

TWELVE WHO RULED: THE YEAR OF TERROR IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

(R. R. PALMER)

July 23, 2018

Among the many gaping holes in American historical knowledge is any grasp of the French Revolution (and that includes my own knowledge). As an abstract matter, this is unfortunate, but nothing notable, given that the historical knowledge of modern Americans is essentially one large gap. As a concrete matter, though, it is a real problem, because in our own troubled times, the French Revolution offers critical, universal lessons, which we forget to our peril. Nowhere is this more true than with respect to the Terror, the rule of the twelve-man Committee of Public Safety, from 1793–94, the subject of this classic 1941 work.

The frame of this book is as political biography of the members of the Committee, all of whom were part of the loose grouping commonly referred to as Jacobins. The Committee was, for this one year, a dictatorial body that drew its power from the National Convention, a pseudo-parliamentary body claiming to represent the interests and will of Frenchmen. The Convention created the Committee in July of 1793, in response to a wave of existential threats, ranging from foreign invasion to internal counter-revolution to economic turmoil. During the following year, the Committee ruled through two basic methods: issuing decrees, which theoretically could be overridden by the Convention but never were, and by sending some of its members on assignment, “representatives-on-mission,” to critical areas around the country, with plenipotentiary power of life and death. At the same time, the Committee’s members involved themselves in, and led, the descending spiral of internal purges and violence against perceived ideological enemies who were themselves part of the Revolution, a process which ended in the Committee’s own destruction and the execution of its most prominent members.

The task of the author, R. R. Palmer, was complicated by the Committee having left essentially no record of its own internal discussions. All that exists are a few anecdotes and recollections of dubious accuracy set forth in the autobiographies of some of the Committee’s survivors. Thus, Palmer’s focus is on what the individual members of

the Committee actually did, according to contemporary reports and letters, and on the orders and decrees they signed and issued. This is probably more interesting than a record of internal debates would have been, and it makes Palmer's book more compelling as a result. However they made their decisions, the Committee's executive actions were largely a success in pushing back threats to the Revolution (and, as Palmer notes, many of their actions presaged the modern world, such as the "Levy in Mass," conscripting the entire population to participate in declared national goals). Foreign invaders were beaten back (although as Palmer makes clear, contrary to French myth, it was not the *élan* of revolutionary armies or even superior leadership, though the latter was true, but that the Allies were opposed to each other as much as to the French). Internal enemies, equally poorly led and worse organized, were brutally suppressed. (The counter-revolutionaries who are most often remembered today are those in the Vendée, royalist and Catholic. But Palmer makes clear that of greater concern to the Committee were the "federalists," centered around Lyon and Marseilles, who strongly supported the Revolution but opposed the Jacobins and those even farther left, the so-called Hébertists.) The economic situation was stabilized, both in terms of food supply and in terms of ability to manufacture essential goods for the state, especially munitions. So the knock on the Committee is not that its members failed; for a committee, especially, they were remarkably effective, if blessed in their enemies. It was their vicious treatment of defeated internal enemies, and most of all, of former allies now treated as enemies, that earned them the deserved reputation of bloodthirstiness.

The Committee's bloodthirstiness followed an exponentially rising arc. Just prior to the Committee's formation, the "moderate" Girondists had been completely purged from the Convention, by the simple expedient of arrest and execution. This began the pattern of subsequent purges, where as factions developed after each cleansing, their opponents would attempt to tar them with the brush of those who had been purged earlier, and so distinguishing oneself from those killed earlier became essential to survival. Purge followed purge. Each one was made easier by law, culminating in the "Law of 22 Prairial" (the irritating French Revolutionary calendar makes following dates hard; that's June 10, 1794) which allowed anyone to be summarily tried for

sedition on the vaguest of charges, without any lawyers or defense being allowed and the only possible verdict death or innocence. By this point everyone active in politics not in the Committee's camp figured it was only a matter of time before the guillotine would come for him (or her—the Committee went in heavily for executing women, as well as men, for political opposition). Thus, the purges culminated in the “Thermidorean Reaction” of July, 1794, in which a combination of those members of the Convention more moderate and more radical than the Committee, both fearing they would be the next to go, executed three members of the Committee and then dismantled it entirely. (Those three were Maximilien Robespierre and his two closest allies, Antoine Saint-Just and Georges Couthon; the exact interaction of Robespierre and the other members of the Committee is still hotly debated, but he was clearly the leader at that point.)

