Viewpoint 5

"In 1793 terrorist discourse was in the mouths of nearly all the leaders of the Revolution."

The Reign of Terror Was Caused by Jacobin Leadership

François Furet

The rule of Maximilien Robespierre and other members of the radical Jacobin party is best remembered for the Terror, when more than thirty thousand people were executed in France between 1793 and 1794. In the following viewpoint François Furet criticizes the Terror and disputes the arguments made by scholars wishing to defend the revolutionaries. Furet asserts that the Terror was not necessary to ensure public safety but was conducted to silence counterrevolutionaries and others who threatened Jacobin rule. He also argues that the Terror exacerbated the civil war that beset France in 1783. Furet was a professor at the University of Chicago and a leading scholar of the French Revolution whose works include *Interpreting the French Revolution* and *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution.*

The legacy of the Terror poisoned all subsequent revolutionary history and, beyond that, all political life in nineteenth-century

François Furet, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. Copyright © 1981 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reproduced by permission.

France. Throughout the Thermidorian period[1] the Terror lurked about the fringes of the political scene. The royalists used it to forge a weapon of revenge, an instrument for settling local scores in areas where the population leaned toward their camp and Republican troops were thinly scattered, as in the Rhône valley. The republicans would have liked to forget the Terror and root the new institutions of the Year III [September 1794 to September 1795] in the law; Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël worked feverishly between 9 Thermidor and 18 Brumaire[2] to exorcise the ghost of the guillotine that haunted the Republic, but to no avail. Thermidor revived the royalist menace and counterrevolutionary violence, and the Directory[3] was unable to adhere to the legal election dates stipulated by the Constitution. In September 1797 [Pierre] Augereau's army laid siege to Paris at the behest of the director [Paul] Barras in order to save the Republic from a royalist parliamentary majority. The coup d'état of 18 Fructidor (September 5) was the signal for a new series of 'public safety' measures in which deportation to Guiana replaced the scaffold, with refractory priests paying the heavy price. The nation's revolutionary education proceeded on course, and the civil and military putsch of 18–19 Brumaire (9–10 November 1799) capped it off by establishing a regime 'that completed the Terror by replacing permanent revolution with permanent war' (Marx, *The Holy Family*).

In the nineteenth century memories of the Terror imparted a peculiar bitterness to civil struggle, while at the same time adding further passion to the great conflict between Ancien Régime[4] and Revolution. By associating the advent of democracy with a bloody

1. The Thermidorian period began in July 1794, following the arrests and overthrow of key Jacobin leaders. The Thermidorians were more moderate than Robespierre and his compatriots. 2. Benjamin Constant was a French-Swiss novelist and political writer who had a lengthy affair and eventually went into exile with fellow writer Madame de Staël. Born Anne Louise Germaine Necker, she was the daughter of Jacques Necker, a key figure in Louis XVI's government and a supporter of progressive politics. 9 Thermidor is July 27, 1794, when the major Jacobin leaders were arrested; on 18 Brumaire, or November 9, 1799, a coup d'etat made Napoleon Bonaparte the First Consul (and putative dictator) of France. 3. The Directory was a five-man executive board established in August 1795. 4. The Ancien Régime was the government prior to the French Revolution; the time of absolute monarchy.

dictatorship, it supplied counterrevolutionaries with arguments and liberals with fears. It embarrassed or divided republicans and isolated socialists. In postrevolutionary France the monarchy was suspect because of the Ancien Régime, but the Republic was unable to cleanse its image of the blood spilled in its name. When it finally triumphed in the 1870s, it was because the republicans had conquered their own demons and presented a pacified version of their great ancestors from which the spectre of the guillotine had been exorcised. It was not until the twentieth century, with the injection of bolshevism and the development of a communist extreme left, that a cult of the Terror, associated with that of [Maximilien] Robespierre, was established on grounds of revolutionary necessity, where for half a century it flourished in the shadow of the Soviet example.

Interpreting the Terror

Thus, there exists a history of the history of the Terror associated with the vicissitudes of French political history over the past two hundred years. But that history can also be written in a less chronological mode by attempting to reconstitute the various types of interpretation to which the Terror has been subjected.

