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David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 441 pp. Figures, maps, notes, and index. \$26.00. ISBN 0-374-27341-3.

Review by Paul R. Hanson, Butler University.

In his ambitious new book, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France*, David Andress sets out to bring a reasoned perspective to this most emotional and controversial of topics. He places the French Reign of Terror not only in the context of the French Revolution writ large, but also in the context of the violence of modern war and our current War on Terror. It is a work of synthesis, not a work based on original scholarship, addressed to a broad reading public. Because of that intended audience, the book becomes an extended narrative of the Revolution, paying particular attention to those events and policies that bore directly, or indirectly, on the Terror proper. Thus, one is more than 100 pages into the book before reaching the Terror itself. The title, then, is a bit misleading, although the subtitle does point to the central paradox that Andress sees as lying at the heart of Revolutionary politics: the Terror stifled freedom in the name of protecting it.

Andress sketches out his perspective on the Terror quite clearly in the Introduction to the book. Old Regime France was a violent society, and the monarchy could be brutal in its application of justice. The violence of the Revolution must be seen in that context. For those who have emphasized the absence of a Terror in the American Revolution, Andress points out that more people fled the colonies during the American Revolution than fled France during its Revolution (p. 2). While he does not neglect ideology in his discussion of the Jacobin government of Year II, Andress insists that there were real threats to the revolutionary regime, both external and internal, and that the Jacobins preserved the unity of the country by resorting to Terror (p. 6). Andress rejects the interpretive tradition extending from Edmund Burke to Hippolyte Taine to Simon Schama that has portrayed the Terror as inevitable, characterizing the Revolution as a spiraling descent into wanton violence. I think, however, that it would be fair to say that he sees the Terror as necessary, though tragic, and he certainly does not back away in his narrative from confronting its most violent and gratuitous episodes. But he reminds us, in concluding his Introduction, that historians of the Napoleonic wars, or most other wars for that matter, seldom fixate on the carnage of the battlefield to the degree that critics of revolution fixate on the excesses of revolutionary terror (p. 7).

This judicious introduction takes up barely seven pages, after which Andress plunges into a narrative, written with verve and flair that I fear sometimes loses sight of the cautions he has offered the reader in those initial pages. The prose is often stirring and vivid, as with the concluding sentence to chapter eight, "Saturnalia;" it is worthy of Carlyle or Michelet: "Throughout the winter, France was to be 'dechristianised' in earnest, but by the end of that season, even as the list of the Republic's victories grew ever longer, the jagged claws of faction had raked new wounds in the tattered and shrunken body politic" (p. 243). But at times that vivid prose can be misleading, as in this description of an episode in the September Massacres of 1792: "Their weapons--swords, knives, hatchets and bludgeons--were a chilling reminder that such groups had decapitated many of the Revolution's enemies since the fall of the Bastille in 1789" (p. 96). While I would agree that there had been violent deaths between July 1789 and September 1792, to the uninitiated reader, for whom this volume is intended, this passage would suggest that the calendar was littered with such episodes, that far from being exceptional, which they were, the September Massacres were just one more example of almost continuous crowd violence. Similarly, we are introduced to the "bloodthirsty followers of Marat" (p. 118). One would not want to

confuse Marat's supporters with those who attended the dinners of Madame Roland, but is it really fair to characterize them all as "bloodthirsty"?

There is a tendency in these pages to reify the Revolution and the Terror, while preserving the individuality of the Terror's victims (not all of them, admittedly—that would require a much longer book). Thus, in discussing the execution of Madame du Barry, Andress writes that "She died essentially as a symbol, like Marie-Antoinette, of all that the Revolution had come to hate" (p. 235). At the end of a very even-handed discussion of the war and repression in the Vendée we read that "Revolutionary politics had put all sentiments of human compassion and mercy beyond consideration, and entrenched death as the only outcome of conflict" (p. 250). But why should we see this as the consequence of revolutionary politics, rather than as a result of the dehumanizing experience of pitched battle in the context of civil war? While Andress acknowledges that there were parts of France that the Terror barely touched, at least in its judicial violence, when he recounts the executions in Nantes overseen by Jean-Baptiste Carrier we read, "As in many cases of such massacres around the country, reports of the looting of corpses and immoral treatment of prisoners before and after death were current, even if unverifiable" (p. 299). It is undeniable that outrages were committed in Nantes, but apart from the executions in Lyon, I can think of no other incident of the Terror that I would place alongside the drownings ordered by Carrier and his local Jacobin supporters. There certainly were not "many such cases."

