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Michel Biard and Marisa Linton, *Terreur! La Révolution française face à ses démons*, Préface de Timothy Tackett. Paris: Armand Colin, 2020. 296 pp. Notes, bibliography, and appendices. €22.90 (pb). ISBN 9782200623517; €14.99 (eb). ISBN 9782200628246.

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“Disons-le nettement, la Révolution a commis des crimes. Pourquoi le dissimuler? A quoi bon les atténuations? Qu’a-t-elle besoin d’excuses? elle est immense. Oui, immense, mais furieuse; immense, mais souvent sanguinaire; immense, mais parfois féroce. Elle a réalisé par des moyens de sauvagerie un but de civilisation.”[1]

Like Victor Hugo, Michel Biard and Marisa Linton believe that understanding the French Revolution requires facing its violence and excesses, even while refusing to let them become its dominant legacy. Although the authors object to the concept of “the Terror,” or even “the Reign of Terror,” as a distinct period in the French Revolution, explaining the state-authorized violence and coercion of 1793-94 remains their focus throughout. Thankfully the book’s lurid cover and sensationalist title are not matched by its content, which is resolutely scholarly.[2] The book’s purpose is to synthesize the most recent works on the period in French and in English, while offering a corrective to historians who are inclined either to discount the force of circumstances, including emotional ones, or who engage in ideological battles at the expense of true historical analysis, as the authors see it (p. 30). The book’s emphasis on the circumstances and emotions that shaped national politics in 1793-94 fits well with Timothy Tackett’s most recent book, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*. [3] Tackett’s apt preface includes a strong supporting statement: “Jamais une quelconque idéologie unique et préconçue n’a été à l’œuvre dans ce processus” (p. 6). As Biard and Linton later make clear, this is aimed at historians such as François Furet and Keith Baker (who are named) as well as Simon Schama and Patrice Gueniffey (who are not), all of whom have argued for powerful continuities between the dramatic caesura of 1789 and the descent into extreme violence in 1793.

Biard and Linton do not ignore background influences, although they prefer discursive genealogy to political ideology. Examining uses of the word *terreur*, from antiquity to the Enlightenment to the early years of the Revolution, reveals its potentially positive implications when directed against threats to public order, as well as its association with popular panic and personal emotions. Such an inquiry serves to discredit the Thermidorians’ claim that France had been subjected to a system of terror under the aegis of Robespierre and his acolytes. Moreover, the National Convention did not officially put terror on its daily agenda (“mettre la terreur sur l’ordre du jour”) on 5 September 1793, as the *sans-culottes* demanded and historians long believed. Biard

and Linton, nonetheless, recognize that thereafter revolutionaries frequently deployed a discourse of terror as an integral feature of the regime. By this time, fears of treason and counter-revolutionary conspiracies had pervaded revolutionary politics at all levels. These were not mere fantasy, they had a basis in actual events: the country's top military commanders, Lafayette and Dumouriez, had both defected to the Austrians; two famous deputies, Le Peltier and Marat, had been assassinated for their political views; and aristocratic émigrés had organized an army in support of the allies while Vendéan rebels sought military aid from the British. Finally, there was the terror that politicians inflicted on one another, wildly accusing each other of conspiracy and treason. In short, the revolutionary leaders of Year II felt fear before they imposed fear. Efforts to justify the resulting repression meant pairing official terror with virtue à la Rousseau. Proving one's bona fides as a citizen became essential to survival, but only if that included a willingness both to die for and to kill for the fledgling republican regime.

Revolutionary change provoked unpleasant emotions and overt resistance from many in France, notably refractory priests and émigrés. As Biard and Linton emphasize, persecution of these groups began well before 1793. The ensuing escalation is blamed largely on the opponents themselves. More could be said about the popular resentment against them, which grew increasingly virulent as democratic politics spilled over into vigilante violence. Moreover, this combined with other sources of prolonged contestation, such as access to subsistence and the characteristics of citizenship, on one hand, or opposition to anti-clericalism, conscription, and requisitions, on the other. As the recourse to coercion and repression increased, "extraordinary" became synonymous with "revolutionary." This included all of the *grands moyens* associated with the "Terror": the law of suspects of 17 September 1793, the use of *armées révolutionnaires* to break resistance and impose dechristianization, the creation of over sixty special courts and commissions (including the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris), the imposition of price controls, etc. However, the authors argue that the resulting "revolutionary government" was too complex to be described either as a "sovereign dictatorship" or a "commissarial dictatorship," concepts first proposed by Carl Schmitt (pp. 95-97). Moreover, it was supposedly too restrained by the law and legal procedures to fit Sergio Agamben's "state of exception" (p. 266).

Biard and Linton include an abundance of statistics, especially about the differential impact of various forms of exceptional justice. These include oft-cited numbers--16,594 official death sentences in 1793-94--alongside more recent figures, such as the number of citizens judged outside the law (*hors de la loi*)--21,799 prosecutions that led to 13,048 executions.<sup>[4]</sup> The work of the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris is assessed largely in terms of its acquittal rates before and after the Draconian law of 22 Prairial II (10 June 1794). Asserting a general procedural regularity requires omitting any mention of such famous perversions of justice as the twenty-eight Farmers General (including the leading chemist of the age, Antoine Lavoisier) guillotined on a single day, or even the batch trials used to empty the prisons of Paris in June and July 1794. On the other hand, the authors take pains to detail the extraordinary lethality of several military commissions and popular tribunals, as well as the death toll provoked by General Turreau's *colonnes infernales* in the West (11,000 in three months). In most cases, numbers do the talking, leaving it to more popular--or more specialized--histories to provide the gory details.

