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Surviving the French Revolution: Strategies and Meanings
Introduction

Mette Harder and Jeff Horn

Even though they made only partial witnesses, those who died from the Revolution have occupied center stage in its accounts. Many of its great figures never saw the rise of the Consulate in 1799, much less the Empire in 1804 or the return of the monarchy in 1814–15.[1] The fates of those who perished prematurely (from causes ranging from exhaustion to execution) in the 1790s – such as Mirabeau, Brissot, de Gouges, Madame Roland, Danton, and Saint-Just – affirmed the latter's assertion that "those who make the revolutions of this world … must rest only in the grave."[2] By contrast, first-rank figures who survived and lived to tell the tale, like Lafayette and various leaders of the Thermidorian and Directorial republics (Barras, François de Neufchateâu, Merlin de Douai, or the Talliens), seem to drop in and then out of the story like shooting stars. The very few exceptions, like Bonaparte, Talleyrand, or Sieyès, prove the rule. This H-France Salon seeks to explore the lives of some of the Revolution's survivors, their strategies, and the meanings of their survival across the Age of Revolution.

Our approach has its origins in a session of David Andress' virtual seminar on the French Revolution in June 2022 that featured a presentation by Mette Harder on Jean-Lambert Tallien.[3] The Q&A led to a longer conversation between Harder, Jeff Horn, and other attendees on the nature of survival and how it can function as a frame for writing biographies of revolutionary figures. This discussion resulted in two sessions at the joint Society for French Historical Studies/Western Society for French History meeting in Detroit in October 2022, which became the basis for the Salon. Denise Z. Davidson, Christine Haynes, Kirsty Carpenter, Ronen Steinberg, and David G. Troyansky participated. Howard G. Brown was an important presence at the conference and agreed to join. Finally, we are deeply grateful to Christine Adams and Marisa Linton for accepting our invitation to contribute their research to the Salon.

The articles in this Salon are divided into two sections: 1) Strategies of Survival and 2) Meanings of Survival. For Brown, "The idea of surviving the French Revolution naturally brings to mind its most violent and repressive phase, the Terror in 1793–94" (Brown, 1). Historians and the general public associate the notion of "surviving" the Revolution with those contemporaries known to have been special targets of revolutionary justice during this time: former nobles,

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[1] The high mortality rate amongst members of the National Convention, has, for instance, been recently explored by Michel Biard, *La liberté ou la mort: mourir en député 1792–1795* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015).
[2] Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, "Rapport au nom du Comité de salut public sur le gouvernement présenté à la Convention nationale le 19 du premier mois, l'an second de la République," 10 October 1793, in *Saint-Just: Œuvres complètes*, ed. Annie Kupiec and Miguel Abensour (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 639.
[3] See also Mette Harder, "Reacting to Revolution: The Political Career(s) of Jean-Lambert Tallien," in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Studies on Voltaire & the Eighteenth Century, 2013), 87–112.

refractory clergy, counter-revolutionaries, and émigrés. Prison memoirs, exile writings, and correspondence as well as Thermidorian pamphlets detailing the human sufferings and losses of the Year II have informed research into their experiences.[4] For survivors of revolutionary violence, the "Terror" became a shared reference to what they had endured. The frequent political uses of their accounts in the Reaction, the Directory, and the Restoration suggest that survivorship was not only a lived experience, but also became a vital part of political discourse, activism, and culture.[5] Because of this, the term "Terror" has been questioned by some historians as a reactionary construct, aimed at discrediting the Revolution.[6] Focusing only on those who suffered during the "Terror" provided fodder for critics of the Revolution and its democratic goals.[7] Yet in acknowledging this issue, we are left with the question of what alternative terminology we might use to discuss the experiences of those who survived the Year II – while also considering the complex political context in which they recounted their memories.[8]

Our focus was never solely on the Year II. All the participants in this Salon took a broader temporal lens on survival. Although it has not been emphasized by the existing literature, there can be no question that, for many contemporaries, the need to survive did not just apply to the year of the "Terror" but to the entire revolutionary decade and beyond. Nor was survival limited to escaping the guillotine, it encompassed enduring politically, socially, financially, morally, and emotionally. Our approach focuses on how the Revolution's own participants, both leaders and those who played less prominent roles, tackled such challenges. How did they, their families, and

