
H-France Review Vol. 17 (August 2017), No. 141

Dominique Julia, ed. *L'École normale de l'an III: Une institution révolutionnaire et ses élèves, Introduction historique à l'édition des Leçons*. Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm/Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 2016. 656 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €50.00 (cl). ISBN 978-2-7288-0548-8.

Review by James E. McClellan III, Stevens Institute of Technology.

On 9 Brumaire Year III (October 30, 1794) the National Convention in Paris voted the creation of a revolutionary normal school, the *École normale*. Launched in the wake of 9 Thermidor (July 27, 1794), the fall of Robespierre, and the end of the Terror and amid a whirlwind of nation-building and other educational projects, the object of this new school was to muster qualified students from all over France and to provide them advanced instruction by eminent professors in a variety of scientific and liberal arts subjects with the aim of students thereafter returning to the provinces to train primary and secondary school teachers responsible for the education of republican youth. Some 1,500 vetted recruits from all over France made their way to Paris, with sessions at the *École normale* opening on 1 Pluviôse Year III (January 20, 1795) in the grand amphitheater of the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle on the Left Bank of the Seine. Classes continued for four months until the National Convention closed the school on 30 Floréal Year III (May 19, 1795). For a variety of reasons the *École normale* of Year III was a failure, but as Dominique Julia and his colleagues make plain, the episode constituted a distinctive moment in the course of the French Revolution and the history of education in France, a moment well worth the thorough study it receives in the remarkable book at hand.

This volume caps and needs to be evaluated as part of a related and even more monumental scholarly project that now extensively documents the *École normale* of Year III. That documentation, initiated by Jean Dhombres decades ago as part of the celebrations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, now includes four published volumes of the courses (*Leçons*) offered at the *École* (mathematics, 1992, edited by Dhombres, who contributes to the present volume as well; history, geography, and political economy, edited by Daniel Nordman, 1994; physical sciences, chemistry, and natural history, edited by Étienne Guyon, 2006; grammar, rhetoric/reasoning, literature, and moral theory, edited by Dhombres and Béatrice Didier, 2008). To the present work, Julia has added a complementary tome of contemporary documents related to the *École*, *Une institution révolutionnaire et ses élèves (2): Textes fondateurs, pétitions, correspondances et autres documents (janvier-mai 1795)* (Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2016), downloadable from Éditions Rue d'Ulm for €15.00. Last, but hardly least in this connection, Stéphane Baciocchi in collaboration with Julia has compiled an extraordinary public and searchable database, *Dictionnaire prosopographique des élèves nommés à l'École normale de l'an III* (<http://lakanal-1795.huma.num.fr/>), that with substantial assistance from provincial archivists, catalogues the names and provides biographical details for most of 1,776 students who did (and did not) attend the *École* as well as identifying 553 districts from whence students came. The present volume of historical narrative and analysis stands atop this substantial body of pre-existing scholarly work, notably the prosopography of students compiled by Baciocchi and Julia that allows for a particularly nuanced and detailed treatment of the *École* and its shining moment in the transit of the French Revolution.

Although seemingly without precedent, the *École normale* of Year III, as Étienne François shows in the introductory chapter, did have antecedents, communicated through Alsatian representatives at the Convention, in earlier German and Austro-Hungarian normal schools designed to teach teachers. Another crucial impetus for the establishment of the *École* came from the success of the accelerated “revolutionary courses” in January and February 1794 devoted to refining saltpeter, manufacturing gunpowder and casting cannon that fetched young men to Paris for quick instruction and then, through a hoped for “multiplier effect,” rushed 800 of them back to towns and villages throughout the nation to launch production for the war effort. The *École polytechnique*, as a further example, saw the first light of day in March 1794, and the *École de Mars* that operated just outside Paris from June through October 1794 and that brought 3,400 young *sans-culottes* to Paris for military training evidences this same efflorescence of patriotic initiative and centralized educational projects. Other plans to establish a national educational system percolated within the Convention’s *Comité d’instruction publique* at the same time as the foundation of the *École normale*.

The instructors chosen to teach were the top French scientists and intellectuals who had made it through the Terror (Lavoisier and Condorcet did not): Laplace, Lagrange, Monge, Volney, Buache de La Neuville, Mentelle, Vandermonde, Haüy, Berthollet, Daubenton, Garat, Sicard, La Harpe, and belatedly Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. (Nominated, André Thouin decided to stay on assignment in the Low Countries). A new pedagogical philosophy animated the “Lessons” offered. Professors were not to read dry lectures but to present material and complementary demonstrations and experiments spontaneously and orally. A stenographic record (*Journal sténographique*) was kept of each session, then published within days and distributed to students, who in special sessions could then raise questions with their instructors and discuss materials otherwise in other student-led preceptorials.

