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## The Coup d'État of August 10, 1792

*Noah Shusterman*

### *Introduction*

This article's title is also its thesis: the events which took place in Paris on August 10, 1792, were a coup d'état. Beyond that – and somewhat independent of the specifics of that thesis – is a broader claim that historians have overemphasized the extent to which the violence of the French Revolution was a popular phenomenon, and underemphasized the role of the revolution's state forces in the major uprisings from 1789 through 1793. The revolutionary *journées* all included official military units siding with the insurgency, a tendency that was especially strong on August 10. Seeing August 10 as a spontaneous action of the people of Paris, attributing it to the anger of sans-culottes, or to some sort of inexorable logic of revolutionary rhetoric, misses the fundamental nature of that day's confrontation. This risk is compounded if we not only accept the subsequent celebration of August 10 as an uprising of the People, but also associate that victory – consciously or not – with what we would consider a people's uprising in today's world.

August 10 was a military confrontation, and eventually a battle, fought on both sides by soldiers and citizen-soldiers, most of whom acted under the orders of their immediate superiors. The opposition believed (plausibly) that their actions were justified because the monarchy was acting against the nation's best interests. The constitution of 1791, though, was on the side of the monarchy; the attack on the Tuileries was illegal under that constitution, which was itself a revolutionary document and not a remnant of absolutist rule. The Legislative Assembly's deputies were wary of any sort of confrontation, military or popular, even as almost all of them had long soured on Louis XVI. The opposition had the support of more of the local population than did the forces defending the monarchy, but that was not why they won the day. The opposition succeeded because their military planning and preparation were more thorough than were the monarchy's, and because political leaders at the neighborhood level were able to work both with commanders in the Paris National Guard and provincial soldiers who had come to Paris to overthrow the monarchy. The Assembly's eventual legitimization of the day's events, and deputies' descriptions of the day as a victory of the people, have obscured the military nature of August 10, 1792.

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### *What Happened*

The general outline of that day's events is well known. Starting on the night of August 9, tens of thousands of people began gathering and marching toward the Tuileries. Sections sounded their tocsins, bells which for centuries had meant mobilization.<sup>1</sup> Many of those who gathered were members of the Paris National Guard; others were soldiers (*fédérés*) who had arrived from Marseilles and Brest; others were unaffiliated Parisian citizens. Section leaders gathered in the Hôtel de Ville and declared themselves an insurrectional commune with control over the municipal government. The king was in the Tuileries, defended by other members of the National Guard, Swiss Guardsmen, gendarmes, and several hundred armed civilians, mostly drawn from France's Old Regime nobility.

Over the course of the night and into the morning, opposition numbers grew while the number of people defending the king and the palace shrank. The royal family would soon seek shelter in the National Assembly. After the king left, the opposition began invading the Tuileries. The Swiss Guards, who had set themselves up above a central staircase in the palace, opened fire on the opposition forces taking over the palace. Eventually, the opposition's greater numbers won out. By the end of the day, the opposition had taken over the palace and killed roughly 600 of the Swiss Guards, mostly after the fighting had ended; during that fighting the Swiss killed around 300 people. In the aftermath, the Legislative Assembly, which had originally opposed the attack on the Tuileries, suspended the monarchy, imprisoned the royal family, and called for a National Convention. It was one of the Revolution's key turning points. It was also the bloodiest day Paris would see between the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the 1871 suppression of the Communards.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to see why historians have not labeled the day as a coup d'état. The violence, the massive participation, the support from the people of Paris, all point to the day being an uprising of the people, as the Revolutionaries described it in its immediate aftermath. Coups d'état often bring republics to an end – the case with both Napoleon Bonaparte and Louis Napoleon, whereas August 10 brought France's first republic into being. It is not the objective of this paper to deny any of those elements. Rather, the goal is to show that the support of the population was not a sufficient cause, nor did the men leading the opposition believe it to be sufficient; that many who fought were opposed to Louis XVI rather than advocates of republicanism; and that further research into the day's causes should focus on neighborhood National Guard units rather than on any sort of progress of revolutionary ideas. Beyond that, the day's violence was not a necessary part of the day's events, though the legacy of that violence would shape the day's aftermath.

