

**Rumor and Revolution:
The Case of the September Massacres**

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On 2 September 1792 hundreds of French citizens began breaking into the prisons of Paris and, after summary extralegal “trials,” proceeded to execute most of the prisoners. Over the next four days between 1100 and 1400 people were killed with swords or clubs or pikes, mostly men, but also a certain number of women and adolescent boys. A few hundred of those killed were political prisoners – nobles, refractory clergymen, or members of the Swiss guard – yet over two-thirds were not political detainees at all but common criminals guilty of a variety of major or minor infractions.¹ The whole episode was especially tragic, occurring as it did only a few weeks after the Second French Revolution and a series of major new achievements in the history of democracy and equality in the western world. The origins of the September Massacres have always posed a difficult problem for historians. The immediate circumstances of that event are well known: the Prussian invasion which had broken through the barrier fortresses in northeastern France and was directly threatening Paris; the Brunswick Manifesto that promised massive destruction and executions if the royal family were subjected to the least insult; and the departure of large numbers of young men from the city to confront the enemy and the consequent fear of leaving families and friends behind unprotected. Indeed, the best information we have as to the identity of the “Septembriseurs” – the actual killers involved –

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¹ I have relied especially on Pierre Caron, *Les Massacres de septembre* (Paris, 1935), esp. 102; also Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution française. La première Terreur*, series “Les cours de Sorbonne” (Paris, [1942]), 158; and Bronislaw Baczko, “Les peurs de la Terreur,” in *La peur au XVIIIe siècle: Discours, représentations, pratiques*, Jacques Berchtold and Michel Porret, eds. (Geneva, 1994), esp. 71-76.

suggests that the majority were Paris national guardsmen and Fédérés troops from the provinces, a group that was just preparing to leave for the front.²

The historical problem is even more puzzling, however, when we discover the wide support for, or at least acquiescence in, the killings, not only among the popular classes but among the Revolutionary elites as well. There can be no doubt that the active support of members of the insurrectional Commune, the Commune's surveillance committee, and many of the sectional leaders greatly facilitated the unrolling of the tragedy. Pierre Caron, the most important historian of the Massacres, also provides substantial evidence of the number of newspapers – including both radical and moderate, Montagnard and Girondin – that either praised the murders or accepted them as regrettable but necessary.³ Such a conclusion is confirmed by my own study of the correspondence of a variety of Revolutionaries from the middle class, written at the time of the event itself. The great majority seem initially to have accepted or enthusiastically supported the Massacres – even though many of these individuals would change their minds over the following weeks and years. Thus, for the Montagnard deputy Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, “Toutes la race scélérate des non-assermentés éprouve le sort que mérite tous leurs forfaits. Il y a lieu à croire que l’empire sera bientôt purgé de tous ces monstres.” The Feuillant Pierre Ramel was also ready to accept the event: “C’est un malheur pour l’homme vertueux qui en est la victime. Mais le peuple est à plaindre et non à blamer.” “Qu’il est triste d’être obligé d’en venir à de pareilles extrémités,” wrote the elderly and generally moderate Parisian retiree Guittard de Floriban, “mais on dit qu’il vaut mieux tuer le diable [avant] qu’il nous tue.”⁴

I have no intention of advancing here an overall explanation of the September Massacres and the apparent wide acceptance of the killings among both the Parisian people and the middle classes. Rather I want to explore one central element of this episode: the power of rumor in shaping opinion at all levels of society at the time of the Massacres. In fact, apart from Georges Lefebvre's celebrated study of the chain reaction panic of the Great Fear (July-August 1789), the phenomenon of rumor during the French Revolution has been relatively little studied. Yet historians can now profit from a considerable body of theoretical insights from social psychologists and other social scientists concerning the phenomenon of rumor – most of it unavailable at the time Lefebvre wrote. Some of these studies are based on

² See especially the eye-witness report of the British spy George Monro, in Earl George Granville Leveson Gower, *The Despatches of Earl Gower, English Ambassador at Paris, from June 1790 to August 1792*, Oscar Browning, ed. (Cambridge, 1885), 226-27 (letter of Sept. 4, 1792); also Caron, 103-11. No doubt that a certain number of artisans and shopkeeper “sans-culottes” also participated. Caron concluded, “ce sont les hommes du 10 août” (111); Lefebvre concurred, 159-60.

³ Caron, 121-53.

