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The Robespierre Problem: An Introduction

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Ever since 9 Thermidor Year II ‘the Robespierre Problem’ has been at the heart of debates about the French Revolution. These debates have been deepened and enriched by a combination of recent contributions, including important books on ‘the Terror’, several new biographies of Robespierre, and challenging interpretations of key moments, including 9 Thermidor itself.

In this issue of *H-France Salon* I outline the ‘problem’ and its recent historiography, followed by short essays from four leading Anglophone and French scholars who have made major recent contributions (David Andress, Michel Biard, Hervé Leuwers, and Marisa Linton), and concluding with a video discussion between Colin Jones and myself.

The greatest challenge for the historian is how to write of the past as if it was the uncertain present rather than simply reading history backwards.¹ This challenge is particularly acute for the biographer. Since we usually know the broad outlines of an individual’s life, it is tempting—and perhaps unavoidable—for us to construct a story of that life as if its stages were neatly arranged stepping-stones rather than encounters with circumstances beyond one’s control and with choices whose consequences were unknowable. For no other individual in history is this biographical challenge sharper than for Maximilien Robespierre, for as soon as he died at the age of thirty-six people rushed to vilify him as much as he had been lauded while alive and projected onto him actions and motives based on rumour or their own guilt. His life was read backwards and presented as an inexorable trajectory to bloodthirsty dictatorship and his own death.

Ever since, historians have also been divided over his stature and achievements as much as they have been over the meaning of the Revolution which he has been seen to incarnate.² Was Robespierre the first modern dictator, icily fanatical, an obsessive who used his political power to try to impose his rigid ideal of a land of Spartan ‘virtue’? Or was he a principled, self-abnegating visionary, the great revolutionary martyr who, with his Jacobin allies, succeeded in leading the French Revolution and the Republic to safety in the face of overwhelming military odds? Were the controls on individual liberties and the mass arrests

¹ These opening paragraphs draw on Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: a Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), Introduction.

² William Doyle and Colin Haydon, ‘Robespierre: after two hundred years’, in *Robespierre*, ed. Haydon and Doyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3–16, is a good summary of the historiographical debate. See also Hugh Gough, *The Terror in the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); Paul R. Hanson, *Contesting the French Revolution* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Michel Vovelle, *Combats pour la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte/Société des études Robespierriistes, 1993), Part I.

and executions of ‘the Terror’ of the Year II (1793–94) the necessary price to pay to save the Revolution? Or was this year a time of horror, of unnecessary death, incarceration, and privation?

Responses to ‘the Robespierre problem’ have always depended both on the personal perspectives of the historians and on the context in which they were writing. So R.R. Palmer’s classic *Twelve who Ruled*, written in the most uncertain days of World War II (1941), was broadly sympathetic to Robespierre:

Since 1940 it is no longer so laughable as it once was to say that democracy is founded upon virtue. As we read through the catalogue of changes which Robespierre announced that the Revolutionary Government wished to see in France, we sense a certain similarity to what we might have read in the morning paper.

To Pierre Chaunu, in the early 1980s, the Terror conjured up instead the images from Cambodia and of Stalinist prisons current at the time he was writing. Then in 1986 he wrote a preface for a book by his doctoral student Reynald Secher arguing that the repression of the Vendéan uprising was a ‘Franco-French genocide’ for which the terrible logic was provided by Robespierre’s vicious imperative of ‘prompt, severe, and inflexible justice’.³

Despite the comparatively limited, if still massive, loss of life during the one year in which Robespierre was a member of the government, historians have drawn preposterous parallels with Mao, Pol Pot, and even Stalin and Hitler. For Eli Sagan, he was a paranoid psychopath, a vicious narcissist, ‘one of the great exterminators of innocent people’. Studying him, he writes, was a journey into ‘the heart of darkness’.⁴ Those tempted by psychobiography have described him as physically repellent and emotionally cold, with no capacity for sexual intimacy. Indeed, he has been cast as a narcissistic ascetic, whose self-identification with the Revolution was a classic case of Freudian ‘displaced libido’.⁵ An obsessive personality is seen to be revealed by his fastidious appearance and toilet, a horror of bodily corruption which would repel him from physical intimacy.⁶ It has been claimed that he was a repressed homosexual with a castration complex, a misogynist, and a pathological narcissist constantly searching for a good father and an all-powerful mother.⁷ Others have understood him as a

