

Colonial Factions and Pamphlet Warfare: Writing Histories of Saint-Domingue and France during the Thermidorian Reaction, 1794-1795

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By the late summer of 1794, most Parisians were breathing a collective sigh of relief that tumbrels filled with condemned prisoners no longer clattered down the streets to the guillotine with the chaotic frequency of the Terror's final months. Now in its sixth year of revolutionary upheaval, the capital was awash with print instead of blood as public interest grew in reading and hearing sobering details (and plenty of salacious gossip) about recent events.¹ In one such printed item, which appeared in early September 1794, readers learned of a confrontation at the house of Pierre-Joseph Cambon, a well-known deputy in the National Convention.² Another prominent figure, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, whose actions in the prized but increasingly precarious French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue had been instrumental in pushing the Convention to abolish slavery throughout its colonial empire earlier that year, had been accosted by an anonymous individual who accused him of calumny, forgery, and mass slaughter overseas. Sonthonax was so shaken

¹ The term "Thermidorian Reaction" applies to the period from Robespierre's fall at the end of July 1794 through to the promulgation of a new constitution in September 1795 and the dissolution of the National Convention the following month. For a contemporary view of the ubiquity and dangers of the printed word throughout the French Revolution, especially in 1794, see Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le nouveau Paris*, vol. 1 (Paris: Fuchs, Pougens and Cramer, 1797), 5. Recent scholarship on Thermidorians looking back into the Terror includes Steinberg, *Afterlives of the Terror* and Fairfax-Cholmeley, "Reliving the Terror."

² British Library French Revolutionary Tracts (hereafter BLFRT) F.678/2 *Dialogue entre les deux égorgeurs de Saint-Domingue, Sonthonax et Polverel* (Paris: Laurens jeune, 1794 [18 fructidor an II?]), 15. The date in brackets with each BLFRT sample item indicates the day or month when publication occurred, based on content from the item in question. It is usually impossible to provide a definitive date, but there are significant interpretative benefits to locating these pamphlets as precisely as possible within a given year.

by this experience that he sought the comfort and advice of his colleague Étienne Polverel, who had worked closely with him in Saint-Domingue between September 1792 and June 1794. They had originally been sent there by France's National Legislative Assembly as part of a "civil commission" charged both with putting down the incipient slave rebellion in the colony and enacting reforms in line with the National Assembly's recent decision to grant full political rights to free people of colour there.³ However, their attempts to uphold French Republican authority in the colony were resisted by white interest groups, who bitterly opposed this programme and undermined the civil commissioners' efforts to protect France's colonial assets against British and Spanish invasion. In response, Sonthonax and Polverel had incrementally and unilaterally granted emancipation to the enslaved population between August and October 1793 in a bid to secure military manpower and win a decisive level of support among the island's Black majority. They had then secured the election of a group of deputies to represent Saint-Domingue in France's National Convention, who pressured France's Revolutionary elite into endorsing the commissioners' decisions. As a result, the Convention declared the abolition of slavery throughout the French colonies on 16 pluviôse *an* II/February 4, 1794.⁴

In the pamphlet, the pair admit to these and other acts presented as brazen abuses of power, including laying waste to Saint-Domingue's cultural capital Cap-Français in June

³ Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*; Blancpain, *Etienne de Polverel*; Piquet, *L'émancipation des noirs*.

⁴ See Benot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, chapter 7; Dorigny, *Abolitions of Slavery*, part III; Gauthier, *Périssent les colonies*; Popkin, *You Are All Free*, chapter 10. For the text of the abolition decree on 16 pluviôse *an* II/February 4, 1794: *Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, réglemens, avis du conseil-d'état*, ed. J. B. Duvergier, vol. VII (Paris: Guyot et Scribe, 1834), 30.

1793.⁵ As their discussion continues, Sonthonax becomes increasingly nervous about a potential act of vengeance by their (white) colonial victims. The individual who had accosted him did so on behalf of this latter group, and had threatened to reveal Sonthonax and Polverel's colonial crimes in print. Polverel is only able to assuage his associate's fears by promising a deluge of misinformation to drown out such damaging revelations: "Fine, we'll get printing too, we'll get distributing and posting up our material so much, more and more, that by the end no one will be able to make any sense of what we did."⁶

Of course, this conversation never actually took place. The title of the pamphlet ("A Conversation between the Two Butchers of Saint-Domingue, Sonthonax and Polverel") reveals this as an example of a fictional dialogue, part of an ancient and wide-ranging literary genre which had undergone considerable expansion within the print culture of Enlightenment Europe.⁷ For historians, however, bias and even outright fiction can be useful allies. This imagined meeting of two shameless, scheming, frightened politicians shows how one particular faction within France's divided polity wished to present their rivals to the reading (and listening) public, within a carefully curated history of recent Revolutionary events stretching from the streets of Paris to the sugar plantations of the French Caribbean. Given our concerns in the twenty-first century about the seductive

⁵ Cap-Français was burnt to the ground in June 1793, three days after Sonthonax and Polverel had begun recruiting slaves to their army in exchange for emancipation during a power struggle with the newly appointed French governor, general Galbaud. See Popkin, *You Are All Free*, chapter 7.

⁶ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 15. All translations are the author's own.

⁷ Alongside the array of classical examples using this form, a famous contemporary creation was Denis Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (Paris: Buisson, 1796), which set out almost the entire novel as a bare script. See also Puyol, *Le dialogue d'idées au dix-huitième siècle*; Hughes, "Commerce of Light"; Eugene R. Purpus, "The 'Plain, Easy, and Familiar Way'".

power of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” it would be a mistake to assume that an eighteenth-century audience was immune to the messaging within even such an obvious falsehood.⁸ Furthermore, the characterisation of Sonthonax and Polverel as ‘the Two Butchers of Saint-Domingue’ was actually an early literary salvo from a pamphlet war extending across the Thermidorian Reaction, which formed an important phase in the development of the French colonial imagination.⁹ With his analysis of Thermidorian imperial policy, Jeremy Popkin made a convincing case for the rehabilitation of a period overshadowed by the earlier abolition decree and Napoleon’s subsequent, regressive stance.¹⁰ However, within Thermidorian scholarship, this pamphlet war has yet to attain any prominence, with individual print items appearing only sporadically as supplementary material in studies on Convention politics.¹¹ A collective analysis is undertaken here for the very first time.

In these pamphlet wars, two bitterly opposed groups were at work: on one side, a colonial faction (often referred to in French as “*les colons*”, by both sympathisers and critics), whose interest lay in restoring as much as possible of Saint-Domingue’s pre-slave rebellion structure and identity. On the other, a coalition of opponents from the island as

⁸ Bode et al., *Words That Matter*.

⁹ For comparison, see Frith, *French Colonial Imagination*; Lau, “Imperial Marvels”; Prasad, *Colonialism, Race, and the French Romantic Imagination*; and Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*.

¹⁰ Popkin, “Thermidor, Slavery, and the ‘Affaire des Colonies.’” Other scholarship that has begun to examine colonial issues between the Terror and Napoleon has tended to focus on the period of the Directory, as with Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire*, 149-155.

¹¹ For example, Gauthier, *Triomphe et mort*, part IV and “Note sur le système de défense de Dufaÿ sous la Convention thermidorienne”; Popkin, “Thermidor, Slavery, and the ‘Affaire des Colonies,’” 67-8; Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l’esclavage*, 179-191; White, *Encountering Revolution*, 98.

well as the metropole who, even if they had initially opposed the slave uprising, were now reconciled to working with the emancipated Black majority there in order to secure the French Republic's strategic and economic interests.¹² For convenience, I am referring to these as the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions for the rest of this article, although the latter grouping never had this (or any other) label at the time. On both sides, key members actually spent the first weeks or months of the Thermidorian period petitioning for their release from Parisian jails, having been arrested at various stages of the Terror. Sonthonax and Polverel were detained when their ship arrived back in Rochefort on 9 Thermidor itself, though the order for their arrest dated back to July 1793. This order had confirmed the ascendancy of their *colon* enemies, but only for a while: many of the *colons* were themselves imprisoned early in 1794 after the passing of the abolition decree left them politically exposed. This all underscores the fact that these factions (and their weaponisation of the printed word) long pre-date the fall of Robespierre. Of course, debates over abolition, the treatment of France's Black and mixed race colonial subjects, and the empowerment of white colonial elites at the expense of metropolitan authority all reached back long before even 1789 — but the advent of Revolution in the metropole caused the battlelines in these debates to be drawn deeper and shift faster.¹³ These arguments would continue through the Directory and on into the Napoleonic era, when

¹² For eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue, see Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*; Cheney, *Cul de Sac*; and Garrigus, *Before Haiti*. For the revolutionary period, Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, provides a strong overview. For France's relationship with her colonies, including Saint-Domingue, during the revolutionary period see Benot, *La Révolution française* and Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage*.

¹³ For example, Garrigus, *Beyond Haiti*, chapter 5; Ghachem, *The Old Regime*, chapter 2; Popkin, "Saint-Domingue, Slavery, and the Origins of the French Revolution".

slavery was reinstated in some parts of the Empire and a final, brutal and unsuccessful attempt was made to reassert French imperial dominance over Saint-Domingue before the independent nation of Haiti was declared on January 1, 1804.

