

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

A difficult transition

‘The people want order, peace and the Republic, and they will have them’
Benjamin Constant in a letter to Mme Nassau, 6 Prairial Year III

REVENGE

The end of the revolutionary government

The fall of an individual or the end of a system? From 10 Thermidor the debate had commenced. Barère presented the previous day’s events as ‘a slight commotion which left the government intact’. This interpretation was to be disproved as the Convention began to undermine the revolutionary system, and public opinion attacked with increasing stridency those responsible for the Terror.

On 11 Thermidor Barère, in the name of the ‘Great’ Committee of Public Safety, proposed three candidates for the posts vacated by the ‘conspirators’. Tallien, Legendre and Thuriot imposed a more radical solution: a quarter of the membership of the committees would be renewed each month, the outgoing members becoming ineligible for a month. This put an end to the stability of the government. In the end six deputies were selected to replace the ‘triumvirs’, Prieur de la Marne, Jeanbon Saint-André – the pretext for their removal being that they were on mission – and Héraut de Séchelles, who had been guillotined with Danton. They were replaced on the Great Committee by Tallien, a repentant Terrorist, Thuriot and Bréard, both Dantonists, Treillard, a member of the Constituent Assembly, and Laloy, a moderate, together with only one of Barère’s candidates, Eschasseriaux. The composition of the Committee of General Security was also modified. Three Robespierrists, including the painter David, were excluded. Of its four new members, two – Legendre and Merlin de

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794–99*

Thionville – represented the Dantonist faction. Thus the ephemeral leaders of Thermidor – Barère, Collot d’Herbois – were isolated in the government by old and new softliners.

The concentration of power, another revolutionary principle, was also undermined. Cambon, who had always succeeded in protecting the autonomy of the Finance Committee and the Treasury, denounced the Committee of Public Safety’s self-identification with the executive. He proposed that each of the twelve commissions (that is, ministerial departments) be attached to the twelve principal committees. But the majority, while aware of the danger of fragmentation, was even more worried by its experience of the disadvantages of a monopoly of power. The decision reached on 7 Fructidor (24 August 1794) carved up the powers of the Committee of Public Safety, restricting it to its former domain of war and diplomacy. The Committee of General Security kept its control over the police. There was now to be a total of sixteen committees with the Legislative Committee, having responsibility for internal administration and justice vested in it, being raised to the level of the two ‘Great’ Committees. These measures, then, increased to some extent the efficiency of the government, but not its unity.

The dismantling of the system of Year II affected, finally, the instruments of the Terror. The law of 22 Prairial, which in practice suppressed judicial guarantees, was very quickly repealed, and the Revolutionary Court, paralysed by the imprisonment of Fouquier-Tinville, was reorganised. Thanks to the introduction of the ‘question of intent’ (without proof of counter-revolutionary intentions defendants could not be found guilty), numerous breaches were opened in the apparatus of repression. The surveillance committees, which had been the organs of the Terror, experienced the full repercussions of these various breaches with the past. Partly in response to a violent campaign against these committees, the Convention left only one in each district in the provinces and twelve, instead of forty-eight, in Paris. Their powers were restricted, and the conditions of membership modified to make it harder for the *sans-culottes** to join.

These few weeks had resulted in the disbanding of the revolutionary government.

* The term literally meant someone without (aristocratic) breeches: hence a radical Republican. [Trans.]

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A difficult transition*

3

A new equilibrium

Ending the Terror meant opening the prisons. If the Convention failed to understand, the pressure of public opinion set about convincing it. At the end of July 1794 approaches were increasingly made to the authorities, and crowds gathered outside the prisons with growing frequency. When the first prisoners were released in August there was an explosion. All sections of the population, all political tendencies, had been represented among them; their liberation seemed a common victory for the French people. The Paris police reports evoke this moment of unanimity, exemplified by the revolutionary committee of Saint-Pol (Nord) in a phrase to the representatives on mission: 'Everyone is holding hands.'¹ Almost everyone, for these hundreds of suspects, freed because no charge against them had been proceeded with, began with their relatives to demand accountability from those who had been responsible for their arbitrary arrest, that is from the Jacobins.