³ R.R. Palmer, *Twelve who Ruled. The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 279; Hugh Gough, ‘Genocide and the Bicentenary: The French Revolution and the Revenge of the Vendée’, *Historical Journal* 30 (1987): 978; Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: the Vendée* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 250. Chaunu’s preface to Secher, *Le Génocide franco-français: la Vendée-Vengé* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986), was not included in the English translation.

⁴ Eli Sagan, *Citizens and Cannibals: the French Revolution, the Struggle for Modernity, and the Origins of Ideological Terror* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), ch. 22.

⁵ Jacques André, *La Révolution fratricide. Essai de psychanalyse du lien social* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Mourning Glory: The Will of the French Revolution* (University Park, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), ch. 7.

⁶ Laurent Dingli, *Robespierre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), pp. 23, 35, 435, Epilogue.

⁷ Jean Artarit, *Robespierre, ou, l'impossible filiation* (Paris: Table Ronde, 2003), pp. 55, 66, 68, 79, 81, 106–07, 112–14, 170, 366–67.

paranoiac who, at a time of generalized belief in the malevolent power of conspiracy, was consumed by the omnipresence of counterrevolutionary plots and his certainty that a new world could be created by rhetoric.⁸

He has reminded others of contemporary politics. For John Hardman, writing in 1999, ‘he was a police boss and France a police state’: his legacy was ‘every dictatorship of the Left’.⁹ Hilary Mantel, author of a major novel set during the Terror, drew a parallel with ‘the conviction of [Islamic] militants, their rage for purity, their willingness to die’; for others, he resembled President Ahmedinejad of Iran.¹⁰ He has been likened both to Tony Blair and George W. Bush and to their enemy, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.¹¹ For Slavoj Žižek, in contrast, he has become the ideological vehicle through which the perceived crisis of western capitalist democracy may be discussed. For him, the moral judgment implicit in the title of Ruth Scurr’s biography of Robespierre, *A Fatal Purity*, highlights the failings of western liberalism.¹²

On the French left, he is still seen as a reminder of what has been forgotten about militant commitment to social justice, exemplified in the speech in Arras on the eve of the bicentenary of 1789 by Michel Vovelle, the Sorbonne professor charged with organizing the academic side of the commemorations in 1989. The title of Vovelle’s speech—‘Why we are still Robespierrists’—recalled the title of a 1920 lecture given by Robespierre’s greatest admirer, another Sorbonne professor, Albert Mathiez.¹³ A common premise has been that all of Robespierre’s actions were proportional and necessary responses to counter-revolution. For Claude Mazauric, Robespierre was the man of peace and principle in 1792, who then ‘submitted’ to the needs of the revolutionary State in assuming its leadership in the direst of circumstances. Robespierre’s view of the Terror would always be ‘without excess’ and ‘devoid of sacrificial and impassioned verbiage ... His place in history is unique.’¹⁴

⁸ These themes are central to the views of Patrice Gueniffey, ‘Robespierre, itinéraire d’un tyran’, *Histoire* 177 (1994): 36–47; and François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 55–72.

⁹ John Hardman, *Robespierre* (London: Longman, 1999), for example, pp. x, 214. Adam Gopnik describes him as a ‘mass-murdering nerd—a man who, having read a book, resolves to kill all the people who don’t like it as much as he does’: ‘Headless Horseman’, *New Yorker* 82:16 (2006): 80–84.

