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978-0-521-44105-6 - Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre

Bronislaw Baczko

Excerpt

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## 1 Robespierre-the-king . . .

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Today, Monday afternoon, Robespierre and twenty-one fellow-conspirators are brought before the revolutionary Tribunal to have their condemnation confirmed since, being outside the law, their trial is over. It is decreed that they shall be put to death in the Place Louis XV, now the Place de la Révolution. They were taken there and passed along the Rue Saint-Honoré and everywhere they were insulted by the people, angry at seeing how they had been deceived. And they had their heads cut off at seven o'clock in the evening. Within twenty-four hours it was all over; they hardly expected to die so soon, these men who wanted to massacre 60,000 people in Paris. Behold how God allows the wicked, at the moment of carrying out their plans, to perish.

Robespierre was the moving spirit of the conspiracy with another villain, Couthon, who backed him. It is said that he wanted to have himself acknowledged as king in Lyon and in other *départements* and marry Capet's daughter . . . How could a private individual get such an idea in his head? Ambitious scoundrel, that is where your pride has led you. With him dying as head of the conspiracy, everything falls with him.

Célestin Guittard de Floriban, who summed up the events of 9 and 10 Thermidor in these words, is an invaluable witness.<sup>1</sup> He set down in his diary the small details of his life as a *rentier* – closer and closer to ruin – in revolutionary Paris. Tireless, he hurried through the streets in search of the latest news, reading posters and papers, joining discussions in the 'groups' in the Place du Carrousel. He was all the more greedy for rumours because he believed them, and with such credulity that one sometimes wonders if it was real or feigned. He rejoiced at the arrest of Hébert who 'produces the Père Duchesne paper': 'What good luck this plot has been detected; we must hope that all its leaders will be discovered.' Three weeks later, on 16 Germinal, Year II, the revelation of another conspiracy delighted him. 'There was an infinite number of people in the square' when 'fifteen well-known conspirators' had their heads cut off and it was Danton 'who was

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Célestin Guittard de Floriban, bourgeois de Paris, sous la révolution*, edited with a commentary by R. Aubert, Paris, 1974, pp.437–8. Please see the appendix for a chronology. It is not intended to provide an exhaustive chronology of the Revolution, but to list the main events mentioned in the text.

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head of the conspiracy'. Another frustrated plot: Chaumette, 'a young man of thirty-one, with a good education and intelligent . . . put himself at the head of a conspiracy to slaughter the National Assembly. He received, along with his accomplices, all that they deserved: death, to which they submitted today. Into what disorder would they have put our country?' On 4 Prairial Guittard went with his *section*<sup>2</sup> to the Convention to 'congratulate Collot d'Herbois, deputy, and Robespierre' for having escaped 'the assassin Amiral' and Cécile Renault, 'also possessed by the devil'; very fortunately 'both have been arrested'.<sup>3</sup> He was not very surprised, two months later, to see this same Robespierre executed and to learn that he wanted to proclaim himself king.

Guittard, credulous though he was, was not the only one to believe this astounding news. Georges Duval, a young clerk working for a notary in Thermidor, Year II who was to become, some months later, one of the leaders of the '*jeunesse dorée*', maintains in his memoirs that after the punishment of Robespierre

there was a rumour, and all who lived then can remember it, that he really had dared to aspire to the hand of the little orphan in the Temple; and some confidential communications lead one to think that this rumour was not completely without foundation. Now, if it is the case that he had conceived such an insolent plan, he no doubt hoped that Mme Elisabeth, being indebted to him for her life, would use her favourable influence with her royal niece. Robespierre, the assassin of Louis XVI, husband of the daughter of Louis XVI! and, no doubt, his successor on the throne.<sup>4</sup>

Georges Duval was a shameless scandalmonger; he presented as true all the rumours which stirred up revolutionary Paris. His evidence is therefore admissible since he is reporting tales and rumours. In a case like this, he is a completely trustworthy liar.

### The history of a tale

The rumour according to which Robespierre wished to succeed to Louis XVI has not escaped historians of the Revolution, especially those who have studied 9 Thermidor. Most have dismissed it swiftly and scornfully: it is too implausible and, moreover, a complete fabrication. However, it seems a rumour that deserves to be taken seriously. Not in order to examine

<sup>2</sup> *sections*. The forty-eight divisions of Paris. All citizens with voting rights formed the assembly of each *section*.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal de Célestin Guittard de Floriban*, pp. 326, 334, 337–8.

