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Jeff Horn, *The Making of a Terrorist: Alexandre Rousselin and the French Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021; ix + 243 pp. 15 halftones. \$54.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-752992-8.

Review by David Andress, University of Portsmouth.

Alexandre Rousselin lived a life wrapped in enigma. Child of a working-class Parisian marriage, he had just turned sixteen when agitation around elections to the Estates-General wracked the city in the spring of 1789. Yet he was no future horny-handed *sans-culotte*. His mother, socially no more than a washerwoman, had some years earlier (after abandonment by her husband) become the companion of an army officer, the younger son of a marquis, and this figure became Alexandre's somewhat ambiguous "foster-father." Thanks to his wealth, Alexandre in 1789 was a recent graduate of the prestigious Collège d'Harcourt, equipped with a rigorous classical education further infused with the stern moralism of one of the capital's most Jansenist religious foundations. Rousselin himself left no account of what happened to him in the months ahead, but at some time before 1791, still only a youth, he became the confidential secretary of the rising radical journalist, Camille Desmoulins.

The implications of that role would remain with Rousselin for the rest of his long and convoluted life, until he died as a wealthy and noble retired newspaper proprietor in 1847. He wrote, and he kept secrets—secrets sometimes buried in documents he refused to publish, sometimes obfuscated by the flow of words, sometimes hammered into obscurity by the threat and reality of legal action. His life became a muddled manuscript, full of erasures and insistent emphases, imposed by a variety of hands, but in which his own predominated through his constant, attentive rewriting. How successfully he persuaded himself that he had imposed order on his acts remains an open question. Jeff Horn begins his biographical study with the gruesome, but widely attested anecdote that in prosperous later life, Rousselin owned and would occasionally exhibit to guests the skull of Charlotte Corday, famed virginal assassin of the ultra-radical Marat. What such an artefact, and its debatable authenticity, might mean to a man who had found himself at the very centre of revolutionary infighting in 1793-1794, is a question at the heart of this work.

Because Rousselin worked so hard not to leave a clear answer, his biographer must circle around a mixture of attested and rumoured facts and contemporary speculations. Much remains uncertain, though what stands out is never less than intriguing. Some time in mid- to late 1791, Rousselin took a step up the ladder of influence, switching employers to Desmoulins' Cordeliers club associate Georges-Jacques Danton, currently gaining increasing prominence in the tense political atmosphere that would propel France to war in April 1792. For both men, Rousselin seems to have served as an all-round personal assistant, handling matters from the minutes of

meetings to their household finances. He was, presumably, invaluable, because Danton kept him in the role as he ascended to the Justice Ministry after the fall of the monarchy that August. Still in that position, Rousselin witnessed the September Massacres as a National Guard volunteer, later writing a dramatic and critical account of events he witnessed—to which we shall return.

Horn has titled his book *The Making of a Terrorist*, but it is fair to say that Rousselin appears in the public record fully formed in that role. No evidence survives of what he was doing between September 1792 and April 1793, but in that latter month (having just turned twenty) he reappears as a spokesman for the Parisian sectional movement. He presented one of the first petitions to the Paris Commune explicitly calling for the removal of the Girondin leadership, and at the end of May, even more dramatically, stood before the Convention as spokesman of the radicals' citywide Central Revolutionary Committee, issuing demands for the Girondins' arrest with the backing of thousands of armed men. It was widely speculated that Rousselin was a simple stand-in for the wishes of his ministerial boss and, in the turmoil that followed the Girondins' removal two days later and the subsequent escalation of provincial revolt at Parisian excess, he leapt at the chance to distinguish himself on his own account.