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[4] For representative examples of prison memoirs, see Honoré Riouffé, *Mémoires d'un détenu* (Paris: B. Mathé, An III), Bibliothèque National (B.N.) N. 8-LB41-17 (G) and the second edition of his text; Louise-Henriette de Duras, *Journal des prisons de mon père, de ma mère et des miennes par Mme la duchesse de Duras, née Noailles* (Paris: E. Plon; Nourrit, 1888), B.N. NUMM-203994; Sophie-Victoire-Alexandrine de Girardin (Sophie de Bohm), *Prisonniere sous la Terreur: mémoires d'une captive en 1793*; preface de Jean-Clément Martin (Paris: Cosmopole, 2006); Dominique-Jean Blanqui, *L'agonie de dix mois, ou historique des traitemens essuyés par les députés détenus, et les dangers qu'ils ont courus pendant leurs captivité* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de F. Porte, s.d. [1794?]), B.N. NUMM-6222398; a useful collection is also Marilyn Yalom, *Compelled to Witness: Women's Memoirs of the French Revolution* (San Francisco: Astor & Lenox, 2015); for an example of correspondence, see the recent *The Letters of The Duchesse d'Elbeuf: Hostile Witness to the French Revolution*, edited by Colin Jones, Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley, and Simon Macdonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press on behalf of the Voltaire Foundation, 2023); samples of Thermidorian pamphlets are discussed in the literature cited below.

[5] See, amongst others, Bronislaw Baczko, *Comment sortir de la terreur: thermidor et la Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Laura Mason, "Thermidor and the Myth of Rupture," in *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 521–37; Howard G. Brown, "The Thermidorians' Terror: Atrocities, Tragedies, Trauma," in *Rethinking the Age of Revolutions: France and the Birth of the Modern World*, ed. David A. Bell and Yair Mintzker (New York, 2018; online edition, Oxford Academic, consulted 20 Sept. 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190674793.003.0007); Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Postrevolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley, "Defence, collaboration, counter-attack: the role and exploitation of the printed word by victims of the Terror," in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford: Studies on Voltaire & the Eighteenth Century, 2013), 137–54 and "Reliving the Terror: Victims and Print Culture during the Thermidorian Reaction in France, 1794–1795," *History* 104, no. 362 (Oct. 2019): 606–629.

[6] This line of argument has most recently been put forward by Michel Biard and Marisa Linton, in *Terror: The French Revolution and Its Demons* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021 [2020]).

[7] Most famously, François Furet inaugurated a critique of the Revolution based on the inevitability of the Terror that has garnered many supporters since 1989. See *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Éditions de la Maison de l'Homme, 1981 [1978]). Amongst the most hostile publications on the Revolution in recent years has been Renaud Escande, *Le Livre Noir de la Révolution française* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2008).

[8] We thank Christine Adams for raising this question in discussions for this Salon.

social circles as well as their allies and acquaintances, adapt to rapid political, social, economic, and cultural change? What backgrounds, connections, career paths, and strategies heightened, or lessened, their chances of survival? What place did revolutionary participants' stories of survival occupy in their own lives and in the Revolution's history, and how should we tell those accounts of survivors who were also perpetrators of revolutionary violence?

The individuals considered in this Salon represent a cross-section of French society: We explored transgressive figures of lasting fame, such as the Marquis de Sade and Joséphine Bonaparte, and famous-in-their-day people like Marie-Joseph Chénier, the Talliens, and Maximien Lamarque. However, the deputy's widow Élisabeth Le Bas, the provincial writer Jacques-Joseph Juge, the Dantonist survivor Alexandre Rousselin, and the Lyonnais Arnaud-Tizon and Vitet families only rarely enter the historical narrative. This deliberate widening of the roster of revolutionary actors opens up new approaches and spaces to our research into revolutionary history. Collectively, these investigations also highlight important themes that help us understand the revolutionary era more holistically and with greater attention to continuities rather than to strictly defined periods such as "Terror" or "Reaction."

Strategies of Survival

In the first part of the Salon, "Strategies of Survival," Marisa Linton, Christine Adams, Denise Z. Davidson, Christine Haynes, and Jeff Horn explore the means revolutionary participants employed to stay alive through the Age of Revolution. All five stress the importance of different types of networks (private, professional, and political) to survival. Family (biological and chosen) and friendships (private and political) played a key role in staying afloat through rapid change both locally and nationally. On the other hand, networks, relations, and connections could also become a liability overnight, as Linton's and Horn's contributions illustrate.

