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**Roll With the Changes:
Different Crises, Different Networks in the Survival of Alexandre Rousselin**

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The twists and turns of Revolutionary politics meant that individuals engaged in politics, particularly those reliant on a government salary to keep body and soul together, frequently needed help to keep their heads on their shoulders, much less remain in office. That help usually came from or through some sort of network. Alexandre Rousselin (1773-1847) held a number of official and unofficial positions from police spy to secretary-general of the department of the Seine, was active in both the Cordeliers and Jacobin Clubs, and enjoyed the patronage and protection of many important Revolutionaries.¹ Networks have not been given sufficient attention in our understandings of political culture in the Age of Revolution.² Developing and maintaining networks, and especially different kinds of networks, was the key to enduring the myriad changes that typified the French Revolution. Of course, network ties could emerge as a threat as well as a potential benefit. This was true not only for Alexandre Rousselin, but also for a host of second- and third-rank bureaucrats, the men who made the Revolution work.

Rousselin was atypical in the number of different networks he could access across his long period of public engagement from 1791 to 1838, but his career provides insight into the diverse types of possible associations and how they could enable members to survive. Rousselin served as the personal secretary to Camille Desmoulins (1790?-91), Georges Danton (1791-93), Paul Barras (1795, 1803-05), General Lazare Hoche (1796-97), General Louis Chérin (1797-98), and General Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte (1799). As a commissaire of the Committee of Public Safety, Rousselin went on two missions to Champagne in the fall of 1793 where he imposed “revolutionary government” on the departments of the Seine-et-Marne and Aube. He served as secretary general of the department of the Seine (1796), the Ministry of War (1799), and the Ministry of the Interior (1815). He edited the Committee of Public Safety’s newspaper, *La feuille du Salut public* in 1793-94 and *Le Constitutionnel* from its founding in 1815 through its becoming the best-selling newspaper in the world until 1838. He survived denunciation by Maximilien Robespierre that led to an appearance before the Revolutionary Tribunal in July

¹ The material on Alexandre Rousselin is from Jeff Horn, *The Making of a Terrorist: Alexandre Rousselin and the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

² Where networks have been explored, it has typically been related to a particular group, time, place, or institution, e.g. Hervé Leuwers, *L’Invention du “Barreau français” (1660-1830): La construction nationale d’un groupe professionnel* (Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 2006) and Jean-Luc Chappey, *La société des Observateurs de l’Homme (1799-1804). Des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2002). The most impressive studies of Revolutionary networks are Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy: The Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) and Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution*, 3 vols., (Princeton, NJ and New York: Princeton University Press (vols. 1-2) and Berghahn Books (vol. 3), 1982-2000).

1794 and was jailed five times for being an “ultra” who committed “terrorisme.” He also endured the enmity of Napoleon Bonaparte based on Rousselin’s close relationship with Marie Joséphe Rose Tascher de La Pagerie de Beauharnais usually known as Joséphine. How did this person manage to die in his bed, wealthy and respected, at the age of 74 in 1847?

Developing Patrons

His long revolutionary and post-revolutionary career path meant that Rousselin needed different networks to survive a host of diverse challenges. Some networks helped him climb the career ladder. Working for Danton in 1793 provided the opportunity for Rousselin to distinguish himself at the bar of the National Convention by denouncing the Girondins on behalf of the sections of Paris on 15 April and 30 May. This service gained him a post as the day-to-day editor of the Committee of Public Safety’s newspaper and another job in the Ministry of the Interior as a coordinator of police spies. After Robespierre’s fall, ties to the enduring Jacobin network, as well as links to surviving supporters of Danton like Jules-François Paré got Rousselin the position of secretary-general of the department of the Seine for five months in 1796. The same job of personal secretary for Bernadotte led to Rousselin becoming secretary-general of the Ministry of War in 1799. After the Revolution of 1830, friendship with Louis-Philippe d’Orléans cemented by the Duke serving as godfather for Rousselin’s second son put Rousselin into the “kitchen cabinet” of the King of the French.

