Memories of Fear in the Early French Revolution

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“Be afraid. Be very afraid.” These words could have been reasonably spoken at almost any time during the French Revolution, as actual and imagined threats seemed both constant and ubiquitous.¹ This was certainly true of the days surrounding the storming of the Bastille. In the evening of Sunday, July 12, 1789, a crowd gathered in front of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. News of King Louis XVI’s dismissal of the popular financial minister Jacques Necker had reached the city that afternoon, followed shortly thereafter by clashes between a protesting crowd and royal troops stationed in the city. The municipal electors, whose official task of organizing elections for the Estates General meeting in nearby Versailles had been completed in early May, hurried to the city hall as well.² Like the gathering crowd, they feared an attack on the capital by royal forces.

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² The electors began meeting after the Third Estate in Versailles renamed itself the National Assembly, in defiance of the king, on June 20, 1789. My account here is drawn from Jean Dusaulx, “L’œuvre des sept jours ou Notice tirée de mon journal, de plusieurs autres journaux, et surtout des procès-verbaux de MM. Les électeurs de la ville de Paris, depuis le 12 juillet 1789 jusqu’au 18 du même mois inclusivement,” in M. Fs. Barrière, ed., Bibliothèque des mémoires relatifs à l’histoire de France pendant le 18e siècle. Tome XXVIII : Mémoires de Linguet et de Latude suivis de documents divers sur la Bastille et
Parisian journalists, pamphleteers and printmakers had evinced strong support for the claim that the Third Estate, representing the commoners of France, spoke for the nation. With the dismissal of Necker, the king sent a message that he would no longer tolerate the refusal of the Third Estate, now calling itself the National Assembly, to disregard his directives and act on its own. That morning, posters had gone up around the city stating that the troops mustering outside its limits were there only to protect against criminal troublemakers. Parisians feared otherwise. During the night of the 12th, customs barriers at the city’s edge were attacked and burned and a monastery ransacked. By the morning of the 13\(^{th}\), panic had set in. Fear beset both the crowds and the electors, convinced that they would be massacred by the royal troops as punishment for their support of the Third Estate. A desperate search for arms to defend the city led to the taking of a state prison and former fortress, the Bastille, on the eastern border of Paris. It was not until the 17\(^{th}\), when Louis XVI made a humbling trip to Paris and announced from the balcony of the city hall that he recognized the National Assembly as a legitimate deliberating body, that panic subsided. Fear gave way to joy and relief.

This relief, however, would not last. Fear was a constant factor in the Revolution and, as historians have argued, was as much a driving motor of revolutionary politics as any ideological convictions. Timothy Tackett and Barry Shapiro have drawn our attention to what Tackett characterizes as the “enormous emotional turmoil” of the deputies in Versailles in late June and early July 1789, as they feared arrest and imprisonment following the establishment of the National Assembly.\(^3\) Jean-Clement Martin has argued that in 1789, fear born from ignorance concerning the goals and needs of various groups within French society, and fed by constant rumors, filled the power vacuum created by the challenge to the authority of Louis XVI and unleashed a dynamic of

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violence that made moderation impossible.\textsuperscript{4} Examining the weeks leading up to the massacre of the Champs de Mars in July 1791, David Andress points to the fears engendered by the press as a cause of increased tension between the people of Paris and the National Guards, and thus of the massacre and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{5} In her analysis of the Terror, Marisa Linton also highlights the role of fear, as deputies fearing for their own survival turned to a politics of betrayal and denunciation.\textsuperscript{6} Fear was so pervasive, William Reddy writes, that it was unsustainable: ending the Terror was an attempt to escape the emotional suffering caused by the fear of being perceived as disingenuous.\textsuperscript{7} The work of these historians helps us to understand how fear contributed to inciting individuals and the state to violence, and how fear could both radicalize segments of the French polity and justify measures meant to limit popular governance.

