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Introduction

Approaching the Aftermath of the Terror

The Reign of Terror was an episode of state-sanctioned violence in the middle of the revolutionary decade in France. For a period of about eighteen months, from March 1793 to July 1794, French citizens were subjected to an escalating series of restrictive measures. Freedoms of speech and movement were curtailed severely. Special ad hoc commissions and tribunals were granted broad mandates to arrest and try people suspected of counterrevolutionary dispositions. There was an expanded application of the death penalty. Executions by guillotine became a daily spectacle in many urban centers. By the end of it all, tens of thousands of citizens had been executed, a collective death sentence was hanging over the heads of some 140,000 political refugees—the “émigrés”—and hundreds of thousands of citizens were languishing in makeshift prisons across the country.¹

Imagine that such an event took place in our day and age: What would its aftermath look like? Among the many possible scenarios that come to mind, the following one emerges with particular force. No doubt, numerous psychiatrists would appear on the scene, ready to discuss the traumatic effects of what had just taken place. Testimonies from victims would appear in the media for months and years after the event. There would be an earnest but only partially successful attempt to hold those responsible for the violence accountable, perhaps with the help of an international tribunal. Diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) would proliferate dramatically.² Above all,

the people involved directly in the unfolding of the event, and just about anyone else who might feel affected by it somehow, would be encouraged to talk, and to talk repeatedly about what had transpired, so that the process of “working through” could begin in earnest.³

That this scenario suggests itself so readily to mind is a reflection of dominant trends in world politics and culture since the end of World War II. The twentieth century is often presented as a period of unprecedented bloodshed, but it was also a period that saw the emergence of a wide array of responses to atrocity and mass violence.⁴ Over the last seventy years or so, states and societies in different parts of the world have experimented with novel institutional and legal measures aimed at dealing with the legacies of collective brutality. International tribunals, truth commissions, bureaucratic purges, the opening up of archives, restitution of stolen land and cultural artifacts, reparations for loss of life and property, formal apologies delivered by heads of state, sometimes decades and even centuries after the events in question—all have been and continue to be employed in various configurations and with varying degrees of success around the world.⁵ At the same time, a whole new language has emerged around injury and healing.⁶ Individuals and groups making claims on the body politic identify themselves increasingly as victims of historical injustice, demanding that the harm done to them be acknowledged and remedied in some way.⁷ The concept of trauma in particular has emerged as a powerful trope for contemporary attitudes toward the past. Originating as a rather specific psychiatric category, it has come to stand for a whole range of experiences and their effects on individuals and societies. Thus, we talk of traumatized nations, traumatized histories, and cultures of trauma.⁸ Before the modern period, the past was seen and taught as a source of emulation and inspiration. It is now seen to a large extent as something one must recover from or overcome. In the words of sociologist John Torpey: “The concern in contemporary politics and intellectual life with ‘coming to terms with the past’ has become pervasive.”⁹

This book applies that set of concerns to the time of the French Revolution. It asks how contemporaries of the revolutionary era grappled with the legacies left in the wake of the Reign of Terror. What legal, political, intellectual, cultural, and even therapeutic models were available to them in order to address the effects of mass violence on self and society? How did they think and talk about traumatic events before the advent of modern trauma-talk? The chapters of the book follow revolutionary leaders, relatives of victims, and ordinary citizens as they struggled to bring those whom they saw as responsible for the Terror to justice, provide some sort of relief to those who suffered the brunt of its repressive measures, and commemorate loved ones in a political

and social context that favored forgetting. This introduction discusses how the book approaches the aftermath of the Terror. First, however, we turn to a man who was closer to the events at hand and who had insight into the issues that also stand at the heart of this book.

