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Ronald Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror in Eighteenth-Century France*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018. 205 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-226-49957-4.

Review by Paul Hanson, Butler University.

It would be a mistake to suggest that Ronald Schechter sets out to rehabilitate the idea of revolutionary terror in this book, but most readers will be surprised to learn, all the same, that legislators took pleasure in 1793 in uttering the words “terror” or “terrible,” or that “terror speech was therapeutic to the revolutionaries of the Year II” (p. 14). As Schechter points out in the very first sentence of the book, “The French Revolution gave terror a bad name” (p. ix). Given the overwhelmingly negative connotation that the word has today, he asks, “Why did the Jacobins and sansculottes conceive of their goals for the French Republic in terms of terror” (p. 5)? This is not, perhaps, the question that I would ask. Rather, I might suggest, “Why did the Jacobins and sansculottes conceive of the defense of the French Republic in terms of terror?” But this is to get to a thorny question that Schechter broaches only toward the end of his argument, so we will leave it aside for the moment. His argument is admirably clear, and he presents it early on: “the appeal to terror in the French Revolution was conceivable and popular because it drew on a long tradition of writing and thinking in which terror was a good thing” (p. 6). Schechter is interested in the genealogy of a word, then, not a phenomenon, and his discussion of how that word was used over the course of the eighteenth century, in a variety of contexts, is both erudite and fascinating.

Schechter’s approach to his topic is guided by the work of both Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, who may have been the first to point to the shift in the meaning of the word “terror” that occurred in late 1794. The book is organized into eight chapters, the first six of which are thematic, focusing in turn on the use of the words “terror” and “terrible” over the course of the eighteenth century in religious contexts, in texts addressing monarchical and national sovereignty, in legal treatises, in theatrical works, in the field of aesthetics, and, finally, in medical texts. The last two chapters turn to the Revolution itself, the first addressing the use of the word “terror” in the early years, and the second focusing on “terror speech” in the Year II. What emerges quite clearly from this discussion is that right up until the days immediately following 9 Thermidor, the resonance of the word “terror” was overwhelmingly positive.

Those who could read in eighteenth-century France tended to read the Bible. Schechter notes that the word “terror” appears “forty-seven times in the Vulgate,” all but one of these in the Old Testament. “The Old Testament repeatedly depicts god striking terror into people and in the process signifying his sovereignty over them” (p. 18). Theological writers in both the Jesuit and Jansenist traditions regularly invoked God’s terror, and priests spoke about terror from their pulpits in order to secure the salvation of their parishioners. Terror thus had a salutary effect. The word *salut*, indeed, is significant in this context. As Schechter observes, it could mean “safety” or “salvation” or “health,” and so it figured not only in the religious discourse of the eighteenth century but in the legal and medical discourses as well. This term would, therefore, carry a triple resonance when the National Convention created the *Comité de Salut Public*—the executive body that would oversee the Terror—in 1793. Schechter also notes that Claude Royer, the deputy who called for making “terror the order of the day” on 5 September 1793, had himself been a priest

before 1789, like a number of other Jacobins, and was, therefore, quite familiar with the religious evocations of terror (p. 37).

Given that the Bourbon monarchs ruled by divine right, we should not be surprised that the term “terror” was associated with their persons as well. Schechter notes that “French dictionaries of the Old Regime reveal the habit of pairing ‘terror’ with rulers who instilled the emotion in others or embodied the quality of terribleness” (p. 39). Louis XIV was the king most often associated with the word “terror,” but it also came to be applied to military commanders (sowing terror in their enemies), and eventually with the concept of the nation: “To be the terror of one’s enemies was an attractive identity, one associated with might, virtue, and justice, and it is easy to see why those who came to view the nation as a sovereign power would have been drawn to it” (p. 57).