This willingness to enumerate, but not to describe, most of the famous atrocities of 1793-94 is part of the authors' efforts to overcome the myth of the Terror first created by the Thermidorians, that eclectic and compromised set of politicians who took control of the Convention after destroying the Robespierrists in July 1794. Subsequent revelations of the

atrocities and tragedies of Year II, usually grossly exaggerated and emotionally charged, provided the fuel for a sentimentalist and pathos-laden image of a pervasive “reign of terror.”[5] The authors generally eschew the language of horror. Nonetheless, they emphasize the dangerous revolutionary dynamics in the capital, deemed the epicenter of the Terror, where the *sans-culottes* gained ascendancy and some 9,300 Parisians were imprisoned in the two years after the overthrow of the monarchy. In contrast, the authors question the extent to which the civil war in the Vendée made the government of 1793-94 a distinctive regime. After all, it took prolonged fighting before the republic gained control of the region in 1796.

*Terreur!* is an excellent introduction to the previous work of both authors, notably Michel Biard on representatives on mission and the siege of Lyon in 1793, and Marisa Linton on the politics of virtue and the deadly rivalry between national leaders, many former friends and allies. All of these topics are critically important to understanding the period. The result is a heavy emphasis on national politics. Regional differences are noted mainly in statistical terms, without really exploring local dynamics. Proximity to war zones is shown to be important, but much more could be said. For example, what role did higher rates of urbanization or the culture of vendetta play in the Midi? Moreover, as Richard Cobb once noted, the government of 1793-94 administered terror “on a national putting-out basis.”[6] To develop his metaphor, the merchants of terror (revolutionary agents sent from Paris) may have supplied the wool (authority to use exceptional measures), but it took country weavers (local surveillance committees, improvised courts, and militia units) to turn it into cloth (imprisonment, expedited trials, and summary executions). This produced the so-called anarchic terror of 1793—not a concept addressed here – in which local initiatives, often deemed excessive or misdirected, produced the motley fabric of repression. From this perspective, the Revolutionary Government of Year II, traditionally understood as a Jacobin dictatorship, resulted from a prolonged effort to gain control of forms of violence and coercion that clearly eroded support for the republic. More could be said about the collapse of state authority, personal ambition, and moral turpitude; however, adding such factors would make it harder to correct the Thermidorian caricature or to provide an over-arching explanation for this extraordinarily violent period. The authors’ strong penchant for empiricism leads them away from broader theoretical discussions, as well as “ideological” interpretations, such as seeing “the Terror” as a precursor to twentieth-century totalitarianisms (pp. 11 and 185).

Girondins and Montagnards, *exagérés* (Hébertistes) and *indulgents* (Dantonistes), *sans-culottes* and Vendéans, Jacobins and Cordeliers, all receive considerable attention: less remarked are market women and *gros fermiers*, government bureaucrats and army generals, images and songs. This is not surprising: the authors are committed to a largely political, rather than an ideological, social, or even cultural, explanation for the crescendo of state-authorized violence in Year II. They make a strong case for eschewing the traditional concept of a distinctive period dubbed the “Terror,” with its attendant need for opening and closing dates. Judicial exceptionalism and military repression were not uniquely associated with the Year II; they continued, albeit in attenuated forms, for another decade thereafter. Without developing this larger context, including many of the achievements dear to Victor Hugo, Biard and Linton provide a sophisticated synthesis of much recent scholarship on the period in both French and English. Together the detailed reference notes and extensive bibliography constitute a treasure trove of sources, many of them easily missed in a still prolific field. A detailed chronology for the period of the Convention (1792-1795) is also useful. Even more valuable is the appendix of maps. Several of them are clever visual summaries of such central matters as the regional application of *hors de la loi*, the jurisdiction of regular armies as well as *armées révolutionnaires*, the location of prisons and the itinerancy of the

guillotine in Paris, and the frequency and purpose of representatives on mission. (Too bad the publisher did not match this admirable commitment to scholarly usefulness by including an index.) Biard and Linton clearly took individual responsibility for different chapters, but they are to be commended for their rare--and rich--cross-channel collaboration. Despite their best efforts, however, the "reign of Terror" or just simply "the Terror" are perdurable terms that will not disappear from the lexicon of French history and, instead, will continue to stimulate rich theoretical analyses of what Hugo calls the "moyens de sauvagerie" used to achieve "un but de civilisation."

## NOTES

[1] Victor Hugo, "Pages d'histoire" (manuscripts associated with his novel), *Quatrevingt-treize*, préface et commentaire de Gérard Gengembre, (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992), Dossier historique et littéraire, p. 442.

[2] The cover is a detail from George Cruikshank's satirical caricature *The Radical's Arms* (1819).

[3] Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[4] Donald Greer, *Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935); Éric de Mari, *La mise hors de la loi sous la Révolution française (19 mars 1793-an III)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014). Other important statistics are drawn from Jacques Hussenet, ed., "Détruisez la Vendée." *Regards croisés sur les victimes et destructions de la guerre de Vendée* (La Roche-sur-Yon: Contre vendéen de recherches historiques, 2007) and Bruno Hervé, "Les archives de la justice révolutionnaire, une source majeure de l'histoire politique de la Révolution française?," *L'Atelier du Centre de recherches historiques*, <http://journals/openedition.org/arch/1654>.

[5] Howard G. Brown, *Mass Violence and the Self: From the French Wars of Religion to the Paris Commune* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), ch. 4, "The Thermidorians' Terror."

[6] Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 189.

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