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Colin Jones, *The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 572 pp. Maps, notes, and bibliography. \$32.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0198715955; \$13.79 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0191025044.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Most histories of the Revolution convey a sense of inexorability about the spectacular drama of 26-28 July 1794 (8-10 Thermidor Year II). The main outlines of the story are that, despite military victories in May-June, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety had failed to wind down the “terror,” instead intensifying it with the law of 22 Prairial (10 June) to such an extreme of fear that, when Robespierre threatened a purge of the National Convention itself, its members decreed his arrest. They were led by men with the most to fear from being called to account for the atrocities they had overseen, such as Jean-Lambert Tallien and Louis-Stanislas Fréron. The actuality was far less predictable. The greatest merit of Colin Jones’s microscopic study of those deadly days in the summer of 1794 is that he succeeds in conveying the terrified uncertainty of the many actors, including large numbers of ordinary Parisians. No one knew the likely consequences of Robespierre’s menace-laden speech of the 26th, even when the Convention decreed his arrest the next day. Politicians, the armed forces, police, and activists swarmed across the city, desperate for news, reassurance, and safety. Who should they obey, the Convention or the Incorruptible and his allies in the Paris Commune? Citizens, including Robespierre himself, were caught between acceptance of the Convention’s ultimate authority and the claims of Paris to speak for the nation, as in 1789, 1792, and 1793. In the end, majority public opinion as well as the National Guard sided with the Convention against Robespierre, his closest associates, and the militants of the Commune and *sections* (neighbourhoods). More than one hundred of his closest allies were executed as “outlaws.”

Jones demonstrates that the outcome was “determined not just by politicians’ machinations, but also as a result of a huge process of collective action by the people of Paris” (p. 2). Historians have long known that the fall of the Robespierrists was sealed by the nature of the popular response to their arrest,<sup>[1]</sup> but Jones recounts in unprecedented detail the unpredictable swirling of support for and opposition to Robespierre and his allies in the popular societies, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. His account required a massive amount of archival work, and his bibliography is testimony to his labors. Apart from scores of published memoirs, he has utilized the reports of the 48 Parisian sections and, importantly, 350 boxes in the F7 “Police Générale” series at the Archives Nationales, containing many thousands of individual files. The latter have the merit of not being *post facto* justifications and distortions, unlike so many of the other sources. The broader educated public with an interest in this extraordinary period will enjoy Jones’s lively narrative.

It is a complicated story that demands much of the reader unfamiliar with the events but succeeds in conveying the mounting tension of a stand-off where the most threatened of the deputies had determined to kill Robespierre. It is also, however, a controversial and at times unconvincing interpretation.

More fundamentally than how to respond to Robespierre, the core issue for the Convention in July 1794 was how and when to end emergency, revolutionary government. This had been brought into sharp focus by a series of military victories in the northeast and south, culminating in that at Fleurus on 26 June, which accentuated a central disagreement on the Committee of Public Safety, that of future foreign policy. Robespierre was at odds with the military hardheads like Carnot, who wished to push onward to France's natural borders on the Rhine. Parisians wondered why executions of "counter-revolutionaries" were escalating despite the military victories. Jones goes much further than this, however, and argues that Robespierre was planning a new coup against the Convention, just as he had against the Girondins in May-June 1793.

The Convention therefore acted in July 1794 against the threat of future tyranny. Jones's argument here is contentious and contradicts the most detailed studies of May-June 1793, which have seen Robespierre as only reluctantly and belatedly supporting the forced removal of leading Girondins by *sans-culottes* militants.<sup>[2]</sup> For Jones, however, Robespierre was the mastermind, and this provides the rationale for claiming he was about to orchestrate another coup in July 1794: "a few days before 9 Thermidor he warned that the moment was not yet right. This echoed exactly his conduct in April and early May 1793. The people still needed time, patience, and Robespierre's application. The date 9 Thermidor thus would not mark the dénouement of a deep-laid plot. Rather, it was a step in a process whose end was still a little way off" (p. 447). For Jones, Robespierre was not a committed democrat struggling with competing visions of the people's will, but rather a machine politician seeking to orchestrate a coup to preserve his power.

