TERRORISM AND REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE: THE EMERGENCE OF TERRORISM IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Draft

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many accounts of terrorism locate the emergence of the concept in the French Revolution. Intellectual historians tend to regard the French Revolution as a point of rupture in the conceptual history of terror. For Gerd van den Heuvel (1985), for instance, the modern concept of terrorism has its origins in the French Revolution. Similarly, Mikkel Thorup argues that before the revolution, the concept of terror designated “the barbaric or deterrent use of state violence, the psychological dispositions of individuals, religious and social fear, etc.,” whereas “in the period after the French Revolution, the conceptual usage is prioritized as a description of non-state violence aimed at the state or the citizens which the state is obliged to protect” (Thorup 2010, 101). On this view, the French Revolution serves as a hinge between a concept of “terror as state practice” and a concept of “terror as terrorism” (Thorup 2010, 101). By contrast, scholars interested in what might be called a more phenomenological, rather than conceptual history of terrorism attribute its origins to Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Montagnard dictatorship known as “the Terror” from 1793-1794. Invoking Robespierre’s infamous claim that terror was nothing but “prompt, severe, inflexible justice” (Robespierre 2007, 115), some of these scholars argue that Robespierre embraced terrorism as an instrument to enforce the General Will (Baczko 1994; Fagin 1982; Gearson 2002; Hoffman 1998; Johnson 2009; Parry 2013; Raynor 1982; Sagan 2001; Tilly 2004; Tuman
2010). Others note that the term terrorism was used by Robespierre’s opponents to denounce the Terror (Hutchinson 1972).

Conceptual and phenomenological approaches share two key assumptions. First, they agree that the term terrorism names a particular form of violence, specifically the excessive and arbitrary use of force for political goals. Second, whether its use is attributed to Robespierre or critics of his Reign of Terror, the concept of terrorism is understood as denoting a form of violence exercised by a state and its representatives, in particular Robespierre’s Terror. The conceptual use of terrorism to describe violence perpetrated by non-state actors, by contrast, emerges only after the revolution.

In this article, I develop a two-pronged argument that simultaneously supports and problematizes these assumptions. By way of a critical reading of select archival sources from the period between 1793 and 1796, I defend the claim that an understanding of terrorism as violence perpetrated by non-state actors for political purposes with the aim of achieving maximum publicity only emerged after the French Revolution. I show that terrorism entered the political vocabulary in 1794 as the name for a political system, and I suggest that the French Revolution thus offers historical support for a growing body of literature that emphasizes the role of states in perpetrating terrorism (Blakeley 2007; Blakeley 2009; Claridge 1996; George 1991; Jackson 2008; Jackson 2009; Sluka 2000; Westra 2012). At the same time, however, I argue that an examination of the archive forces us to expand the conceptual space in which terrorism is understood. For while the concept of terrorism initially named a political system, it quickly underwent a number of transformations that complicate an understanding of terrorism both as a particular form of violence and in terms of state and non-state violence.

To develop this argument in detail, I begin with a critically important yet largely overlooked speech that Jean-Lambert Tallien delivered to the National Convention on August 28, 1794. I argue that this speech constitutes one of the earliest systematic elaborations of terrorism as a form of government, specifically the system of Robespierre. I then turn to the writings of the radical egalitarian journalist and political agitator François Noël “Gracchus” Babeuf, who first shared an understanding of terrorism as a form of government, but quickly decoupled the term from the person of Robespierre and used it against the
Thermidorians. I subsequently identify a second concept of terrorism as a political philosophy, which described the political commitments of authoritarian populists of all stripes (Montagnard, sans-culotte, egalitarian). Finally, I isolate a third concept of terrorism as a political identity, which Babeuf embraced as a name for patriots, republicans, and friends of the revolution. Due to considerations of space, I conclude with a merely cursory overview of the development of the concept of terrorism after the French Revolution. I offer some preliminary archival evidence for the claim that it was over the course of the nineteenth century, and in particular in the political thought and practice of Russian revolutionaries, that terrorism acquired its conceptual use as a certain form of violent action perpetrated by non-state actors for political purposes with the aim of achieving maximum publicity.

2 TERRORISM AS A FORM OF GOVERNMENT

2.1 Jean-Lambert Tallien: Terrorism as the System of Robespierre

One of the earliest systematic reflections on terrorism was offered by Jean-Lambert Tallien in an address to the National Convention on August 28, 1794. Under Robespierre’s Reign of Terror, Tallien had presided over the Terror in Bordeaux. However, because he had “only” guillotined 104 counter-revolutionaries, Robespierre had accused him of moderation and negligence. Afraid of having to face the blade, Tallien thus conspired with other moderate Montagnards to bring about Robespierre’s downfall. On 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794) the National Convention had Robespierre and other members of the Committee of Public Safety arrested, sentenced to death, and executed the following day (Andress 2005; Baczko 1994; Brown 2007; Israel 2014; Palmer 1966). According to Bronislaw Baczko, Bertrand Barère was the first to characterize Robespierre’s reign as a “system of terror” the day after Robespierre’s execution, but it was not until the following month that Tallien proposed to understand the Terror as a system of power or a form of government (Baczko 1994, 49).