Neo-Jacobins: A Network Refurbished

During the Directory, Rousselin exploited his political ties to Neo-Jacobin deputies to support his literary endeavors. He sent the biography *La Vie de Lazare Hoche* that he had penned to two Commissions of the Council of 500: Public Instruction and Republican Institutions to request their endorsement. The Jacobin leadership of these Commissions strongly endorsed the text and recommended to the Directory that it “be distributed as prizes to young citizens as a national reward.”³ Although there is no evidence that the government purchased more than a few token copies, Rousselin took advantage of the publicity to issue two more editions of the book and to seek greater notoriety and a little ready cash, producing epigrams, lyric poetry, and librettos for well-known composers. For writers, making use of networks to get access to publishers, scarce materials, and opportunities could be the key to success in a competitive marketplace.

Intellectual Ties that Bind

Other networks helped Rousselin establish a reputation as an intellectual and historian. Through his lover Julie Talma, the wife of the famous actor Joseph who was close to Napoleon, Rousselin became part of the intellectual circle around Benjamin Constant and Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël-Holstein in 1798. His friendship with Constant and de Staël validated his desire to be — and to be recognized as — an intellectual. The group referred to him as “the historian” or as

³ Albert-Augustin-Antoine-Joseph Duhot, *Rapport au nom des commissions d’instruction publique et d’institutions républicaines, sur une motion d’ordre de Laloy, concernant la vie du général Hoche, présentée au Conseil par Alexandre Rousselin* (26 April 1798).

“Plutarch” when they wrote in code to escape the vigilance of the censors.⁴ Appreciation from these literary lions for his work as a “fixer,” whose information networks kept the couple and their circle apprised of developments behind the scenes, stoked Rousselin’s ego and ambition. He also helped the others buy property, find publishers, and negotiate contracts.

The intellectual salon around de Staël and Constant was critical of Bonaparte and his regime. It attracted several of Rousselin’s former patrons such as Senator Dominique-Joseph Garat, Joseph Fouché, and Bernadotte, who all attended regularly. By providing discrete information sources and influence within the government, such encounters were important means for these intellectuals to keep abreast of what was really going on. They could not abide “the silence” of public discussion of current events. The core group presented “useful suggestions” to those in power and used their shared friendship to deal with their exclusion from decision-making.⁵

In addition to the intangible benefits of friendship, this network burnished Rousselin’s reputation, kept him in social contact with important figures in the Imperial government, and gave him the connections and standing to join a group of former Jacobins who founded a newspaper in 1815 that became *Le Constitutionnel* in part to publicize Constant’s ideas. Since the astonishing success of *Le Constitutionnel* was the foundation of his wealth and later influence, this informal social network must be considered one of the most significant in Rousselin’s life. It afforded him opportunities that he could not access in any other way.

Barras: Patron, Relative, Friend

Rousselin’s ties to Paul Barras began when he was Danton’s secretary and deepened dramatically across the Revolutionary decade. Barras got Rousselin the job as Hoche’s secretary. After Hoche’s death, Rousselin was the Directors’ personal political link to the Republican generals, Chérin and Bernadotte. When Bonaparte appointed Rousselin vice-consul to Damietta, Egypt in 1804, Barras opened an escape hatch from this exile to a disease-ridden port in hostile territory. While hiding among Barras’ relations in Provence, Rousselin seduced, had a child with, and then later married Clémentine de Montpezat, the daughter of a known royalist, the granddaughter of a duke. Barras blessed the union, “I have felt satisfied with and flattered at an alliance honorable in its purity.”⁶ Marrying Barras’ cousin solidified Rousselin’s social standing especially after he received his foster father’s title in 1813 to become comte de Saint-Albin. Longstanding network connections to royalists, nobles, and Provençal clients of Barras’ all grew out of this family tie. Marriage has always been an important way of adding to or solidifying networks, but this social and political strategy has received less attention for the Revolutionary era than for the periods before and after.

⁴ See, for example, Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance Générale*, vol. 5 (1803-1805), ed. Dennis Wood and Adrienne Tooke with Peter Rickard (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2007), 1999.

⁵ Benjamin Constant, *Correspondance générale*, vol. 4 (1800-1802), ed. Dennis Wood and Adrienne Tooke with Peter Rickard (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 480.

⁶ Georges Duruy, ed., *Memoirs of Barras: Member of the Directorate*, 4 vols., trans. C. E. Roche (New York: Harper & Bros., 1896), IV: 20-21.