In thinking about fear, however, historians have focused primarily on the ways in which this emotion undermined the revolutionary project of creating a more egalitarian public, one united behind the principles of political liberty and the rights of man. By looking at fear as a straightforward response to danger, and as a destructive emotion that individuals seek to avoid, we miss the complicated ways in which fear helped Parisians make sense of the events of July 1789 while also encouraging the formation of communal bonds. This essay explores these other functions of fear by examining the ways in which contemporaries described their emotions concerning the storming of the Bastille and its aftermath in published works.

Recent historiography has emphasized the importance of positive emotions in forging relationships among individuals in the pre-revolutionary literate public sphere, which formulated its claims to existence and authority through the emotions of love and empathy. Lynn Hunt has shown that the cultivation of empathy for the suffering of others was central in the articulation of and adherence to a belief in universal

human rights. Sarah Maza argued that faced with growing confusion concerning a social hierarchy in transition, French writers and artists increasingly valued the love of familial bonds, and proposed the family as model of society that could counter that of the estates. The monarchy itself was not immune to the force of love: as David Bell has argued, royal propagandists employed a “language of love” to reconceptualize the relationship between the king and his subjects.

Love and empathy were the cornerstones of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, and as such it is not surprising that they shaped the discourse of the pre-revolutionary public sphere. Sentimentalism, or sensibilité, was founded upon the dual beliefs that the human character was formed through interactions with the physical environment that were mediated by the senses, and the conviction that those of a more refined nature were more attuned to the suffering of others and more likely to display strong emotion, especially by shedding tears. These beliefs became important components of revolutionary language and practice. We see many examples of this in accounts of the days surrounding the storming of the Bastille, most often when recounting Louis XVI’s arrival in Paris on July 17, 1789. In Louis-Antoine de Caraccioli’s La capitale délivrée par elle-même, (The capital saves itself) for example, the king was described as surrounded by “cries, tears, [emotional] transports, an innumerable multitude of persons from all regions, of every age, of every rank, that was unceasingly replenished.”

De Caraccioli’s account, in which the successful storming of the Bastille and the reconciliation between the king and his subjects that

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followed is celebrated using the language of sentimentalism, begins by evoking the “terror” (épouvante) and “alarm” of Parisians faced with the news of Necker’s dismissal. Fear would seem the antithesis of the language of sentimentalism, and one might argue in this case that the passage from a language of fear to one of sentimentalism was meant to reassure readers that the threat had passed. We see this opposition between fear and sentimentalism in William Reddy’s work, where he argues that fear caused “emotional suffering” during the Revolution. Reddy drew inspiration from the work of anthropologists to argue that every society has rules that dictate which emotions may be expressed and their accepted means of expression. Even in the strictest of these “emotional regimes,” as Reddy terms them, it is impossible to expect total adherence to rules regulating the expression of emotion, since “one always finds a divergence between social principle (the formal patterns of ‘culture’ as publicly explicated) and social practices (the strategies and miscues of relation building).”  

The constant correction that this divergence necessitates is what Reddy calls “navigation.” Reddy argues that in some circumstances, conflict between an individual’s goal of protecting “health and wholeness” and the demands of another (or the refusal of others to meet one’s own demands) makes navigation so difficult that the individual experiences “emotional suffering.” Reddy argues that this was the case during the Revolution, when threats to personal safety made it difficult to conform to the existing sentimentalist emotional regime. Sentimentalism called for an authentic display of emotion that became increasingly dangerous during the Terror, leading to “an escalating spiral of suspicion, because everyone felt like a hypocrite in the face of such laws.” The fear produced in this situation was unbearable, Reddy argues, leading to

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unsustainable emotional suffering. As a result, after the fall of Robespierre, sentimentalism was banished from politics in order to eradicate the fear that caused suffering.16

The assumption that fear is a reasonable response to dangerous situations lies behind Reddy’s interpretation of the impact of fear on revolutionaries. Indeed, contemporaries defined fear in this way. In the Encyclopédie, Louis de Jaucourt wrote, “the strong dread of some danger causes fear.”17 Féraud’s Dictionnaire critique de la langue française (Critical dictionary of the French language) similarly described fear as “a feeling [état de l’âme] more or less troubled by the thought of some danger.”18 An implicit assumption that fear is a natural response on the part of an individual to real or imagined dangers, prompting him or her to seek safety, has shaped the work of historians of the Revolution.19 If, however, we examine fear as an emotion that performs a collective, and not just individual function, we can begin to understand the political function of fear as a means of articulating and experiencing revolutionary belonging.

