Archives and the French Revolution:

The Phoenix Effect

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Introduction

That the French Revolution was the dominant, catalytic turning point in the field of archives is a well known and established fact (Valge, 2007, p. 196), as evidenced by the creation of a centralized and formally cataloged archive system, open to the public, made for the preservation of culturally and administratively important documents (Kingston, 2011, pp. 2, 5, 9; Lokke, 1968, pp. 24, 26-27; Panitch, 1996, pp. 31, 39; Posner, 1940, p. 161; Valge, 2007, p. 197). Less known is the import placed upon the newly minted National Archives of the New Republic by contemporaries. So important were the archives that the constitution of Year III (1795) declared that "the status of member of the Legislative Body is incompatible with the holding of any other public office, except that of Archivist of the Republic" (Lokke, 1968, p. 26). The new archives of the New Republic were used primarily for both the seizure of properties and—with far larger implications—the storing of the flood of administrative records being produced by the fledgling republic, from which evolved the principles of *fonds* and *respect des fonds* (Kingston, 2011, pp. 2, 5, 9, 18; Lokke, 1968, pp. 24, 26-27; Panitch, 1996, pp. 38-39).

France's archives, however, did not metamorphose into modernity in isolation of the infamous violence of the French Revolution, nor did archivists avoid participation in such violence. On the contrary, by both legislative orders and their own volition archivists partook a major role in the destruction (at times with precision, at other times extensively) of records they deemed redundant, useless, or contrary to the Revolution and its ideals (Kingston, 2011, pp. 3-5, 7-9; Lokke, 1968, pp. 23, 27-28, 30; Panitch, 1996, pp. 34-35; Posner, 1940, pp. 161-162). French archives, just like the modes of governments they served, were destroyed and burned, only to be recreated—quite literally—from the ashes. Thus, only through the deliberate, violent

destruction of archival records could both the New Republic and its new National Archives be created on a grander scale (Panitch, 1996, p. 47)—the Phoenix Effect.

Into the Fire

The destruction of Old Regime archives during the Revolution and in its formative aftermath were, in some ways, symbolic in nature, while also fomented by a deeply rooted loathing of the royalty, the Church, and the nobility, as well as by more level-headed rhetoric. Like archives of today, the archives preceding the French Revolution housed legal documents of ownership; unlike today, however, preserving legal documentations of ownership and other economic documents of the nobility, clergy, and monarchy were the crux and purpose of archives (Duchein, 1992, pp. 15, 18; Panitch, 1996, p. 33; Posner, 1940, p. 161). Archival records were so vital to monarchical power that some sovereigns went so far as to maintain their archives in secret to maintain "an arsenal of judicial and political arms" that was "placed at the disposition of those in power" (Panitch, 1996, p. 33).

As such, archives had tremendous power in reinforcing "the entire legal, political, and economic legitimacy of the monarchy and nobility" (Panitch, 1996, p. 33) to the subjugation of the Third Estate (Panitch, 1996, pp. 33-34), and held great symbolic and practical benefits to the revolutionaries in destroying them. This was exemplified in 1788 when the Second Assembly of Notables utilized legal documents from 1614, more than a century and a half before, to enforce "voting by order rather than by head" for the future Estates General, a decision which the Third Estate was loathe to for its effective deafness to their voices (Lokke, 1968, p. 23). One contemporary of the time went so far as to publish the incideniary opinion "that it would be fortunate if the archives of France were destroyed by fire" so that old legal doctrines in favor of the nobility would be nullified (Lokke, 1968, p. 23). An eerily accurate foreshadowing.

Up in Smoke

Revolutionaries, both before and after the Terror, operated "on the political and ideological grounds that all documents of *servitude* and *fanatisme* were to be destroyed" (Duchein, 1992, p. 18), and burned vast quantities of documents in the early days of the French Revolution in an effort to "eradicate all traces of the defeated monarchy" (Kingston, 2011, p. 2; Panitch, 1996, pp. 32, 34; Posner, 1940, pp. 161-162). Such rioting mob destruction also sought to prevent a return to monarchy rule in the event of the Revolution's failure and, simultaneously, demonstrated one's hatred of the monarchy and their loyalty to the Republic (Lokke, 1968, p. 31; Panitch, 1996, pp. 34-35). From the city of Mantes came reports that:

> [b]eneath the tree of liberty was lit a fire into which were thrown all *orders of priesthood*, feudal titles, and tapestries bearing the fleur de lys. . . . Around the fire, the citizens and our priests danced a carmagnole to the sound of music composed by citizens of our community. (Panitch, 1996, p. 35)

Similarly, a major, early figure of the French Revolution, Marquis de Condorcet, spoke with glee and pride about burning "600 folio volumes attesting to the vanity of this class [the nobility] whose titles will at last disappear in smoke" at the foot of a statue of Louis XIV (Panitch, 1996, p. 34). The documents targeted for this destruction by revolutionary mobs were primarily feudal titles, genealogical documents, and other "evidence of servitude" (Kingston, 2011, p. 2; Lokke, 1968, p. 27-28; Panitch, 1996, p. 34).

Such unsystematic vandalism driven by rioting revolutionary fervor, however, constituted only a small fraction of the damage done against French archives. French archivists themselves, under the directions and encouragement of the New Republic, were the chief actors in the destruction of archives, with most of the destruction occurring after the execution of Robespierre

on July 28, 1794 (Kingston, 2011, p. 7). With identical purpose as earlier destruction, as well as to address the large accumulation of New Regime documents in need of storage (Kingston, 2011, pp. 11-13; Panitch, 1996, pp. 38-39), the legal and administrative destruction of records was undertaken in order to eradicate the past and prevent its return, continuing to destroy economic documents of the nobility, their family records, and titles deemed "redundant" (Kingston, 2011, pp. 2-4, 7-8; Lokke, 1968, pp. 23, 27-28, 30-31; Panitch, 1996, pp. 34-35, 46; Posner, 1940, p. 162).

