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The Terror as a Difficult Past

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The National Convention held its last session on October 26, 1795. It had been through a lot in its three years of existence. First came the September Massacres and the trial and execution of Louis XVI. Then came *La Terreur*, to use a term that was adopted after 9 Thermidor for the events of 1793-4. Eighty-two of the Convention's members died on the guillotine or in prison.¹ Now, fifteen months after the fall of Maximilien Robespierre, many members of the Convention were ready to do what they had wanted to do for a long time, namely, bring the Revolution to an end. In August it adopted a new constitution, the country's third in four years. It was now time for this body to dissolve itself and transfer power to a new form of government, the Directory. The Convention spent much of its last session discussing the Terror. In particular, it discussed the proposals put forth two days earlier in a special report delivered by one of its members, Pierre Baudin, on the subject of amnesty. Baudin proposed that in its last acts as the legislative assembly, the Convention abolish the death penalty, burn the guillotine publicly, change the name of the *Place de la Révolution* – the main site of executions in Paris during the Terror – to *Place de la Concorde*, and terminate all investigations into actions related directly to the Revolution. “There are evils that are inseparable from a great revolution,” Baudin told his colleagues, “and among these evils are some which, by their very nature, can no longer be remedied.”² Two of Baudin's proposals were adopted: the name-change of the public square in Paris, and a sweeping amnesty decree, “for all acts related purely to the Revolution.”³ The Convention rejected, however, the abolition of the death penalty, or rather, it deferred the discussion to a later, unspecified date. In an ambiguous, cautious way, the Convention thus devoted its last session to closing the books on the most controversial episode of the French Revolution.

Thirty-five years later, the secretary of the Ministry of Interior sent a letter to the prefect of the department of the Vaucluse to inquire about certain incidents, which had taken place around a

¹ I take this number from Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 1.

² *Rapport fait à la Convention nationale, et projet de décret, présenté dans la séance du 2 brumaire, an 4, au nom de la Commission des onze, par P.C.L. Baudin, député de la département des Ardennes, sur l'abolition de la peine de mort, et l'amnistie pour les faits relatifs à la révolution* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, an 4), 9.

³ P.-J.-B. Buchez and P.-C. Roux, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française*, 40 vols. (Paris: Paulin, 1834-8), 37: 88. On the amnesty decree, see Bronislaw Baczko, “Briser la guillotine. Une amnistie thermidorienne,” *Crime, histoire & sociétés* 8, No. 2 (2004): 5-31.

monument to the victims of the Terror in the town of Orange. The monument was built in 1825 to commemorate the 332 residents of the town who had been sentenced to death by the *Commission populaire d'Orange* in the summer of 1794.⁴ Following the July Revolution of 1830, the monument became a site of political clashes between various factions in the town. And so, in November of that year, the Ministry of Interior wrote to the authorities in the Vaucluse to express concern over these developments. The ministry had received reports that certain groups in the town were threatening to destroy the monument, possibly with explosives. "The location of this edifice," said the letter from the ministry, "which perpetuates painful memories, seems to have been the pretext for *culpable attempts*," the latter phrase being a euphemism for criminal conspiracies. The letter urged local authorities to relocate the monument "in the interest of public order as well as that of national glory."⁵ The authorities, for their part, chose not to heed the call, and so in 1831 an explosion damaged the façade of the monument. This was followed by another attack in 1836. It seems the guilty parties were never apprehended. Eventually, following the 1848 Revolution, the municipal council of Orange decided to demolish the monument, which it now described as "counter-revolutionary."⁶ As these conflicts around a monument to the victims of the revolutionary violence of Year II four decades after the last session of the National Convention show, it was not so easy to close the books on this revolutionary episode. The period known as "the Terror," it seems, was destined to remain a difficult past; a past that had not passed.