The Committee's actions were, and were meant to be, “revolutionary,” by which they meant outside the rule of law, “exceptional and expeditious,” not governed by any constitution or charter other than the grant of power itself to the Committee. Their actions “rested on higher law.” As Saint-Just, the youngest and most icily nasty of the political fanatics who composed the Committee, put it: “Since the French people has manifested its will, everything opposed to it is outside the sovereign. Whatever is outside the sovereign is an enemy.” Or, in an even more modern-sounding phrasing, “All is permitted to those who act in the Revolutionary direction.” In essence, the Committee's core belief was Rousseau's doctrine of the general will, animated to malevolent life. All the Revolutionaries were obsessed with *The Social Contract*, so this is no surprise. The results were predictable, at least from our vantage point. It was not just in mass killing that the rule of law was destroyed, it was also in many other actions, such as ending elections to the Convention, because, according to the Committee, “When the revolutionary machine is still rolling, you injure the people in entrusting it with the election of public functionaries, for you expose it to the naming of men who will betray it.” Very convenient.

My favorite passage to illustrate the corruption of language that characterized the Committee is Palmer's summary of a speech by Saint-Just on March 13, given as the internal purges gathered steam. “Saint-Just began by discussing the right of revolution, affirmed in the Declaration

of Rights and recently invoked by the Cordeliers [a purged group]. Insurrection, he said, is of course a right, a guarantee for the people; but government also has its guarantee, the people's justice and virtue. Whoever corrupts this virtue makes government impossible, and public virtue is corrupted when confidence in the government is lost. The present sovereign is not a tyrant; it is the people. Whoever opposes the present order is therefore evil, and insurrection, once a useful recourse, is now counter-revolution. Opposition does exist—furtive, clandestine—because no one ever opposes an established order openly. Opposition always disguises itself; subversive elements always pretend to be loyal.” This is a perfect example of James Burnham's definition of ideology, “a more or less systematic and self-contained set of ideas supposedly dealing with the nature of reality . . . and calling for a commitment independent of specific experience or events. . . . An ideologue—one who thinks ideologically—can't lose. He can't lose because his answer, his interpretation and his attitude have been determined in advance of the particular evidence or observation.” There is nothing more dangerous than a man driven by ideology, and there is no dealing with people who can justify themselves in this way. Not only have they departed from any relationship with reality, but the result, empirically, is always a trail of corpses, the creation of which can be ended only one way.

I promised lessons, so what's the lesson here? It should be obvious— all the behavior I've outlined in the past several paragraphs, if you took out the specifics of names and dates, could equally well characterize any regime of the Left in power for the past two-and-a-half centuries. Those behaviors did not spring from nothing—the Terror, and the Gulag, and Year Zero, are real fruits of the Enlightenment, whatever Steven Pinker may say. While it is possible, perhaps, for a time, for Enlightenment ideas to not lead to the Terror, such as in the American Revolution, and perhaps not every key Enlightenment idea necessarily leads to terror, in both cases that's the exception, rather than the rule (and probably impossible outside a context based on English traditions, as opposed to those of Rousseau).

So what are those Enlightenment ideas? The Twelve were religious believers, adherents of the first of the secular, ideological religions, and the same core religious beliefs have characterized the Left since and as a result of the Enlightenment. The religion of the Twelve was, and the

religion of any ideologue of the Left is, the central Enlightenment idea that it is possible to create a heaven on earth, “the dawn of universal felicity,” through reason. In this ideology, heaven is reachable through ever-more liberty and emancipation compelled by the ever-heavier hand of the state. And not only is it reachable, but it is the natural end of humans, who are inherently good and perfectible through proper training and education. Who could disagree with such a goal? Only evil men, clearly. But the problem is, to the believers, in order to attain such a utopia, any cost is bearable, and any opposition doubly evil, since it attempts to deny happiness to those alive today and also to all the generations yet unborn. A believer must therefore conclude that if the promised utopia fails to arrive, it is because evil men oppose it for their own base reasons. If that is true, certainly such evil men deserve to die, a small cost that must be paid so that many others may reach heaven, even if most of those paying the price are actually innocent of any opposition. Thus, the end result of the Left being in total power is always going to be the same as that in 1794 (even if it may not always be as compressed in time or as dramatic as the Terror). Or, put another way, any person of the Left has to endorse the Terror or reject the essential premises of the Left, because the Terror was, and such terror is, a necessary consequence of the Left being in power. The only alternative, and the only solution, is to reject much or all of the Enlightenment itself, something that is fortunately coming back into fashion.