Scholars working within emotion studies, such as sociologist Deborah Gould, have emphasized the importance of collective emotions in articulating social relationships and in forging a link between the

16 Recent works have demonstrated the continued political importance of emotion in the post-revolutionary period. See Emmanuel Fureix, La France des larmes: Deuils politiques à l’âge romantique (1814-1840) (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2009); Sarah Horowitz, Friendship and Politics in Post-Revolutionary France (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).


18 Féraud, Abbé, “Peur” Dictionnaire critique de la langue française 3 volumes (Marseille: Chez Jean Mossy, 1788), 3:151.

19 Most historians do not define what they mean by the term “fear.” Patrice Gueniffey is an exception: he draws on the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (Dictionary of the French Academy) to define “terreur” as “un état psychique, plus intense que la peur, où se trouve toute personne menacée par un danger extrême.” (a psychological state, more intense than fear, in which any person threatened with extreme danger finds himself). As this definition suggests, contemporaries assumed a continuum from fear to terror depending on the nature and severity of the perceived danger. Dictionnaire de l’Académie française. Nouvelle édition 2 volumes (Lyon: Joseph Duplain, 1776), 2:573 in Gueniffey, La politique de la Terreur, 22.
individual and the community. To approach fear in this way, it is useful to distinguish between what I will call “feelings” and “emotions.” Psychologists and neuroscientists who have studied fear have established that when faced a perceived threat, the human body reacts with a set of physiological responses that can be called feelings: an increased heart rate, a surge of adrenaline, a quickening of the senses, a readiness to act. Upon the perception of feelings, humans attempt to make sense of the situation and determine appropriate actions through a process that feels instinctive although it can be strongly shaped by cultural context. For example, when we name our feelings we draw upon a repertoire of terms that are available to us as part of our culture, and that are both situationally and culturally appropriate. When we express our feelings using gestures, bodily movements, or words meant to communicate fear, we draw upon cultural conventions that make it clear both to ourselves and to others what we are feeling. Culturally conditioned emotions (what Reddy calls “emotives”) such as fear are meant to communicate something about ourselves in relation to others. However, as philosopher Brian Massumi notes, naming an emotion leaves behind a “complexity [of sensations] too rich to be functionally expressed” that he calls “affect.” For Massumi, affect belongs to a realm of possibility, and marks a turning point at which multiple pathways are available. This observation cues us to notice the intricate cultural work behind the expression of emotions such as fear. An author who draws attention to an emotion such as fear in a text draws upon a rich depository of cultural memory and combines

23 The range of choices of emotions can also be limited by factors such as the sex or race of the individual. See for example, Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds, *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 273.
aspects of this memory in new ways that are determined in part by reaction to the event in question and in part by the author’s goal in writing about this emotion.\textsuperscript{25}

Accounts of the events surrounding the conquest of the Bastille demonstrate how authors drew upon what might be called a cultural memory of fear. Between July 12, 1789 when news of Necker’s dismissal reached Paris and July 17, when Louis XVI came to Paris to announce his recognition of the National Assembly, Parisians feared reprisals from royal troops for the city’s support of the Third Estate, attacks of brigands, and the unpredictability of an armed and unsettled populace. These fears were not unreasonable, but neither were they unmediated reactions to events. Fear appeared to be an appropriate emotion (rather than, for example, anger or despair) in part because a model for making sense of the situation already existed: the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572. Descriptions of the July 1789 crisis in Paris referred to this event. For example, the anonymous \textit{Le projet échoué contre la ville de Paris} (The failed plan against the city of Paris) described the massing of troops in and around the capital as “the preface to the Saint-Bartholomew.” “[W]e will see,” warned the author, “the houses of patriots burned down, the public libraries abandoned to flames, the Palais-Royal pillaged, devastated, sacked.”\textsuperscript{26} The Saint-Bartholomew’s Day massacre, in which Catholic forces killed Huguenots in Paris, was a reference that would have been easily understood. Voltaire’s poem \textit{La Henriade}, published in 1723 and reissued continuously throughout the eighteenth century, painted a vivid portrait of Coligny wakening in fear in a Paris under siege:

