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Annie Jourdan. *La Révolution française. Une histoire à repenser*. Paris: Champs, 2021. 658 pp. Notes, references, and index. €12.00. (pb). ISBN 9782080255624; €11.99 (eb). ISBN 9782080266088.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

Originally published in 2018 under the title of *Nouvelle Histoire de la Révolution*, Annie Jourdan's work has now been issued in a smaller format and with a title that more accurately reflects its contents.[1] Jourdan, for many years professor at the University of Amsterdam and the author of numerous books and articles on the French and Batavian Revolutions, begins by expressing her concern that the prevailing image of the Revolution, especially in books for the French general public, remains largely negative. "On oublie délibérément tout ce que la France doit à la Révolution," she writes, adding that "l'historiographie confond Révolution et 'terreur'" (pp. 16, 18). Her own rather idiosyncratic narrative seems aimed more at specialists than at general readers, however. Standard topics that other comprehensive histories of the Revolution cover get short shrift, particularly in the early chapters.[2] She presumes that her readers know the basic story of the Revolution, which allows her to dismiss the storming of the Bastille in half a sentence, to make only two passing references to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and to skip any mention of the battle of Valmy.

Whereas the reference to "rethinking the French Revolution" might suggest integrating traditionally neglected topics, such as the role of women and the movement's colonial dimension, into the narrative, Jourdan's focus is strictly on high politics. The peasantry is virtually absent from her story, events in the provinces are rarely mentioned, and even the Paris sans-culottes get little attention. In contrast, episodes such as the "civil war" between the Girondin and Montagnard factions in the National Convention and the Parisian *journée* of 5 September 1793 are treated in great, albeit sometimes confusing detail. The Directory period gets considerably more attention than in most standard histories of the Revolution, and thematic sections at the end of the book deal with the republican regimes created outside of France's borders between 1795 and 1799 and with the question of whether the French Revolution was truly more violent than other revolutionary upheavals.

Jourdan emphasizes the idea that the Revolution should be seen as a civil war, echoing David Armitage's argument to that effect in his *Civil Wars: A History of Ideas*, cited in Jourdan's bibliography but not explicitly referenced in the text.[3] "Deux France s'affrontent, dont les principes sont diamétralement opposés," she announces (p. 81). By framing the revolutionary era in this way, Jourdan suggests that there was never any possibility of compromise or consensus that might have avoided its more violent phases. The notion of civil war also implies that violence

was not the result of the revolutionaries' pursuit of abstract ideals that could not be realized, as François Furet and the "revisionist" historians of the 1980s contended, and that blame for the period's excesses deserves to be equally shared between the two sides, or even be assigned primarily to the counterrevolutionaries who "n'a rêvé que de revanche et de vengeance" (p. 413).

Jourdan is not the first historian to analyze the Revolution as a conflict in which compromise was impossible. In his influential 2006 essay, *Violence et revolution*, Jean-Clément Martin wrote of a clash of cultures that inevitably resulted in irreconcilable conflict.[4] One difficulty with Jourdan's version of the civil-war argument is that she provides only a sketchy and not always convincing portrayal of the anti-revolutionary side of the conflict. In her eagerness to emphasize the significance of the king and queen and of royalist plotters close to the Court, Jourdan sometimes relies on dubious claims and arguments. A lengthy list of figures supposedly bribed by the court in the fall of 1791 is given with no reference to any sources, and the claim that Louis XVI should bear an equal share of the blame for the violence of the *journée* of August 10, 1792, with the armed sans-culotte militants who surrounded his palace seems contrived (p. 127). Surprisingly, in view of her thesis, Jourdan says very little about the peasant uprising in the Vendée and nothing at all about the role of women, who often formed the backbone of resistance to the revolutionary reform of the Church.[5] In another of his important contributions to revolutionary historiography, Martin, who began his career as a specialist on the Vendée, argued convincingly that the nature of "counterrevolution" changed repeatedly over the course of the 1790s, as individuals and groups who had originally supported the changes made in 1789 found themselves at odds with the Revolution's increasingly radical thrust.[6] Jourdan's picture of the counterrevolution is less nuanced, even when, in her treatment of the federalist revolts of 1793, she acknowledges that some former revolutionaries found themselves fighting against the ruling faction of the day.

On the question of the Terror, Jourdan aligns herself with what is now a full-fledged movement in revolutionary historiography that I am tempted to label the "Don't Say Terror" school. For nearly two decades, Jean-Clément Martin, Michel Biard, Marisa Linton, and a number of other scholars have questioned whether one can meaningfully label the period 1793-1794 as a "reign of terror." As they have shown, the revolutionaries themselves never used the phrase, which was invented by the Thermidorians in the wake of Robespierre's execution, and historians who do use the label cannot agree on when the Terror began or ended. Martin was the first to emphasize that the Convention explicitly avoided satisfying the demand to declare terror "the order of the day" put forward by sans-culotte militants on 5 September 1793. Biard dispelled the notion that the majority of the deputies sent on mission in 1793 and early 1794 used violent methods to compel obedience, and Linton has stressed that the revolutionary leaders were themselves victims of an unplanned "politicians' terror" as the conflicts among them became increasingly bitter.[7] Biographies of Robespierre by Martin, Hervé Leuwers and Peter McPhee have depicted the Incorruptible as trying to steer a middle course between extremists truly determined to make terror the order of the day and colleagues whose indecisiveness threatened to allow the counterrevolution to triumph.[8]