Networks: Opportunity and Liability

Networks of amity and advancement made Rousselin's lifestory exciting and juicy with gossip; networks of survival made those thrilling interludes possible. But my argument also requires an explicit link between network, survival, and threat of the sort that other participants in this H-France Salon have also depicted, especially Howard G. Brown, Denise Z. Davidson, Christine Haynes, and David Troyansky. If ties to Danton got Rousselin notoriety and influential posts in the Revolutionary government during 1792-93, by the spring of 1794, those links became both a threat and a means of escape. During a debate at the Jacobin Club on 25 May 1794, Maximilien Robespierre accused Rousselin of making "insidious motions" leading to his purge from the Club as "the executor of Danton's will." The Committee of General Security ordered his incarceration and trial.⁷ Before the Revolutionary Tribunal on 2 Thermidor, prosecutor Antoine-Quentin Fouquier-Tinville asserted that "Rousselin's objective was to serve Danton's faction through all sorts of crimes."⁸ Yet, Rousselin and his sixteen "accomplices" were all acquitted. When Robespierre learned of the verdict, an eyewitness reported that he wondered where "is my power when I cannot place the head of an accomplice of Danton under the sword of justice?"⁹

How does a Dantonist, accused of being an "ultra" because of his implementation of Revolutionary government survive multiple denunciations including arrest orders signed by Robespierre himself and seconded by Georges Couthon, another member of the Committee of Public Safety? For a challenge of this magnitude, only the work of multiple networks made survival possible. Former Parisian adherents of Danton such as Louis Legendre who was the only deputy to defend the great orator in the National Convention were closely allied to the delegation from the Aube, Danton's birthplace and the site of Rousselin's second mission. Recognizing the deterioration of his political standing after the execution of Danton and Desmoulins, Rousselin systematically approached others accused of exceeding their charge while on mission, including Barras and Fouché. Another of his associates, Antoine-Jean Garnier, one of the Aube deputies, showed up at Rousselin's trial and redirected the proceeding from Rousselin's actions to the "federalism" and "perjury" of his accusers.¹⁰ These linked but separate networks, with Rousselin serving as a "behind the scenes" linchpin, came together to protect themselves. Their alliance not only saved the young man, it also seized control of the Revolutionary government on 9 Thermidor.

Despite his acquittal, on that fateful day, Rousselin was in jail once more thanks to the enmity of members of the Committee of General Security. Legendre got him out, asking, "What are you doing in there, you damned rascal? Get out, quickly!"¹¹ Despite persistent denunciations for his actions, the Dantonist and "ultra" networks helped Rousselin escape the Revolutionary barber three times in 1794. Jules-François Paré, a friend of Danton's from the Collège de Troyes, and

⁷ François-Alphonse Aulard, ed., *La Société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, vol. 6, *Mars à Novembre 1794*, 6 vols. (Paris: Cerf-Noblet, 1897), 155.

⁸ *Acte d'accusation par Antoine-Quentin Fouquier, Accusateur-Public du Tribunal Révolutionnaire*, 2 Thermidor, an II (20 July 1794), Archives Nationales de France [AN] W426.

⁹ Louis-Marie Prudhomme, *Histoire générale et impartiale des erreurs, des fautes et des crimes commis pendant la Révolution française*, 6 vols. (Paris: n.p., 1797), V: 414.

¹⁰ *Extrait du registre des audiences du tribunal révolutionnaire*, 2 Thermidor, an II (20 July 1794), AN W47 (3140).

¹¹ Cited by Nicolas Villiaumé, *Histoire de la Révolution française 1789-1796*, 5th ed. 4 vols. (Paris: S. Raçon et comp., 1852), III: 317.

later his legal secretary, served as Minister of the Interior in 1793-94 when Rousselin was an overseer of police spies. As commissaire-general of the Seine in 1796, Paré rehabilitated Rousselin by naming him secretary-general of the department. This crucial step was due solely to patronage and their time together in Danton's service.