Nevertheless, when analysing the struggle between the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions, the Thermidorian period merits special attention, because of the richness of the writing they produced during that time and how closely this material interacted with broader political and cultural developments. Their output connected distant locations and overlaid colonial and metropolitan Revolutionary dynamics at a critical juncture. Metropolitan authority in Saint-Domingue had almost been extinguished in 1793, but the recruitment of rebel slaves as Republican soldiers in return for their freedom had allowed Sonthonax and Polverel to retain some measure of control over sections of the island. In 1794 they were joined by Toussaint Louverture, the most effective Black general to emerge in three years of fighting, and France's position gradually improved. However, Saint-Domingue's future hung in the balance while France remained at war with Britain and Spain and with only hazy visions of how a post-plantation economy might be organised (and, inevitably, no real understanding of how a post-emancipation society might react to any such attempt at reorganisation).¹⁴

Meanwhile, a dramatic shake-up of metropolitan power structures in the wake of Maximilien Robespierre's arrest and execution on 9-10 Thermidor *an II*/July 27-28 1794 sparked an intense, long-running debate about the future trajectory, both domestically and

¹⁴ French authorities would seek to correct this with a fresh mission to Saint-Domingue (again featuring Sonthonax) launched by the Directory in early 1796, but this had very mixed results: Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 191-203; Stein, *Sonthonax*, chapters 8-9.

abroad, of France's Revolutionary project.¹⁵ Key elements of the Terror had begun to be dismantled with the creation of new national executive committees, the arrest of the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal's public prosecutor, and a review of the state policy of mass imprisonment of Counter-Revolutionary 'suspects.' However, France remained a fractured, dangerous political environment with a volatile relationship to the Revolutionary past. France's elected representatives had only approved the abolition of slavery seven months previously and the principle of Black emancipation was still contested, as well as being bound up with metropolitan confusion and concern over France's imperial future. The raw violence and economic shock of Saint-Domingue's unravelling since the outbreak of slave rebellion there in August 1791 resonated with the troubling narratives emerging across Thermidorian France about the violence and state-sanctioned repression of the Terror. Politicians and wider French society attempted to chronicle, castigate, explain, and understand events and individual or collective Revolutionary behaviour since 1789, and especially during the period of the Terror from the summer of 1793. This process of looking back, of engagement with the recent past, was a crucial component of the Reaction's unique political and cultural atmosphere: a transitional, reflective, and creative phase of the Revolutionary decade certainly, but no less bitter and acrimonious for that. Justice and retribution loomed large, with profound implications for all those linked to rebellion and revolution in Saint-Domingue.¹⁶

¹⁵ See, among many others, Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror*, chapter 4; Jones, "9 Thermidor"; Martin, *Les échos de la Terreur*.

¹⁶ Biard, *Missionnaires de la République*, chapter 7; Fairfax-Cholmeley, "Reliving the Terror"; Steinberg, *Afterlives*. Recent scholarship also continues to interrogate the role of Thermidorian politicians in fashioning the recent past into 'the Terror' (overseen by Robespierre) when the reality had been more complex and

The pamphlet war conducted between the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions located, developed, and manipulated the links between these metropolitan and colonial contexts. It provides a unique case study of how contemporaries came to understand the history of the Revolutionary era they were living through, and how individuals collected and controlled the information required to construct the narratives that guided this process. A complex, tense historiography of Revolution emerged, even as the Revolutionary upheaval continued on both sides of the Atlantic. Its authors carved out a distinct arena within the contemporary metropolitan public sphere as they sought to influence public opinion and France's imperial policy, and the bitter rivalry between the two factions involved was the spark for a host of creative reimaginings of the Revolutionary era up to that point. In particular, a worldview that events since 1789 formed a dual Revolution unfolding in Saint-Domingue and in France simultaneously, in striking contrast to the absence of the former from nineteenth and twentieth-century historiographies of the French Revolution.¹⁷ This worldview was both a partial reflection of reality (because of the many tangible links between France and Saint-Domingue) and a political weapon to sharpen each factions' arguments and attacks on the other. The pamphlet war reveals a significant colonial angle to Joseph Zizek's longstanding argument about the 'forensic power of history' within this post-Terror period. The many battles fought over evidence (its

remained more entwined with the Thermidorian present than Robespierre's denouncers cared to admit: for example, Biard and Linton, *Terror*; Martin, *Les échos de la Terreur*.

¹⁷ Trouillot's blistering critique of the erasure of the history of the Haitian Revolution remains timely: Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, esp. 96-107. See also Benot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, chapter 10. Attempts to better integrate developments in France and Saint-Domingue include Popkin, "The French Revolution's Other Island." Beyond the Revolutionary decade, see Girard, "Napoléon Bonaparte and the Emancipation Issue" and Kwon, "When Parisian liberals spoke for Haiti."

collection, dissemination and manipulation), the politicization of chronologies, and each faction's historical analysis of the immediate past all complement Žizek's exploration of new practices and theories of history-writing in development from 1789 onwards.¹⁸

These dynamics tallied with the broader thrust of a Thermidorian Reaction that saw individuals from across French society produce countless manuscript and print accounts of the recent past. At a national level, the Convention paid increasing attention to such history-making as it was hit by a wave of allegations against its members for their complicity in the Terror, and in recognition of the public interest surrounding the trials of two deputies for their prominent role in provincial repression: Jean-Baptiste Carrier and Joseph LeBon.¹⁹ Evidential trails criss-crossed the country as people collected and publicized material to bolster these initiatives, most prominently in the "*pièces justificatifs*" appended to many personal histories to convince readers of the injustice of what had been suffered (or to argue the opposite, where somebody found themselves accused of being an agent of repression).²⁰ The seminal work of Bronislaw Baczko, and more recent analysis by Howard Brown and Ronen Steinberg among others, confirms how embedded such practices were in the Reaction's political and cultural fabric through to the autumn 1795.²¹

¹⁸ Žizek, "Plume de Fer," 631-2 and "New History". For further discussion of how history-writing and historical interpretation were important ingredients within Thermidorian political culture **as politicians moved away from the Terror and towards the conservative Constitution of Year III**, see Colman, "The Foundation of the French Liberal Republic," chapter 2.

¹⁹ Gomez-Le-Chevanton, "Le procès Carrier"; Steinberg, "Terror on trial," 428-430.

²⁰ See the work done by individuals and local communities in Fairfax-Cholmeley, "Reliving the Terror" (for example, 627).

²¹ Baczko, *Comment sortir de la Terreur*; Brown, "Robespierre's tail" and "The Thermidorians' Terror"; Steinberg, *Afterlives* and "Terror on Trial". See also Mason, "Thermidor and the myth of rupture".

And yet, because the long shadow of the Terror has inspired such historiographical focus on when, how, and why domestic events were either obscured or revealed, the implications of this obsession with history for our understanding of the French Revolution within an international setting continue to be overlooked. Studying the activities of the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions during the Reaction can help to change this.

This pamphlet war also connects – albeit often implicitly – to the broader fight over the principles of abolition and Black emancipation and their relationship to the French Revolutionary project. As Jeremy Popkin has shown, the new constitution of October 1795 signalled a hard-fought victory for the argument that reneging on abolition would be a potentially fatal attack on Revolutionary ideals.²² The fact that when Poulverel died in April 1795 the Convention was three months into a seven-month investigation of his and Sonthonax's conduct in Saint-Domingue shows the scale and intensity of the Reaction's reckoning with France's colonial legacy. The former commissioners were only formally exonerated in August 1795, and the two factions continued to circle each other across the final months of the Convention and the promulgation of the new constitution, which finally confirmed abolition as part of the post-Terror Revolutionary consensus.²³

While it is possible to follow some of the activity of the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions through Convention records and contemporary newspapers, their principal battleground was in the wider print culture of the Reaction, and the printed pamphlet their weapon of choice. This was to be expected given the ubiquity of the printed word in the Revolutionary lives of politically active French men and women since 1789; indeed, many of the most

²² Popkin, "Thermidor, Slavery, and the 'Affaire des colonies'," 78.

²³ Benot, "Le procès Sonthonax"; Stein, *Sonthonax*, chapter 7.

significant *colon* and anti-*colon* names had been appearing regularly in print since well before 9 Thermidor.²⁴ It was a complex print ecosystem, with writers building and refining their own faction's offering over many months while simultaneously interjecting in and disputing with their rivals' attempts to do likewise. Reconstructing such an ecosystem from within the Revolutionary world of print is a formidable challenge. The volume and diversity of printed material, combined with the difficulties libraries and archives have had in cataloguing it (including deceptive or generic titles, hidden authorship, and confusion over publication dates), necessitated that research for this article center on extensive sampling from within a broader print collection. This work was undertaken on the British Library's French Revolutionary Tracts (BLFRT), covering 472 print items classified as relating to French colonial matters during the Revolutionary era. Thirty-seven items of interest were identified as a result: eighteen are from the *colon* side during the Reaction, sixteen push the anti-*colon* cause, and a further three are by anonymous authors offering a more neutral perspective.²⁵ These items were produced across the Reaction, from the end of thermidor *an* II to early fructidor *an* III/August 1795. The early weeks were the most prolific, but both

²⁴ For example, *Courte réponse que font les commissaires de Saint-Domingue, Page et Brulley, au Précis de la justification de Paul-Augustin Cambefort, et autres déportés de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, 1793), which appeared back in February 1793.

