Spaces of Mourning:
The Cemetery of Picpus and the Memory of Terror
in Post-Revolutionary France

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The Parisian cemetery of Picpus has a special meaning in the history of the French Revolution. The former site of a convent that was destroyed during the revolution, it became the burial ground of more than thirteen hundred bodies of people who had been guillotined in the nearby Place du Trône renversé (today Place de la Nation) and interred in two large mass graves in the summer of 1794. After the Terror, family members of the victims purchased the land and began using it as a private cemetery. With the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814, a funerary chapel was constructed on the site; there daily masses were to be held in honor of the victims, and a special commemorative service was to take place once a year in the presence of the affiliated families. Both the annual pilgrimage to Picpus and the burials in the cemetery continue to this day.¹ This article examines the transformation of the cemetery of Picpus from a cimetière des suppliciés (cemetery of the punished), a locus of horror and profanity, into a sacred place and a pilgrimage destination.

Historians of the revolution have not neglected the subject of the remembrance of the dead, but, with a few exceptions, they

have paid less attention to the specific problems posed by the commemoration of the victims of the Terror. The revolutionary decade was on the cusp of a major change in European attitudes towards death. Philippe Ariès argued that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a period of transition to the modern, western notion of "invisible death," by which he meant the tendency to exclude death and the dying as much as possible from ordinary social life. Few historians today accept Aries' arguments about the changing attitudes towards death in the west without reservations, but virtually all agree, at least implicitly, that somehow the cultural and institutional transformations of the revolution played a role in the emergence of the "cult of the dead" in the later nineteenth century.² We know a great deal about the complex ways in which the memories of the dead and even their remains were employed to cultivate a republican pedagogy.³ Even historians who question the extent to which the revolution contributed to transformations in the culture of death and who stress, for example, the continuity and resilience of religious funerary practices despite the revolution's secularizing or laicizing thrust find that the period witnessed an intense politicization of death.⁴ Thus, the cult of republican "martyrs"


⁴ See Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press of the Western Society for French History
during year II gave way after 9 thermidor to an increasing militarization of the remembrance of the dead, which accorded well with the coming Napoleonic cult of the army. But these were glorious, heroic deaths, the stuff of exemplary deeds and of myths. What of the dead of the Terror? What edifying lessons could be derived from the ignominies of being carted off to the guillotine, of the death of those who were, after all, victims? What place was there in post-revolutionary society to commemorate a negative event, a painful past that evoked disagreement and horror rather than glory?

This essay approaches this question by examining how the individuals involved in the creation of the monument at Picpus attempted to carve out a space for mourning the victims of the Terror in a historical moment when such commemorative practices were deemed undesirable by the larger society. In so doing, it draws on insights from studies on the significance of place in the aftermath of violence. Cultural geographer Kenneth Foote has defined the transformations in the meaning of former sites of violent conflict as "the sanctification of place." Places are bound up in powerful ways with the identities of the social actors who create them, invest them with meanings, values, considerable emotional energy, and who are, in turn, affected by

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To formulate this question I have drawn on an important article by Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past,” American Journal of Sociology 97, no. 2 (1991): 376-420.

them. As sociologist Thomas Gieryn put it, "[Place] stabilizes and gives durability to social and structural categories, differences and hierarchies . . . embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities and memories." The cultural norms, identities, and memories "emplaced" in Picpus belonged primarily to returning émigrés and families of Old Regime nobility, the main groups who were involved in creating it. The social status of these groups in the period between the end of the Terror and the restoration of the Bourbons was highly fluid and uncertain. The uniqueness of Picpus was that it marked an effort to constitute, physically and discursively, a simultaneously private yet public space for the remembrance of the victims of the Terror and for the individuals who maintained the site over the years.