\begin{quote}
Sudden at once a thousand hideous cries
Break his soft slumbers: --sudden to his eyes
A thousand horrid shapes of murder rise!
His palace blazing thro’ the glowing air,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25} I make this distinction between the reaction to an event and authorial intent in describing this reaction to acknowledge that an author may not be fully aware of the ways in which an event, particularly a recent and frightening event, has impacted his or her understanding of what occurred and thus the subsequent written account. As Cathy Caruth writes, in the retelling of a violent event, “[w]hat returns to haunt the victim […] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.” Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History} 20th anniversary edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 6.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Le projet échoué contre la ville de Paris} (N.p.: n.d.), 1.
And arms and torches cast a sudden glare.  
Welt'ring in blood, his murder'd servants lie, 
Their panting limbs the dusky flames supply;  
From ev'ry side the furious rabble pour,  
Wild for their prey, in savage sounds they roar:  
Spare none!—spare none! —'Tis God directs our hand,  
The king and Medicis their blood demand.”

Other reminders of the Massacre, such as descriptions in histories of Paris, similarly kept the memory of widespread violence in the city alive. By referring to the Saint-Bartholomew's Day Massacre, authors made sense of their feelings of perceived danger by choosing an emotion – fear – and by situating that emotion within a shared cultural context.

While the well-educated would have been familiar with the *Henriade*, those who didn’t immediately understand references to the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre were enlightened by Marie-Joseph Chénier’s blockbuster play *Charles IX ou la Saint-Barthélemy*. This play, which premiered in November 1789, “popularized,” the Massacre by relating its history to a broader audience. As with the anonymous author of *Le projet échoué*, Chénier linked the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre to the storming of the Bastille by mixing past and present, as when L'Hospital, the advisor of Charles IX who was understood to be Necker by

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27 Voltaire, *The Henriade: An Epic Poem, in Ten Cantos* (London: Burton and Company, 1797), Canto II, 42. Among the educated public, the question of the responsibility of Charles IX for the massacre continued to be a topic of debate throughout the eighteenth century, as did the question of the place of Protestant minorities in France. As a result, the massacre was repeatedly discussed in written works. See O.R. Taylor, “Voltaire et la Saint-Barthélemy,” *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 73:5 (Sept-Oct 1973), 829-838. In accounts of the July crisis, the association of intense fear with the nighttime may have been in part due to familiarity with this poem.


revolutionary audiences, proclaimed: “these awful bastilles, will crumble one day under generous hands.”

Familiarity with the Saint-Bartholomew’s Massacre offered Parisians a framework for making sense of the feelings elicited by the events of July 12-17. Barry Shapiro has argued that these feelings can be understood by placing them within a framework of trauma, arguing that deputies oscillated between denial and acknowledgement of their fears due to psychological stress caused by the king’s perceived betrayal when he ordered members of the Third Estate to meet according to his prescribed guidelines on June 23. Shapiro’s account prompts us to acknowledge the range of emotions experienced by the deputies in June and July 1789, and the impact of these emotions on future political decisions. However, trauma was not a concept available to revolutionaries and, as Ronen Steinberg reminds us, using trauma “to describe the experiences of the French Revolution […] means treating it as a timeless, universal category.” Shapiro does, however, make an excellent case for the ambivalence of the feelings that deputies held toward the king, the difficulty they had in expressing these feelings, and their tendency to move between emotional states in an extremely unstable situation. This “intense mix of emotions” called for the creation of a framework in which to understand the new and troubling feelings elicited by the events of June and July 1789.

