

The Crisis of March 1793 and the Origins of the Terror

Timothy Tackett

Historians have long recognized the period from early March through early April 1793 as a key moment in the creation of the institutions that would undergird the Terror of the Year II. The Revolutionary tribunal, the surveillance committees, the systematic dispatch of representatives on mission to the departments, the Committee of Public Safety, the extensive arrest of foreigners, the end of parliamentary immunity (first decreed in June 1789): all were voted by the National Convention within a period of only a few weeks. To be sure, most of these measures would be rigorously implemented only over a period of several months and especially after the *journée* of September 5, 1793, when crowds from the Parisian sections and clubs coerced the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety into enforcing more repressive policies. Nevertheless the abrupt creation in March of such an array of measures and institutions still poses a significant historical problem.

In the past historians have understandably linked this development to the ‘circumstances’ of the moment: above all to the outbreak of the Vendée uprising, to the near collapse of the northern front in the war and to the subsequent betrayal of general Dumouriez. Here, without discounting the importance of such events, I would like to explore the psychological and emotional dimension of the Convention’s decisions, and in so doing offer some reflections on the coming of the Terror.¹

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¹ Among recent publications, see, e.g., Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, 2000); David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York, 2005); Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris, 2006); Donald Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law, and*

I will base my observations above all on the correspondence written by the deputies of the various National Assemblies and by other contemporaries who lived through the period. In their search for observations by contemporaries, most historians have relied almost entirely on the memoirs of various Revolutionaries. The memoirs of Talleyrand, Alexandre Lameth, Bertrand Barère, Paul Barras, Madame Roland and the marquis de Ferrières were called upon repeatedly by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians. Yet such memoirs were commonly written twenty or thirty years *after* the Revolution. To be sure, letters are more difficult to use. They typically wander over a wide range of topics, interspersing accounts of political events with personal observations of all kinds – family news, health problems, local gossip or instructions concerning a farm or a business. Moreover, much depended on the specific relationship between individual writers and their correspondents, and unfortunately we usually have only one side of the ‘conversation.’ In general we have given preference to longer and sustained exchanges between close friends, colleagues or relatives. Such letters are particularly useful, moreover, when they are read ‘in series,’ when one compares the reactions and impressions conveyed by several different witnesses who passed through the same experiences. Day-to-day accounts of this kind by thoughtful contemporaries, presenting observations and opinions without foreknowledge, can provide rich insight into the state of mind, and the experience of the Revolutionaries when critical decisions were made.²

Justice during the French Revolution (Cambridge, 2009); and Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2013).

²The following have been used in the present article: Jean-Henri Bancal des Issarts in *Le conventionnel Bancal des Issarts. Etude biographique suivie des lettres inédits*, ed. Francisque Mège (Paris, 1887), 209-74; Claude-Antoine-Augustin Blad, letters to the municipal officers of Brest: A. M. Brest, 2 D 23; Jean-Baptiste Boyer-Fonfrède, letters to the Bordeaux popular society: A. D. Gironde, 12 L 17 (in 2 Mi 8425); Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *Correspondance et papiers* (Paris, 1912); Pierre-Jean-Louis Campmas, letters published in Emile Appolis, “Un conventionnel régicide: Pierre-Jean-Louis Campmas,” *La revue du Tarn*, nouv. sér., 9 (1943), 141-52 and 244-54, and 10 (1944), 326-35; Etienne Chaillon, letters to Vaubertaud in Nantes: B. M. Nantes, Fonds Dugast-Matifeux, Tome I, Vol. 44 (Mic B 48/44); Sylvain Codet, letters to the department of Ille-et-Vilaine: A. D. Ille-et-Vilaine, L 294; Adrien-Joseph Colson, to Roch Lemaigre in Levroux (Indre): A. D. Indre, 2 J 10-12; Georges Couthon, *Correspondance inédits de Georges Couthon, 1791-94*, ed. Francisque Mège (Paris, 1872); Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, *Lettres parisiennes d’un révolutionnaire poitevin* (Tours, 1994); Jean Dyzèz, “Lettres d’un conventionnel (1793-an III),” *La revue de France* 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1926), 201-32, 503-27, 672-93; Pierre-Mathurin Gillet, “Lettres du conventionnel Gillet aux administrateurs du département du Morbihan,” *Révolution française* 61 (1911), 240-68, 354-73, 435-41, 522-35 and 62 (1912), 69-76, 148-74; Nicolas-Célestin Guittard de Floriban, *Journal de Nicolas-Célestin Guittard de Floriban, bourgeois de Paris sous la Révolution, 1791-1796* (Paris, 1974); Jeanbon Saint-André, “Lettres de Jeanbon Saint-André et de Cavaignac à la municipalité de Montauban,” *Révolution française* 21 (1891), 338-73, 24 (1893), 156-61, 29 (1895), 63-86, and 30 (1896), 461-66; Rosalie Jullien, letters to her husband and son: A. N. 39 AP; Philippe-François-Joseph Lebas, letters to his family, in Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez and Pierre-Célestin Roux, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française*, 40 vols (Paris, 1834-1838), 35:318-65; Louis Louchet, letters in B. M. Rodez, kindly copied for me by Peter Jones; Jean-Baptiste Monestier, “Registre de lettres écrites”: B. N., Nouv. Acq. Fr. 6902; Jacques Pinet, letters to the Jacobins of Bergerac: A. M. Bergerac, U 43; Pierre-Ramel, letters to the municipality of Cahors: A. C. Cahors, Unclassed; François-Yves Roubaud, “Lettres de Roubaud, député du Var à l’Assemblée législative (1791-1792),” *Bulletin de la Société d’études scientifiques et archéologiques de Draguignan* 36 (1927-26), 3-218; Nicolas Ruault, *Gazette d’un Parisien sous la Révolution: Lettres à son frère, 1783-96* (Paris, 1976); François-Jérôme Riffard de Saint-Martin, *St-Martin (député de l’Ardèche): Sa correspondance avec L. Th. Chomel* (Privas, 1906); Pierre Vinet, “Lettres du conventionnel P. Vinet,” *Annales historique de la Révolution française* 7 (1930), 63-70.