The Jacobins occupied strong positions in the administration and in government, especially on the Committee of General Security. From August to October they succeeded in holding their ground. In Paris they were threatened by two forces, the moderates and the neo-Hébertists. Accounts of life in prison and various other revelations stoked the campaign against the 'blood drinkers'. The most important leaders of this campaign, the former Terrorists Fréron and Tallien, had two crucial forms of action at their disposal: the press and the street. Freedom of the press, demanded by everyone, was quickly obtained after Thermidor. Right-wing papers run by talented journalists – Dussault on *La Correspondance politique*, Richer de Sérizy on *L'Accusateur public*, Fréron himself on *L'Orateur du peuple* – incited the population to revenge, gave instructions for action and pointed out the most dangerous Jacobins. And the 'jeunesse dorée',* which included young bourgeois, lawyers' clerks, artists, military absentees and deserters, began to stir up noisy disturbances in the Palais-Royal quarter. Led by an adventurer, the Marquis de Saint-Huruge, and the dramatist Martainville, these youths intervened in theatres, shouting down actors reputed to be Terrorists, interrupting plays and giving readings or

* Literally gilded youth; the groups of young aristocrats who assaulted the Jacobins. [Trans.]

¹ Quoted by G. Sangier in *Le District de Saint-Pol de Thermidor à Brumaire* (Blangermont, 1946), vol. 1, p. 8.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794–99*

singing songs. Such ostentatious displays had a certain intimidatory value.

In the course of their campaigns these fops were careful not to confuse the ‘bloodthirsty Jacobins’ with the ‘decent *sans-culottes* of the faubourgs’. Although their attitude and vocabulary betrayed condescension towards, and fear of, the people, this position also marked a convergence between the moderates and the neo-Hébertists in a common hostility to the consequences of revolutionary government. The popular society known as the Electoral Club and the Gravilliers and Museum sections served as rallying points for the leaders of the popular movement. There were demands for unrestricted press freedom, for an elected municipality, and for an application of the constitution of 1793. *L’Ami du peuple*, edited by Châles, and Babeuf’s *Le Tribun du peuple* developed these themes further. Until the end of Vendémiaire the community of views between these two currents of opinion seemed perfect.

The Jacobins, the third element in this triangular confrontation, were momentarily at a loss. Everything about the new course of events seemed inauspicious to them: the emptying of the prisons, the destruction of the revolutionary government, the now free and self-confident right-wing press. When there was an explosion at the powder factory of Grenelle, probably from accidental causes, murmurings were heard in the crowd. ‘This is the result of freeing the prisoners’ (police report, 31 August 1794). To deal with this ‘aristocratic plot’ the Jacobins demanded a return of the Terror. In September they went on the offensive. Some ill-considered releases from prison and the excesses of the fops began to annoy many members of the sections. The majority on the Convention adopted a policy of continuity, as in the transfer of Marat’s ashes to the Pantheon, of reconciliation, as in Lindet’s economic programme of 20 September, and of caution. In addition, the Convention had also rejected Lecointre’s denunciation of Barère, Collot, Billaud-Varenne and their friends.

Finally, encouragement came from the provinces where local Jacobins expressed their discontent in numerous formal addresses. The mother-society therefore had hopes of gaining the advantage in the Parisian sections. At least eight of them supported the text of the Dijon Society, which strongly set out the Jacobin viewpoint. Similarly, when the Lindet report was laid before the sections, the Jacobins replied with a speech by Audoin which was a violent declaration of war against the ‘respectable citizens’. The debate turned to the advantage of one or

A difficult transition

5

other party depending on the sections and the composition of the assemblies. The Jacobins could only claim a small number of successes. Their victory was limited and precarious because it rested upon a minority of activists; it was dangerous because it pushed the Thermidoreans away from compromise and encouraged them to break with the policy of balance.

