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Vincent Denis, *Policiers de Paris, Les commissaires de police en Révolution (1789-1799).* Paris: Champ Vallon, 2022. 384 pp. Notes, references, and maps. €27.00. (pb). ISBN 9791026710905.

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Vincent Denis's *Policiers de Paris* is a study of French Revolutionary policing through the prism of the local police commissaries (*commissaires de police*) in the French capital throughout the Revolutionary decade. At first glance, the expression, 'Revolutionary policing' might seem a paradox, an oxymoron even. That this is, in fact, anything but the case owes much to the rethinking of the nature of policing in French history that Denis and a host of fellow-travellers--among them Vincent Milliot, Claire Denys, Jean-Marc Berlière, Quentin Deluermoz, Emmanuel Blanchard and the late Dominique Kalifa--have been leading for some years now.[1] Instead of viewing policing as principally a repressive and disciplining force bearing down on society from on high, the historiographical impetus has come from a closer association with social scientific approaches, notably a more anthropological perspective on peace-keeping and dispute-settlement at local levels. Brilliantly researched and lucidly argued, *Policiers de Paris* is very much in this vein and is equally effective in throwing new light on the history of the police and the history of the Revolution.

Policiers de Paris has a big story to tell. Parisian police forces were placed in what seemed to be terminal discredit by the 1789 Revolution--the last incumbent of the notorious post of *Lieutenant general de police* fled the city even before the storming of the Bastille, and no one seemed minded to replace him. Yet Parisian police forces were to stage a remarkable recovery from a kind of policing void over the next ten years. By the end of the Directory, recognisably modern forms of state-run policing had been put in place and they would be consolidated by Napoleon. Denis tells the story in a way which is both aware of the longer-term developments in policing, yet also alert to the way that the major political events of the decade impacted and sometimes dislocated the course of events. In what emerges as a very non-linear tale, Denis highlights the unpredictable and apparently random changes of direction that characterise the period. His study is all the more striking for combining the history of the institution with that of the individuals involved: the prosopographical analysis of just over two hundred Parisian policemen, amassed through herculean archival shifts that Denis has put in at the Archives de la prefecture de police and the Archives nationales is as impressive as it is illuminating.

The old *commissaires du Châtelet* were almost the only vestige of Ancien Regime policing that survived the shock of 1789, and the institution (as well as many of the existing personnel) effectively stayed in place in the Revolution's early phase. Reforms legal and administrative produced a new landscape of municipal governance, in which *commissaires de police* found their place alongside the National Guard and newly-created judges of the peace (*juges de paix)* within the city's forty-eight sections that were established in 1790. Though Denis does not develop the point, local keeping of the peace also initially had a role for the parish clergy following the 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Denis finds the politics of the different *commissaires* reflecting the political complexion of their sections--a pattern that, as Timothy Tackett showed long ago, was comparable to the response to the constitutional oath of the parish clergy, who were elected officials like policing and judicial personnel.[2] Indeed, the virtual absence of the clergy from community acceptance at the local level after 1791 put an even greater burden on the local role of the *commissaires* throughout the decade. One may speculate on how Napoleon's 1801 Concordat changed that.

Reflecting one's section 'upwards' to municipal and central government made the post a hot potato as from 1791 onwards the Revolution became politically polarised. This impacted the composition of the corps of *commissaires*, producing a high turnover, particularly among moderates drawn from the ranks of law and administration with careers dating back to the Ancien Régime. The widening of the franchise in 1792 played a major part in a democratisation, or rather a *sans-culottisation*, of *commissaire* ranks. Artisans and shopkeepers--staple elements of the popular movement--were elected in greater numbers. These "*citoyen-commissaires*" had moreover to deal with fellow-citizens alert to their natural rights (p. 147, citing Raymonde Monnier). To survive in these circumstances, *commissaires* needed advanced skills in political tight-rope walking.

From mid 1792, moreover, their situation was made even more complex when they found themselves reporting as much to the Revolutionary Government as to the municipality, and having to deal with additional institutions that impinged on their work, notably the spies and agents of the Comité de sûreté générale, the Commune's new police administration, and sectional surveillance committees (from March 1793). It was characteristic of the volatility of the period that they were even expected, as one sectional meeting put it in August 1792, to ensure "le maintien du bon ordre dans l'insurrection" (p. 151).

The rightward swing of national politics after Thermidor turned a page, with central government putting in place a tougher and more professional system of policing that was more overtly responsive to the needs of the state. Though continuing political oscillations still caused problems, the Directory strove to keep the whole judicial and policing regime in the capital on a tight rein. The emergence of the judicial police (*la police judiciaire*) took some functions out of the *commissaires*' hands, while chains of command and more professional codes of practice were laid down by a Police ministry (1796). The "*citoyen-commissaire*" had breathed his last. Formerly elected delegates of the population of the sections of the city had become primary

agents of central government and servants of the state. Revealingly, the *commissaires* found themselves becoming increasingly involved in the state's new regimes of identity verification (passports, *certificats de civisme, cartes de sûreté,* etc)--a subject on which Denis is an acknowledged expert.[3]

Denis has his hands full in focusing on Paris, and though it will be fascinating to see how these crucial developments in the French capital played out across France and indeed within the colonies over the next century, [4] one senses that he has uncovered the master narrative. Moreover, by placing developments in the Revolutionary decade as a key element in the making of the modern state and of apposite forms of governmentality, *Policiers de Paris* will find a receptive audience among all scholars of post-Revolutionary France. It could even be useful reading too for scholars and citizens currently debating the role of the police in local communities and the conflicting calls of the state and the citizenry.

NOTES

[1] For a recent overview, see Vincent Milliot, Emmanuel Blanchard, Vincent Denis & Arnaud-Dominique Houte, eds., *Histoire des polices en France: Des guerres de religion à nos jours* (Paris, 2020). For a useful early account of the historiographical shift involved, see Vincent Milliot, "Histoire des polices : l'ouverture d'un moment historiographique," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 2, no. 54-2 (2007) :162-177.

[2]Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[3]Vincent Denis, *Une histoire de l'identité: France, 1715–1815* (Paris, 2008).

[4]For the latter, Catherine Denys & Vincent Denis, eds., *Polices d'empires, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles* (Rennes: Presses universitaire de Renne, 2012) is a good starting point.

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