It is not possible in the present essay to give an extensive development on all of the events of March 1793. Here I want to place particular emphasis, first, on the importance of the conspiracy obsession among the leadership; and, second, on the extraordinary impact on the elite mindset of the military victories at the end of 1792.

The issue of conspiracy beliefs during the French Revolution has been the subject of considerable debate in recent years, a debate that has produced numerous articles and at least two books.³ In my own view, such beliefs were in fact pervasive among the *popular* classes throughout the eighteenth century and on the eve of 1789. However, there is far less evidence for such a phenomenon among the educated elites who would initiate and lead the Revolution.⁴ While a few eighteenth-century authors – such as Voltaire and the Abbé Barruel – were indeed convinced of the existence of various nefarious conspiracies, the vast majority – according to a search through the ARTFL data base – never used the word or any of its obvious synonyms, and those who did, referred primarily to events in the historical past. Montesquieu declared that conspiracies were far more unlikely in his contemporary world than in Greek and Roman times. Diderot derided the popular propensity to explain the high price of bread in terms of plots: “People know that wheat must be cheap, because they earn little and are very hungry. But they do not know, and will never know, how difficult it is to reconcile the vicissitudes of the harvest with the need for grain....”⁵ Indeed, by the later eighteenth century new models for the analysis of political and economic events were becoming available to the educated classes, models that did not require the willed maneuvers of individuals. The language of conspiracy was rare or non-existent in the Old Regime correspondence preserved for future Revolutionaries. One can say much the same of the pamphlets written by future Third Estate deputies during the Pre-Revolutionary period and of the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789. Although there were numerous demands for ministerial accountability and public knowledge of government finances, conspiratorial notions and language were largely absent. Most patriots in 1789 were hopeful that the aristocracy could surmount its “prejudices” and be won over to the Revolutionary cause through reason and persuasion.⁶

The inflation of conspiracy fears among the leadership *after* June 1789 emerged primarily, in my view, from four elements of the Revolutionary process itself.⁷ It arose, in the first place, from the very real threats of counter-revolutionary opposition, led by many

³ See, notably, Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester, 2007); and Barry Coward and Julian Swann, eds., *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe from the Waldensians to the French Revolution* (Ashgate, 2004) (with chapters on the French Revolution by Peter Campbell, Nigel Aston, Marisa Linton and Munro Price).

⁴ Much of the present paragraph is based on the author’s “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror: 1789-1792,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), 691-713. See this article for details of the analysis. ARTFL, the Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language, is based at the University of Chicago and available at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/>.

⁵ Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (Paris, 1967; orig. 1748), 122-23; and Diderot, letter to Necker, June 10, 1776, cited in Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 452.

⁶ Reference here is to the “general” cahiers, those written at the last stage of the electoral process of 1789, to be taken with the deputies to Versailles.

⁷ Themes in this and the following paragraphs are developed in detail in the author’s book, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015). See esp. 135-41 and “Conclusion.”

of the great nobles and clergymen of the Old Regime. If in retrospect, the efforts of the aristocratic opposition and the emigrant armies across the Rhine seem remarkably inept and improbable, it was extremely difficult for the Revolutionary leadership to assess the danger. The threat seemed all the more menacing when more than twenty-five thousand parish clergymen throughout the kingdom, unhappy with the Revolutionaries' reorganization of the Church in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, refused to take an unrestricted oath of loyalty to the new regime. It was impossible to ignore individuals such as these, nobles and priests, who had always wielded such influence in the past and who were now widely suspected of plotting conspiracy and counter-revolution.

Second, one must take into account the decentralization, the veritable institutional and psychological power vacuum that characterized the period from 1789 to 1793. Already by the late summer of 1789 the nation was swept by a crisis of authority unlike anything the French had experienced in their lifetime. Numerous Old Regime officials – intendants, subdelegates, police commissioners, tax collectors, magistrates – fled for their lives or lay low for months. Even after the new administrative and judiciary systems were created by the National Assembly in 1790 and 1791, it could take months before such structures were up and running. In theory, the lines of authority within that system were quite clear: emanating downward from the royal ministers through the department, district and municipal bureaucracies. But in reality it was extremely difficult to enforce laws and directives sent from one level to the next. There would be numerous examples of recalcitrance, passive resistance and open disobedience to instructions arriving from above. At the same time, moreover, there was a widespread delegitimization of nearly all previous authority that reinforced the mood of uncertainty and instability in the country and helped breed a climate of fear and suspicion. This was notably the case with the emergence of such parallel powers as popular societies, national guard units and the neighborhood sections in Paris and in several of the larger cities – powers that often competed for authority with the local administration and sometimes with the National Assembly itself. In such a decentralized configuration of power – so strikingly different from the absolute monarchy of the Old Regime – no one was ever quite certain who held the reins of power and who might, in fact, be a closet conspirator hiding behind the “mask of patriotism,” manipulating the situation for personal advantage or for the benefit of a foreign power.

