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**Jean-Clément Martin**, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006. 339 pp. Bibliography and index. 23.00 Euros (pb). ISBN 2-02-043842-9.

Review Essay by D.M.G. Sutherland, University of Maryland.

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Because we know a lot about crowds during the French Revolution, we think we know a lot about violence. Ever since Georges Lefebvre's extraordinarily creative essay on the crowd, and after George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, we have become used to an image of popular violence as purposeful, reasonably restrained, nowhere near as vindictive as the forces of order, and ultimately idealistic.[1] Lefebvre explained the occasional vindictiveness of the crowd as a function of the desire to punish following highly emotional panics and provocations.

We also think we know a lot about the Terror, thanks to Donald Greer. Terror was a justified response to treasonous counter-revolutionaries within and foreign invaders without. Greer's figures have had the effect of sanitizing the Terror. The fairly small number of those executed relative to twentieth century revolutions, the emphasis on the fact that judicial repression affected only a small minority of departments, and the insistence that the numbers executed reflected the wider universe of genuine counter-revolutionary opposition that the government had to quash, all of these conclusions normalize the Terror.

The standard historiography thus renders violence during the Revolution as comprehensible, more or less rational, and justifiable. But, in fact, we know very little about violence as such. We know about violent crowds in Paris, we know about panic-stricken peasants, and we know about the raw numbers of victims of revolutionary justice. We do not know much about violence except as by-products of these other things. The field is, however, extraordinarily rich as Jean-Clément Martin's new book aims to show.

Martin began his publishing career with a study of local memory of the wars of the Vendée and then with the wars themselves. This region was by far the most violent in the country, not only in terms of popular violence but also in official repression too. Violence in this region was hardly antiseptic. Martin's study of the massacres at Machecoul in March 1793 showed how the event was the culmination of a long series of confrontations between blues and whites, and at the same time, how the perpetrators—in the event, the peasants from the surrounding area—acted out their vengeance fantasies on the bodies of their victims through display and sexual humiliation. In one of his most haunting studies, Martin explored the interplay of memory and massacre in the Vendean village of Les Lucs. Local memory of the massacres in 1794, during the march of republican general Turreau's infernal columns, altered the facts only to make a more coherent story while retaining its essential truth.

*Violence et Révolution* leaps the boundaries of the *Vendée militaire* to explore the role of violence in the country as a whole. It is an ambitious book and the chronological presentation sometimes makes the themes difficult to follow. The dominant thrust is a commentary on the standard narrative viewed from the top down and from Paris out. This is not at all a flaw because the commentary is always refreshing and challenging. It is rather like the audio guides that museums rent out, although the detached voice does far more than describe the passing scene. Indeed, on almost every page, there is a novel remark or a statement so bold that one wishes one could engage the voice in the audio guide.

One example would be the general significance he draws from Charlotte Corday's murder of Marat. Martin observes that the young woman expected death, asked to see the guillotine that would execute her since she had never seen one before, and mounted the scaffold with extraordinary equanimity, revealing a fascination with death that was common to an entire generation. Marat, Robespierre and Saint-Just also shared it.

Another example is the sure touch in describing how the myths and rumors surrounding the Carrier trial in December 1794 cast Carrier as a scapegoat for all the alleged illegalities and atrocities of the period as a whole. The attempt failed, but after Carrier's execution, the peasants of the West could no longer be represented as gangrened. They were restored to simpletons misled by counter-revolutionaries. Such representations permitted a much more lenient repression. And while the Carrier trial failed to act as a catharsis for Terror, the tales of the *noyades* and republican marriages survive to the present day.

The other principal goal of the book is to examine the notion that the Revolution is one of those events, like the Holocaust or the slave trade, that has a far more significant meaning than the mere recounting of facts. He intends to discuss the violence of the revolutionary era as a way of desacralizing this deeper meaning. Although Martin could have expanded on what he means by the "national myth" to which the subtitle of the book refers, he appears to have in mind legends that are still current in France about the violence of the Revolution. Frequently, these originated in post-Thermidor stories about the *noyades* at Nantes, terrorists making clothing out of human skin, evisceration of pregnant women, and so on. He is specifically skeptical of the conservative myth of the early nineteenth century that equated any social change with violence or the argument that Aulard embedded so deeply in the historiography, the thesis of circumstances. Instead, the book shows with a vast amount of detail that violence was frequently not related to social change in any meaningful sense and that violence could be more than just defensive. Some people were violent to settle scores, others to grasp power, and still others to seek a morbid satisfaction. Whatever the content of the lugubrious tales that still circulate, Martin shows that popular violence was considerably more brutal than is usually thought and that the political elite's relation to it was considerably more compromised and opportunistic.