The most common strategy is to relate the Terror to circumstances external to the Revolution; we are told, then, that the Terror was merely the product of the tragic situation in which the Republic found itself in 1793 and was a terrible yet necessary instrument of public safety. Surrounded by enemies foreign and domestic, the Convention [a legislature] allegedly had no choice but to rely on fear of the guillotine to mobilize men and resources. We find this interpretation being advanced by the Thermidorians in the period immediately following Robespierre's fall, and it was destined to enjoy a brilliant future, for it can also be found in most French public school texts for reasons that are easy to understand: it has the advantage of offering to the ultimately victorious republican tradition a revolution exonerated of guilt for the terrorist episode, responsibility for which is shifted to its adversaries. That is why this interpretation is favoured by many who consider themselves heirs of 1789, for it is a way of escaping the dilemma of contradiction or denial.

The 'circumstantial' thesis is often associated with another idea, according to which the Terror coincides with a period during which social strata other than the cultivated bourgeoisie were gaining access to power: specifically, the class of urban artisans and tradesmen from which the sans-culotte activists[5] were recruited and which [François] Mignet, for example, setting the tone for liberal historiography, dubbed the 'plebs' or the 'multitude' to distinguish them from the bourgeoisie of 1789. Thus circumstances presumably brought to the fore a second revolution, which lacks the historical dignity of the first because it was neither bourgeois nor liberal; its necessity was merely circumstantial, that is, subordinate to the principal course of the event, which continued to be defined by the principle of 1789 and the rise of the bourgeoisie. But the plebeian nature of this episode makes it political reflexes, at once egalitarian and punitive, triggered by military reverses and internal insurrections. The Ancien Régime had not known how to educate its people, and for this it paid a heavy price at the moment of its downfall.

It is not difficult to find elements of historical reality to support interpretations of this type. The Terror did in fact develop in the course of the Revolution at a time of foreign and domestic danger and out of obsession with 'aristocratic' treason and an 'aristocratic plot'. It continually justified itself in these terms as indispensable to the salvation of the fatherland. It was 'placed on the order of the day' and exercised in the name of the state and the Republic only under pressure from sans-culotte militants. The Paris prison massacres of September 1792 showed the extremes to which the punitive passions of the people might go. A year later, it was in part to channel those passions that the Convention and the Committees turned the Terror into a banner of government.

Nevertheless, neither the circumstances nor the political attitudes of the *petit peuple* [little people] are enough to account for the phenomenon. The 'circumstances', too, have a chronology. The risks for the Revolution were greatest at the beginning and in the middle of the summer of 1793, at a time when the activity of the Revo-

5. Sans-culottes were politically radical workers who were known for wearing long trousers in opposition to the breeches worn by aristocrats.

lutionary Tribunal was relatively minimal. By contrast, the Terror intensified with the improvement of the situation and the victories, starting in October. It reached a peak during the winter, in a Lyons that had been vanquished for several months and in a defeated Vendée that had to be put to the torch, as well as in countless other places where there were violent clashes as a result of initiatives on the part of local militants or envoys of the Convention. There was indeed a connection between the civil war and the Terror, but it was not that the Terror was an instrument for ending a war; it followed and actually prolonged rather than shortened the war. One cannot credit it with patriotic devotion without falling into inconsistency, because to do so would be to assume—incorrectly, by the way—the existence of a counter-revolutionary France. Nor can one credit it with saving the fatherland or maintaining the Republic, since it came after the victory 'The Great Terror', wrote the republican [Edgar] Quinet as long ago as 1867, 'nearly everywhere revealed itself after the victories. Can we maintain that it caused them? Can we argue that, in our systems, effect precedes cause?'

