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“Robbers, Muddlers, Bastards, and Bankrupts?” A Collective Look at the Thermidorians

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Who were the Thermidorians? The 1964 book jacket of Lefebvre’s posthumously translated *The Thermidorians & The Directory: Two Phases of the French Revolution* (Random House) presents them in a quaint group portrait: Several *Conventionnels* stand assembled around a table at the Tuileries Palace with a direct view of the Place de la Révolution.¹ Outside – they have their backs turned to it – the guillotine is busy dispatching Maximilien Robespierre and his alleged accomplices. Inside, those newly empowered by his death are studiously ignoring the nasty business. They are already hard at work “ending the Terror”, as Bronislaw Baczko put it.² Middle-aged, dressed conservatively as if it were still, or again, 1789, they look rather pleased with themselves. With their quills and their ink wells, surrounded by paperwork, the Thermidorians, as portrayed here, are executors of, not former contributors to, “the Terror.” Their number, five, also diverts from their past and looks to the future: to the Constitution that will become their major achievement, and to the Directory that will provide some, though not all of them, with continued political careers.

Instead of the “real” Thermidorians, this mid-century cover of Lefebvre’s classic work shows a fictionalized version of a curious group of revolutionaries who dominated the last fifteen months of the Convention. And yet, despite many excellent works on the subject,³ we still don’t have a

¹ Georges Lefebvre, *The Thermidorians & The Directory: Two Phases of the French Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1964). The aforementioned book cover can be seen here: <https://www.librarything.com/work/2409546>.

² Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre* (Cambridge; New York; Paris: Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1994).

³ For example, Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution* (this ed., Paris: Belin, 1987); Albert Mathiez, *La Réaction thermidorienne* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1929); Lefebvre, *Thermidorians*; François Gendron, *La Jeunesse Dorée: Episodes de la Révolution Française* (Sillery: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1979); Denis Woronoff, *The Thermidorian Regime and the Directory, 1794-99* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Baczko, *Ending the Terror*; Roger Dupuy et Marcel Morabito, eds., *1795: Pour une République sans Révolution* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1996); Michel Vovelle, ed., *Le Tournant de L’An III: Réaction et Terreur Blanche dans la France Révolutionnaire* (Paris: Editions du CTHS, 1997); Howard G. Brown and Judith A. Miller, *Taking Liberties: Problems of A New Order from the French Revolution to Napoleon* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Sergio Luzzatto, *L’Automne de la Révolution: Luites et Cultures Politiques dans la France Thermidorienne* (Paris: H. Champion, 2001); Michel Troper, *Terminer la Révolution: La*

sufficiently comprehensive alternative depiction of them. Perhaps this is because they have, until recently, attracted relatively little attention. Where other revolutionaries have been idealized, condemned or caricatured – and, in the case of Robespierre, pathologized and digitally reconstructed –, the Thermidorians are often simply dismissed as cynical survivors, self-serving leaders of an impotent parliament, and, above all, as those who did away with Robespierre and, alongside him, the Revolution.⁴ As reactionaries, they have generated one-dimensional assessments by generations of historians committed to the Revolution’s memory. We know the names of the Thermidorian leaders: Jean-Lambert Tallien, Stanislas Fréron, Paul Barras, Edme-Bonaventure Courtois, among others. Beyond their individual names, there is, however, no clear sense of who the Thermidorians were collectively, how cohesive a group they became, and what exactly they hoped to achieve while in power. Their name itself adds to this uncertainty, as it is used interchangeably to describe a specific group of reactionaries and the entire Convention post-Thermidor.

Named after the month in which it ended Robespierre’s life, the Thermidorian Convention remained heavily defined by its original event. Throughout the year III, it sought to create a strong sense of a “before” and “after” Thermidor, which we have inherited. The formulation of a Thermidorian myth of the “Terror” as a conspiracy by the few against the many, for which Robespierre, the Committee of Public Safety, and the Jacobins were solely responsible, became the assembly’s most enduring legacy. Tallien’s famous speech on the *System of Terror* (11 Fructidor II) demonstrated how the Thermidorians, including many former Jacobins, quickly repackaged the Republic’s and their individual pasts to adapt to rapidly changing political circumstances. Without access to trauma theory, Tallien’s speech, according to Ronen Steinberg, suggested that the “Terror” had traumatized French citizens, causing symptomatic “trembling” and a “true destruction of the soul.”⁵ Tallien, a former Jacobin and representative on mission, notably succeeded in presenting himself as a victim, rather than a perpetrator, of this process.