Although often under the supervision of the local patriotic society and/or a local representative on mission dispatched from Paris, recruiting students was highly decentralized with each district developing its own processes and norms for identifying candidates and vetting them politically and academically through interviews, juried exams and the like; some students received direct appointment from authorities in Paris. Based on the prosopographical database of students, Julia and Baciocchi are able to detail the geographical origins of students (mostly from northern France), their ages (many in their forties and fifties), and religious and social backgrounds (many politically motivated former priests and professors anxious to carve out fresh careers in the new regime). To call those who attended the *École normale* of Year III “students” (“*élèves*”) misses the point that many were already accomplished and well-educated men who did not uncritically absorb everything that emanated from the front of the room at the amphitheater of the *Muséum*.

The winter of 1794-1795 was an especially harsh one that made life in Paris grueling for students and all concerned. The thermometer matched record lows; bread and firewood were scarce and rationed, a situation made worse by rampant inflation. Students at the *École* received a nominal stipend from the government but many continued only with support from relatives in the capital or from the districts that sent them. Many dropped out and returned home.

The *École* failed on several levels. Attendance was spotty as students could attend or not as they chose. Many followed only the courses that interested them, such as literature or the sciences. The school’s mission was ambiguous: was it to teach teachers or to convey cutting-edge research? Although a special committee worked on preparing simplified works for pedagogical use, the planners offered no practical instruction for prospective teachers and instead opted for simply transmitting advanced instruction, leaving its reception or utility up to students. As a result, most of what was presented at the *Muséum* was irrelevant and over the heads of most auditors. The originally planned set of regional normal schools never came about and no nationally organized primary or secondary schools were in place by mid-1795, so students at the *École normale* in Paris ended up with no guarantee of employment afterward, which not only demoralized cadres but rendered the *École* irrelevant to the further work of the *Comité*

d'instruction publique. Then, as the Thermidorian reaction gained steam, the École and its students became tainted as residues of radicalism and hence extraneous, even dangerous in French politics. The experiment was not to be repeated.

All this and more Julia and his team document in ample and fascinating detail. The richness of their prosopographical database allows them to untangle diverse interpretations in making their way forward through their material (e.g., ascertaining the place and career trajectories of former priests among the student body). One of their main conclusions is that, overall, the students who studied at the École normale in Year III provided the backbone of instructors in the Napoleonic university system. Nicely illustrated with contemporary documents, this is a very dense work of 650 pages printed in too small a font, especially too small for the abundant notes and embedded quotations. The analysis is very fine-grained, and the authors seem unable to restrain their use of examples, given the abundance of cases they have at hand. This book traces the later careers of the *normaliens* of Year III, but it deliberately skirts the delicate issue of the relation of this École normale to the later foundations of 1808 and 1826 and the present-day École normale supérieure on the Rue d'Ulm in Paris.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Dominique Julia, "Préface"

Étienne François, "L'École normale: une création allemande?"

Dominique Julia, "La formation des corps enseignants dans la France du XVIIIe siècle"

Dominique Julia, "La fondation de l'École normale de l'an III"

François Azouvi, "L'École normale de l'an III ou la recréation de l'entendement humain"

Dominique Julia, "La mise en œuvre du décret du 9 brumaire: les mesures préparatoires"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Les procédures d'application du décret et les viviers de recrutement des élèves"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Les élèves nommés: des candidatures spontanées aux refus et aux abandons"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Les élèves parisiens"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Rétrospection: l'an II des normaliens"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Un hiver à Paris"

Dominique Julia, "Le déroulement des Leçons dans l'amphithéâtre du Muséum"

Dominique Julia, "Les 'conférences' de l'École normale: typologie des débats"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "La dissolution de l'École"

Dominique Julia, "Le destin ultérieur des Leçons: les éditions des *Séances des écoles normales*"

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, "Les élèves après l'École"

Pierre Lamandé, “L’influence des Leçons au-delà de l’an III: l’exemple des mathématiques”

Stéphane Baciocchi and Dominique Julia, “La voix des normaliens: analyse des pétitions collectives”

Jean Dhombres, “Quelles postérités pour l’École normale de l’an III?”

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ISSN 1553-9172