

**Représentants en Mission: A Provincial Version of the Terror**

Adele El-Khoury  
History major, French minor  
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Professor Hodson, History, [c-hodson@northwestern.edu](mailto:c-hodson@northwestern.edu)

## **Project Description**

The French Revolution most famously overthrew France's absolute monarchy, and established a republic based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. However, this Revolution which attempted to abolish monarchical oppression spawned the Terror movement, which, led by Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety, brutally suppressed freedom of opinion and voice. All those whom the Committee deemed anti-revolutionary, both in the National Assembly in Paris and in the small provincial towns, were executed. With its executions estimated at anywhere between 17,000 and 40,000, the Terror movement further crushed the original ideals of freedom of the Revolution with each fall of the guillotine. Understandably, the Terror caused a rift between those who supported it and those who recognized its hypocrisy. Christopher Hibbert introduces his chapter "The Days of the Terror" in his book The Days of the French Revolution saying "It is a falsehood to say that the Terror saved France, but it may be affirmed that it crippled the Revolution." To be sure, the French citizens living under the Terror could not exhibit such prescience as to understand or predict that the Terror, and the ideology which justified it, ran against the fundamental principles of the Revolution itself. So how could this come to pass: how did the Committee of Public Safety gain support, or at least create passivity, among French citizens at the height of the Revolution? My research project will examine the ways in which "missionaries" of the Committee of Public Safety adapted, exported, and presented the ideology of the Revolution to rally collaboration for the radical and genocidal Terror movement.

My project aims to look at the ways in which missionaries necessarily adapted the message of the Terror to export it to provinces of different cultures, economies, hierarchies, and

belief (particularly Christian) systems than those of the more revolutionary, radical, and secular Paris. Furthermore, my project will attempt to analyze the different ways in which the provinces understood the Terror's message, whether that led to an emphatic acceptance or rejection of its ideological tenets and tangible actions. The project will explore what I see as a gap in research on the influence of the Terror in Paris versus the Provinces, and in particular will attempt to locate and understand the legacies of the division as they can be seen in France today.

Enough literature exists on the French Revolution, including the Terror movement, to fill hundreds of libraries; and yet, ironically, all this material makes it especially difficult to know what happened, and to understand what it meant. Writings on the Terror range everywhere from general analyses to chronicles of specific missionaries and even members of the Committee themselves. For example, Hibbert's book includes an entire chapter's worth of analysis of the Terror. In it, he places the political emergence of the Terror within the important context of a Revolutionary government in crisis, not sure of its next move, and thus characterizes Robespierre's leadership as necessarily unfeeling and radically-minded. He quotes Robespierre's own justification of the Terror: "At the point where we are now, if we stop too soon we will die. We have not been too severe... Without the revolutionary government the Republic cannot be made stronger. If it is destroyed now, freedom will be extinguished tomorrow" (Hibbert, Days, pg. 248). Hibbert's work is representative of many more general analyses of the Terror movement, which place it within the ideological framework of the Revolution, which had legitimately ignited hope for freedom in the hearts of the French people, to the point where it could justify the pursuit of that freedom at any cost.

Another, more specific type of literature on the Revolution can partly be seen in R.R. Palmer's book Twelve Who Ruled. In it, Palmer details the careers of the twelve members of the

Committee of Public Safety, which orchestrated the Terror. Here Palmer delves further into the individual and collective reasoning which went into the actions of the members in Paris and their decisions to use especially repressive measures in the provinces, which proved more stubborn in the face of conformist Terrorist ideology. In a similar vein, Jacques Dupaquier, for example, in his work Le Procès d'un Missionnaire de la Terreur et du Comité Révolutionnaire de Nantes, describes the actions of a specific missionary, Jean-Baptiste Carrier, in Nantes. In this work Dupaquier explains Carrier's collective drowning of suspected counterrevolutionaries in Nantes. In this sense, both Dupaquier and Palmer's works also place the Terror, and terrorist missionaries, in a larger context: not an ideological context as much as a more concrete context of violence as a way of ensuring the survival of the Terror as a political movement, and even as a Republican government.

