

*H-France Salon*  
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 14, #2

## The Robespierre Problem

David Andress  
University of Portsmouth

The key to understanding the “Seagreen Incomprehensible”, to borrow Doyle and Haydon’s phrase, is, in my opinion, to take him seriously.<sup>1</sup> Not to assume, therefore, that when he says something, he really means something else. Nor to decide that, whatever he does seem to mean, he ought to mean something else. Robespierre’s torrents of words have been decoded and recoded so often, for so many different later audiences, it is time we focused on what they were supposed to mean when they were spoken and written. This will neither excuse Robespierre nor allow us to pretend that he was some kind of innocent abroad, but it may allow us to move around the single most significant and distracting element in his history: that his fellow-terrorists decided, in the process of sending him to an arbitrary execution, to make him carry the blame for everything they had done.

We have been reminded only in the last eighteen months of how strongly that judgment resonates, with vivid polemics in France, and globally, about the monstrously corrupted ‘face’ of the Incorruptible and about his ogre-ish role in a video-game reconstruction of revolutionary Paris.<sup>2</sup> The vigour of debate reflects the extent to which Robespierre-the-monstrous has long produced Robespierre-the-stainless as a response from more radical perspectives. Discussing the nature of one crude simplification, while promoting another, makes for entertaining polemic, but little else.

Robespierre did not go to his doom blinded, either by illness or conceit, to what was happening around him. Among the many things he said in his long and ultimately fatal speech on 8 Thermidor was the note that

There has hardly, perhaps, been one individual arrested, hardly a citizen vexed or harassed in any way, to whom they have not said of me, “*Behold the author of your calamities*” ... How could I recount or divine all the species of impostures which have been clandestinely insinuated both in the National Convention and elsewhere, in order to render me an object of odium or terror?<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Colin Haydon and William Doyle, ed., *Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See David Andress, ‘The Continuing Story of the Face of Robespierre’, *The French Revolution Network*, February 13, 2014, accessed October 7, 2015, <http://revolution.hypotheses.org/111>; and David Andress, ‘The Existential Horror of Reducing the Great Revolution to a Video Game’, *The French Revolution Network*, November 15, 2014, accessed October 7, 2015, <http://revolution.hypotheses.org/166>. The claims about Robespierre’s face are dissected, briefly but thoroughly, by Peter McPhee in ‘Robespierre: the oldest case of sarcoidosis?’, *The Lancet*, March 29, 2014, accessed October 7, 2015, [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)60564-X/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(14)60564-X/fulltext).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Biennvenu, ed., *The Ninth of Thermidor; the fall of Robespierre*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 162-63.

Robespierre on that day courted martyrdom while calling for purges, denouncing a general plot in the firm belief that it was all around him and had already made him a scapegoat. The response the next day was multi-faceted, but the intervention of Marc Vadier stood out in turning the tables personally on him. Vadier declaimed against “the cunning individual who has been able to assume every mask”, rhetorically reversing an accusation Robespierre himself had repeatedly made. He drew lively applause by overtly making the charge of tyranny and then struck a shrewd blow when he began to mock Robespierre’s rhetorical style: “he is the only defender of liberty, he is giving it up for lost, he is going to quit everything; he is a man of rare modesty”—at which point laughter erupted and continued as Vadier lampooned his self-pity and criticised his underhand denunciations.<sup>4</sup>

It might seem odd to highlight this moment, the fatal loss of seriousness, in a piece that will argue for Robespierre’s serious meaning, but the two are in fact mutually reinforcing. The spasm of laughter as the tension-wracked Convention recognised Vadier’s description would not have been so devastating had Robespierre’s style not been so effective beforehand. So effective was it, and so well-known, that Vadier himself had used it two years earlier, writing directly to the Incorruptible himself. Denouncing local factions in his home-town, Vadier fumed:

To corrupt, betray, conspire, this is the banner of these slaves; it is against the friends of liberty, justice and virtue that they sharpen the darts of malignancy and vengeance, [and] spill the poisons of calumny and false accusation in the name of the law they outrage...