Quinet's Insight

"The Terror was a first calamity; a second one, which defeated the Republic, was putting the Terror on trial."¹⁰ Thus wrote the historian Edgar Quinet in his magnum opus, *La Révolution*, which was published in 1865. He was talking about a series of trials of key functionaries involved in the apparatus of the Terror, which took place after the fall of Maximilien Robespierre. But more generally, he was lamenting the tendency of the French, and especially of the revolutionary leaders, to talk incessantly about the violence of the Terror in its aftermath. Quinet contrasted this with the conduct of Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the Roman dictator who carried out a brutal purge of the city's notables in 81 BC, abdicated, and took to walking the streets of Rome without the protection of guards, ready to explain how his actions had served the interests of the Republic. Not so with the National Convention after the Reign of Terror. "Once it has committed barbarities, it denounces them itself; once they have been denounced, they must be expiated. . . . This is why the Convention does not enter history in the manner of the tyrants of antiquity: it did not know how to impose silence on posterity."¹¹

Quinet's complaint sounds strange to modern ears. We are much more likely, in our day and age, to be highly critical of governments that try to "impose silence on posterity." Scholars in the social sciences and the humanities tend to view silence and silencing as problems to be studied, not as solutions.¹² If one could boil down to a maxim the myriad ways of dealing with the legacies of mass violence in modern times, it would be "talk about it." But Quinet's point was not really to endorse silence as the appropriate response to the terrible things that have happened in the past. Rather, his point was that terror was fundamentally incompatible with the democratic impulses of the French Revolution.

Quinet saw terror as a tool of the Old Regime. Kings and princes, tyrants and dictators—those were the rulers who had regular recourse to violence, repression, and intimidation as means to political ends. They could afford to do so, because their rule did not rely on the consent of those whom they ruled. The source of their power came from elsewhere, from God or perhaps from tradition, not from the people they governed. The French revolutionaries, in

contrast, tried to create a political order based on popular sovereignty. The source of political power in the new order was not God, but the people.¹³ This does not mean, of course, that all French citizens took an active role in politics overnight. Studies of electoral behavior during the French Revolution show that relatively few chose to do so, even when they had the opportunity.¹⁴ It does mean, however, that the French embarked on a long process of transformation from subjects to citizens.¹⁵ The day-to-day work of governing was carried out by a relatively small group of elected officials, but as the Revolution evolved, more and more segments of the population could express their wills in a variety of ways and venues. As Lynn Hunt has argued: "The French Revolution enormously increased the points from which power could be exercised, and multiplied the strategies and tactics for wielding that power."¹⁶ Terror was incompatible with this democratic trajectory. The new political order required the consent of a large enough part of the population in order to function, and the repressive measures that the revolutionary government adopted in 1793–1794 eroded this support. In a nutshell, the Terror damaged the legitimacy of the Republic. In Quinet's words, "Terror cannot succeed in a democracy, because a democracy must have justice, whereas an aristocracy or a monarchy can do without it."¹⁷ The Reign of Terror, according to Quinet, was the Old Regime rearing its head in the middle of France's attempt to catapult itself into the modern age, and that is why it was bound to fail.

One need not agree with Quinet's interpretation in order to appreciate his insight. His understanding of the French Revolution was political and ideological through and through. At the time of writing, he was in self-imposed exile in Switzerland, having left France after Louis-Napoleon's coup of 1851. Here was a man of the "French generation of 1820," an intellectual and political milieu born during or immediately after the Revolution.¹⁸ Like many of his generation, Quinet was dismayed at the country's tumultuous swing from one regime to another. From monarchy to Republic, from Republic to a Napoleonic Empire, from Napoleon to a restored monarchy, from a restored monarchy to the Second Republic, and from the Second Republic to another Napoleonic coup d'état. To many at the time, it must have seemed as if France was stuck in a cyclical pattern it could neither control nor understand. Quinet was also a Protestant in a country that was by and large Catholic. His interpretation of the Revolution did not sit comfortably with any of the political or ideological camps of the time. Religious without being Catholic, republican without being radical, Quinet's book pleased few and upset many. His analysis of the Terror, in particular, gave rise to a very public dispute with other historians on the left.¹⁹