In the course of elaborating a program for the new revolutionary government, Tallien provided a philosophical meditation on Robespierre’s system of government, which he described as terrorism. Tallien distinguished a necessary fear of the law from terror, which he characterized as “a habitual, general shiver, an external shiver that affects the most hidden
feelings, that degrades man and makes him resemble a beast; it is the shock of all physical forces, the commotion of all moral faculties, the disorder of all ideas, the overthrow of all affections; it is a real disorganization of the soul, which, not leaving it anything but the capacity to suffer, which pulls it into its pain and the softness of hope and the resources of desperation” (Tallien 1847, 613). For Tallien, terror required continuously increasing excesses of violence. Robespierre had placed “a snare on every step, in every house a spy, in every family a traitor, murderers in the court” (Tallien 1847, 613). The Terror had been an “art of spreading terror,” a system of torturing “all citizens with the agony of some” because it was impossible to merely target the “suspicious classes without affecting the rest” (Tallien 1847, 613). Terror could not merely be instilled in “the soul of evil people without troubling the good citizen” because “if the government of terror pursues some citizens over presumed intentions, it alarms them all; and if it restricts itself to monitoring and punishing actions, it is no longer terror that it inspires” but “the healthy fear of retributions that follow crime” (Tallien 1847, 613). In short, the Terror depended on arbitrary, absolute, and unlimited power, concentrated in the hands of one individual. Such a system “cannot be useful but for the minority who wants to oppress the majority” (Tallien 1847, 614). And it was this system, which “has been that of Robespierre” (Tallien 1847, 615), that Tallien called terrorism.

In opposition to Robespierre’s defense of terror as necessary, just, and virtuous in a revolutionary situation in which the republic had yet to be founded (Robespierre 2007), Tallien argued that terror, even if temporary, was “a means of counter-revolution.”

Let us not be mistaken, citizens: if any authority can put everything in chains for one minute, do we not have to fear that it will not keep everything in chains for a century? Besides, the shortest and sweetest tyranny has a vice worse than long and violent tyranny: it corrupts the love for liberty and accustoms to tyranny itself (Tallien 1847, 613).

The task of revolutionary government, however, was the establishment and consolidation of public liberty. This could only be achieved, Tallien maintained, through “the justice of the judge, and not the force of the warrior” (Tallien 1847, 613). True revolutionary government had to adhere to principles, ensure popular support, and instill fear in those who betray the revolution. For this purpose, a government had to “make do with surveillance of bad actions, to threaten them and to punish them with proportionate pains” rather than “threatening people, threatening them always and for everything, threatening them with all cruelties one can imagine.”
One is an optional fear, the other is incessant agony; one is an apprehension of terror that follows crime, the other is terror itself, which installs itself in the soul despite a feeling of innocence; one is a fear based on the law, the other is a stupid fear of people (Tallien 1847, 613).

For Tallien, justice required that people be judged by their actions, not on the basis of suspicion, ideological commitments, or political convictions. Given the superiority of such a system, Tallien was convinced that even a momentary interruption of terror would lead to its collapse. “Once terrorism stops for a moment to terrify,” he declared, “it can only tremble itself” (Tallien 1847, 614). Yet, despite Tallien’s professed commitment to a new form of revolutionary government, the Thermidorian Reaction failed to bring about a break with Robespierre’s Reign of Terror. For not only had the Thermidorians left in place the legal basis of the Terror, but former terrorist personnel remained politically influential (Furet 1988; Israel 2014; Kennedy 2000). Moreover, while terrorism described a political system with a certain institutional and administrative structure, it was not “contained in any one institution” but rather a policy, “a ubiquitous means of government” (Furet 1988, 140). As a consequence, it was possible to decouple the term terrorism from Robespierre and associate it with “the agents and political personnel of the Terror, all those whom public opinion condemned in advance for having participated in the exercise of an iniquitous power” (Baczko 1994, 125). These developments gave rise to a series of transformations of the concept of terrorism, which can be identified in the political writings of the radical egalitarian François Noël Babeuf, most notably in his *Journal de la liberté de la presse* (Journal of the Freedom of the Press), later renamed *Le Tribun du Peuple* (The Tribune of the People): first, Babeuf disassociated the term terrorism from the person of Robespierre and used it to denounce the Thermidorian government; second, he articulated terrorism as a political philosophy underpinning various forms of authoritarian populism; and, finally, he introduced terrorism as synonymous with patriotism and appropriated the term to describe a particular political identity.

2.2 *Gracchus Babeuf: Thermidorian Terrorism*

On the first point, Babeuf argued that Robespierre had not just been a tyrant, but also a morally upright patriot. He declared that one had to “distinguish between two persons, that is to say, Robespierre the sincere patriot and friend of principles until the beginning of 1793, and Robespierre the ambitious tyrant and most profound scoundrel since that time” (Babeuf
Babeuf further maintained that the first Robespierre had, in fact, left behind the weapons to fight the legacy of the Terror, namely the rights and liberties guaranteed by the constitution of 1793, which Robespierre and the Jacobins had supported. At the same time, however, in an attempt to curb dissent and political opposition Robespierre had restricted these very rights by imposing censorship and suppressing all newspapers, publications, and theatrical performances that were not in line with Montagnard ideology. For Babeuf, it was necessary to return to the old Jacobinism that had supported revolutionary principles and to restore freedom of expression, which he regarded as the condition of possibility of public liberty. “I open a forum (une tribune) to plead for the rights of the press,” Babeuf declared (Babeuf 1966e, 1), and he was full of hope that “10 Thermidor marks the new term in which we work for the rebirth of freedom” (Babeuf 1966a, 2).

However, his hopes for a return to the rights of the 1793 constitution were soon disappointed. On 6 Vendémiaire An III (September 27, 1794), just three weeks after the first issue of his Journal had appeared, Babeuf complained that even though 10 Thermidor had been called a revolution, “the people noticed that it was nothing but the revolution of a dead man, a tyrant, if you will, but that this so-called revolution did not get rid of tyranny – the latter merely fell into other hands” (Babeuf 1966d, 3). The society of 9 Thermidor, he argued, “has not changed [Robespierre's] system.”

