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978-0-521-44105-6 - Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre

Bronislaw Baczko

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Ending the Terror makes accessible for the first time to an English-speaking readership a major revisionist assessment of a crucial moment in the history of the French Revolution. The months that followed the fall of Robespierre in July 1794 mark not only a turning point in the history of the Revolution: 'Thermidor' is also a symbolic moment which came to haunt the subsequent revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By this date the Terror as a system of power was discredited, and the engineers of the Terror were confronting the problem of how to dismantle it without repudiating the aims of the Revolution itself and its work. Professor Baczko analyses the Terror in detail through the political history of the French National Assembly, and looks at the broader issues of the political culture of Revolutionary France. He also uses the problem of the ending of the Terror to highlight contemporary problems in the break-up of the communist system.

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*The French Revolution
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Translated by Michel Petheram



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A la mémoire de
Rela
ma femme, mon amie, mon amour

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Preface

This essay was born of surprise and amazement. I was reading, a little by accident, the diary kept during the Revolution by a certain Célestin Guittard de Floriban, a Parisian bourgeois, when I came across the page where the author mentions that during the night of 9 to 10 Thermidor a rumour ran through Paris, according to which Robespierre wished to proclaim himself king and even harboured intentions towards Louis XVI's daughter, who was imprisoned in the Temple. Having examined the evidence, I concluded that this absurd rumour had nevertheless found quite a large audience and influenced the course of events. How was that possible? What was the political and psychological context of this rumour and its at first glance paradoxical success? From this I became interested in the events of 9 Thermidor and, more widely, in the whole troubled and troubling Thermidorean period.

On 10 Thermidor no one yet knew – nor considered – where the fall of 'the last tyrant' might lead the Revolution. The importance of the Thermidorean period lies not in an initial political or ideological programme, but in the problems with which the political protagonists were confronted and which they had to resolve. While their responses were often hesitant and contradictory, worked out as they went along, the problems themselves still present today, in their connections, a quite remarkable coherence. What was to be done with the overpopulated jails? Who was to be freed from them and when? What form should justice take, now that it was 'the order of the day'? What freedom should be given to the press? How were the political, cultural and psychological consequences of the Terror to be remedied? How to permanently dismantle the Terror? Who bore responsibility for it and did this call for punishment?

These partial questions complement each other and all raise a single problem: *how to bring the Terror to an end?* By what choices and by what routes? What political arena should be created for after the Terror? How to prevent for ever any return of the Terror? And, similarly, how to end the Revolution and ensure a new start for the Republic? My investigation, therefore, bears upon the *Thermidorean political experience* which provides

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this period of fifteen months with its unity and originality, and integrates it into the overall experience of the Revolution.

I quickly perceived that this investigation is indissolubly linked with another. How could revolutionary symbolism and imagery, victorious in Year II, disintegrate in such a short time, in the space of only a few months? What is the anti-terrorist and anti-Jacobin imagery, produced and repressed during the Terror, which, from the moment that fear starts to retreat, rises brutally to the surface, leaving the mark of its obsessions on collective memory for a long time? For the retreat of fear and the advance of freedom of expression led the political protagonists to formulate painful questions. 'How did *that* happen to us?' How could the Revolution, starting from the principles of '89, arrive at the terrorist practices of Year II? Could its principles be reconciled with its history? In other words, what light does the Thermidorean strategy throw on the winding paths already traversed, on the experiences and the workings of the Revolution, on its political institutions and their psychological environment?

The French Revolution quickly became a model, a kind of paradigm, for the revolutions which followed. Accordingly one sees revolutionaries identify themselves in turn with the Girondins, with the Jacobins, with the *sans-culottes* . . . They would dream of their 14 July and their 10 August. Yet they never identified themselves with the *Thermidoreans* and the idea of having *their own Thermidor* haunted them like a nightmare.

That is undoubtedly a lot of questions for one book, and certainly too many. They are connected, however, by the force of circumstances and this book is only an essay: it invites the reader to reflect and does not put forward definitive replies.

The plan of this book was first sketched out in the course of several lectures within the framework of the seminar of my friends François Furet and Mona Ozouf, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Our constant dialogue, which was particularly intense in the course of the discussions on 'The French Revolution and modern political culture', did much to enrich and stimulate me. For all that they brought me, let them be, once more, very cordially thanked.

I cannot tell how much this research owes to Jean-Claude Favez, infallible friend, privileged reader and partner in discussion, to his intellectual rigour, as well as his critical sense of history.

This book is dedicated to my wife; while she was alive, her presence and help supported me every day and allowed me to overcome the great difficulties that accumulated in the course of composing this work; after her death, her memory encouraged me to complete the writing of this text, despite everything.