The conduct of the revolutionaries after the fall of Robespierre marked something new in history. Earlier regimes did not reckon with their own historical records in the same way, especially when those records were tainted by brutality. The democratizing dynamic unleashed by the Revolution transformed the way French society struggled with its own difficult past. In his discussion of the aftermath of the Terror, Quinet brought up numerous historical examples: the assassinations that the nobles of Venice practiced on each other; the role of the house of Valois in instigating the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre; the machinations of Richelieu; Louis XIV's persecution of French Huguenots following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685—all had been shrouded by the same silence. "What would have become of the Spanish Monarchy," Quinet asked rhetorically, "were it to condemn all those who had massacred the Indians of America on its own orders, and publicize their deeds? The Spanish Monarchy would have been dishonored by its own hands."²⁰ Kings, Quinet implied, know how to institute amnesia. This was something that the French Republic could not do. The Republic could neither decree amnesia nor control memory because of the democratizing thrust of the Revolution. There were simply too many competing voices in the public arena for any single entity to enforce silence after the Terror.

The Indeterminacy of the Terror

The Terror is the best-studied episode of the French Revolution, but it remains a subject of much controversy. Historians disagree on its chronology, nature, geographic incidence, and the number of its victims. They disagree vehemently on its origins.²¹ A few years ago, the former director of the Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française at the Sorbonne (The Institute for the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne), Jean-Clément Martin, suggested that we should stop talking about it altogether. Instead of an organized campaign of political repression, as the name connotes, Martin argued that what actually took place was a bumbling, chaotic series of actions that were more anarchic than systematic, and that were given the appearance of a unified phenomenon after the fact.²²

There are two main reasons for the difficulty of talking clearly about the Terror. The first has to do with the moral and political stakes of revolutionary historiography. The second has to do with the nature of the Terror as an event. For better or worse, the French Revolution functions as the founding

myth of the modern age, at least in the West. By myth, I mean a story of origins that endows a given period or culture with its central values and identity.²³ If the Revolution is a founding myth of modernity, the Terror is the scandal at its heart. The Revolution gave the world the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, but also the guillotine. What then are the fundamental values of this modern age? Are they embodied in the idea of human rights, in the guillotine, or in both? More troubling, is the guillotine necessary in order to realize the emancipatory promise of the Revolution? To take a position on these questions is to take a position on the foundations of the modern age.

Consider the two main interpretations of the Terror. According to the first, the Reign of Terror was an unfortunate but necessary response to a series of threats facing the young Republic in 1793. These threats included foreign war, civil war, counterrevolution, and a subsistence crisis. From this perspective, the Terror was a temporary aberration from the revolutionary struggle, an unfortunate means to a laudable end.²⁴ According to the second interpretation, terror and violence were inevitable features of the Revolution. The political culture of the Revolution, so the argument goes, owed much to the Enlightenment, especially to the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that the proper use of reason should lead all members of a political community to desire the same things for the benefit of all. He called this principle the General Will. The problem with this idea is that it left no room for dissent. From this vantage point, it was a short step to see differing opinions as treason, and to react to them with repressive measures.²⁵ The first interpretation justifies revolutionary violence implicitly, whether it intends to or not. The second interpretation condemns it, and sometimes quite explicitly.²⁶

Indeed, violence is a polarizing subject.²⁷ It is difficult to write about it without defending or condemning it in some way. This much was apparent already in the revolutionary era. "The violence of the Revolution caused much harm, but it also brought about its success," wrote the French diplomat Adrien de Lezay-Marnésia in 1797.²⁸ The Irish statesman John Wilson Croker was much less forgiving. He wrote in 1843 that "the whole French Revolution, from the taking of the Bastille to the overthrow of the Empire, was one long Reign of Terror."²⁹ One would think that the passage of time would make the ideological implications of interpretations of the Terror less relevant, but this has not been the case. The historian Timothy Tackett ended the introduction to his recent book on the origins of the Terror by stating his "personal reticence toward condemning outright the men and women of the French Revolution for their acts of violence, even for their obvious moral crimes, without attempting to understand and contextualize why they did what they did." Asking ourselves how we would have acted in their place is, according to Tackett,

among the “most important questions posed for people living through perilous political times.”³⁰ Therefore, the first reason for the difficulty of writing about the Terror is that the stakes of doing so have long gone beyond the mere establishment of facts: they cannot be separated neatly from one’s political and moral worldviews.