<sup>4</sup> G. Duval, *Souvenirs Thermidoriens*, Paris, 1844, vol. 1, p. 146. Duval maintains that 'Robespierre lost his temper with the English only in order to impress the people and to cover under a thicker veil the secret relations he was carrying on with them, so that one day, with their assistance, he could seat himself upon the throne of Louis XVI, which he had done so much to make vacant on 21 January, 1793': *ibid.*, pp. 201–2.

its validity; on the contrary, it is because it is so obviously false that it holds our attention. It is a commonplace, too often forgotten, that a false rumour is a real social fact; in that it conceals a portion of historical truth – not about the news that it spreads, but about the conditions that make its emergence and circulation possible, about the state of mind, the *mentalités* and imagination of those who accepted it as true. Also, the more a public rumour is false, implausible and fantastic, the more its history promises to be rich in lessons. Now, the tale of Robespierre-the-king in actual fact circulated in the confused Paris of 9 and 10 Thermidor; it was taken to be the revelation of a truth hidden until that moment, at least by certain actors in these events. Therefore, it is not solely evidence of its own existence. If, on 9 Thermidor, the tale managed to insinuate itself into the social imagination, then the right thing to do is to ask oneself about this imagination and about the event with which the rumour was so closely linked that it influenced the outcome, false though it was.

As for the history of this tale, we can reconstruct it only very incompletely. There are two reasons for this: the tale has left only fleeting traces and the evidence referring to it is often confused. The rumour was spread by print and by word of mouth. This distinction is, it must be added, quite relative. The newspapers, placards and pamphlets which reported the news were distributed by street-hawkers who wore out their lungs to capture the attention of the public. In the streets and the squares, groups would form and the text would often be read out loud, discussed on the spot. The mass of written texts bequeathed by the revolutionary period should not hide the fact that the culture of the epoch remained largely oral and that political information in particular circulated among the popular masses mostly by oral means. This was especially the case during the ‘revolutionary *journées*’ in Paris when tens of thousands of people came into direct contact with each other in the street. The oral progress of a rumour therefore leaves few traces and these, when they exist, are often unreliable. Accordingly, for the night of 9 and 10 Thermidor, when our tale arose, there is abundant documentation: the reports of the debates of the Convention; the hearings of the revolutionary committees and the assemblies of the *sections*; the reports that these committees, as well as the commanders of the armed forces of the *sections*, sent, hour by hour, to the Committees of Public Safety and General Security; the hearings of the Commune, the countless testimonies, etc. But this mass of documentation is just as much, not to say above all, evidence for the confusion that reigned among the actors that night. This superabundance fails to fill certain gaps and even adds contradictions to the confusion that marks accounts of the events. Furthermore, the tale of Robespierre-the-king is, like all public rumours, protean. It has several variations, from the most rudimentary to the highly elaborate, with many

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ramifications. Its history can be begun only by drawing up an inventory, as an anthropologist would, which will still remain very incomplete.

On 9 Thermidor in the morning, at the time of the session of the Convention which was to culminate in the arrest of Robespierre, Couthon, Saint-Just and the others, our rumour was not in circulation. The *tyrant*: this is the word, both indictment and insult, that Billaud-Varenne hurled at Robespierre. The members of the Convention would take it up, crying *Down with the tyrant!*, exorcising their fear with uproar and preventing Robespierre, by their repeated shouts, from speaking. Tallien was to add other insults: *the new Cromwell*, *the new Catiline*. Among the accusations against Robespierre, as many as they were varied, no one claimed that he wanted to re-establish the monarchy, let alone that he aspired to be king. During this debate, an allusion to the 'throne' appeared but once, in a rhetorical flight by Fréron against Couthon: 'Couthon is a tiger corrupted by the blood of national representation. He has dared, for a royal pastime, to speak at the Jacobin Club of five or six leaders of the Convention. That was only the beginning, and he wanted to make our corpses so many steps to climb to the throne.' A cruel and ridiculous remark; Couthon was content to reply, as he displayed his paralysed feet, 'I wanted to reach the throne, yes ...' During the stormy debate no one went to the trouble of being precise as to what form of government the 'new tyrant' wanted to adopt. Elie Lacoste spoke vaguely of a triumvirate composed of Robespierre, Saint-Just and Couthon. Barère mentioned the threat of a military dictatorship, and denounced the collusion of the 'conspirators' with aristocrats and foreigners. He referred to an anonymous 'enemy officer', captured in Belgium, who had confessed: 'All your successes are worthless; we still expect to negotiate for peace with one party, whichever it is, with a fraction of the Convention and soon change the government.' He raged against 'the aristocracy, joyful at present events . . . this aristocracy, which all our efforts seem unable to extinguish, and which hides in the mud when it is not in blood, the aristocracy [that] has seethed since yesterday with an activity that looks like nothing else but a counter-revolutionary movement'. The *Proclamation de la Convention nationale au peuple français*, voted through at the end of this session but drawn up in advance, a few hours earlier, by Barère, paraded all the dangers run by the Revolution.

