1. Nomenclature: Naming a Difficult Past after 9 Thermidor

Published by

Steinberg, Ronen.
The Afterlives of the Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Postrevolutionary France.


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On August 28, 1794, precisely one month after the execution of Robespierre, the Thermidorian leader Jean-Lambert Tallien delivered a seminal speech in the National Convention on the future of the revolutionary government in France. There had been much uncertainty since the events of 9 Thermidor. On the one hand, there was little doubt that the repression, which had characterized the previous months, was being relaxed. In the time that had passed since those events, the revolutionary government abolished repressive laws, relaxed censorship, and began the mass release of prisoners. According to the journalist Jean-Joseph Dussault, the gates of the prisons were not so much opened as “torn off their hinges.” The playwright Georges Duval described in his memoirs the revival of Parisian night life after a year of Jacobin austerity: “From every corner of the Capital, the joyous sounds of the clarinet, the violin, the tambourine, and the flute call on passersby to the dance halls.” On the other hand, it was far from clear that the dangers of the Terror were over. Two days before Tallien delivered his speech, his former secretary, Méhée de la Touche, published a pamphlet titled La queue de Robespierre. The pamphlet was a diatribe against the Montagnards, but its title became a popular catchphrase of the period, warning readers that they must remain vigilant against “Robespierre’s Tail,” that is, those who would revive the Terror. Officially, the government was still revolutionary, and the
Republic was in a state of emergency. It was time then, declared Tallien, to put an end to “this state of oscillation we have been living in for a month now.”

To end the instability, one had to define the present moment, and to define the present moment, one had to define the Reign of Terror. The Terror, according to Tallien, was a political system based on the principle of fear. “The art of Terror,” he said, “consists in setting a trap for every step, a spy in every home, a traitor in every family.” The regime must know how to use the public death of the few to terrify the many. Executions had to be spectacular, even theatrical, in order to make a lasting impression on the spectators. The goal was not to eliminate the enemies of the Revolution but to break their will to resist. To be effective, the Terror had to be unpredictable and self-expanding. “One achieves nothing by having cut off twenty heads yesterday if one is not prepared to cut off thirty heads today, and sixty tomorrow.” This method of governing, according to Tallien, split society in two: “those who are afraid, and those who make others afraid.” So unique was this system of power, that Tallien used a new word—terrorisme—to describe it.

This was the birth of the modern definition of terrorism. Historians of political violence point routinely to the French Revolution as the first time that terror was used systematically and deliberately to create a new and better social order. Scholars, philosophers, and revolutionaries have been arguing since the late eighteenth century about the relationship between the violent overthrow of the Old Regime and the emergence of the new one. The terms used during the Revolution to describe these forms of political violence—terreur, système de terreur, système de la terreur, terrorisme, and the derivative terroriste—meant many different things, but as Annie Jourdan has argued recently, they constituted, first and foremost, “a rhetorical strategy for intimidating or delegitimating an adversary.”

But the Reign of Terror was something else as well: a difficult past. Tallien introduced this problem early in his address. “The shadow of Robespierre,” he said, “still hovers over the Republic; the minds that have been divided for so long and agitated so violently . . . have not yet been reconciled.” The Terror, in other words, may have ended, but its effects were present. Tallien described these effects explicitly in his speech. “The Terror,” he stated, “produced a habitual trembling; an external trembling that affects the most hidden fibers, that degrades man and likens him to a beast.” The experience of Terror had a negative impact on the physical, psychological, and mental well-being of those who went through it, resulting in “a real disorganization of the mind. . . . An extreme affliction.” These effects were not limited to individual psyches; they were collective as well. The Terror, Tallien exclaimed, “de-fraternizes, demoralizes, and de-socializes.” In a language that traversed the domains of
political analysis and medical diagnosis, and that brings to mind modern definitions of PTSD, Tallien named the Terror a difficult past; that is, a destructive episode that was over, but not gone.\textsuperscript{13}

This chapter is about the construction of the Terror as a difficult past after 9 Thermidor. The narratives about the Terror that emerged after the fall of Robespierre are usually seen as part of the Thermidorian Reaction; that is, as a political tactic designed to delegitimize the previous regime and to legitimize the current one. This is undoubtedly true, but as this chapter tries to show, there is more to it than that. Representations of revolutionary violence that were produced after 9 Thermidor were not only part of a political reaction but also the result of much broader processes. Secularization and the rise of the public sphere—developments that predate the Revolution—transformed European attitudes to cataclysmic events. Natural disasters and mass violence came to be seen less as manifestations of divine will and more as social and political problems. The Revolution accelerated and inflected these changes. Specifically, the Revolution opened up a debate about the relationship between violence and the social order. Violence came to be seen as the guarantor of the new world the revolutionaries were trying to create, and, at the same time, as its very undoing. Representations of the Terror after the fall of Robespierre displayed a telling ambivalence. On the one hand, revolutionary leaders, writers, and ordinary citizens proclaimed repeatedly that the Terror had ended, and that the violence of Year II was a thing of the past. On the other hand, the texts that they produced often included the acknowledgment, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, that this was a past that could not be laid to rest so easily; that its traces were all around, in the landscape and in the minds of people. This chapter situates these iterations in the context of changing attitudes to catastrophic events, as well as in the new understandings of the relationship between violence and the social order that emerged from the Revolution. Ultimately, it argues that the construction of the Terror as a difficult past after 9 Thermidor was rooted in a semiotic crisis created by the Revolution; that is, the increasing difficulty of reading and interpreting the social world in the context of the tumultuous events that unfolded from the storming of the Bastille.

**Attitudes to Cataclysmic Events on the Eve of the French Revolution**

Massacres, atrocities, disasters, wars, famine, and political upheaval: this litany of calamities was part and parcel of the collective memory of European
men and women on the eve of the French Revolution. Historians of Europe have shown that there was a steady decline in the incidence of violence in everyday life between the early modern and modern periods. The agricultural revolution of the eighteenth century, the beginnings of industrialization, and the ongoing imposition of judicial order by ever stronger centralized states meant that increasing numbers of people had access to more and better food and fewer chances of meeting a violent death. Life, generally speaking, was becoming safer. Yet Europeans did not need to look far for reminders that dangers abounded. The Thirty Years War (1618–1648) had left an imprint of death and destruction on European culture. The Enlightenment emerged, at least in part, as a reaction to the religious violence of the preceding century. Incessant warfare continued throughout the period, from the War of the Spanish Succession at the beginning of the century (1701–1713) to the War of the Austrian Succession in its middle (1740–1748.) The Seven Years War alone (1756–1763) left over a million combatants dead, although most of them lay buried across the Atlantic. Apart from war, the eighteenth century was also a period of extensive natural disasters. The Lisbon Earthquake (1755) in particular left a lasting impression on Europeans, though the number of people killed in it was much lower than the number of people killed as a result of war. The eighteenth century, writes the philosopher Susan Neiman, “used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today.”