The same means, the same way of government continue after his death. ... People of France, you who conserve your first flames of freedom, open your eyes to this situation. What does it matter to abolish a tyrant but not tyranny? (Babeuf 1966b, 4–5).

This passage reflects Babeuf’s subtle reworking of the concept of terrorism. By decoupling it from the person of Robespierre, he understands terrorism to be a political system that comprises any government that “fights the rights of man; judges the pros and cons and puts them at the same rank; paralyzes public opinion; ... it murders a people who wants freedom and unity of the republic; it demands, like the tyrant Robespierre, that the blood flows in wide streams, that one sacrifices for security and private ownership an immense number of people, who, according to the Thermidorians, are suspects because they don’t think like them; it wants to fill the prisons, prevent freedom of thought and press” (Babeuf 1966c, 3). Babeuf thus achieved a certain generalization of the concept, which could subsequently be applied to any government that abrogates constitutional rights and controls public opinion by
fear and intimidation. As a consequence, when the president of the National Convention, André Dumont, dismissed a petition by a large group of citizens to proscribe the Thermidorian government, Babeuf interpreted Dumont’s actions as a return to terrorism. “You threaten the people in the name of the convention,” Babeuf accused him, “you make it take up the language of terrorism by making it say that it knows how to save the people, by striking those who want to agitate against it” (Babeuf 1966f, 7–8). Moreover, he criticized Tallien and the journalist Stanislas Louis Fréron (1754-1802), former Montagnard and acolyte of Marat who became a prominent critic of the Terror, and demanded that they be guillotined as “terroriste, … buveur de sang, démolisseur, incendiaire!” (Babeuf 1966k, 333).

For Babeuf, the Thermidorian government was ultimately not much different from Robespierre’s Reign of Terror. Its violation of the rights of man, which it justified as “the certain and only guarantors of freedom” (Babeuf 1966h, 221), meant that the Thermidorian regime amounted to “terrorism, the government of blood, the government of Robespierre, the tyranny of Robespierre, the despotism of the committees, and all the subsequent atrocities, the guillotinades, the shootings, the drownings, oppression, despair, all forms of squalor, deprivation and misery” (Babeuf 1966g, 4). Babeuf maintained that the real terrorism (le vrai terrorisme) was “Thermidorian terrorism” (le terrorisme Thermidorien) of the government (Babeuf 1966m, 10), which “pretended to want to kill another [terrorism]” (Babeuf 1966i, 304). He argued that the violation of the rights of man committed by the National Convention meant that it engaged in terrorism by its own lights. As a seemingly objective description of a particular type of government, he left the meaning of the word unchanged and simply applied it to the new political leadership. Terrorism, he claimed, had been legalized with the establishment of the Thermidorian government on 22 Thermidor. “Is it really true,” he asked, “that we have done nothing but change terrorism” from that of Robespierre to that of the current revolutionary leadership (Babeuf 1966i, 308)? As the historian Edgar Quinet was to note in his critical history of the French Revolution, published in 1865, “the system of extermination had changed hands, but it remained the same” (Quinet 1987, 624). Quinet further agreed with Babeuf that the Thermidorians had actually outdone the Jacobins in their efforts to eliminate their political opponents. For Babeuf, the Thermidorian Reaction had brought “the most revolting of miseries, the insulting triumph of the aristocracy, terrorism, and the most excessive oppression against patriots” (Babeuf 1966i, 308). As a consequence,
his journal ran a section on the “terrorisme des anti-terroristes” (terrorism of the counter-terrorists) on 9 Pluviôse An III (January 28, 1795) (Babeuf 1966j, 311). Here, Babeuf observed, “the enemies of the people have established terrorism against the patriots, … massacres of whom have been openly preached” (Babeuf 1966j, 313). For Babeuf, it was clear that the Thermidorian government had itself become a terrorist government. Calling it anything else was a “logogriph,” an anagrammatical charade that forced people to speak “une langue d’argot,” a secret code intended to conceal reality (Babeuf 1966g, 4).

This first modification of the concept of terrorism, which amounted to an expansion of its scope to accommodate not merely Robespierre’s system but any system of government that violently infringed on individual rights, paved the way for another, more substantial change of the concept. This transformation was made possible by the Jacobins’ justification of the Terror, which pointed towards a certain “philosophy behind [their] measures” (Furet 1988, 140). The older conceptual use of terrorism as a form of government thus came to be supplemented by a concept of terrorism as a political philosophy. To be sure, this new use of terrorism did not replace previous discourses; rather, they circulated at the same time, informing, supporting, and keeping each other in existence.

