

## **Sinking a Ship and Loading the Cannon: Interpretations of Mass Murder and The Terror**

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The Terror is a critical part of the field of French Revolutionary studies as it looks at the changing social response to a rapidly changing government. Over the past several decades historians have shifted their focus from specific events to the implications of those events for modern society. They offer insight into what constituted the Terror and the role of individual citizens in its chaos. Competing arguments have emerged to explain the widespread violence of The Terror. This essay examines the role of key events in the development of The Terror, and the ways in which they influenced society and informed government-sanctioned violence. Over the past three decades, historians have particularly emphasized contemporary European politics, the National Convention's deputies, the regions of Vendee and Lyon, and the social, political, and psychological effects of mass violence and state-sanctioned violence. In examining mass violence during the Reign of Terror, this paper will compare the work of five historians in order to highlight the political shift toward authoritarianism, which justified the deaths of thousands of political enemies, and evaluate the implications for future society.

In *A French Genocide: The Vendée* French historian, Reynold Secher, describes the atrocities that took place in his hometown during The Terror. His focus is the region of the Vendee which had a counter-revolution in the 1790s. He points out why this war was a genocide, and he does this by reconstructing the "life of the military Vendee through its habits and conflicts as well as through local political events and economic vicissitudes."<sup>1</sup> He argues that although there was military success early in the war, the Republican army crushed this insurrection. His Sources point out how Republicans moved into the territory and decided to exterminate "this cancer" before it

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<sup>1</sup> Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*, ed. and trans. George Holoch, (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), XIV.

could spread, this Justification allowed the mass murder of thousands. Secher's analysis of the Vendee provides insight into French Revolutionary studies through mass violence during the terror that should be considered genocide. His work uses primary accounts to understand the true scope of this violence by calculating the number of deaths and destruction.

The book is organized into fifteen chapters, which are further split into four sections, starting before the start of the Vendean insurrection and ending with anarchy that was apparent from 1800 to beyond. Secher utilizes many letters that describe the political and social spheres of the Vendee, two examples would be a record from the Departmental archive of Loire-Atlantique, which was tied to the mindset of killing Vendean, and another is a letter from church leaders. The first section explains Vendean life before the war mentioning how the government pushed people around, forced draft, and attacked their way of life causing protests. The Vendean were devout to Catholicism and royalist, but the government forced itself upon them through the National Convention. Secher uses this to show building frustration because people viewed municipal governments as sellouts to the National Assembly in their making of priests' outlaws. Secher follows this with the section by pointing out how rising tensions turned into a massacre which is explained through a citizen's representative named Minier's letter to a representative in 1794 "Because shooting them takes too long and would use up powder and bullets, we've decided to put a certain number of large ships, to take them in the middle of the river, a half a league from the town, and to sink the ship. This operation is carried out daily."<sup>2</sup> Secher states that the successful guerilla warfare of Vendean invited powerful forces to quell them, these armies slaughtered, ostracized, and committed atrocities to tame the region. It is noted atrocities on this scale were committed frequently and multiple other sources have similar accounts to prove this.

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<sup>2</sup> Secher, *A French Genocide*, 112.

The third section speaks on post-war Vendee showing how people faced social discrimination where anarchy, governmental oppression, and poverty wreaked havoc. Sources such as public policies depict the political issues that came from spitefulness, where the government decreed a war tax making it harder for them to survive. This cruelty of the Republic in “The Terror” shows how they despised anti-revolutionaries. In the last section, statistics emphasize the destruction and the issues that come with creating the historiographies of the Vendee. Several sources demonstrate how mass murders of the Vendean went undocumented due to the nature of the events, but he estimates 117 thousand were dead or missing.

The most interesting part of his work is the difficulty of making a historiography on the Vendee due to a lack of sources. This research’s importance to French revolutionary studies is its comparability to other accounts of antievolution. The revolution attacked their way of life because the new republican government wanted to enforce “the people's will” onto them causing insurrection. Secher points out that this led them to their demise because amid the terror there was no disagreement with the government. The mass murders and the destruction of the Vendean become comparable to genocide as Berger the next author will show.

