Beyond the Terror – Factional Warfare and Political Violence in the French Revolution, 1789-1799

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My research seeks to make a major contribution to the study of FACTIONAL WARFARE AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE in the French Revolution, 1789-1799.

In the 1790s, a series of POLITICAL PURGES wiped out the majority of the French Revolution’s “founding fathers”.

In spite of Enlightenment ideas of liberty, free speech, and democratic politics, power struggles and differences in political opinions resulted in hundreds of revolutionary politicians being deprived of their rights and sent to prison or to the guillotine.

The purges that occurred during THE TERROR (1793-1794) are well known: they include the arrest of the Girondins, Danton’s trial, and the execution of Maximilien Robespierre. The purges of politicians in later periods – those of the Reaction (1794-1795) and the Directory (1795-1799) – have, by contrast, been neglected.

Relevance: new interpretations of the Terror and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte

My work represents the first comprehensive history of all the main political purges of the French Revolution. It highlights the role that purging played in the repression of political opposition, stressing its importance not just during the Terror, but beyond, and assesses its short- and long-term impacts on French politics and society.

By putting the well-known purges of 1793-1794 in the wider context of revolutionary purging, my study queries the idea of a single event that can be described as “the Terror”. Purging, political violence, and the repression of political opposition, it argues, were central, long-term aspects of revolutionary history rather than just a feature of what is conventionally called “the Terror”.

My work also offers an alternative explanation for Napoleon Bonaparte’s rise to power: long-term purging, it argues, did much to undermine the stability and public image of republican institutions, making them particularly vulnerable to Bonaparte’s military coup in 1799.

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