But he then went on to address Robespierre personally:

The identity of our principles and of our affections during the perilous career that we have gloriously traversed has been able to give me some rights to your friendship, I call on them all at an occasion on which depends the salvation of a people that I love as you do.<sup>5</sup>

In writing this, Vadier was continuing an occasional correspondence that had begun months earlier and in which Robespierre had engaged with remarkable emotional force: in one letter from the spring of 1792 the latter begged his “friend” for “all your indulgence” for his delay in responding to “eulogies” which “would have inspired too much pride, had more tender and elevated sentiments left any place in the heart of the one you have judged worthy of your confidence and esteem.” In closing, Robespierre lamented that he could not “converse with you for longer on the ideas and sentiments that fill my soul; but pressing occupations call me: I am forced to wait for a more favourable moment.” Regretfully, therefore, he closed, “Adieu, I embrace you tenderly, and I await your answer with impatience.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, *Correspondance* (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 2000 [orig. 1910-67]), pp. 150-51.

<sup>6</sup> Robespierre, *Correspondance*, pp. 145-46.

I have written elsewhere on the possibilities for understanding exposed by exploring the emotive vocabulary of revolutionary sensibility and its melodramatic potentials.<sup>7</sup> Without reviewing these arguments at length, I want to illustrate why the language and attitude that Vadier encouraged in 1792 and mocked in 1794 might be one of the keys to understanding Robespierre in his own historicity. In so doing, we have the opportunity to think about an issue which seems to tie historians in knots: emotion.

The history of emotions is, of course, an entire sub-field of its own, but the French Revolution has been notably prone in the last decades to interventions which invoke emotion in distinctly partial ways. From William Reddy's culturally-scripted "emotives", to the almost metaphysical rage of the people summoned by Sophie Wahnich, to Lynn Hunt's claim that we can neuroscientifically assert individuals' interiority at centuries' remove, enormous, and incompatible, claims have been made.<sup>8</sup> While some such as Marisa Linton have shown how attention to emotional torment can bring new life to discussions of the Terror, others such as Timothy Tackett have used the fear expressed by elite witnesses to explain aspects of the whole Revolution.<sup>9</sup> The question of the extent to which Robespierre himself was prevented from thinking straight in 1794 by some combination of physical and psychosomatic illness, stress, and trauma hangs over our discussion here like a fog. Ronen Steinberg has recently noted that the temptation to apply what we "now know" about trauma and PTSD to the Terror is almost irresistible, but that people at the time "knew" about mental health and the impact of dramatic events in quite different, but also specific and operative, ways.<sup>10</sup> The complete absence of agreement about how we should "know" about emotion in the historical past suggests that asking what past actors thought they knew, and thus chose, or felt compelled, to do, is more fruitful than continuing such debates.

In reading Robespierre's words, one aspect that leaps out, for me at least, is their unhesitating confluence of the emotional and the harshly, materially political. To take one example, a

---

<sup>7</sup> David Andress, 'Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre's Sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution', *Representations* 114 (2011): 103-128; David Andress, 'The Sentimental Construction of Martyrdom as Motivation in the Thought of Robespierre, 1789-1792', in *Martyrdom and Terrorism; pre-modern to contemporary perspectives*, eds. Dominic Janes and Alex Houen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 131-51; and David Andress, 'Jacobinism as Heroic Narrative: Understanding the Terror as the Experience of Melodrama', *French History and Civilisation: Papers from the George Rudé Seminar* 5 (2014): 6-23, accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/rude/rudevolv/01%20Andress%20Jacobinism%20as%20Heroic%20Narrative%20final.pdf>. I confess freely that the primary texts examined here have all been previously treated in these various publications.

<sup>8</sup> See my 'Introduction: Revolutionary historiography, adrift or at large? The paradigmatic quest versus the exploration of experience', in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress, SVEC, 2013:05, (Oxford: SVEC, 2013); pp. 1-15. Other recent overviews include Erin Sullivan, 'The History of the Emotions: past, present, future', *Cultural History* 2 (2013): 93-102; Susan J. Matt, 'Current Emotion Research in History: or doing history from the inside out', *Emotion Review* 3 (2011): 117-24. Barbara Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 821-45 is a slightly earlier but still very relevant meditation.