²⁵ The sample for this article was constructed from analysis of the following volumes of printed pamphlets: BLFRT F.678-700; F.72*-76*; F.R.398; F.R.402; F.R.406; F.R.408; R.326; R.593; R.638 (a total of 472 printed items, 1788-1822). These volumes were selected using the only available printed catalogue summary of the BLFRT's rich but eccentrically organised contents as a guide: G. K. Fortescue, *French Revolution Collections in the British Library: List of the Contents of the Three Special Collections of Pamphlets, Journals and Other Works in the British Library, relating chiefly to the French Revolution* (London: British Library, 1979). Pamphlets without a BLFRT reference at their first citation are not part of this sample but have been chosen for inclusion where relevant.

sides continued to publish several times a month thereafter.²⁶ Indeed, the depth of both factions' commitment to these printed exchanges is further evidenced by the substantial number of other such publications which lie outside this article's BLFRT core but which clearly echo the themes explored below.²⁷

The *Colon* and Anti-*Colon* Factions

The material produced during this pamphlet war can first be used to interrogate the identities fashioned by these rival factions — both for themselves and for each other. Two individuals stand out as leaders of the *colon* grouping: Pierre-François Page and Augustin Brulley, who had been sent to Paris back in the summer of 1792 as commissioners for Saint-Domingue's second Colonial Assembly, a bastion of white planter interests.²⁸ Along with two others, Louis-Jean Clausson and Thomas Millet, they had subsequently been tasked with representing (mainly white) colonists who had fled Saint-Domingue for America since the first outbreak of slave rebellion in August 1791. This group, whose members described themselves as “refugees,” had grown exponentially since the destruction of Cap-Français in the early summer of 1793.²⁹ Although Page, Brulley,

²⁶ This article's BLFRT sample includes printed material from every month of the Reaction apart from nivôse, ventôse, floréal and thermidor III.

²⁷ For example, and in response to the writings of Therou (the author of the dialogue featured at the beginning of this article): *Léonard Leblois, au calomniateur Therou, et à ses complices, tous colons blancs, ennemis nés de la liberté et de l'égalité* (Paris: Pain, 1794). Authors, titles and key themes from the BLFRT sample were all cross-referenced against three other major print collections for supplementary material: the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Newberry Library and the John Carter Brown Library).

²⁸ F.R.406/1 *Notes sur les lettres*, 1-2. For an excellent overview of this Assembly's reactionary track record across 1791-2 see Popkin, “The French Revolution's Royal Governor,” 211-223.

²⁹ White, *Encountering Revolution*, esp. chapter 3.

Clausson, and Millet were the most prolific authors, the full list of signatures from the *colon* pamphlets studied for this article points to a larger group of active supporters. Other public figures, including the Convention deputy Benoît Gouly (another white representative, of Isle-de-France, now Mauritius) were also involved.³⁰

Colon pamphlets constructed a shared history of earlier Revolutionary activity for this core group, in particular for the crucial period around the Convention's decision to abolish slavery.³¹ These *colons* also prided themselves on what they believed to be their superior knowledge of France's imperial possessions and emphasised their personal connections with those living beyond the metropole. As one pamphlet put it, "not every Frenchman is a *colon*"³²; another eulogised "that precious class of Frenchman" who had been responsible for Saint-Domingue's economic boom and, undeterred by the current violence, stood ready to return to rebuild the colony..³³ This imperial outlook also meant that the *colon* factional identity incorporated a much larger community, both real and imagined. A number of individuals held genuine claims to representative powers as

³⁰ For example, see the signatures to F.R.406/7 *Les calomnieurs*; F.R.406/12 *Les terroristes*; R.326/10 *Au comité de salut public. Observations sur une note remise par Dufay, Garnot, Mils, Belley et Boisson* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1795 [2 messidor an III?]). The full list of *colon* signatories is: Pierre-François Page, Augustin Brulley, Louis-Jean Clausson, Thomas Millet, Legrand, Therou, Louis Verneuil, Jean-Gabriel Larchevesque-Thibaud, Cesar Duny, René Ambroise Deaubonneau, Senac, Fondeviollle, general François-Thomas Galbaud, and Convention deputies Pascal Creuzé-Dufresne and Jean-Claude Defrance.

³¹ For example, BLFRT F.R.406/11 *Réponse à Dufay, sur la rétractation tardive et mensongère, relative aux députés de la Gironde* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1795 [7 messidor an III?]),10 and BLFRT R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 4.

³² BLFRT F.R.406/7 *Les calomnieurs Leborgne, Polverel, Sontonax [sic] et complices, appelés au Tribunal révolutionnaire par les commissaires des patriotes de S. Domingue, députés près la Convention nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [10 brumaire an III?]), 2.

³³ R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 7.

“commissioners” appointed by various exiled groups across the Atlantic.³⁴ *Colon* pamphleteers in Paris therefore frequently presented themselves as spokesmen (and they are all men, in both camps) for a maltreated, frequently impoverished yet defiant group of France’s international citizenry. This diaspora allegedly encompassed thousands of victims of a Terror spanning the Atlantic, from those forced to live as refugees in America to *colon* prisoners within the hexagon.³⁵ It also extended beyond the living: for example, pamphlets expressed horror at the massacre of the inhabitants of Cap-Français, or highlighted the claim that hundreds of fellow French *colons* had been executed in Brest after their deportation from British territory elsewhere in the Caribbean.³⁶

In the early weeks of the Reaction, the Parisian core of this faction complained vociferously that many of them remained in gaol long after their adversaries were released. While individuals from both factions were gaoled during the Terror, the *colon* faction had indeed been targeted much more comprehensively, including via targeted legislation in March 1794.³⁷ Furthermore, the affected *colons* were only released in November of that

³⁴ For example, BLFRT F.686/15 *A la Convention nationale* (Paris?: 1794 [20 thermidor an II]), 8; F.694/3 *Calomniateurs dénoncés à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [fructidor an II?]), 2; F.R.406/1 *A la Convention nationale. Notes sur les lettres attribuées à Page et Brulley, commissaires de St.-Domingue députés près la Convention Nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [fructidor an II?]), 1-2; F.682/2 *Défi aux factieux. Adresse à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [10 Vendémiaire an III?]), 1; F.R.406/7 *Les calomniateurs*, 1.

³⁵ F.678/2 *Dialogue*: 8-9 (refugees). For claims of mass incarceration within France, see BLFRT F.678/5 *A la Convention nationale. Réponse de Page et Brulley, commissaires de St.-Domingue, députés près la Convention nationale, aux calomnies qu’on a fait signer au citoyen Belley* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [11 fructidor an II?]): 11 and F.R.406/11 *Réponse à Dufay*, 10.

³⁶ BLFRT F.R.406/12 *Les terroristes de Saint-Domingue dénoncés à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1795 [prairial an III?]), 3-4.

³⁷ See fn. 114 below for details on this legislation, the Law of 19 ventôse an II.

year, whereas anti-*colon* prisoners were freed much earlier in the Reaction.³⁸ This pattern of experience led the *colons* to claim that they were reliant on print to level the political playing field.³⁹ In the invented dialogue between the “butchers” of Saint-Domingue, the *colon* author Therou therefore has Sonthonax ascribe an awesome power to the pen of his unnamed *colon* adversary. “ ‘He immediately made a note of my accusation,’ ” Therou had Sonthonax say, “ ‘ordered me to show some evidence, and then demanded to know my name with an air and in a tone, and all the while with his pen poised, that made me quite afraid he was going to finish me off!’ ”⁴⁰

Anti-*colons* disputed this image of courageous suffering. Readers were warned not to trust a “colonial aristocracy” trying ever more desperate tactics to avoid punishment for a litany of crimes.⁴¹ One writer warned the Paris Jacobin Club that “you never had more determined enemies even among all the tyrants of Europe,” and identified the *colon* faction’s roots in the ‘colonial tyranny’ of the pre-Revolutionary Caribbean.⁴² In Saint-Domingue, its members were linked with the politically conservative (majority white) colonial assemblies of the early 1790s; in France, “these white colonials” were portrayed as

³⁸ Gauthier, “The Role of the Saint-Domingue Delegation,” 171-173.

³⁹ F.686/15 *A la Convention nationale*, 4.

⁴⁰ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 13.

⁴¹ BLFRT F.75*/5 *Sonthonax, ci-devant commissaire civil, délégué à Saint-Domingue, à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [6 fructidor an II?]), 1. Contemporary readers might well have made a link from such language to the lobbying done earlier in the Revolution by the Massiac Club, founded to defend white planter interests against the work of the Society for the Friends of Blacks. The latter called for equal rights for free people of colour and moved tentatively towards a future abolition of slavery. See Debien, *Les colons de Saint-Domingue et la Révolution*; Resnick, “The *Société des Amis des Noirs*”.

⁴² BLFRT F.75*/9 *Réflexions d’un observateur sur les malheurs que Saint-Domingue éprouvés depuis la Révolution, adressées aux Jacobins* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [20 fructidor an II?]), 6.

skilful political chameleons who saw the Reaction as just another opportunity to shift public identities while strengthening their private Counter-Revolutionary position.⁴³ Thus, while the *colons* tried to present themselves as part of the Reaction's vanguard by focusing on how they had supplied evidence of Robespierre's covert links to the deputies who campaigned for abolition at the height of the Terror, their opponents countered with their own depiction of the group as having enjoyed the fruits of Robespierre's patronage right up until this criminal resource was taken from them by the latter's arrest and execution.⁴⁴ Étienne Polverel's son, François, wrote angrily in the spring of 1795 about the insidious effect the latter tactic was having on the French Republic's difficult transition out of the Terror. The *colons* "insert themselves into the ranks of honest citizens," he argued. "They class themselves among the victims of tyranny; they challenge revolutionary veterans, virtuous and energetic patriots, for the honour of having suffered in the cause of liberty."⁴⁵

Specific references to a group identity among those with anti-*colon* sympathies are rarer. *Colon* writings tended to focus more on particular adversaries, and this seems to have encouraged individual lines of defence and counterattack from the anti-*colon* side, too. *Colon* literature was unequivocal about the level of organisation being confronted, though, with "Sonthonax, Polverel and the faction serving them" a typical formula presented for

⁴³ F.75*/9 *Réflexions d'un observateur*, 7.