Initially this meant following the line of backroom work that had been the underpinning of his rise. In mid-June 1793, he became a division chief in the Interior Ministry, and two months later was appointed to oversee the reports of the “observers,” or police spies, on the streets of Paris. He shared this role with the editorship of the *Journal of Public Safety*, a blatantly propagandistic newspaper published at the initiative of the Committee of Public Safety, that first appeared on 3 August. He held this editorship, initially, for barely more than a month, but in that time managed to carve a niche in future historiography by denouncing, and successfully agitating for the imprisonment of a theatre troupe that had dared to perform insufficiently patriotic material. Rousselin fell squarely in the mainstream of radical rhetoric, publishing a book of purported “original correspondence” (p. 41) from émigrés documenting their treachery, and authoring several firebrand speeches that were also published, bringing him further income on top of his civil service role and his journalism. All seemed to be going well, when in October 1793, Rousselin fell into a political snakepit from which he would never fully escape.

He was sent, initially, as one of a pair of ministerial commissioners to Provins in the Seine-et-Marne, there by order of the Committee of Public Safety to take command of a unit of the paramilitary *armée révolutionnaire* and use it to effect a requisition of grain and flour for the capital. The orders aped those given since the previous spring to the Representatives-on-mission (elected members of the Convention dispatched as primary instruments of the gathering Terror), but Rousselin remained a mere appointee. As such, his existence infuriated the actual Representatives who had been trying to control local politics around Provins for some time and for whom Rousselin's mission was the product of scurrilous denunciation by the moderates they had crossed. In scathing and memorable terms, the *conventionnel* Pierre Dubouchet denounced Rousselin's arrival in the pomp of a six-horse carriage, “accompanied by a whore, for his ‘low pleasures’” (p. 45), and his conduct, surrounding himself with an unnecessary armed retinue and living the high life at public expense. Rousselin shot back in the pages of the *Journal of Public Safety*—the carriage only had four horses, the woman was “honest,” it was Dubouchet who dined with guards at his door as “used to be done at Versailles” (p. 46).

Rousselin's mission lasted barely ten days, producing far more heat than light and yet in November the Committee decided to send him out again with similar powers to the regional

centre of Troyes, riven with conflict as the result of earlier such missions, but vital to sustaining the war effort on the eastern frontiers. Here things went irreparably wrong. Embarking unhesitatingly on rounds of purges ostensibly against aristocracy and fanaticism, but often directed by the personal vendettas of those who had seized his attention, Rousselin stirred up Troyes to such a height of animosity that, by mid-December, the only way he could leave his lodgings for a brief trip to Paris was “disguised as a woman” (p. 59). The extent to which the twenty-one-year-old Rousselin proved incapable of managing the collision of his own ambitions and the city’s politics is marked by the fact that, at the end of the year, an experienced Representative, Jean-Baptiste Bô, took only six days to calm the situation. Rousselin departed Troyes shortly after, having spent in total some seven weeks there.

The hatred of the leading citizens pursued him immediately and, in a significant sense, for the rest of his life. He returned to the pages of the *Journal of Public Safety*, distancing himself from sans-culotte radicalism as the Hébertist faction fell from favour and using his other job as collator of police reports to pour dirt on their heads. He survived the fall of his old patrons Desmoulins and Danton—later claiming to have been one of the recipients of the latter’s famous reluctance to flee, unable to carry his country on the soles of his shoes. But the net was closing: at the end of May, at a session of the Jacobins roiled by news of assassination attempts, Maximilien Robespierre and his ally Georges Couthon turned on Rousselin, animated by a steady flow of hostility from Troyes. He was flung in prison for investigation of charges of personal corruption and thus, inevitably, of counter-revolution. Through June and July 1794, his enemies rained further charges on him, in an ultimately vain attempt to have him executed, along with so many others in these frenetic weeks of the so-called “great terror.” He was arraigned before the Revolutionary Tribunal with sixteen alleged accomplices on 20 July, but to the astonishment of informed observers, acquitted (and his chief accuser indicted for perjury, conspiracy and false denunciation). As politics both before and after the Thermidorian coup soared far away from any empirical grounding, the furious arguments between Rousselin’s supporters and detractors saw him released and re-imprisoned several times, but never again brought to trial. He was in prison, on the orders of Jean-Baptiste-André Amar of the Committee of General Security, when Robespierre fell, and was, according to subsequent accounts, personally freed by the former Dantonist and professional butcher Louis Legendre with a “kick in the pants” to send him on his way (p. 92).