Marisa Linton's chapter, the first in this section, focuses on two members of Robespierre's biological and chosen family: his sister Charlotte and his host sister Élisabeth (wife of the Conventionnel Philippe Le Bas) and on how they survived the purge of 9 Thermidor. "'I wrote with my blood': Families of Jacobin Leaders and their Identities and Survival Strategies after Thermidor" demonstrates the drastic impact that men's political decision-making had on their immediate dependents and encourages us to consider not only the fates of the "great" revolutionary figures but also of those in their direct social orbits. Charlotte Robespierre and Élisabeth Le Bas survived emotional, financial, and social distress following the loss of their male relatives by relying on their remaining networks and, in the case of Le Bas, their own deep political convictions.

In contrast to Linton's long-term look at Robespierre's and Le Bas' desperate struggle for survival from Reaction to July Monarchy, Christine Adams' chapter, "Surviving the Revolution as a Woman: Strategies of the Directory's *Élégantes*," examines the survival and rise to fame of four women in a specific period of the Revolution: the Reaction and the Directory. Thérésia Cabarrus (Madame Tallien), Marie-Josèphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie (future Joséphine Bonaparte), Juliette Récamier, and Anne-Françoise-Élisabeth Lange wielded great social, cultural, and political influence in the Revolution's final years. All four, Adams argues,

redeployed Old Regime strategies and operated within complex networks to survive the Year II and achieve social prominence and political influence in the Revolution's final years.

The role of networks in surviving the Revolution (including socially and financially) is equally at the heart of Denise Z. Davidson's "Bourgeois Families and Their Survival Strategies." She examines four key survival tactics used by the interlinked Lyonnais Arnaud-Tizon and Vitet families. Her contribution is based on a larger research project into over 600 letters between Catherine Arnaud-Tizon and her son-in-law, Pierre Vitet (son of the Conventionnel Louis Vitet). Applying experiences from the Old Régime and the Revolution, the family obtained political office, maintained relationships with allies, and established residence throughout France and Europe. They also demonstrated superb political instincts in understanding when to withdraw from public life to enjoy the pleasures of domesticity in the midst of revolution.

Christine Haynes' "Military Service as a Strategy for Surviving Revolution: The Case of Maximien Lamarque" delineates the career of Jacobin captain and later general Lamarque, highlighting a surprising stratagem for survival: military service. Showing that Lamarque did not suffer any ill consequences from 9 Thermidor, she argues that, for many, military service provided distance and shelter from the political upheavals and perils that marked the most radical phase of the Revolution and its aftermath. The army also provided the networks necessary to maintain and advance one's career throughout various regime changes. At the same time, Haynes reminds us, military and political spheres were invariably connected; survival necessitated negotiating and maintaining one's contacts and reputation in both.

The importance of managing networks to survive the Revolution – and beyond – is Jeff Horn's emphasis in "Roll With the Changes: Different Crises, Different Networks in the Survival of Alexandre Rousselin." From personal secretary to the journalist Camille Desmoulins to editor of *Le Constitutionnel,* the world's best-selling newspaper until his retirement in 1838, Horn illuminates the extraordinary number and variety of contacts and networks that Rousselin developed and maintained in revolutionary and post-revolutionary circles. These connections furthered his career and, on occasion, saved his life. Surviving the Revolution, Horn's chapter highlights, depended profoundly on one's "people skills."

Meanings of Survival

In the second section of this Salon, "Surviving the French Revolution: Meanings," Ronen Steinberg, Kirsty Carpenter, David G. Troyansky, Howard G. Brown, and Mette Harder discuss how different individuals experienced surviving the Revolution both in the long and short term: from the Marquis de Sade to ex-Jacobins facing deportation in the Consulate, to former Montagnards facing the memories of a lost revolution. Though individual stories of survival have long been part of the Revolution's historiography in the form of biography, there has not been a consistent focus on survivors as a distinct group. These contributions reflect a broader historiographical return to individual and collective biography to understand this not yet fully explored aspect of the French Revolution.[9] Life writing never wholly disappeared from