The second reason is that the revolutionary decade in France saw many instances of mass violence. It is quite difficult to determine which among them formed part of the Terror and which belonged to other, distinct yet related processes of contention. Take, for example, the September Massacres of 1792. A crowd of Parisian militants, incensed by rumors of an imminent Prussian invasion, descended on the prisons of the Capital and began killing inmates out of fear that they would join the Prussians and wreak vengeance on the city. According to most estimates, some 1,300 prisoners were killed, while the authorities proved powerless to stop the massacre.³¹ Should this be seen as part of the Reign of Terror? According to some historians, this incident did indeed signal a revolutionary turn to violence and intimidation. According to others, the Reign of Terror was instituted precisely in order to take violence out of the hands of the people and establish the state’s monopoly over the use of force.³² Furthermore, while violence stands at the heart of the Terror, the Terror cannot be reduced to violence. The same regime that passed repressive laws and made liberal use of the death penalty also abolished slavery throughout the French Empire and experimented with radical forms of social welfare, such as annual pensions to widows, and free public education.

So, the Reign of Terror is a fuzzy concept. On the one hand, it was an intense, visceral experience for many French women and men in the 1790s. Thousands of people were executed, hundreds of thousands arrested, and an untold number of citizens lived in daily fear, worrying that they or their loved ones might be next. “It was a time when the claims of the rights of man and the mournful voice of nature found no echo in sensible hearts.”³³ This was how Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the indefatigable chronicler of Parisian daily life during the Revolution, described this period. On the other hand, most certainties about the Terror dissolve when one looks closely at the details. Its violence was not arbitrary, but neither was it as systematic and organized as it may seem. Some interpretations isolate the Terror from other instances of mass violence in the Revolution, while other interpretations see it as one point, albeit one of exceptional significance, along a broader “continuum of destruction,” leading from the storming of the Bastille to the exterminatory campaigns in the Vendée.³⁴ The Reign of Terror had a real impact on those who lived through it, but its contours as an event are blurry. It resists a neat, concise description.

This book will not offer one. On the contrary, this book is in many ways about how difficult it was for those who experienced the Terror to tell its story. The French Revolution constituted “a deep rupture in remembered experience.”³⁵ Those who were affected by it were well aware that they were witnessing something momentous, yet had difficulties describing what was happening. “It is impossible to express,” is a phrase repeated again and again in testimonies from the time.³⁶ Events followed each other at such speed that they seemed to outpace the ability of contemporaries to narrate them. The German philosopher Wilhelm Traugott Krug distinguished in 1796 between “new history” and “newest history, that is, the history of the day.”³⁷ He saw the latter as characterized by uncertainty and analogous to myth. In the context of the revolutionary maelstrom, it became harder to record the history of one’s own time.

The men and women who lived through the violence of the Terror struggled in its aftermath to transform a series of chaotic experiences into a narrative that made sense. Theirs was the time of memory, of fragments, when cause and effect, the why and the how, were still unclear. In 1816, when the surviving members of the National Convention who had voted for the regicide of Louis XVI were exiled, many of them went to Brussels, and there, as old men, they passed the time writing their memoirs.³⁸ Fifteen years later, the first serious histories of the Revolution would begin to appear.³⁹ This book tries to capture this liminal time between memory and history, between lived experience and retrospective narration.

The Aftermath of the Terror

How should we approach this twilight zone between experience and narration? How should we think about the aftermath of the Terror? The vast historiography of the Revolution has refrained for the most part from posing these questions. It has been more focused on the origins and evolution of revolutionary violence than on its consequences. The work of the historian Bronislaw Baczko is the exception to this norm. In a pathbreaking study, published at the time of the bicentennial of the Revolution, Baczko launched an inquiry into the process of ending the Terror. “Ending the Terror,” Baczko pointed out, “was not an act but a process, tense and with an uncertain issue. The Terror was not brought to an end by the fall of Robespierre; it was a road to be discovered and travelled.”⁴⁰