Third, the patriot elites were invariably shaken by a series of real, high-profile betrayals by individuals whom they had previously trusted and counted on as strong supporters of the Revolution. As we know, the attempted flight of Louis XVI in June 1791 had been altogether traumatic for French citizens everywhere, especially after the king's handwritten note was found in which Louis formally disavowed the solemn oaths to the Constitution that he had formally sworn.⁸ Lafayette's desertion to the Austrians in August 1792, and the revelations of Mirabeau's double-dealings in November 1792 (with the opening of the famous “locked safe”), would further shake the trust of the patriots. If Mirabeau and Lafayette – both long considered heroes of the Revolution – were now proven to be traitors, how could one ever know whom one could trust? Many of the deputies felt mortified and humiliated that they had been so trusting in the past, and they vowed never to allow it to happen again in the future.

⁸ See the author's *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), esp. chaps. 6 and 7.

Fourth, conspiracy beliefs among the elites were reinforced over time through the influence of the more pervasive fears of the popular classes. Such fears spread, in part, since militant Parisian radicals, in particular, came increasingly to idealize and identify with “le peuple,” and to some extent adopt and integrate their values, as they often adopted their speech and clothing. But popular fears also spread among the elites since in periods of great tension and uncertainty – as social scientific studies have suggested – there can be a certain merging of emotional communities that are normally quite separate and distinct.⁹ During a number of panics in Paris – or even in the whole of France – rumors of impending counter-revolutionary coups could race both upwards and downwards between the elite and the popular classes.

In any case, one can document the inflation of conspiracy fears during the Revolution through the systematic analysis of language connoting belief in plots, as found in the correspondence and speeches of the deputies in the various national assemblies.¹⁰ Such an analysis reveals a substantial increase in the frequency of such language in the Legislative Assembly from the autumn of 1791, an increase that continued to rise under the Convention. Such beliefs rapidly spread to all patriot factions on both the Left and the Right – and indeed to the counter-revolutionaries as well. Of particular interest is the emergence of a belief in a “grand conspiracy,” where internal conspirators, external conspirators and conspirators in the court itself were all thought to be working together, with one or a few master operators pulling the strings. To be sure, such beliefs were stronger among some individuals than among others, and they were not necessarily linear in their development, but ebbed and flowed over time, depending on the situation. Nevertheless, the trend was clearly on the increase after the summer of 1791.

The second factor I would like to consider in the assessment of March 1793 is the impact of recent French military successes on the mindset of the Revolutionary leadership. France had first gone to war on the wave of enthusiasm generated by Jacques Brissot and his Girondin friends – Vergniaud, Gensonné, Guadet and Condorcet. The rhetoric of this group had reached a climax in mid-January 1792, with impassioned orations in the Legislative Assembly by one speaker after another. In a particularly dramatic speech on January 14 the Bordeaux lawyer Marguerite-Elie Guadet vowed that the nation would defend to the death the French Constitution against all the enemies of Europe. As he spoke these words, the deputies were swept by a wave of enthusiasm, and all rose with raised arms, shouting out together, “yes, we do so swear!” – an oath vigorously repeated by the spectators in the hall. Adrien Colson, who seems to have been present that day, thought the event was even more dramatic than the Tennis Court oath

⁹ See especially Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2006), “Introduction”; also Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (New York, 1966); and Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, 2007).

¹⁰ For this paragraph and details of the analysis, see the author’s “Rumor and Revolution: The Case of the September Massacres,” *French History and Civilization: Papers from the Rudé Seminar* 4 (2010), <http://www.h-france.net/rude/rudepapers.html>; and, with Nicolas Déplanche, “L’idée de complot dans l’oeuvre de Georges Lefebvre: Remise en cause à partir d’une nouvelle sources,” online article at www.ihrf.com, with accompanying graphs.

two and a half years earlier.¹¹ The spontaneous oath was indicative of the extraordinary enthusiasm and self-confidence with which the French declared war on Austria in April 1792.

The early months of the war, however, from April through September – the stalemate on the northern front and the Prussian invasion in the northeast – were immensely disappointing and unsettling for the patriots. Indeed, the frustrations and fears of that summer would play an important role in the overthrow of the monarchy and the September Massacres. But the victory over the invading Prussians at Valmy on September 21 marked the beginning of an extraordinary reversal of fortune. As the Prussians retreated from French territory in disorder and disarray, soldiers of the Republic swept rapidly into west Germany, the Swiss Confederation, Savoy, the county of Nice and – perhaps even more extraordinary – across the whole of the Austrian Lowlands to the border of Holland. By the end of the year Revolutionary troops had gone far beyond the conquests of Louis XIV, advancing further than any French armies since the time of Charlemagne.¹²