Collective attitudes toward cataclysmic events changed in the transition from the early modern to the modern period mainly because of two developments: secularization, and the emergence of the public sphere. Secularization is a controversial concept. In its classic formulation, it refers to the growing rationalization and declining religiosity of the modern world. One of the major results of the Enlightenment, according to this view, was the gradual replacement of belief with scientific understanding. The sociologist Max Weber referred to this transition to modernity as the “disenchantment” of the world. This view of secularization has come under increasing criticism in recent decades. Religion, scholars point out, has not faded from modern life. The relationship between science and faith, Enlightenment and religion, was never as antagonistic as the narrative of secularization would have it. Instead, what has emerged is a more complex set of accommodations, whereby church and secular society adapt to each other.

In the case of French history, the critique of secularization has yielded a more nuanced understanding of the changing place of religion in everyday life. The Enlightenment had its religious dimensions, and most of the philosophes that were identified with it held on to religious belief. A majority of the population clung to Catholic rituals even after the aggressive dechristian-
izing campaigns of the French Revolution. *Laïcité*, the French version of secularization, emerged in the nineteenth century in an effort to codify the relationship between state and church, but that does not mean that religious faith was disappearing from the lives of French men and women. Nevertheless, it remains clear that the transition from the early modern to the modern periods entailed a profound transformation of the place of religion in everyday life. Perhaps it is best to understand secularization as a change in the degree to which people possess a sense of existential security, “that is, the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted.”

What does all this have to do with changing attitudes to cataclysmic events in the period leading up to the French Revolution? As life in Europe became increasingly safer, religious explanations for massive destruction became less common or less appealing. Narratives written in the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre (1572) show that people at the time made sense of the carnage mostly by referring to divine will. Most interpretations of the event situated it in the context of the great cataclysms mentioned in the Bible: the deluge, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Babylonian exile—all evidence of God’s anger. In contrast, authorities turned to science in order to make sense of disaster after the Lisbon Earthquake. The Portuguese secretary of state, the marquis of Pombal, distributed a questionnaire to the parish priests of the country in 1756, but, tellingly, the questions were mostly scientific in nature, marking a “repudiation of those who viewed the earthquake primarily as an act of God.”

Although some French writers did interpret the violence of the Revolution from a religious perspective, theological explanations were becoming less and less persuasive by the late eighteenth century. This “secularization of catastrophe” matters for the aftermath of the Terror because it means that those who sought to make sense of revolutionary violence after 9 Thermidor had to look less in the realm of divine will and more in the realm of human action. In this context, the bloodshed of the Revolution became a political rather than a theological problem. This politicization of cataclysmic events would have all kinds of implications for questions of retribution, redress, and memory; implications that will be explored more fully in the following chapters.

The second development that transformed how Europeans approached cataclysmic events was the emergence of the public sphere. Here too there is considerable disagreement on what this term means and what it implies for our understanding of the past. It was coined by the German theorist Jürgen Habermas, who used it to describe a new kind of collectivity that came into being in eighteenth-century Europe. The public sphere marked an area of
social life where literate individuals, mostly bourgeois men, entered into critical debate with each other, relying only on their reason. At first the debates were mostly about literature. But as they turned from aesthetics to politics, the public sphere became an area of opposition to the state, an autonomous region, separate from the court or the home, where the status quo could be questioned in relative freedom. Habermas argued that the public sphere took shape through various social institutions, such as the literary salons of eighteenth-century Paris, the coffeehouses of eighteenth-century London, and “everywhere,” thanks to the printing press. In France, according to Habermas, the public sphere assumed its full political function after the publication of the state budget by the minister of finance, Jacques Necker, in 1781. The publication of the Compte Rendu, which made the dire fiscal situation of the monarchy clear, caused such a stir that, from that moment on, “the public sphere in the political realm . . . could no longer be effectively put out of commission.”

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has had a tremendous impact on the historiography of the French Revolution. From literary salons to courtroom dramas, from medical advertisements to restaurants, historians have used it to illuminate the emergence of new arenas of contestation in Old Regime France, where notions of self, society, and the relationship between them were refashioned, sometimes in radical ways. The concept and its historiographical uses have also been criticized roundly as a fantasy of egalitarian, democratic, and rational communication; a fantasy that, needless to say, never had its corollary on the ground. Perhaps the public sphere is best understood as a metaphor, which brings together several processes in one iconic image: the rise of literacy, the expansion of the press, the growth of capitalism, and the emergence of a new social imaginary.

These processes changed how Europeans experienced cataclysmic events. The early modern press circulated stories of violence, crime, and disasters in a variety of ways. Criminal tribunals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries published detailed accounts of the cases they were trying, usually in the form of posters or broadsheets. Sensationalized accounts, featuring glorified outlaws and smugglers, captured the imagination of French men and women in the bibliothèque bleue, a series of cheap pamphlets and books that were sold in villages and towns by traveling peddlers of literature, the colporteurs. News spread faster and to more readers, creating a sense of contemporaneity; that is, the perception shared by more and more people of experiencing a particular event at the same time, even from a great distance. Rates of literacy were not an impediment to the dissemination of printed content. In seventeenth-century France, about 29 percent of men and 14 percent of women were able to sign their names on official documents. By the late eighteenth century, this
figure rose to 48 percent for men and 27 percent for women. But even those who could not read had access to printed information. Literate members of rural communities would read the news to others while working in the field. In Paris, people could pay to have the news read out loud to them. The circulation of crime stories created a sense that danger was all around, even though the actual incidence of everyday violence was declining.

The rise of the public sphere, with its intimate ties to reading and writing, changed the relationship between representation and reality, words and things. As visual and verbal representations circulated through society in growing numbers and frequencies, so the awareness of their power to shape public perceptions grew among those who produced them and, among those who consumed them, an increasing concern over their ability to manipulate people. An anonymous pamphlet published at the outbreak of the French Revolution illustrates the point. The pamphlet, titled On the Means to Communicate Immediately with the People, proposed a variety of machines that would make it possible to share the deliberations of the newly formed National Assembly with a large population. These included a giant megaphone or a mobile sonic projector for transmitting information. That the anonymous author could imagine the means to communicate to a mass audience long before the technological capabilities to do so existed attests to what Lynn Hunt has referred to as the increasing visibility of society at the time of the Revolution.

More than 1,300 newspapers came into being between 1789 and 1799. The historian Jeremy Popkin described this prodigious output as “the collective creation of a society searching for new ways to govern itself.”