Jourdan echoes these arguments, writing that it is "difficile de condamner la sévérité de la Convention" for its treatment of the Hébertist and Dantonist factions and insisting that "Robespierre ne ressemble guère à la caricature que l'histoire a faite de lui. Il est bien plus nuancé" (pp. 253, 281). Although she recognizes the dangers posed by the law of 22 Prairial Year II reorganizing the Revolutionary Tribunal, she interprets it primarily as a sign of the rivalry

between the two "great" committees, the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security, rather than as a conscious step toward a totalitarian regime. The redoutable Tribunal révolutionnaire "a fonctionné correctement" for most of its existence (p. 534), she maintains, a judgment that would have been news to General Blanchelande, the last royal governor of Saint-Domingue, who was guillotined after a travesty of a trial during the first week of that court's operations in April 1793.[9] The revolutionary government of the Year II, she adds, should be remembered not just for its harsh measures against its opponents but for its effort to found "une société plus égalitaire et plus juste, dotée d'institutions généreuses" (p. 284).

If there is a villain in Jourdan's account, it is not Robespierre but rather the ambitious Napoleon Bonaparte, the leader of a cohort of generals who brought about a militarization of French politics under the Directory. Bonaparte's success in defying the orders of the civilian government in Paris encouraged his fellow commanders to act similarly--Jourdan might have added the "Black Napoleon" Toussaint Louverture to her list of willful Directory-era generals--and set the stage for the overthrow of the Republic (pp. 382-383). Jourdan's section on the other regimes established in Europe during the Directory combats the notion that they were a homogeneous set of "sister republics." She argues that the differences among them outweighed the similarities. The Batavian Republic, a case she knows well, strikes her as distinctive because it was able to work out its institutions largely free from direct French interference and because the stark political differences between factions there never descended into outright violence (pp. 431-432). In Italy and Switzerland, she emphasizes the extent to which the French, and especially Bonaparte, put their thumbs on the scales and the civil-war-style conflicts that broke out in both regions. Her final section compares the violence of the French Revolution with that of the English and American Revolutions. "La Terreur' n'est pas une exception française," she concludes (p. 537).

Over eighty years ago, at a moment when the democratic ideals so forcefully articulated by the French revolutionaries were facing threats all around the globe, the American historian R. R. Palmer published his classic *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution.*[10] Palmer used the term "Terror" in his title, but his main arguments--that the policies of the Terror were largely justified responses to a crisis situation and that Robespierre never exercised dictatorial authority--anticipated many of the assertions made by Jourdan, as well as the other scholars with whom she aligns herself. At a moment when democracy and even the honest pursuit of historical truth are once again in peril, one can only welcome the challenge from Annie Jourdan and the other scholars of the "Don't Say Terror" camp to "rethink" some of the most controversial aspects of the French Revolution, even if one disagrees with some of her detailed assertions.

NOTES

[1] Annie Jourdan, *Nouvelle Histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).

[2] Other recent full-length histories of the Revolution include Jean-Clément Martin, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), and this reviewer's *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

[3] David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History of Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

[4] Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

[5] On the role of Catholic women in the counterrevolution, see Corinne Gressang, "Breaking Habits: Identity and the Dissolution of Convents in France, 1789-1808" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2020).

[6] Jean-Clément Martin, *Contrerévolution, Nation et Révolution en France, 1789-1799* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

[7] For a concise presentation of the "Don't say Terror" school's position, see the collaborative volume by Michel Biard and Marisa Linton, *Terror: The French Revolution and its Demons* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021). For Martin's most recent iteration of his argument about the *journée* of September 5, 1793, see Jean-Clément Martin, *La Terreur: Vérités et legends* (Paris: Perrin, 2017). Biard's thesis was originally published as *Missionnaires de la République. Les représentants du peuple en mission (1793-1795)* (Paris, Éditions du CTHS, 2002). Marisa Linton's research is most fully laid out in *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). By entitling his most recent book *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), Timothy Tackett has put himself somewhat at odds with this historiographical current, although his concentration on the early phases of the Revolution means that he has not confronted the issue of the nature of the regime in 1793-1794 head on.

[8] Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre: La Fabrication d'un monstre* (Paris: Perrin, 2016); Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). For a contrary viewpoint, see the recent dual biography by Loris Chavanette, *Danton et Robespierre: Le Choc de la Révolution* (Paris: Humensis, 2021).

[9] On Blanchelande's trial, the first politically significant case taken up by the Tribunal, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "The French Revolution's Royal Governor: General Blanchelande and Saint Domingue, 1790-92," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71/2 (April 2014): 203-28.

[10] Robert R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1941).

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