In the provinces the implications of Thermidor were not immediately understood, at least in certain *départements*. For example, in Brest, as in Nîmes or the Ardèche, there was no let up in the Terror, while in Besançon, an exceptional but not unique case, the Jacobins hailed the triumph of the 'true patriots', and the moderates took fright. The situation was clarified by the decree of 7 Fructidor which virtually abolished the surveillance committees. What policy should now be adopted? The conformity of the messages of support for the Convention failed to disguise the disarray of the authorities. Local reactions ultimately reflected the great disparities in local situations during the course of the Terror. In places where conflict had been acute and where the representatives on mission called for revenge – Boisset at Bourg, Goupilleau at Avignon, Auguis and Serre in Marseilles – local officials were decimated by arrests and exclusions, and a large-scale release of prisoners took place. By contrast, political stability was maintained until the winter in the Hérault, the Haute-Saône, the Nièvre and the Ardennes, etc. Indeed, some representatives played a moderating role. Bayeux was perhaps a typical case: the mayor resigned after Thermidor, the Terrorists made themselves scarce, and the most conspicuous of them were purged from the popular society.

The modification in the balance of power was more marked in the large cities. At Le Havre the municipality and the conseil général soon included only shipbuilders and businessmen. In Toulouse the Girondins made themselves visible in large numbers. The reactionaries took the Jacobins to task in the streets of Lyons and Marseilles. Thus, in different ways and at different speeds, the revenge of the defeated of Year II took shape.²

The resurgence of the reactionaries

At the height of the Jacobin offensive, the trial of the Nantes federalists handed the initiative over to the Thermidoreans. The defendants

² See M. Schlumberger's up-to-date assessment, 'La réaction thermidorienne à Toulouse', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (April–June 1971), pp. 265–83.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794–99*

denounced the atrocities committed by the town's revolutionary committee. At once a newspaper campaign began to exploit these revelations about summary executions and drownings. During September feelings of revulsion and anger spread through Paris. The acquittal of the accused, on 15 September, marked out the real culprits: the Nantes Committee and, even more, Carrier. The right, spurred on by Tallien and Merlin de Thionville, could have imagined no more suitable subject for debate. In mid-October the Nantes Terrorists appeared before the revolutionary court. The indictment of Carrier posed greater problems: mooted as early as 20 October, it was not achieved until 23 November. The former Montagnards, the 'Crétois' (the men of the Crest), had fought a lukewarm rearguard action. And many members of the Convention, whether through caution or legalism, were careful not to act too quickly. But the intrigues of the Jacobins in Paris and the provinces, especially Marseilles, were worrying enough to push Thuriot, Merlin de Douai and Cambacérès towards the most stringent action. On 16 December Carrier was condemned to death and guillotined.

It was easy to slip into a policy of ascribing guilt by association; all Jacobins were at risk. On 16 October the Convention had forbidden the mutual affiliation of popular societies, their correspondence with each other and the submission of collective petitions. This broke the Jacobin network of solidarity, which had already been considerably undermined by purges and defections. Fréron's bands and the right wing of the Convention demanded even more: the closure of the 'den of thieves' – achieved on 12 November in an atmosphere of a witch hunt and after two onslaughts by the fops.

The majority of the sections approved this measure, which raised hardly a stir. Put to the test, the Jacobins lacked leaders of stature. Duhem and Goujon, in spite of their courage, were no substitutes for Barère, Collot and Billaud-Varenne, silent since their resignation from the Committee of Public Safety on 1 September. The Jacobins were not only weakened, they were also isolated and lacking in popular support, as was shown by the success of the moderates in capturing their remaining sections. The closure of the Jacobin Club gave an important impetus to the struggle for power in the assemblies. For the opportunists and waverers this was a signal for the imminent victory of the moderates; the downcast Jacobins lost control of sections which they had previously only held because of the absence of any firm opposition. At the end of November the overwhelming success of the moderates

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A difficult transition*

7

had overcome the last bastions: those of the north-west, the Piques (Place Vendôme) and Butte-des-Moulins (Palais-Royal) sections, and those of the left bank, the Université (Monnaie) and Thermes sections – to mention only the most important.