Constitution de 1795 (Paris: Fayard, 2006); Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); Stephen Clay, “Vengeance, Justice and the Reactions in the Revolutionary Midi,” *French History* 23, no. 1 (March 2009): 22-46; Howard G. Brown, “Robespierre’s Tail: The Possibilities of Justice after the Terror,” *Canadian Journal of History* 45, no. 3 (December 2010): 503-535; Laura Mason, “The Thermidorian Reaction,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2013), 313-327; contributions by Colin Jones, Laura Mason, Jeremy D. Popkin, Ronen Steinberg and Mette Harder to “Forum: Thermidor and the French Revolution,” Parts 1 and 2, *French Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (February 2015) & 39, no. 3 (August 2016); Loris Chavanette, *Quatre-Vingt Quinze: La Terreur en Procès* (Paris: CNRS, 2017).

⁴ Philippe Charlier and Philippe Froesch, “Robespierre: The Oldest Case of Sarcoidosis?,” *The Lancet* 382, no. 9910 (2013): 2068. See also responses by Peter McPhee and Eric Faure in the following issue.

⁵ Jean-Lambert Tallien, C.N. 11 Fructidor II, MON 343, 13 Fructidor II, 613 (my translation). See Ronen Steinberg, “Trauma before Trauma: Imagining the Effects of the Terror in Post-Revolutionary France,” in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), 177-183.

While Tallien's speech could be interpreted simply as a political manifesto that announced the Thermidorian Reaction, it also, as Steinberg affirms, contained a radical critique of the close "relationship between fear and political power" in the year II.⁶ In this, and other ways, leading Thermidorians, far from being mere "reactionaries," actually revealed an ability to reflect critically on the problems of governing in revolutionary times.⁷ While there were many continuities from the previous year in their methods – in the ongoing use of revolutionary justice against political opponents and the increasingly ruthless suppression of the popular movement – the Thermidorians also, arguably, reinvented revolutionary politics in progressive ways.⁸ They reopened spaces for, and revived, political debate, at the Convention, in the press, and by encouraging citizens to send constitutional projects and critiques to its Commission des Onze. At the same time, as Laura Mason argues, Thermidorian leaders still manipulated year III populist politics for essentially "conservative" ends.⁹ Stanislas Fréron's inflammatory and incredibly successful journal *L'Orateur du Peuple*, for instance, used "the form and language of populist radicalism" in an attempt to "demobilize the people," limit political assembly and abolish universal suffrage.¹⁰ In a similar way, while the Thermidorian Palais Royal became once more a place for politics, it also witnessed the rampant abuse of *sans-culottes* and former Jacobins by Muscadin *jeunesse dorée*, who, by the end of 1795, turned against the Convention itself.¹¹ Multiple standards applied to freedom of political expression, debate and opinion under the Thermidorians, according to the circumstances.

There is more interest now in the complex dynamics of year III politics, especially since the recent forum published on this period in *French Historical Studies*, edited by Laura Mason.¹² What is still needed, however, is a comprehensive analysis of the Thermidorian reactionaries. The Convention's unhinged, exhausting debates on the "Terror's" legacy, and responsibility for it, presented an intense, parliamentary melodrama that many of its deputies and members of the public perceived as degrading and dangerous for the republic. Bronislaw Baczko and others have studied them, their major participants and the question of how to "end the Terror."¹³ Previous

⁶ Steinberg, "Trauma before Trauma," 183

⁷ For analyses of the liberal, democratic culture of the later Revolution, see also Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2008) and James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁸ Sergio Luzzatto raised this issue when he argued that the Convention might have become "Thermidorian" long before 9 Thermidor, when it began to impose limitations on popular involvement in politics.

⁹ Laura Mason, "The Culture of Reaction: Demobilizing the People after Thermidor," in "Forum Thermidor and the French Revolution," ed. Laura Mason, special issue, part 2, *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2016): 445.

¹⁰ Mason, "The Culture of Reaction," 446-450.

¹¹ See Gendron, *La Jeunesse Dorée*.

¹² See above.

