



## The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror

By John Merriman

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### **The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror** By John Merriman

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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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Those who think of terrorism as an inexplicable evil produced by an alien culture will have their eyes opened by this fascinating study of 19th-century anarchist terrorists. Yale historian Merriman (*History of Modern Europe*) tells the story of Émile Henry, a well-educated young man from a politically radical family who tossed a bomb into a crowded Paris cafe in 1894. In Merriman's portrait, Henry emerges as an understandable, if not sympathetic, figure—a sensitive dreamer whose outrage at the misery of the poor curdled into a fanatical hatred of bourgeois society. He found a home in Europe's percolating anarchist movement, whose adherents celebrated a cult of revolutionary violence and sang hymns to Lady Dynamite; their bombings and assassinations set off a wave of panic and police repression. Merriman's account frames an illuminating study of working-class radicalism in belle époque France and its bitter conflict with the establishment in an age when class warfare was no metaphor. It's also an absorbing true crime story, with Dostoyevskian overtones, about high ideals that motivate desperate acts. Photos. (Feb. 12)

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From [Booklist](#)

A notable scholar of French history, Merriman recounts an episode of terrorism in 1890s Paris that plumbs the motivations of one particular bomber. He was Émile Henry, who at age 20 rejected a potential career in the French army and embraced anarchism. In his narrative, Merriman brings forth biographical elements about Henry—his father was active in the Paris Commune, bloodily suppressed in an all-out 1871 class war—that illuminate his adoption of a radical outlook. Of an intellectual cast of mind, Henry read anarchist classics by Pyotr Kropotkin, novels by Émile Zola, and volunteered for anarchist newspapers. Anarchism's issue of the day was whether workers' liberation would come by revolutionary word or revolutionary deed; in this debate, Henry came down on the side of deeds, galvanized, Merriman suggests, by two anarchists who went unflinchingly to the guillotine for their bombings. Reconstructing Henry's own attacks, Merriman allies a forensic eye with the texture of Paris de la belle époque, ably renders Henry's personality, and implicitly invites comparison of his with the mind-sets of contemporary terrorists. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

Praise for *The Dynamite Club*

"In *The Dynamite Club*, John Merriman brings together his astonishing knowledge of nineteenth-century France, his unmatched skills as an archival 'detective,' his marvelously lucid writing style, and his uncanny talent for bringing historical figures to life. The result is a searing portrait of the tensions and violence that lurked behind the glittering façade of fin-de-siècle France and eerily foreshadowed the terrorist threat of the present day." — David Bell, author of *The Cult of the Nation in France* and *The First Total War*

"Those who think of terrorism as an inexplicable evil produced by an alien culture will have their eyes opened by this fascinating study of nineteenth-century anarchist terrorists . . . [An] absorbing true crime story, with Dostoyevskian overtones, about high ideals that motivate desperate acts." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"John Merriman has told an absorbing story of the strange world of anarchism in late-nineteenth-century France. Replete with uncanny and uncomfortable similarities to the 'war on terrorism' today, *The Dynamite*

*Club* portrays a society swept up in the fear of bombers who are certain that they are achieving immortality for a righteous cause. This saga of Émile Henry and his motley crew of fellow anarchists is hard to put down." — David Kertzer, author of *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* and *Amalia's Tale*

"A notable scholar of French history, Merriman recounts an episode of terrorism in 1890s Paris that plumbs the motivations of one particular bomber. He was Émile Henry, who at age 20 rejected a potential career in the French army and embraced anarchism...Reconstructing Henry's own attacks, Merriman allies a forensic eye with the texture of Paris de la belle Époque, ably renders Henry's personality, and implicitly invites comparison of his with the mind-sets of contemporary terrorists."

(*Booklist* 2009-01-01)

"Merriman leads the reader through a succinct history of anarchism and the rise of dynamite during this period...[his] account complements other sources on the history of terrorism by putting a human face on this and other acts. Well told and thoroughly researched..."

(*Library Journal* 2008-12-01)

"Reading a book on nineteenth-century anarchism by John Merriman is a bit like reading one on the semicolon by Strunk and White. Merriman's *A History of Modern Europe* (1996) is perhaps the best survey of the era, but by narrowing his scope from five hundred years of Continental history to a few bomb-throwing anarchists in Belle Époque France, he is able to pack in riveting detail. "

(*Bookforum* 2009-02-01)

"Brisk and well-written, continually directing our attention toward contemporary analogues."

(*Kirkus Reviews* 2008-12-01)

"Questioning why terrorists attack people like us may lead to answers that call for us to examine our own roles in creating and maintaining the social, economic or political conditions that give rise to terrorist acts. This examination is what makes *The Dynamite Club* so important. Merriman demythologizes Émile Henry and the loosely organized international group of anarchist thinkers who inspired and supported him. Merriman also comments, without being heavy-handed, on the conditions European anarchists were trying to change."

(*Texas Observer* 2009-01-09)

"Merriman paints a fascinating picture of the anarchist underworld, giving real-life background to a milieu made famous by novels such as Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*."

(*Barnes and Noble Review* 2009-02-23)

"Those who think of terrorism as an inexplicable evil produced by an alien culture will have their eyes opened by this fascinating study of 19th-century anarchist terrorists."

(*San Francisco Examiner* 2009-02-08)

"Yale historian John Merriman does many things in *The Dynamite Club*," his book about the bombing, and does them quite well...In describing the fate of a single terrorist, Merriman has skillfully illustrated how social alienation fueled the rise of extremist ideas and acts. The lethal impulses that motivated Henry aren't so different, the author concludes, from the impulses that lead to terrorism today. This accessible account is historically eye-opening and psychologically insightful."

*(The Boston Globe 2009-02-26)*

"Written with elegant brevity, *The Dynamite Club* is a reminder of an era when violent anarchists acted out their hatred against a repressive civilization."

*(The Shepherd Express 2009-04-01)*

"Gripping as a narrative, necessary as a historical lesson, Merriman's *"The Dynamite Club"* reads like a great novel -- all in the service of bringing novel insight into the birth of modern terrorism."

*(Minneapolis Star Tribune 2009-04-14)*

"In *The Dynamite Club*, his enthralling and cinematic account of a Paris cafe bombing in 1894, Merriman achieves that rare thing: virtuosic storytelling that doubles as superb history."

*(Chicago Tribune 2009-05-16)*

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ernest Villa:**

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