

FORUM

Thermidor and the French Revolution

Introduction

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The Thermidorian moment poses an enduring challenge. Stretching from Robespierre's defeat on 9 Thermidor Year II (July 27, 1794) to the dissolution of the National Convention some fifteen months later (October 26, 1795), it lasted longer than the Terror and encompassed almost half of the Convention's period of governance. Yet the Convention of those months was not the mighty assembly of the early republic but, rather, a divided legislature purged of its most dynamic members. Nor did Thermidorian France seem to be the nation of the Revolution's climax, wrestling with the problems of class, crisis, and ideology that have been the historian's bread and butter for more than two centuries. Long famed for corruption, extravagance, and revenge, the period seemed hardly to merit consideration.¹ Jules Michelet and Jean Jaurès flatly refused to address it, declaring that the French Revolution ended with Robespierre's defeat.² Marxists and revisionists took it up but denied the period originality, finding rare agreement in their common conclusion that 9 Thermidor marked the point at which the Revolution doubled back on itself to revive the liberal aspirations of 1789.³

Despite the disdain, Thermidor became the site of some remark-

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¹ The classic account of a decadent Thermidor is Edmond Goncourt and Jules Goncourt, *Histoire de la société française pendant le Directoire*, new ed. (Paris, 1892). For a more critical account of this image, see Ronald Schechter, "Gothic Thermidor: The Bals des Victimes, the Fantastic, and the Production of Historical Knowledge in Post-Terror France," *Representations*, no. 61 (1998): 78–94.

² Françoise Brunel, *Thermidor: La chute de Robespierre* (Brussels, 1989), 8.

³ See, e.g., Albert Mathiez, *La réaction thermidorienne* (Paris, 2010); Georges Lefebvre, *From 1793 to 1799*, vol. 2 of *The French Revolution*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (New York, 1964); Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799*, trans. Alan Forrest and Colin Jones (New York, 1975); François Furet and Denis Richet, *The French Revolution*, trans. Stephen Hardman (New York, 1970).

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able scholarship. Albert Mathiez may have laid the foundation for Marxist repudiations of the period, but the scope of his narrative and the incandescence of his scorn make for a bracing read.⁴ Writing within different historiographical traditions, Richard Cobb and Kåre D. Tønnesson produced indelible portraits of militants chased and defeated after the collapse of the radical republic.⁵ Mona Ozouf, tilling the ground of intellectual history, produced resonant essays on the difficult project of simultaneously remembering and forgetting the trauma of the Terror.⁶ And the crowd of historians gathered to commemorate the Thermidorian bicentenary in *Le tournant de l'an III* reached from Paris deep into the provinces to describe a rupture that touched every dimension of French political culture.⁷ But however successful these individual works, they did not integrate Thermidor into the history of the French Revolution or even make it particularly well known. The period was destined to obscurity as long as historians believed that it was only the site of return or reaction and saw the Revolution's principal interpretive problems playing out elsewhere.

Bronisław Baczko's work changed that. *Ending the Terror*, first published in French in 1989, located novelty in the period with its argument that Robespierre's defeat opened a way forward for legislators equally unwilling to restore the monarchy or preserve Jacobin "tyranny" and popular democracy. The deputies, having learned much in the preceding five years, preserved and transformed the republic by adopting the conservative constitution of Year III.⁸ Baczko's groundbreaking work laid the foundation for a new generation of scholarship. Historians following in his footsteps knit together pre- and post-Thermidor to explain how legislators and private citizens continued to elaborate revolutionary political culture right up to the proclamation of the First Empire in 1804.

Baczko's most visible impact has been on histories of the Directory.⁹

⁴ Mathiez, *La réaction thermidorienne*.

⁵ Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (London, 1970); Cobb, *Reactions to the French Revolution* (London, 1972); Kåre D. Tønnesson, *La défaite des sans-culottes: Mouvement populaire et réaction bourgeoise en l'an III* (Oslo, 1959). On the assault on popular militancy after Thermidor, see also François Brunel and Sylvain Goujon, *Les martyrs de prairial: Textes et documents inédits* (Geneva, 1992); and Haim Burstin, "Echos faubouriens des journées de Prairial," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 304 (1996): 373–85.

⁶ Mona Ozouf, "The Terror after the Terror: An Immediate History," in *The Terror*, vol. 4 of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Oxford, 1994), 3–18; Ozouf, "Thermidor ou le travail de l'oubli," in *L'école de la France* (Paris, 1984), 91–108.

⁷ Michel Vovelle, ed., *Le tournant de l'an III: Réaction et terreur blanche dans la France révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1997).

⁸ Bronisław Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre*, trans. Michel Petheram (Cambridge, 1994).