### *Citizens, Militias, Soldiers: Understanding Revolutionary Paris*

As I have argued elsewhere, previous generations of historians have mischaracterized revolutionary violence by referring to it as “popular” and linking it to “the crowd” rather than emphasizing the key role that French military forces played.<sup>3</sup> The Storming of the Bastille was a stalemate until the French Guards, the largest military force stationed in Old Regime Paris,

<sup>1</sup> Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 180; Hamon, “Le tocsin de la révolte,” 3.

<sup>2</sup> All histories of the Revolution include discussions of August 10, though the day would benefit from a standalone study. For an account focused on the day from a military perspective, see Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 173–92.

<sup>3</sup> Shusterman, “Somewhat Organized.”

intervened on the besiegers' side. The October Days were less a response to bread prices in Paris, than to increased army presence in Versailles and the fear that it would be an effective counterrevolutionary force. David Andress has also argued against the description of revolutionary violence as "popular"; the 1793 purge of the Girondins was done by National Guardsmen "arrayed in arms", he notes, and the Terror was a matter of state violence against the population. "It is only by choosing, a priori, to see these movements as 'popular,'" Andress writes, "that such a character can be forced on them."<sup>4</sup>

The French Revolution saw repeated confrontations between different branches of the French military because Louis XVI struggled to control his armed forces – a trend that began with the desertion of the French Guards in 1789 and continued until he was dethroned.<sup>5</sup> But in the October Days' aftermath a settlement emerged, both politically and for the policing and military control of Paris. Lafayette was already the commander of the Paris National Guard; with the government moving from Versailles to Paris, Louis XVI gave Lafayette command of all troops in the region.<sup>6</sup> The king never regained full control over the Line Army – at least not the kind of control that could get him back to Versailles, or even past Varennes. The king also never got control of the military forces in Paris, either – but Lafayette did. He did so, moreover, as a constitutional monarchist, and a supporter of the Revolution but wary of its more radical elements. And while "the man in charge commanding the government's armed forces supported that government" might seem a banal point, in the whirlwind of the Revolution that kind of allegiance could not be taken for granted, especially as all of the officers in 1789 came from the Old Regime nobility.<sup>7</sup>

Lafayette's National Guard coexisted with a number of other forces in Paris, including Swiss Guards and, at times, a unit protecting the royal family. The National Guard's size, though, gave it an enormous role in both keeping public order, and in maintaining or ending a particular government's reign. The Paris National Guard was a hybrid institution, combining full-time guardsmen, most of whom were former French Guards, with Parisian citizen-soldiers. As Roger Dupuy noted in 2010, National Guard support was the "determining factor" in Revolutionary events from 1789 up through 1871.<sup>8</sup> This was true for August 10, as well: there was no factor more important in the day's success than the willingness of large parts of the National Guard to march on the Tuileries, and the unwillingness of the rest of the guard to oppose them.<sup>9</sup> Lafayette, though, was a constitutional monarchist, and while he had control over the guard, its politics never strayed that far from his.

Military allegiance can make or break a revolution; this was not unique to France. In 1917, Russian soldiers, weary from years of war, either sided with the Bolsheviks or stood down. Chinese generals in 1989 opposed cracking down on protesters, before hard-liners eventually prevailed.<sup>10</sup> These allegiances are not simple results of a cause's popularity, objective economic conditions, soldiers' class status, etc. Governments and movements aim to cultivate the military. During the French Revolution, when the governments succeeded at this, they remained in power.

Lafayette led the Paris National Guard from July 1789 until October 1791. Under his command, the National Guard allowed the government to remain in place after the city's

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<sup>4</sup> Andress, "Popular Violence in the French Revolution," 178, 185, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Alder, "Stepson of the Enlightenment," 1–18.

<sup>6</sup> Auricchio, *The Marquis*, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Bien, "The Army in the French Enlightenment."

<sup>8</sup> Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 9, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 185–86.

<sup>10</sup> Werth, "Russia 1917: The Soldiers' Revolution"; Buckley, "New Documents Show Power Games".

population soured on the king following his attempt to flee France in June 1791. The following month, thousands of Parisians gathered at the Champ de Mars demanding he leave the throne. National Guardsmen under Lafayette's command fired on the crowd. Estimates on the deaths vary from a dozen to several hundred.<sup>11</sup> Yet the government remained in place, with no large-scale disturbances for nearly a year.