In all their correspondence, witnesses expressed near-millenarian emotion for such victories and for the future which they now saw spread out before them. The Revolution's destiny to liberate all the peoples of Europe, enunciated the previous January by Brissot and the Girondins, now seemed within reach, and the intensity of enthusiasm soon touched every political faction. Jeanbon-Saint-André, the Montagnard Protestant from Montauban, described the Prussian army, "the successors of Frederick the Great", fleeing "like a herd of sheep, trembling before the shepherd's crook." "Now is the perfect moment," wrote Robespierre's young friend Philippe Lebas, "to destroy tyranny throughout the whole of Europe."¹³ It seemed patently obvious that the only thing that had blocked the French victories six months earlier had been the actions of a treacherous king and general. Once the monarchy had been abolished and once they were rid of Lafayette, everything had become possible. "The end of the monarchy," wrote the Girondin Riffard de Saint-Martin, "seems to have marked the end of all our difficulties." Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, who usually sat with the Plain, clearly concurred: "Now at last," he wrote, "we are able to show the whole universe what a free people can do that has dared to abolish the monarchy."¹⁴

The Revolutionary hubris seemed to know no bounds. There was talk of 'liberating' Poland, Naples and Spain. If this meant taking on the whole of Europe, so be it. Recent events had demonstrated that a free people could easily overcome the best

¹¹ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises. Première série (1787-1799)*, Jérôme Mavidal, Emile Laurent, et al., eds., 82 vols (Paris, 1867-1913) [hereafter AP], 37:412-13 (Jan. 14, 1792), and 491 (Jan. 18). Colson, letter of Jan. 18. See also the account of Codet, letter of Jan. 16.

¹² See, esp., Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution française*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1885-1911), vol. 3; Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution française. La première Terreur*, series "Les cours de Sorbonne" (Paris, [1942]); and *La Révolution française: La Convention*, series "Les cours de Sorbonne," 2 vols. (Paris, [1943]); Jean-Paul Bertaud, *Valmy, la démocratie en armes* (Paris, 1970); and T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787-1802* (London, 1996).

¹³ Jeanbon, 29 (1895), 66 (letter of Oct. 3, 1792); and Lebas, 35:325 (letter of Oct. 26). See also Ramel, letter of Sept. 23; Couthon, 198 (letter of Sept. 27); Blad, letter of Oct. 10; Colson, letter of Sept. 26; Gillet, 248 (letter of Oct. 2); Dubreuil, 73 (letter of Oct. 6); and Louchet, letter of Oct. 4.

¹⁴ Saint-Martin, 50 (letter of Oct. 10, 1792); and Dubreuil, 74 (letter of Oct. 6). See also Ruault, 317 (letter of Oct. 18); and Jeanbon, 29 (1895), 65 (letter of Oct. 3).

armies on the Continent, and there were numerous references to the defeat of the great Persian empire by the ancient Greeks. In a speech on November 9 the Girondin Pierre Vergniaud pushed his eloquence to new heights, as he dreamed of a war to end war: “Men have died in the recent fighting. But it is so that none will ever die again. I swear to you, in the name of the universal fraternity which you are creating, that each battle will be a step towards peace, humanity, and happiness for all peoples.” Brissot himself, in a revealing letter to Dumouriez of late November, urged the general to cease concerning himself about alliances with the Prussians or the English or whomever. They must abandon the manner of thinking of Old-Regime ministers: “how can their petty schemes compare to the uprisings of the whole planet and the momentous revolutions that we are now called upon to lead.” By next year, he predicted, the French would march into Berlin. As the Montagnard Jacques Pinet wrote to his constituency: “We will soon overthrow every throne.”¹⁵

There can be no doubt – and this is clear in some of the speeches during the king’s trial the following December and January – that the assumption they were now going to overthrow all the tyrants of Europe was a significant factor in the determination to eliminate their own former tyrant, “Louis Capet.” The Convention deputy Jean-Baptiste Mailhe made this point explicitly in his influential report on the king’s trial in November. The success of the French armies, he announced, would soon transform the whole of Europe and bring the destruction of all kings. The Convention’s treatment of their own king “must serve as an example for all nations.”¹⁶

The immense French self-confidence was also evident in the rhetoric building to the declaration of war against Britain and Holland in early 1793. In January, Brissot’s friend Armand Kersaint developed an extraordinary vision of the conquests the nation would achieve once they had settled with the British and their Dutch allies. They would move on to liberate all the colonies held by the two powers: “Asia and the Americas are calling us.” And why not also bring the Revolution to Portugal and Brazil.¹⁷ On January 12, Brissot himself expounded a similar message. In money, ships and men the French had a clear advantage over Britain, which was now, he claimed, the mere “shadow of a great power,” deeply in debt from its previous wars. Indeed, war with England would provide the occasion to bring the blessings of freedom to India.¹⁸ Much the same language was mobilized by speakers from the Mountain and the Plain as the Convention voted unanimously to declare war on Britain.

Throughout the weeks of February and early March, in letters both to patriotic societies and to family and friends, all the deputies predicted the rapid and overwhelming victory of the armies of the Republic. There was a remarkable optimism, a veritable exaltation among Girondins, Montagnards and members of the Plain alike. “I cannot doubt,” wrote the Montagnard stalwart Georges Couthon, “that if we firmly desire it, we can liberate Europe in six months and purge the earth of all tyrants.” His colleague Jean-Baptiste Monestier fully agreed: “The war will be successful. I have never doubted it, since it is undertaken for a righteous cause and supported by men who will never retreat.”