⁴⁴ F.694/3 *Calomniateurs dénoncés*, 8 (vanguard); F.75*/9 *Réflexions d'un observateur*, 7 (Robespierre's patronage).

⁴⁵ BLFRT F.75*/6 *Le masque en lambeaux, ou Preuves de la connivence et de la complicité des colons Léopards avec les Decemvirs et les assassins subalternes du Tribunal révolutionnaire, avant et depuis le 31 Mai 1793 jusqu'au 9 thermidor* (Paris: Pain, 1795 [germinal an III?]), 2. This was written after Étienne Polverel's death. Another of his son's printed defences described the attacks against Polverel's reputation in similar terms: BLFRT F.696/10 *Pétition à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Pain, 1795 [30 germinal an III?]), 2-3.

denunciation.⁴⁶ In late Autumn 1794, a *colon* pamphlet warned the Convention that England had in fact been directing this same faction for the past five years.⁴⁷ And Therou's invented dialogue ends with a powerful image of Sonthonax and Polverel returning to their clandestine world of shadowy, anonymous operatives:

Sonthonax: You are right: you have restored my courage, goodbye. I am going to see C.... and B....

Polverel: Goodbye: as for myself, in an hour's time I will go and see T.... and B.... Tell Dufay to also go see C... and L... .⁴⁸

Dufay, the only character identified, was deputy Dufay from Saint-Domingue whose delayed arrival, along with his colleagues Jean-Baptiste Belley and Jean-Baptiste Mills, to take their seats in the Convention at the start of pluviôse an II/mid-January 1794 had been the catalyst for the abolition decree later that month. This trio had been elected from Saint-Domingue's North Province the previous September in special elections arranged by Sonthonax.⁴⁹ They have often been referred to as the "tricolor delegation" because they were chosen as representatives of Black, mixed race and white racial groupings on the island, and they remained prominent in discussions of colonial affairs during the Reaction.

⁴⁶ F.682/2 *Défi aux factieux*, 12.

⁴⁷ BLFRT F.R.406/2 *Adresse à la Convention nationale. Faction anglaise, ses projets* (Paris: Laurens, 1794 [brumaire an III?], 1.

⁴⁸ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 16.

⁴⁹ Three other deputies (Étienne Laforest, Joseph Boisson and Pierre Garnot) did not arrive in Paris until July 1794, the group having decided to travel in two separate groups for security reasons. Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 95 and 110; Gauthier, "The Role of the Saint-Domingue Delegation," 171-173.

Undermining their reputation aided *colon* writers' attempts to weaken the Thermidorian consensus about the wisdom of the abolition decree Dufay, Belley and Mills had sponsored. In early fructidor, Belley explained his disgust at the slanders directed at him and his fellow representatives from Saint-Domingue by emphasizing that these should be considered not just attacks on him and his colleagues but as an affront to all their island constituents.⁵⁰ In a later co-authored publication, the trio were presented as having "cemented" the link between France and the colonies by securing the loyalty of Saint-Domingue's inhabitants.⁵¹ Another pamphlet alleged that *colons* had organized a failed plot to convince Robespierre to put a swathe of individuals with anti-*colon* sympathies on the list for trial and execution by the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal.⁵²

Colon attacks against the tricolor delegation also had Sonthonax and Polverel in their sights. One origin myth saw them appointed amidst the ashes of Cap-Français on the understanding that they would moonlight as legal representatives tasked with ensuring France was a safe place for the civil commissioners to return to when they had completed their criminal enterprise overseas.⁵³ Overall, it is clear that the *colon* faction identified

⁵⁰ BLFRT F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue Représentant du peuple, à ses collègues* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [6 fructidor an II?]), 1-2.

⁵¹ BLFRT F.R.406/9 *Copie d'une note remise au comité de salut-public par la députation de Saint-Domingue* (Paris?: n.p., 1795 [29 prairial an III?]), 3.

⁵² BLFRT F.696/12 *P. J. Leborgne, ci-devant commissaire de la Marine aux Isles du Vent de l'Amérique, à Janvier Littée, homme de couleur, député de la Martinique; sur le système de diffamation employé par la faction Anglaise contre les patriotes* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [6 vendémiaire an III?]), 10.

⁵³ F.R.406/1 *Notes sur les lettres*, 4. Other individuals who appear as anti-*colon* authors or signatories in the pamphlets I have studied are: Léonard Leblois, Pierre-Joseph Leborgne, François Polverel *fils*, Etienne Polverel, Julien Raimond and deputies Joseph Boisson, Pierre Garnot and Etienne Laforest. The *colons* Clausson and Millet also claim the deputies Jean Pelet, Jacques-Alexis Thuriot, Louis Turreau (cousin of the infamous general Louis-Marie Turreau) and Cambon provided public support to their opponents, see

Sonthonax and Polverel as their primary target, with the former regarded as the more influential and dangerous foe. One early pamphlet linked them to Louis XVI; another pushed Sonthonax's court connections back further to 1787 and the final weeks of Vergennes's Foreign Ministry.⁵⁴ They were depicted incessantly as morally and financially corrupt, with the blood of thousands of Saint-Domingue's citizens on their hands (mainly from among the white section of the colony's population).⁵⁵ As for the anti-*colon* response, Sonthonax had already revealed himself to be a strong personality and a skilful communicator during his mission to Saint-Domingue, and it tended to be his own writing that challenged these *colon* accounts most forcefully. He had no compunction about brandishing an image of himself and Polverel as dogged Republican heroes, without whose efforts (and in spite of countless *colon* machinations) France would by 1794 have lost all control of her prized Antillean possession.⁵⁶

Creating Revolutionary Historiographies

The fall of Robespierre immediately presented new challenges and opportunities for both factions. As the *colon*'s poised pen in Therou's pamphlet about the "Butchers of Saint-Domingue" has already suggested, the battle over recent Revolutionary histories would be

F.686/14 *A la Convention nationale*, 2-3. This does suggest that there was a much wider circle involved in this faction.

⁵⁴ BLFRT F.686/14 *A la Convention nationale* (Paris?: n.p., 1794 [6 fructidor an II?]), 1 (Louis XVI); F.686/2 *Impostures de Santhonax [sic] et Polverel dévoilées à la Convention nationale* (Paris?: n.p., 1794 [10 fructidor an II?]), 4 (Vergennes).

⁵⁵ For example, F.686/2 *Impostures*, 7.

⁵⁶ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*: 4. Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, contains many examples of these aspects of the commissioner's character.

pivotal as the Reaction gathered pace. Early confirmation of this came via the rival appearances each faction's principal representatives made to plead their respective causes at the Paris Jacobin Club. Sonthonax and Polverel went there in person to publicize their version of events in the colonies the day after their release from prison, on 19 thermidor *an* II/August 6, 1794.⁵⁷ In typically confident fashion, the former declared, "We [both] swear to you that while in the Americas we have been martyrs to the principles you hold dear." Because they were still in gaol, Page, Brulley, and their compatriot Legrand could only address the same audience in early Fructidor by having a letter read out there.⁵⁸ Forty-eight hours earlier, on 5 fructidor *an* II/August 22, 1794, supporters had tried and failed to engineer their release after securing the right to address the Convention when it was in session. Their plea was initially successful, and a motion to release Page, Brulley and Legrand was passed. However, it was immediately reversed in a second and decisive vote after Belley led four fellow deputies — Jean Pelet, Louis Turreau, Jacques-Alexis Thuriot, and Cambon (the same Cambon whose house was the supposed location of the confrontation between the "butcher" Sonthonax and the anonymous *colon*) — in denouncing their prospective release.⁵⁹ Within twenty-four hours, Page and Brulley had penned a frustrated diatribe in response, accusing Belley of brazen ineptitude, Turreau of

⁵⁷ François-Alphonse Aulard, *La société des Jacobins. Recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, vol. 6 (Paris: Cerf, Noblet and Maison Quantin, 1897), 327-9; *Courier de l'égalité* No. 721 (23 thermidor *an* II), p. 415. In a quirk of fate, Sonthonax and Polverel had arrived back in France at Rochefort on 9 Thermidor *an* II and were promptly arrested under an outstanding order from 1793.

⁵⁸ Aulard, *La société des Jacobins*, 370-2 (session of 7 fructidor *an* II/Aug. 24, 1794). This incident is also referred to in F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 10.

⁵⁹ *Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur seule histoire authentique et inaltérée de la Révolution française*, vol. 21 (Paris: Plon, 1861), 566-7.

opining on an issue he knew nothing about, and Thuriot of being a credulous cipher of “these monsters” who were conspiring to hide the truth about the authors’ predicament as well as the fate of Saint-Domingue.⁶⁰ But this had no immediate effect: losing control of the narrative meant staying in gaol, and Page, Brulley, and Legrand remained there until November.