That road turned out to be long and winding. The first step was dismantling the institutional apparatus of the Terror. This was done rather swiftly in

the weeks after the fall of Robespierre. The Convention repealed repressive laws, reformed the organs of revolutionary justice, purged the personnel that enforced its decrees in the provinces, and began releasing prisoners. Changing the political culture, however, proved to be a much more daunting task. The revolutionaries had to face difficult questions about the path that led them from the promise of 1789 to the violence of 1793. The trials of public officials who were involved in the Terror incensed public opinion with revelations about the extent of the brutality, especially in the provinces. The revolutionaries, and French society more generally, had to work out what kind of political and institutional arenas were necessary and even possible after the Terror. As the *conventionnel* Merlin de Thionville put it several weeks after 9 Thermidor, the problems facing the Republic required a clear answer to the following questions: "Where have we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?"⁴¹ If the goal was to regain stability, and bring the Revolution to an end, the French had to imagine new ways of resolving their political and ideological disputes. Baczko's study showed that there was considerable continuity between the Terror and the political culture that rose in reaction to it. The Thermidorian counterimagination crystallized "within a framework . . . that was born of the Terror and modeled by it."⁴²

Baczko's work has had a significant impact on the historiography of the Revolution. It has led to a reevaluation of the Thermidorian Reaction and to a renewed interest in the period between the fall of Robespierre and the rise of Napoleon.⁴³ Howard Brown has taken this inquiry forward by examining how the Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory struggled to bring the Revolution to an end by quelling various forms of civil violence. Brown's research has shown how the regimes that followed each other at a dizzying pace between 1794 and 1804 employed repressive measures that were similar to the measures employed by the Jacobins in Year II. The combination of the democratic culture of the Revolution with a heavy-handed security apparatus led to a hybrid state, which Brown called "liberal authoritarianism."⁴⁴

Two conclusions that emerge from the recent wave of research about the aftermath of the Terror are especially important for this book. First, the Thermidorian Reaction can no longer be seen exclusively as the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the defeat of the popular movement. Rather than a "drab interlude" between the fall of Robespierre and the rise of Napoleon, it has come to be seen as a distinct moment in the Revolution with a specific set of problems.⁴⁵ The Thermidorians, according to Baczko, "did not possess a political strategy."⁴⁶ Rather, they faced a unique and largely unprecedented set of challenges that had to do, in one way or another, with regaining stability and reestablishing order.

Second, one of the main questions that occupied contemporaries of the revolutionary era after 9 Thermidor was what to do about the past. As the chapters of this book show, revolutionary leaders and ordinary citizens, whose lives had been impacted by the violence of Year II, engaged in a broad process of reckoning with the legacies left in the wake of the Terror.⁴⁷ This process began by constructing the events of 1793–1794 as a difficult past, which is the subject of chapter 1. Chapter 2 analyzes the trials of public officials for their role in the Terror. The trials gave rise to debates about accountability, and they enabled victims to face perpetrators in front of packed courtrooms. Chapter 3 discusses the effort of widows of victims to get their husbands exonerated posthumously, and to regain possession of the property that had been confiscated from them. Many revolutionaries who took an active part in the repression lost their positions in the administration and were shunned or persecuted by their communities. Family members and friends of the victims fought to bring their loved ones to proper burial. Chapter 4 examines how they tried to find space for commemoration in a political context that was changing constantly, often in radical ways. Indeed, when one considers those whose lives had been rent by the Terror, one wonders what it means to speak of its end at all. Surely, for them and for many others, the events of 9 Thermidor were not really a denouement, but rather the beginning of a long process of coming to terms with what they had been through. For this reason, chapter 5 focuses on haunting, bringing together a variety of iterations that illustrate the ghostly presence of the Terror in the postrevolutionary landscape. The aftermath of the Terror emerges here as a retrospective moment; it invites us to consider how contemporaries of the revolutionary era faced a “difficult past” in the context of a movement oriented toward the future.⁴⁸

Transitional Justice, Trauma, and the French *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