<sup>9</sup> Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror; virtue, friendship and authenticity in the French Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); see my review of Timothy Tackett's *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015) in *Reviews in History* (June 2015), accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1783>, and Timothy Tackett's response in *Reviews in History* (June 25, 2015), accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1783#author-response>.

<sup>10</sup> Ronen Steinberg, 'Trauma Before Trauma; imagining the effects of the Terror in post-Revolutionary France', in Andress, ed., *Experiencing the French Revolution*, pp. 177-99.

speech of early June 1791 called for the dismissal of the entire army officer corps and their replacement by democratic means. Officers “gifted with too little sensibility and virtue to attach their individual happiness to the public happiness” by far outnumbered the minority “sincerely attached to the cause of the revolution, animated by the purest civic sentiments of liberty.” Because of this emotional defect, the army as a whole had been engaged, he claimed, in driving out common soldiers who displayed any sign of patriotism. By a host of illegal and nefarious means, more than fifty thousand such men had been left “without resources and without bread... expiating their services and their civic virtues in indigence and opprobrium.”<sup>11</sup>

Events at Nancy the previous year, where mutinous soldiers were shot down by militia led by aristocratic officers, highlighted his claims. They drew from him an extended passage of rhetorical paralipsis, in which, while supposedly declining to relive the horrors, he vividly portrayed them:

But my horrified imagination revolts from the retracing of these lugubrious ideas! I cannot consent to re-open all the wounds of my soul: I would have to speak of the crimes and catastrophes of Nancy: I would have to carry my gaze to those scenes of blood, where the friends of liberty plunged into the breast of its defenders the arms which should have been terrible only for tyrants, and deployed the courage of *civisme* and virtue only to prepare the most frightful of triumphs for despotism: I would have to see the victims escaped from the iron of the victors, falling in crowds to the blows of executioners; presenting for several days the sweetest of spectacles in the eyes of the enemies, who could at leisure gorge on their tortures, and the first days of liberty soiled by cruelties that have not branded the memory of the cruellest tyrants.<sup>12</sup>

When he was not invoking the spectacle of emotive responses, he was sometimes provoking them. Mere days after the speech above, in the immediate aftermath of the king’s Flight to Varennes, Robespierre addressed the Jacobin Club on events in the National Assembly on 21 June 1791. Having lambasted the hesitant and compromising attitudes on display there, he perorated in his already well-established style:

Perhaps, in speaking to you with this frankness, I am going to draw down upon me the hatred of all the parties. They will certainly feel that they will never reach the end of their designs, so long as there remains amongst them a single just and courageous man who will continually unravel their projects and who, scorning life, fears neither steel nor poison, and would be only too happy if his death could be useful to liberty and the *patrie*.<sup>13</sup>

In response to this, reportedly, “the holy enthusiasm of virtue seized hold of the entire assembly, and each member swore, in the name of liberty, to defend M. Robespierre even at peril of his life.” Georges-Jacques Danton joined in, personally raising the self-sacrificing

---

<sup>11</sup> Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 7, pp. 470, 475.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 470–71.

<sup>13</sup> F.-A. Aulard, *La Société des Jacobins; recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1889-1897), vol. 2, 533.

stakes with a “formal engagement” to “carry his head onto the scaffold” or to prove that it should be “the traitors” whose heads “must fall at the feet of the nation, that they have betrayed.”<sup>14</sup>

Camille Desmoulins, witnessing the speech and reporting its effects in his newspaper, noted that “I was moved by this to tears at more than one point”, and as Robespierre spoke of his own death found himself exclaiming “we shall all die before thee,” joined in this by “more than eight hundred persons [who] rose as one and, led like me by an involuntary movement, swore to rally around Robespierre, and offered an admirable *tableau* by the fire of their words, the action of their hands, of their hats, of all their faces, and by the unexpectedness of this sudden inspiration.”<sup>15</sup>