Hibbert's book highlights a critical fissure between these two areas of research and analysis. He suggests, without going into further detail, that there exists another inherent layer between these two approaches. He writes: "The worst excesses were committed in the provinces where— although most *représentants en mission* were more concerned with enlisting recruits and collecting supplies than with punishment— in several towns the guillotine was kept constantly at work and those convicted of crimes against the Revolution were slaughtered wholesale on the instructions of fanatical or savage representative or of those who were frightened of being considered too weak" (Hibbert, Days, pg. 227). Therefore, as much as the Terror took radically violent measures to enforce its will, its missionaries could not, and did not, merely use brute force in their recruitment of support in all provinces. It is this gap in understanding between violence and ideological coercion in the provinces that I will explore in my project.

The timeline and methodology of my project will begin this summer in Evanston, both at Northwestern and at the University of Chicago. In the Special Collections section of the Northwestern Library, I will read through the germane sections of the extensive collection of original revolutionary pamphlets to get an idea of the official way in which the Committee presented and exported the Terror in the media and in propaganda. In addition, the University of Chicago also has an entire section of its library devoted to the French Revolution, particularly to pamphlets and newspapers, another important source of Revolutionary ideology and goals. This research should give me at least a part of a more general framework in which to understand Terrorist missionaries and the Committee. Once I arrive in France, my research will have to begin in the Archives de Paris, the Paris Archives, which contain not only historical resources, but political and judicial ones, which will prove important in researching the political role of committees during the Revolution and the reasons for which the Committee of Public Safety in particular emerged as the practical leader of government. This archive will also be useful in searching for actual speeches given at conventions and national celebrations by members of the Committee, particularly Robespierre. Finally, it is not until I spend time in the Paris Archives that I can narrow my interest down to a few specific provinces. My research of specific missionaries and their visits to specific provinces will largely depend on my ability to research in smaller, local archives. However, while the Paris Archives have a thorough website through which I can do some preliminary work, many local provincial archives do not provide this same resource. Nevertheless, one of the most productive ways in which to find information on local archives and sources is to look closely at the bibliographies of the works of French scholars, which I will be able to find in the Paris Archives. I can begin that search in a more cursory fashion here, but the bulk of that work will have to be done after my visit to the Paris Archives.

At Northwestern, I took a class on the history of modern France which looked predominantly at the Revolution and have also taken a class on French literature within a historical and cultural context every quarter. In addition, the fact that I can read and write French well allows me to use all available resources for research, without the limits of a language barrier.

The importance of this project lies in the understanding of the character of revolution. While, in hindsight, the Terror may have curtailed the Revolution itself, for the French people living under the Terror, its emergence merely marked another development in their fight for freedom from absolutist monarchy. However, the Revolution, and the justification for the Terror, was more than an idealistic rhetoric—it took on a concrete meaning in political terms, and in the creation of an entirely new government. Therefore, the exploration of the ways in which the Terror was accepted in certain provinces and rejected in others will shed light on two crucial modern French realities: the character of its government and its political decisions, and the political and cultural divisions between Paris and the provinces.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Budget**

2 France YouthPasses (allows for 4 days of travel for one month anywhere within France on the Rail): \$195 per pass; \$ 390

3 one night stays in youth hostels (in three provinces): average \$30 per hostel; \$90 total

Photocopies and book purchases: \$150

### **Addendum**

I am in the process of trying to find an advisor at Sciences Po, although it is a bit more difficult because the actual lecturers at the university tend to be government officials who do not interact much with the students outside of class. However, this summer I am going to try to contact a teacher from one of the “discussion section” type courses to see if he or she could either advise me or lead me to someone who could. In addition, this summer I also need to try to contact someone at the Paris Archives, as archival research in France tends to be difficult (even looked down upon), especially for undergraduates. However, the Paris Archives’ website seems to suggest that it is student friendly, so hopefully I can make a connection through information on the website.

As of now, I am planning to conduct research on my own, and not as part of a course at Sciences Po. I do know, however, that this research will only comprise a small part of a larger future project: a senior thesis in history. In this thesis, I will be looking to explore how the

ideology of the French Revolution has been exported to outside contexts, particularly the Latin American context. I recently read a book by historian Greg Grandin on Guatemala, in which he described an incident where Guatemalan peasants brought a petition to the steps of their local government building— this petition directly referenced the French Revolution and its abolition of slavery; its claims also used language almost identical to that of the first Revolutionary constitution. I am interested in the importation and adaptation of outside ideology to local interests in the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s, but in order to understand how this ideology was understood, particularly in a Marxist fashion, in outside contexts, I must first understand the crafting and local adaptation of the ideology within France itself.

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