



/ BOOKS /

When Terror Reigns

Two new histories single out the power of fear in driving the French Revolution and its aftermath.

By DAVID A. BELL

TURN ON THE TELEVISION during election season, and the role that fear plays in contemporary political life couldn't be more obvious: the ominous music, the clips of shadowy masked figures, the deep-voiced narrator making alarming claims about our vulnerability to any number of deadly menaces. Sometimes political ads seem to boil down to a simple message: be very afraid. *Surely*, we may be tempted to say, harrumphing at the screen, *people used to be made of stronger stuff*.

History reveals otherwise. American revolutionaries stoked fears of sinister British conspiracies with warnings that make modern political consultants sound tame. American slaveholders summoned up nightmares of slave rebellion to justify horrific oppression. And it has been more than 200 years since the French Revolution first gave the word *terror* a prominent place in the West's political vocabulary.

Two new books highlight the power of fear in driving political change during the first age of democratic revolutions, and they do so in complementary ways. In *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, Timothy Tackett examines how "a culture of fear and mistrust" helped bring about a frenzied spiral of repression in 1793–94, during which the radical First Republic executed tens of thousands of its own citizens—many of them also fervent revolutionaries—after cursory trials. The perpetrators of the Reign of Terror, in short, had terrors of their own. Adam Zamoyski, in *Phantom Terror*, argues that the fears the revolution generated among its opponents led to the stifling of liberal reform in Europe for nearly half a

century, while spurring the creation of repressive police apparatuses.

Earlier generations of historians tended to explain the French revolutionary Terror either as a defensive response to violent counterrevolution, or as the product of some sort of Enlightenment ideology spinning out of control. Tackett, an accomplished historian from the University of California at Irvine who has spent a fruitful career studying the French Revolution, challenges both interpretations, and instead places emotions front and center. Among his key sources are letters and diaries written by eyewitnesses, and he puts particular emphasis on the experiences of ordinary citizens. Rather than dwelling on the familiar stories of revolutionary leaders like Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton, he highlights figures like Nicolas Ruault, a Parisian bookseller and publisher; Rosalie Jullien, the wife of a radical revolutionary; and Adrien-Joseph Colson, an estate agent for a noble family.

Drawing on their day-to-day observations, Tackett argues that the revolutionary process fundamentally changed the people who watched and participated in its unfolding. As France careened in just four years from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy to democratic republic and then descended into the Terror, citizens veered too. Especially in the early stages, the revolution spurred men and women to great flights of enthusiastic idealism. But it also generated enormous anxiety and mistrust. Familiar institutions disappeared, money lost its value, and terrible

● Revolutionary violence escalated rapidly in France—here the Tuileries Palace is under attack—sowing fear in spectators and perpetrators alike.

conspiracies seemed to be taking shape, while word spread that the revolution's enemies were marshaling armies of “brigands” and foreign hirelings to set upon the country and destroy it.

Worse, events seemed to bear out these apprehensions, pushing anxiety toward hysteria among the public and political leaders alike. Already by the spring of 1790, Rosalie Jullien was writing that “all the devils of Milton are but angels compared to the devils of the aristocracy.” Things got much worse after King Louis XVI, who had initially given signs of embracing the revolution, tried to flee the country in June 1791, to join noble émigrés who had formed counterrevolutionary armies. (He was caught with his family not far from the border, forced to return to Paris, and eventually executed.) By 1793–94, following several large-scale internal rebellions and the start of war against most of the great powers, the radicals had proclaimed terror, in words that became chillingly ubiquitous, “the order of the day.”

Even after the worst actual threats to the revolution passed, the radicals remained gripped by a panicked desire for security and revenge. So instead of the Terror waning in the spring of 1794, it accelerated as Robespierre and his allies turned on anyone who might still jeopardize their movement. Only when a large fraction of the remaining deputies in the National Convention started to fear for their own lives in the summer of 1794 did they finally rise up against Robespierre. Less organized but still violent civic strife, driven by the same sort of wild emotions as the Terror, continued for years.

BY ATTENDING TO the role of emotions in propelling the Terror, Tackett steers a more nuanced course than many previous historians have managed. It helps that political causes beyond the seminar room no longer drive interpretations of the Terror the way they once did. On the left, explaining the Terror as a necessary response to counterrevolutionary aggression helped justify later instances of state terror; some French Marxist historians invoked revolutionary France to defend Soviet repression. At the conservative end of the spectrum, blaming the Terror on dogmatic Enlightenment ideas allowed critics to dismiss the Enlightenment itself as a misguided attempt to impose abstract schemes of social organization on imperfect human beings. Today, the revolution stirs fewer political passions.

Yet Tackett, despite (or perhaps because of) his greater distance from the events, works so hard to understand the point of view of those who instigated violence that he too readily takes



The CULTURE FILE



THE COMING OF THE TERROR IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
TIMOTHY TACKETT
Harvard



PHANTOM TERROR: POLITICAL PARANOIA AND THE CREATION OF THE MODERN STATE, 1789–1848
ADAM ZAMOYSKI
Basic

them at their word: he assumes they sincerely believed what they said about wicked conspiracies threatening the revolution. A good deal of evidence suggests that in fact revolutionary leaders often deliberately exaggerated the dangers in the service of their own ambitions.

More important, while Tackett astutely charts the rising levels of fear, he doesn't offer a satisfactory explanation for why this emotion prompted such a murderous reaction, and why the revolution, in a phrase often repeated at the time, “devoured its own children.” Again, not long before the events in France, American revolutionaries denounced monstrous British conspiracies in words every bit as hysterical and fear-laden as the ones Tackett quotes. King George III was accused of plotting “death, desolation and tyranny” with a “cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages”—and these passages come not from an obscure broadside but from the Declaration of Independence. The Americans, like the French, had to deal with atrocities by their enemies, and with counterrevolutionary plotting and rebellion in their midst. Yet the Loyalists, even if they received very harsh treatment, never became the victims of mass executions. And despite bitter divisions within the Continental Congress, the American revolutionaries never turned on one another in the cruel way their French counterparts did.