When we read such accounts, we need to contemplate not just the extent to which, as in Reddy’s analyses, these are acts of linguistic signalling about expected norms of response, but how far they are also contextualized expressions of the weight of the situation revolutionaries felt themselves to be under. Thus, in the case of Robespierre’s expression in particular, we can suggest a merging between what is “felt”, as an emotion, and what is “felt to be”—the experienced reality of a situation.<sup>16</sup> Touchstones such as those above, the expulsions of soldiers from the armies and the Nancy massacre, recur in his words, cementing the impression of revolutionary events as bearing an enormous burden of both significance and danger—not merely occasional or circumstantial risk, but ongoing, oppressive, experienced threat. A threat, moreover, that came not just from the overt, emigrated enemy, but from the very structures of power that the Revolution had erected.

On 11 January 1792, Robespierre spoke at the Jacobin Club, which was his main oratorical outlet since the National Assembly had concluded its business, and articulated once again these images of danger and of popular victimhood. Still in the early stages of a struggle over looming war, with Brissot and his associates asserting the invincibility of the liberated French, Robespierre apostrophized the men who had stormed the Bastille in 1789 to join this fight, only to find that “indigence, persecution, the hatred of our new despots has dispersed you”:

Come, at least, soldiers of all those immortal units that have deployed the most ardent love for the people’s cause. What! The despotism that you had vanquished has punished you for your *civisme* and your victory. What! Struck with a hundred thousand arbitrary and impious orders, a hundred thousand soldiers, the hope of liberty, without revenge, without occupation, and without bread, expiate the fault of having betrayed crime to serve virtue!<sup>17</sup>

The victims of “sanguinary” martial law—as declared at Nancy—were no longer available to serve, let alone those killed in massacres even outside its bloody ambit: “Ah! What had these women, these massacred children done? Did the all-powerful criminals have such a fear of

---

<sup>14</sup> Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, vol. 2, 533.

<sup>15</sup> Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 7, footnote to 523.

<sup>16</sup> For an ethnographic elaboration on taking the participants’ perspective in this form, see Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth; the remaking of social analysis* (London: Beacon Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 97–110, citation at p. 107.

women and children?” Countless others were also gathered into the bosom of martyrdom, in a retrospective roll call of popular suffering through incidents of conflict and oppression since 1789:

You who perished beneath the blows of assassins encouraged by our tyrants; you who languish in irons where they have cast you, you will not come with us: no more will you come with us, you unfortunate and virtuous citizens, who in so many provinces have succumbed beneath the blows of fanaticism, aristocracy and perfidy! Ah! God! So many victims, and always amongst the people, always amongst the most generous patriots, when the powerful conspirators breathe and triumph!<sup>18</sup>

Having here already placed martyred victimhood in a central role as witness to the perfidy of counterrevolutionary “tyrants”, “despots”, and “powerful conspirators”, Robespierre went on in his peroration to demonstrate how deeply embedded this idea and its example were in his longer-term vision. He addressed the future generations of “nascent posterity,” the “sweet and tender hope of humanity” that he hoped would be the beneficiaries of the current struggle, and foresaw them learning the lessons of the revolutionary past by being exposed to its full horrors:

... instead of the poisoned songs of voluptuousness, may the touching and terrible cries of the victims of despotism ring in thy ears; may the names of the martyrs of liberty occupy in thy memory the place usurped in ours by the heroes of imposture and aristocracy; may thy first spectacles be the Field of Federation inundated with the blood of the most virtuous citizens; may thy ardent and sensitive imagination roam amongst the corpses of the soldiers of Châteaueux [the Nancy mutineers] ...; may thy first passion be the scorn of traitors and the hatred of tyrants; may thy motto be: protection, love, benevolence for the unfortunate, eternal war on oppressors! Nascent posterity, hasten to grow and to bring forth the days of equality, of justice, and of happiness!<sup>19</sup>