The approach to the aftermath of the Terror in this book is rooted in concerns and themes that dominated the political and cultural life of the late twentieth century, especially as those pertain to the long shadow cast by the Holocaust. In a recent essay on the historical consciousness of our time, the historian Alon Confino argued that certain events constitute “foundational pasts.” He meant by this “an event that represents an age because it embodies a historical *no-vum* that serves as a moral and historical yardstick, as a measure of things human.”⁴⁹ Foundational pasts mark a rupture in historical time. They generate fundamental questions of politics, culture, and values that define an en-

tire era. Confino argued that the French Revolution constituted the foundational past of the West from 1789, but it was replaced around the 1970s by the Holocaust, which has come to serve as “the actual emblem” of our historical epoch.⁵⁰

If Confino is right—and I think that he is basically right—this means that the emblematic atrocities of the twentieth century are the dominant prism through which historians, and not only historians, view the past. As Jan Goldstein noted, while reflecting on the state of French history in the new millennium, the optimistic questions that made the study of the French Revolution so attractive for much of the twentieth century have given way to a more somber reflection on the horrors of the past: “The defining event of modernity now seems to be the Holocaust.”⁵¹ The tragic horizon that dominates contemporary attitudes to the past has not been lost on historians of the Revolution. Jean-Clément Martin has noted recently that “the history of the French Revolution occupies without a doubt a place that is similar to that of the destruction of the Jews. . . . The stakes of the debate have long surpassed the mere establishment of facts.”⁵² Hunt observed that the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, respectively, have reshaped the views of historians on the violence of the French Revolution in powerful ways.⁵³

Transitional justice and trauma are two concepts that have proven particularly salient for elaborating the challenges that individuals and societies face in the aftermath of mass violence. Transitional justice is a fairly recent term. It emerged in the 1990s to describe the global wave of transitions from authoritarian to liberal regimes in South Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Its precise definition is a matter of debate, but at its broadest, it refers to “those mechanisms, judicial and non-judicial, employed by communities, states, and the international community in order to deal with a legacy of systematic human rights abuse and authoritarianism.”⁵⁴ These mechanisms range from formal ones such as criminal trials, truth commissions, and reparations to less formal ones such as commemorative monuments, art, and therapy. A helpful way of thinking about these various measures is to situate them on a spectrum “between vengeance and forgiveness,” as defined by legal scholar Martha Minow.⁵⁵

The concept of trauma is, of course, more widely known.⁵⁶ It first emerged in the 1860s to account for a particular pathology, which was known as “railway spine.”⁵⁷ In modern psychiatry, trauma designates a mental and physiological response to events that are so extreme—usually events involving a close encounter with violence, death, and the threat of bodily harm—that they cannot be processed through the normal mechanisms of memory and cognition.⁵⁸ They become split off in the brain, giving rise to a host of symptoms

that take on a life of their own, disconnected from the original event. Essentially, trauma is a phenomenon of mental dissociation.⁵⁹ But in the course of the twentieth century, and especially after PTSD has been adopted as a formal clinical diagnosis by the medical profession in the United States, trauma has come to denote a much broader range of phenomena that have to do with the persistence of “difficult pasts” in the present. As Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have argued recently, it has become “one of the dominant modes of representing our relationship with the past.”⁶⁰

The concepts of transitional justice and trauma, respectively, are invaluable for thinking about the aftermath of the Terror in revolutionary France.⁶¹ Transitional justice calls our attention to the series of dilemmas that the revolutionaries faced after the fall of Robespierre. The revolutionaries, and French society more generally, had to negotiate a treacherous path between justice and stability, peace and truth, memory and amnesia, vengeance and forgiveness. Someone had to be held accountable for the excesses of Year II, but who? And what if doing so risked plunging the Republic anew into a cycle of reprisals and recriminations? Victims needed to be compensated for the harm done to them, but what if doing so meant in effect destroying many of the social and economic achievements of the Revolution? Could a revolutionary movement, focused as it is on the future, afford a reckoning with its own past? These questions have no definite answers, but the revolutionaries faced them without a blueprint, without a script or a set of measures they could draw on from experience.