[9] For a broader discussion of the current vogue for biography, see the introduction by David Bell and Colin Jones to the book that derived from a Spring 2022 conference at Princeton University's Davis Center entitled "French Revolutionary Lives." David Bell and Colin Jones, eds., *French Revolutionary Lives: Understanding the*

examinations of the period as new biographies of iconic figures like Robespierre and Napoleon seem to appear every few years. In this section, we invite readers to consider the experiences and trajectories of "lesser" or forgotten participants in the Revolution as of equal importance: those who lived through the 1790s and beyond, confronting personal losses, repeated persecution, and revolutionary failure in turn.

In public perception and in some scholarship, thinking about survivors' experiences is most closely associated with the history of the Holocaust, its victims, and their testimonies.[10] How can the same term be applied to those who "survived" the French Revolution without likening eighteenth-century revolutionary to twentieth-century genocidal violence?[11] Far more appropriately, the comparative study of revolutions has supplied us with many examples of survivors in different contexts, though significant differences still separate the experiences of those in later revolutions from the lives lived in revolutionary France.[12] Despite these reservations, we contend that historians' work on stories of survival across the European past can still supply useful methodologies for research. Many of the authors in this section have successfully drawn on the history of memory and/or the emotional turn, as well as on research into how people emerged from traumatic events to illuminate their subjects.[13] Our aim is to emphasize the Revolution's participants' emotional and intellectual responses to their particular struggles for survival.

Ronen Steinberg's "Sade in Paris: The Banality of Survival," explores the unlikely trajectory of the Marquis de Sade, who, because of his social status and history of transgressions, would have been "an ideal candidate for the guillotine" (Steinberg, 1). Steinberg inquires into the contemporary meaning of "survival" and how it applied to Sade, who "lived" through imprisonment, but lost everything (from his lands to his creative assets in the form of his manuscripts) to the Revolution. What allowed Sade to endure against the odds and what were the individual and broader meanings of his survival?

In "Surviving the Revolution: Marie-Joseph Chénier," Kirsty Carpenter grapples with the personal impact of survival and loss as a result of revolution. Her subject is Marie-Joseph-Blaise Chénier, a poet and member of the National Convention, who lost his brother André Chénier to the guillotine in July 1794, shortly before Robespierre's fall. Marie-Joseph survived but lived a sort of half-life after his brother's death as his health, literary output, and political influence

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Revolutionary Era Through Life Writing (London: Routledge, 2025). Both Haynes and Horn contributed to the volume. On the uses of microhistory for writing eighteenth-century biography, see Robin Mitchell, "Notes on Sources: Suzanne Louverture," *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 49 (2023): 88–92.

[10] For an introduction, see, for instance, Tom Lawson, "'Holocaust Testimonies': The Ruins of Memory and Holocaust Historiography," in *Debates on the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 270–304. And discussions in Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

[11] See, for example, Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*, trans. George Holoch (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

[12] For an introduction to Russian patronage networks and survival during the Revolution, see Vera Kaplan, "Weathering the Revolution: Patronage as a Strategy of Survival," *Revolutionary Russia* 26, no. 2 (2013): 97–127.

[13] See William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions*, 2nd ed. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2024 [2018]). On trauma, see Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror*.

suffered greatly from this personal tragedy which he was forced to live out in public. Guilt, pain, and obsessive overwork characterized the years before his premature death.

A magistrate in Limoges is the subject of David G. Troyansky's "Jacques-Joseph Juge de Saint-Martin: Surviving the French Revolution in the Limousin." Juge was a landowner who bought *biens nationaux* and participated in local revolutionary politics. He was also a writer on numerous subjects who withdrew into intellectual pursuits during the Revolution's most radical moments. His survival was due to this strategy as well as to his ability to adapt and self-represent his political engagement flexibly for different audiences and political moments.

In "The Consulate and Militant Revolutionaries: Patterns of Persecution and Survival," Howard G. Brown examines the little-known fates of revolutionary militants of the Year II and neo-Jacobins who faced political persecution during the Consulate. After 18 Brumaire, three groups were subjected to exclusion from their seats, and, in some cases, exile and deportation to the Seychelles Islands or Guyana. In examining their individual and collective fates, Brown probes the authorities' motivation for the persecutions and who amongst the revolutionary militants was allowed to survive, while others were not.