¹⁰ Hilary Mantel, ‘If you’d seen his green eyes’, *London Review of Books*, 20 April 2006: 3, 8. Mantel’s novel is *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992).

¹¹ Lynn Hunt, ‘For Reasons of State’, *The Nation*, 29 May 2006, p. 28; David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution*, London: Little, Brown, 2005, pp. 375–76; ‘Robespierre, Julian Assange, and the tyranny [sic] of the individual,’ accessed 27 September 2015. <https://soldiercitizen.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/robespierre-julian-assange-and-the-tyranny-of-the-individual/>.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Slavoj Žižek presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror* (London: Verso, 2007), referring to Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus), 2006.

¹³ Michel Vovelle, ‘Pourquoi nous sommes encore Robespierristes?’, in *Combats pour la Révolution française*, pp. 349–59. See Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France 1789–1989* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 456–63.

¹⁴ Claude Mazauric, ‘Présentation’, *Œuvres* vol. 1 (Paris: Phénix Éditions, 2000), pp. xviii–xxix; ‘Robespierre’, in *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution française*, ed. Albert Soboul (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989), p. 921. A recent statement of the continued relevance of ‘Robespierriste’ is by Yannick Bosc, Florence Gauthier, and Sophie Wahnich, *Pour le bonheur et pour la liberté* (Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, 2000).

Debates about ‘the Robespierre problem’ show no signs of dissipating. On the contrary, new biographies and lively exchanges about new approaches to the Revolution and ‘the Terror’ have accentuated these debates—as well as offering very significant new insights.

There are three key dimensions to these debates. First, is Robespierre’s political and personal trajectory after 1789 best explained by the force of the circumstances he encountered, by his intellectual and emotional predispositions, or in other terms? Two recent biographies have sought to trace in detail Robespierre’s life from his childhood in the Artois capital of Arras until his execution in Paris. My own biography sought to understand Robespierre as a remarkable young man living through an unpredictable and tumultuous revolutionary crisis.¹⁵ The young revolutionary was formed by his childhood, schooling, and working life, most of it spent in the small provincial centre of a distinctive region of northern France. Maximilien was conceived outside wedlock and was subject to cruel taunts about illegitimacy throughout his life. His response was to develop a backbone of steel. But, rather than the emotionally cold, even stunted, dictator of legend, incapable of intimate relationships, Robespierre emerges in my biography as a man of passion, with close friendships with both women and men.

Hervé Leuwers’ meticulous biography, with its exhaustive consultation of archival sources, drew also on his expertise as an historian of the world of the law in eighteenth-century France and his profound knowledge of the history of Artois.¹⁶ For Leuwers, as for me, Robespierre’s legal education was to be crucial to the image that he fashioned of himself as, in Rousseau’s terms, a ‘virtuous legislator’ acting on behalf of those less fortunate and powerful. At the same time, his intellectual formation—particularly through his familiarity with the classics through his Oratorian education at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris and his encounters with the work of Rousseau and others—was to be crucial in his responses to the unfolding divisions and dramas of the years after 1789. Leuwers seeks to remove Robespierre from the myths and clichés about him, particularly that of the ‘Revolution incarnate’: he was a unique individual with particular values and attitudes, not an icon.

Very different as an approach to making sense of Robespierre’s trajectory is an historiographical stream evident at the time of the Bicentenary which has since become a river of discourse analysis. The current ‘War on Terror’ has influenced some historians—as well as journalists—to continue to focus on the supposedly paranoid or millenarian ideology of Robespierre and the Jacobins.¹⁷ Understanding the period dubbed ‘the Terror’ once Robespierist Jacobins were executed in July 1794 has become an exercise in identifying the discursive roots of paranoia rather than placing Robespierre and others within the exigencies of war and counter-revolution. Dan Edelstein’s brilliant study of ‘natural right’ makes few references to the extent of counter-revolution or to the scale of the external military threat,

¹⁵ McPhee, *Robespierre*.

