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## The Terror in the French Revolution

Dr Marisa Linton, Kingston University, UK

Keywords

Girondins; the Jacobin Club; Jacobins; the Law of Prairial; the *Marais*; *sans-culottes*; the Terror; the Vendée

### Q. What events led to the Terror?

A. Terror took a variety of different forms during the Revolution. But when historians refer to ‘the Terror’ they generally mean the period when the Jacobins dominated the government. This period lasted from June 1793 to the end of July 1794 (Thermidor) when the overthrow of Robespierre led to a winding down of terror – at least as a legalized system embedded in the structures of government.

There were three principal reasons for the Jacobin Terror. The first was the strength of counter-revolutionary opposition, which began with the onset of Revolution in the summer of 1789 and escalated rapidly during the critical years of 1791 to 1793. The second was the lack of a parliamentary tradition within France to give revolutionaries experience in the management of political parties and majority voting, and to accustom them to accept the legitimacy of opposing political views. The French went almost overnight from being an absolute monarchy to a political system in which the will of the people replaced that of the king. In the absence of traditions of parliamentary rule, the French fell back on universalist abstract principles and Enlightenment rhetoric which were to prove increasingly divisive and leave no space for legitimate opposition. In this climate, all political rivals had the potential to be denounced as conspirators against popular sovereignty.

The third, and most overwhelming reason, was the war with foreign powers that began in April 1792. The exigencies of war, coupled with fears of invasion and conquest by an alliance of counter-revolutionary French nobles and key powers including Austria, Prussia, Britain and Spain, led to demands for a war economy, the recruitment of troops, and requisitioning of supplies. It also led to a shift in mentality that polarized political views and encouraged the denunciation of people suspected of covert counter-revolutionary allegiance.

The war had begun in a belligerent and optimistic mood, but the French soon began to suffer severe reverses. By the spring of 1793, France was once again under threat of invasion, while suffering the defection of French generals, and the outbreak of a civil war in the Vendée. The Vendée civil war broke out in March 1793, motivated partly by resistance to conscription into the army. At the start of June 1793 the leading group in the Convention, the Girondins, who were largely seen as responsible for the inadequate response to the war they had themselves initiated, were overthrown in a coup which brought the more radical group, the Jacobins, to power, with the support of the *sans-culottes* (Parisian militants from the lower orders). The Jacobins assumed power on the

understanding that they would further the wishes of the *sans-culottes*, mobilize the nation for war, put the economy on a war footing and step up the Terror. But over the summer, the situation deteriorated still further. Civil war escalated; revolts broke out in 49 of the 83 departments, including major cities, most notably Lyons. Not all of these revolts were counter-revolutionary. Many were led by moderate revolutionaries, motivated in part by revulsion at the arrest of the Girondin deputies and also by hostility towards the domination of Paris over the Revolution.

The Jacobins had two aims: (1) to win the war and the civil war; and (2) to establish the Revolution ideologically within France. For both of these aims they resorted to the use of the Terror. The Terror was in part a consequence of their weakness. The Jacobins had only shaky legitimacy, and relied on the Terror, together with the rather unpredictable support of the *sans-culottes*, in order to enforce their authority. The *sans-culottes* wanted greater control of prices and stricter measures against hoarders of supplies and against counter-revolutionaries as the price of their loyalty. Although the Jacobins relied on the *sans-culottes*, they felt uneasy about doing so, and they reacted by trying to control and direct the anarchic violence of the *sans-culottes* (seen in episodes such as the September massacres after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1792) and bring the Terror under central bureaucratic control administered by government. But the Jacobins also wished to establish revolutionary ideology in the minds of the people, and for this too they resorted to the use of the Terror.

### **Q. How was the Terror organized?**

A. Most of the essential institutions of the Terror were actually in place before the Jacobins came to power. Some had initially been instituted as a response to the civil war in the Vendée, but under the Jacobins these institutions were firmed up and their roles intensified.