In the final contribution to this Salon, "A Republic in Fragments: Montagnard Survivors and Saint-Just's Manuscript Remains," Mette Harder looks at two ex-Montagnards, Marc-Antoine Baudot and Bertrand Barère, who, in exile as regicides, had to confront their pasts not only as survivors but also as perpetrators of the political violence that destroyed many of their generation's leaders. Both took a particular interest in preserving the written legacy of one of their former Robespierriste opponents, Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, executed on 9 Thermidor. Their safeguarding of their revolutionary colleague's manuscripts and ideas helped ensure a different kind of survival into posterity: that of their generation's shared political heritage and collective republican endeavor.

The infamous aphorism, "Like Saturn, the Revolution devours its children" expressed by the émigré Jacques Mallet du Pan and the revolutionary Pierre-Victurnien Vergniaud served as both an inspiration and a warning.[14] The notion that those who attempt to implement revolutionary change usually pay the ultimate price has shaped understandings of this momentous period in ways that sometimes obscure as much as they reveal. The contributions to this H-France Salon cover a wide spectrum of topics related to the difficulties and opportunities surrounding survival during and after the Revolution. The variety in the contributors' chronological focus shows that "survival" did not just concern the "Terror" but included a much longer timespan that encompassed the revolutionary decade, the Consulate, the Empire, and the Restoration. Thus some, like the Arnaud-Tizon and Vitet families portrayed by Davidson, successfully safeguarded their political, social, and financial interests across the revolutionary decade. Maximien Lamarque, analyzed by Haynes, Alexandre Rousselin, recounted by Horn, and Jacques-Joseph Juge, depicted by Troyansky, survived revolutionary events but reached the apex of their influence only after 1815.

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[14] Jacques Mallet du Pan, *Considérations sur la nature de la révolution de France et sur les causes qui en prolongent la durée* (London: n.p., 1793), 65; Pierre-Victurnien Vergniaud, Convention nationale, 13 March 1793, as cited in Michel Lhéritier, ed., *Les grands orateurs républicains*: *Vergniaud* (Paris; Monaco: Héméra, 1949–1950), 187.

At the same time, the Year II remains a natural focal point for research on some of the most extreme cases of survival in a period punctuated by widespread violence, as illustrated by the cases of the Marquis de Sade and Marie-Joseph Chénier and his family. After the Revolution, both survivors and perpetrators of political violence – such as the Montagnards Barère and Baudot – had to contend emotionally, politically, and practically with the senseless waste of human life and potential in the Year II. After Robespierre's fall, the "Terror" became a catalyst for the persecution of revolutionary militants and their families, who faced their own struggle for survival, as shown in Linton's, Horn's, and Brown's research. Looking at these struggles adds to our understanding of the continued persecutory politics and political culture of the Revolution's later years and the consequences of regime change. It also details the specific challenges facing those who, because of the dynamics of gender or class, had fewer means of defense.

Emotional and family ties, friendship, various types of professional and political networks, political allegiances and opportunism, and patronage all shaped how successfully contemporaries navigated the decades after 1789. Continuity in the networking habits of Old Régime politics and society received deep consideration from Adams, Davidson, and Troyansky. Other contributions showed the important role that political and ideological families played in the lives and survival of radical revolutionaries such as Robespierriste and Montagnard survivors. Military service and connections, as Haynes' work on the Jacobin soldier Lamarque and Horn's on Rousselin show, could also protect individuals from the political pitfalls of the time.

We hope that our Salon encourages future discussion about the means and meanings of survival within a revolutionary political culture that was very much in flux: sometimes from day to day. Just like following the rhythms of an individual life can tell us much about a particular era, looking at how a person or group faced the specific challenge of survival provides great insight into the political and societal stakes of the moment. The authors found the notion of "survival" to have value in understanding individual and collective actions; we also found that the comparative element of the Salon illustrated communalities in people's experiences, whether they were nobles or "bourgeois." At the same time, it drew our attention to the impact that, amongst others, factors like gender, class, family status, location, and age could play in people's struggles. Finally, our shared, long-term perspective may diminish the uniqueness of the drama of 1793–94, but it also underscores important continuities in the lived experience of those who participated in the "long" French Revolution.

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