⁴ Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, *Lettres parisiennes d’un révolutionnaire poitevin. Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, député à la Législative et à la Convention*, Marie-Luce Llorca, ed. (Tours, 1994), 64, (letter of Sept. 15, 1792); A.C. Cahors, Unclassed box of deputy letters, Pierre Ramel, letter of Sept. 5, 1792; Nicolas-Célestin Guittard de Floriban, *Journal de Nicolas-Célestin Guittard de Floriban, bourgeois de Paris sous la Révolution, 1791-1796*, Raymond Aubert, ed. (Paris, 1974), 175 (letter of Sept. 2, 1792). Cf. A.N. 39 AP the letter of Rosalie Jullien, letter of Sept. 2, 1792: “Le peuple est levé, le peuple, terrible dans sa fureur, venge les crimes de trois ans des plus lâches trahisons.... la France est sauvée.” Out of 21 witnesses examined for this study who gave their immediate reactions to the Massacres, three condemned them outright, two avoided mentioning them, and the remainder generally accepted them as either a positive good or an unfortunate necessity. Here I only consider the case of Paris; I have not attempted to examine other towns where similar massacres occurred during the summer of 1792.

controlled experiments, but many are buttressed by the analysis of actual rumor situations: among soldiers at the front, for example, or on Wall Street, or as passed along over the internet.⁵

Among social psychologists, rumors are generally conceived as statements communicated in times of uncertainty, ambiguity, and perceived danger that help people both to explain the situation they are confronting and to develop responses. Thus, rumors are often both descriptive and prescriptive. Among the various characteristics of such phenomena identified in social scientific treatments, six are particularly worthy of note for the present study. First, rumors only rarely move through a population in a unilinear, unidirectional manner. They entail, rather, a collective exchange of “news” through multiple and complex interactions and discussions, so that any one individual may hear several different accounts from several different sources. Indeed, even the currents of the Great Fear of 1789 did not always proceed along linear paths – as Lefebvre suggests – but frequently entailed complex eddies and counter-currents, with many communities receiving word of approaching “brigands” from several different directions.⁶ Second, through a process of continual dialogue and readjustment among individuals touched by such multiple interactions, the content of rumors frequently evolves over time toward a “consensus.” Nevertheless, the consensus itself may be fleeting and metamorphose as circumstances themselves evolve. Third, there is considerable evidence that the content of rumors, especially as they move toward a consensus, is shaped in part by previously held opinions and general attitudes. Indeed, such rumors are typically adapted and inflated as a means of confirming and justifying pre-existent hatreds or fears: “fears of which one is ashamed” – as Marc Bloch put it – and that can now conveniently be attributed *not* to one’s personal “weakness” but to the authority of hearsay passed along by others. To quote Bloch once again, commenting on war rumors, “on croit aisément ce qu’on a besoin de croire.”⁷ Fourth, rumors commonly develop when there is a general absence of reliable information or a lack of trust in the institutions and individuals disseminating that information. Rumors have been described as alternative forms of news, “improvised news,” engendered as a community struggles to ascertain the reality of its situation.⁸ Fifth, rumors can communicate general moods and feelings as well as specific interpretive messages. The conveyance of general sentiments of fear, of panic, of anger, etc. can form an integral part of the rumor spreading process. Sixth, while rumors are sometimes limited to specific classes, cultural groups, or factional affiliations in a given society,

⁵ Among the most useful studies of rumor are Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (New York, 1966); and Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, DC, 2007). See also Gordon W. Allport and L.J. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947); Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York, 1976); Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, Chip Heath, eds., *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2005); Marc Bloch, *Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de guerre* (Paris, 1999) (originally in *Revue de synthèse historique*, 1921); Michel-Louis Rouquette, *Les rumeurs* (Paris, 1975); François Ploux, *De bouche à oreille. Naissance et propagation des rumeurs dans la France du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2003).

⁶ Earlier psychological studies that attempted to reproduce the rumor process by passing information from one individual to the next in a chain now seem inappropriate. See, notably, DiFonzo and Bordia, 237. See also Timothy Tackett, “Collective Panics in the Early French Revolution, 1789-1791: A Comparative Perspective,” *French History* 17 (2003): 157.

⁷ Bloch, 42.