Secularization and the rise of the public sphere thus changed how Europeans processed and responded to cataclysmic events. As the place of religion in everyday life was transformed, so debates about the roots and consequences of massive destruction had less to do with divine will and more to do with human action. The emergence of the public as an arena of contestation led to a growing recognition of the power of words to incite discord, but also to end it. Violence and its effects on society became subjects of public debate.

The Debate on Violence and Society during the French Revolution

The French Revolution is inseparable from violence. From the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to Napoleon’s rise to power in the late 1790s, most of its defining moments featured riots, insurrections, military exploits, massacres, executions, or assassinations. The seizure of the Bastille was a violent affair
that left more than a hundred people dead. It was only after this that the press began to define what was happening in France as a revolution.\textsuperscript{42} The assassination of Jean-Paul Marat in July 1793 was a major catalyst for the Terror.\textsuperscript{43} This does not mean, however, that we have to endorse Simon Schama’s damning verdict that “in some depressingly, unavoidable sense, violence was the Revolution itself.”\textsuperscript{44} As Micah Alpaugh has shown in a recent study of political demonstrations in Paris during the Revolution, only 7 percent of these gatherings became violent. For the most part, Parisians engaged in politics nonviolently, even taking special care to avoid escalation.\textsuperscript{45} The Revolution was not violent alone, but violence was inherent to it, an essential feature that made it what it was. Following it, the adjectives “memorable and violent” appeared in the \textit{Dictionnaire de l’Académie française}’s definition of the word \textit{révolution}.\textsuperscript{46} All along the revolutionary decade, violence was “both a reality and a topic of passionate discussion.”\textsuperscript{47}

Much of this discussion focused on popular violence. The journalist Elysée Loustalot left memorable descriptions of several instances early on in the Revolution, when lynching mobs killed noblemen and paraded their severed heads around Paris. Describing the fate of Bertier de Sauvigny, the royal \textit{intendant} of Paris, Loustalot wrote how the crowd tore his “heart from its palpitating entrails.”\textsuperscript{48} Edmund Burke described how the Palace of Versailles had been left “swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses” after the October Days.\textsuperscript{49} Graphic descriptions of this sort were often hyperbolic. The October Days, for example, were violent, but they hardly left the palace “strewed with scattered limbs.” All told, the crowd killed two guardsmen. Yet this hyperbole was indicative of changing sensibilities. According to Alain Corbin, scenes of cruelty and carnage were associated with religious ritual and the sacred in the early modern period, but this association was severed in the eighteenth century, and consequently, massacre became intolerable, an outrage against public decency. It became a mark of social distinction to express horror in the face of such violence. During the Revolution, “murder and desecration by angry mobs horrified sensitive souls desperate to make sense of the sudden outbreak of blind, anonymous violence in a society suddenly deprived of its key symbols.”\textsuperscript{50}

The instances of lynching early in the Revolution gave rise to debates about the relationship between popular violence and the creation of a new social order. On the one hand, the violence of the crowd was seen as legitimate. It was an expression of the popular will. As such, it had a constructive, even foundational, capacity. The people’s fury could cleanse the nascent Republic of impure elements. Defending the lynching of Bertier, the otherwise moderate deputy of the Third Estate Antoine Barnave wondered aloud whether the
blood that had just been spilled was so pure. Following the September Massacres, Tallien wrote that these were horrific events—a sentiment shared by the majority of revolutionaries—but that “in a time of revolution and disturbance, it is necessary to throw a veil” over them. Popular violence in short was justified as part of the collateral damage of the Revolution and as a necessary element in the regeneration of the French people. On the other hand, popular violence was unpredictable, uncontrollable, sliding all too easily into outright criminality. In this sense, it had a destructive capacity that threatened to rip the delicate fabric of society apart. Faced with popular violence, the revolutionaries found themselves in a bind. They knew that the crowd’s spontaneous action had often served their cause, but they also knew it could end in a bloody cycle that would engulf the entire revolutionary project.

The ambivalence of the revolutionaries toward popular violence was also a matter of temperament. Most revolutionary leaders, after all, were bourgeois men. They spoke of le peuple incessantly, but they were repulsed by what they saw as its ignorance, its lack of refinement. Jérome Pétion, the future mayor of Paris, acknowledged the usefulness of popular riots in 1791. “There are insurrections,” he wrote, “that I cannot condemn, for they are useful to public safety, or they are ones where the people shows itself in all its majesty.” “But,” he continued, “calm energy suits me better. . . . I abhor excess. Turmoil and disorder dishonor the people and show it to be unfit for liberty.” This attitude expressed itself also in how revolutionary legislators viewed the participation of women in urban riots. Women took an active part in many of the revolutionary journées. They did not shy away from violence, whether in the form of the bagarre—street brawls—or as leaders of the crowd, as was the case in the October Days. Revolutionary leaders tended to extoll the republican virtues of these women, but at the same time they were uncomfortable with the implications of such participation for the traditional role of women in the family. Revolutionary leaders praised the spontaneous actions of the people and of the women among them, but at the same time they were terrified of the inherent uncontrollability of both groups, their inability to be governed.

The revolutionaries did not argue only about popular violence, but also about the state’s right to execute its citizens. In 1791, the National Assembly spent several days debating the abolition of the death penalty. Those who argued that the death penalty should be maintained believed that the state had both the right and the duty to sentence certain people to death. A citizen who has taken the life of another, so the argument went, excluded himself or herself from the social contract. He or she had to pay with their own life to maintain the stability of the social order. “The death penalty is the fundamental basis of all political aggregation,” argued the deputy Jean-Antelme Brillat-Savarin,
who would go on to win fame as a pioneer of modern gastronomy. Executions had to be dramatic and spectacular so as to deter future criminals. “It is extremely important,” claimed the deputy Joseph Golvan Thouault de la Boverie, “that a man, exposed to all the passions of humanity, returns home after an execution with his heart penetrated by terror and dread.”

Those who argued for the abolition of the death penalty maintained that it was both inhumane and ineffectual. Drawing on the ideas of the Italian philosophe Cesare Beccaria, whose *Treatise on Crime and Punishments* (1764) had a tremendous impact on judicial reform in Europe, the deputy and magistrate Adrien Duport argued that there was a general tendency to overestimate the influence of the law on human behavior. Education, the inculcation of proper values and sentiments, was a better way of preventing future crimes. “The sight of spilled blood,” Duport added, “encourages crime.” Maximilien Robespierre delivered one of the most eloquent arguments against the death penalty. He claimed that society had neither right nor reason to condemn an individual to death. Once the person in question had been detained, and no longer presented a threat to society, what reason could there be to kill him, except for vengeance? Robespierre believed that shame would be a much more useful deterrent. Executions were nothing but “juridical murder,” and an affront to public decency. The primary duty of legislators was to shape public mores, but violent spectacles corrupt them. If the law enables “cruel scenes and corpses murdered by torture before the eyes of the people . . . it will distort notions of justice and injustice in the hearts of the citizens.”

