

**Annie Jourdan, Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution, Paris (Flammarion) 2018, 658 p. (Au fil de l'histoire), ISBN 978-2-0812-5036-9, EUR 25,00.**

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If Burke had not already pre-empted it, a better title for Annie Jourdan's new book would have been »Réflets sur la Révolution française«, since it is less a general history than a series of sketches concerning important episodes of the great upheaval. There are no fewer than 88 chapters, some comprising only a couple of pages, others much longer discussions of complex issues. Seventy-one of them span the whole period of the Revolution in France. A second section of nine chapters surveys its impact in areas beyond France, such as the United States, the Italian sister republics, and not least the Netherlands, on which the author (who lives there) has written extensively elsewhere. Eight final chapters offer overall observations on the period, and on revolutions in general.

The aim is to introduce new research, not only in French, and to dispel persistent myths. Any author who has tried this will know how difficult it is to kill historical errors passed on from book to book down the generations, however much new research might have demolished their foundation. Thus, for instance, it will be interesting to see how quickly, if at all, Jourdan's discussion of the *journée* of 5 September 1793 destroys the legend that on that occasion the Convention decreed that terror should be »the order of the day«. She demonstrates, over several of her longer chapters, that no such decree was passed. It was merely that various orators in the Convention and elsewhere observed that terror as the order of the day was what the sans-culotte insurgents were demanding.

This point has also been made by Jean-Claude Martin, but Jourdan digs deeper. She shows that developments long thought to have followed from the mythical decree, such as the law of suspects, or the proclamation of government as »revolutionary until the peace«, were formulated weeks beforehand in discussions of how the Revolution could be defended and moved forward. She also reminds her readers that France had no monopoly on terror in the 1790s. All the belligerent states in the revolutionary wars acted ruthlessly towards internal dissidents. It is too often overlooked, for example, that the scale of slaughter in Ireland in 1798, under the supposedly constitution-bound British crown, was comparable to that in France in the Year II and, given the size of the population, proportionately greater.

Jourdan also invokes episodes worthy of being called terrors from the earlier history not only of France but other states in internal turmoil. Terror, she argues, in the overarching theme of the book, was merely an extreme manifestation of what all revolutions are: civil wars. Revolutions sow irreconcilable divisions within societies, which lead almost inevitably to intercommunal violence. If counter-revolutionaries had triumphed in the 1790s, their words suggest that they would have been just as vindictive towards their opponents as Jacobin terrorists were towards them.

Jourdan is at her most lively when she has new things to say about well-known episodes or problems. Historians are more likely therefore



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to mine her book for insights into particular areas, in the short individual chapters, rather than read it as a whole. Not everyone will emerge satisfied. The author is at her least stimulating when she discusses the origins and early stages of the Revolution. They clearly interest her less than what happened later, and her treatment contains her own share of factual errors. She also makes little attempt to highlight crucial early topics such as the seizure of national sovereignty by the National Assembly or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen – both fundamental for understanding the thrust of the Revolution.

Some topics now fashionable among historians of the period are also absent. Surprisingly for a female author, there is little mention of the Revolution's impact on the situation of women; and, although the troubles in Saint-Domingue are briefly dubbed the most murderous civil war of the period, their direct result, the first general abolition of slavery in the history of the world, goes unrecorded. Treated only sporadically, there is no sense that religious questions inflicted the Revolution's most profound and persistent wound on France. Nor do events outside the capital, affecting the vast majority of the French population, receive more than passing attention. The lengthy discussion of terror in its various aspects is mostly about what happened in Paris; yet more victims by far perished in the departments, as the centres of »federalism« were punished for their rebellion.

Other trends are better reflected. Like most of those who have written about him recently, Jourdan is relatively indulgent towards Robespierre and the dilemmas he faced. She has an excellent chapter on Thermidor, and is emphatic that the Incorruptible was a scapegoat for terror rather than its architect, though admitting that at the time he looked more like a dictator than he really was. These insights also represent something of a return to the classic interpretation of the Year II which goes back to Mathiez. Without analysing them or their sincerity, Jourdan is careful to list with approval the famous »anticipations« of social welfare which scarcely survived Robespierre's fall and which left-wingers from Babeuf to the late Michel Vovelle have always seen as lost progressive opportunities, however regrettable the severities which accompanied them.

And she shares the basic contempt of the classical historians for the Thermidoreans, the Directory, and Napoleon. It is true that she does not stop abruptly in 1794, as they tended to do. Unlike them, she recognizes that the Revolution was certainly not over. Much recent research has been focused on the post Thermidorean period, and Jourdan incorporates results of this in fully sixteen chapters. But, having earlier shown that terror was never officially the order of the day, she devotes many pages to arguing that the Terror (capital letter) was largely a retrospective and self-justifying concoction (her word) of the men who had brought Robespierre down. Having invented it as a horrific memory, however, they had to live with it, haunting the republic's politics right down to the seizure of power by Napoleon.

Nor does Jourdan, who has written on him at length before, accept that Napoleon's rule finally brought the end of terroristic policies. She notes that under the consulate almost 4000 opponents of his regime suffered the death penalty, and that at the height of the Empire, in 1810, there were almost 30 000 political prisoners in France, and many more victims of French occupation abroad. When Napoleon fell for the second time in 1815, the royalist White Terror which followed was even more



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ruthless. All this, she concludes, »relativizes« the exceptionalism of the Year II.

Written in a clear and vigorous style, the text is accompanied by 40 pages of lively notes, plenty of contemporary black and white images, and a full colour selection of unusual illustrations.



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