

**Timothy Tackett.** *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. Maps, illustrations. 480 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-73655-9.



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*The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* adds to Timothy Tackett's considerable corpus on the French Revolution. Whereas his earlier work, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (1996), analyzed how certain individuals became revolutionary, this book focuses on how revolutionaries became terrorists. Both studies address the development of a collective psychology among the political elites. In the more recent study, Tackett raises an important question: "How was it that essentially well-meaning, even high-minded, individuals came to commit evil acts" (p. 12)? The book focuses not on the terror but on its origins: "the principal analysis ends in the autumn of 1793," although an extended epilogue carries the tale to the death of Maximilien Robespierre (p. 11).

Tackett brings to the task a familiarity with primary material and a mastery of the secondary literature, but he never engages the historiographical literature in either the text or the notes. In addition to a wide range of archival documents

and documents published in printed collections, this meticulously researched study is enriched by contemporary diaries and letters through which Tackett attempts to capture "the emotional experience of those who lived through such events" (p. 61). These eyewitness accounts stem largely but not entirely from the Left. Contemporaries provided often chilling insights, such as that by Rosalie Jullien who, after noting that some were arrested in error, nonetheless concluded that "they are so necessary for the security of the state that even those who are innocent victims cannot complain if they are truly republican." Tackett quotes Jacques-Alexis Thuriot's plea that "We must halt this raging torrent that is leading us to barbarism," but in general the voices of moderation, such as Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes or Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, are muted (p. 304). It may be that like the cave-dogs of the Roman poet Claudian Claudianus they were scared to silence in the swallowing night of the terror.

Tackett does not downplay the violence of the pre-revolutionary world that accelerated in its last thirty years with over fifty incidents in towns alone. As early as 1789, at least one individual could argue that “reason will perhaps need to be accompanied with terror” (p. 68). He traces the bitter factionalism, the politicization of Paris, the collapse of authority, the growth of suspicion, and the increasing radicalization of the Revolution. Still the author notes the polarization of the assembly as early as 1790 and the “development of a Manichaean logic that demonized and dehumanized their opponents” (p. 104). The reader witnesses the power of rumor, the poison of denunciation, the growth of suspicion, and the pervasiveness of fear in this confrontational struggle for power and revenge. For Tackett, “the Terror was not pre-ordained in 1789 ... but emerged out of the Revolutionary process itself” (p. 38). That thesis lends the work a chillingly exculpatory note in some passages. He quotes a contemporary deputy who “understood the situation only too well”: “Few men are able to maintain their integrity when everything around them is threatening and shaking and collapsing.... They are pushed along and carried away without ever realizing it” (p. 277).

To explain is not to condone, but still Tackett’s sympathy to the Revolution is evident throughout. In speaking of August 10, Tackett describes Parisians as “noble volunteers” (p. 190). He later argues that the “the Girondins greatly hurt their case, moreover, when they began taking advantage of the Convention’s lenient policies and fleeing into the provinces” (p. 288). Given the toxicity of the environment and the viciousness of the defamation, can one fault them for fleeing? In his discussion of the September massacres, he notes “a seeming callousness that can be understood only in the context of panic fear of internal conspiracy in the face of the invading Prussians” and contends that it was “a phenomenon initially supported by a broad consensus of much of the Parisian population” (pp. 217, 214). This argument

is a difficult one to make, even given his use of diaries. How representative were they? At least some of them could be accused of *parti pris*. In this and other instances he seems to embrace the argument from circumstances. Experience rather than ideology molded the terrorist: bitter factionalism, pressure of events, influence of the crowds, perceived threats (real or apocryphal), and a culture of mistrust and suspicion. For Tackett, “circumstances, then had a powerful impact on the coming of the Terror. Yet circumstances alone would have been insufficient without a prior transformation of the psychology and mentalité of the Revolutionaries, a transformation with a tragic inner logic that was integral to the process of the French Revolution—and that is perhaps after all integral to the phenomenon of revolution itself” (p. 348). The role of individuals and indeed of moral choice is not discussed. Nor are genuine differences of belief. Tackett treats revolutionary groups outside the assembly as though they were external forces.

The book uneasily strides the divide of appealing to a general public and to the specialist. Much of the text consists of Tackett’s general reflections on the Revolution (particularly the first six chapters), which will be familiar to specialists. Amid those reflections, he focuses on “the development of a political culture of violence among the leadership, on the attitude or mentalité ... that preceded the Terror and made the option of ‘state-sponsored violence on an unprecedented scale’ *seem almost inevitable and necessary*” (emphasis added, p. 3). Still the thesis too often disappears within the larger narrative only to reemerge later, making it difficult for nonspecialists to follow.

Unlike the recent work by Marisa Linton (*Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* [2013]), Tackett provides little or no biographical material and does not analyze the role of networks, whether of friendship or patronage. Both books downplay the role of ideology and political discourse and em-

phasize the important constraints these men faced. Tackett's book includes three maps and twenty well-chosen (but a number poorly reproduced) black-and-white illustrations.

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