¹³ Recent works of particular interest include: Corinne Gomez-Le Chevanton, "Le Procès Carrier: Enjeux politiques, pédagogie collective et construction mémorielle," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 343 (2006): 273-292; Brown, "Robespierre's Tail," 503-535; Ronen Steinberg, "Terror on Trial: Accountability, Transitional Justice, and the *Affaire Le Bon* in

research has also focused on the Thermidorians' problematic economic measures and their government's more openly authoritarian aspects, in particular efforts to suppress the *sans-culotte* movement.¹⁴ More recently, research has focused on Thermidorian attitudes and legislation on other urgent issues such as slavery.¹⁵ Beyond that, however, many questions asked about previous periods remain unexplored in the case of Thermidorian politicians: Who were the Thermidorians? What, if anything, do their leaders' backgrounds and trajectories reveal about their political careers and choices? And to what degree is "reactionary" an accurate, or sufficient, term to describe them?

In his 1996 work, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)*, Timothy Tackett provided a collective biography of the deputies of the Estates-General and the National Assembly. This acclaimed work, in examining deputies' day-to-day writings, gives insights into their collective psyche and asks whether those of the Third Estate, especially, entered the Estates-General with a revolutionary mindset already formed. Whereas most previous attempts to understand French revolutionaries' inner emotional and intellectual lives looked at individual careers, or very small groups of politicians, Tackett's study adopted Lewis Namier's ambitious, large-scale approach in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929).¹⁶ His and Namier's works on the members of two very different eighteenth-century parliaments both combined elements of prosopography and collective biography to gain insights into the assemblies as a whole, and not just specific "parties" or individual members.¹⁷

Namier, criticized for focusing mostly on second-rate politicians while ignoring Britain's great parliamentarians, was ahead of his time in his investigation of the former's personal interests and ambitions.¹⁸ Tackett has been similarly innovative, both in *Becoming a Revolutionary* and in his

Thermidorian France," in "Forum Thermidor and the French Revolution," part 2, 419-444; Mette Harder, "A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor," in "Forum Thermidor and the French Revolution," part 1, 33-60.

¹⁴ Kåre D. Tønnesson, *La Défaite des Sans-Culottes: Mouvement Populaire et Reaction bourgeoise en l'an III* (Oslo: Presses Universitaires d'Oslo, 1959).

¹⁵ Jeremy D. Popkin, "Thermidor, Slavery, and the "Affaire des Colonies," in "Forum Thermidor and the French Revolution," part 1, 61-82.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Norman Hampson's comparison of the experiences of Brissot, Saint-Just and others in *Will and Circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

¹⁷ Collective biography and prosopography are often used interchangeably. However, collective biography focuses on the individual, while prosopography "collects and exploits structured biographical data" in order to understand the whole. See K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, "Biography, Identity and Names: Understanding the Pursuit of the Individual in Prosopography," in *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook* (Oxford: Unit for Prosopographical Research, Linacre College, University of Oxford, 2007), 140; 144.

¹⁸ Linda Colley, *Namier* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 66-67; Namier's three-volume dictionary *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons: 1754-1790*, for which he had planned, but did not write, an analytical part, was heavily criticised for being a "mere" works

2015's *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, by looking at the collective aims, hopes and fears of so many "ordinary" revolutionaries. Both his and Namier's investigations of politicians' motivations and experiences provide ideas for approaching those believed to have "ended the Terror." A sub-section in Namier's text, "Why Men Went into Parliament," for instance, is entitled "Immunity: Robbers, Muddlers, Bastards, and Bankrupts," prompting reflections on whether looking at the Thermidorians' personal motivations would lead to a more complex reading of why they desperately clung to power as they transitioned the country into the Directory. *Becoming Revolutionaries* should also encourage researchers to look at the deputies' backgrounds and their social networks, at the main figures, key speakers, divisions and factions. Such a layered approach might similarly help understand complex motivations and move beyond the one-dimensional categories so frequently applied to the Thermidorians.

I. Defining "Thermidorian"

"Thermidorian" is not a neutral word, as M.J. Sydenham has pointed out. The term, when applied to the entire Convention, does not do justice to those deputies who saw Robespierre's death as a necessity, but wanted nothing to do with the Reaction it unleashed. Some historians have tried ways around this: Albert Soboul differentiated between a "Thermidorian majority" and a "Montagnard minority" in the assembly. Baczko, in stressing the deputies' efforts to come to terms with the Terror, used the term "Thermidorian," not to describe a particular political direction, but rather a collective state of mind in the Convention.