¹⁶ Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

¹⁷ For example, the prominent Australian commentator Waleed Aly described the beheading of American journalist James Foley as ‘ISIS in Jacobin mode; its post-revolutionary Régime de la Terreur’. See ‘James Foley beheading baits America to intervene’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 2014, accessed 27 September 2015: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/james-foley-beheading-baits-america-to-intervene-20140821-106jbo.html#ixzz3HQ3sCVk8>

the usual contextual reasons given for the reluctant decisions of the Convention to put in place the draconian measures of its policy of ‘terror until the peace’. Instead, Edelstein argues that classical republicanism and the myth of a golden age became fused with ‘natural right’ theory in eighteenth-century political culture, the basis of a violent ideology of exclusion during the Terror.¹⁸

Similarly, for Mary Ashburn Miller the violence was legitimized, even encouraged, by the inherently violent language of nature, especially of volcanic eruptions and tempests, chosen by the revolutionaries: ‘nature provided a way of exonerating or even encouraging revolutionary violence, of limiting opposition to ‘natural’ acts’.¹⁹ Three of Robespierre’s major speeches of 1794—that on revolutionary government (5 February/17 Pluviôse Year II), the Festival of the Supreme Being (7 May/18 Floréal), and his final speech to the Convention (26 July/8 Thermidor)—are core evidence for her. But, while there were indeed a few references to the ‘stormy’ circumstances in which the Republic found itself, as Miller argues, a more thorough consideration of these speeches reveals them to be studded with classical references, from Agis and Lycurgus of Sparta to Philip of Macedon and Miltiades and Aristides of Athens. In particular, Robespierre drew directly on Cicero’s account of the Catiline conspiracy in first-century B.C. Rome.²⁰ This was a juxtaposition of the vices and virtues, the latter under conspiratorial threat, which seems to have become embedded in young Maximilien’s subconscious when a boy at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand.²¹

Particularly productive recent contributions to our understanding of Robespierre have been made by the way in which Marisa Linton and Timothy Tackett examine the world of the Jacobin leadership in general during the Revolution and Terror, with a specific focus on their personal networks, emotional sensibilities, the sources of their ideology, and the contrast between their rhetoric and the politics they actually practiced once in power.²² That is, the Terror is understood as political process and Robespierre as a political man. His discursive style—like that of his peers—was the result of the explosive encounter of the sentimentalism of the cult of nature and the language of virtue in neo-classicism. Rousseau’s certainty that

¹⁸ Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Edelstein, ‘Do We Want a Revolution without Revolution? Reflections on Political Authority’, *French Historical Studies* 35 (2012): 269-89.

¹⁹ Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 18.

²⁰ ‘Second Oration against Lucius Catalina: Addressed to the People’, *M. Tullius Cicero. The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero, literally translated by C.D. Yonge, B.A.* (London, 1856). See Thomas E. Kaiser, ‘Conclusion: Catilina’s Revenge—Conspiracy, Revolution, and Historical Consciousness from the ancien régime to the Consulate’, in *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*, eds. Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

²¹ See Maxime Rosso, ‘Les Réminiscences spartiates dans les discours et la politique de Robespierre de 1789 à Thermidor’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 349 (2007): 51–77; and Marisa Linton, ‘The Man of Virtue: the Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L.A. Saint-Just’, *French History* 24 (2010): 393-419.

²² Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror. Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015). In this context, note also the important analysis by Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution. The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the virtuous legislator would know the general will lurking in the conscience of ‘the people’ would become potentially deadly when combined with the cult of heroes of antiquity such as Brutus, combining civic sacrifice and denunciation of conspiracy, vice, and corruption. Like Rousseau, revolutionaries ‘believed that the human heart spoke with one voice’.