3 TERRORISM AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND IDENTITY

5.1 Terrorism as a Normative Political Program

Another shift in meaning occurred in the midst of an economic crisis in early 1795, which resulted in an understanding of the word terrorism as political philosophy. By this I mean that the term terrorism no longer only functioned as the name for a system of government, even though it continued to operate in that way, but was also understood as a philosophical reflection on normative principles of political organization. As such, the use of the term terrorism as a form of government, analogous to words like tyranny, monarchy, or despotism, came to be supplemented by its use as a name for political commitments, like republicanism, populism, or royalism. That is, the word terrorism now operated as a name for both a political system and a set of political commitments.
To illustrate this new conceptual use of terrorism, consider the response of the National Convention in the face of rising food prices at the beginning of 1795, which lent support to radical sans-culottes and royalists (Andress 2005; Baczko 1994). To avoid riots, the Convention, by now decidedly anti-Thermidorian and dominated by Girondins, articulated the need to “make unremitting war on both royalistes and terroristes” as “twin dangers” to the revolution (Israel 2014, 604). Eager to stabilize the revolution, the revolutionary leadership knew it had to draft a new constitution that suppressed not only authoritarian populism, but also royalism. For this purpose, the 1795 Constitution, which established the Directory with the aim of reconciling revolutionary principles with a liberal democratic order, implemented safeguards against the risk of direct democracy to be hijacked by authoritarian populists, on the one hand, and the danger of a return to monarchy, on the other (Brown 2007). Individual rights formed the basis of legitimate political authority, determined the boundaries of government intervention, and limited the rightful use of force to cases where the law was violated. Accordingly, government was legitimate as long as it acted in accordance with law, freedom ended where it violated the rights of others, and violence was permitted for punishing such violations. As François Antoine Boissy d’Anglas (1756-1826), member of the Committee of Public Safety after Thermidor, eloquently argued, this punitive use of violence against illegal activities was necessary, for “if the people make bad choices and opt for monarchism, terrorism or fanaticism, the Republic will be lost!” (cited in Israel 2014, 610).

It was clear by fall 1795 that an understanding of terrorism as a political philosophy had been firmly established in the discourse of the government. Far from describing, first and foremost, a particular system of government as well as political actions and institutions, terrorism now designated a political stance one could choose. While a system of terrorism might eventually be the result of people’s bad choices, the choices themselves were motivated by a set of underlying normative political commitments and attitudes. Just like the triumph of royalism was presumed to result in a restoration of absolute monarchy, the political philosophy of terrorism was regarded as the ideological foundation of and roadmap to a terrorist government.

Noting this new use of the term, Babeuf observed that the name sans-culotte had been turned into an insult, and the term terrorist had become an accepted epithet of the same order as royalism and was “synonymous with patriot and friend of the principles” (Babeuf 1966i,
In the same way, Philippe Buonarroti, an Early Socialist and chronicler of Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality, observed that terrorism had become synonymous with republicanism (Buonarroti 1836). By denouncing republicans, patriots, and friends of the revolution as terrorists, the government effectively used the constitution to portray their actions as illegal transgressions of individual rights. As a consequence, Babeuf sharply criticized the 1795 Constitution as a “work of crime” (Babeuf 1966o, 304) and declared that it made “terror against the people the order of the day” (la terreur contre le Peuple est à l’ordre du jour) (Babeuf 1966o, 296). For Babeuf, in other words, the constitution of 1795 represented a significant limitation of the rights guaranteed by the constitution of 1793, which, alas, had never been put in force.

Babeuf had already registered his disagreement with such a limitation of rights for the purpose of preserving freedom in October 1794. The logic by which the “violation of all your rights, … the most audacious oppression that they cover under the name of necessarily strict measures, under the name of measures for the general security, are the only certain guarantee for your liberty,” Babeuf asserted, was twisted and relied on faulty reasoning (Babeuf 1966h, 211). In addition, Babeuf pointed out that terrorism had become a term of opprobrium against sans-culottes and Jacobins, and thus against those who, for him, were actually patriots and true supporters of revolutionary values (Heuvel 1985). On Babeuf’s view, then, the government attempted to eliminate political opposition and increase its power by disseminating two falsities: first, it argued that the only way to preserve freedom was through the restriction of rights; and second, it portrayed those committed to the revolution as terrorists and a threat to national security.

3.2 Babeuf’s Affirmative Appropriation of Terrorism

It was in response to the second maneuver, that is, the denunciation of patriots as terrorists, that Babeuf mounted a two-pronged response. In a first step, he argued that the government’s understanding of terrorism did not describe actual terrorism, but was merely a means to denounce those committed to revolutionary principles. In a second step, he introduced the term furoriste, derived from the Latin word furor meaning anger or frenzy, to distinguish republicans from royalists and other enemies of the people. He did so in order to
denounce the real enemies of the people, while at the same time reclaiming the term terrorism and endowing it with a positive valence (Heuvel 1985; Walther 1990).

Consider Babeuf’s exchange with Jean-Baptiste Armonville, one of the few sans-culotte deputies in the Convention, in which Babeuf expressed his hope that at least part of the Convention had “opened its eyes to the ferocious conduct of the furoriotes, and that it has repeatedly declared itself protector of the patriots who are oppressed under the name terrorists, which is given to all republicans, even to the soldiers of liberty.”

It has been proven that the furoriotes do not know anything but terrorists, those who have scared the enigrés, the kings, the royalists, the papists, the plungers, the wholesale buyers, eventually, all enemies of the people (Babeuf 1966l, 49).

In contrast to his earlier efforts to retain the meaning of terrorism as a tyrannical system of government and apply it to the government, Babeuf now argued that the government’s actual use of the term effectively changed its meaning. If terrorism was indeed the demand for freedom, the rights of man, democracy, justice, and equality, then surely it was desirable to be a terrorist. On this account, terrorism thus constituted a political identity that could be assumed and cultivated by way of an active commitment to revolutionary principles.

