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Graeme Fife, *The Terror: The Shadow of the Guillotine: France 1792-1794*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. xi + 436 pp. Illustrations, revolutionary calendar, bibliography and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-312-35224-7.

Review by Leigh Whaley, Acadia University.

At a time when historians of the French Revolution are changing their perspectives on the Terror from focusing on its negative aspects, such as unnecessary violence and bloodletting, to stressing its liberal and democratic legacy, Graeme Fife takes a different path. [1] His interpretation not only of the Terror, but of the entire French Revolution, is overwhelming negative. According to Fife, fear was the “basis of the Terror, the engine of it, the justification of it in a shocking perversion of Article 3 of the Declaration of Rights: ‘The principle of all sovereignty emanates essentially from the nation’” (p. 33). Severed heads on pikes, butchered prisoners in Paris prisons, and the execution of a king are all portrayed in graphic detail before the official Terror begins.

The author is a playwright and BBC radio personality. Although neither a revolutionary specialist nor a professional historian, Fife has written a number of revolutionary themed plays and radio dramas. These include *Revolutionary Portraits*; *A Breath of Fresh Air*, a dramatization of Lavoisier's death; and *The Whisper of the Axe*, a drama based on last letters of prisoners. Material from these works is incorporated into sections on the Terror.

Fife has no illusions about writing a scholarly work. At the start of his book, Fife acknowledges that although he is writing a work of history, rather than fiction, “a certain folklorish element is present” in some of the stories told (p. ix). *The Terror* is both chronological and biographical in structure. The jacket cover explicitly states that he is writing “for the audience that made a major bestseller of Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*.” In other words, this book is geared to the popular market. However, unlike Schama's scholarly work, *The Terror* is completely lacking in documentation. There are many fascinating lengthy quotations from diaries, correspondence, domestic and foreign newspapers, police files, official revolutionary assembly and club proceedings; however, no footnotes are provided. This is one of the book's great weaknesses. A brief bibliography composed of secondary sources—primarily general histories of the revolution, the Terror and individual revolutionary actors—may be found at the end of the book. These sources represent the whole spectrum of views on the Revolution and the Terror, from Marxists to Revisionists.

In spite of its rather misleading title, *The Terror: The Shadow of the Guillotine 1792-1794*, Fife's book provides an account of the French Revolution beginning with the central events of 1789 including the storming of the Bastille, the October Days, the Great Fear, and the Night of 4 August, all portrayed as violent episodes culminating in the years of the Terror. Fife argues that the French Revolution was a failure, that it did not speak for the majority it claimed to set free, and that the “totalitarian impulse” of “ideologue” revolutionaries including leaders such as Robespierre, Marat, Danton, Saint-Just, and Fouché produced a “War government” that inhibited liberty for the purpose of saving “Liberty” (pp.101-102, 238, 416).

Indeed, the men of the Great Committee of Public Safety (which Fife incorrectly calls Committee for Public Safety), major revolutionaries such as Robespierre, Saint-Just, Couthon, Fouché, and Danton, dominate the book. Extensive biographical details of these men are provided; for the most part, they

receive a bad press. Robespierre is “at once the small vulnerable orphan, alone and battling to survive in the deprivation of all the comfort, all the support...he had never had from his absent father and prematurely dead mother” (p. 129). He was “guilty of a systematic slandering of his political adversaries, of setting himself for idolatry, of tyrannising the Paris electoral assembly by intrigue and fear (p. 85). The others do not fair any better. Saint-Just is the “angel of death while Fouché is described as “cold, calculating, canny” (p. 176). Danton is “inordinately vain” (p. 66) and believed it was the government’s job to inspire terror (p. 107).

The French revolutionaries were divided into a complex web of personal relationships, and political factions. These groupings were fluid, and political affiliations were often based on friendships as much as geography and political principles. These complex groupings are not properly explained to the reader. The Girondins, who are called moderate (even though they were quite radical before 1793), are identified as a republican party named after the Gironde River, and led by Brissot. Yet Brissot himself was not from the Gironde. Those unfamiliar with the intricacies of political factions would find this confusing.