Linton’s title ‘Choosing Terror’ is deliberately provocative, for the ‘force of circumstance’ thesis has been the comfortable explanation of generations of historians who have argued that it was actual, and not imagined, counter-revolution that drove revolutionaries to impose martial law and sweeping surveillance and repression in 1793-94. As she and Tackett have shown, rumour and fear of conspiracy had fuelled the Revolution from the outset, and Robespierre was not immune. Rumours of conspiracies to re-impose the ancien regime were sustained by news of actual as well as imagined counter-revolutionary activities and, in regions close to the frontiers, by fear of invasion and war. Revolutionaries were well aware of the magnitude of what had been achieved in 1789-91 and readily convinced that the crowned heads of Europe would stop at nothing to prevent the spread of the revolutionary contagion. Once the king attempted to flee in June 1791 and his fellow monarchs felt impelled to voice more bellicose attitudes to the Revolution, such rumours of war sharpened the acute fear that counter-revolution was even more dangerous than it was. The Jacobins of whom Linton writes were men from provincial towns and cities reliant on networks of politics and friendship to keep them informed of the situation of their *pays* while they were in Paris. My own biography has highlighted this in the case of Robespierre, whose home town of Arras was constantly swept by rumours of invasion and counter-revolution, which were only too believable given the close proximity of the fighting after April 1792.

The great merit of the contributions of Linton and Tackett is to explore the interaction of unforeseen circumstances and ideological predispositions in the trajectory of a man like Robespierre, a complex in which difficult and deadly choices were made. These were neither a pragmatic response to circumstances nor simply the product of obsessive paranoia. Above all, however, it was the counter-revolution and the mixed emotions of panic, outrage, pride, and above all fear that it aroused which fostered his willingness to believe that enemies were omnipresent.

A second key element of continuing debates about ‘the Robespierre problem’ concerns the particular role and responsibility attributed to him in 1793-94 and on the Committee of Public Safety in particular. Much of the writing about the year during which Robespierre was in government has been based on the assumption that he was in some sense the ‘leader’ or spokesman for the Committee and for the Jacobins in general, even that he was an unelected ‘dictator’. This assumption today permeates popular understandings of the Terror, a simple way of making sense of an extraordinarily complex and challenging crisis.

In contrast, the work of Michel Biard, Philippe Bourdin, Hervé Leuwers, and their French colleagues, exemplified in three recent edited volumes, is characterized by close attention to political process and its context.²³ They are far less constrained than earlier generations of

²³ Eds. Michel Biard et Hervé Leuwers, *Visages de la Terreur. L’exception politique de l’an II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); Ed. Michel Biard, *Les Politiques de la Terreur, 1793–1794: actes du colloque international de Rouen, 11–13 janvier 2007* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes; Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 2008); Eds. Michel Biard and Philippe Bourdin, *Robespierre: portraits croisés* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012). See the review article by Gavin Jacobson, ‘Caricatures Travel Better than Portraits: On Maximilien Robespierre’, *English Historical Review* 537 (2014): 388-402.

French academic historians by the perceived imperative to condemn or justify the ‘Incorruptible’. Rather than seeing ‘the Terror’ as an authoritarian, dictatorial regime dominated by Robespierre, they point to the fissures and instabilities within the Jacobin regime. They emphasize the contrasting provincial experiences of the Terror and the role of individual decisions to kill perceived enemies, such as that made by Étienne Maignet in Bédoin in May 1794.

The Committee, while without the formalities of a council of ministers, acted like a war cabinet, and the nature of its decisions reflected its preoccupations with the mobilization and supply of the army and with military strategy. Spheres of responsibility were clear. In the final four months of 1793, the Committee issued 920 decrees, of which authorship may be confidently ascribed in 272 cases to Carnot (military matters), 244 to Barère (foreign policy), and 146 to Prieur de la Côte d’Or (munitions). Robespierre, by no means expert in military matters, was responsible for just 77.²⁴ He never visited the front and was content to leave organizational and strategic decisions to those with real military experience.

