

H-France Salon

Volume 11, Issue 16, #1

Rethinking the French Revolutionary Terror: Introduction

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There is no evading the terror. Each generation poses after its own fashion the fundamental question – how did a revolution that started with idealistic and humanitarian intentions descend into violence? It is a grim, disturbing – often disillusioning – subject. As historians of the Revolution we cannot avoid it, nor should we. Yet before drawing any conclusions or setting out any ‘lessons learned’ from the experience of terror, we need first to understand what the French revolutionary terror actually was and what it was not. We need to address the extent to which much of what is generally assumed about the French revolutionary terror, is founded on ‘myths’, many of them invented during the year that followed the Year II, a year henceforward characterised as the year of *the Terror* or *the Reign of Terror*.

In the popular imagination *the Terror* and the Revolution are virtually synonymous. Ask anyone – beyond a narrow band of specialists – what image first comes into their heads when they hear the words ‘French Revolution’ and they will almost invariably reply not with ‘the Rights of Man’ but with ‘the guillotine’, that macabre, horrifying, yet singularly efficient, death-machine. Close behind the guillotine in the popular imagination comes the Revolutionary Tribunal – the court set up in March 1793 to hear the cases of people accused of counter-revolutionary crimes. The popular image that resonates around the Tribunal is one of hapless nobles, bravely defiant as they are inevitably condemned without a hearing by a ‘people’s court’ of the unruly, ignorant, vindictive and unwashed.

How closely do these popular images correspond to the reality? Two-hundred and thirty years after the French Revolution, how well do we understand what is commonly called *the Terror*? In recent years historians of the revolutionary terror have been posing a series of questions. The questions begin with basic nomenclature: what should we call it? – ‘terror’ or *the Terror*? And how does that capital ‘T’ affect the way we conceptualise the subject? Was *the Terror* a retrospective invention? Can we speak of *the Terror* as a unified system, or did it consist rather of a series of improvised responses to circumstances? How should we define it? Was it an ideology, already present in 1789? Or a process that grew out of escalating circumstances, above all the war with the foreign powers? What was the relationship between terror and justice? To what extent was terror a rhetoric, a form of words, a threat to intimidate enemies? What about the experiences of individuals? Who were the principal victims? How far was terror something to which revolutionaries themselves – including the nation’s elected representatives – were subject, and how did their consciousness of the danger in which they stood affect their choices and their actions? How far can new thinking on emotions, trauma, violence and retribution help us to throw new light on the experience of terror in the French Revolution?

For this *H-France Salon* on ‘Rethinking the French Revolutionary Terror’, four historians, Michel Biard, Mette Harder, Carla Hesse, and Ronen Steinberg reflect on how their own

work, and the work of others, helps us to understand the French Revolutionary terror anew. In their different ways they take up many of these questions posed here, coming to thought-provoking conclusions that invite us to rethink the nature of *the Terror*.

Michel Biard in his piece ‘Remplacer *la Terreur* par la ‘terreur’ pour mieux comprendre l’une et l’autre?’ makes a strong case for historians of the Revolution to establish some new common ground in how they conceptualise the revolutionary terror. As a first step, it is time, he suggests, that we should agree to stop calling it *the Terror*, because the term implies a systematic coherence that did not actually exist. Rather, it would be better and more accurate to talk about ‘terror’, or ‘recourse to terror’, or, if we must, ‘the terror’ (without a capital).