⁸ Shibutani, notably 23.

they frequently spread across such class or factional lines. This is especially the case when the anxiety accompanying the rumor is exceptionally intense and when the rumor is repeated frequently – for repetition has been shown to increase credibility. In such situations, the “news,” the attendant mood, and the prescription for action may be accepted even by those groups in society that are normally more skeptical of rumors.⁹

Since rumors are commonly a form of communication passed by word of mouth – over the “grapevine” as it were – they are invariably difficult to document, especially for the historian studying such phenomena in times past. For the present study, I have relied to some extent on newspaper articles, but above all on contemporary correspondence and diaries, in which individuals recount from day to day to friends and family their thoughts and observations. Of particular importance here are the letters of Adrien-Joseph Colson, the general agent of a noble family living in Paris, conveyed in bi-weekly missives to a friend and business associate in Berry. Colson commonly reported at the end of his letters the latest rumors circulating in the city, both to spice up his business notes and to keep his friend informed of the latest news in the capital.¹⁰

As we know from the studies of David Garrioch, Arlette Farge, Robert Darnton and others, rumor and gossip were already persistent and powerful elements in the social and cultural life of Old Regime Paris.¹¹ The root causes of the pervasiveness of rumor were complex and included the near absence of mass media, the extreme secrecy of the royal government and the Paris police, and the functional illiteracy and oral culture of much of the population. There is ample evidence of the passionate desire for “improvised news,” both for its own sake and as it might affect the lives of Parisians. The rumors concerning grain and bread shortages have been well studied by Steven Kaplan.¹² But other topics of interest and concern were wide and varied: from war and the threat of war, ministerial reshuffling, and crime, to *faits divers* and various scientific or pseudo-scientific experiments.¹³ The information in question was usually passed along through a dense network of oral interactions, in which – as David Garrioch has demonstrated – a variety of intermediaries might play a role in the transmission: peddlers, water carriers, bakers, servants, and the like. According to Robert Darnton, the “news” was also sometimes supplemented by such widely circulating written sources as *libelles* or *nouvelles à la main*.¹⁴ The upshot, as

⁹ See Shibutani, 142; and DiFonzo and Bordia, 232. Indeed, sometimes similar rumors are also adopted and adapted by those in opposing factions: see, for example, Sudhir Kakar, “Rumors and Religious Riots” in Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath, 53-55.

¹⁰ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, 1080 ms letters to Roch Lemaigre in Levroux (Indre), 1778 through 1795; and AD Indre, 2J 15, responses of Levroux for 1792. Extracts have been published in *Lettres d'un bourgeois de Paris à un ami de province, 1788-1793*, Chantal Plantier-Sanson, ed. (Paris, 1993). For more information on Colson see Timothy Tackett, “Paths to Revolution: The Old Regime Correspondence of Five Future Revolutionaries,” *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009): 533-35.

¹¹ David Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris, 1740-1790* (Cambridge, 1986), 25-27 and *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley, 2002), 25-26; Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 95-97; Arlette Farge, *La vie fragile: Violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris aux XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1986), 261, 266, 274-82; Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century France,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 1-35.

¹² Steven L. Kaplan, *The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1982).

¹³ See Tackett, “Paths to Revolution,” 539-42 *passim*.

¹⁴ Garrioch, *Making of Revolutionary Paris*, 25; and Darnton, esp. 9.

well documented in the letters of Colson, was that Paris was continually vibrating with “improvised news,” modulated and metamorphosed as it was repeated and discussed in multiple exchanges.

While rumor probably thrived primarily among the Parisian popular classes, the elites might also be influenced on occasion. Much of the Paris “news” passed along by Colson to his friend in the provinces was actually what the social psychologist would call “gossip”: that is, “evaluative social talk,” primarily concerning individuals of note, spread less in a spirit of problem solving than as entertainment – the pregnancy of Madame d’Artois (the king’s sister-in-law), for example, or the word that Madame Elizabeth (the king’s sister) was about to join a convent. We do not always know the source of Colson’s information. Sometimes he specifies that it came from newspapers he read, such as the *Gazette de France* and *Le Courier de l’Europe*. But perhaps even more commonly it derived from stories passed on orally by individuals he encountered in his daily activities: the wine merchant across the street, a cook who worked in Versailles, or the unmarried daughter of his downstairs landlord.¹⁵ Colson was commonly rather condescending in his description of such sources. He sometimes derided those rumors that were obviously untrue, even ridiculous, and he added snide remarks about the credulity of the common people.¹⁶ On occasion he attempted to verify the stories he heard, as when word of a riot near the hôtel de ville sent him scurrying over to see for himself (the news turned out to be totally unfounded). And nevertheless, when the subject was especially important for him and when no other information was available, he did sometimes take the rumors into consideration and give them credence. This was clearly the case in his avid desire to know more about the war in America.¹⁷ And the convocation of an Assembly of Notables in 1787 brought a spate of rumors and reflections on the possible reasons why the king had called such a gathering. In fact, initially most people had no idea why the Notables had been convened.¹⁸