The death penalty was maintained eventually, but this debate illustrates to what extent the Revolution opened up fundamental questions about the relationship between violence and the social order. According to the historian Paul Friedland, the debate on the death penalty was a laboratory of sorts, where different conceptions of society and politics were brought to light and into conflict with each other. In this debate, Friedland wrote, “we can witness radical historical shifts in a kind of slow motion, as individuals struggled to balance their desire for change with long-held preconceptions about the nature of punishment.” The revolutionary attitude toward violence was ambivalent at its core. On the one hand, violence and force were necessary to implement laws. And popular violence often saved the revolutionaries from their own faint-heartedness. On the other hand, violence unleashed a dynamic that was unpredictable and uncontrollable. The sight of spilled blood had a barbarizing effect on the mores of the people. Revolutionary violence was both necessary and unwelcome, both the guarantor of the new social order the revolutionaries were trying to create and its very undoing.
From the Foundation of a New Society to a Difficult Past

The attitudes of Europeans toward mass violence and natural disasters changed in the decades before the French Revolution. Much of this change had to do with sensibilities. To be horrified by massacre became a sign of a sensitive soul and a mark of social distinction. The Revolution opened up a debate about the relationship between violence and the social order. The revolutionaries were horrified by popular violence and at the same time they viewed it as necessary, hence legitimate. The construction of the Terror as a difficult past after 9 Thermidor was rooted in these broader developments. As Alain Corbin put it, “After Thermidor, the new sensibility began to take hold. In retrospect, people began to describe the violent mobs of years past as ‘cannibals.’ Tales of bloodthirsty violence began to appear in the summer of 1794.” The outpouring of these tales, according to Corbin, “would leave indelible traces on the national memory.”

The construction of the Terror as a difficult past entailed a transformation in its meaning from a means to create a new order to an event of mass violence that one had to come to terms with. It is difficult to talk of a unitary concept of terror during the French Revolution. The term meant different things to different people, and it was used for various purposes. In June 1793, for example, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, who would go on to become Robespierre’s right-hand man in the Committee of Public Safety, accused the Girondins of having created a “system of terror” to encourage the hatred of Paris in the provinces. After the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, whose famous newspaper L’ami du peuple became the most influential platform for the sansculottes, numerous popular societies demanded that the government turn to terror in order to vanquish the enemies of the Revolution. Thus, a day after the assassination, a political club in Paris assured the Convention that “our calm and the force of our union will terrorize tyrants.” The editors of another periodical warned their readers that “it is only by striking the soul of traitors with terror that you will have assured the independence of the fatherland.” But the clearest articulation of the concept of revolutionary Terror, or at least the most famous one, was delivered by Robespierre in February 1794, when the repression was well under way. Terror, according to Robespierre, was necessary in order to create a republic of virtue. The violence employed by the revolutionary government was necessary not only in order to break the will of counterrevolutionaries, but also in order to create a new moral order. Robespierre described this moral order as a utopia: “We want to substitute...
morality for egoism, probity for honor, principles for custom, duty for propriety, the empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion. . . . The greatness of man for the pettiness of the great.”

The Terror, as described by Robespierre, was a transformative experience. It was terrible, to be sure, but the French people would emerge the better for it. Before 9 Thermidor, the Terror was defined in terms of the future it would bring about.

After 9 Thermidor, however, the Terror was defined in terms of its negative impact on the Republic. On 14 Thermidor, Betrand Barère, who had been one of the “twelve who ruled” alongside Robespierre, claimed that the measures employed by the revolutionary government before 9 Thermidor amounted to a “system” that robbed patriots of their “liberty and their trust” in the political project of the Revolution.

He compared Robespierre to Caligula, arguing that the former encouraged the centralization of power “in order to usurp it,” and called on the Convention to “substitute inflexible justice for stupid Terror.”

The Convention heeded the call, at least in part, for in the same session it abrogated the Law of 22 Prairial that had led to a dramatic increase in the rate of executions during the summer of 1794—the so-called Great Terror.

It also decreed the reorganization of the revolutionary tribunal, ordered that an indictment be prepared against its chief prosecutor, Fouquier-Tinville, and began the reform of the revolutionary government, most notably by deciding that from then on four members of the Committee of Public Safety would rotate monthly, a measure that was aimed at ensuring that this body would not be able to assume dictatorial powers again.

The basic elements in the Thermidorian rhetoric about the Reign of Terror were already articulated in these early statements. First, the Terror constituted a system of oppression. It was a mass crime perpetrated intentionally and meticulously against the French people. Lexicometric studies have found a marked increase in the usage of the phrases “the system of Terror” and “the system of the Terror” after 9 Thermidor. Second, the main culprit behind this system of oppression was Robespierre. There was no end to the aspersions cast on l’incorruptible in this moment of the Revolution: Nero, ferocious tiger, bloodthirsty tyrant, monster, Caligula, Catiline.

An advertisement for a new book on Oliver Cromwell noted that “in reading about his life, one would find the same system of oppression operating in the same manner; one would believe oneself to be traversing a history of the present day.” According to Bronislaw Baczko, the impression created by the newspapers, parliamentary records, and pamphlets of the time is that “all of France awoke on 10 Thermidor anti-Robespierrist.” Consequently—this is the third element in the Thermidorian rhetoric about the Terror—the oppression came to an end with the fall of Robespierre. The government remained revolutionary, but
the Thermidorians drew a clear distinction between the regime that had been in place before 9 Thermidor and the regime that came into power since then. The former was identified with vice, crime, and despotism, while the latter was identified with virtue, justice, and liberty. The speech by Tallien, which opened this chapter, ended by declaring that “terror . . . is the most powerful weapon of tyranny, and that justice . . . alone should be the order of the day,” thus establishing an inverse symmetry with the famous call from September 1793 to “make terror the order of the day.”

Of course, this conception of the Terror did not correspond to the realities of Year II. Revolutionary violence was neither as systematic nor as controlled as the Thermidorians would have it. As Jean-Clément Martin pointed out, there was little ideological or political unity in the Reign of Terror. Nor did the repressive measures employed by the Jacobins cease with the downfall of Robespierre. Mette Harder has shown recently that the legislative purge, which had led to the arrest and execution of many members of the Convention, continued well beyond 9 Thermidor.