In this period, and beyond it, Rousselin has something of the appearance of a revolutionary Zelig, popping up in the background of events and, to a certain extent, echoing the chameleon-like qualities of that character. Having been a Dantonist and (briefly) a sans-culotte, he seems also to have ingratiated himself along the way with at least two of the leading Thermidorians, Joseph Fouché and Paul Barras. Deprived of official and journalistic employment, there are tantalising hints that in late 1794 he may have become himself a police informer for cash. By July 1795, he was undergoing his fifth period of imprisonment, as local and national factions fought over him and the question of what sort of terrorist politics he represented. He seems to have remained incarcerated for the remainder of the year, his situation perhaps aggravated by a persistent conflation of his name with one Osselin, a juror on the Revolutionary Tribunal that had dispatched the Girondins. Yet when finally released, Rousselin was soon back at work in the bowels of the state bureaucracy, sponsored by Jules-François Paré, an old colleague from Danton’s ministry, and Barras himself, a newly appointed Director under the 1795 Constitution.

A stint as secretary-general of the *département* of the Seine was ended with (faintly preposterous) accusations of Babouvism, and replaced with an appointment as (once again) confidential secretary, this time to general Lazare Hoche, fresh from suppression of rebels in the Vendée and planning an invasion of Ireland. A year later, Rousselin became the secretary of Barras himself, at the very heart of the increasingly viperous politics of the capital. Still only twenty-four, he also followed the prevailing fashion by embarking on a high-society liaison with Julie Talma, the hostess wife of the era's leading stage actor. Yet, by the end of the year, he had moved on again, serving on the staff of the armies currently occupying parts of western Germany, and then returning to Paris in mid-1799 to serve as secretary-general in the War Ministry under the newly appointed minister Jean Bernadotte. Rousselin quit alongside him in September as part of the ever-more toxic manoeuvring that opened the way to Bonaparte's coup.

At this point, and facing the persistent hostility of the new First Consul, Rousselin's official career came to a dead stop. To reach the end of the decade, Jeff Horn has painted a swirling panorama of revolutionary action, yet one in which the ultimate resolution of many points is suspended by the impossibility of knowing what its central character was really up to. Ironically, given how vehemently and repeatedly he was denounced as a fire-breathing, bloodthirsty radical, Rousselin is positioned (and allowed to position himself) within an account that often seems to have more sympathy for a moderate view of events. Returning to Rousselin's own account of the September Massacres, noted above, it is intriguing to see how far it echoes, from its post-Thermidorian perspective, charges that the Girondins were already laying as early as October 1792.

Louvet de Couvrai, on the 29th of that month, famously indicted Robespierre in the Convention as an aspiring dictator, and the September Massacres as part and parcel of a plot to subordinate the true national representation to a coalition of seditious municipalities and murderous thugs. For Rousselin (himself at that point in 1792 burrowing into the ranks of ministerial employees beneath Danton), legitimate popular fears of the "accomplices of the tyrant" in the prisons were turned by "certain men" towards "crime" through "the ingenious invention" of the idea of a prison plot (pp. 31-32). Invoking the authority of an eye-witness account, drawing in the names of now-infamous radicals like Billaud-Varennes, Rousselin painted a picture of bloodthirsty, drunken villains, in particular carrying out a universal massacre at the Abbaye prison, site of the first violent outbreak.

But these contentions are false. As the researches of Pierre Caron demonstrated almost a century ago, the registers of the Abbaye prison were carefully scrutinised by the *septembriseurs*, and at least 250 of its some 450 inmates were spared death, for insufficient evidence of their counter-revolutionary acts. There were extensive exonerations at almost every other site.[1] And my own research into the events of 1791 demonstrated quite clearly that "prison plots" and the presence of large numbers of professional "brigands" in the capital were an abiding fear long before the fall of the monarchy, compounded by repeated concrete evidence of the prisons' lax security and corrupt management.[2] The post-Thermidorian Rousselin, anxious, we might suspect, to ingratiate himself with the moderate mainstream as he ping-ponged in and out of jail, seems simply to have written what others already chose to believe.