In order to appreciate the transformations in the meaning of the cemetery of Picpus, it is first necessary to examine its meaning and significance in the Parisian urban imagination as a cimetière des suppliciés. Michelet was probably the first historian to discuss at some length the burial places used for disposing of victims of the Terror. It was a strange subject for a scholar to tackle—and Michelet knew it. He began his discussion with an apology: "I touch here on a sad subject; history wishes it so . . . pity itself was extinguished or muted; horror spoke, disgust, and the anxiety of the great city, which feared an epidemic. The living became alarmed, believing themselves to be encircled by the dead." Michelet went on to describe the

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9 "Emplace" here means that intangible cultural qualities, such as norms, memories, and identities, are given tangible form and expression in a physical space.
recurring complaints from residents living near those sites who were worried that the putrid air emanating from the open graves would have pernicious effects on their health. Thus did Michelet, with his customary acuity, sniff out that the cemeteries of the punished occupied an important and troubling space in the mental topography of the residents of Paris.

There were three such sites in the capital: La Madeleine, famous as the burial place of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette; the cemetery of Mousseaux, today parc Monceau; and Picpus. These places were chosen primarily for their proximity to the guillotines. After the executions, tumbrels would carry the bodies to one of the three sites, where officials of the commune would register the names of the dead and inventory their clothes and other belongings. Then they would be placed in mass graves that remained open until full. The odor must have been horrendous given the heat of the summer months, even though quicklime was used to hasten the disintegration of the bodies. Thus, in July 1794, residents near Picpus informed the Committee of Public Safety that they were "justly alarmed by the proximity of these graves, destined for the burial of conspirators who were struck down by the blade of the law." The authors of this petition went on to complain about the odor and beseeched the authorities not to let "those who had been declared

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12 G. Lenôtre, *La guillotine et les exécuteurs des arrêts criminels pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Perrin, 1903): 279-95. G. Lenôtre was a pseudonym of Théodore Gosselin (1855-1935), historian and member of the French Academy. Nearly all of his many books on the revolution were written under this pseudonym. He is, by the way, the only person to have been buried in the cemetery of Picpus who had no familial connection to victims of the Terror.

13 Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (henceforth APP), AA 70: pièce 574, "Description des vêtements trouvés sur les deux cadavres du sexe masculin amenés au ci-devant cimetière Paul au sortir de la guillotine place de grève, le premier messidor an seconde de la république," 18 June 1794.

enemies of the people and the republic while they were still alive . . . assassinate them [the people] after their death.”

This sensitivity of the residents to the presence of the mass graves in their vicinity was probably a result of fairly recent developments. After all, for much of the early modern period the majority of French men and women were buried in open mass graves, so that these sites were a constant feature of pre-revolutionary urban life. This state of affairs was increasingly challenged in the course of the eighteenth century, largely due to the influence of the Enlightenment. The emergence of the miasma theory in the medical sciences, which contended that diseases spread through putrid air, gave rise to recurring concerns over the presence of open graves in populated areas. Voltaire himself wrote in 1738 about the war of the dead against the living, a notion echoed both in the petition from the residents of Picpus and in Michelet's discussion. The neighbors' concerns about the open graves were possibly also related to older cultural beliefs about the cadavers of the condemned. In early modern culture, the blood and clothes of executed persons became popular relics that were believed to possess healing qualities, and such beliefs did not disappear with the revolution. After the execution of Louis XVI, many spectators rushed forward to dip their handkerchiefs in the monarch's blood. In this sense, the cemeteries of the condemned bring to mind Emile Durkheim's concept of the "impure sacred," which he defined as ambiguous.

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17 Quoted in McManners, Death and the Enlightenment, 307.


religious powers that could be either beneficial or dangerous, depending on changing circumstances.20

