

# Reevaluating Terror in the French Revolution

About: Annie Jourdan, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution française*, Flammarion, 2018.

*By Charles Walton*

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**Was the French Revolution bound to become authoritarian? Do revolutionary ideologies always lead to violence? Annie Jourdan's book reconfigures mainstream narratives and provides an alternative interpretation of the 'Reign of Terror'.**

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In this book, Annie Jourdan seeks to disrupt mainstream views about the French Revolution. Specifically, she takes aim at common notions that 'revolution' and 'terror' are synonymous and that all ideological projects to regenerate society are bound to turn authoritarian, 'forcing people to be free' (Rousseau). These views, which stretch back to the Revolution itself, were revived by François Furet and his followers in the 1970s and 1980s, and they came to dominate late twentieth-century interpretations. Today, however, most experts reject them. Like Jourdan, they are more likely to attribute revolutionary violence to collective emotions, institutional weaknesses and circumstances than to ideology. Yet, the 'ideology' interpretation persists among the general public. Countering it, Jourdan posits an alternative view. To understand revolutionary violence, she believes, we need to frame the French Revolution in terms of what it essentially was: a civil war.

Several arguments follow from this 'civil war' perspective. Chief among them is the claim that French revolutionary terror was not exceptional.<sup>1</sup> It appeared in other revolutions of the period, including in the United States. Nor was terror peculiar to Jacobins and sans-

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<sup>1</sup> This point reinforces the thesis in Jourdan's previous book, *La Révolution : une exception française ?*, Paris, Flammarion, 2004.

culottes; all parties to the conflict resorted to it in the course of the French Revolution. Terror, she argues, grew out of the revolutionary predicament. Beginning in 1789, weak-state conditions allowed recriminations and punitive impulses to intensify, eventually spiraling out of control. This radicalisation process occurred not only in the well-known revolutionary *journées* but also in the many revolts and massacres that tore through the provinces in these early years—events that have often been downplayed or overlooked. The story Jourdan tells is one in which growing distrust and seething hatreds fuel revanchist politics. The process begins between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries (between Protestants and Catholics in the Midi) but soon comes to engulf revolutionaries themselves, tragically dividing Jacobins as early as 1791.

## From Coercion to Terror

The failure to secure the principle of ‘loyal opposition’ after 1789 was not a problem of Jacobin ideology, Jourdan insists. All sides failed to uphold it. Why? Because the stakes of regime change were so high and the state’s mediating and coercive powers were so weak. Readers might pause here to wonder: should states coerce? Wouldn’t that make them authoritarian and inclined to impose terror? Anticipating this question, Jourdan offers a nuanced response. She distinguishes terror from coercion.<sup>2</sup> Whereas terror expresses the passions (fear, anger), coercion appeals to rationality. Terror springs from the heat of civil strife and short-circuits reflection by targeting the emotions in order to induce certain behaviours, such as flight or submission. Legal coercion, alternatively, amounts to constraint; it gives citizens the mental space to consider the implications of their actions. It is indispensable to the proper functioning of the rule of law (p. 531).

The distinction between coercion and terror is crucial to the argument. It allows the author to claim that the ‘Reign of Terror’ was not really about terror. It was about coercion. It aimed to end civil war by consolidating the legal authority over punitive violence. In fact, neither the Convention nor the revolutionary government ever made ‘terror the order of the day’, as is often claimed.<sup>3</sup> Why, then, did revolutionary justice run amok in June and July of 1794?

In what may surprise many readers, Jourdan argues that it did not run amok nearly as much as historians have thought. She debunks depictions of the Revolutionary Tribunal as a kangaroo court. For the most part, the tribunal took suspects’ rights and investigations seriously, even when doing so delayed trials for weeks or months. Nor was the infamous law of 22 prairial Year II (June 10, 1794), which further rationalized and consolidated judicial

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<sup>2</sup> There is some inconsistency in how this point is presented. At times, coercion is one type of terror (e.g., p. 414), at others, it is distinct (p. 531).

<sup>3</sup> For this point, she draws on Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2006. The author acknowledges her debt to Martin for many of her insights.

procedures, responsible for the butchery that soon followed, when nearly 1300 executions occurred within six weeks. In addition to reigning in the representatives on mission, the law provided institutional checks on revolutionary justice, preventing any institution or faction from controlling it. This is why it was not repealed in the immediate aftermath of Robespierre's fall.

