the 'Great Terror', 1,376 people were sentenced to death, averaging thirty daily beheadings. Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, a member of the Convention who survived, recalled that the Terror 'hovered over everyone's head, striking them down indiscriminately; it was as arbitrary and swift as Death's scythe'.<sup>36</sup>

This was the whole point: since no one could feel secure, their safety lay in unquestioning loyalty to the government. It was not enough that this loyalty was publicly-expressed: a virtuous citizen was meant to internalise the egalitarian, self-abnegating values of the new Republic.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, the Terror aimed to root out those whose patriotism was insincere: Robespierre frequently spoke of 'unmasking' such people. Yet, once it became an instrument of moral transformation, no one could see when and how it would end. Saint-Just wrote that 'the revolution must stop when its laws have brought happiness and public liberty to perfection...One speaks of the high point of the revolution. Who will determine it? It changes.'<sup>38</sup>

The Jacobins themselves could see no safe way of ending the Terror. The transition back to constitutional law meant that the 'terrorists' would be vulnerable to the vengeance of those whom they had hurt. The repentant 'terrorist' Jean-Lambert Tallien later recognised this dilemma. How, he asked, could its practitioners 'return to the crowd, after having made so many enemies? How could they not fear revenge after committing so many crimes?'<sup>39</sup> Moreover, how could the Jacobins repudiate the Terror without appearing to reject the Revolution itself? By the summer of 1794, they had passed the point at which they could simply declare that the crisis had abated: their own regenerative project was now too tightly interwoven with the Terror itself. Both practically and ideologically, the Jacobins had painted themselves into a corner with toxic paint. So it was that the Terror ended when the

government's enemies – politicians who felt targeted themselves, the *sans-culottes* angry that the Maximum was also imposed on wages – marshalled their forces and overthrew and guillotined Robespierre and his associates, including Saint-Just, on 9-10 Thermidor (27-8 July 1794).

### *The Uses of Terror in Early Nineteenth-Century Europe*

The Terror horrified the European imagination and cast its shadow over revolutionary movements in succeeding generations. In the period between the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Revolutions of 1848, European revolutionaries included a spectrum from liberal, constitutional monarchists to the early revolutionary socialists, all opposed in different degrees to the authoritarian order that emerged in 1815. For most, the state terror of 1793-4 was a warning to be heeded. It was more than of symbolic importance that, when the Second Republic was proclaimed on the ruins of France's last monarchy in 1848, one of the first decrees of the provisional government was to declare the abolition of the death penalty for political crimes.

Yet for a small, hard kernel on the radical left, terror would be necessary to complete the revolutionary transformation. These hardliners were explicitly inspired by the experience of the Jacobin Terror and by the figure who in hindsight now appears to be the first 'professional revolutionary', Gracchus Babeuf, who took his name from the Gracchi, the brothers in Ancient Rome who pursued reforms for the poor. Babeuf had been arrested in 1796 as he and his secret organisation, the 'Equals', planned to overthrow the Directory (the regime that ruled France between 1795 and 1799) and ultimately establish a egalitarian social order. Babeuf ominously argued that measures would be needed 'to eliminate whatever obstacles stand in the way'.<sup>40</sup>



Revolutionaries who explicitly embraced such tactics in the first half of the nineteenth century sat on the radical fringe. They included the French revolutionary socialists Louis-Auguste Blanqui and Armand Barbès, whose ‘Society of Seasons’ sought to seize power and exercise a revolutionary dictatorship in the pursuit of an egalitarian society.<sup>41</sup> The Russian revolutionary Pavel Pestel, the ‘Russian Jacobin’, represented the radical wing of the Decembrist movement.<sup>42</sup> Pestel’s manifesto, *Russian Justice*, envisaged a Russian republic, peasant emancipation and the public ownership of half the country’s agricultural land, to be achieved by the coercive rule of a ‘Revolutionary Senate’ modelled on the Committee of Public Safety.<sup>43</sup> Most European revolutionaries in this period wanted to avoid such measures. The Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini emphasised national self-determination and popular sovereignty, but stressed that the rights of the individual were paramount. In the *Duties of Man* (1841-60), he wrote: ‘there are certain things that are constitutive of your individuality and are essential elements of human life. Over these, not even the People have any right. No majority may establish a tyrannical regime’.<sup>44</sup>