Palmer himself basically endorses the Terror. Compared to most scholarship about the Terror, though, he’s relatively even-handed. And he sees the Twelve’s motives clearly; he notes, in the context of the suppression of Lyons, featuring such activities as the daily killing of hundreds by grouping them together, harrowing them with grapeshot and then bayoneting the survivors, “the combination of blood lust with the jargon of revolutionary idealism. . . . It is necessary to realize that these men inflicted death with a holy glee.” At root, though, he thinks that the behavior of the Committee is excused by their desire to make the world a better place. But that is not an excuse for their monstrous behavior, it is the reason—it is what made them do what they did. There is a complete and universal parallel between the behavior described in this book and the subsequent behavior of the global Left in power, both in Europe and in Asia during the twentieth century. Palmer couldn’t

see that, really, at the time he wrote. But his overriding goal of excusing the Terror can be seen by examining his approach to various matters that are part of his history.

First, while he couldn't see the full sweep of the twentieth century, not once does Palmer criticize the Left, Marxism or Communism, or analogize later leftist thought and actions to the Revolution, even in the slightest way. The closest he comes is one single reference to the show trial of Georges Danton, calling it "an outrage to civilized procedure comparable only to certain political trials of our own time." This is not an overt attempt to excuse the Terror, but it shows where Palmer's heart is, since even in 1941 the parallels were obvious. And when he re-issued the book in 1989, Palmer was extremely proud that he made no substantive changes to the text, as he notes in his "Preface to the Bicentennial Edition," completing his whitewash of the Terror as it relates to the Left.

Second, Palmer explicitly declines to talk about the "Grand Terror," that is, the culmination of and most violent period of the Terror. "We shall not dwell much on [that is, we shall not dwell at all on] the Grand Terror, which in fact was by no means entirely the work of the Committee of Public Safety. The Hundred Days before Thermidor were not primarily a time of destruction. They were a time of creation, of abortive and perhaps visionary creation, nipped by the fatal blight of the Revolution, the inability of the Revolutionists to work together. Had the Jacobins been a revolutionary party of the modern kind, drilled to a mechanical obedience, the whole French Revolution would have been different." The dishonesty and naiveté of this is breathtaking. So, when Palmer suggests that "We cannot understand [the Revolution's] history or [European] memories without dwelling on events that many modern historians pass over as sensational," we realize that he, just as much as all the others, is "passing over" events that might whip up sentiment against the Revolution. Historians, including Palmer, pass over these events, not because they are "sensational," but because their existence is corrosive to their own most fondly-held political beliefs, which align with those of the Committee. They are only too happy to endlessly discuss, and use as a bludgeon, "sensational" events if they relate to medieval times, or religion, or any modern Right regime. It is the bad behavior of the Left that they always screen with a thick curtain, and not by accident or because they are delicate.

So, Palmer notes that Jean-Baptiste Carrier, who ordered the murder of thousands of men, women and children after their defeat in the Vendée by drowning them in barges sunk in the Loire, is “condemned as a monster by reactionary and humanitarian writers,” but for others, presumably by all historians not characterized with epithets, “is subject to attempts at rehabilitation” (although Palmer thinks those are “on the whole not very successful”; whether that chagrins him or not is unclear). Palmer also notes that the Terror would have been infinitely more bloody if it were not the case that the Committee “habitually used an exaggerated manner of speaking; but they were, in reality, for the most part, still checked by humane and Christian scruples.” He does not note the contradiction, or rather, the now-obvious conclusion, that combining “a revolutionary party of the modern kind,” something he endorses as making the Revolution better, with an absence of Christian scruples necessarily leads to deaths in the tens of millions, rather than the tens of thousands, not a more “visionary creation.” Just ask Pol Pot, who, after all, studied in Paris, drinking deep of Revolutionary ideology.