To paraphrase Annie Jourdan, if the perception of the Terror that most people still hold today is something of a myth, it was the Thermidorians who invented it. They did so for good reasons. Many of the leaders who shaped the Thermidorian rhetoric about the Terror were themselves implicated in the political repression of Year II. The revolutionary career of Jean-Lambert Tallien is a case in point. As a représentant en mission, he oversaw the repression of the federalist revolt in Bordeaux in 1793. As the Terror radicalized, and after his common-law wife Thérésia Cabarrus was arrested, he turned against Robespierre. He was probably among the organizers of the coup on 9 Thermidor, and, subsequently, he reinvented himself as the persecutor of terroristes. By the time he delivered his famous address in August 1794, he was fast emerging as a key leader of the Reaction, “an idol of the Convention.” Tallien and other revolutionary leaders had good reasons to describe the Terror in a way that would minimize their role in it.

The image of the Terror that emerged from Tallien’s address was completely different from the image that emerged from Robespierre’s address several months earlier. In Robespierre’s address, the Terror was defined by the future; in Tallien’s reformulation, it was described as receding into the past. Robespierre’s articulation of the Terror was remarkably abstract. It was theoretically astute, groundbreaking even, but it was devoid of any references to the guillotine, to cadavers, and to prisons; devoid, in short, of any references to the sensory realities of the repression. In contrast, Tallien’s discussion of the Terror was intensely corporeal. It resounded with the smells, sights, and sounds of massive violence: “Death has to be rendered atrocious in order to
spread fear,” he claimed. “At first the idea of hemlock suffices to terrify the imagination; soon it has to be followed by . . . the sight of spilled blood; then the victim must be surrounded by other victims. . . . A man must watch the death of fifty others before he is killed.”81 Finally, the Thermidorian transformation of the meaning of the Terror entailed redefining its relationship to the social order. Tallien implied that all governments rely on fear and violence to a certain extent, or at least on the threat of violence, but whereas legitimate governments target people because of what they do, the Reign of Terror targeted people because of what they are. The actions of legitimate governments produce “potential fear,” which is the consequence of one’s actions, whereas the measures employed by a system of terror result in “incessant torment . . . which establishes itself in the mind in spite of one’s innocence.”82 If Robespierre’s discussion of the Terror focused on its political goals—in a word, regeneration—Tallien’s definition of Terror focused on its emotional effects.83

The Problem of Representing the Violence of the Terror

How could those who had lived through the Terror describe its effects on themselves and on others? How could language capture the physiological and psychological experience of mass violence? This problem was not unique, of course, to the revolutionary era. Violence and language have an uneasy relationship. As Paul Ricoeur argued, they mark each other’s limits; indeed, they are opposites.84 This is captured well in what parents say to children who have been acting out violently: use your words. Periods of political violence are often accompanied by semiotic destabilization. Repressive regimes impact not only people’s lives, but also the social production of meaning. They invent new words that mask the gruesome realities they create, while victims often find themselves in a linguistic crisis of sorts, unable to narrate what they had been through.85

The concern over the instability of language was explicit in the aftermath of the Terror. In September 1794, Michel-Edme Petit, a relatively moderate member of the Convention, argued that those who had been responsible for the violence of Year II “have introduced a great number of new words into language, classifications that they have chosen at their own discretion for men and things, to be hated or loved by a people that has been led astray.”86 Petit proposed to outlaw certain words, such as “Jacobin,” “Montagnard,” or “Muscadin,” because of their propensity to incite discord. The royalist journalist Jean-Gabriel Peltier wrote in 1797 that “when one looks back at all the names
of parties and factions . . . one doubts whether language itself could ever be forgiven for the crimes it had committed.”

To quote the historian Sophia Rosenfeld, after 9 Thermidor the revolutionaries were concerned with “ending the logomachy.”

These misgivings about the precise meaning of words had a direct bearing on the construction of the Terror as a difficult past. Dealing with a difficult past begins by naming it; that is, by transforming a series of chaotic experiences into a narrative that makes sense. This is often a painful process, but it was especially challenging in the context of the revolutionary decade. It was challenging because the Revolution had given rise to a crisis of representation by instituting a new relation to the social world. Society, so to speak, became the ground of meaning instead of religion. The substitution of the social for the divine as the ultimate frame of reference made the process of transforming the experiences of the Terror into a coherent narrative especially difficult because it rendered the meaning of words and of names unstable and uncertain. The Revolution, in other words, constituted a rupture in the symbolic order; that is, the web of customs, institutions, mores, rules, norms, practices, rituals, and traditions within which human beings interpret the world around them. The crisis of meaning that the Revolution engendered made it especially difficult to find the right terms, indeed the right language, to describe the effects of the Terror on self and society.

Consider the following letter, which was sent in February 1795 by an ordinary citizen named Pindray to the Committee of Public Education. The subject of the letter was grammar. Specifically, Pindray had written to complain about some new words that have been introduced during the Revolution. He mentioned two words in particular: 

**burocratie**, spelled thus in the original letter, and **sanguinocratie**. The first word was coined in 1791 to refer to the power of state officials. The second word was coined at some point in 1793 or 1794 to refer to the Reign of Terror. Pindray’s problem was that these compound words mixed stems from two different linguistic origins. The word **burocratie** was derived from the French word **bureau**, meaning “desk or office,” and the Greek suffix **-kratia**, meaning “the power of.” It could thus be translated as “office-power,” or more precisely, “the power of administration.” The second word was derived from the French adjective **sanguin**, meaning bloody, and the same suffix, **-kratia**. It could thus be translated as “the power of blood” or, if one prefers, “bloody power.” In both cases, the stems of these words mixed French (from Latin) and Greek origins. This rendered them linguistically incorrect. Indeed, citizen Pindray found them to be “absolutely barbaric.” If one wanted a new word to designate what he referred to as the “despotism of commissaries,” it should be **graphocratie**, from the Greek word **grafeio**, meaning...
“desk or office.” As for sanguinocratie, the correct word for “the power of blood” would be aimatocratie, from the Greek word for blood, aíma.92

Pindray’s letter is interesting for what it tells us about the difficulty of naming the Terror in its immediate aftermath. There is something misplaced about his linguistic pedantry seven months or so after the fall of Robespierre. It seems wrong to be worried about grammar when the country was reeling from fifteen months of political repression. But the more interesting aspect of the letter is the tension between the two neologisms. The English form of the first word, “bureaucracy,” has become a permanent fixture in our vocabulary. It connotes rules, regularity, predictability, and paperwork: the quiet world of the office that Max Weber identified as the linchpin of modern rationality.93 The second word has all but disappeared from language. There is some evidence that it was fairly familiar at the time of the Revolution: Louis-Sebastien Mercier has an entry on the sanguinocrates in his ethnographic compendium Paris pendant la Révolution.94 The word brings to mind rivers of blood, torn limbs, and the shrieks of the dying; images reminiscent of Phlegethon, the river of boiling souls in Dante’s Inferno.95 Weber’s rationality and Dante’s hell; paperwork and the guillotine; the predictability of office routine and the unpredictability of violence unleashed—the two poles of modern state power.96 Pindray put his finger here, probably without being aware of it, on the crisis of meaning that made it difficult to find terms for the new forms of power that the Revolution hurled onto the surface of social life.