References to the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre provided a context in which the fear that each individual felt could be understood and shared. These references helped Parisians articulate the reasons behind their actions, painting even the most violent acts as measures of self-defense against a fear of annihilation that appeared legitimate because it had an historical precedent. We see this in Honoré Duveyrier’s detailed report of the events of July 1789. In his narrative, rumors that Parisians would soon be under attack precede descriptions of actions taken by the

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31 Ronen Steinberg, “Trauma and the Effects of Mass Violence in Revolutionary France: A Critical Inquiry,” Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques 41:3 (Winter 2015), 30. This is not to say that trauma has no analytical value for historians. For an example of how the concept of collective trauma can used to understand reactions to the French Revolution see Victoria E. Thompson, “An Alarming Lack of Feeling: Urban Travel, Emotions, and British National Character in Post-Revolutionary Paris,” Special Issue on Emotions and the City, Urban History Review/Revue d’histoire urbaine 42:2 (2014): 8-17.
32 Shapiro, Traumatic Politics, 130.
electors who were acting as an ad-hoc municipal government during the crisis. In particular, the intense fear of armed forces massing at the city’s gates in preparation to invade the city was presented as an explanation for actions taken by the municipal government, such as the authorization of a bourgeois militia. Although Duveyrier acknowledges repeatedly that the electors tried to calm the crowd, his text neither states nor implies that their fears were unfounded. Evoking the fear of an attack ordered by the monarchy as justification for unsanctioned or illegal action can be seen beyond 1789. For example, a 1792 pamphlet justified the deposition of Louis XVI by comparing the violence committed by the Swiss Guards against insurgents on August 10 with the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, stating that “kings always have recourse to treason to save their throne.”

In these accounts, fear justifies actions taken without royal approval, or even in opposition to the monarchy. Yet fear was not sufficient justification. Proof that the actions taken were in the best interest of the Nation, rather than irrational acts of panic, lay in the progression from the emotion of fear to that of collective expressions of love and affection. Many of the accounts of the July crisis published in 1789 and 1790 begin by evoking fear and end with scenes in which tearful participants physically join together as a sign of the creation of a new political community. For example, Jean Dusaulx, in his L’oeuvre de sept jours (The work of seven days) took pains to recapture the fears of Parisians as the crisis began, as in this characterization of the chaos of night of July 12th: “How the appearance of things and men suddenly changed! How peaceful citizens, without plans, without schemes, submitting to the yoke of tradition, were carried away, unawares, in the whirlwind of civil discord!”

Dusaulx also emphasized continued fear following the successful storming of the Bastille, not only because of de Launay’s murder, but also caused by rumors that supposed subterranean mines under the Bastille might cause it to explode, and by concerns over

34 Louis Boussemart, Bouquet qui a été présenté à MARIE-ANTOINETTE, épouse du ci-devant Roi, par un Sans-Culotte, & mention des événements de la Saint Laurent, qui cadrent avec ceux de la Saint Barthélemi (Paris: Guilhemat, 1792), 5.
35 Dusaulx, L’oeuvre de sept jours, 142.
royal reprisals. The tension that the text creates in the reader is not fully alleviated until Louis XVI arrives in Paris and greets the electors. Then, in a scene of reconciliation, the king “gave himself to us, abandoned himself to everyone. We kissed his hands, we kissed [all of him] up to the imprints left by his steps: from time to time, our transports of love and gratitude were made twice as strong.”

Similarly, Duveyrier captured the many moments of fear experienced by Parisians during the July crisis, noting at one point that “tumult, disorder and confusion had reached such a point of excess [as] disastrous news came in repeatedly with great speed.” Like Dusaulx, Duveyrier ends with repeated depictions of physical and emotional bonding. When the deputies from the National Assembly enter Paris on the 16th, “all arms reached out to them, all eyes were filled with tears.” When the Marquis de Lally-Tolendal, member of the deputation sent by the National Assembly to Paris following the storming of the Bastille, announced to the crowd assembled at the Hôtel de Ville that the king would withdraw the troops stationed in and around the city, those near him “squeezed him in their arms.” Bailly and La Fayette were subsequently “surrounded, squeezed, embraced by the multitude truly drunk [with emotion.]” The widespread fear evoked throughout these texts gives meaning to the hugs and tears at the end, just as the affection at the end justifies the actions taken in response to fear. Furthermore, the emphasis on physicality, whereby those who were previously divided must repeatedly touch each other, transforms the Nation from an abstraction into a concrete reality: an emotional community comprised of others whose bodies surround and touch each other.