To change how we speak of *the Terror* is in line with the findings of a number of historians who, in their different ways, have been coming to similar conclusions. Several French historians, including Jean-Clément Martin, Annie Jourdan, Hervé Leuwers and Michel Biard himself, have been calling into question long-standing assumptions about the nature of the revolutionary terror. Within the anglophone world too, there has been an increased readiness to question some of the received tenets of the traditional historiography of terror. Michel Biard mentions a recent conference held at the University of California at Irvine, in 2017, in honour of Tim Tackett, one of the world’s foremost historians of the French Revolution. A number of us came away from the Irvine conference with a sense that things were changing in terms of how we understand the nature of the revolutionary terror.¹

Biard identifies two particular problems that arise from the traditional term, *the Terror*. The first is that *the Terror* has been used to denote a chronological period, rather than a phenomenon, as though everything before and after those dates was not about *the Terror*, and everything within that time period can be categorised as part of *the Terror*. We have all (myself included) at some point used term *the Terror* to denote a chronological period rather than a system. It is simpler and neater to write than a phrase like ‘recourse to terror’. But using it gives problems – it implies a settled agreement over chronology. Can we actually agree when the revolutionary terror began, or when it ended? In fact, historians take different views on that. We were often told in the past that *the Terror* began in September 1793 when, as so many older history books recount, ‘terror’ was made the ‘order of the day’, and the Law of Suspects was instated. But we now know that, despite pressure from *sans-culottes*, the Convention never did declare that ‘terror’ was the ‘order of the day’, neither on that day nor any other, and that a succession of laws that enabled terror were passed over a number of months, some of them before the Jacobins came to dominate revolutionary government. The decree of 19 March 1793, for example, which was specifically directed against people who took up arms to fight against the Revolution, was responsible for the great majority of executions that took place in 1793-94.² Now it looks more as though the choice to implement

¹ A collection of papers given at that conference is published in a salon on H-France: Micah Alpaugh, Robert Blackman and Ian Coller (eds), ‘Becoming Revolutionaries: Papers in Honor of Timothy Tackett’, *H-France Salon*, vol. 11, issue 1 (2019): <https://h-france.net/h-france-salon-volume-11-2019/#1101>. They include several contributions on the terror, by Michel Biard, Mette Harder, Ted Margadant, Peter McPhee, and myself. Carla Hesse also spoke at the conference, and a version of her talk is published in the present salon.

² Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: essais sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris: Sueil, 2006), esp. pp. 186-93; Annie Jourdan, ‘La journée du 5 septembre 1793 La terreur a-t-elle été à l’ordre du jour?’ in Michel Biard and Hervé Leuwers (eds), *Visages de la terreur. L’exception politique de l’an II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), pp. 45-60.

terror was a gradual and escalating process, which needs to be understood against the backdrop of a series of military crises, external and internal, along with some very high profile betrayals.³ Equally, we are all familiar with the popular narrative that the Terror ended neatly with the fall of the Robespierre and the eclipse of Jacobinism. The reality was far different. To comprehend and categorise the killings that took place after 10 Thermidor, we need to use a different, more accurate term than *the Terror*.

The second problem that Biard addresses is that the narrative of *the Terror* with which we are familiar is largely an invention of the Thermidorean period. To use the term *the Terror* implies that there was a unified system of terror, with a coherent and consistent policy. The term is problematic because of a growing historiographical awareness of the degree to which the meaning of ‘the Terror’ was a later construction.⁴

As Biard is at pains to emphasise, to speak of ‘terror’ rather than *the Terror*, is not to seek to minimise the violence, or to excuse it, but rather to avoid an overly-schematic reification of that violence, as though it were part of an organised system. For Biard, ‘la notion d’exception politique’ presents a much more accurate way of understanding what it was the revolutionaries were trying to do during the Year II, and also helps us to understand rather better exactly why they failed.

Violence there was aplenty. But this violence was far from uniform. Many regions saw little, or even no violence. A recent work by Howard Brown, looking back on 1793-94 from the perspective of 1795, supports this view. Brown makes the point that: ‘The “Terror” as a distinct period of the French Revolution was largely a construct of lawmakers who took the reins of government after the defeat of Robespierre and his closest allies’.⁵ According to Brown many people in the regions of France away from Paris, areas of civil war, federalist revolts, or the frontiers, were barely aware of terror, and learned about it retrospectively from Thermidorean texts, images, pamphlets and prison memoirs which informed them that they had been subjected to a ‘Reign of Terror’ led by Robespierre and his allies.