The explanation involving the role of popular attitudes accounts for only some of the facts. It is indeed true, as we have seen, that the pressure to establish a terrorist dictatorship came chiefly from sans-culotte militants. But it is not a simple matter to establish a dividing line between the 'people' and the political elites, between 'popular' culture and 'high' culture. What about [Jean-Paul] Marat, for example, who may be considered one of the purest ideologues of the Terror? To which group did he belong? This demi-savant, who since 1789 had been denouncing the aristocratic plot and tirelessly calling for scaffolds to be erected, straddled both 'cultures'. The same can be said of [Jacques-René] Hébert and the Hébertists, who extended his influence in Paris and played so important a role in the republican repression in Vendée.[6] In fact, in 1793 terrorist discourse was in the mouths of nearly all the leaders of the Revolution, including those who had no special relation to sans-culotte activism, the legists and bourgeois of the committees and the Convention. [Bertrand] Barère's demand in the summer of 1793 for the total destruction of the Vendée is enough to make clear the grip of terrorist fanaticism on all the Montagnard deputies.

6. Vendée was an area in western France that was the site of a counterrevolutionary movement.

Of course this call for widespread extermination grew out of the civil war, even if that was not its only cause. But, as Mona Ozouf has demonstrated, from the autumn of 1793 to the spring of 1794 the case for the necessity of the Terror abandoned the circumstantial grounds of the war in favor of a more fundamental justification: nothing less than the Revolution itself. After the end of March and the liquidation of the Hébertists, which put an end to the bloody escalation of what remained of sans-culottism, the Terror, by this point the exclusive instrument of the Robespierrist clan, had ceased to be a matter for learned and sometimes philosophical rationalization. It was less a part of the arsenal of victory than of an ambition for regeneration.

Nor was the climate any longer that of a besieged city, since the frontiers had been liberated and the civil war extinguished. The most obvious use of the guillotine was no longer the extermination of avowed enemies but rather that of 'factions': the Hébertists followed by the Dantonists [supporters of the Jacobin Georges-Jacques Danton]. The Terror raged all the more fiercely because the Robespierrist group had no further support either on its left, among the activists, or on its right, in public opinion; it was a government of fear, which Robespierre portrayed in theory as a government of virtue. Conceived in order to exterminate aristocracy, the Terror ended as a means of subduing wrongdoers and combatting crime. From now on it coincided with and was inseparable from the Revolution, because there was no other way of someday moulding a republic of citizens.

Hence the Terror cannot be reduced to circumstances, whether the emergency situation or pressure from the *petit peuple*, surrounding its birth. Not that circumstances played no role; obviously they provided an environment in which ideology developed and allowed terrorist institutions to be gradually put in place. But this ideology, present in the Revolution of 1789, predated the circumstances and enjoyed an independent existence, which was associated with the nature of French revolutionary culture through several sets of ideas.

Revolutionary Ideas

The first of these ideas was of man's regeneration, in which respect the Revolution was akin to a religious annunciation but in a secularized mode. The actors in the events actually conceived of their own history as an emancipation of man in general. The issue was not to reform French society but to reinstitute the social pact on the basis of man's free will; France represented only the first act of this decisive development. This truly philosophical ambition was unusual, however, in that it was constantly caught up in the test of actual history, as though the truth of a religious promise had been left to empirical verification by the facts. In the gap between facts and promise was born the idea of a regeneration, to reduce the distance between the Revolution and its ambition, which it could not renounce without ceasing to be itself. If the Republic of free citizens was not yet possible, it was because men, perverted by their past history, were wicked; by means of the Terror, the Revolution—a history without precedent, entirely new—would make a new man.

Another idea said roughly the same thing, or arrived at the same result: that politics could do anything. The revolutionary universe was a universe populated by wills, entirely animated by the conflict between good intentions and evil plans; no action was ever uncertain, no power ever innocent. As first [Georg] Hegel and later Marx recognized, the French Revolution was the theatre in which the voluntarism of modern politics revealed itself in all its purity. The event remained ever faithful to its original idea, according to which the social contract could be instituted only by free wills. This attribution of unlimited powers to political action opened a vast field to radicalization of conflicts and to militant fanaticism. Henceforth each individual could arrogate to himself what had once been a divine monopoly, that of creating the human world, with the ambition of recreating it. If he then found obstacles standing in his way, he attributed them to the perversity of adverse wills rather than to the opacity of things: the Terror's sole purpose was to do away with those adversaries.