Suzanne Berger is a political scientist who served as the head of the Department of Political Science and specialized in the political development of both European and French politics. Her work “The French Revolution in Contemporary French Politics” was published in 1990, in French Politics and Society volume 8. Her work makes a connection between the violence that erupted in the Reign of Terror and how it was arguably an inspiration for genocide in Europe. She bases herself on historians' works, using events such as the Holocaust and the Bolshevik Revolution to relate to the French Revolution. Its repercussions demonstrate the extermination of political enemies as a viable form of government as the thesis states “The salience for contemporary politics

of current historical controversies about the Revolution emerged in discussions of the Terror and even more important, in arguments about the links between the Terror and twentieth-century genocide”<sup>3</sup> She concludes that the terror directly inspired much of the political ideologies born from the French Revolution such as disagreement with the government meant you were wrong. Flaws in society were noticed through people, which allowed for their extermination just as the Vendeanes were in Secher’s work. The goal of perfection relates to Jacobinism and the move towards an authoritarian state which would come to plague Europe in the future. Suzanne Berger makes this comparison relate to French revolutionary studies, through her connection of modern mass violence with revolutionary mass violence.

She connects 20<sup>th</sup> century mass murder to parallels in Revolutionary France such as the massacre at the Vendee. The first source Berger uses relates the Reign of Terror to modern mass killings and it comes from a newspaper titled *Le Monde*, published on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1989 by Jean-Marie Benoist. This speaks about categorizing citizens that allowed for their disposal and was imitated by later societies “Kill all members of a category without exception, here the aristocrats, later the Jews in the Third Reich, In the recurrent form of genocide; that the Terror's list of suspects prefigures the Cheka's persecutions under Lenin and Stalin's Gulag?”<sup>4</sup> She notes the building of authoritarianism in the twentieth century continues this trend in her 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*. She uses these to view the French Revolution through a political lens and observe how a move to authoritarianism inspired following governments.

In her first section, she connects Revolutionary violence inspired by people like Robespierre to tragedies of the twentieth century in the removal of “problematic” groups. She also

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Berger, “The French Revolution in Contemporary French Politics” *French Politics and Society* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Berger, “The French Revolution,” 53.

states that the revolution justified political ideals as this was the reason for following individuals who saw the need for bloodshed. This connects with their idea of renewal through replenishing the French populace through the problems with anti-revolutionaries. Her second section connects with contemporary France's influence from the Jacobin state, where she uses both primary sources in the explanation of how they became an authoritarian power and why they shouldn't be. She continues this by mentioning the French ideals of Fraternity, Brotherhood, and liberty which are ingrained in French culture due to their use in validating their actions through mass violence in the Reign of Terror. The third section explains how the terror took shape and it was because of the very same ideals. She explains this best through anti-revolutionary sentiment that is relatable to Secher "In the system of the French Revolution everything immoral is anti-political; everything that is corrupting is counterrevolutionary"<sup>5</sup>. She states that people's justification for fighting is to ensure their purity. Her final section gathers contemporary thought and how Terror has had several repercussions on society which can be made clear through this "Terror is to be explained as the acts of exhausted, frightened men, acting against their own ideals"<sup>6</sup>. She draws connections to authoritarianism, the practice of murder to those that went against doctrine, and The Terror to the ongoing issues of today.

The most interesting part of Suzanne Berger's research on this topic is how she uses the Reign of Terror to show how governments allowed the deaths of millions to become commonplace. The precedent was set when state-controlled violence killed anti-revolutionaries like Vendean, much like Secher's descriptions. She critically analyzes the rise of state-wide mass violence and where its implications can be seen. This work is important to French Revolutionary studies because it tries to make sense of the widespread chaos that was the terror. This explains the lifestyle of

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<sup>5</sup> Berger, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, 62.

those revolutionaries and how their actions have been repeated by other individuals in the current day.

In her 2020 book, *The Candle and the Guillotine: Revolution and Justice in Lyon, 1789-93*, historian Julie Patricia Johnson examines the region of Lyon, which faced violence when the Jacobins retook power.<sup>7</sup> Johnson discusses the Jacobins retaking power after the failed Federalist rebellion when they exact their justice as violence. Her thesis for this chapter sets the tone for Jacobin's wrath, depicting the inevitable destruction that came from presenting antirevolutionary sentiment “They had examined and accepted the new constitution, the Tricolore flag flew above them, and they offered the ‘olive branch of peace.’ Their arms would only be used against those who wanted to ‘enslave them.’ But events had gone too far. Armed forces of the Convention were marching against Lyon.”<sup>8</sup> Her chapter summarizes what many failed rebellions looked like in the wake of Jacobin's power, which is killing people as a deterrent. This builds upon Berger and Secher as it allows for comparisons to other antirevolutionary events such as the ones in the Vendee but also demonstrates how the field had shifted from a focus on specific events to the bigger impacts that they had.