The charge given to the Committee of Public Safety was crushing in its scale. With the benefit of hindsight, ‘the Terror’ it applied appears as a monolith, with Robespierre as its architect. At the time, however, those in the National Convention who haphazardly put in place its building blocks had no such prescience. From October 1792 the Convention and its committees had pieced together a series of emergency measures designed to defeat the invading armies and counterrevolution in all its guises, to meet the continuing grievances of urban and rural people, and to control the actions of militants who claimed to represent the people’s will. These included a Revolutionary Tribunal, the mass mobilization of human and material resources for the army, controls on prices, wages and production, the definitive abolition of seigneurialism, and an emergency executive with sweeping powers. The period from the entry of Robespierre onto the Committee is more accurately described as a period of sweeping governmental measures to win a civil and foreign war, rather than as ‘the Terror’, a descriptor first used only afterwards.²⁵

There was no one moment at which the National Convention decided upon a system of government which they called ‘the Terror’: the closest they came to this was to support a delegation from the forty-eight sections and the Jacobin Club which demanded that it ‘make terror the order of the day’ on 5 September 1793. Indeed, Jean-Clément Martin has argued compellingly that the term ‘the Terror’ should no longer be applied to the period although, as Annie Jourdan has emphasized, the language of terror suffused the rhetoric of that year.²⁶ Much of the violence later grouped under the organizing trope of ‘the Terror’ consisted of the attempt of the government to channel popular fury and division into a national will that could secure victory in the extreme violence of the wars—both foreign and civil—being fought out on French soil, as Sophie Wahnich argues.²⁷

²⁴ Palmer, *Twelve who Ruled*, p. 109.

²⁵ See Michel Biard and Christine Peyrard, ‘Les Rouages de la Terreur’, in *Politiques de la Terreur*, ed. Biard, pp. 23–37.

²⁶ For example, in ‘Violences et justice’, in *Politiques de la Terreur*, ed. Biard, pp. 129–40; and ‘Les Discours de la terreur à l’époque révolutionnaire (1776-1798): Étude comparative sur une notion ambiguë’, *French Historical Studies*, 36 (2013): 51-81.

²⁷ Sophie Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror. Liberty or Death in the French Revolution*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2012).

Even though only Prieur and St-Just were younger, and military matters were in the hands of more expert colleagues, Robespierre's standing on the Committee was such that he exerted a powerful overall sense of direction. There were many specific matters on which he did not have his way, but the key political statements were his. Robespierre had always been dutiful about his correspondence, and this, combined with his political popularity and the renown of his major speeches, made him in people's eyes the leader of the Committee. He received letters from all over France in these months—from Bayonne to Montmédy, from Perpignan to Coutances—on everything from requests for better army supplies to denunciations and proposals for new reforms. He was approached about—and blamed for—everything.

The third and particularly thorny question within 'the Robespierre problem' concerns how one might explain the final four months of his life, after his acquiescence in the deadly factional strikes against both 'Hébertistes' and 'Indulgents' in March 1794. Did the coincidence of the assassination attempts of 23 and 24 May and his physical exhaustion prevent him from being able to see the great victory at Fleurus on 26 June as the signal that explicit undertakings could be given that the crisis was almost over, that there could be a return to peacetime government? Was the spectacular increase in executions in Paris—from about three per day in the period of greatest military crisis from March 1793 to 10 June 1794 to thirty per day after the passing on 10 June of the Law of 22 Prairial—an attempt to centralize and complete the crushing of counter-revolution or a symptom of uncompromising factional bloodletting which would finally claim Robespierre himself?