The concept of trauma, in turn, helps us see how the Terror continued to figure in the social and cultural life of postrevolutionary France. Physicians writing in the late 1790s and early 1800s wondered about the effects of revolutionary violence on public health. Debates about the death penalty became occasions for reflecting on the imprint that the guillotine left on the psyche of an entire generation. Multimedia shows that took place after 9 Thermidor, and that made use of innovative visual technology, featured images of ghosts rising from the dead. These were different iterations of the notion that revolutionary violence may have been over, but it was not gone; it continued to figure in the present in uncanny, disruptive, and often intangible ways.⁶² To paraphrase social theorist Avery Gordon, the concept of trauma calls on us to confront the ghostly aspects of the Terror’s aftermath.⁶³

The approach of this book to its subject, and the kinds of questions it sets out to answer, have been shaped heavily by a constellation of issues that arose in reaction to the catastrophic death toll of the twentieth century. There is a word in German that captures this constellation of issues particularly well: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It is composed of the word *Vergangen*, meaning “past,”

and the word *Bewältigung*, meaning “to wrestle with or tame.” It can thus be translated as “mastering or coming to terms with the past.” Initially, it referred to the particular set of challenges that German society struggled with in the aftermath of the Third Reich, most notably around the process of denazification. It has since come to denote a broader preoccupation with the Nazi past in various arenas: film, literature, monuments, and even the writing of history.⁶⁴ In a sense, this book describes a French *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

This might lead some readers to deduce that this book draws an analogy between the Reign of Terror and the massive democides of the twentieth century.⁶⁵ This is not my intention. The revolutionary state in eighteenth-century France had neither the ability nor the design to carry out devastation and surveillance on the scale of modern totalitarian regimes. Whatever else it may have been, the Reign of Terror was not a modern atrocity in the twentieth-century sense of the term. The questions that this book poses are rooted in the epistemological and existential anxieties of the twentieth century, but this does not imply an analogy between the events in question. The concepts I employ in order to analyze how men and women in the late eighteenth century struggled to come to terms with the Terror may be recent, but the difficulties they address are not. In drawing on them, this book shows how contemporaries of the revolutionary era grappled with similar issues to those that arose in the aftermath of more recent cases of state terror, but on their own terms, with the concepts and frameworks available to them at the time.

Argument and Structure

In the aftermath of the Terror, revolutionary leaders, relatives of victims, and ordinary citizens, in and beyond France, struggled to come to terms with the catastrophic violence of Year II. The first steps in this process were judicial or institutional in nature, and they combined retributive justice with restorative justice. Some public officials were put on trial after 9 Thermidor, beginning with Jean-Baptiste Carrier, who had been the *représentant en mission* in Nantes during the Terror, and culminating with Joseph Le Bon, whose case is the subject of chapter 2. Other people who had been identified with the regime of Year II were dealt with more summarily and less legally. Several hundred Jacobins and so-called *terroristes* were rounded up and lynched during the White Terror, a wave of more or less spontaneous killings that spread through the south of France in the winter of 1795.⁶⁶ Vengeance, wrote Baczko, was a “Thermidorian passion.”⁶⁷ But alongside revenge, there was also redress.

A partial restoration of the property, which had been confiscated from victims of the Terror, was under way by the summer of 1795. The founders of a new civic religion, Théophilanthropie, stated that one of its goals had been to “heal the wounds of the Revolution . . . by preaching mutual forgiveness and the forgetting of all wrongs.”⁶⁸ In its last session as the legislative assembly of France, the National Convention adopted a sweeping amnesty decree; changed the name of Place de la Révolution to Place de la Concorde; and discussed proposals to abolish the death penalty and burn the guillotine publicly. These measures were meant to close the books on the most painful episode of the Revolution.