The revolutionary government, object of the hate of the enemies of France, is attacked in our midst; the forms of republican power come close to ruin; the aristocracy appears to triumph, and the royalists are ready to reappear. Citizens, do you wish to lose in one day six years of revolution, of sacrifices and of courage? Do you wish to return to the yoke which you have broken? . . . If you do not rally to the National Convention . . . our victories will become a curse; and the French people will be exposed to all the furies of internal division and all the vengeance of tyrants.

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Hear the voice of the *patrie*, instead of joining your cries to those of the men of ill-will, the aristocrats and the enemies of the people, and our *patrie* will be once more saved.

The transformation of ‘conspirators’ into royalists was sketched out, then, through hints and allusions to their common objective, namely the destruction of the Republic; but of Robespierre-the-king there was as yet no mention. This step would be taken on the evening of 9 Thermidor, in the panic that gripped the Convention. Having recommenced its session about seven o’clock in the evening, it received, hour by hour, more and more alarming news: the rebellion of the Commune which called on the *sections* to ‘rise’; the movements of the armed force of the *sections*, about whose attitudes contradictory information came in; the arrival of the gunners in front of the Convention, in the Place de la Réunion (formerly Place du Carrousel), who had freed Hanriot (confined in the afternoon at the Committee of General Security, he now rode through the streets on his horse, haranguing the gunners and the companies of the *sections*); the freeing of Robespierre and of other deputies put under arrest. Yet it is not in the debates of the Convention that the first traces of the rumour are to be found. Neither the decrees outlawing Robespierre, the other arrested deputies and the rebel Commune, nor the stormy and disorganised discussion which followed their adoption make any mention of Robespierre’s ‘royalist designs’. The rumour spread in the street, particularly in the Place de Grève, and in the *sections*. The committees of the *sections* were at that time in permanent contact with the Committees of Public Safety and General Security; moreover, they exchanged information among themselves. The rumour was certainly being spread abroad at the time that the *huissiers*, surrounded by torches, were proclaiming in the streets the decrees outlawing Robespierre and the others. It was also spread by at least some of the twelve members of the Convention who were helping Barras, appointed general in command of the National Guard. Wearing tricolour sashes, sabres at their sides, plumed hats, they launched into the assault of the town, in order to mobilise the battalions of the National Guard, the gunners, the Committees and the assemblies of the *sections* – in a word, the whole population – around the Convention and against the conspirators. Information on all this feverish activity is incomplete. Léonard Bourdon, one of the twelve members of the Convention helping Barras, violently denounced Robespierre at the Gravilliers *section*, which was to play an important role in the course of events; but there is no information on the arguments that he used to support his accusation. Other representatives, to convince the hesitant *sections* of the faubourg Saint-Antoine, spoke of the fleur-de-lis seal found in Robespierre’s house (we shall have to return to this seal); Barère, who described this episode in his report of 10 Thermidor, did

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not however give the names of the members of the Convention. We can guess, with more or less certainty, that during the night of 9 and 10 Thermidor the rumour spread through at least fifteen or so *sections* (or their battalions) – including those of the faubourgs Saint-Antoine and Saint-Marcel, as well as certain *sections* of the town centre.