Revolutions are profoundly emotional events, both for the people who take part, and for people who oppose them. In recent years historians have been exploring the emotional dimensions of the Revolution.⁶ The revolutionaries themselves were well aware of the effects

³ Tim Tackett makes a strong case for March 1793 as a key moment in this process: Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁴ Amongst the recent works to address this problem, see: Annie Jourdan, ‘Les discours de la terreur à l’époque révolutionnaire (1776-1798): étude comparative sur une notion ambiguë’, *French Historical Studies*, 36 (2013): 51-81; and Michel Biard, ‘Réflexions autour de “la Terreur”’, in ‘Becoming Revolutionaries: Papers in Honor of Tim Tackett, *H-France Salon*, vol. 11, Issue 1 (2019). See, too, several works by Jean-Clement Martin, *La Terreur. Vérités et légendes* (Paris: Perrin, 2017); Martin, *Les échos de la Terreur. Vérités d’un mensonge d’État, 1794-2001* (Paris: Belin, 2018); and Martin, *La Terreur. Part maudite de la Révolution* (Paris : Gallimard, 2010).

⁵ Howard Brown, ‘The Thermidorians’ Terror: Atrocities, Tragedies, Trauma’, in David A. Bell and Yair Mintzker (eds), *Rethinking the Age of Revolutions: France and the Birth of the Modern World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 193-235.

⁶ Two recent studies that trace the role of emotions in the genesis of terror are: Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts:

of uncontrolled emotions in revolutionary politics. They often referred to these emotions as ‘les passions’ and tended to interpret them in a negative light, as feelings that overrode reason. ‘Terror’ had an emotional dynamic as well as an intellectual one: it took place in the hearts and stomachs of those who participated in it, as well as in their heads. To make sense of revolutionaries’ emotions we need to situate them in the context of a political situation that was unstable and constantly shifting. As far as terror was concerned, fear was a central part of it, a fear to which revolutionary leaders themselves were also subject. Revolutionary leaders, like anyone else, could be caught up in the tide of emotions that frequently engulfed the Revolution, a tide that ebbed and flowed, but at its height could be hard to resist. We need to be wary however of reducing revolutionaries to their emotions, as though they were not also reasoning beings, committed to strategic policies and ideological goals. Nor can we understand the emotions of revolutionary activists in a vacuum, in isolation from other factors – ideologies, political culture, networks, and the onward drive of events. To see revolutionary activists in terms only of their emotional responses risks reducing them to passive ciphers, fenced in by their own ‘emotional regimes’.⁷ Revolutionary leaders were far from being prisoners of their emotions. Within the limits of the possible, they had agency, and room to manoeuvre. And they had the ability to make choices, both strategic and moral. Thus they could ‘choose terror’, or choose to reject it – though during the vertiginous Year II the consequences of making either choice might be perilous.

The term *Reign of Terror* is still more problematic than *the Terror*, because it carries the implication not only that there was a system of terror, but that someone – usually depicted as Robespierre – was controlling it, as a kind of dictator. We need to get away from the simplistic assumption that *the Terror* can be explained through the machinations of a few individuals – above all Robespierre. It is surprising to see the extent to which the wider public and even some historians, continue to attribute *the Terror* to Robespierre himself, either to his supposed obsession with achieving dictatorial power, or a mental illness that made him crave blood. Recently, Jonathan Israel ignored the work of many historians of the Revolution on the complex collective dynamics of revolutionary politics to set out a schematic view of *good* pro-Enlightenment revolutionaries, such as Brissot, Mirabeau, Danton and Desmoulins, versus the *bad* Rousseau-obsessed revolutionaries, amongst whom he identified as the principal culprits ‘Robespierre and Saint-Just, the men who wrecked the Revolution of 1789 to 1793’. Despite Israel’s scholarly erudition, one would be hard put to find a historian of the Revolution who is persuaded either by his conceptual framework or by his uncertain grasp of the complexities of revolutionary politics.⁸

Harvard University Press, 2015); and, on the emotional and ideological reasons behind the revolutionaries choosing a terror that rebounded strongly upon themselves, Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See too, Jack R. Censer, ‘Historians Revisit the Terror – Again’, *The Journal of Social History*, 48,2 (2014): 383-403. For an original perspective on the emotion of terror as it affected the *sans-culottes*, and the ways in which this emotion affected the adoption of a policy of terror, see Sophie Wahnich, *La liberté ou la mort, essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003).