From at least June 1791 until August 1792, then, France's monarchy remained in power despite being unpopular among Parisians, because local military forces remained loyal. An unpopular government staying in power because it controls the military is common – perhaps even an accurate description of most governments in world history. The question of how August 10 happened, then, is a question of how the monarchy lost the support of the military, and how the opposition gained enough military support to allow them to overthrow the monarchy and bypass the National Assembly. Put differently, the question of how August 10 happened was the question of what had changed since the Champ de Mars massacre in July 1791.

### *Paris after Lafayette*

Under Lafayette's leadership, there were tensions between different guard units, and especially between the units east of Paris and the central leadership, but those tensions never fully boiled over. In October 1791, though, Lafayette retired as commander of the Paris National Guard. That December he became a general in the French Army.<sup>12</sup> At the time of his departure, he still had the guard's support, but was no longer popular among Parisians. Command fell to six regional commanders (*chefs de légion*) who served on a rotating basis. None of those men ever received the kind of loyalty from the guard that Lafayette had enjoyed.<sup>13</sup> The first step toward August 10, then, came from the deteriorating power of the National Guard's central command and the resulting relative autonomy of the guard units most likely to not only oppose the king but to do so in ways that exceeded what politicians in the Legislative Assembly accepted.<sup>14</sup>

Phrased differently: before there was a coup against the monarchy, there was a coup within the military.<sup>15</sup> Before the opposition freed France from Louis XVI, they freed the region's guard units from the central leadership. This transformation took months, but well before August 10, no authority could force guards units in Eastern Paris and Faubourg Saint-Antoine to support the monarchy, or to obey the Assembly. June 20, 1792 made that clear: thousands of Parisians invaded the Tuileries, including uniformed guardsmen.<sup>16</sup>

If June 20 showed that none of Lafayette's successors controlled the guard as he had, Lafayette's ineffective speech before the National Assembly on June 28 confirmed that there would be no return to his personal control over the National Guard. He threatened to return to Paris with "his" soldiers from the Army of the Centre (soldiers who, that August, would refuse to march on Paris).<sup>17</sup> At that point in the Revolution, then, there was no one who would be able to control Paris's National Guard who supported the monarchy. While unpopular governments remain in power with military support, the monarchy, unpopular in Paris since the summer of

<sup>11</sup> Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars*, 178–206.

<sup>12</sup> Auricchio, *The Marquis*, 251, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 2:17.

<sup>14</sup> Dupuy, *Garde Nationale*, 172–76.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the two reviewers of this article for making this point.

<sup>16</sup> Shusterman, "Somewhat Organized," 54–56.

<sup>17</sup> Auricchio, *The Marquis*, 259.

1791, was losing its military support. And the men in the Legislative Assembly sped that process along.

### *Legislators in Limbo*

The Legislative Assembly played an ambivalent role at every stage of this process: they helped prepare a confrontation that they did not want; they were both casualty and beneficiary of that confrontation; they began the process of legitimizing an uprising which, hours before, they had declared illegitimate; and, given the opportunity to establish the official word on that confrontation, the deputies did so in a way that announced the imminent dissolution of the Assembly itself. They were neither the instigators nor the targets of the coup d'état. Had the Assembly been more unified and its leaders more savvy, they could have been the coup's main beneficiaries; but had the Assembly been more unified and its leaders more savvy, the crisis of the summer of 1792 would not have happened in the first place.

The Legislative Assembly shifted the balance of military power within Paris away from the king and toward the opposition. In May 1792, the Assembly eliminated the King's Guard, an 1800-man force responsible for the royal family's safety.<sup>18</sup> Defense of the king fell to National Guardsmen and Swiss Guards, neither of whom had the ideological commitment to the monarchy that the king's guard had had. Despite having veto power, the king went along with this, probably because he was hoping for a French defeat in the war.<sup>19</sup> Louis XVI was a poor tactician, and decisions that would eventually backfire were not out of character. He did veto a proposal to bring 20,000 soldiers to Paris. Eventually, though, the Assembly declared that they no longer had to pay attention to his veto, and began bringing those soldiers in.<sup>20</sup> In July, the Assembly also decreed that any soldiers from the line army who were in Paris needed to head to the front. This was supposed to include the Swiss Guards, but wound up only including some of them; it exempted men from the French Guard.<sup>21</sup> With those moves, the deputies helped make it possible for the opposition, on August 10, to outnumber the monarchy's defenders by a degree sufficient to overcome the tactical difficulties of attacking a palace.