In the end, the Revolution put the people in the place of the king. In order to restore to the social order the truth and justice ignored by the Ancien Régime, it returned the people to its rightful place,

usurped for so long by the king: the place of sovereign. What the Revolution, following [philosopher Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, called the general will was radically different from monarchical power in the manner of its formation yet identical to it in the extent of its jurisdiction. The absolute sovereignty of the king presaged the sovereignty of democracy. Wholly obsessed with legitimacy, having thrown off divine guidance without establishing reciprocal checks and balances in the American manner, the Revolution was unwilling to set limits to public authority. It had lived since 1789 on the idea of a new absolute—and indivisible—sovereignty, which excluded pluralism of representation because it assumed the unity of the nation. Since that unity did not exist—and Girondin [a moderate political faction] federalism showed that factions continued to plot in the shadows—the function of the Terror, as well as of purging elections, was [invariably to] establish it.

Viewpoint 6

"The institutions of the Terror had been created long before [Maximilien] Robespierre joined the government on 26 July 1793."

The Reign of Terror Was Not Caused by Jacobin Leadership

Gwynne Lewis

The radical Jacobin government has often been blamed for the eventual failure of the French Revolution to form a lasting republic, in large part because of the thousands of executions (known collectively as the Terror) that occurred between 1793 and 1794 under the leadership of Jacobins such as Maximilien Robespierre and Georges-Jacques Danton. In the following viewpoint Gwynne Lewis defends the actions of these men and other Jacobin leaders. She argues that the moderate Girondin government that led France in 1792 and 1793, when the nation was at war, set the stage for the Terror by establishing the Revolutionary Tribunal (a court that held trials for accused political offenders) and the Committee of Public Safety (the chief executive body). Lewis also contends that most of the Jacobin leadership was uncomfortable with the more extreme politics advocated by groups such as the *enragés*, a small group of Parisian

Gwynne Lewis, *The French Revolution: Rethinking the Debate.* New York: Routledge, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Gwynne Lewis. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.

radical extremists who campaigned for strict economic controls. Lewis is a professor of history at the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, and the author of *The French Revolution: Rethinking the Debate,* the source of the following viewpoint.

From the summer of 1793 to the summer of 1794, the period known to history as 'The Terror', the Revolution was saved from its internal and external enemies, at considerable cost to human life and the infant political democracy of the early 1790s, symbolised by the famous Constitution of 1793. Published on 24 June, it was not only founded upon universal male suffrage but included the right to public assistance and to education, as well as the 'right to insurrection'. It was, of course, never implemented, since, formalised by the decree of 10 October 1793, the government of France was declared to be 'revolutionary until peace'. The fact that the Constitution of 1793 was stillborn underlines the immense gap—central to an understanding of the Revolution—which separated the political idealism of 1789 from the harsh socio-economic and military facts of life in that summer of 1793 when Jacobins and sansculottes[1] began to dominate the political scene in most towns and villages of France, a sword in one hand, a social policy in the other. The great political paradox of the Year II would be that whilst the Jacobins, desperate to unleash the energies of the nation for war, sought to satisfy the social and economic aspirations of the urban and rural masses, they were also creating the structures of a powerful State bureaucracy, civil and military, which would eventually be used to eject the mass of the public from a participatory democracy.

Jacobins Versus Girondins

Not that the Terror of 1793–4 should be identified too hurriedly with the Jacobins: the institutions of the Terror had been created

1. Translated as "without breeches," sansculottes were politically radical workers known for wearing long trousers, in opposition to the breeches worn by aristocrats. Jacobins were the radical leaders during the early years of the revolution.

long before [Maximilien] Robespierre joined the government on 26 July 1793. Following the downfall of the monarchy, France had been governed by a Council of Ministers supported by committees of the Convention, not the ideal structure for a wartime crisis. It was this crisis which gave birth to the Terror. It was not the Jacobin, but the Girondin-dominated Convention which had created the *représentants-en-mission*[2] to the provinces as well as the Revolutionary Tribunal on 9 March 1793; the same body which set up, on 21 March, those basic units of terror, the *comités de surveillance*,[3] and, on 7 April, the Committee of Public Safety. Furthermore, if one enquires into the origins of the revolutionary relationship between the central government and local municipalities and districts, one must look not to the Jacobins, but to the deputies of the Legislative Assembly, who, given the king's refusal to energise the entire nation for war, had instructed local government to set itself upon a war footing as early as the spring of 1792. The apparent contradiction between the Jacobin theory of liberal democracy—individual rights and the defence of property included—and the facts of the Terror cannot be resolved without reference to the facts of war and counter-revolution, which explains why [according to Anne Sa'adah] 'revolutionary Jacobinism preached the virtues of representative institutions and practiced the rigors of revolutionary government'.