In fact, one of the few things both factions agreed about was the value of history to their cause. Irrespective of an author’s political agenda, there was a high level of sensitivity over the way in which narratives were being (or could be) constructed, as well as widespread concern about the threat posed by those histories created and disseminated by rivals. Furthermore, both factions recognised that material evidence was critical to the success of their campaigns: an entirely polemical account was not considered to be effective in such a saturated market, or at least no polemic which had not been disguised with at least some decorative evidence. Recognition of the importance of evidence (and its effective presentation) is writ large across this print conflict. Such material was frequently handled in a sophisticated manner, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the simultaneous need to build a relationship of trust with the reading public while also manipulating and undermining readers’ opinions of the opposition and its evidence. The experienced political activist Julien Raimond took care to emphasize in a preface to one lengthy piece that every single claim he made about the *colon* faction was drawn verbatim from the pamphlets that this group had itself published. A dense network of footnotes then reinforced this message

⁶⁰ F.686/14 *A la Convention nationale*, 2-3.

to the reader throughout the main text.⁶¹ On the opposing side, a collective attack on Saint-Domingue's Convention deputies in the summer of 1795 was assiduous (and accurate) in providing not just the title but the page number for what was, in the context of the late Reaction, a damning passage in a co-authored piece by Belley, Dufay, and Mills published soon after their arrival on French soil back in 1794. The *colons'* research had unearthed an unequivocal statement in support of Robespierre and the use of the guillotine against political opponents, sentiments which had been unremarkable at the height of the Terror but were a hostage to political fortune after Thermidor.⁶²

One anti-*colon* document is especially revealing of this evidential battlefield: a transcript of two letters by Page and Brulley, who were sarcastically described as “patriots” in the pamphlet title when their own unpatriotic thoughts were there for everyone to read underneath.⁶³ The first letter, for example, had Page writing in July 1792 to condemn the behaviour of Parisian protestors who the previous month had forced their way into the Tuileries palace to confront the King. The letter also regretted a decline in the public display of the white cockade (a symbol of royalist sympathies), and criticized the

⁶¹ BLFRT F.692/3 *Preuves complètes et matérielles du projet des colons pour mener les colonies à l'indépendance, tirés de leurs propres écrits* (Paris, Imprimerie de l'Union, 1795 [an III]), iv; Garrigus, “Opportunist or Patriot.”

⁶² R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 5. The publication they were referring to was *Relation détaillée des évènements malheureux qui se sont passés au Cap depuis l'arrivée du ci-devant général Galbaud, jusqu'au moment où il a fait brûler cette ville et a pris la fuite* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1793), and the statement in question can be read on p.16.

⁶³ BLFRT F.75*/8 *Lettres des patriotes Page et Brulley* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [fructidor an II?]). Revolutionary authorities during the Terror had made extensive use of private correspondence and other written evidence when investigating and prosecuting potential Counter-Revolutionaries, in the belief that such material could reveal an individual's ‘true’ loyalties and hidden plots: Hesse, “La Preuve par lettre.”

republican faction gaining control over the National Assembly that summer.⁶⁴ In a separate publication, Sonthonax trumpeted the value of such evidence: “We are bringing to light their [Page and Brulley’s] correspondence with the other *colons*; it is with their own writing, fully signed, that we plan to expose them; it is with their own writing that they will be convicted.”⁶⁵ However, Page and Brulley vehemently denied the authenticity of these documents. Could any reasonable person, they asked, really believe that such a conveniently damning pair of letters were genuine? They argued that the style was suspiciously similar given the supposed differences in authorship, location, and recipient: Sonthonax, Polverel and their Convention “accomplices” were using forgeries to discredit their enemies and cover up their crimes in Saint-Domingue.⁶⁶ In his invented dialogue, Page and Brulley’s ally Therou had Polverel boasting that these “‘fabricated letters’” were certain to bring down their intended targets in the court of public opinion, while a more cautious Sonthonax was already fretting about the response they could expect from their enemies: “‘However well forged they may be, you know as well as I do that it will go badly for us when we are forced to have them verified by [handwriting] experts.’”⁶⁷

In the early weeks and months after Thermidor, the recurring refrain of the *colon* faction was that such manipulation and falsification of the historical record by their adversaries could only be corrected if the Convention granted two related requests: *colon*

⁶⁴ The actual term used was “républicistes”, which is highly unusual for this period. F.75*/8 *Lettres des patriotes*, 2.

⁶⁵ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*, 2.

⁶⁶ F.R.406/1 *Notes sur les lettres*, 3-6. They claimed that these letters had circulated extensively, including in newspapers, for some months prior to their publication by their enemies in fructidor II. This had apparently precipitated their imprisonment during the Terror.

⁶⁷ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 4.

access to their own papers, and some form of hearing that would give them an opportunity to rebut their rivals's lies in person and in public. With regard to the first request, one unique feature of this pamphlet war provides a salient example of the wider Thermidorian preoccupation with material evidence: the physical distance between the process of history-writing (in Paris) and much of the history-making (in Saint-Domingue). This meant material evidence was weighted towards the personal possessions of the key participants more than was often the case for domestic events – a trend accentuated by the huge quantities of official records lost since 1791, most iconically in the 1793 destruction of Cap-Français. In early August 1794, Sonthonax noted that he was waiting to regain access to a trunk containing his personal correspondence, which had been under seal since his arrest.⁶⁸ A month later, he spent four pages of another pamphlet listing some of the principal items of interest from this and other sealed collections, as well as indicating how these would advance the anti-*colon* cause.⁶⁹ Some of this material had apparently been sent well in advance of the civil commissioners' return; other portions would have travelled with the civil commissioners themselves, just as Belley, Dufay, and Mills tried but failed to bring documents with them at the end of 1793 when they sailed for France to take up their seats in the Convention.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*, 5.

⁶⁹ BLFRT F.690/2 *L. F. Sonthonax, commissaire civil, ci-devant délégué à St.-Domingue par l'Assemblée législative et la Convention nationale, à Bourdon (de l'Oise), représentant du peuple* (Paris: Pain, 1794 [5th sans-cullotides *an* II?]), 10-13.

⁷⁰ Sonthonax wrote of "a trunk of papers" which arrived from America on 11 brumaire *an* II/Nov. 1 1793: F.690/2 *L. F. Sonthonax, commissaire civil*, 9. Belley, Dufay and Mills had many of their possessions destroyed when they came under repeated attack by white protestors in Philadelphia.

The *colon* faction was even more vocal about the significance of their personal papers, which they repeatedly presented as forming an official “archive” (trading on the quasi-official status many of them had as “commissioners” appointed by various colonial interest groups) and which had been under seal since their arrest, back in February 1794. As Page, Brulley, and Legrand wrote in an early Thermidorian expression of what was to become a longstanding frustration: “These are the facts.....these are the truths.....an examination of our archives, and above all of the official records in our possession, will prove that not a day went by without us warning representatives, ministers and the [colonial] committee of the danger the colonies were in.”⁷¹ They addressed their claim directly to the Convention, arguing that it was imperative to unseal those archives so that their voluminous contents could be shared with deputies – and, by inference, the wider public. When Brulley did finally gain access to some of these documents in mid-February 1795, he emphasised their importance by inserting an introductory footnote claiming he had incorporated them into a pamphlet on the very day they were finally made available to him.⁷²

The *colons* were dogged in their request for some kind of public hearing that would pit the two factions against each other in a set piece encounter. Throughout August and September 1794 they called for a “colonial commission” to be established, arguing that it

⁷¹ F.694/3 *Calomniateurs dénoncés*, 4.

⁷² BLFRT F.686/1 *A Dufay, qui se dit calomnié, comme s'il pouvait l'être* (Paris?: n.p., 1795 [pluviôse an III]), 1. Official records show that the *colons* were present at examinations of their “archives” by the authorities from mid-October (while they were still being held in prison) but this was very different from having personal access. See AN F⁷ 4664/61/dossier 2 (Page) Colonial Commission to Committee of General Security, 23 vendémiaire III.

would remove pressure from an overworked Committee of Public Safety and ensure the necessary capacity for processing the reams of evidence currently under seal – as well as for identifying and rejecting the fabricated evidence of their opponents.⁷³ This campaign was successful: the Convention announced just such a commission on 7 vendémiaire *an* III/September 28, 1794.

This Colonial Commission pursued a lengthy and forensic investigation of events in Saint-Domingue since the beginning of the slave rebellion, focusing on the conduct of Sonthonax and Polverel, which provided ample opportunity for the *colons* to testify in public against their greatest enemies. Within days, however, the *colons* began to complain about the way in which the commission was going about its work. Concern centered on the alleged failure to utilize material evidence correctly. One pamphlet even called for proceedings to be moved to the Revolutionary Tribunal in the hope of a more sympathetic bureaucracy.⁷⁴ The investigation did not proceed as the *colons* had hoped: hearings dragged on from January 30 to August 19, 1795, and the commission's eventual conclusions vindicated Sonthonax and Polverel and damned their *colon* accusers.⁷⁵

⁷³ F.694/3 *Calomnieurs dénoncés*, 11 (Committee of Public Safety); F.R.406/1 *Notes sur les lettres*, 7-8 (evidence, from both sides).

⁷⁴ F.R.406/2 *Adresse à la Convention nationale*, 3-9 (failure); F.682/2 *Défi aux factieux*, 10 and F.R.406/7 *Les calomnieurs*, 7-9 (Revolutionary Tribunal)

⁷⁵ The investigation can be followed in Benot, "Le procès Sonthonax" and Popkin, "Thermidor, Slavery, and the 'Affaire des Colonies'." See also, White, *Encountering Revolution*, 115-118.