¹⁵ Vergniaud in *AP*, 53:331 (Nov. 3, 1792); Brissot, 316-17 (letter of Nov. 28); Pinet, letter of Nov. 11. See also Louis-Marie Prudhomme in *Révolutions de Paris* (issue of Nov. 8 to 15).

¹⁶ *AP*, 53:275-82 (Nov. 7, 1792).

¹⁷ *AP*, 56:114-16 (Jan 1, 1793).

¹⁸ *AP*, 57:23-24 (Jan. 12, 1793).

Brissot's friend Henri Bancal des Issarts was convinced the coming conflict would be a war to end wars: "the last that will ever bring grief to Europe." The young merchant from Bordeaux, Jean-Baptiste Boyer-Fonfrède, recognized the challenge that the war presented, but he was convinced of an ultimate victory: "An end to repose, an end to peace, an end to all feeble fears. We reject any thought of compromise. We will save the nation," he concluded, "as long as we never look back."¹⁹

It was in this same mood of unbounded determination and confidence that the deputies now began formally annexing to France almost all of the territories previously occupied by their victorious armies. By the first week of March Belgium, Nice, Savoy, the Right Bank of the Rhine and some areas of Switzerland, along with the former independent enclave of Salm in Eastern France, had all been slated for incorporation into new French departments.²⁰ Pinet was ecstatic: henceforth the French and the Belgians "are all one. There will be no more distinctions between them, and these two nations will form but a single people of brothers and of friends." Monestier was already thinking about the name they should give to the new French department in southern Belgium, deciding that the "Plaines du Nord" would be most suitable. Couthon predicted that once it had been "occupied," Holland too would ask to be joined to the Republic.²¹ It was in this same mood of undoubting confidence that on March 7 the Convention unanimously declared war on Spain. "One more enemy for France," declared Bertrand Barère, "will bring one more triumph for liberty."²²

Of course, a war to be pursued against the whole of Europe along all of France's frontiers and on the high seas would obviously demand more troops and perhaps a reorganized army and navy. The deputies were well aware, moreover, that many of the volunteers of 1792 had only enrolled for a limited period and had now left the front and returned home. But they felt optimistic that most such men would take up arms once again when they realized their country's need for new sacrifices. And they were confident that the Convention could raise the additional troops necessary for a multi-front war, just as they had been able to do the previous summer. After careful calculations they determined that the nation would need some 300,000 additional soldiers, and a decree was voted in late February to begin the necessary recruitment.²³ In general, they assumed that new troops could be raised without difficulty. They took note of France's large population, with a greater supply of young men than any other nation of Europe. And above all they recalled the enthusiasm of the summer of 1792 when national guardsmen and other volunteers from towns all around France had rushed to join up and confront the invading Prussians. "We are hopeful," confided Claude-Antoine Blad to his friends in Brest, "that the cry of the 'fatherland in peril' will suffice to bring to our aid far more defenders than we have asked for." Pierre Vinet came to much the same conclusion: "Opinion in the departments could not be more favorable. All have adopted the same

¹⁹ Couthon, 218 (letter of Feb. 7, 1793); Monestier, letter of Feb. 7; Bancal, 259 (letter of Feb. 21); Boyer-Fonfrède, letters of Jan. 19 and Feb. 2. See also Dubreuil, 95 (letter of Mar. 5); and Blad, letter of Mar. 2. In debates on military reform, both the Jacobin Dubois-Crancé and the Girondin Isnard agreed on "l'invincibilité de l'armée française": *AP*, 59:66 (Feb. 21). Among the Montagnard leadership, Robespierre, Collot, Danton and Carnot all gave strong support for war: Lefebvre, *Convention*, 1:239-42.

²⁰ See, e.g., *AP*, 59:570-71, 602-603, 648-49 (March 3, 4, and 6, 1793); also Sorel, 3:312.

²¹ Pinet, letter of Mar. 2, 1793; Monestier, letter of Mar. 2; Couthon, 222 (letter of Mar. 5).

²² *AP*, 59:686-91 (Mar. 7, 1793).

²³ Lefebvre, *Convention*, 1:257.

motto: ‘victory or death!’” “If we are to resist the whole of Europe leagued against us,” wrote Louis-Marie Prudhomme, “we will need 300,000 more men. We will have them. For the volunteers will know that we are fighting for all the patriots of Europe.”²⁴

The problem, as we know, was that many of the most fervent young patriots – townsmen for the most part – were already serving in the armies. If the recruitment was to be successful, there must be a considerable number of new enlistees from the lower and lower-middle classes and, above all, from the great mass of the peasantry. And as the Convention would discover to its distress, a great many Frenchmen and, especially a great many peasants, were not at all ready to fight.

