The Reign of Terror: Revolutionary Continuity and Inconsistency

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The French Revolution
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November 30, 2011
In his book *Origins of the French Revolution*, William Doyle contends that the Revolution began on June 10, 1789, when the Third Estate sent an ultimatum to the clergy and the nobility, giving them one last chance to verify their credentials in common and promising that even if their invitation was rejected, the Third Estate would move forward on its own (Doyle 160). Doyle deems this to be the Third Estate’s “first overtly revolutionary step”, because for the first time in French history, elected representatives were laying claim to political authority and implicitly rejecting distinctions between social classes (160 – 161). The Third Estate’s declaration on June 10th thus symbolizes the Revolution’s commitment to democracy and equality. However, some historians would disagree with Doyle, and argue that the French Revolution truly commenced with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. During this famous event, the common people of Paris took control of the Bastille prison in their quest for arms (Popkin 32). The Storming of the Bastille is glorified in French popular consciousness, as it represents the political awakening of the *menu peuple* of Paris and their decisive blow against despotic authority (32). While the taking of the Bastille is often idealized, it is important to remember that it was also characterized by gory popular violence; the prison’s military commander and the head of the royal municipal administration were both lynched and subsequently beheaded (32). The ultimatum of June 10th and the storming of the Bastille roughly a month later represent two very different sides of the French Revolution; one symbolizes the Revolution’s liberal bourgeois identity and its devotion to representative democracy, while the other epitomizes the growing importance of the future sans-culottes and their use of popular action and violence to push the Revolution forward.

The paradoxical trends represented in these early revolutionary events do not dissipate as the Revolution progresses, but certain themes receive more attention than others depending on what regime was in power. During the liberal phase of the Revolution (1789 – 1792), the
National Assembly and the Legislative Assembly concentrated political power in the hands of the bourgeoisie and ushered in an era of liberal reforms that enshrined the rule of law and the protection of civil liberties. After the overthrow of the monarchy in August of 1792, however, power shifted to a new National Convention that drifted in a far more radical direction. In the context of war with Austria, Prussia, Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain, federalist uprisings in Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Caen, a royalist revolt in the Vendée region, and the increasingly drastic political demands of the sans-culottes, the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety enacted a Reign of Terror that lasted from September 5, 1793 until July 27, 1794, although the chief institutions of this epoch were put in place months before the 5th (Popkin 74 – 75, 77, 90). The Terror is infamous for its disregard for human rights, its brutal repression of dissent, and its executions of tens of thousands of French citizens.

Taken out of context, the Reign of Terror initially appears to be a dramatic deviation from the Revolution’s initial course and core principles. However, when the Terror is closely examined within the framework of the Revolution’s conflicting themes, it becomes apparent that there is important continuity between the Reign of Terror and the Revolution. Various aspects of the Terror were certainly new innovations, but they were derived from pre-existing revolutionary trends. The policies of the Reign of Terror clearly violated the central liberal tenants of the Revolution, as laid out in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, but the Montagnard Convention also demonstrated a profound commitment to egalitarianism not realized by previous revolutionary governments. Moreover, the Reign of Terror reflected the Revolution’s long standing history of violence and endorsement of conspiracy theories, but the state’s monopoly on terror initiated the end of popular violence and the beginning of a new era of governmentally coordinated bloodshed. Finally, the leaders of the Reign of Terror were possessed by the new
utopian belief that politics could fundamentally reshape human nature, but this idea was rooted in Rousseau’s concept of the general will, a consistent feature of revolutionary ideology.

The French Revolution was an unplanned and unpredictable occurrence, and therefore it did not begin with any inherent ideological foundation. Nevertheless, on August 26, 1789, the National Assembly endorsed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a bill of rights that “immediately became the most authoritative statement of the French Revolution’s principles” (Popkin 37). The Declaration of the Rights of Man promises the equality of all men, protection of individual liberties, and the right of all citizens to contribute to the formation of the law (38 – 39). If the Declaration of the Rights of Man is taken as the definitive collection of the Revolution’s ideals, it can provide a useful measuring stick for assessing how authentically revolutionary France’s government was at different periods of time.