The nature of this period as a difficult past has not been a major subject of inquiry for historians. The questions that dominate the historiography of the Terror – what it was, why it happened, and what was its relationship to the Revolution – have led scholars to focus on the years leading to 1793 and on the evolution of the repression.⁷ The aftermath of the Terror seems irrelevant to these discussions. Yet looking at how those who had lived through the violence of Year II struggled with its legacies opens up new perspectives on the revolutionary experience. Bronislaw Baczko's pathbreaking work is a case in point. Baczko analyzed the political culture of Year III, showing that there was considerable continuity between the Terror and the reaction against it. Emerging from the Terror, he argued, was a complex experience that "had to be worked out within a framework – political and symbolic, institutional and social – that was born of the

⁴ See L'abbé S. Bonnel, *Les 332 victimes de la commission populaire d'Orange en 1794, d'après les documents officiels, avec reproduction du Monument expiatoire de la Chappelle de Laplane et de quinze Portraits*, 2 vols. (Carpentras: chez Tourrette, 1888).

⁵ *Ministère de l'Interieur à la Préfecture de Vaucluse*, 16 November 1830, Archives départementales de Vaucluse, 1 M art. 904, italics mine.

⁶ *Le sous Commissaire d'Orange au Monsieur le Maire d'Orange*, 28 May 1848, Archives Municipales d'Orange, M 1371.

⁷ As Haim Burstin noted, there is a distinct historiography of the Terror within the more general study of the Revolution. See Haim Burstin, "Entre théorie et pratique de la Terreur: un essai de balisage," in *Les politiques de la Terreur, 1793-1794*, edited by Michel Biard (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 39-52. For a recent summary of the main questions and areas of disagreement in this historiography, see Dan Edelstein, "What was the Terror?" in *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, edited by David Andress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 453-470.

Terror and modelled by it.”⁸ Howard Brown’s work on the reestablishment of order after the Terror has shown how the regimes that followed the Jacobin dictatorship borrowed many of its methods in their effort to quell civil unrest and bring the Revolution to an end. More recently, Mette Harder has shown that the purges of members of the Convention continued well beyond the fall of Robespierre.⁹ Taken together, these studies show that the aftermath of the Terror constituted a distinct moment in the Revolution, with its own set of problems. One of these problems – perhaps the main one – was what to do about the past.

The *conventionnel* Robert Lindet addressed this question explicitly in a special report that he delivered on behalf of the revolutionary government on the last day of Year II. He admitted that the conduct of many public officials was excessive but argued that the responsibility for the violence of the previous months was collective. “Let us reproach ourselves,” Lindet said, “neither for our mistakes nor for our misfortunes... the Revolution has taken place, it is the work of everyone.” Yes, there were injustices and the Terror left many victims in its wake, but it was not a good idea to open up all these things for scrutiny. “Reason, the welfare of the fatherland does not allow you to look back on the ruins you have left behind.” Revolutions, Lindet implied, cannot afford a reckoning with their own past.¹⁰

How remarkable, then, that this is precisely what took place after 9 Thermidor. In spite of Lindet’s call to let bygones be bygones, the National Convention undertook the prosecution of several of its members for their role in the repression. It restored the possessions that had been confiscated from those who had been convicted and executed as counter-revolutionaries to their surviving family members. Memoirs of prisoners who had been incarcerated as suspects in Year II became an overnight success, selling multiple editions to a readership that was eager for some sort of catharsis.¹¹ Relatives of victims struggled to bring their loved ones to proper burial well into the nineteenth century. Most of those who had been executed in 1793-4 were buried in mass graves. Their relatives began transforming these mass graves into commemorative sites immediately after the fall of Robespierre. This process of commemoration and sanctification continued into the 1830s, involving multiple exhumations and reburials, as well as hundreds of people who made annual pilgrimages and maintained these sites over time.

⁸ Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 34.

⁹ See Howard Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); and Mette Harder, “A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor,” *French Historical Studies* 38, No. 1 (2015): 33-60.