⁷ This phrase is used in a study of how literary forms of ‘sentimentalism’ suffused and constrained revolutionary politics: William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸ Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) p. 20-1. Major scholars of the French Revolution who have been strongly critical of Israel’s thesis

There have been more biographies devoted to Robespierre than to any other revolutionary and, since the very first accounts of his life by, respectively, the abbé Proyart, his former tutor at Louis-le-Grand, and his sister, Charlotte, people have taken diametrically opposed views of Robespierre's life, motivation, and political choices. In recent years a particularly illuminating series of biographies of Robespierre have situated his life and politics within the wider context of revolutionary activism. Amongst these biographies, those by Peter McPhee, Hervé Leuwers and Jean-Clément Martin stand out as particularly revelatory.⁹ The sub-title of Martin's book, revealingly, is *La fabrication d'un monstre*. The title echoes that of the extended study by Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, *Robespierre. La fabrication d'un mythe*.¹⁰ There is a much greater understanding now of the extent to which our traditional view of Robespierre as the mastermind behind the Terror was an invention of the Thermidoreans. The story of Robespierre as a would-be dictator, obsessed with his own desire for power and celebrity is looking decidedly threadbare now, and it would be hard to imagine any serious historian trying to resurrect this kind of narrative.

Another way in which historians have been rethinking the revolutionary terror is to look at the meaning of the word itself before the Revolution. The French revolutionaries did not invent the concept of terror.¹¹ Recently, Ronald Schechter has given us a genealogy of the multiple meanings and deployment of the term terror before the Revolution.¹² According to Schechter: 'The French Revolution gave terror a bad name. This is not a facetious statement. For many centuries prior to the Revolution, the word "terror" had largely positive connotations.'¹³ Before the Revolution, terror was seen as salutary. It was used in the Old Testament to denote God's power to terrify sinners, and thus to ensure their salvation. It was also used in relationship to kingship, where it appeared in two contexts: firstly the military context, where terror denoted the king's responsibility to ensure the safety and security of his realm, by imposing terror on France's enemies; secondly, in a legal context through the king's obligation to dispense justice. The king had a responsibility to impose salutary terror through justice, especially when giving illustrations of his power in the theatrical rituals of drawn-out executions and other corporal punishments – such as the brutal execution of Damiens.

include: David A. Bell, in *New York Review of Books*, 10 July 2014; Lynn Hunt, in *New Republic*, 27 June 2014; and Jeremy Popkin, in *H-France Review*, in 2015; www.h-france.net/vol15reviews/vol15no66popkin.pdf. See too, Censer, 'Intellectual History and the Causes of the French Revolution'.

⁹ Peter McPhee, *Robespierre. A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012); Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris, Fayard, 2014); and Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre. La fabrication d'un monstre* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).

¹⁰ Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, *Robespierre. La fabrication d'un mythe* (Paris, Ellipses, 2013).

¹¹ By contrast, the words 'terrorisme' and 'terroriste' were coined after the fall of Robespierre, as part of a retrospective invention by the Thermidoreans of the concept of a 'system of terror' or 'reign of terror'.

¹² Ronald Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018). See too, George Armstrong Kelly, 'Conceptual Sources of the Terror', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 14, 1 (1980): 18-36; and Jourdan, 'Les discours de la terreur à l'époque révolutionnaire (1776-1798)'.

¹³ Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror*, Preface, p. ix.