The principal authority under the Terror was the Committee of Public Safety which had been set up in April 1793. It was responsible for executive action, in particular, for the co-ordination of the war effort, and it functioned as a kind of war cabinet. Its membership of 12 was renewable by election, but it kept the same members for the year of Jacobin rule. Second only to the Committee of Public Safety was the Committee of General Security, which applied the legislation of the Terror, and directed the police and revolutionary justice; in principle, this was the ministry of the Terror. The Committees, like all the other institutions of the Terror, were ultimately answerable to the legislative authority, the National Convention, but throughout the year of the Terror the Convention proved reluctant to challenge the decisions of the ruling Committees. Central revolutionary justice was implemented by the revolutionary tribunal in Paris, created in March 1793.

Deputies on mission (*deputés en mission*) were members of the Convention sent as political watchdogs to the provinces, particularly in vulnerable frontier departments. They had extensive powers with the armies and kept a watchful eye over the generals. At a local level the Jacobins had neither the administrative infrastructure nor the coercive capacity to enforce their will, so they relied heavily on local Jacobins and *sans-culottes*, especially those who were members of local surveillance committees, and on units of the

*sans-culottes* militia (the *armée révolutionnaire*), as well as denunciations and propaganda.

The Jacobin Terror was, unlike the *sans-culottes* version, sanctioned and authorized by legislation. The Jacobins had drawn up a notably egalitarian and libertarian constitution in June 1793, but this was shelved and never put into operation, on the grounds that in time of war, the priority was to ensure that the Revolution continued to exist. The main terrorist legislation was the Law of Suspects, passed on 17 September 1793. It gave very wide powers of arrest, and defined ‘suspects’ in very broad terms, giving sweeping powers to the ruling Committees, and making ‘Terror the order of the day’. The Decree on Emergency Government in October 1793 authorized the revolutionary government to pass beyond accepted constraints and limits, stating ‘the government shall be revolutionary until the peace’. The Jacobins went some way towards providing for the economic controls demanded by the *sans-culottes* by the Law of the General Maximum in September 1793.

The Revolutionary government received further official sanction through the Law of Frimaire, in December 1793. This provided a charter for revolutionary government, and increased the executive powers of the ruling Committees, while curtailing the autonomous activities of the provincial revolutionary committees. Thereafter, the meetings of the Convention grew more perfunctory and the activities of the revolutionary clubs less dynamic. The Jacobin Club itself was effectively dominated by spokesmen for the government. The most notorious piece of terrorist legislation was the Law of Prairial, of 10 June 1794, which was designed to speed up the process of dealing with the backlog of arrested persons awaiting trial by decreeing that only a summary of evidence need be heard, defence counsels were to be abolished, defence witnesses need not be heard, and sentences should be simplified – either death or acquittal. This led to a further concentration of cases being brought to Paris to be heard before the Revolutionary Tribunal, the so-called ‘Great Terror’.

### **Q. Who were the main victims of the Terror?**

A. The kinds of people affected cut across class and social lines. Despite the popular image of powdered and dandified (but blue-blooded) aristocrats as the principal victims of the Terror, it was in fact peasants who formed the great majority of victims overall (just as they formed by far the most numerous group in French society). The great majority of these had taken up arms against the Revolution, many of them in the Vendée. Although it was never illegal to have been a former noble (nobility itself was abolished in 1790), those people (many of them noble) who had chosen to emigrate (become *émigrés*) rather than continue to live under the Revolution, and had then returned to France, were liable to execution. The assumption was that they returned as agents or spies of counter-revolution, or as soldiers for the invading armies. Another category of people subject to execution was the refractory priests who had refused to take an oath of loyalty to the constitution. They had been ordered to leave the country in August 1792. During the Terror, those who had failed to leave or who returned were treated as *émigrés*.