But the events of August 10 were not their doing. On the night of August 9, they heard – and applauded – Condorcet's address on “the exercise of sovereign rights.” Acknowledging that despots had “sentenced to death all French people who dare to fight for freedom and for the laws,” and that the people had the right to revoke their approval of any laws and any leaders, Condorcet still left the determination of the collective will to elections, and “invited” all portions of the population to “respect the law.”<sup>22</sup>

### *The Movers and Shakers*

Who, then, wanted an insurrection? Not Condorcet and his allies, obviously. Nor did Robespierre, who was calling for the king to be deposed and for a new legislature, but not an insurrection.<sup>23</sup> Marat was going somewhat further, calling for the royal family and their supporters within the government to be taken hostage, and for a national convention that would

<sup>18</sup> Mavidal and Laurent, eds, *Archives parlementaires* [henceforth *AP*], 44:305.

<sup>19</sup> Furet, *Revolutionary France*, 106.

<sup>20</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Poisson, *L'Armée et la Garde nationale*, I:448.

<sup>22</sup> *AP* 47: 615.

<sup>23</sup> McPhee, *Robespierre*, 124

choose a new king – but, again, not an insurrection.<sup>24</sup> That planning began at the neighborhood level – among section leaders and the men leading the National Guard units in more radical neighborhoods. Eventually, the *fédérés* also played leading roles in the planning, and especially in its timing. Establishing alliances between the *fédérés* and the National Guardsmen would be among the most important steps in the build-up to August 10.

One of the best accounts of that build-up comes from Pierre Chaumette, a Parisian politician who, until August 10, was primarily active at the section level, and who became a leading member of the insurrectional commune. In the following months, Chaumette wrote his memoirs, and his description of the preparation showed how Chaumette understood it as a matter of military preparedness. He knew that the court had reinforced the Tuileries, increasing the number of cannons and the number of men stationed there. His concern was not with gathering popular support, but with how the Tuileries had reinforced its walls. He also focused on the arrival of the soldiers from Marseilles, worrying that too many National Guardsmen were still loyal to Lafayette and the court. He was even convinced that the defenders of the Tuileries had sharpened the blades on their knives.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Chaumette's ally Jacques Hébert described the close ties between the Marseilles soldiers and the pro-insurrection segments of the Paris National Guard – and the two groups' willingness to fight National Guard units still loyal to the monarchy.<sup>26</sup> According to Albert Mathiez, the final timing was a compromise between Pétion, the mayor of Paris, who hoped to buy time for the National Assembly to act, and the Marseilles soldiers, who were eager to fight, either in Paris against the monarchy or at the front.<sup>27</sup>

### *Turning Points*

Several aspects of the day's events are worth highlighting. The Insurrectionary Commune replaced Antoine Mandat, the acting head of the National Guard, with Antoine Santerre, the standard bearer of the more left-wing National Guard units east of Paris.<sup>28</sup> Santerre, acting with the commune's approval but against the Assembly's wishes, marched thousands of soldiers and citizen soldiers on the Tuileries. This show of force snowballed; more National Guard units either joined the insurrection or made known that they would not oppose it.<sup>29</sup>

The day's most famous moment came at around 7 a.m. With around 3,000 men defending the Tuileries, and probably around 20,000 people outside of the palace, ready to attack, the royal family walked from the Tuileries to the National Assembly. That was the end of the Bourbon monarchy, and could have been the end of the confrontation. At that point, everyone who had marched on the Tuileries was still alive, as was everyone defending it.

The question of why August 10 succeeded, then, is also the question of how the opposition was able to gather such an overwhelming show of force that Louis XVI knew that there was no hope in opposing it. The opposition's strength and intimidation did not come from sheer numbers, but from the heavily militarized nature of the opposition. When the king looked out on the opposition, he saw armed units of National Guardsmen, acting as such, along with the *fédérés*, all acting under the authorization – such as it was – of the insurrectional commune.

<sup>24</sup> Marat, *Œuvres politiques*, 7:4154-57.

<sup>25</sup> Chaumette, *Mémoires*, 27, 36, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Hébert, *Grand détail*.

<sup>27</sup> Mathiez, *Le Dix août*, 91-2.

<sup>28</sup> Mathiez, *Le Dix août*, 102.

<sup>29</sup> As Rudé noted, "Though the final outcome was hardly in doubt, the defenders might have put up a sterner resistance." Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 104.