What the Jacobins did possess, and the Girondins did not, however, was an unparalled network of clubs, radiating from the '*le club-mère*' in Paris to every corner of France, as well as to some of the major European cities. Michael Kennedy estimates that around 2 per cent of the French population was caught up in the Jacobin net, covering, as early as 1791, over 400 clubs. During the Terror, Jacobinism could create an alternative, 'unofficial' and revolutionary structure of government, headed by the *représentants-en-mission*, functioning through the Jacobin provincial clubs and operating alongside the thousands of *comités de surveillance* created in March by the Convention. At the apex of this 'Revolutionary Government of the Year II' were the two great committees—the Committee of General Security, whose main jurisdiction was confined to police affairs, and the far more influential Committee of Public Safety, whose brief extended to every other aspect of government, military and civil. It must be remembered that the latter committee, composed of twelve deputies, including the 'triumvirate', Robespierre, [Louis] Couthon and [George-Auguste] Saint-Just, as well as very influential figures like [Lazare-Nicolas-Marguerite] Carnot (in charge of military affairs) and [Jean-Baptiste-Robert] Lindet (food supplies), was created by, and was ultimately responsible to, the National Convention. Robespierre would be overthrown inside, not outside, the Convention. Napoleon would first emasculate, then eliminate democratically elected national assemblies.

2. *Représentants-en-mission* were deputies who helped supervise the war effort in 1793. 3. The *comités de surveillance* were committees of revolutionary militants who made sure that revolutionary legislation was implemented.

Problems Facing the Jacobins

The second major prop upon which the Jacobin Government of the Year II rested was the Popular Movement, particularly in Paris. It was a movement, unlike typical eighteenth-century 'crowds', which was organised and, even more important, armed. During the critical period of the summer of 1793 to the spring of the following year, the sansculottes, meeting nightly in draughty church halls draped with the appropriate revolutionary symbolism—tricolour flags, extracts from the Declaration of the Rights of Man, 'busts of the martyrs'—there at the dawning of their brave, new world, injected more revolutionary and martial vigour into the Republic's struggle for existence than any other socio-political group in the country. The forty-eight Sections of the capital—provincial towns had also been divided into Sections, ostensibly for electoral and administrative purposes—had been transformed, following their invasion by 'passive' citizens in the summer of 1792, into engines of political activity, each run by their own officials and committees, including the powerful *comités de surveillance*. Each of these forty-eight Sections sent two representatives to sit on the Paris Commune, but each Section, founded upon the life of the *quartier*, was jealous of its own powers. Not all of the Sections were radical; indeed, it was not until the autumn of 1793 that the radical Sections came to dominate the capital. The sansculottes, as these political activists proudly called themselves, took

the Constitution of 1793 seriously, and whether or not their political programme, which included the 'sovereignty of the people' and the 'sacred right of insurrection', sprang from hand-me-down versions of [philosopher Jean-Jacques] Rousseau or the requirements of a depressed artisanal and shopkeeper society, . . . they came into increasing conflict with the Jacobin Government which, whatever its own Rousseauesque pedigree, had a country to run and two major wars, civil and foreign,[4] to win.