In terms of the geographical incidence of the Terror, with the exception of Paris (where many of the more important political prisoners were transferred to appear before the Revolutionary Tribunal), most of the executions were carried out where there was war

or civil war, that is, in regions of revolt, such as the Vendée, Lyons and Marseilles, and in the frontier departments. There were, however, very wide regional variations: many departments had either very few or no death sentences. Because on the whole the Jacobins were so meticulous in maintaining a legal structure for the Terror, we have very clear records for official death sentences. Thus, we know that the total number of death sentences in Paris was 2,639. The total number of death sentences during the Terror (including Paris) was 16,594. But many more people died without formal death sentences imposed in a court of law. Many perished in overcrowded and unsanitary prisons while awaiting trial. Many of those who died in the civil wars and federalist revolts did not have their deaths officially recorded. A classic study of the statistics of the Terror was made by the American historian Greer who estimated an overall total of 41,000 victims. But recent estimates of the number of deaths in the Vendée have caused historians to revise that figure considerably. One historian, Pierre Chaunu, spoke of the Vendée with deliberate provocation as a 'genocide' and claimed that 500,000 rebels had died. More realistic estimates, such as that by Jean-Clément Martin, suggest up to 250,000 insurgents and 200,000 republicans met their deaths in a war in which both sides suffered appalling atrocities. Another group that was decimated by the unleashing of the Terror was that of the revolutionaries themselves. Successive revolutionary factions fell victim to the Terror that, in many cases, they had themselves helped to orchestrate. In the atmosphere of fear and suspicion that prevailed in that fateful year, they were accused of conspiring against the Revolution that they had helped to build. These revolutionary victims included the Girondins in October 1793, the Hébertists in March 1794, followed a week later by the Dantonists, and finally, the Robespierrists in Thermidor (July 1794).

### **Q. Why did the Terror end?**

A. The Terror began to wind down after Thermidor – though not immediately; the greatest days of carnage on the guillotine were the 10 and 11 Thermidor, as supporters of Robespierre, within the Convention, the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Paris Commune, were despatched before enthusiastic crowds. The deputies who had conspired to bring about Thermidor were themselves active Jacobins, including members of the ruling Committees, together with several men such as Fouché and Tallien, who had aroused suspicion from Robespierre for the excessive zeal with which they had employed terrorist methods while they had been on mission. These men did not intend the Terror to die with Robespierre, rather, they assumed that it would continue under new management. But others thought differently – especially the hitherto politically unaligned majority of the deputies in the Convention (known as the *Marais*). These men had had enough of the Terror. They had stayed silent while revolutionary government appeared to be a necessity. They had even accepted the proscription of their own members in a period of war crisis, but they hated and feared the committees for having pushed them into such a position. And during the Terror there was constant fear that they would be the next person to be arrested. With the increasing victories that the French armies had won in recent months (the most significant of which was Fleurus in late June), the threat of invasion had been lifted; the civil war in the Vendée and revolts elsewhere had been defeated, and the need for a government maintained by the Terror was lifting. When Robespierre made the fateful political mistake of coming to the Convention to state that

certain deputies were to be denounced as conspirators but refused to name them, thus making everyone wonder if they might feature on his list, his own downfall was inevitable.

Not only the deputies, but also public opinion had tired of the Terror. It was impossible to continue to live in that state of semi-intoxication mingled with fear that had characterized that traumatic year. The Jacobin deputies who had engineered the overthrow of Robespierre were themselves soon outflanked and a number of them were, in their turn, denounced as terrorists. In the months after Thermidor, with incredible speed, the institutional and legal structures of the Terror were wound down, the power of the Committees was dismantled and, in November 1794, the Jacobin Club itself was closed down. The Terror as an instrument of government was ending. But in its place began the so-called 'White Terror' whereby murder gangs (particularly in the region around Lyons and the Rhône valley) began to attack former Jacobins in a war of retributive violence that began in December 1794 and escalated into 1795.

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