With the advent of the Revolution, both the nature and the intensity of rumor in Paris seem to have been substantially modified. In fact, the thrill of enthusiasm for the achievements of the Revolution always coexisted with a deep sense of uncertainty and fear. The deputy from Cahors Antoine Durand described his feelings in the summer of 1789: the “contraste frappant de bien et de mal, de crainte et d’espérance, de joie et de tristesse qui succèdent rapidement.”¹⁹ The waves of violence, the social unrest, and the periods of power vacuum created an atmosphere of anxiety and ambiguity that were particularly conducive to the spread of rumors. To judge from the correspondence of Colson and several of his contemporaries, the rumor networks of the Old Regime continued to function but became far more

¹⁵ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Dec. 17, 1780, Apr. 20, 1783, and Aug. 8, 1786.

¹⁶ See, for example, AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Dec. 17, 1780 and Nov. 29, 1789. Compare the comments of Louis-Sebastien Mercier on the credulity of the common people: *Tableau de Paris*, 12 vols. (Amsterdam, 1782-88), 2: 297-303.

¹⁷ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Sept. 30, 1781; Nov. 13, 1781; and Jan. 12, 1783.

¹⁸ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Jan. 23, 1787 and Feb. 4, 1787. Note that even ambassador Thomas Jefferson was initially in the dark about the reasons for summoning the Assembly: see his letter to John Jay of Jan. 9, 1787: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Julian P. Boyd, ed. (Princeton, 1954), 11:29.

¹⁹ AM Cahors, unclassified box of letters from Revolutionary deputies, letter of July 14, 1789 to the municipality of Cahors (held in B.M. Cahors).

politicized. Political rumors largely replaced the social gossip and *faits divers* of the earlier letters.

The “improvised news” proliferated in part through the emergence of newcenters for the exchange of rumors: the district (later sectional) assemblies, the neighborhood clubs, and the political cafés. It was further amplified through the flood of frequently contradictory assertions in newspaper and pamphlet publications. As we know, some of the journalists of the period made an attempt at objective and accurate reporting, but a great many others specialized in unconfirmed stories, wild speculation, and scurrilous *ad hominem* attacks. Confronted with this profusion of writings, and with little previous experience in reading a “free” press, many literate citizens could only treat the print media as another source of rumor. The confusion provoked by the plethora of newspapers and pamphlets was amplified, moreover, by the phenomenon of the newspaper hawkers. Frequently illiterate themselves, the paper peddlers filled the air every morning and afternoon with shouts of improvised “headlines,” conceived as much to attract sales as to convey the actual content of their merchandise. Such verbal transmissions could ultimately influence both literate and illiterate citizens. Louis-Sebastian Mercier has left us an unforgettable description of the rumors and falsehoods propagated in the streets “dans la bouche d’airain de ces brailleurs infatigables.” “De simples projets de décrets sont transformés en décrets, et tout un quartier raisonne ou s’épouvante de ce qui ne doit pas avoir lieu. Le peuple, mille fois trompé par ces annonces infidèles, n’en écoute pas moins le vociférateur.”²⁰ Very early in the Revolution, the comte de Mirabeau conveyed the power of rumor in this time of upheaval in a passage anticipating the conclusions of the social psychologists: “Rien ne frappe davantage un observateur que le penchant universel à croire, à exagérer les nouvelles sinistres dans les temps de calamités. Il semble que la logique ne consiste plus à calculer les degrés de probabilité, mais à prêter de la vraisemblance aux rumeurs les plus vagues, sitôt qu’elles annoncent des attentats, et agitent l’imagination par de sombres terreurs. Nous ressemblons alors aux enfants [parmi lesquels] les contes les plus effrayants sont toujours le mieux écoutés.”²¹

The specific stories circulating in the city during the Revolution varied enormously from the astute to the ludicrous. But two families of frequently overlapping rumors are particularly relevant for the origins of the September Massacres: 1) rumors involving the Parisian prisons; and 2) rumors involving conspiracy.