The normative force of Babeuf’s attempt at appropriation, however, was undercut by the practical consequences of being labeled a terrorist by the government. Being denounced as a terrorist, Babeuf said, was “the equivalent of a mark on the forehead” written in “red iron” (Babeuf 1966n, 150). And he was not the only one to criticize the Convention for its use of excessive counter-terrorist violence as well as its failure to prevent royalists, who formed so-called companies of Jesus, from perpetrating violence against Jacobins and sans-culottes. While Babeuf admonished the government for laisser faire le royalisme, letting royalism reign without interference (Babeuf 1966l, 17), Alexandre Legot, member of the National Convention from 1792 to 1795, expressed his dismay at the failure of the “true friends of the patrie to take care that the hot and energetic patriots who had carried out and consolidated the Revolution were not sacrificed under the pretext of terrorism, Robespierrism, etc.” (cited in Aulard 1951, 28:138). In the same vein, Paul vicomte de Barras, an opportunist politician and military strategist with a talent for siding with the respectively dominant political faction, reported, “they have hunted down the best patriots with the help of a word as insignificant as terrorist” (cited in Brunot 1937, 654). And the Moniteur Universel, the main Parisian
revolutionary newspaper, reported that “the assassins of the counter-revolutionary regime slit the throats of those they call terrorists in prisons, in the streets, and even in private residences, and men without passion made sure that more than a good citizen perished in these massacres” (Panckoucke 1847, 258). In short, the term terrorism functioned as an effective rhetorical weapon that allowed for the persecution of critics of the political establishment, regardless of whether they expressed oppositional opinions or engaged in subversive actions. As Babeuf, who was himself “imprisoned for eight or nine months as apostle of terrorism” (Babeuf 1966n, 154), observed, those branded terrorists were condemned “to bread and water, to rotten straw, to the most despicable darkness, to the horror of having to exist for a number of months in this subterranean place where the floor was covered a foot deep in putrid and infected water [and] where they stayed for many days without food; and instead of consolation, they received nothing but abuse and death threats from the soldiers of Jesus of Douai” (Babeuf 1966n, 159). For Babeuf, this treatment was not legal punishment for a crime stipulated by the constitution, but rather an outside-of-law (hors la loi). Drawing attention to the double standard of the government, which failed to implement the constitutional procedures it had itself implemented, Babeuf charged:

In your mind and according to the letter of your acts, you have already judged and condemned me in advance. If I have the misfortune to fall into your hands, I firmly believe that by virtue of your full authority you will scoff at my good reasons and deliver me to the judges that you choose at your pleasure (Babeuf 1966n, 160).

Babeuf was wrong, however, that his fate was to be determined outside of law. On the contrary, his increasing radicalization as well as his role in the Conspiracy of Equals, an attempt to subvert the government by insurrection and return to the Montagnard Constitution of 1793, led to a ban of Babeuf’s journal and his arrest in May 1796 (Bax 1911; Buonarroti 1836). His subsequent trial was conducted in exemplary fashion. Legal procedures were followed meticulously, and Babeuf had every chance to defend himself without interruption (Babeuf 1972). Even so, he was convicted for conspiracy and sentenced to death on May 26, 1797, and guillotined the following day (Bax 1911; Rose 1978).

The years between the Thermidorian Reaction in July 1794 and Babeuf’s execution saw a number of different uses of the term terrorism. Whereas Tallien had introduced the term to name a form of government, specifically the system of Robespierre, it was soon extended to cover all those who appeared to endorse Robespierre’s populist political philosophy. At the same time,
critics of the Thermidorian government insisted on Tallien’s initial understanding of the term as describing a political system, but they proposed that it applied to any government that violated the rights of citizens. Babeuf, in particular, argued that the Thermidorian government was indistinguishable from Robespierre’s Reign of Terror and accused the Thermidorians of being the real terrorists. When this rhetorical maneuver proved politically ineffective, Babeuf changed his strategy. Since the government used the term terrorism as a label for those people Babeuf regarded as patriots, he attempted to reclaim the word as a positive self-description and political identity.

At the same time, however, there emerged in Babeuf’s discourse another concept of terrorism that differed from its function as the name for a political system, political philosophy, or political identity. This alternative notion of terrorism can be discerned in Babeuf’s diagnosis that “in order to govern justly, one must terrify the villains, the royalists, the papists, and those who starve out the public, and that one cannot govern democratically without this terrorism which alone is permitted and legitimate; otherwise, there is nothing but injustice and famine; there is nothing but the most terrible tyranny and servitude for the good citizens, just like it has been exercised for too long” (Babeuf 1966l, 50; emphasis in the original). I argue that implied in this statement is a view of terrorism as a particular mode of conduct by which one instills fear in one’s enemies. To put this more clearly, terrorism is conceived of as a means to an end, that is, in terms of a specific form of action, method, or strategy, by which a particular purpose is to be achieved. This use of the term terrorism, which continues to predominate our present conceptual space, was first articulated systematically by Russian revolutionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. It did not, however, replace older uses of the term. Rather, the various notions of terrorism that had emerged over the course of the French Revolution supported at the same time as they were kept in existence by the new concept of terrorism as a form of revolutionary struggle.

4 TERRORISM AS A FORM OF REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE

The new concept of terrorism as a form of revolutionary struggle had its historical conditions of possibility in a number of developments by which terrorism, first, became a term of moral opprobrium against a whole host of different political groups; second, began to
circulate outside of France and was increasingly disconnected from the context of the French Revolution; and third, was applied to groups who were united in their deployment of particular forms of violent conduct.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the word terrorism had become interchangeable with a number of other terms, such as anarchist, Jacobin, or Babouvist. As Babeuf noted in his defense, his own name had “acquired the odious distinction of designating a sect which includes all republicans, all patriots, and which is charged with preparing them all for the establishment of a new reign of terror. Gone are the epithets of Robespierrist, Terrorist, Anarchist, and Jacobin: Babouvist has taken their place” (Babeuf 1972, 24–25). Regardless of whether Babeuf was right about the waning importance of the terms terrorist, anarchist, and Jacobin, I want to suggest that the important implication of his observation concerns the essentially synonymous use of the words Robespierrist, terrorist, anarchist, and Babouvist as terms of moral opprobrium against a rather diverse group of people. This claim is supported by a range of archival sources, such as a report of the Bureau Central of Paris of April 29, 1799, which cautioned that an inflationary use of these words by royalists masked the real danger posed by anarchism. “The parties which the force and above all the agreement of the constitutional powers have been depriving of all means of open revolt,” the report stated, “seem today to wake up, gain hope and prepare new troubles.”