⁹ Bernard Gainot, *1799: Un nouveau Jacobinisme?* (Paris, 2001); James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Howard Brown and Judith Miller, *Taking Liber-*

If he did not excite an outpouring of new scholarship on the Thermidorian period itself, his influence is visible in a few essential works. The essays gathered in *Pour une république sans révolution* explore an “inextricable play of rupture and continuity” in Year III as they describe the realignment of political forces around the Convention and shifting notions of political order that emerged within its ranks.¹⁰ Although Thermidorian deputies adopted a constitution in 1795 that decisively repudiated democracy, the contributors argue, they looked more favorably on other dimensions of republican government, even the notion of popular sovereignty bequeathed by the constitution of 1793.

Sergio Luzzatto’s *L’automne de la Révolution* and Pierre Serna’s *La république des girouettes* are more ambitious in their appropriations of Bacsko’s revitalized Thermidor, reaching beyond the Revolution to integrate this moment into the broader sweep of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although Luzzatto declares his subject to be the period’s battles over popular sovereignty and public opinion, his true concern is how Thermidorians integrated the many eras France had traversed too quickly by fusing popular and elite cultures of the Old Regime with competing revolutionary aspirations. Alluding to almost every dimension of an era overflowing with incident, Luzzatto explains how debates played themselves out, not just around public opinion and popular sovereignty but also around immunity and culpability, subsistence, religion, and war. Thermidor, he concludes, marked “the moment when political leaders came to understand that ‘the memory of the French Revolution’ could not be one,” either for the nation or for the individual, leaving them “haunted not only by the fear of being betrayed but by the fear of betraying themselves.”¹¹ Serna’s more tightly focused argument turns on its head the notion that France has been torn between radicalism and reaction since 1789, instead linking fears of polarization to the forging of an “extreme center.” That center was not, he asserts, the preserve of moderation to which a weary nation aspired but a revolutionary construct that was formalized after Thermidor to justify strengthening the executive against all opposition. Serna concludes that the retreat to an “extreme center,” institutionalized by the Directory to legitimate its resort to exceptional measures against

ties: Problems of a New Order from the French Revolution to Napoleon (Manchester, 2002); Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville, VA, 2006); Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 2008).

¹⁰ Roger Dupuy and Marcel Morabito, eds., *1795: Pour une république sans révolution* (Rennes, 1996). The phrase concerning rupture and continuity is in Bacsko’s contribution to that volume: “Le tournant culturel de l’an III,” 19.

¹¹ Sergio Luzzatto, *L’automne de la Révolution: Luttes et cultures politiques dans la France thermidorienne*, trans. Simone Carpentari Messina (Paris, 2001), 342–43.

critics labeled “royalist” or “Jacobin,” crested first with Napoléon and continued to fuel searches for “l’homme providentiel” well into the twentieth century.¹²

The purpose of the essays gathered in this forum and those that will follow in the next volume is to build on the foundation of such works by more fully integrating the Thermidorian moment into the history of the French Revolution itself. Robespierre’s defeat did more than pose the constitutional dilemma that Baczko identified. It opened an extended period of renegotiation that reached well beyond the Convention, drawing in citizens of all ranks and every opinion whose efforts touched on the social, cultural, and intellectual, as well as the properly political. To renegotiate was not, however, to begin anew. Indeed one of the central purposes of this forum is to call into question the distinctiveness of the Thermidorian moment. The essays that follow highlight continuities across 9 Thermidor that joined supposedly antithetical political cultures, calling into question traditional ways of periodizing the Revolution and suggesting how much we remain under the Thermidorians’ sway when we accept their mythmaking as the foundation of our historical categories.¹³ Hence this forum and the next intend not just to reexamine the Thermidorian moment but to reshape the contours of the First Republic. The persistence of vital convictions, practices, and habits of violence beyond Robespierre’s defeat revives the question of what role crisis played in the republic’s formation and suggests that we cannot really answer it without better appreciating what was or was not abandoned as crisis receded and why.

Colin Jones begins this forum by examining how official accounts of 9 Thermidor came to exclude Robespierre’s Montagnard opponents and the people of Paris from the final struggle against him. Although Montagnards, and even members of the Committees of Public Safety and General Security, were instrumental in bringing down Robespierre, they were written out of the picture by men who hid their own compromises by generalizing opposition from an individual “tyrant” to an entire “system of terror.” More striking still, Thermidorian deputies eager to assert their authority effaced from memory the thousands of ordinary Parisians who turned out to defend the National Convention on 9 Thermidor, without whom the assembly may not have prevailed.¹⁴

¹² Pierre Serna, *La république des girouettes* (Paris, 2005).

¹³ Jean-Clément Martin and Annie Jourdan raise similar questions around Thermidorian mythmaking. See Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris, 1996); and Jourdan, “Les discours de la terreur à l’époque révolutionnaire (1776–1798): Etude comparative sur une notion ambiguë,” *French Historical Studies* 36, no. 1 (2013): 51–81.

¹⁴ For a detailed account of popular activism on 9 Thermidor, see Colin Jones, “The Overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre and the ‘Indifference’ of the People,” *American Historical Review* 119, no. 3 (2014): 689–713.

