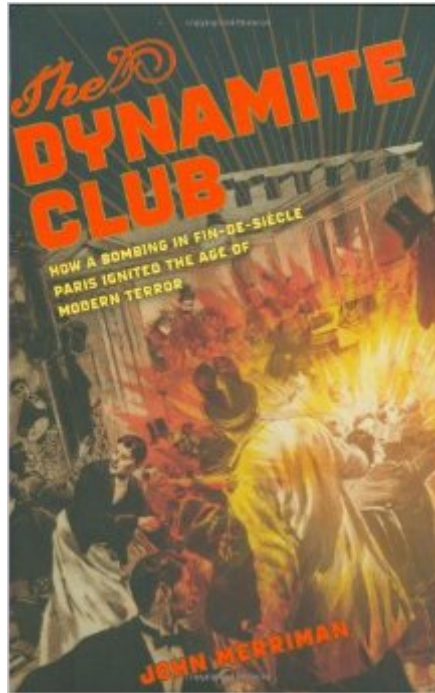


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The Dynamite Club: How A Bombing In Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited The Age Of Modern Terror



Synopsis

The fascinating story of a long-forgotten "war on terror" that has much in common with our own. On a February evening in 1894, a young radical intellectual named Émile Henry drank two beers at an upscale Parisian restaurant, then left behind a bomb as a parting gift. This incident, which rocked the French capital, lies at the heart of *The Dynamite Club*, a mesmerizing account of Henry and his cohorts and the war they waged against the bourgeoisie—setting off bombs in public places, killing the president of France, and eventually assassinating President McKinley in 1901. Paris in the belle Époque was a place of leisure, elegance, and power. Newly electrified, the city's wide boulevards were lined with posh department stores and outdoor cafés. But prosperity was limited to a few. Most lived in dire poverty, and workers and intellectuals found common cause in a political philosophy—*anarchism*—that embraced the overthrow of the state by any means necessary. Yet in targeting civilians to achieve their ends, the dynamite bombers charted a new course. Seeking martyrdom, believing fervently in their goal, and provoking a massive government reaction that only increased their ranks, these "evildoers" became, in effect, the first terrorists in modern history. Surprising and provocative, *The Dynamite Club* is a brilliantly researched account that illuminates a period of dramatic social and political change—and subtly asks us to reflect upon our own.

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Customer Reviews

John Merriman, professor of history at Yale and author of the classic undergraduate text *A History*

of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present, has been called America's best living historian of France. Born and raised in Oregon, he has lived in France on and off much of his life and is skilled at bridging the cultural divide. In our current "age of terror" it is illuminating to remember that for about a 15-20 year period during the "fin-de-siecle" (end of the 19th century), Paris was gripped by a wave of Anarchist Dynamite bombers. The central story of this book is about one of those Dynamiters, Emile Henry, the first terrorist to bomb anonymous otherwise innocent civilians and, according to the subtitle, "ignite the modern age of terror." "The Dynamite Club" is a small package (216pg, 8.5" book) but, like the subject of its title, packs a wallop amount of information. Using the creative non-fiction technique of writing history through telling the narrative story of a central hero (or anti-hero in this case), it is a biography of Emile and the bombing and its aftermath - and also the larger story of Anarchism in the 19th century. We learn about the underground world of Paris and London, teeming with hungry, unemployed and angry youth, the revolutionary intellectuals who inspired them and the state enforcement that emerged with them.

It might make headlines when some nightclub or hotel is bombed, but such headlines might not even make it onto the front page these days, for unfortunately such occurrences are frequent. This sort of terrorism was new and startling in 1894 when a bomber attacked the Caf  Terminus in Paris. It may not have been the very first incidence of modern terrorism, but it was part of a new type of attack on society. Such attacks could not have happened without dynamite or without philosophical and social underpinnings. A wealth of details about such larger issues, and about that particular bombing, is set out with impressive clarity in *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Si cle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) by Yale historian John Merriman. It was Emile Henry who executed the attack, and Merriman writes, "This book is motivated by a very simple question: why did Emile Henry do what he did?" It was a long time ago, and in a foreign society with different bad guys than we have now, but it is bracing to have Merriman as a guide to a frightening act which introduced the world to a completely new type of threat, one which came from an individual who was not completely an outsider and not completely mad. Henry grew up within the anarchist philosophy, but Merriman makes clear that the wide inequalities between rich and poor at the time made such a philosophy seem tenable: "In short, the belle  poque was not *belle* for most French men and women, who had little reason for optimism and great concern for the future." Henry won prizes for excellence in school, but as he became older, he was obsessed with the grinding poverty in Paris; his sympathies were always with the jobless and hungry.

The terrorists of these days had some good teachers and precursors in the past. These were the anarchists of the nineteenth century whose purpose was to bring to a radical change of the world order. The state was regarded by them as something evil which, in Proudhon's words, "is my enemy. To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed, law-driven, numbered, regulated, enrolled, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, checked, estimated, valued, censured, commanded by creatures who have neither the right nor the wisdom or virtue to do so". Anarchism was a reaction to the rapidly expanding power of governments following the creation of nation-states in the nineteenth century. Expanding bureaucracies, police forces, and armies manifested power. Anarchists were confident that a new, improved society could exist one day, but they believed that violent revolution was a prerequisite, in contrast to those adherents who preached for socialism. Most of the anarchists were far from being intellectuals. But the hero of this book was different, because he was a middle-class young educated man who might have enjoyed a productive life, were it not for his father's treatment at the hands of the state, exacerbated by the appalling poverty that he witnessed in Paris. One day, on a February evening of 1894, Emile Henry drank two beers at a Parisian restaurant, then left behind a bomb. What follows is a most intriguing tale of suspense and history of anarchism before, during and after Henry's deed. The French society like many other European ones, was extremely anxious, living in constant fear of bombers who were certain they were achieving immortality for a very good cause.

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