The day's confrontation could have ended there – and for some people involved, it had. The hundreds of National Guardsmen and Swiss Guards who accompanied the royal family to the Assembly did not return to the Tuileries. Those National Guardsmen still in the palace no longer understood why. As one account put it, “the king's departure for the Assembly had a bad effect among the National Guardsmen; they looked in their neighbors' eyes for what they should think.”<sup>30</sup>

When Louis XVI arrived in the National Assembly, he claimed that he had done so to “prevent a great crime.”<sup>31</sup> But he acted only to save himself and his family, as shown by his decision not to order the soldiers defending the palace to stand down.<sup>32</sup> August 10 was among the most violent days Paris saw during the Revolution. Yet the violence was less integral to the day's events than might appear, and occurred after the king had left his palace. The king faced an unwinnable situation because, in the preceding months, the monarchy's opponents had worked systematically to both weaken his military power within Paris, and to strengthen the military forces hostile to him.

The democratic movement that had drowned in its own blood at the Champ de Mars the summer before, as Mathiez put it, was now triumphant.<sup>33</sup> The biggest difference – though certainly not the only one – was that a popular movement against the king now had military support. Local leaders had led a section of the military as it turned its coercive power against one of the apexes of the state. The result was a successful organized effort at a sudden, illegal removal of the executive branch of France's government. Massive, messy, and, within Paris, popular – but still a coup d'état.

### *What is a Coup d'État?*

Referring to August 10 as a coup d'état goes against generations of scholarship and popular opinion. It also requires at least a baseline understanding of what constitutes a coup d'état. This article follows the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research in defining coups as “organized efforts to effect sudden and irregular (e.g., illegal or extra-legal) removal of the incumbent executive authority of a national government, or to displace the authority of the highest levels of one or more branches of government.”<sup>34</sup> Alternative definitions include “the sudden substitution of key incumbent government authorities by an individual or small group, usually without intended or actual change in the government structure itself,” “a seizure of power by a group using the permanent employees of the state ... merely to substitute one ruling group for another,” and “when the military, or a section of the military, turns its coercive power against the apex of the state, establishes itself there, and the rest of the state takes its orders from the new regime.”<sup>35</sup>

None of these definitions rely on the change of power (or attempted change of power) being unpopular, or on new leaders having less support than the ones they replaced. Nor is it inherently a bad thing for a coup d'état to lead to a change in government, especially when the government in power does not provide a means for replacing unpopular leaders; a tyranny overthrown by well-placed leaders within the government or the military might lack a

<sup>30</sup> Anon, *Histoire secrète*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> AP 47:636.

<sup>32</sup> Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française* I:791.

<sup>33</sup> Mathiez, *Le Dix août*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Peyton, “Cline Center Coup D'état Project Dataset Codebook,” 2.

<sup>35</sup> Varol, “The Democratic Coup d'Etat,” 297; Kyriakodis, “The 1991 Soviet and Bolshevik Coups Compared,” 318; Bartelson, “Making Exceptions,” 323.



democratic revolution's drama, but it might also lack the enormous body count. In a recent piece, Ozan Varol has argued that while all coups include "anti-democratic features," some are a response to popular pressure and can foster democracy. These "democratic coups" involve the military, in response to popular pressure, overthrowing an authoritarian regime and facilitating the establishment of democratically elected governments.<sup>36</sup> The end of Portugal's authoritarian government in the 1970s, for instance, began with a movement from within the Portuguese army.<sup>37</sup> Common usage of the term, though, is pejorative – and with good reason. Coups like Pinochet's in Chile, Idi Amin's in Uganda, or the current situation in Myanmar, have led to enormous suffering. Meanwhile, the coups attempted against Hitler all failed.

European historians generally use the term for changes in power that took place against the desires of the population, or at least without their approval. Interpretations of Russia's October Revolution in 1917 as a coup d'état aim to delegitimize the Bolshevik rule by emphasizing its lack of popular support. The Bolsheviks' relatively poor showing in the subsequent elections, and the ensuing closing of Russia's Constituent Assembly, cemented the view that the Revolution's success relied on military power rather than a mandate from the people.<sup>38</sup> This debate highlights another feature of analyzing coups: the distinction between legal transfers of power and coups is often clearer than the distinction between coups and popular revolutions. France has an established nomenclature of coups and revolutions. The events of 1830 and 1848 were successful revolutions, 1870 and 1968 were failed revolutions; 1851 was France's one successful post-1815 coup d'état, though there were many failed ones. History is often messy, though, and there is no reason that every event would fit into only one category.