The impotence to act, the profound memory that the disastrous epochs had left in the mind, the only idea of disorganization, of troubles and of murders that presents the horrifying word anarchy, reduce for the moment to silence and to inactivity the followers of this horrible party. It is certain that, if there were only the hatred of the true friends of the Constitution of the Year III, [anarchism] would be better appreciated and consequently more fearsome; but unfortunately, the horror that it instills in the sincere republicans is accompanied by that which it causes in the crowd of royalists; in the eyes of these latter, all those who cling to republican institutions, all those who embrace with interest the principles of maintaining the existing order of things, or who ardently intercede for the defense and prosperity of the Republic are anarchists. For a partisan of the old regime, patriot is equally synonymous with anarchist and terrorist and, by dint of reverberations, a certain class of incorrigible reactionaries grows and extends this illustrious and often misunderstood word anarchy (Aulard 1902, 5:490).

The problem, according to this report, was an undifferentiated use of a variety of terms, which obscured important differences between opponents of the revolutionary government and the Constitution of 1795.

In addition to the conflation and generalization of terrorism and anarchism as umbrella terms for diverse political commitments, these labels began to circulate outside of France in
the final years of the eighteenth century. At first, the connection between terrorism and the
French Revolution, and in particular Robespierre, remained intact. For instance, in the fourth
of his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, a series of letters in opposition to the British Prime Minister’s
effort to seek peace with France, the Irish philosopher and critic of the French Revolution,
Edmund Burke, criticized the Thermidorian government for issuing the amnesty law of 4
Brumaire An IV (October 26, 1795). Burke argued that the law, which the revolutionary
government had passed in a desperate effort to garner support against the royalists (Brown
2007), ensured that “thousands of those Hell-hounds called Terrorists, whom they had shut
up in Prison on their last Revolution, as the Satellites of Tyranny, are let loose on the people”
(Burke 1999, 3:316). Burke further argued that the Directory “differed nothing from all the
preceding usurpations” but was, in fact, “strengthened with the undisciplined power of the
Terrorists” (Burke 1999, 3:316). While his use of the word terrorist echoed the Thermidorian
notion of terrorism as a term of opprobrium against Jacobins, sans-culottes, and egalitarians,
it is important to note that Burke also understood terrorism as a form of government,
emphasizing the continuity between the Jacobin Terror and the Directory. Denouncing the
latter as a regicide government, Burke argued that its hatred of royalism led it to ally with
“irregulars” (Burke 1999, 3:316) and “robbers” (Burke 1999, 3:317). In a similar vein, the
German poet Christoph Martin Wieland understood terrorism as a name for a political system
and was convinced that only Napoleon’s coup in September 1797 had saved France from
being “thrown back into all the horrors of anarchy, terrorism and the most ferocious civil war”

Others, however, such as the leading German Jacobin Matthias Metternich, objected to
the inflationary and indiscriminate use of the words anarchism and terrorism. Metternich
complained that “whenever a republican plucked up the courage to show the abyss toward
which this anarchic system would lead, he was branded a Jacobin, a terrorist, an anarchist –
and proscribed” (Metternich 1975, 575–576). For Metternich, in other words, terrorism and
anarchism had become smear words against anyone who was critical of the political
establishment, regardless of the formers’ political views and the latter’s ideological and
institutional make-up.

It was this use of terrorism as a rhetorical weapon against political opponents that paved
the way for a decoupling of the term from the French Revolution throughout the first half of
the nineteenth century. As Rudolf Walther observes, until the mid-nineteenth century “only here and there had the term ‘terror’ been detached from the French Revolution and applied to other events and constellations.”

This was to change in situations of political and social crisis when the political enemy and his praxis could be described with the term. … “Terrorism” now served to qualify every political opponent who advocated radical claims – independent of his history, his praxis and his other aims. … Whenever the term appears in the political sphere, it carries negative connotations (Walther 1990, 379–380).

By 1848, terrorism was firmly established as a term of opprobrium for non-state political actors, who exercised excessive, illegitimate, and illegal violence (Thorup 2010). Hearkening back to Babeuf’s understanding of terrorism as a form of political action designed to intimidate and aided by the invention of dynamite (Most 1978), terrorism was increasingly regarded as a carefully orchestrated attempt to create fear by causing maximum public impact. On this view, then, the word no longer functioned as the name for a system of government, political philosophy, or political identity, but described a particular form of criminal action articulated in terms of means and ends. Terrorism was now primarily understood as a form of revolutionary struggle, like guerrilla warfare or partisan warfare (Schmitt 2007).