When this measuring stick is applied to the Reign of Terror, it is apparent that the legislation and governmental practices enacted by the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety violated the majority of the seventeen “natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man” (38). Article 8 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaims that every man is “presumed innocent until he has been declared guilty”, but the Law of Suspects, ratified on September 17, 1793, converted countless French citizens into counterrevolutionary suspects simply by virtue of their political opinion or class membership (Popkin 38, Palmer 67). Among the suspects defined by the law were émigrés, former nobles and their families, discharged government employees, people denied the “certificates of good citizenship” issued by the sections and the communes, and “those who, by their conduct, relations or language spoken or written, have shown themselves partisans of tyranny or federalism and enemies of liberty” (Palmer 67). The definition of suspects was thus incredibly broad, and it allowed for the indiscriminate arrests of thousands of citizens (67). Furthermore, the arrest of people based
merely on their statements or publications is also in violation of Article 10, which declares that “no one may be disturbed because of his opinion...provided that their public demonstration does not disturb the public order established by the law” (Popkin 39). Article 11 also upholds the right of every citizen to “freely speak, write, and print”, although the propagators of the Reign of Terror might have been able to justify their suppression of free speech with the clause stating that citizens who make use of their freedom of expression are “answerable for abuses of this liberty in cases determined by law” (39).

Article 2 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man asserts that “the aim of every political association” is to protect the natural rights of “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression” (Popkin 38). However, the revolutionary army and the revolutionary committees, key political associations active during the Terror, had the sole purpose of violating individual liberties, seizing property, disregarding personal security, and oppressing the masses (Furet 140 – 141). The revolutionary armies, composed of radical sans-culottes, were sent out into the provinces in order to identify suspects and force supposed grain hoarders to surrender their crops (Schama 757, Furet 141). In areas that had resisted the authority of the Montagnards, the revolutionary armies were accompanied by représentants en mission, officials appointed by the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety, who had near dictatorial power, including the right to court martial, establish special courts, and order mass executions (Furet 141). While the marauding armées révolutionnaires dealt with alleged counterrevolutionaries in the provinces, suspects were also identified by the revolutionary committees, local organizations that issued certificates of civism and arrested traitors on behalf of the Committee of General Security (Furet 140, Palmer 67). Article 7 condemns “those who solicit, draw up, execute, or have executed arbitrary orders”, but the actions taken by the revolutionary committees were totally arbitrary, as the definition of suspect was almost completely subjective (Popkin 38).
The judicial trying of suspects also violated the spirit of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Article 8 mandates that “the law must establish only penalties that are strictly and clearly necessary” (Popkin 39). While the phrase “strictly and clearly necessary” is up for interpretation, the Revolutionary Tribunal, created in March of 1793, meted out only the harshest punishments and made a mockery of the justice system (Furet 140). When the Terror was in full swing, all defendants found guilty by the Tribunal faced the guillotine, and deliberations were not allowed to surpass three days (140). To make matters worse, the law of 22 Prairial (June 10, 1794) abolished the Revolutionary Tribunals’ preliminary investigation, nixed the examination of witnesses, denied defendants the services of an attorney, and “permitted charges to be brought merely on the basis of denunciations” (141). Thousands of alleged traitors were condemned to death by the Tribunal and other special courts, but even more were detained and never tried; at one point as many as 100,000 suspects were imprisoned in France (Palmer 68). Moreover, thousands of people living in hotbeds of royalism or federalism were executed at the discretion of the representatives on mission and their special courts (Furet 141).

Article 16 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man pronounces that “any society in which guarantees of rights are not assured nor the separation of powers determined has no constitution” (Popkin 39). Ironically, the society denounced in Article 16 perfectly describes the state of the French government under the Reign of Terror. As the arbitrary witch hunts conducted by the Revolutionary Tribunal, the revolutionary army, and the revolutionary committees demonstrate, “guarantees of rights” were certainly not assured. Also, there was little separation of governmental power after the decree of October 10, 1793 granted the Committee of Public Safety the authority to commandeer and dispense food and necessities throughout the nation, the right to command both the revolutionary army and the national army, and the mandate to supervise ministers of state and constituted authorities (Palmer 74). The autocratic powers of the
Committee also included the right to choose the representatives on mission and nominate the members of subordinate committees, and after December 4, 1793, the central government was empowered with the authority to dismiss and replace local administrators (Popkin 80). Article 16 prophesized that a society that denies civil liberties and fails to maintain a balance of power “has no constitution”, and although the drafters of the Declaration of the Rights of Man may have meant this figuratively, during the Reign of Terror, this was literally the case. Although an exceedingly democratic constitution had been drafted in June of 1793, its implementation was indefinitely delayed by the Committee of Public Safety (Palmer 34, 75).