Because of the term's association with a particular political outlook, and because my own work has stressed continuities, rather than differences, between the "two Conventions" of the years II and III, I often hesitate to use the phrase "Thermidorian" Convention. The term seems most useful when applied to specific deputies who participated in the Reaction. To some among them, it was, after all, a badge of pride. Unlike "Girondin" or "Indulgent," it did not signify victimization, but victory in a political purge: Tallien was in fact so proud of this victory that he named his daughter Thermidor Rose Tallien. Others, of course, "used (...) [it] as a term of opprobrium."¹⁹

The Conventionnel Marc-Antoine Baudot, in his *Notes* on the Convention, returned obsessively to the topic of "*les réacteurs*": Tallien, Thibaudeau and others. In a section titled "Death of the Reactionaries," he provided a list of Thermidorian leaders, who, to him, represented "another kind of Robespierre."²⁰ His colleague René Levasseur in his memoirs similarly denounced a "Thermidorian party" in the assembly, including Tallien, Barras, Fréron, François-Louis Bourdon (de l'Oise), Antoine-Christophe Merlin (de Thionville), Jacques-Alexis Thuriot, Louis Legendre and other former Montagnards who had "condemned themselves in the person of their

of reference, "a pile of bricks" instead of "a house," in the words of E.H. Carr. See Linda Colley, *Namier*, 73.

¹⁹ M.J. Sydenham, *The First French Republic 1792-1804* (London: Batsford, 1974), 26.

²⁰ Marc-Antoine Baudot, "Mort des Réacteurs," in *Notes Historiques sur la Convention Nationale, le Directoire, l'Empire et l'Exil des Votants* (Paris: D. Jouaust, 1893), 136 & "Réacteurs," *Souvenirs, Remarques et Objets Divers*, 1821, BNF Richelieu, NAF 6526.

former friends.”²¹ These early lists of Thermidorians by their former colleagues intrigue me, not least because some include deputies who never supported reactionary measures. They also consistently neglect to name some of the most active and virulent Thermidorians: deputies such as Pierre-François Henry-Larivière, François-Joseph Gamon and Marie-Benoit Gouly. Defining a Thermidorian bloc in the assembly would therefore necessitate a long look at what contemporaries meant by that term, and how discerningly they applied it to their colleagues. What made somebody a Thermidorian deputy or member of the “Thermidorian party?” Did certain “Thermidorians” attract more attention and vitriol than others, and was this because their betrayal of Montagnard values and colleagues was more keenly felt?

Defining certain basic criteria for a Thermidorian group in the Convention is helpful, but also raises more questions. Was a Thermidorian someone who:

1. Actively contributed to Robespierre’s fall on 9 Thermidor?
2. Regularly denounced the “Terror” and advocated for justice or vengeance for its victims?
3. Attacked the Commune, the Jacobin Club and ex-Montagnards?
4. Opposed the Constitution of 1793?
5. Supported pro-*émigré* causes?

It is clear that while there were many Thermidorian reactionaries in the Convention, the “Thermidorians” were not necessarily a cohesive or unified group whose membership remained unchanged throughout the year III. As the Reaction itself radicalized, some who had plotted Robespierre’s fall, such as Jacques-Nicolas Billaud-Varenne, or denounced Montagnard colleagues at the Convention immediately after, like Laurent Lecointre, themselves fell victims to it. Even prominent Thermidorians like Tallien abandoned the reactionary course when it overwhelmed their capacity to control it, threatening their republican identity and careers. Given the choice between sparing the lives of over 700 royalists at Quiberon Bay after an *émigré* landing there in the summer of 1795, and preserving his political reputation, he took a drastic measure that, according to Jean-Clément Martin, shook “noble and *émigré* circles” to the core.²² Charles de Lacretelle, one of Tallien’s fiercest critics, commented that the former Jacobin and hero of 9 Thermidor had finally returned to his original, criminal “inclinations.”²³ That “Thermidorian” was not necessarily a stable identity or position was also illustrated by the trajectory of Tallien’s partner in crime Fréron. As Stephen Clay has highlighted, Fréron, after fanning the reactionary flames in Paris after Robespierre’s death, agreed to a mission to France’s Southern departments in late 1795 with the goal of quelling “anti-terrorist violence” and “arresting the progress of royalism” there.²⁴ Tallien’s and Fréron’s changes of heart raise

²¹ René Levasseur, *Mémoires* (1831) as cited in Richard Bienvenu, ed., *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 335.

²² Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la Naissance d'un Mythe National* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 265. See also Jean-Lambert Tallien, C.N. 9 Thermidor III, MON 315, 15 Thermidor III, 356.

²³ Charles de Lacretelle, *Réponse de Lacretelle le jeune à Tallien* (Paris, 1795).

²⁴ Stephen Clay, “The White Terror: Factions, Reactions, and the Politics of Vengeance,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, 365.

questions about the sincerity and purpose of the reactionary stances they originally adopted after 9 Thermidor.

II. Studying the Thermidorians

The next few years will offer exciting new opportunities for research on the Convention in the year III. Basic biographical data, as well as in-depth details, on the deputies' lives and careers has long been available in August Kuscinski's classic dictionary.²⁵ Information on some of the so-called "Girondin survivors," who returned to the assembly after imprisonment throughout the year II, and who formed a temporary relationship of convenience with some of their former Montagnard persecutors there, may also be found in works such as Alison Patrick's *The Men of the First French Republic* or Furet/Ozouf's edited volume on the Gironde.²⁶ Several works have, in addition, been dedicated to the fates of ex-Montagnards in the Thermidorian Convention. Most importantly, a new dictionary edited by the ACTAPOL project under the direction of Michel Biard will soon provide us with newer, and more structured, information than Kuscinski's work about "the social origins, cultural background and, above all, political careers of the men of the Convention."²⁷ It will include data on the deputies' "political tendency or tendencies," committee membership and "other offices," "missions," "main speeches," key "nominal votes," engagements in political clubs and information on political persecution.²⁸ Using the ACTAPOL dictionary to find and analyse participants in the Reaction could be the basis for a study on the Thermidorians similar to Alison Patrick's, which, as William Doyle suggested, "Namierised the early Convention with surprising results."²⁹

Patrick's analysis of votes and debates debunked entrenched assumptions about parliamentary majorities before the purge of the "Girondins." Yet, even with the help of the ACTAPOL dictionary, and the use of parliamentary debates, an already problematic source for the year III, a similar analysis of the Thermidorian Convention will be challenging. As Anne Simonin and Corinne Lechevanton-Gomez explain, little data for this period is available on crucial *appels nominaux* votes, which were then used "only for technical questions (renewal of the assembly's bureau)" and "became secret from 5 Thermidor Year III (23 July 1795) onwards."³⁰ A key

²⁵ August Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels* (Brueil-en-Vexin: Editions du Vexin Français, 1973).

²⁶ Alison Patrick, *The Men of the First French Republic: Political Alignments in the National Convention of 1792* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); François Furet and Mona Ozouf, *La Gironde et les Girondins* (Paris: Payot, 1991).

²⁷ Michel Biard, Philippe Bourdin, Hervé Leuwers, "ACTAPOL: A Workshop for Research on the Members of the National Convention," *AHRF* 3, no. 381 (2015): 3. http://www.cairn-int.info/focus-E_AHRF_381_0003--actapol-a-workshop-for-research-on-the.htm

²⁸ Biard, Bourdin, Leuwers, "ACTAPOL," 3.

²⁹ Doyle was one of the first reviewers to recognise the importance of Patrick's findings: *The Men of the First French Republic: Political Alignments in the National Convention of 1792* by Alison Patrick, review by William Doyle, *The English Historical Review* 89, no. 350 (January 1974): 201-202.

³⁰ Anne Simonin and Corinne Lechevanton-Gomez, "L'appel nominal, une technique pour la démocratie extrême (1789-1795)?" in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 357:

exception was the vote on Carrier, the former representative on mission accused of crimes against humanity. This vote could be one way to form a clearer picture of who the Thermidorian reactionaries in the assembly were and what kind of support they could rely on.

Paul Magdalino, in his work on Byzantine Constantinople, noted that prosopography is “most useful” in cases “where the number of recorded individuals is relatively modest, and where the records do not lend themselves to the construction of major biographies[.]”³¹ Prosopography, as opposed to collective biography, sometimes deals with people whose names are unknown to the researcher.³² This is not the case with the Thermidorians. Yet the identities of many reactionary deputies are still extremely difficult to pin down and there are few sources on them. Some were political nonentities, such as the deputy who first called for Robespierre’s arrest on 9 Thermidor. Their survival until that date had, at least in part, depended on becoming invisible. After all, “Vergniaud, Guadet, Gensonné, Condorcet, Danton, Billaud-Varennes, Saint-Just, Robespierre himself and others” had died precisely because they had been the “most visible.”³³ As Laura Mason reminds us, the Thermidorian Convention was “a divided legislature purged of its most dynamic members.”³⁴ Reactionaries survived because they had sat quietly, gone into exile, or been forgotten in prison. “Ce que j’ai fait? J’ai vécu,” Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès’s famous phrase when asked what he had done during the Terror, summed up the reality of many Thermidorian reactionaries’ experiences in the year II.³⁵ The conditions of their survival forcibly left gaps in their political records: Absences, disappearances, and many anonymous hours spent on the Convention’s benches with their mouths tightly shut. These experiences also imprinted on their political behavior in the year III.