One man who took it upon himself to do just that was the revolutionary journalist Louis-Marie Prudhomme. Prudhomme was the founder of the successful newspaper Révolutions de Paris. As a republican, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution in its early days, but like so many others who had held similar political views, he grew disillusioned as it became more radical and more violent. He was arrested briefly in June 1793. By early 1794 he had had enough: he closed down his paper in February and left Paris with his family. Having kept a low profile for several years, he returned to the capital during the early days of the Directory and tried to revive his journalistic career. It was in that context that he conceived of a new project: an exhaustive catalogue of the Revolution’s crimes. It was a perilous enterprise, or at least it was important for Prudhomme to present it as such. “I am the first,” he stated, “to employ his iron quill with courage in order to trace the deplorable repertoire of all the offenses human perversity is capable of.”97 In an introductory historical essay titled On the Necessity to Make the Crimes of Tyrants Known during Their Reign, Prudhomme provided a long list of regimes that, throughout history, have persecuted, repressed, and killed their own people. These included the “religious tyranny of Moses” and the mass executions ordered by Char-
lemagne, the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, and the expulsion of the Protestants from France. Prudhomme claimed that no one has ever dared to hold those in power accountable for their wrongdoing. “Terror has engulfed the universe. . . . And no one dares reproach the executioners of the human species.” Against this background of silence throughout history, Prudhomme presented his project as speaking truth to power: an epigraph on the frontispiece of the third volume reads simply “I have dared!”

Prudhomme’s project consisted, in its final form, of six volumes and more than five thousand pages. Published as a serial in 1796–1797, it was titled A General and Impartial History of the Errors, Offenses, and Crimes Committed during the French Revolution. It contained a dictionary of the dead, which was a list of the people who had been condemned to death by revolutionary tribunals, including such details as their age, place of residence, occupation, and the nature of the charges against them. The following is a representative entry: “Perrier, widow of Hilaire, age 62, born in Clermont, department of Puy-de-Dome, residing there, a cart-woman condemned to death on 25 Messidor, Year II, as an enemy of the people, for having said that she has been ruined ever since France came to be governed by the race of buggers.” The General History also included Prudhomme’s interpretation of the Revolution, and reports on atrocities, crimes, and various instances of brutality committed between 1787 and 1795. These reports formed the bulk of the project, and they were organized according to the political chronology of the Revolution. So, for example, volume 3 lists crimes that occurred under the Constituent Assembly, whereas volumes 5 and 6 are devoted to crimes that were committed when the National Convention was in power. Prudhomme collected these stories of violence and excess from readers all over the country, and he seems to have published them all, with little to no editorial discretion.

The result is monumental and chaotic; the work is exhaustive and fragmentary at the same time. Historical analysis is interspersed with accounts of graphic violence. Mourning, commemoration, shock, a desire to make sense of a chain of events that seemed to defy reason, and a tinge of self-aggrandizing all operate side by side in Prudhomme’s text. Perhaps because of this, historians of the Revolution have not made much use of it. According to Mona Ozouf, all the basic explanations for the Terror have already been laid out in nuce during the Thermidorian Reaction. The more graphic tales of violence published in the same period are of little use to historians, because their main goal was to scandalize the public, not to explain what had taken place. Ozouf is right that the goal of the more graphic accounts of revolutionary violence was to provoke an emotional response. Prudhomme, for example, stated that he would “set frightening portraits of butchery . . . [before] the reader’s distraught
soul.” But it is unfortunate that the style of the *General History* and other similar texts has led historians to dismiss it. It is precisely this odd combination of the horrific and the analytic, the commemorative and the titillating, the comprehensive and the fragmentary that makes Prudhomme’s text valuable as a historical source. As Joseph Zizek has argued, Prudhomme’s project illuminates a post-Thermidorian dilemma: “What kind of ‘history’ was possible after the Terror?”

Prudhomme certainly believed that his project marked a new way of writing history. He was especially proud of the inclusion of numerous lists in the *General History*: lists of legislators and of laws, of départements and communes, of civil and military courts, nomenclatures, chronological tables, and statistical data. Prudhomme believed that the inclusion of “objective” facts—today, this kind of information would be called raw data—rendered his history scientific. It was also part of his mission as he saw it: to be the voice of a society that had been torn apart by revolutionary violence. “The orphans of a nation that has been buried in a coffin raise their eyes to the heavens and ask, ‘where is the man who would be courageous enough to describe the secret and public crimes of our tyrants’ . . . Well, I shall be that man.” Throughout the book, Prudhomme engaged in numerous instances of naming and shaming public officials for their excess, corruption, and cruelty.

The *General History* also included many images. One of them is an etching that appears in some editions of the work on the cover of the second volume. At the center of the image is a man striking a dramatic pose, his hands stretched, his head turned to his left. He is looking at a group of women and children. The women seem to be weeping, and the children are on their knees in a posture that suggests they are begging or imploring. To his right is a bust with a seated figure holding a spear, and above it another figure that is hovering in the air while lifting some sort of curtain. Some human bodies are lying on the ground, perhaps dead. There seems to be a severed head. A group of men, their arms raised, is fading into the background. Demonic figures of some sort seem to be emerging from, or retreating into, dark clouds. A paragraph on the following page explains the curious image: “Time is lifting the veil of Error, which has covered the statue of Liberty . . . Terror disappears in a chasm; the relatives of Victims demand justice from Posterity; it is promised to them by . . . a friend of Humanity.”

This vignette can be read as a visual representation of a difficult past. It captures the intersection of themes involved in coming to terms with mass violence: history and memory, truth and justice, loss and mourning. It suggests that contemporaries were aware on some level that the Terror had not ended on 9 Thermidor, or at least that its ending was not a simple matter. Allegories
of time, error, and liberty; the Terror fading, becoming part of the past; the victims turning to posterity, that is, to the future, demanding justice; the figure of the man, presumably Prudhomme himself, promising to deliver this to them through his project of listing and naming, calculating, and narrating. Prudhomme’s image represents the notion that although the repression of Year II was over, its repercussions were still being felt all around.