Of course, the meaning of terror would change as a consequence of the revolutionary experience itself. But by looking at the concept of terror in the eighteenth-century context we can steer clear of the temptation to take a teleological approach, and read the past backwards. The French revolutionaries knew nothing about what terror would come to signify in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but they were familiar with its meaning in their own time. They understood the idea of terror as something used to terrify your enemies, and thereby to keep your people safe. Thus on 5 September 1793, the date when Claude Royer called upon the National Convention: 'It is time to terrify (d'épouvanter) all the conspirators. Right then! Make terror the order of the day',¹⁴ he would have had in mind the religious connotations of terror as salutary (he was a priest turned Jacobin, after all). So, how did using the language of terror make revolutionaries of the Year II feel when they spoke or wrote it? Schechter makes the striking claim that for the revolutionaries: 'Using the language of terror made them feel powerful and safe. It functioned as a kind of therapy by which revolutionaries tried to overcome their own feelings of terror.'¹⁵ Paradoxically then, speaking of terror could be a way to ward off (one's own) terror. Schechter's conclusions bear out recent work showing that the men who had recourse to terror were drawn to it, not only for ideological and tactical reasons, but also for emotional ones.

Another way of getting beyond the myths of the Terror is to look more closely at the actual figures for deaths. According to figures established back in the 1930s by Donald Greer, the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris condemned 2,639 people to the guillotine. Far more people (the large majority of whom were not nobles) died in other circumstances, circumstances that were equally dreadful for them, but which somehow have failed to exert the same grip on the popular imagination and are little remembered, except by specialists. Their deaths are not part of the 'myth' of the terror. There were 16,594 death sentences in total between March 1793 and August 1794, around three-quarters of which were dealt to people who had taken up arms against revolutionary forces (most were shot, not guillotined); around 20,000 more were subjected to summary execution in regions where there was fighting against the Revolution; whilst a number of people (the figures are uncertain) died as an indirect consequence of terror, whilst under arrest through the Law of Suspects, many from illnesses contracted in crowded and insanitary conditions in the prisons. That gives us a total of around 40,000 victims of terror, though some historians estimate as high as 50,000. A far greater number died in the civil war in Western France that centred on the Vendée, though the total figure is debated. Others died in the so-called 'white terror', reprisals against Jacobins after Thermidor. All of these figures are dwarfed by the number of casualties, French and non-French, soldiers and civilians, in the revolutionary and, above all, Napoleonic wars. No one has ever clearly established the numbers of deaths in these wars, especially for civilians, but the figures run into several million.¹⁶

¹⁴ P.J.B. Buchez et P.C Roux, (eds), *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française depuis 1789 jusqu'à l'Empire*, 40 vols (Paris, Paulin, 1833-1838) vol. 29, p. 41. See too the account of the events of 4 and 5 September 1793 in Annie Jourdan, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018), pp. 204-211.

¹⁵ Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror*, p. 187.

¹⁶ See Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror During the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1935), pp. 135-47; Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 345; Paul R. Hanson, *Contesting the French Revolution* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 173-4; Jean-Clément Martin, 'Dénombrer les victimes de la Terreur: La Vendée et au-delà', in Michel Biard and Hervé Leuwers (eds), *Visages de la terreur. L'exception*

These figures and their significance are discussed by Carla Hesse in her piece on ‘Terror and the Revolutionary Tribunals’. The relationship between terror and justice was central to the revolutionaries. Hesse has been working on this subject for some years. In her thought-provoking piece she looks at the activities of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the use of the guillotine and its rituals acted as a deliberately dramatic demonstration of revolutionary power.

Hesse identifies two myths relating to *the Terror*. The first, she says, is ‘the purportedly greater violence of the French Revolution’ in comparison with other pre-twentieth century revolutions. Recent historiography has shown that the old ‘illusion’ (as Hesse puts it) that the French Revolution was far more violent than the revolutionary outbreaks in the seventeenth-century British Isles, and the American revolutionary war is very wide of the mark.¹⁷ Ironically, as Hesse shows, the association of the French Revolution with the guillotine and the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal came about in part through a conscious strategy of the revolutionaries themselves, to make themselves look more intimidating to their enemies by the recourse to spectacular judicial violence. If we associate the French Revolution with the theatre of the guillotine it is in part at least, because that was an image that the revolutionaries chose to publicise. The revolutionary terror, Hesse concludes, was ‘a weapon of the weak’.