Yet of necessity European revolutionaries shared with the Blanquists a commitment to secrecy and conspiracy. Republicans, socialists and even liberals who were otherwise horrified by the prospect of terror were none the less willing to adopt methods that were conspiratorial in preparing for an insurrection. Yet the intention was rarely to sow fear, or to make a propagandist point through demonstrative violence, even if these were the effects. Rather, the revolutionaries were motivated by two possible goals.

Firstly, they were working for a direct confrontation with the authorities, in the shape of an insurrection or a coup d’état. The *Carbonari*, for example, were Italian secret societies whose membership included liberal and Bonapartist army officers and officials alienated by the conservative order that had replaced Napoleonic rule. Such organisations were particularly prevalent in states where the freedom to organise openly was severely circumscribed.

Liberals saw parliaments as the only legitimate sphere of political action and aspired to a society based on civil liberties. Where these existed, liberals tended to avoid conspiracy, as they did in Britain, the Low Countries, southern Germany and France (where the *Charbonnerie*, an imitation of the *Carbonari*, mostly consisted of former Bonapartists and republicans). Yet in absolute monarchies where such rights were limited, the challenge was how to achieve the goals of a constitution, civil rights and national freedom. Some liberals therefore chose conspiracy as the middle road between supine submission to absolutism and full-blown revolution 'from below'. This point reveals the essential elitism at the heart of early European liberalism, but it was an elitism conditioned by a real fear of the dangers of 'bottom-up' terror.<sup>45</sup> After 1815, liberal revolutionaries pursued regime change while avoiding the unpredictable violence of a popular uprising. Thus the first European revolutions after 1815 were conspiracies unleashed by liberal army officers seeking an ordered transition imposed 'from above'. Such were the *pronunciamientos* in Spain and Portugal, which triggered the liberal revolutions of 1820; the *Carbonari* revolutions in Italy in 1820-21; the Decembrist uprising in 1825 and – initially – the Polish insurrection of 1830-1.

Yet the failures of these revolutions spurred a change of tactics, giving conspiracy its second main purpose. The ultimate goal was still an insurrection and the methods were still conspiratorial, but the ideal revolution would be driven by a genuinely popular uprising. The most important example of this change of direction was the creation of Mazzini's 'Young Italy' in 1831. It expected its members to work towards subverting the political order and to sacrifice themselves in the cause of Italian unity and freedom. Yet it diverged from earlier underground organisations by having a published programme, a broad membership which paid subscriptions, and a messaging service keeping its various branches in touch with each other. In short, though operating outside the law, it shared many features of an organised political party. This, in fact, suited its immediate purpose, which for Mazzini was education

and propaganda, to convince the public of the republican and nationalist cause. Yet Mazzini also believed that Italy's despotic regimes would only be ousted by an insurrection. The uprising would target only the regime, securing the support of the local people, respecting their property and the Church. The goal, in other words, was not terror, but a revolution supported by a willing population.<sup>46</sup>

Other forms of 'direct action', such as assassination, were not unknown, but they were rarely the weapons of choice. The most notorious assassinations after the French Revolution were committed by people acting on their own: in 1819, Karl Sand, a German student radical, murdered the conservative playwright August von Kotzebue; the next year the Duc de Berry, third in line to the French throne, was stabbed to death by another lone assassin, Louis-Pierre Louvel, a Bonapartist. It was only after the Revolution of 1830, which bitterly disappointed French republicans because it replaced one monarchy with another, that assassination was seriously considered as the beginning of the revolutionary process. The Decembrists may have planned to kill the Tsar in 1825 and the Polish revolutionaries the Russian viceroy in 1830, also as the beginning of the transition. Even so, many revolutionaries still disapproved of the tactic. One of the grisliest assassination attempts of this period was committed by Joseph Fieschi on King Louis-Philippe of France in 1835, which only grazed its target, but killed eighteen others and seriously wounded twenty-two.<sup>47</sup>