The lists and tables in the *General History* also shed light on the difficulty of representing revolutionary violence after 9 Thermidor. In spite of Prudhomme’s claim that the inclusion of all these lists marked an “absolutely new way” of writing history, there were actually numerous lists published during the Terror. The journalist François-Barnabé Tisset published a list of the cases that were tried in front of the Revolutionary Tribunal in Paris. He titled it *Compte rendu aux sans-culottes* and prefaced it with a sardonic essay in which “Madam Guillotine” herself provides details about those “whom I have so amorously held in my arms and dispatched to the world beyond.” Lists with the names and addresses of legislators were published by the revolutionary government. The Office of the National Estate published lists with the names of those who had been convicted by revolutionary tribunals and whose property now belonged to the nation, including tables enumerating the confiscated...
possessions and their value. During and after the Terror there were numerous lists of victims published outside of France, especially in London, where there had been a significant presence of émigrés. The publication and circulation of such lists in Year II attests to the democratic impulses behind the Terror. Even at the height of the repression, there was a commitment to render the workings of the revolutionary government transparent and accessible to all citizens.

Prudhomme’s fondness for lists was rooted in the political culture of Year II, but by the time the General History was published the context had changed, and with it the meaning of such catalogs. Before 9 Thermidor these various lists reflected the importance of transparency in the political culture of the Revolution. After 9 Thermidor, lists, catalogs, and nomenclatures were used in order to assess the effects of revolutionary violence, and especially the Terror, on society. The Swiss political economist François d’Ivernois, for example, used various mathematical methods to evaluate “the physical and moral depopulation of France” as a result of the revolutionary wars. D’Ivernois estimated that approximately three million people had died as a direct result of the Revolution and noted the “profound impression” made by the “daily executions” during the Terror.

Prudhomme, too, was preoccupied with a general assessment of the damage caused by the violence of the Revolution. In the sixth volume of the General History he inserted a broadsheet titled “A General Table of the Disasters of the French Revolution.” The broadsheet included the number of people who had been killed or who emigrated during the Revolution; the number of towns, villages, and castles destroyed; the number of laws passed; and a numerical assessment of the spoils of the revolutionary wars. According to Prudhomme, the French armies seized 8,900 cannons from enemy hands, as well as 268 thousand shotguns, more than four million pounds of gunpowder, and 334 flags. The broadsheet also listed the number of casualties in the colonies, broken down by race, and “the number of individuals who have committed suicide by hanging, drowning, or throwing themselves out of the window as a result of the Terror,” as well as the number of women who died giving birth prematurely, and the number of individuals “driven mad by the Revolution.” Overall, Prudhomme estimated that more than two million lives had been lost as a direct result of the Revolution, and that the various legislative assemblies had passed about fifteen thousand new laws.

It is difficult, if not downright impossible, to verify Prudhomme’s numbers. He did not provide the sources for his tally, and in any case his project was conceived and carried out in the immediate aftermath of the Terror, when the iron was hot, and outrage took precedence over the cool-headed verification.
Tableau Général

Des désastres de la Révolution Française : des individus qui ont péri ou été mutilés des Villes, Châteaux, Villages qui ont disparu au nom de la religion, de la royauté et de la liberté, à la suite des victoires remportées par les Anglais pendant la Révolution.

<table>
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<th>Quantité</th>
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ASSEMBLÉE CONSTITUANTE

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<td>Assemblée</td>
<td>Constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1er octobre 1792</td>
<td>Convention</td>
<td>Négociation</td>
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CONVENTION NATIONALE

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COLONIES

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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hommes, femmes et enfants noirs et de couleur</td>
<td>2500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villes incendiées</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitations incendiées</td>
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Guerre de la Vendée

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ASSEMBLÉE LEGISlatitive

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Assemblée</td>
<td>Législative</td>
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RéCAPITULATION

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<th>Quantité</th>
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VICTOIRES EMPOISSONNÉES ET ARMÉES FRANÇAISES

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<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantité</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Les victimes des attaques ennemies</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INDIVIDUS qui se sont suicidés, pendus, étranglés ou par les feux, par suite de la terreur | 4000 |

Femmes mortes par suite de coups pratiqués | 3000

Individus déshérités par la révolution | 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantité</th>
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of facts. But the accuracy of Prudhomme’s figures is beside the point. The point, rather, is the particular way he went about classifying and enumerating the consequences of the Terror. In the right-hand bottom section of the broadsheet, in tiny print, there is a list of names. It is titled “A nomenclature of the identifiers to which the French Revolution has given birth, and which have served as an excuse for people to persecute each other.” It is a political taxonomy, listing the names of various groups and factions that appeared and disappeared during the Revolution. Some of these names remain well known today, such as Girondins, Montagnards, or Enragés. Others have faded into obscurity, such as the Démagogues, “the Knights of the Dagger,” or “the Conspiracy of the Red Eggs.”115 The following sequence is especially delightful: “the Patriots; the Patriots par Excellence; the Patriots of the Dauphin Cul-de-Sac; the Patriots more Patriotic than the Patriots.”116 All told, Prudhomme listed 211 names in his political nomenclature.

Prudhomme’s broadsheet makes for a strange set of juxtapositions: the number of suicides alongside the number of seized cannons; the number of women who have died giving birth prematurely alongside the number of chateaus that were burnt down; the number of people of color who were killed in the colonies alongside an exhaustive nomenclature of political factions. It brings to mind the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, the fictitious Chinese encyclopedia created by Jorge Luis Borges, which Michel Foucault quoted as the inspiration for his critique of modern systems of classification, *The Order of Things*.117 In Borges’s fabricated encyclopedia, animals are classified in a way that baffles the modern reader. They are categorized as “a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) suckling pigs, e) mermaids, f) fabulous,” and so on.118 Foucault noted that the striking thing about Borges’s encyclopedia was the impossibility of understanding its logic of classification. It was impossible to understand this logic because the common ground, which made it possible to juxtapose fabulous animals with animals that have been “drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,” has been destroyed, and can only be accessed through excavation.119 For us, the question that arises out of Prudhomme’s table is: Do these things belong together? What is a political nomenclature doing alongside the number of people who have been driven mad by the events of the Revolution? Classification, of course, is not just a representation, or a way of organizing reality; it also constructs the reality it purports to describe. Prudhomme’s project sheds light on the construction of the Terror as a difficult past because its fragmentary nature and the strange system of classification he seems to have employed suggest a social world that has become, in a sense, illegible.
What’s in a Name?

One of the processes that shaped the social world, and at the same time made it difficult to read it during the Revolution, was naming. The revolutionaries named and renamed everything repeatedly and obsessively from the very beginning of the Revolution: people, places, and events. The representatives of the Third Estate in the meeting of the Estates-General renamed themselves the National Assembly in June 1789, thereby claiming their right to speak for all French men and women. The map of France was divided into departments, symmetrical administrative units that were named after rivers or mountains in their respective geographic regions. The concern with nomenclature became more apparent as the Revolution radicalized. Time and space were stamped with a whole new vocabulary. The Republican calendar, adopted in 1793, renamed the days and the months: *primidi*, *duodi*, and *tridi* became the first, second, and third days of the week, respectively. The months of winter were renamed *Brumaire* (October 22 to November 22), from the French *brume* meaning “fog,” and *Nivôse* (December 21 to January 21), from the Latin adjective *nivosus* meaning “snowy.” Three thousand towns and villages changed their name in Year II. The city of Lyon, after being bombed into submission by revolutionary forces, was renamed Ville Affranchie (Liberated City). People renamed themselves or were renamed by others, sometimes against their will. Louis XVI was renamed Louis Capet after his failed attempt to flee France in 1791, signaling that he was to be treated from now on as an ordinary citizen. Numerous children received names drawn from the revolutionary nomenclature: *liberté*, *loi*, *fraternité*. A baby girl born in Épernay two weeks after the Convention adopted the Constitution of 1793 was named Victorine Constitution Liberté Égalité.