Contemporaries ridiculed the Thermidorian leadership for its supposed lack of intellect: Legendre could not spell, Tallien lacked knowledge on any subject, and Courtois, who once claimed that “Robespierre had no talent,” had even less.³⁶ We have unquestionably absorbed these contemporary caricatures. Perhaps this is not only because many of us do not like the Thermidorians and what they stood for, but also because they demonstrated no clear political vision. They formed diametrically opposed alliances within the Convention, let others write their speeches, and strategically changed seats on the assembly’s benches. The career of Many questions about Jean-Lambert Tallien, for instance, whose mission in the Gironde is known thanks to Alan Forrest’s work, remain unanswered. Why did a 27-year-old committed Jacobin turn reactionary after Robespierre’s fall? When studied on his own, Tallien’s few papers,

“Radicalités et modérations en Révolution” (2009): 101; see also: Corinne Gomez-Le Chevanton and Françoise Brunel, “La Convention nationale au miroir des Archives parlementaires,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 381 (2015): 11-29.

³¹ As discussed by Keats-Rohan, “Biography, Identity and Names,” 141.

³² Keats-Rohan, “Biography, Identity and Names,” 150.

³³ Baudot, “Les orateurs de la Convention,” in *Notes Historiques*, 293.

³⁴ Laura Mason, “Introduction,” in “Forum Thermidor and the French Revolution,” part 1, 1.

³⁵ As cited in François Mignet, “Notice historique sur la vie et les travaux de M. le Comte de Sieyès,” in *Mémoires de l’Académie Royale des Sciences Morales et Politiques de L’Institut de France* (Paris: Didot Frères, 1839), II: XLII.

³⁶ Baudot, *Notes historiques* as cited in Kuscinski, “Note on Courtois, Edme-Bonaventure,” *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels*, 157-158.

scattered across various, often private, archives, do not provide a satisfying answer, indicating only that, in the year II, revolutionary violence had suddenly, brutally, turned against him and invaded his private world. His politics and alliances in the Reaction were unstable; he thrived in aristocratic circles but remained part of republican politics, and then abruptly returned to the Convention's high benches – home of the “Mountain” – in late 1795. Tallien shares such ambiguity with other Thermidorian politicians, who might better be approached as part of a collective.

III. A Thermidorian History of Emotions?

Tackett's *Becoming a Revolutionary*, which is not just a “painstaking prosopography or collective biography of deputies to the Estates General/National Assembly,” but also a history of revolutionary emotions, could serve as a model to read Thermidorians such as Tallien despite their vagueness and thin source record.³⁷ His research made exhaustive use of parliamentary proceedings and deputies' correspondence to allow insights into backgrounds, financial status, and political formation. This approach would be a valid option for the Thermidorians. Many of their private papers are dispersed. When found, however, their correspondence and private writings can be extremely revealing. A letter by the Conventionnel Roberjot, for instance, captures the assembly's collective experience of the Reaction. Writing to a friend, he described the moment that the Convention, still hung over from its victory over Robespierre, suddenly collapsed into mutual recriminations reminiscent of 1793:

I don't understand anymore, my dear Reverchon, the events that are happening here; I have reached the end of my wisdom... Yesterday's session was spent, in part, with invectives, injuries, reproaches, insulting descriptions, words such as thief, intrigant, scoundrel, counterrevolutionary could be heard...³⁸

Roberjot's account is a window into the shock and horror that many Conventionnels felt as they watched their assembly fall apart following 9 Thermidor – something they had not foreseen and could not understand. The history of emotion allows us to approach feelings such as distrust, shame and fear, caused by bitter experiences of exclusion and persecution in the year II, and that might have driven some of the bitter recriminations Roberjot described. Many of those who participated in them, and became leading reactionaries, were former Montagnards who, before 9 Thermidor, had been purged from the Jacobin Club and ostracized by former friends and allies at the Convention. In the weeks leading up to Thermidor, they had been hounded by government spies, afraid to sleep in their own homes, and too scared to attend the Convention for fear of another purge. Some had been personally humiliated, such as Fréron and Barras when visiting Robespierre at his home, an experience that Barras, in his memoirs, recalled as a “moral

³⁷ Isser Woloch, “Deputies, Voters, and Factions in French Revolutionary Political Culture,” *The Historical Journal* 42 (1999): 278.

