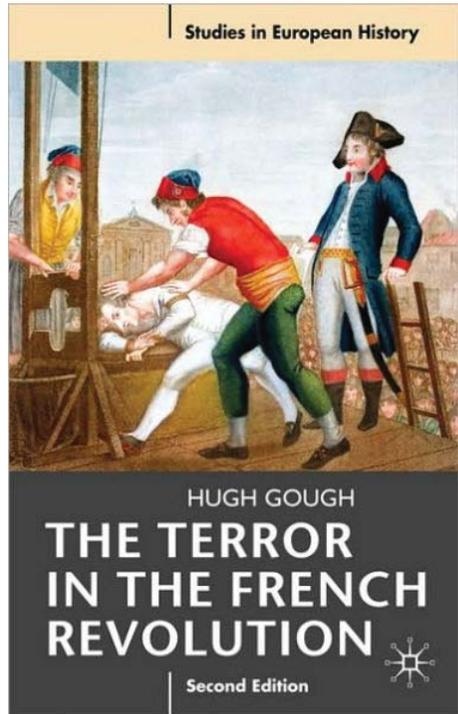

Hugh Gough. *The Terror in the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Book Review

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The second edition of *The Terror in the French Revolution* by Hugh Gough is an interesting, short, and concise book advancing the theory that the French Revolution was the wellspring of political terrorism. In the initial pages of his book, Gough adds a preface exclusively for his second edition, illustrating the more recent research and historical interpretations which have caused him to deemphasize certain aspects of the French Revolution's early stages. Alternatively, Gough provides additional research and materials that focus on the overall effect of *the terror* in terms of the social, cultural, and political changes that it wrought. Gough also includes a chronology of events, followed by an extensive annotated bibliography. With the book barely one hundred fifty pages long, this leaves an abbreviated but easily readable version of the French Revolution. It focuses on the events that occurred during the year of 1789 and then the years 1793-1794, which are effectively considered the beginning and the end of the French Revolution, commonly referred to as "the terror."



In *The Terror in the French Revolution*, Gough starts with an in-depth definition of what can be considered terror, including the etymology of the word and explains briefly why terror had a new meaning for France by the early nineteenth century. He discusses that during the terror, over sixteen thousand

people were guillotined, more than twenty thousand prisoners died during captivity, and another two hundred thousand died from civil war. Gough observes that although the death toll is a fraction in comparison to those caused by other destructive political regimes such as Stalin's 1930s purges, Germany's Holocaust, and Pol Pot's Cambodia, as a terror it was highly effective. Body count was not the issue so much as the overall intent and dedication of the French revolutionaries to remake society. Gough also states, "For the first time in history terror was used in the name of popular sovereignty, in the name of people, to kill opponents of democracy."¹

Gough's second chapter tells of events leading up to the Parisian assault on the Bastille in July of 1789 and the democratic reforms that followed throughout the next two years. He notes, "These reforms made France into Europe's most democratic state."² However, by 1792, France had declared war with Europe and the fledgling democracy collapsed. In 1793, the king had been executed and France was thrown into civil war.

With this brief explanation underway, Gough goes on to break down the actual events of France in the years following 1789. Political conflict in 1789 and 1791 frustrated French citizens, especially the aristocrats, dividing the upper class into two threads: the *monarchiens* and the *noirs*. While the *monarchiens* were still royalists, they were in full support of the parliamentary style of government, using Britain as an effective example, keeping veto power with the King and nobles, while defending the position of the Catholic Church. The *noirs*, in contrast, wanted reinstatement of the Estates-General while disbanding the King's Assembly, and to have ideals such as feudalism and religious discrimination returned. Gough explains that due to the poor communication during that time, "plot theory" became a very real threat to French aristocracy by 1790.

Gough continues to describe other political issues as well, including the loss of absolute power for King Louis XVI and his subsequent flight to Varennes in 1791, the Girondins (considered to be radicals) campaigning for war, and the six-week long "first terror" of political violence caused by the Austro-Prussian armies advancing against the Tuileries Palace.³ Lastly, Gough circles back to the Girondins and their "failure" of sentencing the former King Louis to death by guillotine, effectively weakening the power of the Girondins' regime. This caused political strife among the country in a time when it desperately needed stability and comradery.

Gough's third through fifth chapters explain the beginning and consummation of the Terror—largely the "critical points were, first, the overthrow of the Girondins on 2 June 1793 and then the destruction of the 'factions' in the

early spring of 1794.”⁴ The sixth chapter discusses the rapid rise of execution rates that came with the summer of 1794, later known as the “Great Terror.” During this period, the amount of blood that surrounded the guillotine grew into such a putrid mess that the revolutionaries were forced to move the guillotine and stage to the Bastille—only to have citizens still complain of the stench. This resulted in the revolutionaries moving the guillotine again, this time to the far city outskirts with the bodies merely dumped in a nearby mass grave. Considered the high point of the French Revolution, the guillotine was steadily maintaining over thirty executions per day. For a spectator, this would have been a grisly scene, as thirty deaths per day equate to at least two deaths per hour, if the guillotine operators ceased for a short eight hours of rest at night.

Gough moves on to explain the culmination of the Terror, and the creation of a new Republic beginning in 1794. He outlines the lasting effects—including consequences affecting women’s rights, religious issues, education, and the economy. Gough also briefly mentions Napoleon’s contributions to ending the Revolution, although his name is mentioned less than expected.

As a conclusion, Gough briefly re-describes the Revolution and then succinctly incorporates the Democratic Period of 1792-1804, despite his extensive explanations of revolutionary “terror” including events up to 1794, which is then followed by the Napoleonic Period of 1804-1815. Gough describes the long-term consequences: “Death was the most obvious, making the guillotine, possibly, the terror’s most lasting image,”⁵ following the “overwhelming majority of victims . . . opposing the authority of the Convention.”⁶ Essentially, anyone found to oppose the government during this time was sentenced to death. Gough also states that the political impact was primarily to save the republic from defeat by creating oppression. The lasting result of the terror, then, was a republican democracy, parliamentary democracy, and separation of church and state. Even these results were short-lived, however, as one of Gough’s last sentences reflects upon the French Revolution signaling the beginning of two hundred years of political instability for France.

In general, Gough provides an authoritative view of the French Revolution and the terror it created, giving a broad yet succinct description of key issues and events. He tries to explain the impact of each event on the Terror as a whole—summarizing it all into one large, generalized effect culminated from many smaller and individual incidents. While his book is well written without being too lengthy, Gough does often jump around in his chronology in order to explain certain points as he proceeds through his book. While readers can counter this by referring to the Chronology section of the book there are times when, as a

reader, the amount of cross-referencing seems unnecessary. In relation to Gough's argument that the French Revolution was the birth of political terrorism, the author provides a fair amount of evidence in support of his point. While Gough's discussion includes many valid points in his favor, one area he is lacking is the discussion of ancient acts of political malice, such as Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero, and why these would have contrasted with the French Revolution in terms of political terrorism. Despite this, in using the information provided by Gough, his point is well illustrated and easily argued. Overall, it is a worthwhile read, which provides a thorough look at the French Revolution.

1. Hugh Gough, *The Terror in the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 18.

4. Mike Rapport, review of *The Terror in the French Revolution* by Hugh Gough, Macmillan, 1998, *History* 85, no. 277 (January 2000): 169, accessed June 11, 2015, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

4. Gough, *The Terror*, 109.

5. *Ibid.*, 110.