Into the war, and through its disastrous early months, Robespierre continued to beat the drum of a revolutionary people caught between horror and hope, and at risk of being crushed by its own government. On 29 July, he declaimed at the Jacobins in favour of the French people, “betrayed by the holders of its authority, delivered by the government itself to the insults and the iron of foreign despots, reviled, oppressed, despoiled in the name of the laws.” An “eternal toy of the intriguers who have governed since the start of the revolution,” the *peuple* was now “in the final period of the long crisis which torments it” and still foolishly prepared to trust its unfaithful mandatories.<sup>20</sup> Labelling current events unambiguously as a conspiracy by the majority of the political class against the people and the patriots, his call for action was equally clear:

Proscribed by the new government, we must find all our resources in ourselves. We must rise to all the prodigies to which the love of liberty may

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., vol. 8, pp. 107–8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., vol. 8, p. 110. The passage uses the intimate form *tu* throughout.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., vol. 8, p. 408.

give birth. The fate of all nations is attached to ours; and we have a fight against all the powers, physical and moral, that have oppressed them until this moment; we have a fight against the numerous and redoubtable traitors who live amongst us ... The French people must support the weight of the world, and must subdue at the same time all the monsters that desolate it. [The people] must be, amongst peoples, what Hercules was amongst heroes.

Yes, I have already said it at several occasions, and I repeat it again in this moment; there remain to us only two alternatives, either to perish and to bury with us the liberty of the human race, or to deploy great virtues and resolve ourselves to great sacrifices.<sup>21</sup>

When the struggle he envisaged reached Paris, with the carnage at the Tuileries on 10 August 1792, Robespierre's response, published in his newspaper in late August, was to place real present victims where he had, months before, put imagined recollections:

Who might paint the interesting pictures of that day? Who could express the sublime sentiment that filled all souls? The heaped victims of the Court's fury offered themselves on all sides to the eyes of the citizens, in the vast lair it had inhabited, in all the nearby places: the citizens had their fathers, their friends, their brothers to weep for; but the love of the *patrie*, the enthusiasm of liberty dominated over all affections; one regarded, without emotion, the cadavers of the satellites of tyranny; one shed sweet tears upon those of the defenders of liberty, swearing to avenge them.<sup>22</sup>

He noted earlier that the Swiss Guards at the château had initially "held their hands out to the citizens, several wore the bonnet of liberty," but this "sweet illusion" was broken by treacherous fire. As a result of this, "The château was stormed, the Swiss put to flight, pursued; a great number of them were sacrificed to the shades of the defenders of liberty, who had perished under the blows of tyranny."<sup>23</sup> Having thus linked past and present into one combative message, he carried it forward into the future, abandoning the dread of oppression for the fury of justice:

You are henceforth at war with all your oppressors; you will only have peace when you have punished them. Let pusillanimous weakness be far from you; or that cowardly indulgence that tyrants, thirsty for the blood of men, claim only for themselves. Impunity has given birth to all their crimes and all your ills. Let them all fall beneath the blade of the laws. The clemency that pardons them is barbaric; it is a crime against humanity.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his exhortations, the threat to the Revolution and the patriotic people from those around them did not diminish, in Robespierre's eyes, in the new Republic. At the end of October 1792 he addressed a long speech at the Jacobins to the "influence of calumny on the

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., vol. 8, p. 418.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, issue 12, Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 4, p. 364.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, p. 354.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, p. 360.

Revolution,” placing the Brissotin/Girondin “faction” at the heart of its ills and identifying himself, as he had done before, directly with the people: “they are the respectable people, the ones who are *comme il faut* in the Republic; we are the *sans-culottes* and the rabble.” In charge of the government, and with the agenda of the Convention and its committees in their hands, the Girondins were, he claimed, all-powerful:

Woe to the patriots who, unaided, will still dare to defend liberty! They will be crushed like vile insects. Woe to the people, if it dares show some energy or sign of existence! They know how to divide the people, to have it slaughtered by its own hand; and they are thirsty for its blood.<sup>25</sup>

A few days later, responding in the Convention to charges of aspirant dictatorship and complicity in the September Massacres laid by the Girondin Jean-Baptiste Louvet, Robespierre noted the new tendency to lament the victims of those events (after an initial consensus that it had been a regrettable necessity) and urged that such emotions be directed elsewhere, to the many other victims he had invoked so often before:

Let us keep some tears for more touching calamities. Weep for the hundred thousand patriots immolated by tyranny; weep for our fellow-citizens dying on their burning roofs, and the sons of citizens massacred in the cradle, or in the arms of their mothers. Do you not have enough brothers, children, wives to avenge?... Weep then, weep for humanity slain beneath [tyrants’] odious yoke; but recover if, imposing silence on all the vile passions, you wish to assure the happiness of this country and of the world...<sup>26</sup>

Concluding his speech, as so often before, Robespierre invoked personal as well as collective martyrdom in the cause of the people’s freedom and happiness:

I renounce the just vengeance that I would have the right to pursue against the calumniators; I demand only from them the return of peace and the triumph of liberty. Citizens, traverse with a firm and rapid step the superb course ahead of you; and may I, at the expense of my life and even my reputation, travel with you to the glory and happiness of our common *patrie*!<sup>27</sup>

\*\*\*

What have we gained by wading through this selection of Robespierre’s public pronouncements, which leave us still nearly ten months before he joined the Committee of Public Safety? We can see that, plainly, Vadier was right on 9 Thermidor—he had Robespierre’s style down to a ‘T’, and everyone else knew it, too. But, in that sense, he was accusing Robespierre of being consistent. The Incorruptible who condemned plotters and warned of martyrdom in 1794 was the same man who had earned fame and popularity as a result of exactly the same lonely stand for years beforehand. His vision of the revolutionary process, and experience, was one of a people who were already marked out as survivors of horror. Haunted by defeats and pursued by enemies, the people grasped desperately at the

---

<sup>25</sup> Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, vol. 9, pp. 44–60, citation at p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 79–101, citation at p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 100–101.

security of a happy life gained through patriotic endeavour. But this always lay in the future, and meanwhile the reanimated counter-revolutionary zombies of the Old Regime clawed at the people's backs, as repeated betrayals by the powerful cut their feet from under them. Not only did this resonate quite clearly with audiences' fears, but it spoke distinctly to their experiences, in which reported massacres loomed large, while leaders, idols, and popular tribunes had dropped their masks, revealing themselves to be monsters of counter-revolution, over and over again: Mirabeau, Lafayette, Barnave, Dumouriez, Brissot....

This context merely takes on new and more convoluted forms as we pass into and through the Terror.<sup>28</sup> We can see that in some senses Robespierre's own situation had undeniably altered—he was no longer the isolated tribune of virtue, but the spokesman, indeed ideological pilot, of a “ruling” committee. Yet that rule continued to be experienced in ways which put him and his colleagues in the position of popular tribunes acting against menacing power. The Convention itself, in the aftermath of the purge of the Girondins, could be claimed as a bastion of the people. Robespierre had long practised an identification between himself and the people, and this was now rhetorically extended by him and others.<sup>29</sup> Danton in January 1794, for example, declared that “the Convention has only had successes because it has been *peuple*, it will remain *peuple*, it will seek out and follow public opinion ceaselessly, it is that opinion which must decree all the laws that you proclaim.”<sup>30</sup> But the Convention was not the only part of the structure of government, and when the “Representatives of the People” considered the wider apparatus of the state, they were far from sanguine about its composition or intentions.

The danger of relaxing vigilance and leaving government to its own devices ran through the proposal to make such government “revolutionary until the peace” in October 1793. In seeking this move, Saint-Just had openly declared, in the name of the Committee of Public Safety, that “A people has only one dangerous enemy, and that is its government. Yours has constantly made war against you with impunity.”<sup>31</sup> The crackdown on officialdom this heralded ran on into the Law of 14 Frimaire, Robespierre's own speech on the “Principles of Revolutionary Government” on 5 Nivôse, and the purging of local and national bodies that had already begun again by that date. What was in practice, and most particularly of course in the eyes of its actual and potential victims, a succession of unhesitating exercises of state power was also conceptually the product of an ongoing fear of state power and its role as an implicitly counter-revolutionary menace. The outcomes of this could be paradoxical, as when Claude Javogues—by any reasonable definition a “tyrannical” operator on mission in the Loire—denounced the 14 Frimaire measures as the creation of “dictators” in the persons of the National Agents who would “dispose arbitrarily of the life and fortune of the citizens”.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> I am not, here, taking a position on circumstance-vs-ideology in the creation of ‘the Terror’ in general; rather noting, along with Marisa Linton's *Choosing Terror*, that the most perplexing part of this period, and thus the best to think with, is the seemingly inexorable turning of the radical republican leadership on itself.