### *What is a Revolution?*

The French Revolution was a definition-shaping event. Supporters and detractors alike agree that it was a revolution, just as they agree that it began in 1789. There is less consensus about when the Revolution ended, though Napoleon Bonaparte's 1799 coup d'état is as valid an answer as any. That was a classic coup: politicians plotted a takeover of the government and, with military support, imposed their rule on the existing government. When Napoleon addressed the legislature, he acknowledged that "there is talk of Caesar, of Cromwell, of military government."<sup>39</sup> In his defense, Napoleon pointed to the lack of respect for the Constitution that had already resulted from the events of 18 Fructidor V, 22 Floréal VI, and 30 Prairial VII.

Those three dates, along with Napoleon's seizure of power on 18 Brumaire VIII, have all entered the history books as coups d'état.<sup>40</sup> The term, however, is never used for events before the fall of Robespierre. There are valid reasons for treating the two sets of dates differently. Most *journées* involved large-scale participation, including civilians, at a time when Parisian popular life was hyper-politicized. In post-Thermidor Paris, that hyper-politicization had declined, and fewer people participated. Nor did the Directory's coups involve significant bloodshed, the way that several *journées* – including August 10 – did.

Still, this distinction – *journées* before the fall of Robespierre, coups after – is a matter of usage and traditions rather than theorized or debated arguments. Post-Terror uprisings that saw

<sup>36</sup> Varol, "The Democratic Coup d'Etat," 291–356. See also Johnson and Thyne, "Squeaky Wheels and Troop Loyalty."

<sup>37</sup> Varol, *The Democratic Coup d'État*, 148–49.

<sup>38</sup> Kyriakodis, "The 1991 Soviet and Bolshevik Coups Compared."

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from Baker, ed., *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 406.

<sup>40</sup> Lyons, *France under the Directory*, 215–28;

significant mobilization were unsuccessful in reshaping the Revolution.<sup>41</sup> And while this paper is focused on August 10, it was not the only *journée* that could be characterized as a coup d'état. On June 2, 1793, the leaders of the Paris National Guard surrounded the Convention with armed guardsmen, spearheading a movement that had been spreading through Paris in favor of expelling the Girondin leaders from the government. This move had widespread support within Paris, hesitant support among Montagnard deputies, and widespread opposition through much of the rest of France – but unclear support among those rank-and-file guardsmen surrounding the Convention.<sup>42</sup>

All of these days, not only August 10, need to be seen as internal battles involving different branches of the French military, rather than events where the people rose up against the government.<sup>43</sup> As Dupuy noted, though, there is a “relative historiographical silence” about the National Guard, despite their key role in the Revolution.<sup>44</sup> When it comes to the Revolutionary *journées*, that relative silence was baked in almost from the start. In the Legislative Assembly on August 11, deputies routinely referred to the actors of the previous days as *le peuple*. Santerre assured the deputies that “the people is full of respect for their representatives.”<sup>45</sup> Danton, then Minister of Justice, described the events as one where “the people deployed all of their energy.”<sup>46</sup>

Revolutionaries' descriptions of August 10 as an action of *le peuple* continued during the Convention. The day became, for Convention deputies, an act of the people – as Robespierre put it, “the victory, and the people, have decided that [Louis XVI] alone is a rebel.”<sup>47</sup> Historians have tended to follow the Convention: August 10 was a “victory of the entire people,” according to Jules Michelet.<sup>48</sup> For Jean Jaurès, the day began when Louis XVI “had the stinging, fatal sensation that he stood alone against the people.”<sup>49</sup> More recently, William Doyle described the insurgents as “shopkeepers, petty tradesmen, and artisans,” Jeremy Popkin, while noting the importance of “armed battalions of the more radical Paris sections,” stressed the “sans-culottes” who were “infuriated” at the deaths of other insurgents,<sup>50</sup> and Jean-Clément Martin wrote that the day's atrocities led Napoleon to mistrust “the masses.”<sup>51</sup>

### *Recentering Events*

The erasure of the day's military aspects was not unique to August 10. In a 1996 article, William Sewell showed how the Storming of the Bastille's significance only came with its retrospective interpretation. During the event's aftermath, National Assembly deputies gave it meanings well beyond what its participants had intended. The event became an act that “effected a durable articulation of popular violence and popular sovereignty in the new category of revolution... The most profound consequence of the taking of the Bastille was, then, a reconstruction of the very

<sup>41</sup> Particularly the uprising of 1–4 Prairial III. See Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 217. Thanks to Peter McPhee for pointing to June 2 as an event to be analyzed in this perspective.

