

JOHN ADAMSON

Night of the Guillotine

The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris

By Colin Jones

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So momentous an event was the French Revolution, so labyrinthine its evolution and so far-reaching its consequences for the whole of Europe that it seems the purest folly to imagine that anything useful can be said about the subject in a book devoted to a single day. Yet, however improbably, that is exactly what this book sets out to do.

Still more eccentric is the book's organisation. Traditional chapters are abandoned entirely. Instead we get five lengthy 'parts', each subdivided into a series of ever-faster-paced scenes, the shortest only a few paragraphs long. Each is headed merely by a simple indication of time and place: '10:45 am: Robespierre's lodgings, 366 Rue Saint-Honoré'; '11:00 am: Tuileries palace and gardens'; '11:30 am: Vestibule to the Convention hall and environs', and so on. One can almost hear the ticking of all those Parisian ormolu clocks.

Two things prevent all this from collapsing under the weight of its own wayward ambition. Colin Jones, one of the finest living scholars of early modern France, is no ordinary historian. And the day in question, 27 July 1794, was no ordinary day.

For 27 July 1794, '9 Thermidor Year II' in the new republican calendar, has long been recognised as a 'pivotal moment' in the French Revolution. Until that point, the course of the revolution had been marked by increasing radicalism: France had gone from constitutional monarchy after the fall of the Bastille in 1789, to kingless republic in 1792, to wartime police state from 1793. After the events of 9 Thermidor, the trend was towards increasing conservatism. The democratic and reformist energies of the early revolution were mostly dissipated. Within a decade, France was again a monarchy, with a Corsican-born emperor in place of a Bourbon king.

This sudden *bouleversement* has conventionally been explained as a reaction to

the guillotine-fixed excesses of the Revolutionary Government of Year II (1793–4) and the austere, donnish 35-year-old bachelor lawyer from Arras, Maximilien Robespierre, who was its malign presiding genius. With real power transferred after September 1793 from France's revolutionary parliament, the National Convention, to a twelve-man Committee of Public Safety dominated by Robespierre, the regime had resorted to 'terror' as its principal means of deterring royal insurrection and purging 'counter-revolutionary' elements within its own ranks. After the new Law of 22 Prairial (10 June 1794), the rate of executions soared, with more 'enemies of the state' sent to the guillotine in Paris in June and July 1794 than in the whole period since the fall of the Bastille. When, on 26 July 1794, Robespierre addressed the Convention, urging the need for yet further purges, extending even to the Convention's own members, his enemies in the government were provoked to act. They needed to neutralise Robespierre before he did the same to them.

The events of the following twenty-four hours provide the subject of Jones's minutely detailed and unfailingly gripping new book. Robespierre's fall was swift. On 9 Thermidor he was denounced in the Convention as a 'tyrant' and placed under arrest. There was unexpected resistance from Robespierre's Jacobin allies in the city government, the Paris Commune, and its forces briefly secured their hero's release. But the opposition was short-lived. By the middle of the night of 27–28 July, the city government's headquarters had been overrun and Robespierre recaptured. Before sunset the following day, Robespierre and his principal supporters had been decapitated on what is now the Place de la Concorde.

In most accounts, that day of action is represented as a 'kind of parliamentary *coup d'état*'. The speed of the regime's fall

and the Parisian citizenry's apparent 'indifference' to its fate attested to its political and moral bankruptcy. With hindsight, the regime's use of terror during the period of emergency rule was 'essentialized' as its defining characteristic. It became '*the Terror*' with a capital T, with Robespierre singled out as its moving spirit: a 'bestial, demonic specimen', a *buveur de sang* ('blood-drinker').

But the French Revolution, as the playwright Louis-Sébastien Mercier observed, was 'all about optics'. Jones's superbly researched and strikingly original book produces an optic of a radically different kind. 'Only by getting "up close" and drilling down into the "infinitely small" details of the revolutionary process', its author insists, can the day's course and outcome be understood. And for once this counsel of perfection can be put into practice. Interrogatories demanded by Paris's military commander in the days immediately after the coup from officials in each of the city's forty-eight administrative sections produced 'micro-accounts' from vantage points all over the city, many of them broken down into 'quarter-hourly chunks'. Almost two hundred survive, along with voluminous newspaper sources and memoirs. There is probably not 'another day in the whole of the eighteenth century', Jones notes, for which 'sources are so copious and dense'. And from this vast array of little-used archival material, a new and very different narrative emerges.

The purpose of the coup was not to topple the existing revolutionary regime, Jones contends, nor to end the use of terror, but rather to strengthen the regime by the removal of one dangerously over-powerful and increasingly erratic member. In reality, argues Jones, there was little or no ideological difference between Robespierre and the instigators of the coup against him. Most were fellow members of the central executive and as complicit in the use of terror as Robespierre himself.