Still, dysfunctions did creep into the system, and Jourdan explains why. The transfer of provincial suspects to Paris in the spring of 1794, as part of the judicial consolidation process, led to overcrowded prisons, heightening anxieties about counterrevolutionary prison plots. (In a fascinating chapter on prisons, Jourdan explains why such fears were not unfounded.) Pressure to speed up trials thus intensified. Dysfunctions also resulted from the intransigence and miscalculations of robespierristes in the Committee of Public Safety and their allies in the Commune of Paris and Bureau of Police. In an effort to outflank their enemies on the Committee of General Surveillance, they circumvented the praerial law, cutting out institutions from the indictment process – specifically, the popular commissions that were tasked with vetting cases before forwarding the valid ones onto the Revolutionary Tribunal. This circumvention multiplied occasions for errors and score-settling. It also had the effect of alienating Robespierre, whose ‘dictatorial’ aims were denounced in British-subsidized propaganda circulating in France and repeated by Robespierre's enemies. The plummeting reputation of the ‘Incorruptible’, combined with his supposed<sup>4</sup> retreat from politics in the weeks leading up to his fall, made it easier to blame him for what thermidorians would later refer to as *the Terror* – a concept that recast a civil war as a tyrannical regime.

Not that Robespierre was entirely innocent. Jourdan does not go as far as some scholars in presenting Robespierre as a hapless victim swept up in dynamics he could not control. In her account, he appears ambitious, inflexible, and politically unwise. Still, he was not the Catalina that his detractors have claimed ever since.

## Ending the Civil War

Jourdan extends her ‘civil war’ thesis into the Directory. It frames what is otherwise the standard interpretation of the period: faced with existential threats from radicals and royalists, the Directory resorted to illiberal means to protect a liberal order. But its strong-armed measures—purges of deputies and directors, deportations of refractory priests and seditious journalists, the use of military commissions rather than ordinary courts to punish for public disorders— did not constitute terror, she insists. Like those of the revolutionary

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<sup>4</sup> Jourdan follows the historical consensus on this point. But as Colin Jones will be showing in his forthcoming study on Thermidor, Robespierre remained active in the Jacobin Club all the way up to his fall. His interventions can be found in A. Aulard (ed.), *La société des Jacobins : recueil des documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, Paris, Cerf, Noblet, Quantin, 1897, vol. 6.

government of the Year II, the measures fall into the category of coercion, not terror. They intended, not to frighten people or concentrate power around an individual or particular group, but to reinforce the rule of law and stabilize a republic destabilised by relentless civil war.

Curiously, Jourdan does not extend her civil-war thesis to the Consulate and Empire. She characterises Napoleonic repression as gratuitous terror, not legal coercion. The difference lies in intentions: ‘whereas the former believed that concentrating power in the hands of the committees was the only hope for saving the Revolution and bringing an end to widespread anarchy, the latter aimed increasingly to secure [his own] glory and interests’ (p. 415-416). But is this contrast convincing? Civil wars have to end in some manner, and if the means involve repression, should we be surprised? One does not have to sympathise with Napoleon’s rule or excuse his belligerence to acknowledge that a repressive regime was the likely outcome to a decade of civil war. To disconnect his repression from the problem of civil war would require showing that a less repressive outcome was historically likely before the brumaire coup of 1799, which brought Napoleon to power. But such a counterfactual would contradict the flow of the narrative since the title of the chapter preceding the one on brumaire is titled ‘Civil war restarts’.

It strikes this reviewer that Jourdan’s assessment of the Napoleonic period lacks the balance found in the earlier sections of the book. We are told that Napoleon restored the nobility but not that he refused to restore their fiscal privileges. We are told that he made Catholicism the official religion but not that he refused to return the Church’s property or reimburse the Church for its losses. (A sizeable amount of *biens nationaux* remained unsold during his reign.) The fact that Napoleon did not revive venality, when it would have been expedient to do so, is also not mentioned. And although the revolutionary government and Directory are credited for their social and cultural advancements, Napoleon’s creation of prefectures, lycées and the Civil Code is scarcely mentioned. Yet, they could arguably be construed as signs that the nation had finally overcome weak-state conditions and civil war.

## **Revolutionary Violence in Comparative Perspective**

The following sections of the book move beyond the Hexagon to examine the French empire (section II) and the American Revolution (section III). Section II shows the contentiousness of France’s imperial politics in the 1790s, both within France and in its conquered territories. The Directors appear as reluctant imperialists. Their principal motivation for conquering neighbours was financial, but they rapidly lost control over ambitious generals who took charge of treaties, looting, and republicanizing missions. These

missions were especially disastrous. The contradiction between ‘liberating’ conquered territories while fleecing them provoked civil unrest, making them liabilities rather than assets. Ironically, the one country that was given the freedom to determine its own constitution—Holland—turned out to be a bitter disappointment for France. The country imploded politically, rendering it geopolitically useless.