Fieschi was only indirectly connected with the republican underground and few voices were raised in his support. Committed republicans, such as those in the closest French equivalent to Young Italy, the *Société des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (SDHC), regarded assassination as an 'egotistical' act. They preferred open insurrection because it required a large, organised group dedicated to the same ideology, illustrating that the people as a whole were rising up. As one republican leaflet explained in 1837 (after another attempt by a lone would-be assassin), 'it is not enough to kill the tyrant, one must also annihilate the tyranny',

as the French Revolution itself had apparently shown with the death of Louis XVI. Such a broader, revolutionary transformation could only be achieved through a union of all republicans, not by ‘isolated attacks’ on the monarchy.<sup>48</sup> It was for this reason that the barricade – not the terrorist’s bomb or the assassin’s knife – became the pre-eminent symbol of revolution between 1830 and 1848. In Paris alone, streets were barricaded in uprisings in 1832, 1834, 1839 and 1848.<sup>49</sup>

Yet revolutionaries often fell short of condemning the overall *goals* of the assassins – and in this ambiguity lay another feature of modern terrorism: it can flourish in an environment where a broader section of the public may disapprove of terrorism’s *means*, but broadly relate to its grievances. What shocked authorities in Germany after Sand’s murder of Kotzebue was the reaction of some public figures. Friedrich Carové, one of Georg Hegel’s colleagues at the University of Berlin, argued that while Sand’s action was wrong, it showed that Germany’s national spirit had not been entirely corrupted, and it was such corruption that the German people should guard against.<sup>50</sup> Carové’s response reflects the tortured relationship between terrorism and the wider community from which it springs. A terrorist act may be condemned by the majority, but the condemnation might be tempered by a shared sense of malaise with the existing order. It is in such circumstances that terrorism as conspiratorial, demonstrative violence can flourish.

### *Conclusion*

The French Revolution left a constructive gift to the world in its emancipating ideology of human rights and political freedom, but it also formulated the modern theories and rhetoric of terror - and the revolutionaries themselves were well aware of the contradiction. They seeded the essential problems of modern terrorism: can peace and justice ever emerge from the evils

of violence, particularly violence directed by a state against its own citizens, or by one group of citizens against the existing order? To what extent should a democratic state abandon its own rules to defend itself? What, if any, forms of political violence are legitimate? The French revolutionaries were among the first to elevate political terror into a complete system, supported by a network of institutions reaching from the political centre to the most localised level, and explained by a justificatory rhetoric and ideology. Central to such practices was the idea of terror as all-pervasive, deriving its power not just by the force of example, but also by fostering the sense that it could strike at anyone and anytime, which is how modern terrorism sows fear.

Moreover, in seeking not only to defend the Republic, but also to ‘regenerate’ society itself, the Jacobin Terror anticipated later terrorism in its messianic sense of mission, one which allowed terrorists to qualify not only active opponents as enemies, but also the indifferent or apathetic. Political violence could come to be regarded by terrorists as a salutary, regenerative process in itself, in which perhaps the most important blood to be sacrificed would be their own. Within Jacobinism, as in later revolutionary and terrorist ideologies, lay the nihilistic sense that the cause would flourish on sacrifice and martyrdom. As Robespierre exclaimed on 5 February 1794, ‘let us, in sealing our work with our blood, see at least the early dawn of universal bliss’.<sup>51</sup> Yet while every human being wants the free pursuit of happiness, not all want to shed blood to achieve it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (2 vols) Paris, 1798, vol. 2, p. 775.

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- <sup>14</sup> On forms of state terror during the first half of the twentieth century, see Paul Hagenloh's chapter in this volume.
- <sup>15</sup> Johannes Dillinger's chapter in this volume, 'Tyrrannicide from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Crisis of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century', explores these examples in greater detail.
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