At first the deputies seemed to ignore the reports of the Austrian counter-attack in Belgium and the Prussian onslaught against western Germany at the beginning of March. They had great difficulty setting aside their vision of the inevitable triumph of the forces of liberty. Blad described the initial news from the north as a “minor setback” that would soon be overcome.²⁵ Only after their colleagues Danton and Lacroix returned from the front on March 8 and presented a report, was the Convention confronted with the full gravity of the situation. Scarcely two weeks later came word of the calamitous defeat at Neerwinden and the French evacuation of the whole of Belgium, just as their forces in Germany were being pushed back into Alsace. The predicament seemed all the more incomprehensible and painful, in that the Convention had only just annexed its northern neighbors. The argument was made that it was French territory itself that had been overrun. “It is the territory of the Republic,” wrote Monestier, “that we have to take back.” “We must have revenge!” cried Fonfrède, “Revenge for the attack that our brothers have suffered. We must take back Liège which belongs to us, and Aix-la-Chapelle, which is ours.”²⁶

But almost simultaneously with news of the Neerwinden defeat, reports began arriving of recruitment riots in the provinces, of Frenchmen and especially peasants who refused to enlist. The revolts were particularly massive in the West, throughout much of Brittany, Maine, Anjou and western Poitou, but they initially touched almost every corner of the country – even breaking out in a number of generally patriotic towns like Grenoble, Bordeaux, Angoulême, Orléans and Toulouse. During the terrible weeks of late March, the Convention was bombarded daily with letters concerning both the war disasters and the internal insurrections. Speeches proposing emergency measures to shore up the northern frontier were interrupted by letters from the provinces with desperate calls for aid against anti-recruitment insurrections that were seemingly exploding everywhere at once. Panic-stricken correspondence poured in from towns all over Brittany, all said to be besieged by “brigands.” “Every hour,” wrote an official from Nantes, “we receive more disastrous news. We fear that by the time you receive this letter, the whole department will be in flames.” Stunned deputies on mission in the Breton capital of Rennes reported that “nearly the entire countryside is marching [against us] in battle formation, led by talented leaders.”²⁷

²⁴ Blad, letter of Feb. 20, 1793; Vinet, 66 (letter of Feb. 25); Prudhomme in *Les Révolution de Paris* (issue of Feb. 16 to 23).

²⁵ Blad, letter of Mar. 9, 1793; and *AP*, 59:621-23, 634-35, 667, 673, 677, 686-91 (Mar. 5 to 7).

²⁶ Monestier, letter of Mar. 9, 1793; and Boyer-Fonfrède, letter of Mar. 9. See also Pinet, letter of Mar. 10; and Roubaud, 174 (letter of Mar. 8).

²⁷ See the letters in *AP*, 60:335-704, passim; esp. *AP*, 60:294-95 and 558-60 (Mar. 18 and 26, 1793). Also Charles-Louis Chassin, ed., *La préparation de la guerre de Vendée*, 3 vols (Paris, 1892), 3:378 and 387;

Those deputies who themselves came from the affected departments were particularly distressed, and several wrote desperate letters to loved ones back home. Etienne Chaillon, who lived in a small town to the west of Nantes, learned only after several days of anxiety that his oldest daughter had succeeded in escaping across the Loire with his other children. He was enormously relieved, even though he knew that his home and much of his property had been destroyed. And since it was at first impossible to assess the extent of the uprisings, other deputies with friends and families near the affected regions were also beset by apprehension. When Dubreuil heard that rebels had taken Parthenay, he immediately feared for his own family living just to the south. Pierre Campmas even worried that the uprisings might spread as far as his home in the Massif Central, and he urged his family to flee to Albi.²⁸

From March through May 1793, no single issue more preoccupied the deputies in their letters home than the internal counter-revolutions. And virtually without exception, they were convinced that it was a coordinated plot. How else could one explain that the recruitment riots had all broken out at the same moment? Surely it was not simply a coincidence that the internal uprisings occurred just when the Austrians and Prussians were attacking in the north. What other explanation was there for the revolt of a peasantry who, they believed, had gained so much from the Revolution. To a man they were persuaded of the central role of the nobles and the refractory clergy in leading the revolts. The March disasters were all of a piece. The recruitment issue, wrote Pierre Gillet, “was merely a pretext to disguise this great plot.” Bancal concurred: “The internal and external enemies undoubtedly combined to hatch a conspiracy against liberty and the Convention.”²⁹

Coming on the heels of these multiple disasters, and perhaps even more shattering, was the betrayal at the end of March of the Revolution’s commander in chief on the northern front, Charles-François Dumouriez. Although some Parisian militants had already put in doubt the general’s loyalty, both Girondins and Montagnards had initially rejected such accusations out of hand. “The whole Convention,” wrote Pinet on March 13, “was indignant” against the criticisms of their general.³⁰ Concern was aroused, however, when Dumouriez sent a blistering attack against both the Jacobins and the Convention itself, blaming them for not adequately supporting his army.³¹ Eventually, after the French defeat at Neerwinden, the Convention felt compelled to send four deputies, along with the Minister of Defense, to confront the general. But by now Dumouriez had made a pact with the Austrians and when the commissioners arrived, he had them all arrested – and shipped off to an Austrian prison where they would remain for several years. He then announced his plan to turn the French army around, march on Paris, dismiss the Convention and place Louis XVI’s young son on the throne.³²

Lefebvre, *Convention*, 1:258-59; and Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris, 1987), 28 and 45-46; and *Contre-Révolution, Révolution et Nation en France, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1998), 160-61.

²⁸ Chaillon, letter of Mar. 26, 1793; Dubreuil, 110 (letter of May 18); and Campmas, 251 (letter of May 12). See also Pinet, letter of Mar. 29; Guittard, 236-37 (entry of Mar. 19); and Louchet, letter of May 14.

²⁹ Gillet, 531-33 (letter of Mar. 18, 1793); and Bancal, 261 (letter of Mar. 13). See also Pinet, letter of Mar. 13; Boyer-Fontfrède, letter of Mar. 19; and Prudhomme in *Révolutions de Paris* (issue of Mar. 16 to 23).