The decree of October 10th proclaimed that “the provisional government of France is revolutionary until the peace”, and Robespierre echoed this sentiment in a speech given on Christmas day, in which he declared that “revolution is the war waged by liberty against its enemies; a constitution is that which crowns the edifice of freedom once victory has been won and the nation is at peace” (Palmer 75, Popkin 81). The members of the Committee of Public Safety believed that their gross violation of the inalienable rights of man was a temporary and necessary measure taken in order to save the Revolution from its enemies and to eventually secure a peaceful future where a democratic constitutional government could be enacted. Despite Robespierre’s eloquent rationalization for the Committee’s actions, the fact remains that the principles and spirit of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the seminal text of the Revolution, were fundamentally desecrated during the Reign of Terror. If the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen is indeed an authoritative revolutionary compass, the Reign of Terror was clearly way off course.

Nevertheless, using The Declaration of the Rights of Man as the sole judge of the French government’s compliance with the principles of the Revolution is problematic. The Reign of Terror obviously did not respect the rights of man, but the liberal phase of the Revolution did not
completely do so either. Although the National Assembly was responsible for the drafting of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, one could argue that they quickly failed to live up to their own ideals. Five months after declaring that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights” and that “all citizens have the right to concur personally or through their representatives in [the formation of the law]”, the deputies of the National Assembly decided to only grant voting rights to “active citizens”, adult men who paid taxes equal to “three days of an ordinary laborer’s wage” (Popkin 38, 45). Furthermore, the deputies decided that membership in the legislature was only eligible to men in an even higher tax bracket (45). Thus, nearly half of the adult male population was ineligible to vote, and only about 72,000 men were wealthy enough to become a deputy (45 – 46). Moreover, fewer than 25 percent of active citizens actually voted during the Legislative Assembly election in 1791, because many citizens found the new voting procedures to be foreign and complicated (58). The liberal stage of the Revolution certainly showed commitment to the protection of civil liberties and the rule of law, but dedication to true equality was lacking.

In contrast, the Reign of Terror had a profound egalitarian thrust. The 1793 constitution, although it was never implemented, was much more democratic than its 1791 predecessor. The new constitution called for universal manhood suffrage, recognized the right to subsistence, and promised free universal public education (Palmer 34, Popkin 76). While the suspended constitution did little to benefit the French people, the leaders of the Terror did enact a number of reforms that made real steps towards equality. To help the poorest French citizens who were struggling during difficult economic times, the Convention ratified the General Maximum, which fixed prices for necessities (Palmer 69). The Montagnard Convention also passed a number of laws designed to help the peasantry. Common land and estates belonging to the Church or to émigrés were subdivided and auctioned off, and peasants were excused from redemption
payments for feudal dues (Popkin 84). The ventose decree of February 1794 went so far as to call for the distribution of land confiscated from “enemies of the people” to poverty stricken peasants (84). This radical law was never truly put into effect, but the fact that it was ratified by the Convention demonstrates the extent to which the radical Jacobins were committed to achieving equality (85). Another symbolic display of revolutionary egalitarianism was the Convention’s abolition of slavery and granting of full civil rights to people of African descent (86). The architects of the Reign of Terror indiscriminately infringed on individual rights and liberties, but if equality and social justice are considered to be revolutionary ideals as well, the actions of the Montagnard Convention showed significant continuity with this aspect of the Revolution’s ideology.

Another point of convergence between the Reign of Terror and the earlier stages of the Revolution is the centrality of violence. Since the storming of the Bastille, all of the major journées pushed the Revolution forward through bloodshed (Forster). As previously stated, the storming of the Bastille ensured popular support for the burgeoning National Assembly, but it was also accompanied by the murder and mutilation of two agents of royal authority (Popkin 32). Likewise, the October Days (October 5 – 6, 1789) brought the royal family to Paris, and resulted in the slaying of a number of palace guards (43). The invasion of the Tuileries by radical militants on August 10, 1792 cost over 100 lives, but it achieved the overthrow of the monarchy, the declaration of universal male suffrage, and the calling of a National Convention (66). The famous journées of the Revolution thus used popular violence to assert the political authority of the common people and subordinate royal power.

However, revolutionary violence was not just characterized by these themes of popular sovereignty and monarchial illegitimacy; it was also propelled by fear of conspiracies and plots. The taking of the Bastille occurred in part because of a rumor suggesting that the king was
deliberately starving the people of Paris (Doyle 175). Also, the royal family was brought to the capital during the October Days in order to ensure that the city would have bread, and to keep an eye on the activities of the royal family (Furet 137).