The fear of prisons and of the prisoners they housed undoubtedly existed under the Old Regime. Several state and municipal prisons were to be found in the very heart of the city, a presence that invariably gave rise to speculations about who was detained there and whether the inmates might be able to escape.²² Yet there is evidence that such anxiety intensified during the Revolution. Fears arose in part because of the widespread belief that the power vacuum and quasi-anarchy of 1789

²⁰ Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris*, Jean-Claude Bonnet, ed. (Paris, 1994), 210-11. Also AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letter of Apr. 5, 1789; William Short, letter to Thomas Jefferson in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 20:585 (letter of June 29, 1791); David Andress, *Massacre at the Champs de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Woodbridge, 2000), 177.

²¹ *Courier de Provence*, no. 21, issue of July 31, 1789.

²² See Caron, 3-4; also, Michel Porret, “Effrayer le crime par la terreur des chatiments?: La pédagogie de l’effroi chez quelques criminalistes du XVIIIe siècle,” in *La peur aux XVIIIe siècle: Discours, représentations, pratiques*, Jacques Berchtold and Michel Porret, eds. (Geneva, 1994), 48, 54.

had led to a rampant increase in crime. Soon after the October Days, a surge of panic coursed through Paris that gangs of thieves were planning to attack private homes during the night: “Cette abominable cabale,” wrote Colson, “met tout Paris en alarme; bien des femmes en sont tombées malades dans des états terribles de frayeur.” On October 10 the town fathers felt compelled to act and ordered the whole city illuminated throughout the night.²³ Similar stories circulated once again in early December, rumors that were conveyed to Colson through a conversation with his landlord and from the words of a newspaper hawker shouting outside his window. Whether the increase in theft and murder was real or not is difficult to confirm, but much of Paris clearly *believed* it was real.²⁴ Moreover, the fear of a crime wave went hand in hand with the belief that judges were refusing to try and punish the criminals. By the spring of 1790 some Parisian were even prepared to take justice into their own hands: between May of that year and February 1792 there were no less than thirteen lynchings or attempted lynchings of accused thieves by vigilante groups in various neighborhoods.²⁵

Closely linked to such rumors were the stories that the inmates, now thought to be overcrowding the prisons, were planning to break out and attack law-abiding citizens. One chilling rumor in the fall of 1789 maintained that someone was marking the houses of Paris with white and red crosses, indicating those citizens who were to be robbed by the escapees and those who were to be both robbed and killed – apparently reviving memories of practices used during the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacres in the sixteenth century. A spate of similar stories swept through Paris at the time of the king’s attempted flight in June 1791 – a period of particularly intense anxiety and uncertainty in which all kinds of rumors spread throughout the kingdom.²⁶ Even more frightening were the stories circulating that the prisoners had somehow managed to arm themselves. A series of fires set by prisoners in La Force prison in January 1792 led to wide speculation that they were planning an armed escape and that they would then attack good citizens. “On craint,” wrote Guittard, “que des brigands ne mettent le feu à Paris.”²⁷ Indeed, by the spring of 1792, prisons were widely viewed as sites in which danger was lurking and from which paid “brigands” might easily break out and turn against the Revolution and the Revolutionaries. During the *journée* of June 20, 1792, petitioners from the sections of Paris would already threaten to break into the prisons and execute the prisoners themselves, if the courts refused to do their job: “Le forcera-t-on,” they declared, “à

²³ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Oct. 13 and 18, 1789.

²⁴ Note that David Andress has identified an increase in police arrests in the spring of 1791: *Massacre at the Champs de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Woodbridge, 2000), 137-38.

²⁵ Micah Alpaugh, “Nonviolence, Violence, and Revolution: Political Demonstrations and Collaborative Protest in Paris, 1787-1795,” Appendix, pp. 338-64. See also AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Dec. 6, 1789; May 4 and 25, 1790; and Jan. 23, 1791.

²⁶ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letter of Oct. 13, 1789; Sigismond Lacroix, *Actes de la Commune de Paris pendant la Révolution. 2e Série, Tome V, 21 juin-31 juillet 1791* (Paris, 1907), 14 and 179 (entrees of June 21 and 26, 1791); *Chronique de Paris*, no. 174, issue of June 23, 1791.