At the same time, the concerns about the burial places of victims of the Terror were rooted in the political culture of the revolution. This is suggested by the mention of "conspirators" and "enemies of the people" in the petitions. Indeed, several months after 9 Thermidor, when some of the mass graves had not yet been covered, residents of the area sent another petition, adjusting their language to the new political landscape: "The patriots in the vicinity [of Picpus] demand in the strongest terms the disappearance of the gulf [gouffre] that was dug by orders of Robespierre and his accomplices in order to bury their victims. . . . [the petitioners] call the attention of the department to the horror which the sight of this establishment arouses in the souls of good citizens."21 The petitioners have transformed the "conspirators" of their earlier complaint into "victims," and they depict Robespierre as the head of a band of criminals. This language was consistent with the Thermidorian political discourse, which tended to represent the Terror as an aberration from, rather than a part of the revolution. Hence the "gulf" in this petition could be read both as a reference to the actual open graves and metaphorically as the chasm that the violence of year II opened in the history of the revolution. Thus, the demand to efface the traces of revolutionary violence from the landscape expressed the more general and widely shared desire to "bridge the gulf of the Terror" in the Thermidorian period.22


21 AN, F13 330: "Rapport à la commission des travaux publics," 5 October 1794.

The cemeteries of the punished in Paris evoked sentiments of horror and revulsion and were associated with memories of the Terror. The owner of the property at Picpus complained to the authorities that his wife had fallen gravely ill "from horror and fear" at the sight of the mass graves in their garden.  

The architect of the Commission of Public Works, a certain Poyet who had been responsible for the location of these cemeteries during the Terror, wrote in 1796 that the daily burial of victims in these graves was a "repulsive spectacle to the eyes of humanity." Eventually the municipal authority covered the mass graves in Picpus, hid the property from view by enclosing it within high walls, and prevented access to the site. It was as if the Thermidorian government hoped that removing Picpus from public sight would also remove it from public memory.

Yet, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, works of popular culture firmly established the place of the burial grounds of victims of the Terror in the public imagination. Novels with such titles as Le cimetière de la Madeleine and Le cimetière de Mousseaux were published in pocket editions that sold well in the early days of the Napoleonic Empire. In fact, the plots had very little to do with the places themselves, which served more as evocative backdrops to rather conventional and melodramatic love stories. The editors were explicit, however, about the commercial potential of these place-names: "The cemetery of the Madeleine! What a title! It makes one shudder: couldn't we have

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23 AN, F13 524: Citoyen Riedain à la Convention Nationale, 17 April 1795.  
24 AN, F13 524: Citoyen Poyet à la commission des travaux publics, September 1795.  
25 AN, F13 964: "Rapport, cimetière pour les suppliciés de Picpus, 3 November 1795."  
chosen a less revolting title? But this title is new and piquant . . .
this is not a small advantage."  27

The fact that these novels had very little to do with the
realities of historical events did not prevent them from attracting
the attention of the Napoleonic censors. In 1810 all novels
bearing the names of the cimetières des suppliciés as titles were
censored and their author briefly detained with the rationale that
"the generations being educated currently require other historical
notions, and such souvenirs of the past must cede the way to the
brilliance of the present."  28 As this quotation suggests, the
official attitude towards memories of the Terror was becoming
less tolerant. Unfortunately, it was precisely in this relatively
hostile political climate that the families of the victims launched
their efforts to turn Picpus into a site of mourning.

The transformation of Picpus from a cemetery of the
punished into a place for mourning was embedded in and tended
to reproduce the social hierarchies of the Old Regime. The
people who initiated the post-revolutionary incarnation of the
cemetery were all returning émigrés and members of the old
nobility. In 1796 the princess Amélie de Salm-Kirbourg of the
house of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, whose brother had been
buried in Picpus, purchased the plot of land containing the mass
graves.  29 Several years later, the Marquise de Montagu and
Madame de Lafayette, sisters whose mother had also been buried
there, formed a network of mostly noble families who collected
donations for the construction of a memorial on the site. These
individuals and others constituted themselves formally as an
association, which eventually managed to purchase the property
adjacent to the actual mass graves and began using it as a
cemetery. Affiliated families could buy a concession for a burial
plot. Madame de Lafayette, wife of the celebrated general, was

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27 François-Jean Villemain d’Abancourt, Le cimetières de la Madeleine,
(Paris, 1801), 1:1.