In addition to a brief prologue and postscript, there are nineteen chapters in this lengthy book, most having dramatic and pithy titles, such as, “The National Swimming Baths” and “The Revolution Iced Over.” The introduction to this book is in the form of a prologue. Rather than clearly articulating the book’s aims and objectives, the prologue vividly re-creates in great detail Charlotte Corday’s assassination of Marat, her trial and subsequent execution. Presumably, the rationale for this rather than a proper introduction is to set the tone for what follows: a story of plots and bloodshed and a revolution which would be saved at any cost.

Although they do not deal with the Terror, the first few chapters set the book’s negative tone. Chapter one, “Rebellion”, begins with biographical information about Danton and Robespierre and then shifts gears and moves into a narrative on the origins of the Revolution from the meeting of the Assembly of Notables in 1787. It then jumps to a description of France’s social, economic and demographic situation on the eve of the Revolution, then back to a graphic description of the storming of the Bastille emphasizing the violence and bloodshed. An example is the following sentence: “De Launay, in terror of his life, kicked out wildly when Desnot, an unemployed cook, sprang out of the mob at him; the kick caught Desnot in the groin..de Launay went down, stabbed by someone with a bayonet, and the mob were on him—firing pistols into him, sticking his corpse with bayonets and swords, all of them mad to have a piece of his slaughter” (p. 27). “Rebellion” concludes with another violent event: the October Days. This focus on violence in all its manifestations, dominates the next eighteen chapters.

Chapter two, “Division,” is concerned with the French revolutionaries’ relationship with the Catholic Church, including the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the subsequent oath which divided the nation. Likewise, the crisis of Varennes emphasizes the role of radicals and extremists, rather than presenting a more balanced picture. “Division” concludes with the declaration of war on 20 April 1792.

Chapter three, “The Sword of Justice,” begins with an anecdote about Dr. Guillotin who was born prematurely because his mother was upset by seeing a man broken on the wheel. Thus, “the executioner was his midwife” (p. 51). This chapter covers the events over the summer of 1792 including the dethronement of the king. Once again, the book focuses on the graphic, gruesome and sensational. When discussing the September massacres, Fife prefers statements such as “Billaud-Varenne preferred butchering, a more poignant need of justice...”, rather than attempting to present a balanced reconstruction of events (p. 65).

The constructive and positive aspects of the French Revolution are not emphasized. Although Fife acknowledges that the deputies abolished the vestiges of feudalism and privilege during the night of 4 August and that shortly thereafter passed the Rights of Man, he downplays these major achievements

with his argument that resistance to oppression meant “an invitation to lawlessness, anarchy” in a revolutionary situation. He goes on to argue that “the determining factor in all human behaviour—of oppressor and oppressed—is mutual suspicion, fear” (p. 33). According to Fife, “the course of the Revolution was directed by a gradual narrowing of focus until the broad guarantees of its initial promise had been pared away to the sole propulsion of a psychotic version of human motive and desire” (p. 33).

Interesting, vivid and lively stories and conversations dominate the book. One example is an exchange between Fouquier-Tinville, head of the Revolutionary Tribunal and Ann Maurisan, a woman who ran the restaurant where Fouquier dined on a regular basis. When Anne asks Fouquier if he is busy, he replies “very” and adds that he would “rather be a labourer than a prosecutor” (p. 336). Stories of this nature abound. They bring the revolutionary figures and their mindset to life, but since they are undocumented, the reader cannot confirm their authenticity.

Despite its shortcomings, the book is well-written. It reads like a work of fiction, capturing the tempo of the era in its evocative and poignant portrayals of ordinary people in both cities and the countryside. Fife makes no attempt to place this book within the extensive body of historiographical literature on the Terror, whose interpretations range from circumstantial to ideological. For a more balanced, scholarly interpretation, historians might prefer to read David Andress’s well documented *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* and Hugh Gough’s *The Terror*. For the earlier years of the Revolution, works by Michael Fitzsimmons and Timothy Tackett are highly recommended.[2]

NOTES

[1] See Jeremy D. Popkin, “After All: The French Revolution’s Third Century,” *Journal of Modern History* 74 (December 2002): 801-821.

[2] See David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005); Hugh Gough, *The Terror* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); and Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: the Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Leigh Whaley Acadia University leigh.whaley@acadiau.ca

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