³⁰ Pinet, letter of Mar. 13, 1793. See also *AP*, 60:122 (Mar. 12); Bancal, 264 (letter of Mar. 14); Dyzèz, 211-12 (letter of Mar. 26); and the speech by Vergniaud, *AP*, 60:162 (Mar. 13).

³¹ Lefebvre, *Convention*, 1:316-17; Pinet, letter of Mar. 29, 1793.

³² Lefebvre, *Convention*, 1:346-53.

In fact, as we know, the republican soldiers, intensely patriotic volunteers always suspicious of their officers, would have nothing to do with their general's plans. Dumouriez would be forced to flee across the lines – much as Lafayette had done just six months earlier.³³ But the effect on the Revolutionaries was devastating. After all the other recent betrayals, the treason of a general in whom they had placed so much trust seemed an overwhelming calamity. Deputies from every faction wrote back heartfelt letters to their friends and constituencies. Blad could scarcely believe that “the conqueror of Valmy and of Jemappe, whom the Republic had only recently honored for his triumphs, was only a vile rogue.” Pinet was mortified that he had allowed himself to be so deceived and had not penetrated this new conspiracy. Where would the treachery stop? Whom could they ever trust? It was proof positive, as he said, that they were “surrounded by traitors.”³⁴

In this situation, throughout much of March and early April, a veritable panic swept through both the Convention and the city of Paris. Tensions were further intensified, moreover, by a series of riots in the city in late February – and for which the best account is given by George Rudé.³⁵ Citizens and especially women had demanded an end to the inflation of a whole range of commodities deemed necessary and had stormed into shops across the city to help themselves, paying – if they paid at all – only the price they considered fair. Now, with the disastrous news from the front and from Western France, the gates of the city were locked, the tocsin was rung, neighborhood surveillance committees sat around the clock and many individuals were ordered arrested during nighttime raids. The Convention went into permanent session, with some representatives remaining in the hall day and night. Soon rumors were swirling of plots to murder the deputies, with evildoers ready to emerge, producing an atmosphere not unlike that in the Legislative Assembly in May and again in September 1792. “We feel terrible anxiety over all these events,” wrote Rosalie Jullien. “People say that there is a new plot against liberty. Everyone is trembling.” “I have been unable to sleep at night.” And she readily compared her anxiety to that of the previous September. Some of the *sans-culottes* even began demanding that the Parisians return to the prisons, as at the time of the September Massacres. Indeed, it was in this context that Danton made his oft-cited remark: “Let us profit from the mistakes of our predecessors. We must be terrible, so that the people will not have to be.”³⁶ For Prudhomme, the danger had never seemed so great. Though he had recently been suspicious of the crowds, there now seemed no choice but to fall back on “the people”: “Brave sans-culottes! You are now the only ones we can truly count on.”³⁷

With historical hindsight, it is easy to conclude that the crisis of March 1793 was largely the Revolutionary's fault; that it was madness to expand the war and take on all of

³³ As Durand de Maillane noted, the French soldier “était plus républicain qu'aucun citoyen”: Pierre-Toussaint Durand de Maillane, *Histoire de la Convention nationale* (Paris, 1825), 84. See also Marcel Reinhard, *Le grand Carnot: De l'ingénieur au conventionnel, 1753-1792* (Paris, 1959), 370-71.

³⁴ Blad, undated letter of ca. Apr. 3, 1793; and Pinet, letter of Apr. 3. See also Dubreuil, 103 (letter of Apr. 6); and Louchet, letter of Apr. 2.

³⁵ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959), 114-18.

³⁶ Jullien, letter of Mar. 10, 1793; and *AP*, 59:718-22, 60:1-5, 62-70, and 95-96. See also Pinet, letter of Mar. 10; and Guittard, 233 (entry of Mar. 8).

³⁷ Prudhomme in *Révolutions de Paris* (issue of Mar. 23 to 30, 1793). See also Roubaud, 170 (letter of Mar. 3); Colson, letters of Mar. 30 and Apr. 3; Ruault, 327 (letter of Mar. 16); Jullien, letters of Mar. 17 and Apr. 6 and 9; Guittard, 234 and 238 (entries of Mar. 13 and 28); Blad, letter of Mar. 29; and Pinet, letter of Mar. 29.

Europe; that they should have realized the allies would launch a counterattack against their armies; and that much of the rural population would be unwilling to abandon their fields for a distant war. But the reality is that most of them anticipated nothing of the sort. And faced with so many threats, the deputies became extraordinarily nervous and volatile, sometimes on the verge of panic. For well over a year they had been haunted by the menace of a “grand conspiracy.” They now seemed to have clear proof that the external and internal assaults were all coordinated, all working together to destroy the Revolution. Virtually every deputy who left contemporary testimonies – whether of the Mountain or the Gironde or the Plain – was convinced such a conspiracy existed. The deputy Louis-Sébastien Mercier, essayist and playwright of the late Enlightenment, understood the psychology of the moment only too well. “Few men,” he wrote, “are able to maintain their integrity, when everything around them is threatening and shaking and collapsing.... They are pushed along and carried away without ever realizing it; they are swept up in the passions of others.”³⁸