Yet, as this book tries to show, the Reign of Terror had a long afterlife. Relatives of victims struggled to locate an appropriate space for the commemoration of their loved ones throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century. In many cases, they constructed expiatory monuments on, or near, the mass graves where the victims of the Terror had been buried. At times these projects were carried out with the support of the authorities and at times they were suppressed. As late as the 1840s, departmental and municipal councils in various parts of the country were still dealing with conflicts around monuments to victims of the Terror. The notion that those who had lived through the violence of the Revolution were doomed to live with its emotional consequences for some time to come found expression in a variety of arenas, long before the emergence of modern trauma-talk. One such arena was the Gothic, which, according to literary historian Joseph Crawford, could easily have remained a marginal part of British literature “had it not been seized upon by writers eager to find new vocabularies of evil in the years following the revolutionary Terror.”⁶⁹ Debates on the abolition of the death penalty in the 1830s drew on the fear that public executions might recall the specter of 1793. Children of *conventionnels* changed their last name, so as not to be identified with the men who had voted for the death of Louis XVI and sanctioned the Law of Suspects.⁷⁰

The argument of this book is that the distinct difficulties around coming to terms with the Terror, and the particular debates that this process gave rise to, were derived from the political and social transformations of the Revolution. Popular sovereignty led to debates about accountability after the fall of Robespierre, for if the citizens were the source of power in the Republic, they shared in the responsibility for its actions. How, then, were individuals to be held accountable for mass violence? The revolutionary politics of property made it extraordinarily difficult to consider restitution after 9 Thermidor because restoring possessions, even to those who, ostensibly, had been victims of historical injustice, threatened to undo many of the social and economic achievements of the Revolution. How far back, then, should the state

go in trying to undo the damage caused by its own actions? The politicization of memory and of death during the Revolution gave rise to particular difficulties around the commemoration of victims of the Terror. How was one to commemorate a contentious past without reawakening civil strife? These dilemmas around retribution, redress, and remembrance derived from the democratizing dynamic of the Revolution; they would have been unthinkable under the Old Regime. In this sense, the modern question of what to do with difficult pasts is one of the unpredictable consequences of the French Revolution.

Of course, not all these changes began in 1789. Secularization and the emergence of the public sphere had transformed the attitudes of Europeans toward events of mass violence, including natural disasters, long before the Revolution. Accountability had been emerging as a central principle of European statecraft since the Renaissance. The new links forged between the ownership of private property and civic participation—indeed, the very definition of private property—were part and parcel of the expansion of capitalism. The cult of the dead had been changing in Europe since the Middle Ages in ways that invested burial sites with new meanings and tied their fate to moments of radical, political change.

Nevertheless, the French Revolution, and the revolutionary era more generally, accelerated and inflected these changes, thus rendering them visible in a dramatic fashion. It was in the decades leading up to the Revolution, according to Keith Baker, that society was invented “as the symbolic representation of collective human existence and . . . as the essential domain of human practice.”⁷¹ In the context of the Revolution, society emerged not only as an object of rational analysis and reflection, but also as a subject capable of reflecting upon itself.⁷² The dilemmas explored in this book, and indeed the very notion that society must somehow come to terms with the violence of its past, were rooted in this revolutionary institution of social reflexivity. According to Hunt, the Revolution marked the invasion of politics into the everyday. “Because revolutionary rhetoric insisted on a complete break with the past . . . every nook and cranny of everyday life . . . had to be examined for the corruption of the Old Regime and swept up in preparation for the new.”⁷³ This desire for total transformation was enshrined most vividly in the project of the Republican calendar, which had the audacity to begin time itself anew. In this book I argue that the same radicalizing dynamic, which was predicated on a complete break with the past, also made it very difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to leave certain pasts behind.

The chapters of the book focus for the most part on the period from the 1790s to the 1830s. French society experienced multiple regime changes

during these years, but it is my contention that the process of coming to terms with the Terror continued throughout these transformations—underneath the surface, as it were, of the political upheavals of the time. The chronological arc of the book corresponds roughly to the lifespan of the generation that experienced firsthand the events in question. The themes of the chapters—naming, retribution, redress, remembrance, and haunting—advance from more concrete responses to the Terror to ones that are more amorphous, harder to pin down. One could visualize the structure of the book as a series of expanding, concentric circles. The process of facing the legacies of mass violence in postrevolutionary France is presented here as a ripple effect: the farther one moves from the original event, the more opaque the circles in the water become, but also all the more encompassing.