The chapter first speaks about the city coming under siege from republican forces, and the latter half speaks of the tribunals that the republicans held when they did retake power. She uses primary sources in the first half from the citizens to describe how they felt because of the threat that surrounded their city. One example she used comes from the court system that was functioning despite the bombardment from republican forces on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1793. It's a transcript of a citizen Claudine Henriette Archimbaud stating that she was passing fake money to survive,

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Patricia Johnson, “The Terror in Lyon” in *The Candle and the Guillotine: Revolution and Justice in Lyon, 1789–93* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2020), 188-197.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, “The Terror in Lyon,” 189.

and it was because she was scared, her testimony proved her innocence. This is one of many that Johnson uses to further explain how the people were in a state of terror because of the violence that was already at their doorstep. The second half speaks about how the Jacobins sent people to the guillotine and even used drastic methods to intimidate them. One that is mentioned would be how Judge Jean Jacques Ampere was deemed guilty of sending Jacobins to death and his mistreatment on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 1793 “He had been manhandled by a young gunner of the republican army who held two fingers to his temple like a mock pistol and pointed him out to the rest of the army as if he were a ‘chief of the Vendée.’”<sup>9</sup>

This work connects with both Secher and Bergers’ work, where the people wanted to find faster ways to execute anti-revolutionaries. The sinking of ships in the Vendee is comparable to Lyon where they chained men up in a row and fired cannons at them to exterminate them faster than guillotines could. Johnson's work addresses the idea of mass violence in a broader context of the French Revolution through the lens of this town. Her analysis shows the unfairness of Jacobin leaders and the direct result of incurring their wrath. The use of testimonies from the citizens themselves displays the terror that the people faced on a personal level and how it made them act in ways that they normally would not.

Timothy Tackett’s 2015 book *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* focuses on pinpointing the origins of the institutions that allowed The Terror to take place and how society was changed because of it.<sup>10</sup> Tackett reaches conclusions similar to Berger stating that many men can’t stand up against popular belief when threatened so they join the status quo as described here “It was in this atmosphere of passions and mistrust, as they attempted to respond to the dangers

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 192.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 245-279.

they faced, that the deputies cobbled together almost all of the basic institutions that came to constitute the Terror.”<sup>11</sup> Tackett’s work connects with Secher as well as Johnson in realizing that many events that took place are a result of the people falling to fear and zealotry. His contribution to French Revolutionary studies is to understand what events influenced the terror and the regime that was built around it displayed through several key events that transpired in 1793 that brought about paranoia.

The chapter is organized into seven sections which are supported by primary sources like letters, journals, newspapers, and passages from speeches. He works to explain the reasons for the sudden social, political, and gender changes that 1793 saw because of the formation of The Terror. The first section shows how the national convention was in disarray because of the constant infighting between the Girondins and the Montagnards. This is to explain the lifestyles of these two groups of nobles going into the year through their letters. These show how disconnected the Convention was when their issue was being tired lawmakers and fighting with each other. The second section speaks about the changing power hierarchy in the convention and their need to supply the war effort in the North. He uses primary sources to show the Girondins pushing the war harder, and for this, they needed to find more troops through Tackett showing that they issued a quota of 300,000 men. The third section labeled “The Enrages and the Feminist Movement ” speaks about how lesser social groups and women, began to challenge society both with violence and their words due to class disparity. He reinforces this by mentioning their inclusion in riots as well as how they separated themselves from others. One example of this comes from the mention of how the negative traits of nobility plagued the poor in a Letter from the 29th of April 1793 by a revolutionary woman “Revolution. “Egotism, self-interest, and corruption,” wrote Rosalie Jullien,

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<sup>11</sup> Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror*, 277.



“the three monsters common to aristocrats, priests, and the rich, have always preyed upon the poor people.”<sup>12</sup>The next section mentions insurrections that came about because of the draft quota and the lessons that they taught the nation. Much like Secher, there are several accounts from people of the Vendee region as well as insurrectionists who state why they are fighting. Tackett is using this to show that both insurrectionists and republicans used revolution to justify their fighting and it ended with massacres.

The next section argues that the French became vengeful at the loss of their northern territories and fearful of further betrayal because of people such as Lafayette and one of their generals. They became more zealous of people who could stunt their revolution and the government became more authoritarian. Tackett uses primary sources to describe the situation in letters that convey nobody being safe from accusations. The Section labeled “The Purge of June 2” goes back to how the National Convention was pointing fingers through a quote from Guadet a Girondin “Send into oblivion this handful of traitors and anarchists, who are far more to be feared than the emigrant armies or the rebels of the Vendée.”<sup>13</sup>Much like Johnson the phrase “Vendean” is used to demean, and this outrage led to the precedent for Deputies to be expelled. The final section summarizes the scope of the situation and how it allowed for the terror to take place through letters of people who had been swept up in the moment. The use of force and the submission to fear are what defined this year and set the precedent for ones to come.