French Revolutionary Histories of Saint-Domingue

The Commission's work did not weaken either faction's commitment to the pamphlet war already underway. Indeed, the Commission's very existence confirmed both the importance of the history of contemporary Saint-Domingue to Revolutionary France's future —as well as the importance of controlling that history)— and the difficulties involved in unpacking recent developments there. Belley was clear about the problem undermining France's relationship with its most important colony: “an impenetrable veil of intrigue,” spread by the *colon* faction over the course of five long years of disinformation, calumny and conspiracy.⁷⁶ Such language was ubiquitous in the early days of the Reaction: in their discussions of recent Revolutionary events and alleged excesses, the deputies of the Thermidorian Convention frequently professed wonder at veils being lifted from their own eyes, or eagerness to cast off the veils covering their colleagues. In relation to Saint-Domingue, and the fate of France's colonies more generally, a conspiracy of confusion had been documented at the highest level of government barely a week after the execution of Robespierre. On 19 thermidor *an II*/August 5, 1794, deputy Barère read out a Committee of Public Safety report to his Convention colleagues which emphasised the difficulty in understanding events in Saint-Domingue when so many intriguers, émigrés, and aristocrats from the colony had passed on unverifiable accounts..⁷⁷

These efforts were themselves in part reflections of previous attempts by metropolitan actors during the Terror to understand events in Revolutionary Saint-

⁷⁶ F.75*/2 Belley, *de Saint-Domingue*, 2.

⁷⁷ *Rapport fait au nom du Comité de Salut Public par Barère, sur les colonies françaises Isles-du-Vent* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1794), 1-2 and *Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur*, 418.

Domingue – or at least to collect enough information to be able to control the public narrative of these events for factional purposes. Notable examples included the high-profile trials of two former governors of the colony, Philibert-François Rouxel de Blanchelande and Jean-Jacques-Pierre Desparbès, in the spring of 1793, and a previous colonial commission which had barely got started before the purge of the Girondins on 2 June the same year redirected political priorities elsewhere.⁷⁸ Echoes can also be heard in pre-Revolutionary accounts from both metropolitan and colonial interest groups frustrated by perceived knowledge gaps and policy dissonances in France and Saint-Domingue’s increasingly tense transatlantic relationship.⁷⁹

The production and dissemination of *colon* and anti-*colon* pamphlets therefore had the potential to feed into the longstanding metropolitan struggle to manage effectively what had once been its most profitable colony. Even though that profitability had been destroyed by the ongoing slave rebellion, there was a widespread belief (born of convenience more than realism) that the colony’s economic glory could return if the recent past was understood and the immediate future carefully managed. Furthermore, Saint-Domingue remained strategically important in the ongoing war effort, given British and Spanish interests in the wider Caribbean.⁸⁰ An indication of the Thermidorian trajectory of this disputed history is provided by one early contribution by Belley, from early Fructidor

⁷⁸ Popkin, “Thermidor, Slavery, and the ‘Affaire des Colonies,’” 68 (1793 aborted commission); Popkin, “The French Revolution’s Royal Governor” (Blanchelande). Both Blanchelande and d’Esparbès mounted spirited defence campaigns via print: for example, Blanchelande, *Discours justificatif de Philibert-François Rouxel Blanchelande* (Paris: Nyon, 1793) and Desparbès, *Réponses du citoyen D’Esparbès, A l’Arrêté des Commissaires Nationaux Civils des Isles-Sous-le-Vent* (Paris: Testu, 1793).

⁷⁹ For example, Ghachem, *Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution*, esp. chapters 3-4.

⁸⁰ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*; Davey, *In Nelson’s Wake*, chapter 5.

an II/mid-August 1794. Belley argued that years of obfuscation meant the Convention was unable to understand recent events in Saint-Domingue, and so his first step in lifting the veil was to describe the competing interests at work there. His Manichean picture was populated first by the enemy, depicted as a combination of survivors from the island's reactionary Colonial Assemblies and indebted colonial businessmen, all in treacherous alliance with the English. Page and Brulley were shown as the ringleaders and chief spokesmen in Paris. Belley took readers back to the formation of the Colonial Assembly at Cap-Français in the autumn of 1791 and argued that this and the earlier assembly at Saint-Marc (the membership of which was dominated by white planter interests) formed a "system" for pushing France to abandon the colony, ceding control of the island and its resources to this discriminatory cabal. Their "Machiavellian" tactics included denying the rights of free people of colour, rejecting the authority of metropolitan legislation, undermining efforts to control the slave rebellion, forming an alliance with the English, and publicly criticizing the work of successive French National Assemblies and other French Revolutionary institutions (including the Jacobin Club). All this was done while pocketing the financial aid sent by the metropole to protect its colony.⁸¹ Pitted against this menacing group, Belley's canvas only had space for two heroes: Sonthonax and Polverel. However, even though his stated motive for this pamphlet was to defend their reputations from ongoing attack, Belley explained that he would leave it to them to describe their work in Saint-Domingue.⁸² This particular history therefore remained centered on the activities of

⁸¹ F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue*, 2-4.

⁸² F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue*: 1, 5. It seem highly likely that this was coordinated with Sonthonax, because the latter published a self-defence on the same day (see F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*).

the *colon* faction across two locations and timeframes: on the island of Saint-Domingue in a Revolutionary past, and on the streets of Paris in the Revolutionary present. Page and Brulley were portrayed as heavily implicated in the Counter-Revolutionary machinations besetting both spheres.

This history continued to develop as more pamphlets rapidly appeared on the market. Sonthonax himself provided details of British and Spanish military manoeuvres against the colony during 1793 and 1794, from the capture of the valuable military outpost at Mole-St.-Nicolas by the English to the Spanish blockade of Cap-Français and its subsequent relief by a French Republican army of former slaves – that is, by Black soldiers recruited through Sonthonax’s unilateral act of mass emancipation.⁸³ Léonard Leblois took his readers further back, offering the anti-*colon* perspective on the pre-Revolutionary structure and daily life of France’s colonies. Places like Saint-Domingue, Leblois explained, had tended to have an oppressive government favorable to the richest plantation owners, who then dominated both the slaves and the majority of free people. The latter were “divided nonsensically between white citizens and individuals of color who were denied citizenship.”⁸⁴ The rich, white plantation owners’ cruel exploitation of this system meant it was inevitable they would resist the advance of a French Revolution threatening “their sordid pleasures, their prejudices and their slaves.”⁸⁵ By contrast, free people of color shared a range of interests with less privileged white colonists, including a desire for equality. Leblois’s *longue durée* approach promised to enlighten his Thermidorian audience

⁸³ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*, 3-4

⁸⁴ F.75*/9 *Réflexions d’un observateur*, 5.

⁸⁵ F.75*/9 *Réflexions d’un observateur*, 5.

by highlighting the likely Revolutionary sympathies of different parts of the colonial social structure: even if a veil currently obscured the detail of events in the 1790s, earlier patterns of behaviour offered a useful workaround.

Simultaneously, the *colon* faction was putting out its own version of colonial events, stretching back at least to 1790 and the convocation of Saint-Domingue's first "Colonial Assembly."⁸⁶ In general, *colon* narratives tended to focus on the period of Sonthonax and Polverel's mission to Saint-Domingue from 1792-1794. Two days after Belley's pamphlet, while still confined to the Luxembourg prison, Page and Brulley sent their own detailed account to the printing press. This included claims that the commissioners had dissolved Saint-Domingue's popular societies precisely when patriots most needed this support network in the face of the violence sweeping the island; that they were responsible for the destruction of Cap-Français in June 1793, as well as the unjustified bombardment of the capital, Port-au-Prince; and that they colluded with the English in their meddling in the region.⁸⁷ This built on a piece written a week earlier and addressed directly to the Convention, which portrayed Sonthonax and Polverel as juggling two competing careers, both in direct contravention of their mandate from the French National Assembly: cooperation with England's plans to take over Saint-Domingue, and a desire to achieve personal mastery over the island.⁸⁸ Later the same month, Therou's fictional dialogue also

⁸⁶ F.R.406/1 *Notes sur les lettres*, 1; F.678/5 *Réponse de Page et Brulley*, 1.

⁸⁷ F.694/3 *Calomnieurs dénoncés*, 2. Page and Brulley claimed Port-au-Prince was punished for trying to elect Convention deputies in line with law of 23 August 1792, in contrast to the special elections adapted by Sonthonax to ensure representatives from the different racial groupings on this island.

⁸⁸ BLFRT F.686/19 *Adresse à la Convention nationale* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794 [2 fructidor an II?]), 7. See also Page and Brulley's subsequent prison offering, written just over a week later: F.678/5 *Réponse de Page et Brulley*, 1-4, 14.

created the impression of providing historical details, as when Sonthonax was made to remind Polverel about a speech the president of the *colon*-aligned Colonial Assembly had made upon their arrival in Saint-Domingue late in 1792, stating that body's unequivocal support for the abolition of slavery – if such a decision came directly from the National Assembly.⁸⁹ There was a grain of truth here: the Assembly had declared to the commissioners' predecessors on the island that they would support earlier legislation that expanded rights for free people of color if it was confirmed as the will of the National Assembly. However, this had been cultivated into a falsehood to open another line of attack on Sonthonax and Polverel over their decision to abolish slavery unilaterally.⁹⁰ The manipulated account tied to the *colon* faction's principal angle of attack on the Convention's abolition decree itself: that regardless of the principle involved (which it was not politically expedient to object to directly), the Convention had passed this momentous decree only after the manipulation and subterfuge of Sonthonax and the three co-conspirators he had sent to the Convention as Saint-Domingue's new deputies.

Pamphlets thus contributed to the creation of a contemporary, disputed history of Saint-Domingue. Both factions identified certain events as critical to the production of a narrative capable of winning this battle over public opinion and political influence in the shifting sands of the Reaction. The question of how to present the impact of the Law of April 4, 1792, through which the Legislative Assembly had given civil and political rights to free people of color throughout the French colonies, was a prominent battleground. The requirement that any section of the non-white population of a racially-segregated society

⁸⁹ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 5. This same claim also featured in F.678/5 *Réponse de Page et Brulley*, 14.