This concept of terrorism was first articulated systematically by revolutionaries and the radical intelligentsia in late-imperial Russia under the banner of the propaganda by the deed. In response to a protracted and, ultimately, unsuccessful process of social, political, legal, and economic reforms as well as increased repression against critics of the regime (Gerschenkron 1965; Riasanovsky 2000; Soloviev 1976; Venturi 1964; Zakharova 2006), Michail Bakunin, known as the father of anarchism, called on revolutionaries to “spread our principles not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda” (Bakunin 2002, 196). Following Bakunin, radical intellectuals like Alexander Herzen turned to “the great terrorists of the 1790s” in order to develop their own “Russian Jacobinism” against an autocratic regime (cited in Venturi 1964, 293).

It is clear that Herzen’s use of the term terrorism invokes continuity with older notions of terrorism as political philosophy and political identity. For Herzen, being a terrorist meant that one shared the political commitments of the Jacobins and served the people. This
conceptual use of terrorism as a political identity arising from certain theoretical commitments was articulated most fully by Sergei Kravchinski, better known by his pseudonym Stepniak:

[The terrorist] is noble, terrible, irresistibly fascinating, for he combines in himself the two sublimities of human grandeur: the martyr and the hero. He is a martyr. From the day when he swears in the depths of his heart to free the people and the country, he knows he is consecrated to Death. ... He is a wrestler, all bone and muscle, and has nothing in common with the dreamy idealist of the previous lustre. He is a mature man, and the unreal dreams of his youth have disappeared with years. He is a Socialist fatally convinced, but he understands that a Social Revolution requires long preparatory labour, which cannot be given until political liberty is acquired. ... He has no other object than to overthrow this abhorred despotism, and to give to his country, what all civilised nations possess, political liberty, to enable it to advance with a firm step towards its own redemption. ... He fights not only for the people, to render them the arbiters of their own destinies, not only for the whole nation stifling in this pestiferous atmosphere, but also for himself; for the dear ones whom he loves, whom he adores with all the enthusiasm which animates his soul; for his friends, who languish in the horrid cells of the central prisons, and who stretch forth to him their skinny hands imploring aid. He fights for himself. He has sworn to be free and he will be free, in defiance of everything. He bends his haughty head before no idol. He has devoted his sturdy arms to the cause of the people. But he no longer deifies them. And if the people, ill-counselled, say to him ‘Be a slave,’ he will exclaim ‘No;’ and he will march onward, defying their imprecations and their fury, certain that justice will be rendered to him in his tomb. Such is the terrorist (Stepniak 1883, 42–45).

For Stepniak, being a terrorist thus encompassed the cultivation of psychological and physical traits as well as the subscription to a particular politico-philosophical doctrine, Socialism. Yet, for the revolutionaries, terrorism was more than a theoretical system; it was a set of concrete, useful practices that had to be systematically articulated for terrorism to be truly successful. Underlying both, however, was an understanding of terrorism as a form of revolutionary struggle.

This concept of terrorism was captured by Nicholas Morozov, who set out to “summarize theoretically and to systematize practically this form of revolutionary struggle” (Morozov 1972, 111). This was necessary, he suggested, because only if the “future terroristic struggle becomes a deed of not only one separate group, but of an idea, which cannot be destroyed by people” can the struggle become “popular, historical, and grandiose” (Morozov 1972, 110). Invoking St. Just’s defense of the people’s right to kill tyrants and Babeuf’s conspiracy (see Lehning 1970), he explained that the awesome power of the tsarist regime could only be opposed by secrecy, which awarded the revolutionary movement a number of critical advantages. First, secrecy produced an important psychological benefit. For while previous uprisings against oppressive forced required the self-sacrifice of the rebel, “contemporary terroristic struggle is not like this at all. Justice is done here, but those who carry it out
Secrecy, in other words, allows the revolutionaries to escape retribution and continue their struggle against oppression. Second, secrecy had an important pragmatic value insofar as it protected the revolutionary movement from having to engage in open confrontation with the state’s military force. Deploying “secret assassinations” as its main weapon, Morozov maintained, “terroristic struggle has exactly this advantage that it can act unexpectedly and find means and ways which no one anticipated.”

All that the terroristic struggle really needs is a small number of people and large material means. This presents really a new form of struggle. It replaces by a series of individual political assassination, which always hit their target, the massive revolutionary movements, where people often rise against each other because of misunderstanding and where a nation kills off its own children, while the enemy of the people watches from a secure shelter and sees to it that the people of the organization are destroyed. The movement punishes only those who are really responsible for the evil deed. Because of this the terroristic revolution is the only just form of revolution (Morozov 1972, 106).

For Morozov, the surgical precision with which terrorists were able to strike their targets allowed for a minimization, if not complete elimination, of collateral damage, thereby making terrorism not only the most just, but also the “most convenient” form of revolutionary action (Morozov 1972, 106). Rather than terrorizing the people and creating a climate of fear and suspicion, terrorism had as its purpose the “final disorganization, demoralization and weakening of government for its actions of violence against freedom” (Morozov 1972, 112).8

As Richard Jensen (2004) shows, however, the tsarist regime quickly succeeded in establishing a discourse of terrorism that subsumed a range of different oppositional political movements from anarchism to revolutionary socialism and allowed for their collective denunciation and elimination. The government, the revolutionaries argued, “hanged the innocent and guilty and filled prisons and remote provinces with exiles. Tens of so-called ‘leaders’ were captured and hanged, and died with the courage and tranquility of martyrs” (The Executive Committee 2006, 82–83).9 Stepniak, too, offered a detailed description of the government’s counter-terrorism. He eloquently criticized the exceptional tribunals and secret orders of a judicial system that was turned into an instrument for the assertion and expansion of state power, instead of offering fair trial and investigation as well as protection from illegitimate state violence:

The merest suspicion led to arrest. An address; a letter from a friend who had gone ‘among the people’; a word let fall by a lad of twelve who, from excess of fear, knew not what to reply, were sufficient to cast the suspected person into prison, where he languished for years and
In short, it was precisely the revolutionaries’ concept of terrorism as revolutionary violence against the regime that allowed the government to justify the rescinding of political reforms, the issuing of emergency laws, and the increase of violent repression of political opposition (Daly 1995; Waldron 1995). The terms terrorism, anarchism, and nihilism now all served to justify violent repression against anyone who engaged in certain acts of violence against the state and its representatives.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I sought to offer a nuanced discussion of the emergence of the concept of terrorism during the French Revolution and its transformation in the years between 1794 to 1897. Based on an examination of exemplary archival sources, I argued that terrorism was introduced into the political vocabulary by the Thermidorian Jean-Lambert Tallien in 1794 as the name for a form of government, in particular the repressive system of Robespierre. I further demonstrated that while the term continued to operate in this way, it was generalized and applied to any government that violated the rights of its citizens. Turning to Babeuf’s radical political pamphlet literature, I identified a second conceptual use of terrorism as a political philosophy, which served to pick out a set of political commitments and republican values. Finally, I argued that Babeuf further uses the concept of terrorism in an appropriated way as a political identity, which comprises patriots, republicans, and friends of revolutionary principles. To show that the conceptual use of terrorism as a specific form of violent action was only articulated systematically after the French Revolution, I concluded with an overview of its development after Babeuf’s execution in 1797 and a cursory exploration of the writings of some Russian revolutionaries. In these texts, we see a theoretical and practical elaboration of the concept of terrorism as a new form of revolutionary struggle. It is this notion of terrorism
that might plausibly be regarded as the beginning of a discourse that dominates debates about terrorism to this day. This does not mean, however, that older uses of the term died out; rather, they continue to circulate alongside newer concepts and form a rich repository from which to draw to categorize acts of violence.

The aim of this article, however, was to go beyond a merely better understanding of the complexities of the concept of terrorism in the French Revolution and its aftermath. In the first place, by showing that the concept originates as the name for a particular form of government, I hoped to make available the French Revolution as an important historical anchoring point for those scholars of terrorism, who insist on the significance of state terrorism. At the same time, however, I sought to demonstrate that archival evidence problematizes an understanding of terrorism in terms of a certain form of violent action and pushes us to expand the conceptual space within which we traditionally seek to make sense of terrorism. By attending to the way in which the concept of terrorism is actually used by its practitioners and critics, we are better able to appreciate the historical and contextual specificity of manifestations, discourses, and practices of terrorism.

References


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1 Such synonymous use of terror and terrorism not only fails to account for how the Jacobins understood their own actions but also obfuscates the particular meaning given to terrorism as well as the way in which it functioned in political discourse. This lack of attention to actual practices results in a rewriting of history according to which, in the words of Audrey Kurth Cronin’s, “ironically, Robespierre’s tactics during the Reign of Terror would not be included in [Cronin’s] definition of terrorism, because it was state terror” (Cronin 2003, 34; my emphasis).

2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are mine.
A notable exception is Bronislaw Baczko’s (1994) close reading of Tallien’s speech as a philosophical reflection on the Terror as a system of power. Both van den Heuvel and Thorup suggest that the neologism terrorism was first used in 1794 by Tallien (Thorup 2010, 95; Heuvel 1985, 3:124). However, an even earlier use of the term terrorism can be found in Immanuel Kant’s *The Context of Faculties* (2009), to which Kant first referred in a letter to Johann Gottfried Kiesewetter in December 1793 (see Giordanetti 2005). Kant gives the name moral terrorism to a view of history that sees humanity as continual regression and deterioration, and he rejects this “terroristic conception of human history” for it cannot go on infinitely (Kant 2009, 178–179).

See also *La Queue de Robespierre* (Robespierre’s Tail), a pamphlet directed against Thermidorian Montagnards, whom the author denounced as seeking to continue Robespierre’s Terror (Méhée de La Touche 1794).

The liberal political theorist and politician Benjamin Constant (1797) advanced the same argument.

Baczko refers to this conceptual use of terrorism as a “mode of thought” (Baczko 1994, 110).

The same argument is offered by a number of other revolutionaries, who credited terrorism with the capacity to target the real enemies of the people. Tarnovski, for instance, regarded terrorism as a form of collective self-defense of the people and as direct action “against the real perpetrators of evil” (Tarnovski 2004, 85).

Stepniak offers a detailed description of the government’s counter-terrorism. He eloquently criticized the exceptional tribunals and secret orders of a judicial system that was turned into an instrument for the assertion and expansion of state power, instead of offering fair trial and investigation as well as protection from illegitimate state violence: “The merest suspicion led to arrest. An address; a letter from a friend who had gone ‘among the people’; a word let fall by a lad of twelve who, from excess of fear, knew not what to reply, were sufficient to cast the suspected person into prison, where he languished for years and years, subjected to all the rigour of the Russian cellular system. … The sentences of the exceptional tribunal, which was simply a docile instrument in the hands of the Government, were of an incredible cruelty. Ten, twelve, fifteen years of hard labour were inflicted, for two or three speeches, made in private to a handful of working men, or for a single book read or lent. Thus what is freely done in every country in Europe was punished among us like murder. But not satisfied with these judicial atrocities, the Government, by infamous secret orders, augmented still more the sufferings of the political prisoners, so that in the House of Horrors – the central prison of Karkoff – several ‘revolts’ took place among them in order to obtain equality of treatment with those condemned for common crimes” (Stepniak 1883, 35–37).