²⁷ Guittard, 120 (entry of Jan. 21, 1792). Also AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letter of Jan. 25, 1792; Antoine Rabusson-Lamothe, “Lettres sur l’Assemblée législative adressé à la municipalité de Clermont-Ferrand par Antoine Rabusson-Lamothe,” in *Mémoires de l’Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Clermont-Ferrand*, Francisque Mège, ed., 11 (1869), 288 (letter of Jan. 21, 1792); A.D. Ille-et-Vilaine, L 294 Charles-François-Marie Duval letter of Jan. 23, 1792.

reprendre lui-même ce glaive [de la justice] et venger d'un seul coup la loi outragée, à punir les coupables?"²⁸

As for rumors of conspiracy, it is clear that they were rampant among the popular classes of Paris from the very beginning of the Revolution. In the days before the Bastille, word of an imminent attack by foreign troops concentrated around the city brought much of the population to the verge of panic. Such sentiments reached a fever pitch during the Great Fear of July 1789 with the news that brigands paid by aristocrats had killed and burned their way into Saint-Denis and were even marching down the Champs-Élysées.²⁹ But similar fears continued to haunt Parisians over the following months and years. Thus, in December 1789 rumors raged that hundreds of aristocrats had acquired national guard uniforms and were planning to attack and kill the patriots on Christmas Day. Anxiety became so widespread that the municipality once again ordered an illumination of the city throughout Christmas night. During the year 1790, Colson reported rumors of conspiracies about to break against the Revolution and the Revolutionaries in mid-January (linked to the Châtelet), in early April (by the comte de Maillebois), in September ("Paris serait mis à sang"), and once again on Christmas night. There were also endless rumors of conspiracies involving the kidnapping of the king, beginning as early as December 1789 and continuing to the very eve of the king's actual flight in June 1791.³⁰

As with all popular rumors, the elites seem frequently to have maintained an ambiguous position. Colson ultimately rejected the Christmas plot of 1789 as ridiculous and unproven, and he revived his mocking condemnation of popular credulity: "Le cours libre et multiplié des nouvelles fausses," he wrote, "passe tout ce qu'on peut s'en figurer."³¹ Conspiracy rumors also existed within the Constituent Assembly, but as I have argued elsewhere, they were generally episodic. On occasion solid evidence of real plots gave the Constituents cause for alarm, yet they remained dubious of the veracity of many of the rumors in circulation.³² However, conspiracy fears seem to have taken a quantum jump upward during the early Legislative Assembly. My previous study of this progression, based essentially on deputy correspondence, has been confirmed by an analysis of references to conspiracy in all of the deputies' speeches as charted in a digitized version of the *Archives parlementaires* (through the enumeration of the usages per week and per volume of seventeen words related to conspiracy).³³ There was a sharp increase in such

²⁸ *Archives parlementaires. Première série*, 45:417.

²⁹ See Gilbert Romme, cited in Alessandro Galante Garrone, *Gilbert Rome, Storia di un rivoluzionario* (N.p., 1959), 524 (letter of July 18, 1789). Timothy Tackett, "La grande peur de 1789 et la thèse du complot aristocratique," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 335 (January-March 2004): 1-17.

³⁰ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letters of Dec. 12 and 22, 1789; and Jan. 12, Apr. 4, Sept. 12, and Dec. 26, 1790. Curiously, the Christmas plot of 1789 seemed to be believed by the usually more skeptical Nicolas Ruault, *Gazette d'un Parisien sous la Révolution. Lettres à son frère, 1783-96*, Christiane Rimbaud and Anne Vassal, eds. (Paris, 1976), 173-74 (letter of Dec. 28, 1789).

³¹ AD Indre, 2J 10-12, Adrien-Joseph Colson, letter of Jan. 12, 1790.

³² Timothy Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror: 1789-1792," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691-713.

³³ See tableau 2, "Sensibilité aux complots, 1789-93," in Timothy Tackett and Nicolas Déplanche, "L'idée du 'complot' dans l'oeuvre de Georges Lefebvre: une remise en cause à partir d'une nouvelle source," *La Révolution française* [on line] <<http://lrf.revues.org/index171.html>>. See also Tackett,

references beginning especially in November 1791, a trend that persisted throughout the Legislative Assembly, peaking during the summer of 1792 and oscillating upward into the Convention.

