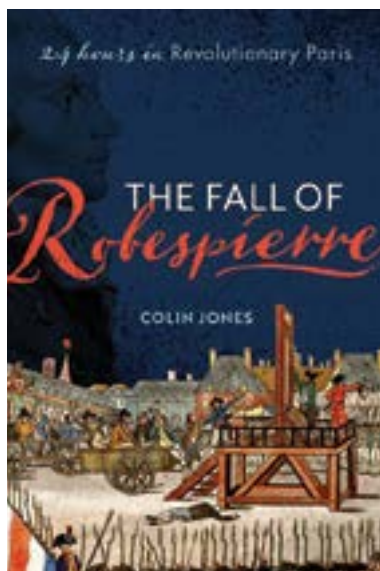


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The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris

By Colin Jones

Oxford University Press

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Reviewed by Pam Cupper,
retired History teacher

The Fall of Robespierre is subtitled '24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris', and that's what it is. There are essentially 24 chapters, one for each hour beginning with midnight on 9 Thermidor Year II and ending with midnight as the day moves to 10 Thermidor. There are additional chapters: an Introduction and Prelude to set the scene, and an Afterword: 9 Thermidor from Afar. But it is the hour-by-hour evolution of the story that is compelling.

Many will be familiar with Colin Jones through his co-authoring with Richard Cobb of the superb *Voices of the French Revolution* (Salem House Publishers, 1988) and perhaps *Paris: Biography of a City* (Penguin, 2004). He's very readable, even for our VCE students, although *The Fall of Robespierre* is too much to ask for any but our most dedicated students. Nevertheless, brief astute quotes from it will add spice and inform teachers' support material for their students.

I would not have appreciated this book quite so much until the past few years. It requires familiarity with the broad history of the French Revolution and Robespierre's role. Having completed my 30-year apprenticeship as a French Revolution student, I can now take on the minutiae of this one momentous day.

Jones uses what he describes as 'the Mercier way': getting up close and drilling down into infinitely small details about the events of those 24 hours. Jones quotes from Louis-Sébastien Mercier's 1798 reflection on the Revolution:

From up close, things are different from when one judges them from afar ... Revolutionary crises are composed of infinitely small things and these form the essential base of all events.

Jones is privileged to be able to apply his 'microscope' to the events of just one day, 9 Thermidor II, or 27 July 1794. As he explains in the Introduction, this 'microscopic, multi-layered' history is only possible 'because archival documentation for the day is quite exceptionally rich', enabling him to access hundreds of 'micro-narratives' from participants and observers of the day's events. Jones writes: 'It would be difficult to think of another day in the whole

of the eighteenth century on which sources are so copious and dense.'

As he points out, a few days after the event the government instructed authorities from each of the 48 Paris sections to gather and submit all details of everything that happened in their section on 8, 9 and 10 Thermidor, no matter how minor it seemed, and to 'be precise on the dates and the hours'. Jones also draws on the many official reports, newspapers, 'literally hundreds of individual police dossiers' and personal memoirs.

When I first opened this book, I was astounded to read in the Prefatory Notes: 'All dialogue is drawn directly from sources: none is invented, and there is a minimum of adaptation.' Having now read the book, I remain in awe of the Paris archives and Jones' achievement.

The hour-by-hour (and often quarter-hour-by-quarter-hour) description of events in one location or another across Paris is helped by a simple map showing most streets and buildings mentioned. Readers can follow Robespierre in his lodgings and his short walk along the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré to the Convention meeting hall, or his final journey to the guillotine. Some minor streets, however, are not marked and I've had to resort to my *Paris Guide Indicateur* to locate them.

Hindsight means we 'know' the simple, popular story of 9 Thermidor: that Convention deputies, fearing for their lives and sickened by so much bloodshed, turned on Robespierre and his followers. This book reveals that the outcome of that day was anything but inevitable, nor was it simple. It could have gone either way: it was not until midday that 'the spell is broken' and the 'magic by which Robespierre, through sheer power

of personality, eloquence, and fear, has kept the Convention docile and respectful seems to be vanishing before the eyes of the deputies’.

If you ever doubted the relevance of history to our own era, look no further than Robespierre railing against ‘false news’, on 9 Thermidor urging ‘the arrest of key journalists so as to control the narrative of the day’, or the Convention’s victory ‘allowing the Convention’s narrative to hit news venues and claim legitimacy’. By late that day, ‘people power’ had come down on the side of the Convention and against the Robespierrists, and

Parisians scrambled to be on the winning side. The final moments on the losing side reminded me of nothing so much as frenzied Nazi leaders and SS officers at the end of April 1945: after midnight on 10 Thermidor, the Convention’s forces moved in to capture the few remaining supporters of Robespierre, who were desperately removing ‘the tricolour sash that now marked them out’, or the small group that holed up in a garret for days, living on ‘stagnant water from an abandoned wooden clog’.

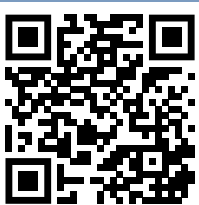
At 456 pages plus detailed notes, a ‘List of Characters’ and ‘Notes on Sources’, this is not a casual read. Nor are there many illustrations: most are scans of various primary sources Jones used—still fascinating to view, all the more so if you read French. I couldn’t put down this book, especially around midday when, for the first time, it became clear that Robespierre’s spell was broken.

Thus book is a must-have for teachers of the French Revolution.

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