

## II.4.

### *The Thermidorians of 9 Thermidor*

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The day of 9 Thermidor Year II (27 July 1794) when Robespierre was overthrown ranks alongside 14 July 1789, 10 August 1792 and 18 Brumaire Year VIII as one of the definitive dates of the Revolutionary decade in France. Curiously, it is little studied. A great many historians have covered the day in terms of the plans and intentions of its central character. Others have considered it as an exercise in factional politics within the National Convention. Yet very few indeed have explored it as a day in Parisian politics, even though the day witnessed an attempted popular insurrection. The most useable guide to this facet of 9 Thermidor remains Albert Soboul's account in his great work on the sans-culottes of Year II. (Soboul, 1958) This draws extremely heavily on the fuller coverage given in the neglected study by Paul Sainte-Claire Deville on the Commune which dates from 1946.

This long-standing neglect may also appear surprising in view of the exceptionally rich documentation which exists for the *journée*, most

notably in police archives (Archives Nationales F7). Barras, who suppressed the Parisian insurrection on 9-10 Thermidor, ordered an extraordinarily thorough enquiry into every aspect of the day in each of the city's forty-eight sections. In addition, the weeks following saw the arrest of hundreds of militants, and this activity threw up large numbers of personal accounts of the day (denunciations, interrogations, petitions for release from goal, etc). Probably no other Revolutionary *journée* is so well-documented. Ironically it may even be that the very plethora of information has deterred historians from examining it more closely in recent years.

A study of recent histories of the Revolution indicates that Soboul's account of the day is generally accepted. The Parisian popular movement, it is held, failed to support Robespierre in sufficient numbers because the Committee of Public Safety had effectively neutered it and depoliticised it in preceding months. 9 Thermidor saw the triumph of popular indifference, with Robespierre and his companions left abandoned in the Commune building at the Hôtel de Ville at midnight, as crowds who only hours before had been demonstrating in their support outside the building preferred to return home rather than stand and fight.

There remains one awkward fact that disproves this argument however. It is that Parisian crowds did not return home in a state of indifference, but stayed up and about in huge numbers on the streets of Paris during the night of 9-10 Thermidor. Accounts of the day in police archives show irrefutably that the people of Paris chose to stand and fight, but *for the Convention* rather than for Robespierre and the Commune. The present consensus ascribes popular support for the Convention to the Parisian masses' 'false consciousness' (a not especially Marxian term incidentally). It is surprising that such an explanation still seems to hold currency.

What I hope to do in this new project is to provide an account of 9 Thermidor that integrates the three levels on which the day operated (inside Robespierre's head; inside the National Convention; and within the city of Paris). By focusing in particular on the individual motivations and actions of city-dwellers on the day, I hope to throw light on the nature of the political outlook of Parisians. The people of Paris did not stand idly by as Robespierre was overthrown: they

overthrew him, and it is worth knowing why. Analysis of the micro-politics of the hopes, fears, plans and projects of the Parisian popular classes should take us beyond considerations of false consciousness or retrospective assumptions about ‘Thermidorian’ (i.e. right-wing) mentalities, and give us a better sense of who the Thermidorians were and what they were about.

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#### WORKS CITED

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