This emphasis on physicality contrasts with what might be considered more traditional evocations of sentimentalism in speeches immediately preceding Necker’s dismissal. On July 10, Jean-Henri Bancal des Issarts called for the formation of a garde bourgeoise in Paris to defend against the “frightening preparations” being made by the troops

36 Dusaulx, L’œuvre de sept jours, 174.
37 Duveyrier, Procès-verbal, 192, 446, 456, 463.
38 Following Barbara Rosenwein, an emotional community is a group of individuals that share a common vocabulary of emotions. Deborah Gould uses the term “emotional habitus” to evoke a similar concept that incorporates practice as well. Both emphasize the ways in which emotions forge collective bonds. See Barbara H. Rosenwein, Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Gould, Moving Politics, 10.
surrounding the city. Des Issarts wrote that when faced with fear of attack, “[w]ho is not moved …? What Citizen, in seeing his country in tears, would not hurry to wipe her tears and to come to her aid?”. Similarly, on the same day, the Elector Carra argued that faced with “this apparatus of terror” – by which he meant the royal troops surrounding the capital – service in a garde bourgeoise would extend the love one felt for one’s family to all Parisians, stating, “it is an honor to watch over the safety of one’s brothers.” In these examples, fear does not divide Parisians, but instead motivates the creation of what we might call fraternity – a love for and a willingness to help others. Yet this love remains an abstraction, a motivating force that prompts one to care for others who may be strangers, as opposed to the physical expressions of affection in evidence at the end of the July crisis. This transition from the abstract to the concrete was not simply a result of genuine relief; it too was made possible by an existing repertoire of gestures that were part of the culture of sentimentalism; the mixing of tears, the fervent embrace, and the outsize gesture were familiar to readers of Rousseau as well as to fans of boulevard theater.

Descriptions of the July crisis that linked fear and fraternity encouraged people to relive the strong emotions of these days. As a critic wrote in 1791 of the play about the storming of the Bastille, La liberté conquise, “each scene retraces for inhabitants of Paris the troubles that agitated them, & the dangers they faced.” These “painful memories,” as this author put it, allowed them also to relive the joy and relief once the crisis had passed. A celebration of the storming of the Bastille that left out the surrounding climate of fear would have been unable to remind people of the simultaneous transformation of both each individual Parisian and the French nation that occurred in July 1789. The passage from fear to fraternity rendered a diverse population that was fearful of both outsiders and each other into a cohesive, caring community. Threats

39 Motion of Bancal des Issarts, 10 July 1789, reproduced in Duveyrier, Procès-verbal, 133, 134.
40 Motion of M. Carra, 10 July 1789, reproduced in Duveyrier, Procès-verbal, 148, 147.
41 On “fraternity” as an emotion that was understood as demonstrating empathy for one’s fellow human beings during the Enlightenment see Marcel David, Fraternité et Révolution française (Paris: Aubier, 1987).
and acts of violence were transformed into shared embraces and tears. As Joanna Bourke has written, “[w]ithout emotional exchange, no amount of shared characteristics will create either the group […] or social action.”

The shared experience of the emotional transformation from fear to fraternity provided Parisians with a visceral memory of the transformation they had undergone in 1789 from subject to citizen. This was a memory that Parisians willingly relived, and one that may have primed them to experience fear as a politically transformative emotion, necessary to the creation of a unified community. Looked at in this light, we might be better able to understand why Parisians were able to sustain repeated moments of intense fear throughout the Revolution, as well as to provoke fear in others. Marisa Linton and Barry Shapiro have both argued that fear had a negative impact on the decisions taken by revolutionary politicians. However, without discounting this observation, we can hypothesize that in certain circumstances, and paired with other emotions such as love, fear also played a role in creating a revolutionary community.

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