28 Quoted in Henri Welschinger, La censure sous le premier empire
(Paris, 1882), 195.

29 La Princesse Amélie, ou l’héroïsme de la piété fraternelle: Élégie
(Paris, 1808).
among the first to be buried there in 1807. The cemetery of Picpus, then, was socially exclusive from the outset: while the victims buried in the place came from all walks of life, the cemetery was reserved only for families who could afford it and was thus in practice, if not in intent, a privileged *lieu de mémoire.*

This private cemetery situated within Paris was an anomaly. In 1804 Napoleon adopted a sweeping reform of funerary practices that stipulated, among other things, relocating all cemeteries outside the city walls. The decrees also transferred the authority over burial and cemeteries from the church to municipal authorities. In other words, there was no such thing as a private cemetery in the post-revolutionary French state. Consequently, the cemetery of Picpus soon drew the attention of state authorities. Municipal officials worried about its location within the city walls and about the lack of supervision over the burials there, a matter that they claimed, "was of interest to public order."

State resistance to the activities in Picpus was at times more explicitly political. In 1810 the Minister of Police, Joseph Fouché, expressed his desire that

all future requests for inhumation in this cemetery shall be refused, a measure that he considers necessary so as not to perpetuate the memory of revolutionary misfortunes, and also not to make out of the relatives of the victims a class apart [my emphasis], thus to prevent the resurfacing of old hatreds.

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Fouché had played an active role in implementing the policies of the Terror, of course; among other things, he oversaw the reprisals in Lyon in November 1793. So he had a vested interest in keeping those episodes of revolutionary violence out of the public's memory. But, as his specific reference to the relatives of the victims as "a class apart" suggests, officials were quick to grasp the socially exclusive nature of Picpus, which contradicted the efforts of the Napoleonic state to foster a vision of a harmonious, post-revolutionary society. That the cemetery was allowed to exist at all probably had something to do with the personal influence of Empress Josephine, whose former husband, the Vicomte de Beauharnais, was among the victims buried there and whose children, adopted by the Emperor, visited the place regularly.  

The Bourbon Restoration proved to be a more hospitable environment for commemorative projects such as the cemetery of Picpus. The return of the Bourbons unleashed a series of commemorations and religious services in honor of the victims of the Terror. The important royalist and Catholic newspaper *L'ami de la religion et du Roi* noted, probably with some exaggeration, that "everywhere people make haste . . . to repay the debt that we have accrued towards those sacrificed to the furies of parties . . . everyone joins with zeal this concert of regrets, homage, expiations, and prayers." As Sheryl Kroen has shown, the Restoration inscribed revolutionary violence within a discourse of expiation that represented the Enlightenment as sin, the Revolution and the Napoleonic regime (for they were considered as one) as chastisement through blood, and the return of the Bourbons as deliverance.  

Thus, the emergence of Picpus as a site of mourning needs to be understood in the context of the

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33 I am grateful to M. Chabot, guardian of the cemetery of Picpus, for calling my attention to this detail.
34 *L'ami de la religion et du Roi*, 1814, 1:282.
new spaces for the memory of revolutionary violence opened up by the restoration.

Against this new political and religious background, Picpus acquired new meanings that were articulated in spatial terms. In 1814, an anonymous pamphlet announced the construction of a funerary chapel in Picpus. It began:

Near the old village of Picpus, today enclosed by the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, under the walls of a garden which belonged to the Augustinian canonesses of Saint Augustine, in a piece of earth which is not even thirty square meters long, there rest thirteen hundred victims who were sacrificed (immolés) in less than six weeks at the barrière du Trône, between 14 June and 27 July, or 9 Thermidor 1794.³⁶

Note the spatial precision and how every place name means something: the old village situated on the outskirts of Paris where in the seventeenth century the canonesses established their convent, which became famous as a place of retreat for noble ladies, this pastoral-religious territory encircled "today" by the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the emblematic neighborhood of artisans and workers, hence a center of revolutionary radicalism and of the sans-culottes, which would become the chief district of Parisian socialism in the nineteenth century.³⁷ An entire history of conflict is condensed and expressed in spatial terms, inscribing Picpus in a series of radical transformations that centered on the concept of sacrifice.