There is insufficient space here to discuss the possible reasons for this “take-off” in rumors of conspiracy among the deputies of the Legislative Assembly. It undoubtedly involved, in part, the pre-assembly experience of those deputies, three-fourths of whom had served as local administrators and magistrates, struggling in the trenches against a variety of real or perceived counterrevolutionaries. It also likely involved a rapid growth of suspicion toward the king, especially after Louis XVI vetoed the Legislative Assembly’s decrees on refractories and emigrants in November-December 1791. Such fears were no doubt strengthened, though not created, by the coming of war with Austria and Prussia and by the initial failure of the French armies. In any case, when the war went badly, a veritable panic swept through the Legislative Assembly in late May 1792. Brissot and his Girondin allies claimed to have evidence of an impending counterrevolutionary attack against the Assembly and the Parisian Revolutionaries. In the wake of the Girondin speeches, similar rumors spread to the Parisian population. Both the municipal council and the sectional committees went into permanent session, the national guard was mobilized around the clock, and the city was once again kept illuminated for several nights running. The incident is especially revealing in that it suggests the extent to which rumors were now clearly crossing class lines, moving both upwards and downwards through Parisian society.

Following the analysis of the social psychologists, one might have expected the summer of 1792 to have been even more propitious for the proliferation of rumors. Particularly during the interregnum between the storming of the Tuileries Palace on August 10 and the convocation of the National Convention on September 20, France passed through what was arguably the most frightening and unsettling period of the entire Revolution. With a terrible lack of reliable information about the war effort and numerous complaints of contradictory reports from day to day,³⁴ no one knew if the Prussian army could be stopped in its march toward Paris. The incertitude was only compounded by the struggle for authority at the heart of the state. After the king had been removed and imprisoned, a complex competition for power broke out involving the Legislative Assembly, the Revolutionary Commune, the sections of Paris, and the provincial Fédéré troops still residing in the city. There were also, as we know, bitter factional feuds among the Republicans themselves, pitting the Girondins, based primarily in the Legislative Assembly, against the Mountain, who generally dominated the insurrectional Commune. Both sides openly accused their rivals of conspiracy and treason, so that it was increasingly difficult to know whom one could trust, who were the true Revolutionaries and who were the conspirators hiding behind the mask of patriotism. Indeed, even general Lafayette, who had once been admired as a national hero by almost everyone, was now known to have betrayed the country and deserted to the Austrians.

“Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution,” 700-704; and *The First Terrorists: The French Revolution and the Origins of a Political Culture of Violence* (Melbourne, 2009), 16-21.

³⁴ See, for example, the letter from Adelaïde Mareux in *Une famille de la bourgeoisie parisienne pendant la Révolution d’après leur correspondance inédite*, Louis de Launay, ed. (Paris, 1921), 295 (letter of Aug. 19, 1792); and of Alexandrine-Charlotte-Sophie de La Rochefoucauld, *Lettres de la duchesse de La Rochefoucauld à William Short*, Doina Pasca Harsanyi, ed. (Paris, 2001), 147 (letter of Sept. 1, 1792).

In this situation, rumors of imminent conspiracies about to explode became an obsession among both the elites and the masses throughout the month of August and were a constant subject of complaint to surveillance committees and the police. Stories spread rapidly that 400 nobles, escaped from the Tuileries on August 10, were now hiding out underground and waiting to strike; that the seminarians of Saint-Sulpice were secretly manufacturing daggers and paying the surviving Swiss Guards to use them; that huge caches of weapons were concealed beneath the Pantheon and under the Palais Royal in preparation for a counterrevolutionary coups; that armed men were threatening to attack the Jacobins; that evil doers had placed pieces of glass in the cities' flour supply.³⁵ For a period of some 48 hours between the 29th and the 31st of August the whole of Paris was systematically searched by the national guard for lurking conspirators and hidden arms. But the search itself, accompanied by continuous drum rolls and the peals of church bells, only further terrified the population. "Un bruit de frayer se répand," wrote Guittard in his diary. "Cela jeta une alarme dans tout Paris." Rosalie Jullien was beside herself with anguish as she wrote her husband: "On prend ici des mesures terribles pour en écarter tous les gens suspects.... Encore des traîtres et des trahisons, [une situation qui] nous met à deux doigts de notre perte." The call to arms was being beaten continuously, "si répétées, qu'il semble que la pluie inonde notre quartier," so that no one was able to sleep. "Toutes les femmes, [sont] aux portes," looking out for the arrival of brigands.³⁶