As for the Hébertists, they were no longer able to pursue their action in favour of direct democracy. The Electoral Club, declared subversive by the Committee of General Security, attempted to continue to function, and in mid-November it became the instrument of resistance to the moderates, the irreconcilable Jacobins having taken refuge with the friends of Babeuf. Later, in a celebrated piece of self-criticism, Babeuf was to draw the lesson of this reversal of alliances: ‘When I was among the first to thunder vehemently in order to bring down the monstrous structure of Robespierre’s system, I far from imagined that I was helping to build an edifice which, in a completely different way, would be no less harmful to the people’ (*Le Tribun du peuple*, 18 December 1794). Mutual suspicions were blunted; reaction forged unity in the popular camp. But the club was constrained to silence. A few sections, including those of Montreuil (Faubourg Saint-Antoine) and Gravilliers, stuck to a ‘Hébertist’ position during the winter.

The persecution of the former personnel of the sections gathered pace at the end of November. Extraordinary commissions carried out purges, hounding especially the former members of the revolutionary committees. In spite of the flood of denunciations, the government openly checked this process. On several occasions the Committee of General Security protected or freed public servants, as if it wanted to contain the repression within limits compatible with the exercise of power.

In the Convention the moderate counter-offensive took a different form. There were demands that the seventy-five protesting deputies excluded after 2 June 1793 should be reinstated. The Dantonists, supported by Tallien (‘in a Revolution men must not look behind them’) tried to oppose this; but, against the Jacobins and Hébertists, how in this month of Brumaire was it possible to do without the support of the moderates? In the struggle the Girondins became both a stake and an ally (Mathiez). On 8 December Merlin de Douai gave the agreement of the committees. Seventy-eight deputies ultimately came back to take up their places.

The ‘*Montagne*’ and the majority on the Councils had allowed this to happen in the hope that in the process the reaction would burn itself out. In fact, during January, there was on the contrary an intensification

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794–99*

of agitation in the capital. The *jeunesse dorée*, whom this first success had made all the more aggressive, adopted an attitude of provocation, imposed their new hymn 'Le Réveil du peuple' instead of 'La Marseillaise', and publicly attacked all those whose reading, whose comments, whose very dress, put them in the extremely large category of Jacobins. The police, half powerless and half sympathetic, did little to prevent such behaviour. Sometimes soldiers who were passing through Paris took it upon themselves to riposte.

The first objective of the right-wing extremists was to bring Barère, Collot and Billaud-Varenne to trial. It took them more than two months (27 December to 2 March) to overcome the resistance of the *Montagne* and of part of the '*Plaine*'. The other battle-cry of these bands was the denunciation of the cult of Marat. This meant both asking the Convention to go back on its own decisions and offending the susceptibilities of the *sans-culottes*. The fops thus turned in a distinctly counter-revolutionary direction. The Committees, even Fréron, were worried about this development. But a three-week campaign of hunting out busts in the theatres was enough to make the Convention comply by 'depantheonising' the 'Friend of the People' on 8 February 1795. 'La Marseillaise', Marat, the *bonnets rouges*,* the '*sans-culotte style*': it was in short a certain conception of the Revolution, egalitarian and austere, which had now lost the war of symbols. On 8 March the surviving Girondins, outlawed since 2 June 1793, were called back to the Convention. The return of Isnard, Lanjuinais and their friends well and truly signalled the end of the illusions and ambiguities of Thermidor.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The abandonment of the 'maximum' †

The destruction of the system of revolutionary government eventually brought about the end of the Economic Terror. With restrictions relaxed and 'Jacobin' measures out of favour, it seemed to peasants who avoided requisitioning and to manufacturers who delayed meeting state orders that they were but slightly anticipating an imminent abolition measure. But on 7 September the Convention extended the general

* The name given to the revolutionaries after their red Phrygian caps. [Trans.]

† On 29 September 1793 the law of the *maximum* introduced general price controls. [Trans.]