The second myth that Hesse identifies is the notion that ‘the revolutionary trials were mere show trials, indifferent to the rights of the accused’. Hesse looks in depth at the workings of the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, showing that the Tribunal’s procedures were designed to establish guilt or innocence.¹⁸ Hesse also throws a new light on the decrees of Ventôse, proposed by Saint-Just, which have often been seen as a proto-socialist measure. Hesse shows that social equality was a secondary consideration, and that the primary purpose of the decrees was to deal with the overcrowding in the prisons, and to allow for the release of as many people as possible who had been unjustly detained.

Hesse’s argument that in most cases the Revolutionary Tribunal made considerable efforts to establish guilt or innocence is persuasive, but this general application of the laws enabling terror needs to be seen in contrast to the treatment meted out to a particular category of people, that is revolutionary politicians themselves. Of all the cases that came before the Revolutionary Tribunal there were none more ruthless than those involving politicians. In most cases brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal, the accused had some chance to mount a legal defence; overall, slightly over half the people brought before the Revolutionary

politique de l’an II (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); and Annie Jourdan, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018), ‘Du nombre des victimes’, pp. 489-95. Jourdan gives the number of French soldiers and civilians killed between 1800 and 1815 as being almost twice the number killed during the revolutionary wars and terror combined, that is, around 916,00 compared to 484,000.

¹⁷ On the violence that accompanied the American Revolution, see Holger Hooch, *Scars of Independence: America’s Violent Birth* (New York: Crown, 2017). See too, Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

¹⁸ Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley, ‘Creating and Resisting the Terror: The Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, March-June 1793’, *French History*, 32, 2 (2018): 203-25 shows that opportunities to mount a legal defence were written into the procedures of the Revolutionary Tribunal, and that in the early months of the Tribunal’s creation, ‘fully two-thirds of judgments in the period [March-June 1793] led to the freeing of suspects’.

Tribunal were sentenced to death; and even after the Law of Prairial was passed on 10 June 1794, one in four of the people who appeared before the Tribunal escaped death.¹⁹ This was not the case with the terror that politicians dealt to one another. None of the deputies who were brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal during the Year II, and virtually none of the other prominent political figures who appeared before it in that time, escaped the death sentence.²⁰

High profile revolutionaries were subject to a specific and particularly virulent form of terror, that I have referred to as the ‘politicians’ terror’.²¹ It was a form of terror that rebounded on the national representatives themselves. The effects of the harsh treatment of the *conventionnels* in particular is the subject of Mette Harder’s contribution to the salon in a piece entitled ‘Habitual Terror and the Legislative Body in the Revolution’. After the removal of their parliamentary immunity, following the turmoil that followed the treason of France’s leading general, Dumouriez at the start of April 1793, the recourse to terror struck hard at the nation’s own elected representatives. Harder examines how the desire to ‘purify’ the political body, a growing fear of conspiracy with royalists and the foreign powers on the part of national representatives, and an intolerance and suspicion of political opposition, contributed to the destabilisation of the new republic. Here Harder builds on detailed research in which she has uncovered the experience of arrest of almost a third of the deputies of the Convention, a number of whom were later indicted, sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal and in almost every case where a trial took place, convicted of treason and executed.²² Harder shows how terror against deputies continued after the fall of Robespierre and the eclipse of Jacobinism as, during the ‘Thermidorean’ Convention, executions decreased in number, but the Convention continued to decree mass-expulsions and arrests of its own membership. Harder explores the negative impact of parliamentary violence and terror on the national representation and the key ways in which this undermined the attempt to establish a democratic republic. Harder’s contribution shows the disturbing process whereby, ‘a habitual,