The suspicion that, whatever else he was, Alexandre Rousselin was highly flexible, not to say somewhat unscrupulous, in his self-interest, hangs over the rest of his career. In 1798-1799, he found brief success as a biographer of sternly virtuous and heroically dead generals, including Hoche. As invoking republican morality became less uncontroversial under the Consulate, he

abandoned this course and became, among other things, a lyric poet. A decade later he was to be found collaborating with the composer André Guétry on an unperformed “sentimental opera” (p. 117). In the meantime, one of the touchstones of his life in the early 1800s appears to have been an emotional and very probably sexual relationship with the future empress Josephine, who he had met through the circles of Barras and Julie Talma. This most un-Zelig-like attachment resulted in Napoleon offering him a vice-consulship in Egypt in 1804. Although this offer to be marooned in the unhealthy port of Damietta may have seemed like the sort that could not be refused, Rousselin managed to refuse it by hiding with Barras’s family in Provence, along with occasional jaunts to Geneva, while apparently claiming the salary for the role, thanks to a protective intervention by none other than Foreign Minister Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand.

The records of Fouché’s police ministry from after Napoleon’s divorce of Josephine half a decade later show that, on the one hand, Rousselin was strongly suspected of continuing a sexual relationship with her, and on the other, he was himself being used as an informer. A full seven years after his Damietta appointment, he was allowed to resign after a final imbroglio involving the protective interventions of Fouché, Talleyrand, the now Marshal (and soon to be Crown Prince of Sweden) Bernadotte, and the current War Minister. This also resulted in a ban on approaching within 100 miles of Paris. By late 1812, he had found his way to Geneva, where he met again Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël, to whom he had been introduced more than a dozen years earlier by Julie Talma. Evidence of their correspondence in the intervening years suggests both a close emotional friendship and an intellectual conviviality, broken up by exile after 1804, but resumed in the context of the Emperor’s ever-more overt tyranny.

Amidst all this high-level chicanery, Rousselin also found time to have a family life. Unsurprisingly, this was also extraordinary. At some time between 1800 and 1804, he probably undertook a secret marriage to Marie-Gaspardine-Justine-Clémentine de Montpezat, daughter of Barras’s cousin, the marquise de Trémolet de Montpezat, a notorious royalist. By the time they undertook a public, legal ceremony in 1807, their son Hortensius was on his way to being two years old. In yet another bizarre twist, in the waning years of the Empire, Rousselin’s foster-father re-entered the picture, now an honourably retired lieutenant-colonel, having married Rousselin’s mother after she divorced her long-absent husband in late 1794, only to lose her less than two years later. Lacking other offspring, Antoine-Pierre-Laurent Corbeau de Saint-Albin adopted Rousselin formally as his heir in January 1813, and died that October. From the 1814 Restoration onwards, Rousselin would take on the name Rousselin Corbeau de Saint-Albin and present himself outwardly as a scion of nobility, grandson of an old-regime marquis.

And the twists continue. During the Hundred Days of 1815, Rousselin found time both to found a newspaper with a group of fellow liberal “publicists” (p. 129), and to be appointed ministerial secretary-general (yet again), this time at the Interior under Carnot, with “special responsibility for reforming public instruction” (p. 130). This official role did not survive the Second Restoration, but Rousselin’s extensive networking amongst the liberal elite bore fruit in a new long-term career as a newspaper proprietor. Not only did his contacts raise the considerable capital necessary to launch such an enterprise, but they helped to sustain it through five different government-imposed shutdowns and title changes in the later 1810s, to emerge as *Le Constitutionnel* which, by the 1820s, was quite possibly the most successful newspaper in the world. With more than 20,000 subscribers by the middle of that decade, it generated an income for Rousselin equivalent to that of a large landowner or merchant banker.