Several factors drove the revolutionary preoccupation with names. It was an attempt to impose revolutionary values on the consciousness of contemporaries. The names of the months in the Republican calendar derived from the central place nature held in the political culture of the Revolution. The symmetric division of the map of France inscribed the values of reason and rational planning on the spatial imagination of French citizens. Naming was also driven by ideology. Names that brought to mind the Old Regime were replaced with names that reflected the new political landscape. Thus, Montmartre became Mont-Marat and boys called Louis were renamed Brutus or Spartacus. But names are not just expressions of values or ideological loyalties. They are also coordinates of the social world. They serve to orient oneself in the intricate web of identities, symbols, practices, and spaces that constitute daily interaction. During the Revolution, this web was being
rewoven repeatedly. As Denise Davidson argued, the aftermath of the Revolution saw “conscious and unconscious . . . efforts to find more reliable and stable ways to order and read society.”

The emergence of a new nomenclature marked an effort to stabilize a social reality that was fluctuating in the most extreme ways.

After 9 Thermidor, there was widespread concern with changing or modifying names that reminded one too explicitly of the Terror. A functionary in the National Treasury by the name of Aïgoin sent a petition to the Convention several days after 9 Thermidor. He was asking to change his son’s name. Apparently, he had named his son Robespierre while in the throes of revolutionary enthusiasm, but now, in the new political landscape, he wanted to spare him the burden of being named after “the most frightful, the most dangerous conspirator.”

Children who were born during the Terror and were given names that reflected the ideological preferences of the moment rushed as adults to have their names changed. Thus, Julien Fructidor Brossard had his middle name removed by a formal act, and one “L’aurore de la liberté Dufour” changed his name to the rather more modest Louis Dufour.

In 1797, Jean-Baptist Dauchez, member of the Council of Five Hundred, presented a special report “concerning the deletion of revolutionary first names given to children whose birth was recorded during the Reign of Terror.” Dauchez was a lawyer from Arras, a man of royalist leanings. He had been arrested briefly during the Terror. He was elected to represent Pas-de-Calais in the Council of Five Hundred in 1797 but was removed from office after the coup of 18 Fructidor on account of his royalist sympathies. His interest in the subject of name changes thus had something to do with his politics, but it was also part of a broader concern with nomenclature after 9 Thermidor.

Dauchez recommended that the government authorize parents to change the first name of their children if these names “bring upsetting memories to mind.” He did not specify which names exactly would fit this criterion. It was, he admitted, “a delicate question.” He did, however, specify that this authorization would apply only to children who were born between May 31, 1793, and September 22, 1794. It is an interesting chronology. Dauchez conceded that Terror had been spreading through France before this date but argued that it was only with the purge of the Girondins in May–June 1793 that the Convention itself was “enslaved,” and that the “empire of crime and brigandage” emerged victorious. As for the closing date, he claimed that there was no reason for children born after this date—the first day of Year III—to bear names reminiscent of the times before the fall of Robespierre.

Dauchez’s report implied that the Terror persisted somehow in the names of these children. The report included two stipulations that are especially in-
teresting in this regard. The first stipulation concerned children who had died in the meantime. Dauchez recommended the authorization of posthumous name changes, so as to spare their families the burden of being associated with these difficult memories. The second stipulation concerned parents who did not want to change the names of their children because they remained attached to the political or ideological motivations behind them. In these “interesting cases,” which involved “blind or fanatic revolutionaries,” Dauchez recommended that the children themselves be allowed to apply for a name change, even though some of them were about five or six years old at the time.  

This concern at the highest levels of government to change the first names of children born during the Terror can be read in several ways. It was an act of erasure, aimed at suppressing the memory of the most radical phase of the Revolution. It was a purge, an act of purification, as if the very existence of children whose names were associated with the Terror polluted somehow the social and political environment. It was also a way of coming to terms with a difficult past. After all, “coming to terms” is a phrase that denotes an act of containment; that is, the effort to leave the past behind by, among other things, naming it. The concern with naming and renaming after the Terror was an essential part of ending it, but, by the same token, it implied an acknowledgment that this was an elusive ending, one whose reverberations were bound to be felt for some time to come in the postrevolutionary landscape.

Conclusion

The literary critic Maurice Blanchot wrote once that “the disaster always takes place after having taken place.” He meant by this that a series of occurrences take on the meaning of a catastrophe only after the fact, when they have been named and narrated as such. This, in a sense, is what this chapter has tried to show. The iterations proclaiming the end of the Terror after 9 Thermidor smacked of the lady doth protest too much. On the one hand, the repression of Year II had been relaxed, and the narrative marking the fall of Robespierre as a dramatic turning point—the end of the Terror—crystallized rather swiftly, thanks in no small measure to the efforts of the Thermidorians themselves. On the other hand, the texts from this period that have been examined in this chapter also show an awareness that this was a past that could not so easily be left behind. If Thermidor marked the “ending of the Terror” rather than the end of the Terror—that is, a process rather than an event—it was to be an elusive ending.
This chapter situated this understanding of the Terror as a difficult past in a broad context, beyond the politics of the Thermidorian Reaction. Collective attitudes to mass violence and cataclysmic events have been changing in the transition from the early modern to the modern period. Secularization and the rise of the public sphere, among other processes of change, led to a view of catastrophes as political and social, rather than theological, events, and created new arenas of debate and contestation, where the effects of such events on the social order, as well as on individual psyches, could be discussed in relative freedom from the imposition of the state or the church. For its part, the French Revolution generated debates on the relationship between violence and the social order. The views of violence that emerged from these debates were ambivalent. Violence was seen as necessary for the creation of a new order, and at the same time, as having the potential to be its very undoing. After 9 Thermidor, this ambivalence rendered representations of the violence of the Terror problematic. Prudhomme’s work was an attempt to create an immediate history of this violence, but the textual topography of his book—its fragmentary nature—and the preoccupation with lists and classification, also suggested an inherent difficulty to read the social reality he purported to describe. The naming of the Terror as a difficult past would have profound implications on questions of accountability, redress, and remembrance in postrevolutionary France.