The Jacobin system of government, always intended as temporary, was forged in the white heat of revolution and war, tempered by the internecine feuds within the Convention and the Paris Commune, and packaged in a Rousseauesque wrapping of civic and political *vertu.* The feuds within the Convention were provoked by the overall strategy of the Committee of Public Safety which sought, initially, to harness the popular fury of the sansculottes against the enemies of the Republic, and then, when success beckoned, to rein it in, a move prompted by the increasing fears of the propertied elites. By the autumn of 1793, a period often described as the 'anarchic period of the Terror', the Parisian sansculottes had completed their defeat of the moderates in the Parisian Sections and had launched a successful invasion of the National Convention (4–5 September) which, reluctantly, granted them legislation aimed at fixing the price of basic commodities (the Law of the General Maximum) and the creation of a 'Revolutionary Army', destined to become the striking force of the Terror in the provinces. The forty or so *armées révolutionnaires* totalling some 40,000 volunteer ex-soldiers, artisans and craftsmen and spearheaded by the Parisian *armée* led by Ronsin, provided the necessary sanction of force. Without it, the sansculottes argued, peasants and merchants would not empty their barns and warehouses of goods, especially if they were obliged to take the increasingly worthless *assignats* [paper currency introduced during the revolution] as payment. More than any other single factor, it was these *armées* which drove the Republic to the edge of anarchy during the autumn and winter months of 1793–4, as they marched from their urban bases out into the countryside to sell the message of

4. During 1792 and 1793 France was at war with Britain, Austria, and Prussia.

the sansculotte Revolution, more often than not to a bewildered, even hostile countryside. As Richard Cobb put it, the *armées*, for all the brevity of their existence,

> were 'essential cogs in the administration of the Terror; they represented the Terror on the move, the village Terror'. The *armées* came closest to realizing the dream of every sectionary militant—a guillotine on wheels, casting its long shadow over grain hoarders, counter-revolutionary priests, and foreign spies. . . .

Further Jacobin Difficulties

Gradually, the political and military circumstances for reining in the forces unleashed by mass popular involvement in the Revolution were being created. It is important to stress that Robespierre and the majority of his colleagues had always been uneasy about the more extreme members and policies of the Popular Movement: Robespierre was not the type of man who enjoyed a 'night with the boys' in the working-class *cabarets* of the faubourg Saint-Marcel: [Georges-Jacques] Danton, of course, would have been quite keen. The process of political disengagement from the Popular Movement may be said to have begun as early as August with Robespierre's denunciation of the *Enragé*[5] leader, Jacques Roux, who did know how the less fortunate members of society actually lived. On 9 September—just four days after the invasion of the Convention by the sansculottes it should be noted—the Parisian Sections were denied the right to sit *en permanence.* The sansculottes would trump this move by setting up their own popular societies in each Section, (the *sociétés sectionnaires*), underlining the fact that the Jacobin Government was still too weak to impose its will unchallenged. It could, however, strike at the women's movement which received scant support from the male chauvinist sansculottes. At the end of October, all clubs set up by women were closed, ending a very interesting and dangerous link between a putative form of feminism and the political extremism of the *En-*

5. *Enragés* were a small group of Parisian radical extremists who campaigned for strict economic controls.

ragés. It could also strike against common enemies: in the same month, Marie Antoinette and the leading Girondist deputies were executed.

The 'Triumvirate' of Robespierre, Couthon and Saint-Just experienced far more difficulty mastering the forces of opposition to the CPS [Committee of Public Safety] based in the Convention and the Paris Commune. Apart from a clutch of deputies tainted by corruption or links with foreign governments, there were two important factions opposing the Jacobin Government during the winter of 1793–94—the moderates in the Convention grouped around Georges Danton and Camille Desmoulins, and the extremists led by [Jacques-René] Hébert and [Pierre] Chaumette with their power base in the Paris Commune. The former should not be dismissed as unprincipled seekers after money and power: the Dantonists stood for an end to the Terror and a possible peace with Britain, representing a strand of opinion which links them to the Girondins. The Hébertists, on the other hand, represented that uncompromising call to arms on the part of the Popular Movement; increased Terror to defeat the foreigner abroad allied, and this is the important point, to a social policy directed at the 'selfish rich' at home. Throughout the month of November, Robespierre moved cautiously, denouncing extremism in all its forms, purging the Jacobin Club of 'foreign' plotters, particularly those involved in the dechristianisation campaign. During this period, Robespierre was the epitome of the careful politician, [according to David P. Jordan] 'the government man, who sees no difference between right and left, between *ultras* and *citras* as they were called: he saw only disequilibrium, crisis and competitors'.