Meanwhile, having lost his first wife tragically young in 1816, he remarried in 1821 to a woman twenty-six years his junior, with whom he had two children—and put the seal on his membership of a liberal opposition establishment by securing as godparents for the first of them the future King Louis-Philippe and his wife. This child, his second son, would go on to a quiet, but again eminently well-connected, life as personal librarian to Napoleon III's Empress, Eugénie. Rousselin's older son, Hortensius, served as a parliamentary deputy from 1837 to 1849 and as an important appeal-court judge from the July Monarchy to the Third Republic. His youngest child, a daughter, Hortense, managed to lead an apparently sheltered life until her father's death in 1847, and then began a relationship with a medieval historian that resulted in a first child four years before a marriage, and a second five years after.

Much of the latter stages of Jeff Horn's narration is taken up with Rousselin's cagy balancing act between supporting forthright moderate liberalism, with all its attachment to sensible, reasonable definitions of freedom and opposition to censorship, and his determination to block, suppress and contest anything that might bring his activities in 1792-1794 back into the spotlight. After all that had gone before, the reader is no longer surprised to find that, around 1823, Nicholas de Lamotte-Valois, no less a person than the husband of Jeanne de Valois-Saint-Rémy, self-proclaimed "Comtesse de la Motte" and mastermind of the epochal Diamond Necklace Affair of the 1780s, came after Alexandre Rousselin. Lamotte-Valois had spent a year in jail after clashing with Rousselin during his ill-fated mission to Troyes, and sought in an initial text to demand the enforcement of a judgment for the return of goods allegedly stolen by the *armée révolutionnaire* before, in a second more openly vindictive memoir (that was quite possibly an effort at pre-publication blackmail), naming Rousselin and detailing various crimes and scandals, including the questionable legitimacy of his first son.

Horn is perhaps overly sympathetic here in noting without further comment that Rousselin, champion of press freedom, "mobilised friends and allies" to get both of these texts "suppressed by the courts," and that a further effort by a rival to revive the charges a little later was merely "swept under the rug" (p. 163). A decade later, information from Lamotte-Valois's texts was recycled by both reactionary and patriotic commentators, at which point Rousselin tried the more liberal tactic of a public rebuttal. But in 1837, Rousselin took to the courts again (joined by Hortensius at the start of his own parliamentary career), suing the author/editors of the landmark *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française*, Philippe-Joseph-Benjamin Buchez and Pierre-Célestin Roux, over the account of his misadventures with the Revolutionary Tribunal that appeared in their 33rd volume. Publication of a lengthy justification penned by Hortensius in the 35th volume ended the suit. Shortly after, another more disreputable journalist was forced to print a partial retraction and explanation after rehearsing assorted facts and allegations. Horn notes that it may have been the combination of these attacks, concern for his children's reputation, and the decline of *Le Constitutionnel's* fortunes from its glory days of the 1820s that caused Rousselin, by now in his mid-sixties, to sell up and withdraw to private life in 1838.

In a brief seven-page appendix, Horn notes some of the ways in which Rousselin's story might cross over with a range of contemporary historiographical currents, to illuminate them as they might illuminate more about him. One cannot help wishing that some of this had been done at greater length throughout the text, and that more glimpses into the foggy room of Rousselin's past had been complemented by wider discussions of parallels, contexts and debates. It is difficult, in the end, to know what to say about the picture of Alexandre Rousselin presented here. In part, this is because Rousselin himself devoted a considerable amount of his clearly formidable energies

and intellect to making it difficult. Evidently, in the latter decades of his life, he viewed himself, and largely acted, as a sincere advocate of moderate liberalism--and was taken at that valuation by many of the best minds of the era. In this context, one also wishes at points for a writer more acerbic than Horn is prepared to be. The story of the man who set Troyes in uproar scarcely out of his teens, and almost half a century later was still meditating on a skull, is surely one that the pen of Balzac or Hugo could have done justice to. But then, had they tried, he would probably have sued them to keep his secrets.

## NOTES

[1] See Pierre Caron, *Les massacres de septembre* (Paris: Maison du livre français, 1935). Chapter four of David Andress, *The Terror; civil war in the French Revolution* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), considers the narrative and evidence for the Massacres in their political and cultural contexts.

[2] See David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars; popular dissent and political culture in the French Revolution*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000, esp. pp. 57-8, 127-8.

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