⁹⁰ Popkin, "Royal Governor," 221.

like Saint-Domingue's "must enjoy" the same rights as whites had been highly controversial, and was critical in developing the impetus for whites to work against metropolitan authority in subsequent months and years.⁹¹ Both factions immediately focused on this issue with the legislation featuring in eight of the twelve pamphlets from my sample issued during the final month of *an II*. *Colon* pamphlets did not dare reject the egalitarian intent of the law directly. Instead, they focused their criticism on how it had been implemented by Sonthonax and Polverel. Thus, Clausson and Millet described the law as "holy and charitable" but accused Sonthonax of abusing its purpose to sow division between whites and non-whites and thereby destroy the colony.⁹² Deputy Belley, in contrast, placed the same law in the context of the Colonial Assembly in Cap-Français, which had been meeting since the first outbreak of slave rebellion in August 1791 and which had unilaterally rejected earlier directives from the metropole to include some free people of color in its proceedings. Belley described the law of 4 April 1792 as destroying this assembly and the racial discrimination on which it was constructed. Furthermore, he invoked a transatlantic connection by stressing that the law of 4 April confirmed the illegitimacy of the Colonial Assembly's powers because they were incompatible with one of the few undisputed Revolutionary totems inherited by the Thermidorians: the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen from 1789.⁹³

Writers on both sides regularly combined historical details from Saint-Domingue with references to events, values, or key personalities from the metropolitan revolution. In

⁹¹ Duvergier, *Collection complète*, vol. 4, 90.

⁹² F.686/2 *Impostures*, 5-6.

⁹³ F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue*, 3.

some respects, this was for the simple reason that, as with legislation from the Legislative Assembly or the arrival of civil commissioners, metropolitan dynamics would often have an effect on a colony like Saint-Domingue — just as had always been the case within France’s eighteenth-century empire. However, these links could also signal more creative responses to the Revolutionary political and culture context within which these pamphlet histories were being constructed. Thus, when Sonthonax attacked French military figures who had opposed him in Saint-Domingue, he highlighted their colonial offenses with the stain of metropolitan Counter-Revolution via association with two infamous defectors: General Dumouriez and the marquis de Lafayette.⁹⁴ Sonthonax proved himself to be adroit at employing this tactic of overlaying France’s Revolutionary experience onto Saint-Domingue — aided no doubt by the fact that it mirrored his position serving as the Republic’s representative to the colony. His methodical approach can be found in a lengthy footnote explaining why the group widely known as “colonial refugees” should be renamed *émigrés* – which would then connect them to one of the core elements of France’s ongoing struggle against domestic and European Counter-Revolution.⁹⁵ In another piece he strongly defended the reputation of the colony’s population of ex-slaves by informing his metropolitan audience that “the Blacks are the true *sans-culottes* of the colonies, they are

⁹⁴ BLFRT F.75*/4 L.F.- *Sonthonax, au Représentant du peuple Pelet (de la Lozère), membre du Comité de Salut Public* (Paris: Pain, 1795 [20 pluviôse an III?]) 2. The two figures Sonthonax attacked here were generals Galbaud and Lasalle.

⁹⁵ F.690/2 L. F. *Sonthonax, commissaire civil*, 9. This debate over refugee/émigré labels continued into the Directory: see White, *Encountering Revolution*, 115 and 119-123.

the people.”⁹⁶ To export these terms, which dominated the lexicon of French Revolutionary activism by 1794, to the colonial sphere was a deliberate attempt to counter the *colon* narrative that slave rebellion or emancipation had led (and could only ever lead) to violence and chaos at the hands of “the African destroyers.”⁹⁷

Those on the *colon* side made frequent comparisons between the impact of the domestic Terror and the violence meted out on the white population of Saint-Domingue. As the political repression of the Terror became increasingly well-known during the Reaction via public trials and the press, the *colon* faction attempted to forge connections to events overseas.⁹⁸ In the process, Saint-Domingue’s Revolution was painted as a work of even greater violence and murkier conspiracy than that which so many had just experienced within France itself. A lengthy attack against Dufay was sustained by the charge that he and others in the anti-*colon* faction had used their criminal record in the colony to gain a controlling influence over the governing committees back in Paris during the Terror, and that to do so they had had to prove themselves to be “even more ferocious” than their metropolitan allies.⁹⁹ Elsewhere, frequent comparisons were made between the bloody campaign waged by deputy Carrier in Nantes during the Vendée rebellion and the violence

⁹⁶ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*, 8. This was written early enough in the Reaction for the term “sans-culottes” to still be politically advantageous.

⁹⁷ R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 5

⁹⁸ The two events with the most significance in raising public awareness of the Terror (albeit not necessarily built on accurate information) were the trials of deputies Carrier and Le Bon: see Gomez-Le-Chevanton, “Le procès Carrier” and Steinberg, “Terror on trial”.

⁹⁹ F.R.406/11 *Réponse à Dufay*, 9.

in Saint-Domingue allegedly perpetrated or defended by members of the anti-*colon* faction.¹⁰⁰

Saint-Domingue and the History of the Terror

This pamphlet war created its own historiography of what is now recognised as the Haitian Revolution, developed by authors who understood the role of evidence and how it might be manipulated. But what about the metropolitan, Parisian setting for these printed battles? After all, the imprisonment of the principal characters from both factions during the Terror, and their staggered release from Paris's gaols during the early months of the Reaction, remained important strands of the identities projected by both factions throughout the period. Authors also could not have failed to be aware that their pamphlets were being consumed as part of a Thermidorian diet rich with other works documenting and reflecting on the Revolutionary violence and repression experienced across metropolitan France in the months and years before the fall of Robespierre. Indeed, the two publishers used almost exclusively by these factions, Pain for the anti-*colons* and Laurens the Elder for the *colons*, were in great demand by other customers.¹⁰¹ These pamphlets need to be sited within this burgeoning history of the metropolitan revolution, where they added a fresh colonial dimension to the domestic narrative tropes coalescing rapidly within contemporary print culture.

¹⁰⁰ For example, F.686/1 *A Dufay*, 10-11 and R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 3.

¹⁰¹ Two among many other examples of these printers's work during the Reaction are *Tableau de route des vingt-huit prisonniers de Marseille, traduits à Paris, détenus à la Maison Égalité, dite Duplessis* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1794?) and *Supplément au tableau des crimes de Vadier, en réponse au résumé de sa défense* (Paris: Pain, 1795?).

Even 9 Thermidor, that iconic date in the Thermidorian narrative of domestic revolution, could be repackaged successfully with a reference to Saint-Domingue. The *colon* deputy Defrance praised his Convention colleagues several months into the Reaction for being prepared on that day to right the Convention's previous wrongs (which he conveniently blamed on "the agents employed to direct government operations" rather than himself and his fellow deputies collectively). He emphasised that this painful record extended from domestic hotspots of repression like Nantes and Lyon right out to the Caribbean.¹⁰² Likewise, in the fictional dialogue between Sonthonax and Polverel introduced at the beginning of this article there were strong echoes of Thermidorian rhetoric, which would have been picked up easily by contemporary audiences. Perhaps this facilitated an engagement with colonial Revolutionary narratives among readers who might be less familiar with events across the Atlantic. The dialogue had Sonthonax's cocksure attitude deflating rapidly after the fall of Robespierre, an event which "produced such a change in people's opinion...that we ourselves, right now, fear for our heads."¹⁰³ Another pamphlet highlighted this change by chronicling the personal experience its author, Sonthonax's former secretary Leborgne, head of the Thermidorian-era judicial system. Although temporarily imprisoned early in the Reaction, Leborgne was able to shrug off a *colon* denunciation to the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal and then triumphantly

¹⁰² BLFRT F.695/9 *Defrance, Représentant du peuple, député par le département de Seine-et-Marne, au citoyen Creusé Pascal* [i.e. Pascal Creuzé-Dufresne] *sur la dénonciation à la Convention nationale, d'une conspiration dans les colonies françaises, et sur-tout à St Domingue* (Paris: Becquart, 1795 [frimaire an III?]), 1. See also BLFRT F.695/2 *Quels sont les coupables dans l'affaire de Saint-Domingue?* (Paris?: n.p., 1795 [frimaire an III?]) and Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage*, 186-192.

¹⁰³ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 10.

informed his enemies, “that time is over when you could drag your victims to the feet of Robespierre, who would then order their execution.”¹⁰⁴

This tactic of recalibrating domestic events as part of the campaign to influence a readership’s understanding of colonial issues was also deployed by those in the anti-*colon* faction. Thus, for example, Belley gave Page and Brulley their own starring role at the heart of the domestic Terror, claiming that they were only saved from the guillotine because the public prosecutor at the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, Antoine Fouquier-Tinville, was their “intimate friend” and found a “specious reason” for delaying their judgment.¹⁰⁵ He also implied that this reprieve came at the expense of other, more innocent victims held in a neighboring cell. Belley also claimed that Page and Brulley had ensured their own political survival for so long (before they were eventually gaoled) by masterminding a campaign throughout the country to “oppress and incarcerate” individuals who had returned from the colonies and might have been able to testify against them and their faction.¹⁰⁶ Writing many months later, François Polverel furiously attacked those who had hounded his father and so many others, and yet had the temerity to “call themselves the victims.”¹⁰⁷ Such arguments tapped into the contemporary obsession with how Terrorist activity had allegedly rippled out across the country at the behest of Robespierre and his henchmen in the capital.

¹⁰⁴ BLFRT F.73*/5 *Attentat contre la liberté de la presse et le droit de pétition* (Paris: Pain, 1795 [brumaire an III?]): 4. The case against Leborgne was dismissed by a Tribunal judge and he was set free (*mise en liberté*) on 2 brumaire III/23 October 1794: AN W/473 dossier 295.