In the final section, Jourdan compares the violence of the American Revolution to that of other revolutions of the era. She debunks the claim, made famous by Hannah Arendt, that the American Revolution involved less violence and terror than the one in France.<sup>5</sup> It turns out that emigration was higher in the US context (one to two per cent of the population as opposed to .4 to .5 per cent). And casualties rates were only slightly lower in the US between 1775 and 1783 (between .9 and 1.52 per cent) than in France between 1789 and 1799 (between 1.15 and 1.9 per cent). Civil strife in France’s sister republics was equally lethal, with death rates ranging from 1 to 2 per cent of the population and emigration in some cases much higher. The violence in the French colony of Saint-Domingue stands out as exceptionally atrocious: between 1791 and 1804, nearly a third of the population ‘disappeared’ (p. 492), although how much this ‘disappearance’ owed to deaths or emigration is not specified. The point of all of these statistics is to show that, in terms of overall violence, the French Revolution, despite its supposed ‘reign of Terror’, was not exceptionally violent.

Another aim of this final section is to show that, *pace* Arendt, the American Revolution was social and not just political. Arendt argues that the Americans avoided terror by not making the mistake of politicising the ‘social question’, as the French did in espousing the ‘rights of the sans-culottes’. Jourdan shows that America was not immune to socioeconomic violence. The principal difference between the two revolutions is that socioeconomic strife in America exploded after the war and rather than during it. Jourdan shows that wealth inequality in the US, already significant during the War of Independence, only got worse under the new republican regime. She contrasts a socially redistributive France, where 30 to 35 per cent of the peasantry was able to expand its landholdings thanks to revolution, with a market-driven America, where ten individuals owned 46% of the land, with the bottom 60% owning only 16% in the 1790s. The Federalists, who controlled the White House until 1800, implemented policies that favoured big financiers and land speculators at the expense of small farmers and those without property (largely Republicans). These tensions erupted in Shays Rebellion of 1787, the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, and Fries Rebellion of 1799.

Attention to socioeconomic grievances in America goes some way to correct Arendt’s rosy view of America, but it is also problematic. Jourdan overstates the difference between a ‘social’ France and a ‘liberal’ America. She thus appears to accept Arendt’s dichotomy but simply reverses the assessment. But the dichotomy dissolves once we consider the liberal-economic policies of the early French Revolution, such as the freedom of the grain trade

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, Viking Press, 1963.

(1789), the refusal to set price caps on bread or even allow authorities to inventory grain supplies (1789-1792), the abolition of the guilds and corporations (1791), and the transformation of feudal dues (1789-1793) into redeemable property rights. All of these policies, which Jourdan scarcely mentions, provoked a great deal of social unrest in France. One could disagree with Arendt's conclusion but go a step further by arguing that the French Revolution took a 'social' turn in response to the failures of its early liberal-economic policies. If the French were tragically utopian, it was not their commitment to resolving the social question but rather their belief that politics and the economy could be separated and that free markets would bring about reciprocity, fraternity and an equitable distribution of wealth.

Even if France's liberal-economic policies had been factored into the author's analysis, comparing the violence of the two revolutions would still be fraught with challenges. The greatest challenge is working with data that employ different units of analysis to measure different kinds of violence. Jourdan ends up comparing apples with oranges, and therefore her conclusions can only be tentative. In some cases, data are missing entirely. We are told that there was much tar-and-feathering in the United States and that the popular rebellions mentioned above were violent, but the violence is not quantified. We know, however, that the three popular rebellions (Shays, Whiskey and Fries) produced few casualties—not even a dozen, all told. As for tar and feathering, does the practice really bespeak civil war?

## What Turns Quarrels Into Civil Wars ?

This is where the civil-war framework begins to fray. Jourdan stretches the concept to include far less violent forms of conflict: 'Civil war is not necessarily synonymous with the taking up of arms and combat. In its early stages or in certain cases, it is latent, expressing itself in civil discord and internecine disputes' (p. 521). But there is a world of difference between quarrels and civil war, and there is no reason to assume that the one leads inevitably to the other. Conflating them risks making the same error that the 'harder' proponents of the ideology thesis made: seeing the Year II as prefigured in 1789. The relevant question, it seems to me, is *what turns quarrels into civil wars?*

Ironically, a 'softer' version of the ideology thesis may be helpful in answering this question. And it is not incompatible with Jourdan's approach. Much like emotional regimes or socioeconomic interests, ideologies create *conditions of possibility*.<sup>6</sup> They feed into circumstances by shaping thought on how to respond to crises. When political conflicts emerged between 1789 and 1792, ideas about unitary sovereignty—royalist and Rousseauian—may have frustrated attempts to compromise, weakening the capacity of contemporaries to see opponents as loyal. One might also argue that early ideological

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<sup>6</sup> Keith M. Baker, 'A Foucauldian French Revolution?' in Jan Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, pp. 187-205.

commitments to market freedom—and especially for grain—helped radicalise politics. It seems to this reviewer that Jourdan’s rich analysis, which throws light on many factors—interests, emotions, conspiracies, contingencies—could only be strengthened by attending to ideas as well.

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