But there is nothing to justify confining the circulation of this rumour only to those *sections* about which we have information. Once set going, the rumour flew from one *section* to another, found many new hawkers, was vigorously discussed wherever people, in the unrest and uncertainty, were greedy for news of the events unfolding in confusion. It was in this way that the meeting of the Indivisibility *section*, which hesitated for a moment between the Commune and the Convention, received a warning from the Lombards *section* to the effect that its revolutionary committee had arrested ‘five villains’, evidently accomplices of the Commune, who ‘desiring to profit from circumstances that they considered favourable to their designs, proclaimed the son of Capet’. This news, which revealed the real purposes of the ‘most appalling conspiracy’, is not to be found in the archives of any other *sections*. However, the Lombards *section*, devoted from the outset to the Convention’s cause, had ‘fraternised’ with a score of other *sections*, by sending them their delegates. One can therefore reasonably suppose that these messengers did not fail to report this overwhelming news everywhere they went. Like the Lombards *section*, most of the *sections* faithful to the Convention communicated between themselves and sought to convince the *sections* who were hesitating, thus forming a compact network for the circulation of news, rumours and hearsay.

What was the story? The stupefying news came in several versions, as if it were distorted as it spread (but it is not certain that all the first rumour-mongers related it in the same way). The constant element was, more or less, this: Robespierre was a royalist; he had at last been unmasked; this explained both the aims of his conspiracy and the measures for public safety taken by the Convention. To this outline were added improvisations, embellishments, corroborations. It is possible to arrange the versions of the rumour in order from the simplest to the most elaborate: a fleur-de-lis seal was found in Robespierre’s house (and/or at the Commune, with the police administrators); two individuals had tried to liberate ‘young Capet’ from the Temple; five ‘villains’ were already planning to proclaim him king; Robespierre wished to marry Capet’s daughter and the marriage contract had already been signed.

The same night there ran a rumour of collusion between the Committees of the Convention and the ‘royalists’, even the ‘foreign party’. Robespierre the younger, just released from La Force prison, delivered a speech at the Maison Commune, violently accusing the faction who ‘wished to enslave

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the people, slaughter the patriots, open the Temple and remove young Capet'. The executive Committee of the Commune decided, late in the night, to order the arrest of some fifteen deputies who 'were oppressing' the Convention. And it promised a civic crown to 'the generous citizens who arrest these enemies of the people . . . who have more audacity than Louis XVI himself, since they have put under arrest the best citizens'. It is to be noted that to present the Convention as 'oppressed' by 'a handful of villains', 'enemies of the people', was to make short work of the very delicate problem of the legitimacy of the insurrection. The Commune and the 'best patriots' would represent, on this account, 'the risen people' which recovered its sovereignty but did not rise up against the Convention, the nation's representatives. The Commune was acting only to 'deliver the Convention from the oppression' under which the 'conspirators are keeping it'. Another effort of the Commune, the most desperate, perhaps, for which the rough draft of a proclamation of its executive Committee is evidence, is quoted by Courtois: 'The people is warned that a patrol sent by the foreign party which dominates the Committee of Public Safety presented itself at the Temple, in order to free the vile offspring of Capet; the patrol was arrested and the Council has had the Capets immolated.' Is this a distorted echo of the rumours which were exciting the street, as the Committees had in fact sent an armed force to protect the Temple? Or a sign of the panic breaking out in the last hours of the Commune, when, after midnight, the Place de Grève became increasingly empty, and the last companies of artillery began to leave? Whatever was the case with these proclamations and their actual circulation, they could only contribute to the general confusion. The rumours joined and became all merged together in a single rumour according to which the royalists were stirring and wished to liberate the 'vile offspring'.