There is a particularly good discussion in the afterword of the post-Thermidorian construction of "the Reign of Terror" and Robespierre's supposed monstrosity, about which Jones has written well previously. The *journée* of 9 Thermidor that was the action of the majority of the Convention against one man within a year became the victory of the Convention against a whole system of government ("the Terror") and Parisian radicalism. Jones is also well aware that the use of "terror" as a government strategy long pre-dated 1793, and deliberately avoids the use of the Thermidorian trope of "the Terror" by drawing on the recent scholarship of Jean-Clément Martin on "terror" as the piecemeal, incomplete application of emergency wartime measures (he could also have recognised the work of Michel Biard, Hervé Leuwers, Marisa Linton, and others).<sup>[3]</sup>

In the end, however, Jones has not escaped from the post-Thermidorian perspective of most of his sources. Especially debatable is the underlying argument that the revolutionary violence of 1793-1794 was "Robespierre's terror," a charge vivified by Jones's powerful descriptions of prisons and executions. Readers of the book are given the clear impression that Robespierre orchestrated arrests and executions, rather than the two governing committees and the Revolutionary Tribunal, despite the fact that Robespierre was absent from the Committee of Public Safety after 12 June. Certainly, Robespierre had oversight of the new police bureau in May and June and received hundreds of denunciations. He made clipped marginal notes: "when you denounce, you must provide names," "why denounce suspects rather than arresting them?", "forward to Carnot," "forward to Herman," and, commonly, "more information needed."<sup>[4]</sup>

Rarely did he order an arrest personally. The sharp increase in trials and executions was primarily the work of his opponents, such as Billaud-Varenne, yet Robespierre is here held accountable because those practicing terror were “fully enfeoffed” to him (p. 364). Using the feudal term “enfeoff,” implying material benefit for a pledge of servility, is puzzling. Robespierre’s friends, the prominent revolutionary administrators and magistrates Herman and Dumas, are dismissed as either supplying “guillotine fodder” or “licking his lips” at the thought (pp. 219, 239). It is implied that Robespierre could have opponents executed simply by ordering their arrest and that arrest was tantamount to execution (at the extreme, the Revolutionary Tribunal found 79 percent guilty).

Historians will always disagree about Robespierre’s personality and motivation: such is the contradictory, ambiguous, and partisan nature of much of the evidence. Jones’s portrait of Robespierre will appeal to many readers familiar with literary representations of a grimly intolerant and narcissistic idealist. Others may find the portrait unconvincing, even tendentious. The reader will have little idea about why so many people revered him, let alone why those close to him felt deep affection. Jones’s depiction of Robespierre is mainly of his world view, that of “a black-and-white world in which the pure, the morally upright, and the patriotic heroically combat all manner of corrupt men and women.” (p. 36) Jones does not question his sincerity or good intentions, but presents him as a mediocre and inexperienced provincial, a “dunce” (p. 34) in finance and an ignoramus in military matters, whose self-belief and “perennially thin skin” (p. 37, 205) led him inexorably to a vicious intolerance expressed in melodramatic speeches. Jones’s Robespierre is a megalomaniac adept at manipulating emotions and accusations to intimidate opponents and the press, ordering arrests and executions when manipulation did not work, possessed of an “egg-shell *amour propre*” (p. 398). His power came from his eloquence alone, faking overly sentimental appeals to his sacral role. His great mistake in absenting himself from the Convention after 10 June 1794 was that he neglected to “nourish the flame” (p. 212) of his manufactured cult of celebrity. In actuality, Robespierre was explicitly critical of individual celebrity, including his own, and was prominent in the Jacobin Club’s decision that “no bust of any living man shall be placed in its chamber.”[5]

Bolstering Jones’s argument are a series of selective assertions. Among them are that Robespierre alone is cited as later being a defender of the September 1792 prison massacres, when many leading Girondins also defended them at the time—among them, the mayor of Paris and Minister of the Interior, Pétion and Roland, who could have intervened to stop them and failed to do so. Another assertion concerns Robespierre’s stormy confrontation with Camille Desmoulins at the Jacobins on 7 January 1794, where he called for copies of the *Vieux Cordelier* to be symbolically burned in the meeting-hall, which in Jones’s account becomes a call for a public burning of all copies of the paper. Jones’s distaste for Robespierre extends to his mocking description of his domestic “nook” at the Duplays, where sycophants fussed over his creature comforts in a house allegedly decorated with “drawings, engravings, and multi-coloured busts and mementoes fabricated by the Robespierre bric-à-brac industry” (p. 119). We do not know whether these later descriptions of the Duplays’ salon by his enemies Barbaroux, Fréron, and La Révellière-Lépeaux were exaggerated for effect, but Jones accepts them unquestioningly. Other visitors made no mention of this décor, and Robespierre’s own rooms were undecorated.

