Chapter 5

April 1834: La Guerre des Rues, I

The uprising of April 1834 was the first planned insurrection, different in character from 1830 and 1832. The militants of the Société des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen (SDHC) were self-conscious about their role as the avant-garde, and awkwardly attempted to stir the masses with republican rhetoric and signs. They forced passersby to work with them, even if it meant laying only a single paving stone on a barricade. They asserted control of the neighborhoods, set up patrols and sentinels, and requisitioned supplies from local stores, in an attempt to establish an alternative authority. They made great efforts to capture the hearts and minds of the masses, and they were absurdly confident of victory. But the whole exercise failed miserably, even (as the next uprising would show) as a learning experience.

The struggle was far more severe in Lyon, where it became a 6-day pitched battle with over five hundred casualties. In Paris, the death toll included only 16 on the side of the government, and 53 civilians and insurgents; the fighting lasted less than a day, from late Sunday afternoon to early Monday morning. The revolt became an ironic defeat for republicans even in symbolic terms, for the boldness of the attack was soon overwhelmed in public perception by the murder of 12 innocent civilians by soldiers, an event which came to be known as the massacre of the rue Transnonain. In July, Honoré Daumier published a lithograph of the scene, dominated by a dead man in a nightdress who has fallen onto the body of a child, the image of a peaceful citizen suddenly violated in his home. Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, a rising radical lawyer who represented...
the brother of one of the victims, soon published an inexpensive pamphlet, which required a second edition only three weeks later. It consisted largely of interviews with the survivors, the simple recollections of ordinary people in their own words; he thus made available to the public the poignant details that would otherwise have been left in judicial files.4 But while the rue Transnonain became an enduring reproach to the government, it also denied the insurrection a heroic martyr in the mold of Charles Jeanne. Instead, the rising was symbolized by noncombatants who were explicitly victims.

The insurrection began on the Right Bank on Sunday, 13 April. The hommes d’action had slowly congregated on the streets Saint-Denis and Saint-Martin. According to local resident Jeanne Colas, there were relatively few of them at the start; their numbers only began to swell, perhaps to as many as 150, by late afternoon: “The street was encumbered, one continually heard cries—Republic or Death!” At about 4 P.M., a shopkeeper on the rue Beaubourg remarked many suspicious strangers in the quarter, “with long hair and long beards,” walking in small groups through the streets. Two men suddenly brought out the “republican banner”; one of them fired a gun as the signal to begin, and the groups began to shout “Vive la République! vivent les Lyonais! à bas Philippe!” One man read out a proclamation (which no one could hear) and various placards were posted on the walls, both printed and crudely handwritten (“It is finally broken, this too-long chain of humiliating tyrannies, infamous perfidies, criminal betrayals!” began one example).7

A man in an Invalides uniform (from the Hôtel des Invalides, for wounded veterans), was heard to admonish the individual who had fired the opening shot: “You’re too soon!”8 The Invalide nevertheless began taking charge, organizing barricade-builders and posting sentinels.9 Others dismantled the street lights to ensure the cover of darkness after sunset. The gamins enthusiastically lent themselves to this hooliganism. The elderly Jean-Baptiste Laselve attempted to stop a boy of about 13 who was cutting the cords of the street lights and letting them smash to the ground. The gamin insolently threatened him with his bayonet; Laselve went after him with his crutch, and turned in the captured bayonet to the local national guard post.10

Barricades soon began to appear. From the cafés, several of which were forced open to serve as headquarters, the sectionnaires took empty barrels. From other shops they seized the iron rods that barred the doors, which they used to pry up paving stones. Passing coaches and wagons were intercepted, the horses unharnessed, the vehicles overturned. Local resident Imbert Rolot estimated that 40 to 50 people, many of them gamins, worked on the formidable barricade on the corner of Montmorency and Transnonain.11 Sunday strollers were