The most interesting part of Timothy Tackett’s research is his primary sources' importance to his topic of The Terror’s creation. Many letters allude to the attitude of the populace, and they come from individuals who reflected the era. This is important because it allows for an understanding of the situation in France when many issues arose and allows for the events to make

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<sup>12</sup> Tackett, 252.

<sup>13</sup> Tackett, 271.

sense comparatively. All the topics he mentions greatly influenced the politics and culture of the Revolution which correspond to why people had to fight. The Vendee showed the people why they could not have another anti-revolution, so they decided to crush the opposition before it ever got the chance as Secher, Berger, and Johnson also alluded to. These events made the terror what it was, and because of that France had several years of Paranoia coupled with the deaths of thousands.

A more modern take on violence “Trauma and effects of mass violence in revolutionary France: a critical inquiry”<sup>14</sup> written by Ronen Steinburg in 2015. He’s an associate professor of history at Michigan State University who specializes in the French Revolution and builds upon earlier studies regarding The Terror. He detours from the political stance and views aftereffects with a focus on psyche focusing on how it influenced French citizens. The connection between mass violence and the trauma that it caused is displayed and is connected to PTSD. The question that is argued for would be that whilst terror has a negative side to it, it also was beneficial in the furthering of psycho studies. Some conclusions he reaches discuss how this event left lasting trauma on citizens driving them mad. They had to perform acts of mass violence amongst other unsavory actions so they could make it through the Terror with their families intact. This led to mass paranoia over counter-revolution and psychological damage for many giving symptoms that would resemble shellshock. Steinburg adds psychological studies of the French Revolution connecting this with modern science where the diagnosis of these people could be better understood.

This chapter is organized into three sections labeled “Terror before the French Revolution,” “The Effects of Terror on Self and Society,” and “Terror and mental health.” Steinburg builds upon social aspects of Terror but shifts to psychological ones that it had on its citizens. In the first

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<sup>14</sup> Ronen Steinburg. “Trauma and the Effects of Mass Violence in Revolutionary France: A Critical Inquiry” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 41, no. 3 (Winter 2015), 28–46.

section, he uses primary sources to describe the physical aspects that are associated with Terror and how it was considered an unreal thing. There was a belief that it was grounded on being the purest and worst form of fear that came from the imagination. It was not expected to go as far as it did, despite it being attributed to despotic regimes by the French philosopher Montesquieu several years earlier. The second chapter speaks about how revolutionary violence disrupted society and how lives were conducted like how Johnson stated the woman was committing crimes when she never had before. He gives primary evidence in the form of people describing their symptoms which relate to PTSD. One citizen thought they were decapitated and were given a head because of their fear of the guillotine. The events of mass violence proved to be an outlet for their anger but it left lasting psychological damage. In the last section, he relates these symptoms to current ideas of PTSD and the effects of mass violence. The primary sources from this point are related to the medical field but they connect with accounts that come from the French Revolution. An example is when a baby was born it was thought that it had a guillotine imprinted on its cheek from the mother witnessing decapitations. This is mentioned to have a cultural effect on the French because more people in France at this time went insane than anywhere else. It affected an entire generation and forced them to adopt governmental change, to avoid this violence ever again.

The most interesting part was how it connected modern psychology with the known effects of violence, taking the field in a new direction. People participated because they needed to survive only to remain scarred, this connects the two with modern studies on mental health. The people hated the old regime, and they followed leaders like Robespierre, a Jacobin who used violence to get his way in making a new one. It left lasting impressions on an entire generation of Frenchmen that caused them to change their political sphere to avoid that trauma. Those symptoms displayed are connected to modern interpretations of PTSD and it makes it easier to understand what

happened back then. He is showing us that the culture of the French Revolution was not only important on a political basis like how Tackett pointed out. Instead, a personal one is used because it shaped the way that people thought about using violence making the field shift from the actions of the Terror to its implications.

The Terror was controversial in the French Revolution and especially thereafter, but it is apparent that over time perspective changed to more modern notions of mass violence's repercussions. This is evident when comparing these topics because they enhance how historians view the field and The Terror's implications. There is still a lot of research that needs to be done on this, such as discovering why people were so willing to throw away lives for the revolution. The primary sources of places such as the vendee would be paramount in this research as it highlights the radical actions of the government and its subsidiaries. Anti-revolutionary revolts need to be explored to see if they had the same results as the vendee and will allow questions like if this was a one-time occurrence or if it happened elsewhere. If other cases of mass killings occurred, then it should be understood to what scale and by what means. This is all to better understand why mass violence became justified in the killing of political enemies and how one could kill another without batting an eye.