Third, Palmer is eager to make generalized excuses that relieve the Committee of moral responsibility—“The Terror was born of fear, from the terror in which men already lived, from the appalling disorder produced by five years of Revolution and the lawless habits of the old regime. It was anarchy that stood in the way of the stabilization of the Republic, and it was anarchy that was causing France to lose the war.” This is more slipperiness. That men lived in one type of fear does not imply that more fear is the obvious solution, and this is just throwing excuses at the wall and hoping one sticks with the reader. Moreover, the endless purges of mostly imaginary enemies were the very definition of anarchy, not a solution for it, which is why the Committee ultimately destroyed itself. Perhaps it’s easier to see from the vantage point of 2018 than of 1941, but it’s very obvious that the source of leftist terror is leftist ideas and thought patterns, not the fact that seizing power usually generates enemies and disorders. The creation of order does not require terror. Concealing this rather obvious truth seems to be the project of most modern historians of the Terror, all men of the Left themselves, who therefore recoil from the necessary conclusion.

Palmer’s project of excusing the Terror can also be seen indirectly, through his continual commentary on the scholarly controversies of

the half century preceding the publication of his book, mostly centering on two French academic luminaries: Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez, the latter a proud Marxist who, according to Palmer, held (along with his entire school, still extant today) "that Robespierre was always right." According to Palmer, both Aulard and Mathiez, who collectively at the time totally dominated scholarship about the Revolution, excused the Terror as necessary. While Palmer agrees that the Terror was necessary, he likes to snipe at Mathiez's ideological prison, saying, for example, that he was "of the opinion that his hero [Robespierre] was better justified by certain principles of class struggle than by the ideas which Robespierre himself never tired of expounding." All these scholars, though, strongly approved of the Revolution and approved of much or all of the Terror; their disagreements appear to have revolved around causes, dividing into Marxists and non-Marxists, and whether Robespierre was a hero whose death prevented utopia from arriving, or a villain who maybe took the Terror just a little bit too far. Palmer fits right into this tradition, whether he admits it or not.

So why does Palmer take this exculpatory approach, given that he was not apparently a man of the Left himself, like Aulard or Mathiez, but rather a liberal in the mid-twentieth-century sense? Because he was in thrall to the idea that whatever its failings, the French Revolution was an important precursor and driver of modern liberal democracy, and therefore should not be overly criticized, so as not to give comfort to liberal democracy's enemies (who were certainly legion in 1941). I don't disagree that the Revolution was the seminal event of modern history. But a dispassionate analysis would see that the Revolution, certainly in its 1793 incarnation, was both mother and father to all later totalitarian regimes of the Left, whatever lip service may have been paid to democracy. (I also think liberal democracy is not in principle distinguishable from all other threads of, and pernicious results from, Enlightenment thought.) Palmer, though, takes at face value the Jacobins' claim that all they wanted was the people to have happiness and liberty, even though that's the claim of every Left totalitarian, and hurriedly moves on. Thus, another key lesson is not to split the difference, and claim the Revolution had good and bad parts, but to reject it and all its works outright.

Totally aside from these matters of principle, this book illuminates a process taking place in America today, the acceleration of ideological

purges among those who actually hold power. In the American experience, where most governmental (and other) power has not been viciously ideological until relatively recently, politics has not featured purges. Such restraint is historically the exception on the Left (and the Right, but the Right is far less ideological, and has never had the power of the ideological Left). In college I joined the Spartacist League, a Trotskyite group still extant, under a pseudonym. Mostly this was for my own amusement, and I was not disappointed, for I received their newspaper, which was chock full of detailed coverage of street fights with their enemies—other groups that to an outsider held indistinguishable political positions, but were excoriated by the Spartacists as exemplars of heresies like the “External Tendency.” With such exceptions, though, the modern American Left has, at least until very recently, been extremely successful at not splintering in this fashion, despite its ideological nature. Why this is I am not completely sure, but I suspect that the central element in this success has been creating an overarching ideology of pan-emancipation, in which each group that might compete instead cooperates with other groups to gain power for them, in exchange for cooperation in their own attempts to gain power. This works well for a while, if it can be held together, but eventually when power can no longer be gained against non-leftists, because the Left has captured all power, it requires that the groupings turn on themselves. We see this process beginning, I think, on the Left today, where farther-seeing relative moderates like Mark Lilla warn, like Cassandra, of the result, yet the Left hurtles down the path that leads to the Committee (a process helped by modern technology and social media), though executions aren’t yet on the horizon—but it is only a matter of time, as history shows us.