In this, archivists were at the forefront of burning documents. Officials tasked with categorizing archival materials into papers to scrap, to destroy, and to conserve, were instructed, along with archivists, not to destroy everything, even that which was contrary to the "interests of the Republic" (Kingston, 2011, p. 8). These instructions appear to have been followed in that not everything was destroyed—yet most was. In Rennes, archivists acquired the "majority of the material sent to the pyre" (Kingston, 2011, pp. 3-4), a claim which could be shared by archivists working across France. The department of Ille-et-Vilaine condemned 1,323 of its 1,545 cartons (85.6%) (Kingston, 2011, p. 8), while between August of 1795 and November of 1796, 4,152 bundles of papers from Parisian "archives of colleges, convents, courts, abbeys, and other former corporate administrations" were processed with only 375 (nine percent) saved (Kingston, 2011, pp. 8-9). Of the latter example, the 375 preserved documents were primarily produced after 1750, and 91% of the destroyed records were considered valueless, with the remaining 9% being "records of former feudal rights or noble privileges" (Kingston, 2011, p. 9). It's worth noting, then, that while Old Regime archives were primarily used for the storage of records for feudal rights and noble privileges (Duchein, 1992, pp. 15, 18; Panitch, 1996, p. 33; Posner, 1940, p. 161)—the documents considered both by contemporaries and future researchers to be the targets

of destruction—they composed less than a tenth of the destroyed records. Just what, exactly, the majority of documents were in this case is undisclosed, as is whether this ratio was irregular or the norm. Additional examples include: the burning of records in the Augustine convent following a decree on May 12, 1792; the burning of 600 volumes of noble genealogies following a June 19, 1791 decree; the "burning of genealogical papers in every public repository" by the decree of June 24, 1791; and the decrees of July 17, 1793 and June 25, 1794 ordering the burning of feudal titles (Kingston, 2011, pp. 5, 8; Lokke, 1968, pp. 27-28).

By no means an exhaustive list, it is evidence of the "wholesale destruction of records under law" which critics and supporters of the Revolution alike considered the conflagration (Lokke, 1968, p. 23). Additionally, it lends credence to reports that by March of 1796 the 400 repositories in Paris that comprised the National Archives had removed over a hundred tons of paper "for disposal," with nearly 550 tons of paper destroyed before an end was put to the destructive policies (Lokke, 1968, p. 30). One prominent detractor, Marquis Leon de Laborde, who himself was a Director of the Imperial Archives, lamented that "more than 10,000 archives were affected and more or less devastated, that they contained a billion documents, that more than two thirds were destroyed…" (Panitch, 1996, p. 37). Though Laborde's assessment was biased by his anti-revolution sentiments, his position granted him superior knowledge of the situation and it is safe, nonetheless, to assume that an immense quantity of records was destroyed.

In addition to the outright destruction of records, there was also an extensive program of recycling and repurposing records that, in an extremely poetic irony, transformed the documentations of the deposed monarchy into gunpowder funnels and paper cartridges to arm the soldiers of the fledgling New Republic against its foes (Kingston, 2011, pp. 2, 6; Lokke,

1968, p. 28). Paper, having become a "material of prime necessity" in the early New Republic, was plentiful in archives, and, being deemed useless in its present state, was used for its material weight (Kingston, 2011, pp. 6-7). Paper merchants in this period profited not from the selling of new paper, but from the recycling of the old, with the government allowing paper merchants to plunder archives alongside the army, or to purchase documents at very cheap prices, to then resell the repurposed paper back to the government and military (Kingston, 2011, pp. 5-6; Lokke, 1968, p. 28). Continuing for more than a decade, the military's need for paper ended with the French defeat at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and by 1807 the value of paper was so low as to not pay for its own transportation (Kingston, 2011, pp. 7, 14).

The Phoenix Effect

The heretofore discussed annihilation of archival documents by citizens and archivists alike was a horrible episode in the fields of archives and history, but from the figurative and literal embers was created a foundation for new growth. France's National Archives paved the way for modern archival practices and principles, and from this early modern French archival growth came about foundational principles such as *respect des fonds* and, most directly, preservation. By destroying tomes upon tomes of papers, archivists decided not only what documents to liquidate, but intrinsically also decided what documents to preserve, from which the basis of preservation emerged (Kingston, 2011, p. 9; Panitch, 1996, p. 45). Camus, the first archivist of the New Republic's National Archives, wrote that France's archivists "adopted the principle of letting nothing remain which bore the stamp of servitude, but to conserve that which could provide evidence of public or private ownership, or which could be used for instruction" (Panitch, 1996, p. 40). In this way, destruction and preservation are two sides of the same coin, and with one must come the other. Archivists of the New Republic decided which records to

destroy, which documents to preserve, chose what new documents would receive preservation, and in a poetic act fitting of the French Revolution, gave their discarded manuscripts of the Old Regime to the defense of the New Republic. Destruction, therefore, served to negate the Old Regime's authority and the documentation of it while concomitantly preserving the foundations of the New Republic. In doing so, it also produced an environment wherein preservation of select documents was increasingly important, eventually becoming foundational to the National Archives, and from there the whole of archival studies.

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