The “conspiratorial view of the world” endemic to French culture even before the Revolution, was greatly strengthened by the king’s flight to Varennes in June of 1791 (Tackett 222). News of the royal family’s attempted escape sparked rumors of an imminent foreign invasion, and prompted the urban masses to attack local nobles and refractory priests (161, 168). This popular violence in response to the king’s botched getaway actually created a “prefiguration of both the psychology and the procedure of the Terror”; municipal authorities began taking the prosecution of the nobility and the clergy into their own hands (223). In the weeks following the flight to Varennes, local governments set many precedents for the Terror including the opening and reading of people’s mail, the illegal arrest of travelers, the suppression of freedom of speech, and the search or arrest without trial of whole categories of people (171 – 174).

When war with Austria was actually declared on April 20, 1792, the “paranoid perspective” enhanced by the king’s escape was propelled to new heights; the “line between opposition and treason” was completely wiped away (Popkin 63, Tackett 223, Furet 138). The culmination of the union between popular violence and popular paranoia were the September massacres of 1792, a year before the Reign of Terror began (Popkin 68). Whipped into a frenzy over the belief that a prison break was imminent once army volunteers left Paris, and galvanized by news of French military failure at Verdun, mobs of rabid sans-culottes stormed into Paris’ major penitentiaries beginning on September 2\textsuperscript{nd} and brutally murdered at least 1,400 “enemies of the people”: half of Paris’ entire prison population (Schama 629 – 631 636).

Thus, when the Reign of Terror is placed within the context of the Revolution’s legacy of violence and paranoia, its existence does not seem terribly out of place. Simon Schama would
argue that the Terror simply reflects “a central truth of the French Revolution: its dependence on organized killings to accomplish political ends” (Schama 637). Similarly, R.R. Palmer contends that “Terror was not a new thing in September [1793]”; from the Great Fear of 1789 to the September massacres of 1792, “violence and insecurity were endemic” (Palmer 55 – 56).

François Furet also asserts that Terror was present long before the Reign; it was “a characteristic feature of the mentality of revolutionary activism” (Furet 137).

Nevertheless, the Reign of Terror did mark an important change in the way violence was used in the Revolution. Up until the months preceding the Terror, the bloodshed of the Revolution was largely synonymous with popular violence; it was committed by mobs of peasants, sans-culottes, and revolutionary militants. The Reign of Terror, however, quelled popular activism and gave the state an exclusive monopoly on violence. As Georges Danton declared, the government had “to be terrible in order to dispense the people from doing so” (Furet 140). Institutionalized oppression obviously had its precedent in the repressive actions taken by municipal governments in the wake of the king’s flight, but the Reign of Terror set new standards for the brutality of the state. While Palmer essentially agrees with Danton’s assertion that state terrorism was necessary to control the anarchy caused by popular violence, he overlooks the fact that the propagators of the Terror not only put violence under state control, they also exacerbated it (Palmer 56).

Donald Greer estimates that that the Terror claimed 40,000 victims, but if all of the violent deaths that occurred during the Vendée revolt are factored in as well, the number rises to something between 250,000 and 300,000 (Schama 791, Popkin 87). Furthermore, the brutality of many of the state’s murders in federalist or royalist strongholds equaled and surpassed the savagery of the September massacres. On one day during Fouché and Collot d'Herbois’ occupation of Lyon, thirty two heads were removed by the guillotine in only 25 minutes, and a
week later, a record 12 heads were severed in just 5 minutes (Schama 782). When the blood from the guillotine began to overflow a drainage ditch, victims were instead executed by firing squad, cannon, sabers, and bayonets (783). In Nantes, somewhere between 2,000 and 4,800 people were drowned in the Loire river in so called “republican baptisms” (789). Echoing the events of early September 1792, 3,000 to 4,000 prisoners from Nantes and Angers were slaughtered at Pont-de-Cé and Avrillé (788). In January and February of 1794, the people of the Vendée experienced the worst of the Terror’s cruelty; twelve “infernal columns” burned crops, confiscated or slaughtered livestock, obliterated barns and cottages, raped women, murdered children, and massacred “virtually every living person who stood in their path” (789 – 790). Jean-Clément Martin calculated that the Vendée, Loire-Inférieure and Maine-et-Loire had lost one third of their entire population by the end of the Terror (790 – 791). While it is true that violence directed towards “enemies of the people” had long been part of the Revolution, making terror “a deliberate policy of the government” signified that even the most savage acts were acceptable, as long as the victims were alleged counterrevolutionaries (Palmer 56). The organization and institutionalization of terror certainly curbed bloody popular action, but it left the limits of state violence unchecked and allowed for a vicious repression that made the Champ de Mars massacre look like a very minor incident.