³⁸ Claude Roberjot, Letter to Jacques Reverchon, [Fructidor II?], in private hands, Librairie Traces Ecrites, Paris. On Reverchon, see Bernard Gainot, “Aux origines du Directoire: le ‘proconsulat’ de Jacques Reverchon (brumaire-ventôse an IV),” *AHRF* 332 “Une révolution du pouvoir exécutif?” (April-June 2003): 129-146.

degradation.”³⁹

Having experienced personal losses during the Terror was an equally, if not more important, motivation for becoming a reactionary. The *conventionnel* André Dumont had been a committed Montagnard until his brother was victimized by political violence in the year II. In the Reaction, and during the Directory, Dumont fiercely denounced former Montagnard colleagues, not least in his anonymously published *Le Manuel des assemblées primaires et électorales de France* (Hamburg, 1797), one of the first – highly unflattering – collective “biographies” of ex-Conventionnels published after the assembly’s dissolution.⁴⁰ Jean-Baptiste Saladin, the spokesperson of the Commission of 21, which examined the conduct of former government members Bertrand Barère, Billaud-Varenne, Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois and Marc-Guillaume-Alexis Vadier in early 1795, had lost his close friends Philippe Égalité, former duke of Orléans, and the Marquis de Sillery to execution. Reactionary leaders Merlin (de Thionville), Fréron and Legendre had watched helplessly as their political family, Georges Danton, Camille and Lucile Desmoulins, François Chabot and Claude Basire were killed.⁴¹ Finally, Courtois, well-known “executor” of Robespierre’s papers after Thermidor, recalled the helpless rage he felt watching Robespierre speak at the Convention shortly after Danton’s execution. Participation in the Reaction offered all these deputies an opportunity to hold their colleagues responsible for the death of family and friends. It gave them enormous power over their former tormentors, which some relished, and momentary safety from the kinds of persecution they themselves had experienced.

Some reactionaries, in denouncing their colleagues, simply behaved as they had previously during the Jacobin Republic. Lecointre, for instance, best known for his attack on former government leaders shortly after Robespierre’s fall, had a history of making accusations against colleagues that stretched back to the “Terror.”⁴² Tallien, who wanted ex-Montagnard colleagues to be arrested in the year III, had been a similarly active persecutor of “Girondin” deputies in 1793. Gouly, one of the most active Thermidorian persecutors of former Committee members, had made denunciations personally to Robespierre. Jean-Baptiste Clauzel, responsible for the creation of the military commission that judged the Martyrs of Prairial, had also accused “Girondins” in 1793-1794. This long-term pattern in certain Thermidorian deputies’

³⁹ *Memoirs of Barras, Member of the Directorate*, ed. George Duruy (London: Osgood, McIlvaine and Co, 1895), I: 172.

⁴⁰ See forthcoming chapter by Mette Harder, “La Critique de la Convention: Un danger pour la République?,” in *Autorité et Société sous le Directoire: Une République en Révolution (1795-1799)*, ed. Loris Chavanette (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2019).

⁴¹ Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire*, 553.

⁴² See *Les crimes de sept membres des anciens comités de salut public et de sûreté générale, ou dénonciation formelle à la convention nationale, contre Billaud-Varennes, Barère, Collot-d’Herbois, Vadier, Vouland, Amar et David; suivie de pièces justificatives, indication d’autres pièces originales existantes dans les comités, preuves et témoins indiqués à l’appui des faits; par Laurent Lecointre, député du département de Seine-et-Oise* (Paris: Maret, 1794). Lecointre acknowledged the long-term effects his denunciations had had on his colleagues to Barère, whom he met in Paris years after the Reaction: “J’ai prêté mon nom à tout cela, mais j’ai connu trop tard ma faute et mon injustice; j’en ai bien du chagrin.” See Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire*, 389.

denunciatory behavior is intriguing, and raises questions about the role of personality, experience, and ideology in French revolutionaries' denunciatory practices and habits beyond the "Terror."