Eighteenth-century theorists also saw judicial terror as salutary. As Schechter notes, “terror speech often contributed dignity to the law and its practitioners” (p. 64). Even those who opposed capital punishment, such as Cesare Beccaria and Voltaire, rejected it as inefficacious, unlikely to deter violent crime, but agreed that “the goal of punishment was exemplary and ‘salutary’ terror.” (p. 74) In the realm of theatre, drawing on a tradition that stretched back to Aristotle, critics argued that viewing tragedy should excite terror and compassion in the theatre-goer. The word *terreur* thus had positive emotional connotations in eighteenth-century French theatre. The most ardent advocate of the “aesthetic value of terror,” as Schechter puts it, was ironically Edmund Burke, who at the end of the century would become one of the most eloquent critics of the rupture with tradition brought about by the French Revolution. As Burke put it, “where we find power...we notice that the sublime always accompanies terror” (p. 104). Burke’s views were enthusiastically embraced by Denis Diderot, who wrote in 1767 that, “everything that astonishes the soul, everything that imprints a sentiment of terror leads to the sublime” (p. 115). Rounding out this discussion, Schechter observes that medical writers and physicians also found value in the application of terror: “If the terror of the laws could save lives and the terror of God could save souls, the physical experience of terror could literally produce *salut* or health” (p. 124).

When revolution broke out in 1789, then, it is hardly surprising that the discourse of politics included terror speech: “The principal argument of this book is that terror, whatever it meant to revolutionaries in September 1793, was appealing in large measure because of the positive emotional connotations historically attached to the words *terreur* and *terrible* (p. 142). And as Schechter emphasizes in his chapters devoted to the Revolution, the deputies were quite “ecumenical” in their appeals to terror (p. 143). In 1790 and 1791, monarchists and revolutionaries “shared the belief that terror was a key element in making the law and judicial institutions respectable” (pp. 149-50). During the king’s trial in late 1792, it was not only those deputies who called for his execution who couched their arguments in terms of terror, but those who demanded that the fate of the king be referred to a national referendum as well. Schechter asserts that when the Montagnards called for terror in 1793, “they were not invoking a partisan ideal but rather appealing to a universal value” (p. 168). I might add that when the institutions that we associate with the Terror were put in place in the spring of 1793, such as the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committee of Public Safety, they were advocated by both Girondins and Montagnards.

Schechter points to two moments in the Revolution that were pivotal in the use of terror speech and that might fruitfully draw attention from future researchers. Each of these moments is relevant to the debate over ideology versus circumstance that has long framed historiographical discussion of the Terror. The first is the September massacres in 1792. Schechter quotes Jean-Marie Roland’s initial words justifying the killings, characterizing them as “a sort of justice” over which a veil should be drawn and adding that the *Moniteur* would later endorse this view and observe that “the people’s justice is terrible” (p. 153). Within days, however, several leading Girondins, including Pierre Vergniaud and Jean-Baptiste Louvet, would abandon that position and condemn those who they accused of instigating the massacres—Robespierre, Danton and Marat. The ecumenical embrace of terror as salutary thus broke down rather quickly in the fall of 1792, and one might ask why this was so. It was a moment of crisis to be sure. The

fate of the king lay in the balance and national elections were at hand. One might point, then, to circumstances. But this was also a moment during which power and sovereignty were at stake, both of them concepts that figured prominently in the eighteenth-century “terror speech” that Schechter discusses (the phrase “terror speech” appears throughout chapters seven and eight). Perhaps it was the fact that “the people” were laying claim to justice and sovereignty in the fall of 1792 that most troubled moderate deputies, which puts us back in the realm of ideology.

The second pivotal moment was 9 Thermidor: “Terror, which had been such a positive force for so long, was suddenly a bad thing” (p. 203). This transformation, too, took place in a matter of days, as deputies who had once allied themselves with Robespierre scrambled to distance themselves from him in particular, and the Committee of Public Safety as well, by laying the blame for the Terror, now seen as a tool of despotism rather than “terrible” justice, at their feet. Was this a moment at which ideology triumphed, or one that must be explained by circumstances? Schechter does not come down on one side or the other: “At the risk of appearing indecisive, I contend that all three of the explanatory models of the Terror are valid” (p. 199). Here, he gives an appreciative nod in the direction of Timothy Tackett and Marisa Linton, who have argued in recent books that emotion, particularly fear, played an important role in the genesis of the Terror.[1]

Students and historians will thus still have plenty to debate in the years ahead in regard to the interpretation of the Terror. But in this very fine book, Ronald Schechter has made crystal clear that the Montagnards did not invent the rhetoric of terror in the Year II, nor can they be held responsible for the “terror speech” that was pervasive not only during the revolutionary years of the 1790s but throughout much of the eighteenth century as well.

NOTE

[1] Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), and Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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