All that said, after the audio guide tour has finished, what have we witnessed? Violence was far more widespread than Greer's map of counter-revolution might suggest, revenge killings and brigandage were probably much more common than the grain riots that have so attracted historians, politicians were frequently incapable of channeling pressure from below, violence destroyed the noble hopes for a new civic order, and so on. Fair enough, but invoking a multiplicity of causes of violence is a scatter-gun approach. Another angle might be helpful.

All societies have mechanisms for resolving conflict, either through private mediation in vendetta societies or through the courts in more developed ones. The courts were not able to perform this function during the Revolution for any number of reasons. The revolutionaries broke with a discredited past by eliminating Old Regime courts, but establishing the new courts took time. The new Criminal Tribunals, for example, only began to operate in the spring of 1792. But institutional fluidity paled before the phenomenon of political justice that appeared from a very early date. No one was ever prosecuted, for example, for the bloody lynching and decapitation that occurred in Marseille in May 1790; nor was anyone prosecuted for the multiple lynchings on the promenades of Aix-en-Provence at the end of the year. At the other end of the country, in the West, the courts failed to try scores of cases of national guardsmen who forcibly closed down churches where refractory clergy were still legally practicing. Moreover, public authority was hardly passive before these outrages. Administrators in the West went on to justify the closings as necessary in the circumstances, especially when legal proofs were so hard to gather before the conspiracy of public silence. Worse still they too undermined religious liberty by ordering the internment and sometimes exile of suspect refractory clergy. Freedom of religious expression was the first of the Rights of Man to go.

Jacobins excused the murder at Marseille too. Since the courts had failed to mete out justice to someone who had insulted the National Guard earlier, this lynching was justified. The *Courrier de Marseille* wrote, "These are the unfortunate consequences of the cowardly condescension of the Courts: the People will exact vengeance itself, when it loses hope the Laws will avenge them."<sup>[2]</sup> Such rationales for irregular justice reached into the political class as well. Aside from Barnave's famous aphorism about the purity of the blood of Bertier de Sauvigny and of Foulon, one could cite the perpetrators of the September Massacres who were not prosecuted until years later. *Montagnards* also excused the September Massacres and their equivalents in the provinces. Nor was it only *Montagnards* who supported a politicized justice. Vergniaud supported an amnesty for the killers in the gruesome Massacres of La Glacière in Avignon in October 1791, on the grounds that a refusal of an amnesty for the killers--good patriots all--was inconsistent with the amnesty granted to the anti-French, anti-patriot forces a few months before. He claimed that his fellow deputies could not "vouer aux fer des bourreaux, ceux qui vous ont constamment servis."<sup>[3]</sup>

The result was disastrous. The unintended consequences of many reforms of the Revolution divided thousands of communities in the West and South-East that were already factionalized. Around Avignon, the absence of justice turned the region over to mentally unbalanced Jacobins like Jourdan whose nickname, *Coupe-tête*, proclaimed a program. Elsewhere, like the West, partisan justice and partisan administration convinced thousands of people that they had to defend themselves against a Revolution that took their Church, their taxes, and their young men. This is a story that Jean-Clément Martin tells well both in this book and in his previous ones.

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## NOTES

[1] Georges Lefebvre, "Foules révolutionnaires," in his *Études sur la Révolution française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 271-87, and George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[2] *Courrier de Marseille*, no. 4, 5 May 1790, p. 38. *Marseille sauvée ou les trois Journées à jamais mémorables. Extrait du Courrier de Marseille, No4.* (Marseille: De l'Imprimerie de F. Brebion, 1790) BM Marseille Xd 3021. Also AP, xv, 495-9, session of 12 May 1790 which differs in important details with the newspaper account.

[3] Cited in René Moulinas, *Les massacres de la Glacière : Enquête sur un crime impuni, Avignon 16-17 octobre 1791* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 2003), p. 175.

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Lynn Hunt, David Andress, and Sophie Wahnich, as well as Jean-Clément Martin's response to all four Review Essays.

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