One answer to these questions is furnished by another of the most significant recent perspectives, the development of the history of emotions. In William Reddy's words, by 1794 'the Revolution had turned into an emotional battleground, where everyone's sincerity was suspect ...'. Robespierre's warnings against 'false pity' for opponents of the Revolution had created a nightmare conflict between real and imagined sincerity. For Reddy, 'the history of the Revolution cannot be understood without an adequate theory of emotions'—that these extremely 'sentimental' people of the time lived out in public their feelings of grief, fear, and envy. Such 'over-sentimentality' might, he suggests, explain the particular obsession revolutionaries had with mostly imaginary conspiracies, for revolutionaries 'had great difficulty distinguishing between reasonable dissent and evil, dissembling opposition'. Robespierre is for him the personification of a key moment in the history of western emotional sensibilities, both the high-point of 'sentimentalism' and, through his death, the moment of its decline.²⁸

Reddy's argument may be criticized for ignoring the evidence of actual conspiracies as opposed to seeing them as fevered constructions of vivid imaginations. Ever since Louis XVI's bungled attempt to flee the country in June 1791, Robespierre and other Jacobins had been vulnerable to fears that the murderous opposition of counter-revolutionaries inside France was only part of a wider foreign conspiracy. There had always been enough evidence to reinforce these fears, even if the full extent of these conspiracies had rarely materialized.

²⁸ William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially pp. 195-98, 326. See, in contrast, David Andress, 'Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre's sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution', *Representations* 114 (2011): 103-28.

Reddy virtually ignores the actual menace of war and counter-revolution and reduces the Revolution to a battle over emotional sincerity.

An extreme version of the view that the Revolution was an emotional battleground between good and evil has most recently been proclaimed by Jonathan Israel, accusing Robespierre, with Saint-Just and Marat, of ‘emotional’, egalitarian, and ‘authoritarian populism prefiguring modern fascism’, inspired by Rousseau’s ‘Revolution of Will’.²⁹ Israel is the most recent in the long line of historians who blame Robespierre for all the less attractive episodes of the Revolution, but he does so with an unusual vehemence and disregard for evidence. Robespierre is vilified as an anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, and xenophobic authoritarian who ‘ruthlessly guillotined’ the well-intentioned Girondins. He suffered from ‘megalomania, paranoia and vindictiveness’; in short, he was a crypto-fascist. The evidence, for example, that he was in the minority of politicians who supported democracy and the abolition of slavery from the outset of the Revolution is dismissed, as is the fact that Robespierre signed few arrest warrants and certainly did not have the power to personally order executions.

Others more careful have seen Robespierre’s decline and fall as the result of his personality, for Ruth Scurr the result of a ‘fatal purity’, an ideological and personal rigidity, resulting in what she labelled ‘Robespierre’s Red Summer’ of June-July 1794. Scurr ‘tried to be his friend and to see things from his point of view’, but found him a ‘mediocre figure strutting and fretting on the historical stage’, narcissistic, and ‘remarkably odd’.³⁰ His ‘intellectual biographer’ David Jordan has instead seen ‘the Robespierre problem’ as a Greek tragedy: like Oedipus, Robespierre completely lacked self-awareness. ‘At the end’, he writes, ‘Robespierre’s blindness was ideological, his vanity self-righteousness, and both had been burnished to a stunning lustre by the Revolution’.³¹

For David Andress, the ‘spiral into paranoid repression’ in 1794 is to be explained by a complex ‘cultural trap’ in which the Jacobins were caught, a mix of ‘melodramatic heroism passed down in narratives of classical antiquity’ and “‘sentimentalist” beliefs about human psychology’ and the ‘malleability of the human mind’ which ‘placed an unbearable burden on the manifestation of emotional sincerity’. Robespierre is seen by him as the incarnation of the particular understanding of virtue as a mix of the ‘solid family values of a respectable householder, and the willingness to order the death of anyone who deviated from the required orthodoxy’.³² Despite the victories of the spring and summer of 1794, this paranoia made it impossible to wind back the bloodletting. Most recently, Michel Biard has explicated the ‘culture of heroic death’ shared by many revolutionaries in an atmosphere of constant fear:

²⁹ Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas. An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), for example, pp. 21-22, 28, 449, 695. See the trenchant critiques by David A. Bell, in *New York Review of Books*, 10 July 2014; Lynn Hunt, in *New Republic*, 27 June 2014; and Jeremy Popkin in *H-France Review* 15, no. 66, accessed 27 September 2015. www.h-france.net/vol15reviews/vol15no66popkin.pdf.