The language of this text, which was probably composed by an ecclesiastic, was replete with references to the sacred. The victims became "martyrs." Human remains became "relics." This cemetery of the punished, which had previously evoked sentiments of horror, was transformed into a fountain of purity and virtue, flowing from the "example" of the lives of those

³⁶ Fondation de la chapelle funéraire de Picpus (Paris, 1814), 1.

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buried there. According to the pamphlet, the monument would ensure that "mourning and prayer shall not be disturbed by the gaze of the profane or the footsteps of the impious. May the ashes of fathers become the most sacred property of their children . . . may this monument become the sad reparation of the past and an imposing lesson for the future."\textsuperscript{38} The language in this text consolidated the representation of Picpus as a sacred site that sought to establish continuity in death where there had been rupture in life.

Burials in the cemetery resumed after 1815, but under an awkward arrangement in which the affiliated families had to obtain special authorization for each burial from police and state authorities. The records of these applications offer a glimpse into the personal motivations of the individuals involved. Most requests were meant to fulfill the last wishes of the dying themselves to be reunited with their families. Others were more explicitly political, such as the request of the Duc de Damas, who informed the authorities in 1823 that his wife "has formed the religious project . . . of reuniting in one place all the remains of her deceased family members . . . [among them] her brothers, who died [during the revolution] while defending the cause of throne and altar."\textsuperscript{39} The vast majority of applications were granted; rejections were mostly because petitioners failed to prove they were related to the victims buried there.

It is difficult to know what the cemetery of Picpus meant to those family members who visited it regularly. Accounts of the continued ritual commemoration in the place are rare. We are thus fortunate to have the letters and journal of Amable de Baudus. This French nobleman and émigré was caught by the news of his father's execution in the summer of 1794 while he was in Holland. This was the peak of the Great Terror, and many émigrés had similar experiences in this period. The historical

\textsuperscript{38} Fondation de la chapelle, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{39} APP, AA 435, 10 bis: M. le Duc de Damas au préfet de police, 11 September 1823.
significance of Baudus's case is that he left mentions of his annual pilgrimage to his father's burial place after the Bourbons were restored to the throne. Thus, we read in his journal:

Wednesday, 13 May 1819, at Picpus with my brother; Monday, 5 July 1819, the anniversary of my father's death. Travel to Picpus. I attended mass and then prayed on the grave of the victims of 1794; Wednesday, 5 July 1820, I heard mass said in honor of my father at Picpus; 14 July 1821 [in a letter to his son] three days ago, my dear friend, I made the pilgrimage to Picpus, as I do every year in this month...  

His words attest to the personal and emotional role that Picpus, as a private yet public place of mourning, played in the lives of the families involved in its creation and maintenance.

Today, the cemetery of Picpus is not one of the more well-known sites in Paris. Situated on the southeastern outskirts of the city, it lacks visitors most days, except for the occasional busload of American exchange students. They come—or, more probably, are taken—there to visit the burial place of General Lafayette, the French aristocrat who fought alongside Washington against the British and whose grave is adorned by an American flag. At present, the monument comprises a chapel, whose walls boast large marble plaques listing the names of the victims buried there, a large garden, the cemetery itself, and, finally, the site of the original mass graves, which is visible but cannot be entered. If visitors would take a moment to read the names on the tombstones in the cemetery, they would be struck by what resembles a list of who's who of Old Regime nobility, as well as by the dates of more recent burials, some as late as 2006. Perhaps this relative marginality is a fitting remembrance of these victims of the Terror, those nobles and returning émigrés who were becoming increasingly "socially marginal, yet symbolically central" during the nineteenth century—a

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40 Famille de Baudus, private archive. Only fragments of the journal have survived, which are fragile, unpaginated, and frequently difficult to make out. I am grateful to Florence de Baudus for allowing me to consult these documents as well as for her generous hospitality.
description that also captures the paradoxical significance of their lieu de mémoire in post-revolutionary society.  