¹⁰ Robert Lindet, *Rapport fait à la Convention nationale dans la séance du 4ème des Sans-Culottides de l’an 2ème, au nom des Comités de salut public, de sûreté générale et de législation, réunis, sur la situation intérieure de la république, par Robert Lindet, Représentant du peuple, et membre du comité de salut public* (Montauban: chez Fontanel, imprimeur de la société populaire, an III), 22.

¹¹ See Julia Douthwaite, *The Frankenstein of 1790 and Other Lost Chapters from Revolutionary France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), chap. 4.

The traces of the period that many referred to as “the Terror” were widespread, then, in the landscape as well as in the minds of people. Contemporaries were aware of these long-term effects of the violence of Year II on individual and social life. In 1830, the physician Pierquin de Gembloux argued that it had been the main cause of the “murderous monomanias and the crimes” that he saw around him. “If we observe the increasing number of individuals charged with murder today,” he wrote, “we will see that it is precisely those whose childhood had been spent around the scaffolds of the Terror.”¹² The question of whether arguments of this kind held any water is beside the point. They show us that at least some French men and women viewed the Terror as a difficult past that continued to shape the present long after the fall of Robespierre, often in pernicious ways.

The view of the Terror as a difficult past, which I am advocating here, is rooted in concerns that have dominated the political and cultural life of the late twentieth century, especially as they pertain to the long shadow cast by the Holocaust. The historian Alon Confino has argued that certain events constitute foundational pasts. He means by this “an event that represents an age because it embodies a historical novum that serves as a moral and historical yardstick, as a measure of things human.”¹³ According to Confino, the French Revolution constituted the foundational past of the West from 1789 onward, but it was replaced by the Holocaust around the 1970s. Jan Goldstein has also noted that the optimistic questions that attracted scores of students to courses on the French Revolution – questions about freedom, democracy, and utopian futures – have given way to a more somber reflection on the horrors of the past. As she put it in 2001, “the defining event of modernity now seems to be the Holocaust.”¹⁴ If these scholars are right, this means that the dominant historical sensibility of our time is oriented less toward the realization of the emancipatory project that was launched by the storming of the Bastille, and more toward working through the horrors of the past.

The historiography of the Terror has been influenced by the emblematic atrocities of the modern age. Jean-Clément Martin opened his influential 2006 reinterpretation of the Terror by arguing that “the history of the French Revolution occupies, without a doubt, a place that is similar to that of the destruction of the Jews by the Hitlerite regime or that of slavery in America.” And Lynn Hunt has written that the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, respectively, have reshaped the perspective of historians on the violence of the French Revolution in powerful ways.¹⁵

¹² Charles Claude Pierquin de Gembloux, *De la peine de mort et de son influence sur la santé publique* (Paris: Imprimerie de Veuve Thuau, 1830), 34.

¹³ Alon Confino, *Foundational Past: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5-6.

¹⁴ Jan E. Goldstein, “The Future of French History in the United States: Unapocalyptic Thoughts for the New Millennium,” *French Historical Studies* 24, No. 1 (2001), 5.

¹⁵ Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 7; Lynn Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 32, No. 4 (2009), 675.

This reorientation of historical consciousness is a source of concern for many scholars.¹⁶ François Furet's famous dictum – “the Revolution is over” – was followed by a lively but short burst of debates and publications, but the field has since settled into what Lynn Hunt has described as a state of “paradigmlessness.”¹⁷ New work on the Revolution, and on the events of Year II more specifically, comes out all the time, but the sense of vitality that has characterized the historiography of the Revolution for a long time has been diminished.¹⁸ When I read some of the classic works on the Revolution published in the twentieth century – Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul, and even R. R. Palmer – I am struck by the energy pulsating in them.¹⁹ These historians knew the place of the French Revolution as a world-historical event with a great sense of clarity and confidence. New work on gender, the Atlantic context, or the global dimensions of the Revolution can be, and often is, exciting, but the belief in radically different futures that animated the older historiography, is simply not there.

