



The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution

By Timothy Tackett

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Between 1793 and 1794, thousands of French citizens were imprisoned and hundreds sent to the guillotine by a powerful dictatorship that claimed to be acting in the public interest. Only a few years earlier, revolutionaries had proclaimed a new era of tolerance, equal justice, and human rights. How and why did the French Revolution's lofty ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity descend into violence and terror?

The Coming of the Terror *in the French Revolution* offers a new interpretation of this turning point in world history. Timothy Tackett traces the inexorable emergence of a culture of violence among the Revolution's political elite amid the turbulence of popular uprisings, pervasive subversion, and foreign invasion. Violence was neither a preplanned strategy nor an ideological imperative but rather the consequence of multiple factors of the Revolutionary process itself, including an initial breakdown in authority, the impact of the popular classes, and a cycle of rumors, denunciations, and panic fed by fear?fear of counterrevolutionary conspiracies, fear of anarchy, fear of oneself becoming the target of vengeance. To comprehend the coming of the Terror, we must understand the contagion of fear that left the revolutionaries themselves terrorized.

Tackett recreates the sights, sounds, and emotions of the Revolution through the observations of nearly a hundred men and women who experienced and recorded it firsthand. Penetrating the mentality of Revolutionary elites on the eve of the Terror, he reveals how suspicion and mistrust escalated and helped propel their actions, ultimately consuming them and the Revolution itself.

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Editorial Review

Review

Essential reading for anyone interested in how revolutions devolve into terror. Beautifully written, superbly documented, and fair and balanced in its judgments, it will be a landmark of scholarship for decades to come. (Lynn Hunt, author of *Writing History in the Global Era*)

A wonderful book, a veritable masterpiece. Tackett finds new sources to answer one of the oldest questions about the French Revolution: why did the deputies of the National Assembly put the Terror in place? In a captivating synthesis of the entire Revolution, he captures its drama and emotion, the fluctuating joys, anxieties, and fears of those who lived through unprecedented events. (David Garrioch, author of *The Making of Revolutionary Paris*)

[A] grippingly written and deeply insightful book. (Robert Zaretsky *Los Angeles Review of Books* 2015-01-12)

The work of **Timothy Tackett** on the French Revolution has made him one of its most influential recent historians. (William Doyle *Literary Review* 2015-02-01)

[**Tackett**] analyzes the *mentalité* of those who became ‘terrorists’ in 18th-century France...In emphasizing weakness and uncertainty instead of fanatical strength as the driving force behind the Terror, ...Tackett...contributes to an important realignment in the study of French history. (Ruth Scurr *The Spectator* 2015-02-21)

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...By attending to the role of emotions in propelling the Terror, Tackett steers a more nuanced course than many previous historians have managed...Imagined terrors, as...Tackett very usefully reminds us, can have even more political potency than real ones. (David A. Bell *The Atlantic* 2015-05-01)

[A] boldly conceived and important book...This is a thought-provoking book that makes a major contribution to our understanding of terror and political intolerance, and also to the history of emotions more generally. It helps expose the complexity of a revolution that cannot be adequately understood in terms of principles alone. (Alan Forrest *Times Literary Supplement* 2015-06-26)

[**Tackett**] shows how fear engendered by countless disappointments, betrayals, invasion, insurrection, and numbing violence on all sides, especially from the revolution’s own militants, progressively turned fervent enthusiasts into conspiracy-obsessed terrorists. Tackett succeeds brilliantly; his volume is now the starting point for all efforts to understand this episode. (G. P. Cox *Choice* 2015-07-01)

About the Author

Timothy Tackett is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Irvine.

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Leticia Nielson:

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Jon Pittenger:

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Gary Spengler:

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