Jones disagrees with those who have argued that, by Thermidor, Robespierre was suffering from increasing physical and mental exhaustion, as he certainly was in February-March 1794 and on occasion earlier in the Revolution. He was not a robust person and did not take care of his body.

Specifically, Jones claims that there is no evidence for Robespierre's alleged exhaustion in June-July 1794. While he boycotted the Convention and Committee of Public Safety meetings, his attendance at the Jacobin club was "assiduous" (p. 444). In fact, he attended about half the sessions after 12 June and mostly spoke briefly. Robespierre's famous final speech of 8 Thermidor is presented as a deliberate and clear statement of his intentions rather than the inept, meandering, and repetitive product of an addled mind (his speech referred more than two hundred times to "conspiracy," "calumny," "crime," and "tyranny"). Indeed, Jones explicitly criticises those who see his speech as frenzied or Robespierre as stressed. His "language was neither exceptional nor symptomatic. If anything, it comprised Robespierre's signature trope. He had used it literally dozens of times in this way before" (p. 445).

While there is no explicit medical evidence of collapse, there are abundant indications of severe stress in the spiral of what Marisa Linton has described as "the politicians' terror." [6] After two attempts on his life in late May and a stream of death threats, Robespierre admitted on 10 June that he was *bourelé* ("worried sick") and "going crazy." Like many others, he was terrified of being assassinated. He largely absented himself from public life until his fateful speech to the Convention on 26 July, in which he stated that "for more than six weeks, the nature and strength of calumny against me, my powerlessness to do good and prevent evil, have forced me to abandon my functions as a member of the Committee of Public Safety...I have had no influence on the government." His personal life had fallen apart with a rift between his brother and sister and with rejection by his oldest friends in Arras. Other friends worried openly about his health. [7]

Ultimately, Robespierre is presented as doing nothing but weaving verbal webs to trap well-meaning but unwitting opponents; he did not actually do or manage anything concrete during the Revolution. It is an odd criticism. Robespierre was not elected to any of the drafting committees under the Constituent Assembly and was only in government for one year, from July 1793. Nevertheless, his contributions were enormous, from commenting on major legislation in hundreds of speeches to drafting a new Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1793 to being a member of a wartime executive in 1793-94 that, against all the odds, saved a nation from invasion and a revolution from bloody reversal. That military victory was the single most important fact about the year 1793-94 and was the central purpose of the emergency government created from April 1793. We still debate why it proved impossible in the summer of 1794 to navigate a return to peacetime constitutional government. Thanks to Colin Jones, we now know much more about the fatal personal decisions made in Thermidor, and have added impetus to understand their motivations.

## NOTES

[1] For example, Part III of Gérard Walter, *La Conjuration du neuf Thermidor, 27 July 1794* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) is detailed on the responses of the sections; and note the general argument of George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), ch. IX. Françoise Brunel, *Thermidor, la chute de Robespierre*, (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1989), remains the best overview of the context of the *journée*.

[2] Morris Slavin, *The Making of an Insurrection: Parisian Sections and the Gironde* (Cambridge, Ma. and London: Harvard University Press, 1986). Note, too, Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), pp. 277-278. Jones's argument is closer to that of Gérard Walter, *Robespierre*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 386-399, 454.

[3] Jones cites Jean-Clément Martin, *Les Échos de la Terreur: vérités d'un mensonge d'État, 1794–2001* (Paris: Belin, 2018), but we should also note Michel Biard and Hervé Leuwers, eds., *Visages de la Terreur. L'Exception politique de l'an II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014) and especially Biard and Marisa Linton, *Terror: the French Revolution and its Demons* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2022).

[4] Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 192.

[5] Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 9, pp. 142-45.

[6] Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror. Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 11-14.

[7] See Peter McPhee, “‘Mes forces et ma santé ne peuvent suffire’. Crises politiques, crises médicales dans la vie de Maximilien Robespierre, 1790–1794,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 371 (2013), 137-52. Robespierre's remarks in his speech are in his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 10, p. 565.

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