After 1794, affiliation with the Jacobin networks had the same kind of Janus-faced effect on Rousselin's life and career as his ties to Danton. As secretary general of the Seine, Rousselin revived the careers of many other Jacobins whom he knew from the early years of the Revolution. His known Jacobinism was an important factor in Barras getting Rousselin a job with Hoche and the other generals, especially Bernadotte. Two years later, as secretary-general of the Ministry of War, Rousselin again did favors for numerous Jacobins who needed inside information or a recommendation to acquire a new post. These favors and these friends helped Rousselin at many pivot points in his later career, especially after the Hundred Days, when he developed a network of former Jacobins to establish *Le Constitutionnel*, get inside intelligence, and protect the fledgling newspaper from heavy-handed censorship. This behind-the-scenes network of former Jacobins tied together by favors enabled Rousselin to escape from political irrelevance and financial hardship.

Institutional Networks

The military and police networks that Rousselin developed and relied on for protection, information, and revenue were absolutely vital to his survival. As a nominal military supply official but actual personal secretary and political link between the Directors and a series of Jacobin generals, Rousselin was deeply connected to the military during the latter half of the revolutionary decade and under Napoleon and remained so through the Restoration. Not only did these "military adjacent" posts provide an escape from the turmoil in Paris, but they also helped to restrain Bonaparte's hostility. The military biographies Rousselin penned also burnished his reputation as a patriot and earned him the gratitude and respect of many officers and men who looked to him and also to Barras — to whom Rousselin was so closely linked — for information and assistance about how to manage the twists and turns of the Napoleonic era. These aspects of the military network complement the more formal version depicted by Christine Haynes in this H-France Salon and suggest, unsurprisingly, that military networks were even more ubiquitous than might be considered.¹²

After almost nine months collating the reports of Paris' dense network of police spies and years of deep engagement in the politics of the sections and the Commune, it should not surprise that Rousselin glommed onto these networks and retained links to the police apparatus across the entire era. It fit his desire for inside information that he could trade for social capital and intelligence with his other networks. Links to the police also provided advance warning of government action such as the alert he received before the arrest of Danton and Desmoulins. During the Napoleonic era, Rousselin's personal and political bonds to Fouché were also ties to the police network. He was accused frequently of being a police spy long before he actually

¹² Howard G. Brown, *War, Revolution, and the Bureaucratic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 98-123, Alan Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 155-79, and Jacques Godechot, *Les commissaires aux armées sous le Directoire: contribution à l'étude des rapports entre les pouvoirs civils et militaires*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1941).

accepted the job sometime around 1805. Gaining and keeping Fouché's favor was worth a great deal even after he was pushed out of the police ministry in 1812; it was Fouché who convinced Lazare Carnot to appoint Rousselin as a good former Jacobin to be secretary general of the Ministry of the Interior during the Hundred Days. Information and patronage from the police network benefited Rousselin enormously: these connections enabled him to dissociate himself from his former patrons and later provided protection after he informed on royalists and disaffected French in Provence and Geneva.

Network Typologies

Different types of networks functioned differently. Some networks like the Jacobins or the military were more institutional in nature. Others, such as those headed by Louis-Philippe or the intellectual circle around de Staël and Constant, were based on friendship or shared experience. Even the "ultra" network was a form of this sort of relationship. A third type of network was closely linked to an individual such as Danton, Barras, or Fouché. In certain networks, the basic structure was fundamentally horizontal, in other words, the members were relatively equal in status: this was true for the Jacobins and within the liberal intellectual circle. In other networks, Rousselin was clearly in an inferior position, such as among the Dantonists or with Fouché. Interestingly, Rousselin was not in a noticeably superior position in any of his networks until the very end of his public career in the 1830s. Rousselin's ability to accomplish so much and survive so many challenges stemmed from his ability to broker information and influence among and between his various networks as well as his ability to ingratiate himself with political and social superiors.

Networks responded distinctively and took advantage of diverse challenges and situations. In the case of Alexandre Rousselin, obsessive attention to developing multiple and different kinds of networks along with his conscious embrace of being a broker at the pivot point of these networks enabled him not only to survive but to thrive. It is unlikely that many others fostered or enjoyed *all* the types of networks that Rousselin did, especially if they were so close to the pinnacles of power. But greater attention to networks helps us to understand why and how individuals and groups lived and succeeded during the age of the French Revolution.

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