A difficult transition

9

maximum, as well as that on grain, for the duration of Year III. This was in fact merely an act of conservatism; the tendency was certainly towards liberalism. As Lindet had promised in his speech of 20 September, foreign trade was the first beneficiary of the government's concern. It was freed from restrictions in several stages. On 17 October and 26 November the unrestricted importation of unprohibited goods was allowed; on 15 November captains of neutral vessels were authorised to negotiate private contracts in French ports. As winter approached the committees took measures to ensure that the Republic was supplied with foreign grain. Similarly the state handed over some sectors of the economy which it had been running, such as the foundries of Toulouse and Maubeuge and the arms factories of Paris. In the latter case, considerations of public order pushed the authorities into dispersing the bulk of the workforce to the provinces. In doing this the Committee of Public Safety was innovating less than has been claimed. 'Nationalisation' had always seemed to it to be a makeshift solution. For example, on 8 Pluviôse Year II, Carnot and Prieur de la Côte d'Or had opposed the state take-over of Creusot in these words: 'No factory should be a burden on the Republic; all should be in the hands of private enterprise.'³

If Thermidor did represent a break with the past, this was above all in its order of priorities: the return to normality was to suffer no more delays or exceptions. Given this fact, could the *maximum* – the linchpin of the system of regulation – be indefinitely maintained? There was a brief attempt to appease resentment in the countryside. From 9 November the failure to fulfil levies no longer entailed more than the confiscation of the required quota. To take account of criticisms, the somewhat unrealistic national *maximum* was replaced by prices calculated at district level. The peasants deserted the markets and sold their harvests secretly for the highest prices, sometimes in exchange for metallic currency. 'As the peasants' fear vanished', wrote Georges Lefebvre in *Les Paysans du Nord*, 'so did their scruples, and their ill will became apparent.' In Paris no one – neither consumers nor police – any longer believed in the *maximum*. Because the black market was plentifully supplied, the idea – echoed by Babeuf and the Electoral Club – took hold among the masses that price control equalled scarcity and that free trade would bring back abundance. It was generally supposed 'that prices would rise but that

³ Quoted by G. Bourgin, 'Régie ou Entreprise' in *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* (1912). Many other writings expressed the same sentiment.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28917-7 - The Thermidorean Regime and the Directory 1794-1799

Denis Woronoff

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794–99*

then they would fall as a result of competition' (police report, 7 October 1794). This autumn illusion was to be shattered in the winter. But the *maximum* had in effect already been abandoned when the Convention decided to put a formal end to it on 4 Nivôse Year III (24 December 1794). Freedom to buy, sell and transport grain was restored; once current requisitions had been delivered, only purchases were to take place. The Thermidoreans had taken a gamble, yet to be won, in both the monetary and the economic sphere.

Currency, prices, food supplies and scarcity

The collapse of the *assignat** was the most noticeable result of the return to free trade. Paper currency fell from 31% of its face value in August 1794 to 24% in November, 17% in February and 8% at the beginning of April. The price-rise encouraged the peasantry to slow down sales in the hope of increasing profits. This price-rise, and the accompanying currency depreciation, was accentuated by speculation in a whole variety of goods such as grain, cloth, candles and ice. Confronted with the price explosion – in Paris prices doubled during Nivôse – the government was again forced to resort to printing money, since it was unable to raise sufficient funds through taxation. The land tax for 1794 was not fixed until the end of the year. Tax revenues came in slowly and were paid in depreciated *assignats*. But this continuous note issue, raising the circulation from 7.6 thousand million *livres* in August 1794 to 11.4 thousand million in May 1795, dangerously undermined the value of the currency. The flight from the *assignat* sometimes developed into a reluctance to accept *assignats* at all, especially in the frontier *départements*. The crisis of confidence was so severe that many expected, even prepared for, demonetisation. The poorer classes were the most certain losers in this situation, because although the level of currency depreciation outstripped the note increase, the rise in the prices of essential items considerably exceeded the rate of currency depreciation: taking 1790 as the base, the price index of foodstuffs stood at 819 in April 1795 and the *assignat* at 581.

The ending of controls, the effects of speculation and the debasement of the paper currency are not in themselves enough to explain the dramatic rise in food prices during the winter of 1794–5. The decisive

* Originally bonds issued upon the security of confiscated Church lands; by this period they had become simply a form of paper money. [Trans.]