Of course, the circumstances in the two countries were different. And no single set of ideas or political habits, or emotional currents, determined the entire tragic course of events in France. What Tackett shortchanges by putting fear so prominently in the foreground is the confluence of factors—particularly the intellectual factors—that drove the revolutionaries' actions as their sense of peril mounted. Dan Edelstein, in his recent *The Terror of Natural Right*, offers a useful corrective. He argues that leading revolutionaries, drawing on early modern theories of natural right, treated their opponents as unnatural “enemies of the human race” (the expression then in use) who could be legitimately slaughtered, without due process. Fear mattered, but it was ideas that encouraged the revolutionaries to carry out mass killings.

ADAM ZAMOYSKI, a nonacademic historian best known for an enthralling account of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, shifts the focus from the fear the revolutionaries felt to the fear they inspired in their enemies. Throughout Europe, he explains, the revolution prompted a terrified overreaction, which ultimately “arrested the natural development of European society” and “helped to create a culture of control of the individual by the state.” Most striking, alarmed rulers almost everywhere expanded police forces to spy on their own populations and,



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backed by harsh legislation, to censor and repress anyone deemed seditious. Well after the end of the revolution, Zamoyski emphasizes, reactionary rulers and police officials remained convinced that a secret, conspiratorial *comité directeur* (“directing committee”) inspired by the Jacobins continued to plot the overthrow of regimes throughout Europe.

Zamoyski, who writes with flair and an eye for amusing detail, is particularly good on things Russian. The most vivid character in his book is Czar Alexander I, whose experience fighting the Napoleonic invasion infused him with an almost utopian Christian mysticism and inspired dreams of uniting Europe into a single peaceful federation. But fears of revolution gripped him as well. During his reign, which began in 1801 and ended in 1825, he reinforced the reactionary autocratic regime that would endure through the rest of the century. Zamoyski cites one writer’s claim that by the mid-1840s, Russia had more censors than it had books being printed. And though Zamoyski’s story ends with the tide of new revolutions that swept over Europe in 1848, he argues in his conclusion that the worst legacy of the repression actually made itself felt in 1917–18. Opponents of Russian autocracy, molded by long persecution into feverish underground conspirators, seized power and, in a true return of the repressed, went on to establish a regime that outdid by many degrees of magnitude the brutal excesses of its predecessors.

Unfortunately, Zamoyski ends up viewing all of Europe too much through Russian eyes. In Britain, the repressive measures of the revolutionary years eased considerably in the 1820s, and in 1832 Parliament enacted one of the greatest liberal reforms in the country’s history, dramatically expanding suffrage. Elsewhere in Europe, the 1820s proved

deeply reactionary, but gave way to a more mixed political landscape (with, notably, a more liberal monarchy supplanting the restored Bourbons in France). Fears of revolution, like the earlier fears of counterrevolution in France, prompted wildly different reactions depending on local traditions, political ideas, and social conditions. Closer attention to police practices would have clarified variations that Zamoyski misses, focused as he is on the view from the cabinet room and the throne; from there, the specter of the shadowy “directing committee” looked much the same in every country.

But imagined terrors, as he and Tackett very usefully remind us, can have even more political potency than real ones. While early-19th-century Europe had its share of real revolutionary conspirators, the “directing committee” was as much a figment of the imagination as was the nest of spies and traitors that Robespierre claimed, toward the end of the Terror, to have discovered at the heart of the revolutionary National Convention. Both fantasies stand in a long line that stretches straight through to our own day.

There is nothing particularly unusual, then, about the fears of an “invasion” of illegal immigrants that have such a large place in the mind-set of American conservatives, or the Russian fears of fascism that Vladimir Putin exploited so successfully to generate support for his incursions into Ukraine. Such emotions are an integral part of modern political life, and tempting as it may be to dismiss them as irrational, hysterical, and not worthy of serious discussion, we cannot simply wish them away. **A**

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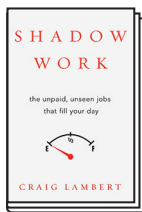
Imagined terrors can have even more political potency than real ones.



COVER TO COVER

SHADOW WORK: THE UNPAID, UNSEEN JOBS THAT FILL YOUR DAY

CRAIG LAMBERT • COUNTERPOINT



YOU DOUBTLESS FEEL too busy to read yet more about why we all feel so busy, but here’s a short book

to put on your long to-do list. Even if you have time only to skim it, you’ll see your lack of leisure in a fresh light. Craig Lambert’s insight is that over the past 20 years, as automation and the Internet have taken off, tasks of a new sort have wormed

their way into the already frenetic days of America’s workers and consumers.

“Shadow work,” as he calls it, is the unremunerated labor we now do ourselves that once got done by others for pay. The toil comes in all shapes, sizes, and places, though

we’ve barely noticed the DIY theme: we pump our own gas, assemble our own furniture, book our own travel, take on new duties at our downsizing offices, coordinate our kids’ extracurriculars, Google for guidance on our medical problems, and that’s not the half of it.

Empowering though the self-service ethos may seem, Lambert urges us to examine the repercussions.

Shadow work makes us not just busier but exhausted and isolated, as we interact more with screens, 24/7, than with other humans at reasonable hours. You don’t have to share his mounting alarm, or his nostalgia for gas-pump jockeys, to avail yourself of his very useful lens: before you can hope to rebalance your time, you’d better first understand how you actually spend it.

— Ann Hulbert

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