¹⁰⁵ F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ F.75*/2 *Belley, de Saint-Domingue*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ F.75* /6 *Le masque*, 7.

The narratives constructed within these attacks could draw on multiple layers of evidence and manipulated argument as the combatants marched further into the Reaction. On 8 Fructidor *an III*/August 25, 1795, Belley's colleague from Saint-Domingue, deputy Laforest, attacked deputy Gouly over the latter's attempt to prevent him from taking up his seat in the Convention. Laforest, who had been elected in the same process as the tricolor delegation back in 1793 (as one of three substitutes) had finally been admitted on 5 Fructidor *an III*/August 22, 1795 as a replacement for citizen Réchin, who had never managed to leave Saint-Domingue due to the English blockade of Port-de-Paix.¹⁰⁸ Laforest condemned his new colleague, who had become a regular exponent of *colon* arguments in the Convention during 1795, by showcasing that Gouly was endorsing long-discredited attacks made by Page and Brulley against the Saint-Domingue delegation back at the height of the Terror. Thermidorian readers were thus presented with yet another national representative who was compromised by the Revolution's repressive history, as well as a reprisal of many of the anti-*colon* attack lines of the past year – such as the claim that Page and Brulley petitioned the Committee of Public Safety “to subvert, slaughter and destroy” the Black rebels in Saint-Domingue who had gone on to become the metropole's principal military asset there.¹⁰⁹ Within a week, Gouly's reply in turn drew on the standard *colon* repertoire of the past year before also plunging readers back into the Revolution's controversial recent past, drawing explicit parallels between Laforest's attack and

¹⁰⁸ BLFRT F.699/11 *Laforest, citoyen de couleur, député de Saint-Domingue, à son collègue Gouly, député de l'isle de France* (Paris: Imprimerie de l'Union, 1795 [8 fructidor *an III*?]). See Gauthier, ‘La Révolution française et le problème colonial,’ 187. For further evidence of Gouly's increasing prominence within *colon* circles during 1795, see Dubois and Garrigus, *Slave Revolution*, 144-147.

¹⁰⁹ F.699/11 *Laforest, citoyen de couleur*, 2.

denunciations made against Gouly by the anti-*colon* faction back at the height of the Terror. “Yet another pamphlet directed against me”, he began. “And where does it really come from? Always from the same source, from that alliance of men who have persisted in persecuting me since pluviôse of Year II because I always fought against the criminal plans they had for both France and the colonies.”¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the focus for both pamphlets was actually Gouly’s record as a representative on mission in the Ain at the height of the Terror, with Laforest selectively quoting documents from this mission to draw parallels with the opinions and tactics of Counter-Revolutionary forces in Saint-Domingue. Laforest only had access to this material because Gouly, like many of his colleagues, had been forced to publish several accounts of his mission earlier in 1795 to defend himself against allegations of Terrorist excess.¹¹¹

The *colon* faction worked hard to rebut the allegation of complicity in the Terror and any unwanted speculation that they might have formed part of what became known as “Robespierre’s tail” of co-conspirators. One straightforward way to attempt this was to invite readers’ sympathy with details of personal and familial suffering, such as when general Galbaud listed the release of his wife and children as his first priority, rather than

¹¹⁰ B. Gouly, *Représentant du peuple, aux membres de la Convention nationale* (Paris: Imprimerie de Galletti, 1795), 1.

¹¹¹ These include: *Recueil de pièces que présente B. Gouly, ... à l'appui des comptes qu'il a rendus à la Convention nationale, les 11 ventôse et 9 messidor, de sa mission dans les départements de l'Ain, Saône et Loire, pour servir de réponse au mémoire distribué, au nom de Blanq-Desisles, aux Jacobins et à la Convention nationale, le 30 fructidor* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1794) and *Compte rendu à la Convention nationale et au peuple souverain, par Benoit Gouly, représentant du peuple, envoyé dans les départements de l'Ain et de Saône-et-Loire* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1795).

the unsealing of the papers he needed to save his own reputation.¹¹² Elsewhere, the *colons* painted their rivals as the true Terrorist culprits. Therou's fictional dialogue contained an extended admission by Polverel about how his and Sonthonax's affiliation with Dufay rendered them all complicit with the machinery of the Terror. Dufay was portrayed as exploiting extensive connections in the policing network (itself "bought" by Robespierre) to order local surveillance committees nationwide "to widen the effect of the decree of 19 ventôse," with disastrous results for their opponents.¹¹³

The law of 19 ventôse *an II*/March 9, 1794, which confirmed the turn of the political tide against the *colons* in the aftermath of the abolition decree, did indeed cast a very wide net. It ordered the imprisonment of former members of the Massiac Club (an early Revolutionary lobbying group for the planter class) as well as Saint-Domingue's Colonial Assemblies; they also mandated the arrest of all "agents" of those assemblies and the sealing of the possessions of "all colonials residing in Paris." Its implementation produced a flood of complaints that its reach extended far beyond any reasonable definition of these targets, and this criticism continued into the Reaction.¹¹⁴ Therou cited the case of eleven individuals originally from Tobago who had been freed from gaol in England only to be imprisoned again by the Revolutionary authorities on their arrival in France on a trumped-up charge that they were assembly members from Saint-Domingue.¹¹⁵ Clausson and Millet

¹¹² BLFRT F.686/18 *A la Convention nationale* (Paris?: n.p., 1794 [thermidor *an II*?], 4.

¹¹³ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Duvergier, *Collection complète*, vol. 7, 95 or, for the full text, *Collection générale des décrets rendus par la Convention nationale. Mois ventôse, an IIe* (Paris: Baudouin, 1794), 192-193 (available as vol. 47 at <https://collection-baudouin.univ-paris1.fr/>). AN D/XXV/76-78 is full of petitions from individuals caught up in this legislation, which does indeed appear to have been interpreted very broadly.

¹¹⁵ F.678/2 *Dialogue*, 14.

also referenced the negative impact of this legislation in one of their appeals to the Convention, while Page and Brulley had already publicised a similar claim about policing: in their version, all three of Saint-Domingue's Convention deputies had been in constant communication with surveillance committees and the police in order to "highlight the colonial victims they wanted to be gaoled."¹¹⁶ And over time it was Page and Brulley who painted the most detailed picture of their adversaries as terrorists. As they put it succinctly in one pamphlet, "Dufay, Mils [sic] & Bellay [sic] could never have directed this police conspiracy if they had not also been the friends and agents of Robespierre."¹¹⁷ Such claims were simultaneously an attempt to recast the *colons* as archetypal victims of the Terror, a prized community identity in the Thermidorian political context.

Narratives of Dual Revolution in Saint-Domingue and France

Twelve months on from Sonthonax and Polverel's fictional confrontation with an unnamed *colon* adversary, the battle still raged for control over the interconnected narratives of Revolution in Saint-Domingue and France. That it was taking place in the contested shadows of both abolition and the Terror ensured that the stakes remained high throughout the Thermidorian Reaction. The literature developed competing identities for both *colon* and anti-*colon* factions, as each side located self and other within a Manichean vision of the Revolutionary era. Their history-writing offers a unique case study of Thermidorian political culture and its tense but creative relationship with the

¹¹⁶ F.686/14 *A la Convention nationale*, 3; F.694/3 *Calomniateurs dénoncés*, 8.

¹¹⁷ F.694/3 *Calomniateurs dénoncés*, 8.

Revolutionary past, as well as the value contemporaries ascribed to material evidence when seeking to confront or exploit both.

The pamphlet war between the *colon* and anti-*colon* factions repeatedly brought transatlantic Revolutionary experiences into dialogue with each other. Participants not only contributed to nascent historiographies of events in distant Saint-Domingue and on the Parisian reader's doorstep; they also presented key events and themes on either side of the Atlantic as interwoven and interdependent. Both sides adapted skilfully to Robespierre's fall, rapidly producing pamphlets that used this technique of transatlantic alchemy to attack their respective opponents and defend their own cause and personal reputation. As early as 6 Fructidor *an II*/August 23, 1794, Sonthonax described the *colons* as a group who had travelled from Saint-Domingue "at the behest of Robespierre" and then embedded themselves in the machinery of metropolitan repression as "regular witnesses at the old Revolutionary tribunal, friends and protectors of Dumas [one of the Tribunal presidents] and Fouquier-Tinville, picking out victims for them."¹¹⁸ This tactic was honed by both sides through the following summer, for example in *colon* allegations that it was Robespierre himself who personally admitted Sonthonax's tricolor delegation into the Convention ahead of the abolition decree. The *colon* picture of a colony at the mercy of "the African destroyers" was sketched out and then embellished over many months. The narratives developed by each faction shared clear parallels to Thermidorian stories elsewhere in the public sphere about the excesses of France's domestic Terror.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ F.75*/5 *Sonthonax*, 4.

¹¹⁹ R.326/10 *Observations sur une note*, 5.

This transatlantic pattern had deep roots that were only strengthened by the Revolutionary debates and tensions over the colonies from 1789 onwards. But the political culture of the Reaction offered unique scope to review the past, raised the stakes in the pursuit of control over the colonial narrative, and so reinforced the dividing lines between *colon* and anti-*colon* factions. A close examination of this pamphlet war has revealed the extent to which the experience and record of Revolution in Saint-Domingue and France were shared and fused together. The work of these competing factions combined to establish and then embellish not two separate accounts of distant Revolutions but one multi-faceted history of a dual Revolution that spanned the Atlantic.

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