<sup>43</sup> Shusterman, “Somewhat Organized.”

<sup>44</sup> Dupuy, *Garde nationale*, 9, 15.

<sup>45</sup> AP 48:15

<sup>46</sup> AP 48:23.

<sup>47</sup> AP 54:74.

<sup>48</sup> Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, I:782, 784.

<sup>49</sup> Jaurès, *A Socialist History*, 101.

<sup>50</sup> Doyle, *Oxford History*, 189; Popkin, *The French Revolution*, 57–58.

<sup>51</sup> Martin, *Violence et Révolution*, 137.

categories of French political culture and political action.” These transformations were significant because they had been “sanctioned at the pinnacle of state authority,” approved by the Assembly and the king.<sup>52</sup>

This article has argued against labeling revolutionary violence as “popular,” and insisting instead on identifying when trained military units play key roles.<sup>53</sup> Celebrations of an event will always have some degree of variance from the way an event unfolded, though, and in both the Storming of the Bastille and the uprising of August 10, those subsequent celebrations deemphasized the idea that these had been internecine military confrontations. The French Guards remained heroes of the Bastille, and the *fédérés* heroes of August 10, but *le peuple* became the true hero of both days. And in both cases, that reinterpretation took place at the highest levels: just as the National Assembly and Louis XVI treated July 14 as a victory of the people, the men in the Legislative Assembly, and then the Convention, established August 10 as a victory of the people.

Sewell’s 1996 article came in the middle of the linguistic turn, when words like “significance” appeared in all of their Saussurean glory. His goal was to understand how the events of July 14 had achieved mythic status. This article has moved in the opposite direction, trying to undo some of the myths around August 10 in order to explain what it took for a government to stay in power – and what it took for the opposition to take down a government. Robespierre called August 10 a thunderbolt thrown by the people.<sup>54</sup> The day, though, was the culmination of a long-term organized project aimed at eliminating part of the government, but not all of it, and using the government’s own forces to do so. Official state military forces turned their coercive power against an apex of the state, and military leaders used their positions to force an extraconstitutional change of the government. It did matter that those military forces had a significant number of citizen-soldiers, and that the monarchy had become less popular with the citizens themselves. But the king’s failure to maintain control over the military, and the inability of any of Lafayette’s successors to maintain the National Guard as the repressive force he had made it, left the government too vulnerable to survive.

### Conclusion

Referring to August 10 as a coup d’état goes against generations of scholarship and popular opinion. It will take more than one article to change that. There is a more pressing need, though, to reexamine what it means to talk about “the people” during the French Revolution. The claim to speak for or act on behalf of the people was a powerful rhetorical strategy at the time, and politicians were eager to use it as a way of justifying the actions of their supporters, whether civilians, citizen-soldiers, or professional soldiers. Phrases like “*aux armes, citoyens!*” blurred any distinctions between those groups.

Things have changed since, however. Writing about a people’s revolt today, in the fading shadows of the Civil Rights Movement and the Color Revolutions of 1989–91, brings with it visions of people acting on their own, of civilians of all ages, women and men together, bringing down governments through collective actions. That vision of the French Revolution as a people’s revolution now coexists with another, older, vision of the Revolution as a time when an inherently violent people ran amok. But both that vision of a violent crowd, and the more

<sup>52</sup> Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures.”

<sup>53</sup> Godechot, *The Taking of the Bastille*, 238.

<sup>54</sup> Baker, ed., *The Old Regime*, p. 309.

supportive view of a people fighting for their rights – the two visions which, in earlier generations, were represented by Gustave Le Bon and George Rudé – obscure the nature of August 10, 1792, and the tens of thousands of men in uniform, under arms, who Louis XVI saw when he looked out that morning. Missing in both versions, then, is an accurate account of how and why the opposition succeeded. In the case of August 10, the opposition used the kinds of methods that later coup leaders would use: forging bonds with military leaders in order to force a change in the government.

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