Early in the film Danton, a historical dramatization of the Reign of Terror directed by Andrzej Wajda, Eleonore Duplay, Robespierre’s confidant and the daughter of his land lord, teaches her young nephew to memorize the Declaration of the Rights of Man. When the child has difficulty recalling the various articles, Duplay sharply smacks him and orders him to repeat the lines until he gets them right (Danton). This scene is an apt metaphor for the Reign of Terror; both Duplay and the Committee of Public Safety tried to use their authority and force to impart revolutionary virtues on others. Robespierre and his cohorts believed in the unlimited
transformative power of politics, and through the Terror they hoped to reshape human nature by eliminating all counterrevolutionary forces and fostering the genesis of a new revolutionary man (Furet 148 – 149).

While this utopian and totalitarian ideology may be considered a new development during the Terror, its genesis can be traced back to Rousseau’s concept of the “general will”, an idea that influenced the Revolution from its beginning and is explicitly mentioned in Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man (Furet 149, Palmer 75, Popkin 38). According to Rousseau, the general will emanates from “the people”, and because the people are the only legitimate force of sovereignty, the general will is always correct (Palmer 75 – 76). Anyone who does not agree with the general will is in fact not a member of the people, and therefore is wrong (75). The general will is thus not directly correlated with democracy or even popular consensus; it is an abstract force that cannot be practically identified. While the Declaration of the Rights of Man seems to associate the general will with representative government, the Committee of Public Safety used the general will to justify their dictatorship and repression. When Saint-Just secured the consolidation of the Committee’s power on October 10, 1793, he declared that “since the French people has manifested its will…everything opposed to it is outside the sovereign; whatever is outside the sovereign is enemy” (75). According to Saint-Just’s interpretation of Rousseau’s rhetoric, despite the fact the majority of Frenchmen may not support his regime, he and his revolutionary comrades are the ultimate arbiters of the general will, and thus, their authority is limitless and anyone who stands in their way is a foe who must be obliterated (77). The concept of the general will was always an integral part of the Revolution, but it was radically interpreted and taken to its logical extremes by the orchestrators of the Terror.

At the end of the film Danton, Eleonore Duplay’s nephew is brought in to see an infirm Robespierre, who had just been informed of Danton’s execution. Now thoroughly rehearsed, the
young boy faithfully recites the articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, although it clear that he is mindlessly repeating them without any understanding of their significance. Just as Duplay succeeded in driving the principles of the Revolution into her nephew’s consciousness, Robespierre had experienced a victory with the death of Danton, a political rival and possible threat to his vision of the Revolution. However, when Robespierre hears the child accurately regurgitate the ideals of the Revolution, he is not overcome with joy, but rather revulsion (Danton). Robespierre suddenly realizes that although coercion and terror can be successfully used to maintain and propagate the Revolution, these techniques bring only a hollow victory. By violating many of the fundamental revolutionary principles in his quest to save the Revolution and create an idyllic future, Robespierre and his allies had debased the very ideals he held so dear.

It is unknown whether the real Maximilien Robespierre actually came to believe that the Revolution had gone off track, as he did at the end of Wajda’s film, or whether he maintained his faith that the Terror would ultimately lead to the perfect revolutionary society. In all likelihood, Robespierre was probably conflicted in his attitude towards the Reign of Terror, just as many historians are conflicted in their assessment of the Terror’s relation to the rest of the Revolution. This ambivalence should not be surprising, as the Revolution itself was bitterly conflicted. Since its inception, the Revolution was plagued by tensions between the rule of law and popular militancy, friction between individual rights and equality, and deep-seated questions concerning the relationship between sovereignty, the people, and the state. Given the ideological divisions of the Revolution, the Reign of Terror should not be considered an aberration; it had significant continuity with the conflicting themes of the French Revolution, but its leaders radically bolstered and expanded pre-existing violent, egalitarian, and dictatorial trends, while trampling all over the Revolution’s most important liberal values.
Works Cited