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the statistics on the variety of verdicts given by the Revolutionary Tribunal, see James Logan Godfrey, *Revolutionary Justice: A Study in the Organisation and Procedures of the Paris Tribunal, 1793-95* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 136-50. For an analysis of why some people escaped death after the Law of Prairial was passed, see Anne Simonin, ‘Les acquittés de la Grande Terreur: Réflexions sur l’amitié dans la République’, in Michel Biard (ed.), *Les politiques de la Terreur, 1793-1794* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires – Société des études robespierristes, 2007).

²⁰ On the devastating effects of terror deployed against the *conventionnels* themselves, see: Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*; Michel Biard, *La Liberté ou la mort. Mourir en député 1792-1795* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015); Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*; and the work of Mette Harder, cited below, note 22.

²¹ Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*, pp. 227-31.

²² Harder has worked closely on the ‘purification’ of the National Convention: see Mette Harder, ‘Crisis of Representation: The National Convention and the Search for Political Legitimacy, 1792-1795’, (Phd, University of York, July 2010); Mette Harder, ‘A Second Terror – The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor’, in ‘Forum on Thermidor and the French Revolution’, Laura Mason (ed.), special issue, part 1, *French Historical Studies*, 38, no. 1 (2015): 33–60; and Mette Harder, ‘Elle n’a pas même épargné ses membres!’ Les épurations de la Convention nationale entre 1793 et 1795’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 381, no. 3 (2015): 77–105.

destructive practice gradually undermined representative institutions and culture in the form of, and from within, France's most central political space'.

Recent work has explored ways in which the experience of terror, both as an emotion and as a legalised policy, affected many of those who lived through the Revolution. A study by Howard Brown, *Violence and the Self*, takes the original perspective of setting the French revolutionary terror into the context of other outbreaks of violence in French history – the wars of religion, the Fronde and the Paris Commune.²³ He asks whether people in the past were 'traumatised' by violence in the same way that we ourselves might be, and before the invention of the term. Part of his study involves evolving visual representations of violence; he argues that more sophisticated and graphic visual representations helped to forge a stronger emotional response.

The issue of trauma as it affected victims of terror, their families, and those who had suffered imprisonment under the Law of Suspects, is explored in this salon in a piece by Ronen Steinberg that addresses 'The Terror as a Difficult Past'. Steinberg discusses how people looked back on the 'terror' in the aftermath of the Year II. Even if the reality was not as all-embracing as the term *the Terror* indicates, Steinberg points out that for people who had survived *the Terror*, but had been personally affected by it, its long shadow darkened every part of their lives. They were literally traumatised. Steinberg approaches the French revolutionary terror through modern concerns such as transitional justice and collective trauma in the aftermath of mass violence.²⁴ These terms are, Steinberg concedes, anachronistic, in the sense that there was no equivalent vocabulary available to the revolutionary generation. But he argues that there is no anachronism about the experience of trauma itself. We need to recognise the validity of the experience of trauma, even if people lacked the words to describe their experience as such. As Steinberg concludes: 'Transitional justice and trauma may be recent terms, but the difficulties that they articulate about dealing with the past are not.'

Finally, I would like to thank Michel Biard, Mette Harder, Carla Hesse and Ronen Steinberg for generously giving us their time, energy, and scholarly expertise for the purposes of this salon. These four historians – along with many others whose work is referred to here – do not attempt to give us definitive conclusions, or 'lessons learned' from the French revolutionary terror, but by helping to disperse many of the myths that still cling around *the Terror*, they bring us closer to the reality of the experience of the generation that lived through the first French Revolution, the choices that they made, and the consequences of those choices.

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²³ Howard G. Brown, *Violence and the Self: Personal Suffering and Collective Trauma from the French Wars of Religion to the Paris Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

²⁴ For a full-length treatment of this subject, see his forthcoming book: Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Postrevolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

ISSN 2150-4873

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