The calamitous news received by the deputies during this period would so crowd together that it is often difficult to determine who in Paris knew what and when and the extent to which specific events, or rather the general fear and uncertainty, influenced the decisions taken. But there can be no doubt that the clustering of unforeseen ‘circumstances,’ directly threatening the very survival of the Revolution from without and within – just at a moment when the political leadership had been so optimistic – led directly to the improvisation of measures that would form the basis of the regime of the Terror. In an atmosphere of suspicion and intense emotion they rapidly cobbled together almost all of the basic institutions that came to constitute the regime of the Year II. There was never a systematic plan, and they would continue to improvise and invent over the coming months, as they progressively implemented and strengthened those institutions, some of which were at first only sketched. Although the new structures would soon work to the advantage of the Jacobins of the Mountain, all of the parties in the Convention helped to create them. Indeed, almost all of the institutions in question had precedents contrived in various earlier crises. The Revolutionary tribunal, the representatives on mission, the surveillance committees and the committee of public safety had all been prefigured after the flight to Varennes or in the weeks following August 10: sometimes in national decrees, sometimes in lengthy debates, sometimes also through the improvisations of local administrations.³⁹ To be sure, the removal of parliamentary immunity and the subsequent purge of the deputies were unprecedented. But the Girondins themselves had implicitly demanded such a purge since they first sought to oust the Montagnard leaders in the autumn of 1792.

Yet the crisis of 1793 had a profound effect not only on the institutions of the Terror, but also on what might be termed the ‘mindset’ of the Terror. Again and again, deputies from every faction drove home the idea that when the Revolution itself was in danger of destruction, all means were justified to preserve it. Couthon was explicit in early May: “Measures that would be political crimes under a peaceful and well-established government, now become indispensable.” The Girondin sympathizer Edme-Michel Petit made much the same argument: “when faced with dire necessity, we have

³⁸ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1994), 327.

³⁹ For the proto-terrorist measures implemented after the flight to Varennes, see the author’s *When the King Took Flight*, esp. chap. 6.

had to set aside the laws.... Such is the terrible compromise we must make in order to preserve our Revolution.” For the farmer-deputy Dubreuil, “the Convention can no longer rely on half-measures, but those required by circumstances. Only thus will the fatherland be saved and our cowardly enemies struck down and defeated.”⁴⁰

On March 18, in the midst of the crisis, Barère delivered a dramatic speech in the name of the Committee of General Security. He spoke of the war reversals, of the recruitment riots and of what many thought had been an attempted social uprising of the *enragés* in breaking into stores and seizing goods. He then demanded a series of repressive decrees. Prosecution in the newly created Revolutionary tribunals must be made more efficient. Those leading ‘counter-revolutionary’ actions or opposing recruitment must be sent before a military commission and executed within twenty-four hours. All foreigners who could not justify their presence must be expelled. The rich must be taxed to pay for the national defense and all property of emigrants must be sold. There should also be a death penalty for anyone promoting the seizure of private property. At one point when Barère called for the death penalty, the whole Convention – first the Montagnards but then all of the deputies – began shouting out “Death! Death! Death!”⁴¹

In fact, the crisis calmed somewhat over the coming weeks. It soon became clear that the republican soldiers had rejected Dumouriez’s orders. As the northern front was temporarily stabilized, and as the recruitment riots were put down by military forces and national guardsmen from the towns in Brittany, Maine and most everywhere except the Vendée, the panic of March and early April faded away. In the short term, many of the new laws laying the groundwork for increased repression and centralization were not stringently enforced – and would only be energized and reinvigorated during the following summer: after the development of the Federalist crisis, after further military defeats, after the assassination of Marat and following the intervention of popular forces from Paris and the provinces in August and September.

Nevertheless, these brief reflections help underscore the complexity of the historical phenomenon of the coming of the Terror. It is obvious that ‘circumstances’ during that spring – the war, the uprising in the West, the betrayal of Dumouriez – played an extremely important role in the origins of the Year II. However, based on the present analysis, it is also clear that one must take into account the impact of emotions – and notably the alternation of emotions between enthusiasm and joy, on the one hand, and fear and anger on the other.⁴² Indeed, one can hypothesize that circumstances alone would have been insufficient to provoke the Terror, without a prior transformation of the *mentalité* of the Revolutionaries. Such a transformation, moreover, cannot be explained by the Old Regime rhetoric of Rousseau, or the sentimental novel, or various abstract theories of virtue or natural right. Rather, I would argue, it was ultimately integral to the

⁴⁰ Couthon, 227-228 (letter of May 9, 1793); Petit, letter of May 27, cited in Lefebvre, *Convention*, 2:32-33; Dubreuil, 103 (letter of Apr. 6). Similar arguments were made by Monestier, letter of Feb. 26; Pinet, letter of Mar. 29; Boyer-Fonfrède, letter of Mar. 19; and Louchet, letter of Apr. 6.

⁴¹ *AP*, 60:290-98 (Mar. 18, 1793).

⁴² Most recent considerations of emotion in the French Revolution have focused on generalized “sentiment”. See, e.g., M. William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001); and Sophie Wahnich, “De l’économie émotive de la Terreur,” *Annales E. S. C.* 57 (2002), 889–913. It is essential, however, to take into account and differentiate between the specific emotions of joy, fear, anger, hatred, etc. See the author’s *Coming of the Terror*, esp. chp. 5.

very process and experience of the French Revolution, and perhaps after all, integral to the phenomenon of revolution itself.