Having denied the popular contribution to its victory, the Convention would henceforth dismiss *le peuple* as the easy prey of demagogues to justify narrowing suffrage with the constitution of Year III (1795). Despite copious documentation to the contrary, historians recycled Thermidorian accounts by portraying *le peuple* as so politically apathetic by 9 Thermidor that they could be chased from the conflict by rain.

If Jones modestly describes the production of an official account as “at one level . . . a minor, local, limited polemic,” he nonetheless makes clear how powerfully it resonates through modern accounts of the Revolution. As he rightly notes, recovering knowledge of popular activism against Robespierre at 9 Thermidor frees historians from the unpalatable choice of portraying the people (from the right) as dupes of the Incorruptible or (from the left) as victims of false consciousness. By demonstrating the vitality of popular activism at 9 Thermidor and beyond, he renews debate about the long struggle over political representation that began in 1789 and sheds new light, above all, on the contest over democracy that racked the years between 1793 and 1795. It is difficult to read this essay without asking whether the exclusion of *le peuple* from suffrage was as necessary to the “ending of the Revolution” as Baczkó argued, or whether this was the more narrowly ideological choice of increasingly conservative Thermidorians.

Mette Harder takes up what was long treated as a unique phenomenon of the Terror—the legislative purge—to analyze its endurance beyond Robespierre. Although Thermidorian deputies decried parliamentary purges and restored safeguards of legislative immunity, she explains, they scorned that immunity with alarming regularity for the same reasons they had done so before Thermidor: to win factional battles and assert their authority. They executed fewer men but regularized their vicious habit by improving arrest procedures for deputies, more often imprisoning or exiling them, and even targeting family members who objected. They sustained fundamental continuity with pre-Thermidor as well by continuing to claim that these kinds of practices strengthened the Convention. On the contrary, Harder concludes, purges weakened the assembly by removing outspoken members, subjecting those who remained to the perpetual threat of sharing their colleagues’ fate, and impairing the very principle of representation by depriving the expelled men’s constituents of formal political voice.

As Harder makes clear, her findings fly in the face of François Furet’s classic argument that Thermidor witnessed the victorious recovery of representative legitimacy. The Thermidorians’ ongoing resort to exceptional measures underscores continuity not only between pre- and post-Thermidor Conventions but also between the Convention and the Directory, raising the question of why exceptional measures were such

an endemic feature of the First Republic. Was this an inevitable dimension of the apprenticeship in representation and democracy that the republic inaugurated? If so, why? By demonstrating that the legislative purge was not, or not only, the destructive outcome of Jacobin or sans-culottes ideologies, Harder urges us to value the institution as much as the event. At the same time, she challenges triumphalist accounts of the constitution of 1795 by reaching beyond deputies' rhetoric to locate practices that link Jacobins and directors by way of the Thermidorian Convention.¹⁵

Jeremy D. Popkin finds more encouraging continuity in the Convention's colonial policy as he explains why the Thermidorians did not reverse one of the Mountain's most radical social policies: the decree of February 1794 that abolished slavery throughout the French Empire. The decision was by no means foregone, because the decree was hotly contested: as Popkin notes, white planters falsely blamed Robespierre and demanded, in deputy Lecomte's words, that the effects of his "bloody regime . . . be solemnly banned" from France's colonies. Yet the Convention upheld the decree of emancipation and even integrated it into the conservative constitution of Year III (1795) to guarantee citizenship to all inhabitants of the colonies. If deputies were motivated in part by pragmatism—they were encouraged by the success of interracial troops in defending the colonies against Britain and Spain and persuaded that a free labor force would eventually prove as productive as one enslaved—they were driven as well by idealism, sharing François Antoine de Boissy d'Anglas's conviction that this was a necessary "act of justice." Their actions had lasting consequences. Although Napoléon reversed emancipation in Guadeloupe, the principles of citizenship guaranteed by the Thermidorians had too firmly taken root in Saint-Domingue to be overturned. Former slaves' resistance to renewed subjugation there brought into being the independent nation of Haiti.

Popkin's account of Thermidorians standing by a decree that opponents condemned as a radical act of expropriation recovers the progressive impulses of men more often tarred as reactionary. It suggests, too, the complexity of Thermidorian thought as legislators and private citizens revised political opinions in light of revolutionary experience. Although this kind of fluidity was long condemned as a failure of principle, it merits renewed scrutiny on both sides of Thermidor to enhance the ongoing investigation of the dynamic impact of contingency on ideology.¹⁶

¹⁵ For accounts that stress the achievements of the constitution of Year III, see Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*; and Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror*.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

By stressing continuity, the essays in this forum suggest how much the First Republic remained a coherent political entity despite the dramatic events of 9–10 Thermidor. The essays that will follow in next year's forum attend more closely to change. But rather than renewing the notion that 9 Thermidor fundamentally ruptured the republic, they will explore how Robespierre's defeat merely inflected the course of the Revolution. In so doing they share in the common project of revitalizing the Thermidorian moment by, paradoxically, minimizing the impact of 9 Thermidor.