<sup>29</sup> For a particularly notable early example of this, see Address, ‘Living the Revolutionary Melodrama’, pp. 114-15.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in H. Morse Stephens, ed., *The Principal Speeches of the Statesmen and Orators of the French Revolution, 1789-1795*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), vol. 1, p. 275.

<sup>31</sup> See David Address, *The Terror: civil war in the French Revolution*, (London: Little, Brown, 2005), pp. 222ff.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Address, *Terror*, pp. 285-86.

Paradox in a wider sense ran through all the apparatus erected in this period, as enlarged bureaucracies for military and economic management spawned further alarms about the power of bureaucracy, more surveillance of them by new layers of officialdom, more purges, and new plans for reconstruction on lines both more efficient and more transparent. This reached perhaps an apogee in April 1794 as the political purges of the “factions” were accompanied by the transformation of government ministries into “executive commissions”, and the infamous *bureau de police générale* was created in the hands of the Committee of Public Safety itself: an instrument of oversight that lasted bare weeks before becoming the target of accusations of tyranny.

Throughout these months in which the Convention at once ruled ruthlessly and continuously agonised about the fear of state power and its abuse, Robespierre was also being personally entangled in an awful awareness of menacing corruption amongst the Representatives of the People themselves. Scarcely had he had time to draw breath from the end of the Federalist menace than the first threads of the “Foreign Plot” were put in his hands by the conniving François Chabot, thickening the fog of denunciation that Fabre d’Eglantine had already set swirling around his own complicity in the Indies Company fraud.<sup>33</sup> Once the seeds of doubt had been planted, given so many betrayals before, what superhuman fortitude would have been required not to take another step down that familiar path of condemnation and exclusion?

If we consider Robespierre’s trajectory through the Revolution as a whole, we see that speaking, and thus when possible politically acting, against those in power who had betrayed the people was a constant to which he was committed rhetorically, intellectually, and emotionally. We can debate exactly what impact the reiterated confirmation of his worst fears had on him, what may have run through his mind as he tortured what he knew of Danton the individual to fit the newly-revealed “reality” of Danton the traitor, but we cannot deny that the actions of his last months stood in a direct line from those of the previous years. What had made Robespierre lauded as the saviour of the people before made him now unable to stop.

Robespierre the Incorruptible, the clean-handed, selfless popular tribune, became something terrible, became the drafter of the rules for the Popular Commission at Orange in May 1794, demanding that judges set aside rules of evidence and take account of “such information of any kind as is capable of convincing a reasonable man and a friend of liberty” that a defendant merited death.<sup>34</sup> Prompted by the kind of men who had gathered themselves around him in his final months, Robespierre became the man who in his last speech could envisage a purgative tide flooding up through the Convention itself, almost to his own office door.<sup>35</sup> He became, there and then, the fratricidal monster he was condemned as. He became that monster by not changing—by continuing to be utterly, consistently, wholeheartedly devoted to the salvation of the people. And in that paradox, born out of the conditions created by the turbulent drama of betrayal that was revolutionary politics, lies the whole of the Robespierre problem.

---

<sup>33</sup> Norman Hampson, ‘François Chabot and his Plot’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1975): 1-14.

<sup>34</sup> See Andress, *Terror*, p. 295.

<sup>35</sup> On Robespierre’s “party”, as it would be dubbed, John Hardman’s brief biography is highly illuminating: *Robespierre* (London: Longman, 1999).

David Andress  
University of Portsmouth  
david.andress@port.ac.uk

Copyright © 2015 by the H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Salon* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

*H-France Salon*  
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 14, #2