Some of the most vocal Thermidorian reactionaries were "Girondin" survivors, deputies who had been imprisoned, in hiding or exiled in the year II. Henry-Larivière, who, in the year III, referred to former members of government as "cancers that will eat up the political body," had been outlawed in the previous year.⁴³ Gamon, who called for the punishment of former Committee of Public Safety members Robert Lindet and Lazare Carnot in Prairial III, had had to go into hiding as an alleged "Girondin" sympathizer in 1793-1794. Not all victims of political violence and persecution in the year II, however, turned into automatic reactionaries. Some, in fact, called (with little success) for unity, clemency and the abolition of the death penalty.

While radical reactionaries dominated the Convention's most dramatic sessions during most of year III, a different political set increased its political influence as the Reaction drew to a close. Among them were Sieyès and other members of the Commission des Onze, charged with preparing the draft of the Constitution of the year III. Lefebvre argued that, while Fouché, Barras and Fréron represented an "extreme reaction" that "could no longer count on more than 150 deputies" by the end of the year III, the "spirit of the Thermidorian Convention [was] really incarnate...in these men of the Center."⁴⁴ Using works such as Pierre Serna's on the "extreme centre," any study of Thermidorian reactionaries would have to take a close look at deputies such as Sieyès, Philippe-Antoine Merlin (de Douai), Pierre-Claude-François Daunou, François-Antoine Boissy d'Anglas and others, who became a growing force in revolutionary politics as the Directory approached.⁴⁵ What were the motivations of this Thermidorian "establishment" and to what degree were they able to collaborate with, manipulate, and finally leave behind the more radical reactionaries? Pierre Serna makes many interesting observations on this question, which is crucial to answer in order to advance our understanding of Directorial politics.

Conclusion

Having announced, in his historical notes on the Convention, that "almost all reactionaries died before their time, from singular illnesses or in extraordinary circumstances," their colleague, the ex-Conventionnel Baudot gave the following details:

Courtois died from an anal fissure, Tallien covered in leprosy-elephantiasis, Legendre tormented by remorse, Fréron perished from black vomit [yellow fever], Clausel became blind, Rovère died in the middle of crocodiles in the savannas of Sinnamary, Aubry died in the deserts of Guyana....⁴⁶

²² Pierre-François Henry-Larivière, CN 9 Prairial III, MON 253, 13 Prairial III, 569.

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, *The Thermidorians and the Directory*, 23.

⁴⁵ Pierre Serna, *La République des Girouettes: 1789-1815...Et Au-delà: Une Anomalie Politique, la France de l'Extrême Centre* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2005).

⁴⁶ Marc-Antoine Baudot, "Mort des Réacteurs," *Notes historiques*, 136.

In Baudot's vision, the physical and psychological pain his Thermidorian colleagues suffered at the end of their lives – leprosy, ulcers, yellow fever (causing the vomiting of blood), blindness, remorse, and death in isolation – was a just punishment for their sins against the Revolution. Forced to leave France alongside other surviving *Conventionnels* during the regicide exile in 1816 or living out their last years in shabby Parisian flats, they represented, if not the counter-, then at least the anti-Revolution. They were despised because they had abandoned many of their revolutionary principles in the year III, scrambled for political posts in the Directory, and, in some cases, petitioned Louis XVIII for mercy during the Restoration. Regardless of what their colleagues thought of them, however, we need to get to know them better. As of now, and to no small extent thanks to Timothy Tackett's work, our understanding of those who began the Revolution far exceeds that of those who ended it.

Collective biography, inspired by the work that Tackett and others have accomplished on the Estates-General, National Assembly, and early Convention, could help produce a new study of these most unpopular of revolutionaries. For this to happen, a careful definition of the reactionary, Thermidorian "bloc" in the assembly and an assessment of who supported them would be a first step. Perhaps one could combine the histories of leading Thermidorians such as Fréron and Tallien with the study of lesser known ones, such as Lecointre, Bentabole or Henry-Larivière, who played decisive roles in driving the reaction and its purges. An investigation into the experiences that turned them against their previous beliefs and colleagues, and a systematic look at Thermidorian debates, votes and legislation would also be crucial. Distinguishing between radical reactionaries and what became the "reactionary establishment" around Sieyès, Daunou and others, finally, would be key for our future understanding of the Thermidorians, their politics, and identities.

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