The rumour was at full force on 10 Thermidor, in the early morning, when, after the capture of the Maison Commune, Robespierre and the other deputies 'declared traitors to the *patrie*' were transferred to the chamber of the Committee of Public Safety, adjoining the one where the Convention was in permanent session. It could be said that we are present at the return of the wave: the rumour, now swollen, comes back to its point of departure. The Convention at last possessed material proof of the royal plot hatched at the Maison Commune: someone brought along 'the registers of the Commune and the seal of the conspirators on which has been engraved just recently a fleur-de-lis and this seal was on the desk of the Commune'. Let us remember that the different versions of the report of the session diverge on one precise point: who brought along this 'infamous seal'? 'Citizens from the Gravilliers *section*'? 'The magistrate from the Gravilliers *section*'? 'A

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deputation of commissioners from the *sections*? ‘A magistrate appointed by the representatives to search the Maison Commune’? Whoever it was, several deputies shouted out that they had in fact seen this fleur-de-lis seal. Having obtained this corroboration, the commentaries set off at a good pace. Among the deputies and, certainly, in the galleries, the story was told that ‘Robespierre had thoughts of marriage with the daughter of Louis XVI, that he wanted to re-establish Capet’s son on the throne’ and this gossip ‘was on everybody’s mind’ (according to Barras who reports it in his *Mémoires*, but adds, nevertheless, that ‘personally he gave no credence to these allegations’; we shall have to return to his testimony). Entirely absorbed in savouring the victory, they let themselves go; insults were now added to the rumours which circulated all night long. Someone announced to the Convention that ‘the cowardly Robespierre is here’ and asked if they wished to see him. The response was indignant.

To bring into the heart of the Convention the body of a man covered with every crime, would be to remove from this beautiful day all the glory it deserves. The body of a tyrant can bring nothing but pestilence; the place marked out for him and his accomplices is the Place de la Révolution. The two Committees must take the measures necessary for the sword of the law to strike them without delay.

Thuriot, who raged in this manner, would not fail to produce full particulars of these ‘crimes’. His opportunity was to come some hours later through Fouquier-Tinville who, pedantic legalist that he was, raised a thorny problem at the Convention. Before proceeding to the execution of the outlawed rebels, it was necessary to establish their identity before municipal officers of their commune; now, it turns out that these officers were themselves outside the law . . . Thuriot, who was presiding over the meeting, disdainfully removed the difficulty:

The Convention has demanded the swiftest death for the plotters. It is too long to wait, for the Committees to make their report and the traitors to mount the scaffold. We are so fully informed of the wickedness of our enemies, *that we know that Robespierre was in a position to have himself proclaimed king in Lyon and in other communes of the Republic.*

The most significant evidence of the spread of the tale, and certainly the most dramatic, does not, however, come from the chamber of the Convention, but from the Committee of Public Safety where Robespierre was stretched out on a table. A full retinue had accompanied his transfer; a crowd pressed to see him. Someone lifted his arm in order to examine his blood-stained face; the insults never ceased. Among these insults the rumour kept recurring, like a refrain. *Isn’t he a handsome king?; Sire, your majesty suffers; I have to tell you the truth: ‘you properly deceived me, you scoundrel’; stand back so that these men* [Saint-Just, Dumas, Payan who



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had just been brought in] *may see their king asleep on a table just like a man*'. To staunch the blood which filled his mouth, Robespierre made use of a little white leather bag, on which were the words 'At the Grand Monarque, Lecourt, sword-smith to the King and his armies, Rue Saint-Honoré'. Was he given this pistol bag by chance or from derision? Difficult to know, but the sign of the vendor provoked insults on 'the outcome his ambition had chosen'. Before his transfer to the Conciergerie, a surgeon, while dressing the broken jaw, placed a bandage over Robespierre's head; at this moment the sarcastic comments recommenced: *Look, his majesty receives a diadem ...*<sup>5</sup>

So Guittard's text, with which we opened this dossier, brings together several variants of the tale which were circulating on the day after 9 Thermidor. Taken up again and embellished, the tale was to be reused to consolidate the victory: first of all on the symbolic level, by the stage management of the execution of Robespierre and his accomplices. The Convention enthusiastically decided to move the guillotine from the Place du Trône Renversé (by the Vincennes gate) to the Place de la Révolution, the symbolic site of the death of the 'last tyrant'. The carts, setting out from the Conciergerie, had to cross the centre of the town. Moreover there were rumours that the remains of those executed had been thrown into the grave where the bodies of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette had been buried, and which had been specially reopened on this exceptional occasion. Barras claimed the honour of this initiative. To be sure, his memoirs, written under the Restoration, abound with boasting and tall stories. Let us recall, however, just for the interest of this tale, a macabre anecdote that he relates in his usual manner, putting himself forward and adding lugubriousness to its picturesque quality. 'Citizen Sanson, the executioner himself', had approached him 'respectfully, his hat removed and very humble: "Where shall we put the bodies, citizen representative?" "Let them be thrown into Capet's grave", I replied irritably. "Louis XVI was worth more than they. It