The point of view that I am presenting here is part and parcel, then, of a certain melancholy that runs through the historical consciousness of our time. But the loss of the paradigms that gave the study of the Revolution direction and meaning can also have a liberating effect, in the sense that it loosens the contours of discussions in the field and opens up space for the emergence of new questions and new perspectives. For the remainder of this essay I would like to talk about how certain concepts that have been especially useful for the study of difficult pasts can enrich our understanding of the period known as the Terror and what it meant for those who had lived through it.

The concepts I have in mind are, respectively, transitional justice and trauma. The term transitional justice emerged in the 1990s, in the context of a global wave of transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Latin America, South Africa, and Eastern Europe. Scholars of transitional justice argue that societies undergoing such periods of transformation must do something about their past. It is not entirely clear what they should do, and this is the subject of much debate. But the premise is that without holding those who had been responsible for past abuses accountable in some way, and without providing some sort of relief to victims and survivors, societies in transition would fail to build a robust, democratic political culture. At its broadest, transitional justice encompasses the formal and informal mechanisms that societies adopt in order to deal with the legacy of systematic human rights abuse. These range from criminal trials, truth commissions, and reparations, to commemorative monuments, art, and therapy. A helpful way of thinking about the various measures that fall under the heading of

¹⁶ See Russel Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

¹⁷ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), part I; and Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” 672.

¹⁸ See Dorinda Outram, “Revolution and Repression,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, No. 1 (1992): 58-67.

¹⁹ I am referring specifically to Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793-1794* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972); R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

transitional justice is to situate them on a spectrum “between vengeance and forgiveness,” as suggested by the legal scholar Martha Minow.²⁰

The concept of trauma is, of course, much more familiar. In its clinical sense, it designates a mental and physiological response to extreme events. These are usually events that involve a close encounter with violence, death, and the threat of bodily harm. The assumption is that such events are so threatening to the integrity of the human psyche, that they cannot be processed through the normal mechanisms of memory and cognition. They become split off in the brain, giving rise to a wide range of symptoms that take on a life of their own, disconnected from the original event.²¹ However, the meaning of trauma in our culture has gone beyond its original, clinical sense. Trauma has come to stand for a whole range of personal and collective experiences and their effects on self and society. Thus, we speak of traumatized nations, traumatized histories, and cultures of trauma. The authors of a recent book on the subject argue that, for better or worse, “trauma has become... one of the dominant modes of representing our relationship with the past.”²²

The concepts of transitional justice and trauma, respectively, are “good to think with” about the violence of 1793-4 as a difficult past. Transitional justice draws our attention to the dilemmas that the revolutionaries faced after the fall of Robespierre. French society had to navigate a slippery course between justice and stability, peace and truth, memory and amnesia. On the one hand, it was paramount to hold someone accountable for the excesses of Year II. On the other hand, doing so could plunge the Republic into a cycle of violence and reprisals. Victims needed to be compensated for the harm done to them, but such large-scale redress could undo many of the social and economic achievements of the Revolution. The Revolution, by its very nature, was focused on the future, on the realization of a new social and political order. What place was there to reckon with the past in this new order? These questions have no definite answers, but those who were involved in, or affected directly by, the violence of Year II faced them without a blueprint or a set of measures they could draw on from experience.