A few seeming inconsistencies find their way into the book as well. Early in his discussion of the trial of Danton and the Indulgents, Andress writes that, "The sharp contrast between this vision of a well-ordered revolutionary state—indeed a police state in all but name—and the play of factions at the centre was obvious to all" (p. 259). Three pages later we read, "None of this, however, is conclusive evidence for anything. What it should remind us is that the Republic of the 1790s was not a modern police state, despite the ambitions of the Law of 14 frimaire" (p. 262). It is possible that I am ignoring the nuance of Andress's language here, that the first statement refers to a "vision," not to reality, but I doubt that most readers will pick up on that subtlety, even if it is intended. Later in the book, discussing the excruciating execution of Maximilien Robespierre, Andress writes, "The Incorruptible had been processed to his death by the same machinery that had accounted for his victims..." (p. 345). Yet, a few pages later we are reminded, quite reasonably, that "Many other suspects were the victims of the kind of petty neighborhood politics that had bred the absurd condemnations of the Great Terror..." (p. 349). Does this mean that neighborhood politics were a part of that Robespierist "machinery"? I think not, but I am also unclear how this latter statement meshes with the observation that "The role of the Incorruptible Robespierre in the politics of the 'late Terror' is absolutely central" (p. 289). It is certainly possible for contingency and design (whether the product of ideology or personality) both to be at play in the Terror, but the relationship between the two seems unclear in passages such as these.

There was more to the Terror than violence and executions. Andress writes that "Remedying the issue of supply would come to be the central concern of the Terror..." (p. 159). It is not the central focus of this book, however. Admittedly, a lengthy discussion of the system put in place to oversee the requisitioning of food, clothing, weapons and ammunition for the armies would not make for gripping prose, but this aspect of the Terror, along with the success of the Jacobin government in controlling inflation during the Year II, might have come in for a bit more discussion. Similarly, while Andress cites the recent work of Jean-Pierre Gross, which focuses on several representatives on mission who carried out laudable efforts toward social and economic reform in the provinces, this non-sanguinary aspect of the Terror receives less attention than it might.^[1] Andress does not neglect the question of ideology and its role in the Terror. He pays considerable attention to the speeches of Robespierre and St. Just, quoting the latter from an important speech in the autumn of 1793, just before the decree on Revolutionary Government: "You have to punish not only the traitors, but even those who are indifferent; you have to punish whoever is passive in the republic, and who does nothing for it" (p. 224).

The Terror, then, would be aimed not only at those who were enemies of the Revolution, but also at those who were indifferent to it as well. What is less clear in Address' account is the degree to which such ideological motivation was carried forward into action.

Promotional material for the book promises an interpretation "which draws troubling parallels with today's political and religious fanaticism." (This is a quotation from *Library Journal* included with the promotional material.) Address turns to those issues in his conclusion, but almost as an afterthought. It is not a concern that is integral to the text itself. For it to have been otherwise may be asking too much, but one might hope that David Address will take up those troubling parallels in a future essay or book. In this work we have been given a well-crafted, nuanced, and detailed account not only of the Terror, but also of the grand sweep of the Revolution as a whole. For the reader new to the topic, it will seem a sometimes bewildering narrative, but the conclusion Address reaches is a relatively simple one: "The problem of the Terror was that its unrelenting quest to preserve and protect the fragile flower of personal liberty was also the engine of the destruction of that very thing" (p. 373).

With this observation Address points the reader toward an enduring question: just what was it that impelled the French revolutionaries to undo their own handiwork by this spiral into political violence? Was it the threat of external war, the panic generated by civil war, real or imagined counterrevolutionary plots, ideology, or the logic of discourse? Address cannot be said to have provided a definitive answer to this question, but his judicious and evenhanded account does steer us away from ideological inevitability back in the direction of historical contingency.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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