<sup>5</sup> The documents and works most useful for following the versions and the progress of the tale on 9 and 10 Thermidor are these: *Archives parlementaires*, Paris, 1982, vol. 93 (remarkable edition of Françoise Brunel, who includes the different versions of the accounts of the sessions of the Convention); C. Duval, *Projet du procès-verbal des séances des 9, 10 et 11 thermidor*, Paris, Year II (text not approved by the Convention); hearings of the sections in: E.B. Courtois, *Rapport fait au nom des Comités de salut public et de la sûreté générale sur les événements du 9 thermidor, an II*, Paris, Year III; G. Walter, *La Conjuration du neuf thermidor*, Paris, 1974; Ph. Buonarotti, *Conspiration pour l'égalité dite de Babeuf*, Paris, 1830, vol. 1; A. Mathiez, 'La Politique de Robespierre et le 9 thermidor expliqués par Buonarotti', *Annales révolutionnaires*, 1910; Guyot, *Relation sur le 9 thermidor*, AN F<sup>7</sup> 4432; *Faits recueillis aux derniers instants de Robespierre et de sa faction dans la nuit du 9 et 10 thermidor*, Paris, Year II, BN Lb<sup>41</sup> 1149; *Courrier républicain*, issues of 12 to 30 Thermidor; Barras, *Mémoires*, Paris, 1895, vol. 1; A. Mathiez, *Autour de Robespierre*, Paris, 1957; P. Sainte-Claire Deville, *La Commune de l'an II*, Paris, 1946.

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will be more royalty for Robespierre, since it appears that he had a taste for it.”<sup>6</sup>

Barère, in his report presented on 10 Thermidor in the name of the two Committees, provided the official version of events. The rumours of the day before are found there as so many confirmed facts: the fleur-de-lis seal seized at the Commune; the mysterious individuals who turned up at the Temple. He also announced new revelations, which would not be slow in coming, about the plans of the conspirators. Hence the energetic security measures taken by the Committees: ‘The Temple is guarded with care, as well as the Conciergerie; the same interest calls the people to guard them.’ He did not go so far however as to take responsibility for the tale of the marriage, either planned or carried out, between Robespierre and the daughter of Louis XVI. The space granted in the report to the ‘royalist aims’ of Robespierre was in fact quite limited. The tone was, above all, one of reassurance and the emphasis was placed on the happy outcome of events, on the excellent state of the *sections* and public morale, and on the devotion of the entire people to the Convention.

The event that is the reference-point is not 21 January, but 31 May: ‘On 31 May, the people carried out its revolution; on 9 Thermidor, the Convention carried out its own; liberty has applauded both equally.’ What brings together and unites all ‘tyrants’, old and new, is loathing of both liberty and the people. ‘May this dreadful era, with its new tyrants, more dangerous than those crowned by fanaticism and servitude, be the last storm of the revolution.’<sup>7</sup>

It was Collot d’Herbois and Billaud-Varenne who took it upon themselves to produce new revelations ‘about the plan of the conspirators, who were led by Robespierre’. They did so at the Jacobin Club. On the night of 9 to 10 Thermidor, the Jacobins held a session even more inflamed than usual, and sent unanimous messages of solidarity to the Commune. Their assembly was broken up by members of the National Guard faithful to the Convention. Reassembling two days later, the Jacobins, again unanimously, affirmed their solidarity with the Convention and their outrage against the ‘conspirators’, the ‘oppressors of the people’ who had deceived them. With amazement they learned ‘a few details relating to the conspiracy’ delivered in turns by Collot and Billaud. ‘The result is that this monster [Robespierre] in concert with Saint-Just and Couthon would share the empire between themselves. Antony Couthon would rule the Midi, *Lepidus*

<sup>6</sup> Barras, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, pp. 199–200.

<sup>7</sup> *Moniteur*, reprinted Paris, 1858–63, vol. 21, pp. 346–7. Henceforth we refer to this edition, by volume number.