It was in these extraordinary circumstances that the two rumors – the prison rumor and the conspiracy rumor – seemed to coalesce. Reviving the fear that had spread through the city a year earlier at the time of the king's flight, prisoners were said to be about to break out and attack. It was generally thought that August 10 had led to a huge increase in the number arrested and that the prison system was being overwhelmed. The prisons were now thought to be gorged with refractory priests and with the very Swiss guards and noble volunteers who had ambushed the national guards and Fédérés troops at the Tuileries – the so-called "Massacre du Saint-Laurent" of August 10.³⁷ It was widely believed, moreover, that the counterrevolutionaries planned to pay the criminal elements, the "brigands" who were interred in the same prisons, to break out and do the dirty work against the patriots. The Commune itself helped to intensify the fears. Immediately after the August 10 insurrection, it had ordered section leaders to visit the prisons in their neighborhoods and post "un tableau de tous les ennemis de la Révolution" held inside, so that local citizens would know precisely the danger they faced.³⁸ The Legislative deputy Sylvain Codet was well aware of the threats and was deeply troubled: "Il y a dans les prisons une foule de conjurés, et sous huit jours, bien des têtes seront tombées." "Le peuple demande avec instance leur jugement," wrote Adelaïde Mareux, "ou ils menacent de les exécuter eux-mêmes." Rosalie Jullien had also heard of the prison conspiracies and the possible preventative vigilante action.

³⁵ Lefebvre, *La première terreur*, 21, 71, 94; Caron, 428-45; Frédéric Braesch, *La commune du dix août 1792. Etude sur l'histoire de Paris du 20 janvier au 2 décembre 1792* (Paris, 1911), 347-49. On the rumors of glass in the flour, see, for example, Haim Burstin, *Une Révolution à l'oeuvre: Le faubourg Saint-Marcel (1789-1794)* (Champ Vallon, 2005), 432.

³⁶ Guittard, 174 (entry of Aug. 29, 1792); A.N. 39 AP Jullien, letter of of Aug. 29, 1792.

³⁷ The number of new prisoners incarcerated after August 10 was much exaggerated at the time: Caron, 17-26.

³⁸ Braesch, 353-54.

“Le nombre des criminels m’épouvante,” she wrote. And she meditated ominously, “Il faut être barbare par humanité et couper un membre pour sauver le corps.”³⁹

Thus, in the late summer of 1792 most of the elements of rumor formation proposed by the social psychologists were present in Paris. The tense and ambiguous situation, the veritable vacuum of authority and legitimacy had produced a lack of trust in official sources of information. The rumors in circulation metamorphosed in such a way as to reflect and justify the already widespread attitudes of hatred and mistrust towards nobles and priests, justifying the desire for revenge by demonizing these opponents. The anxiety and uncertainty were so intense and widely experienced throughout the society that a common rumor consensus was able to form and move across class and cultural boundaries. It was in this context, I would argue, that a large body of Parisians sympathized with the ideas that “one must kill the devil before he kills us” (as Guittard had put it). It was in this context that a substantial number of elites – who in other situations would almost certainly have been skeptical of the rumor and morally outraged by the popular actions that followed – came to accept or even openly to support and facilitate the September Massacres – where common prisoners were now metamorphosed into “brigands” in the pay of the counterrevolution.

The obsession with a prison conspiracy, the desire for revenge, the fear of the advancing Prussians, the ambiguity over who was in control of a state that had always relied in the past on a centralized monarchy: all had come together in a volatile mixture of anger, fear, and uncertainty. It was only in the weeks and months that followed, as the rumors and the situation that promoted them both abated, that a great many people came to look on the Massacres in a new light and express their shock and horror over what had happened. In conclusion then, I would suggest that an understanding of the power and persuasive force of rumor in a time of revolution is essential for explaining the psychology of the “First Terror” of the summer of 1792 and perhaps of the Revolutionary Terror in general.

³⁹ A.D. Ille-et-Vilaine, L 294 (2), Sylvain Codet letter of Aug. 19, 1792; Mareux, 290-97 (letter of Aug. 19); Jullien, letters of Aug. 15 and 21. See also Marie Victoire Monnard in *Les souvenirs d’une femme du peuple*, O. Boutanquoi, ed. (Senlis, 1929), 46.