³⁰ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, pp. 5, 7, 173, 207.

³¹ David P. Jordan, ‘The Robespierre problem’, in *Robespierre*, eds. Haydon and Doyle, p. 31 and ch. 2; Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York: The Free Press, 1985).

³² David Andress, ‘The Course of the Terror’, in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), esp. pp. 301-02; Andress, *Terror*, p. 292.

no fewer than eighty-six deputies would go to their deaths in 1792-95, a deadly cycle commenced by the Girondins' lifting of Jean-Paul Marat's parliamentary immunity in April 1793.³³

My own analysis proposed that Robespierre was physically vulnerable rather than unusually rigid or vain, succumbing with increasing frequency to lengthy periods of physical and nervous collapse closely correlated with moments of political crisis in the Revolution. There is evidence of six or eight absences during these exhausting years, notably for several weeks before and after the arrest of Danton and Desmoulins in March 1794 and for the final six weeks after the Festival of the Supreme Being in June. He was rarely at the Committee of Public Safety or Jacobin Club after 10 June, and did not attend the Convention. Robespierre several times referred to his exhaustion, but his tragic inability to step away from the crushing burdens of leadership was to be fatal, and by April 1794 his capacity for clear-headed leadership was compromised.³⁴

Hervé Leuwers doubts the importance of this evidence of physical and mental collapse and has preferred to focus instead on the uncompromising faction-fighting of 1794, as desperate Jacobins rounded on each other in an atmosphere of relentless military sacrifice, popular discontent, and vicious rumours. Robespierre's mistakes were tactical; and his final speeches rambling, menacing, and almost incoherent.³⁵ Similarly, the brilliantly evocative narratives of the collapse of support for Robespierre by David Andress and Françoise Brunel find compelling answers in a close analysis of a brutal power-struggle.³⁶ Colin Jones, too, has found the evidence of Robespierre's state of health unconvincing and has argued that some historians have felt unwarranted pity for him. For Jones, Robespierre's speech of 8 Thermidor was a deliberate political stratagem, but this time his life-long manipulation of his image as the 'virtuous victim' failed. Unlike Leuwers and Andress, however, Jones has concentrated on widespread popular disaffection with Robespierre and his allies. Rather than the people of Paris standing idly by, disillusioned and exhausted by the constant spectre of factional bloodletting, he argues that Robespierre's overthrow was in large part due to active popular opposition. The Convention could draw on widespread support, in particular from the National Guard.³⁷

The three key questions have been raised in this historiographical survey. First, how do we best explain Robespierre's particular political and ideological trajectory in the years after 1789? Second, what particular role and responsibility is properly attributed to him when in power in 1793-94 and on the Committee of Public Safety in particular? And third, how does

³³ Michel Biard, *La Liberté ou la mort: mourir en député 1792-1795* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015).

³⁴ Peter McPhee, "'Mes forces et ma santé ne peuvent suffire'". Crises politiques, crises médicales dans la vie de Maximilien Robespierre, 1790-1794', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 371 (2013) : 137-52.

³⁵ Leuwers, *Robespierre*, pp. 345-46.

³⁶ Andress, *Terror*, ch.11; Françoise Brunel, *Thermidor, la chute de Robespierre* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1999).

³⁷ Colin Jones, 'The Overthrow of Maximilien Robespierre and the "Indifference" of the People', *American Historical Review*, 119 (2014): 689-713; and his paper on Robespierre to the 2015 SFHS Conference: *H-France Salon*, vol. 7, Issue 7, accessed 27 September 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7aPwwx6Y1w>.

one explain the final four months of his life, after his decision in March 1794 to agree to pressures to arrest both ‘Hébertistes’ and prominent ‘Indulgents’, including Danton and Desmoulins? These were among the questions to which David Andress, Michel Biard, Hervé Leuwers, and Marisa Linton have responded.

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