²⁰ See Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). Transitional justice is a burgeoning field of activism and scholarship. Some of the works that have set the agenda of the field are Neil Kritz, ed. *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, 3 vols. (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace); Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Naomi Roht-Arriaza and Javier Mariezcurrena, eds. *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Truth versus Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

²¹ The literature on trauma is, obviously, enormous, but two good places to start are Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014)

²² Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). See also Jeffrey Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

The concept of trauma, in turn, enables us to see how the more extreme experiences of 1793-4 reverberated in the post-revolutionary landscape long after the fact. These reverberations were heard in different domains of social and cultural life. Thus, we encounter a story from 1801 about villagers in the vicinity of Nantes, who had been alarmed by a wolf roaming in their area, making occasional forays into their communities in search of food. According to a rumor that spread through the region, the wolf was none other than the reincarnated spirit of Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the representative of the revolutionary government in Nantes in Year II. Carrier was executed in December 1794, but apparently the villagers believed that he had come back in the figure of the wolf, “and it is he, who is still causing distress in the region.”²³ When we shift our gaze from the countryside to Paris, we find the phantasmagoria, a new kind of magic lantern show that was created by the physicist and balloonist Etienne-Gaspard Robert several years after the fall of Robespierre. The phantasmagoria consisted in the projection of moving images of spirits rising from the dead, accompanied by the eerie sounds of the glass harmonica, a musical instrument that had been invented by Benjamin Franklin. The shows took place in the abandoned convent of the Capuchin Order in Paris, whose former inhabitants had been driven out by the revolutionaries. On one occasion, Robert projected the image of Marat rising from the dead, and in another, he was asked by an audience member to resurrect the spirit of Louis XVI, but he wisely declined this imprudent request.²⁴ At first glance, these two examples have little to do with each other. But when we look at them through the prism of trauma, they appear connected by a vague but general awareness that the Terror may have been over, but it was far from gone.

Let me end this essay by bringing up two important critiques of my proposal to study the Terror as a difficult past. The first is Jean-Clément Martin’s recent interpretation of the Terror. The second has to do with anachronism.

In his recent rethinking of the Terror, Martin has argued that it was neither a policy of the revolutionary government, nor a unified event. What we commonly refer to as “the Terror,” according to Martin, was actually a series of chaotic, bumbling actions on the ground, that were determined more by the absence of the state than by its power, and that were given the appearance of a unified phenomenon after the fact, most notably by Thermidorian propaganda.²⁵ If the Terror is a misnomer, as Martin seems to be suggesting, then how can one discuss its legacies or its nature as a difficult past? In other words, if there was no *La Terreur*, then what was there to come to terms with? Martin may be right that the Terror was not as intentional or systematic as most accounts make it out to be, but I would argue that it appeared this way to most men and women after 9 Thermidor. Even if this dominant narrative of the Terror misrepresented the complex realities of Year II, it was the narrative that shaped how most men and women viewed the revolutionary past. In this sense, it was a narrative that shaped the post-

²³ L.-A. Beffroy de Reigny, ed. *Dictionnaire néologique des hommes et des choses*, 2 vols. (Paris: Moutardier, 1801), 1: 319

²⁴ See Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000). See also Ronen Steinberg, “Between Silence and Speech: Specters and Images in the aftermath of the Reign of Terror,” *Acta Academica* 47, No. 1 (2015): 247-265.

²⁵ See Martin, *Violence et Révolution*. See also the H-France forum on Martin’s book at <https://h-france.net/h-france-forum-volume-2-2007/>.

revolutionary landscape, and as such, it should be taken seriously, even if it does not match the realities of Year II.

The second critique is that there is a certain degree of anachronism in applying terms such as transitional justice or trauma to the revolutionary experience. This, I think, is true. But as Nicole Loraux has argued recently, a certain degree of anachronism may be necessary for generating new historical questions, and for forging new connections between the past and the present.²⁶ Transitional justice and trauma may be recent terms, but the difficulties that they articulate about dealing with the past are not. There is much we can learn about the Terror by studying how those who had experienced it grappled with similar difficulties on their own terms, with the frameworks and ways of understanding available to them at the time.

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²⁶ See Nicole Loraux, “Éloge de l’anachronisme en histoire,” *Espaces Temps* 87-88 (2005): 127-139. See also Sophie Wahnich, “Comment écrire des chroniques dans un journal, en historienne?” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, Indianapolis, IN, April 2019.