Frankly, in many ways, the ideological Left fully gaining power would, increasingly, be fine by me. The Left is incapable of actually ruling for any sustained length of time, since their ideology denies reality and always ends in disaster, both social and economic. No example in history exists of a successful Left regime, and none ever will (although certainly for a time Left regimes do benefit those at the top). Thus, it does not disturb me in the least that the hard Left is gaining traction rapidly in the Democratic Party. If they fail to be elected, that’s good, as long as the Republican Party is itself remade or replaced, something that appears likely, and perhaps we can gradually move the country in a new

direction. If they are elected, we can get on with the total breakdown of the system, its replacement, and the permanent discrediting and suppression of the Left. We can heighten the contradictions! The temporary dominance of the Left would not be the end of history they think it would be, because it never is—rather, it would create the possibility of Reaction, exemplified, of course, by the Thermidorean Reaction, and the subsequent rise of Napoleon, the original Man of Destiny.

An interesting aspect of this book is that though it is old, and speaks of an even older time, murmurs of today are heard constantly. For example, Palmer spends quite a bit of time on economic decrees of the Committee, especially attempts at wage and price fixing, which worked just about as well as they always do (although unlike today's Left, the Committee was keenly aware of the gross inefficiencies created by state control of economic matters). Naturally, when food disappeared from the shelves, they blamed it on "profiteers, hoarders, and monopolists," the exact same terms used by the current government of Venezuela. In another echo of today, the Committee was obsessed with mostly imaginary foreign conspirators, who were supposedly combining with the Twelve's enemies to destroy the Republic. The American Tom Paine was arrested and almost executed as a result, and many foreigners weren't so lucky. This xenophobic fear of conspiracy has been reborn today in the unhinged obsession with supposed Russian collusion with Donald Trump, which is supported by less evidence than the Committee came up with, since they at least were fed forged documents they believed were genuine. A third echo is the Committee's obsession with "spreaders of false news," who were immediately marched to the guillotine (they were a major target of the Law of 22 Prairial). Of course, as today, "false news" meant news inconvenient to those in power, the falsity of which never had to be shown, merely that it was awkward for the Left. And, finally, a main financing tactic of the Committee was punitive capital levies on the "selfish rich," with who the "rich" were being determined by local Jacobins and with the proceeds distributed to those whom the local Jacobins thought worthy. Some things never change, at least on the Left—and that is, after all, the main takeaway from this book.

I will note that despite Palmer's generally excellent writing, sometimes he makes silly claims, always in service of the idea that the masses were so ignorant that the revolutionaries had to do something to drag

France forward. Thus, whatever Palmer says, it is not true that when a solar eclipse arrived in Paris prior to the Revolution, the citizens screamed in fear and ran for the nearest church. Eclipses were well understood and documented, in the West; in 1504 Christopher Columbus had managed to lord it over the Arawak Indians in Jamaica by accurately predicting a lunar eclipse. Nor is it true that Robespierre came to local prominence in Arras by representing a man who had been sued for putting up a lightning rod because it was “ungodly,” thereby triumphing over religion and superstition. The objection was rather that it would unnecessarily attract lightning and damage the neighboring houses; the dispute was purely scientific in nature. These hiccups don’t show up often enough to really damage the book, however.

But let’s get back to the main lesson—terror is the inevitable result of the Left’s ascent to power, and it will be our own American future if the Left continues to gain ground. So what should we do today? Clarity of thought is the first step, and the first element in such clarity is realizing that hope is not a plan. Past performance of the Left is a guarantee of future results (and thus, the ability to defend ourselves is critical). We should reject all the ideological premises of the Committee, and of the Revolution, both in theory and practice. We should instead form our own conception, a non-ideological conception, of the proper structure of society. And we should not hesitate to act when the time is ripe—because they certainly won’t.