

Maximilien Robespierre's False Friends

Peter McPhee

At the close of the sessions of the National Assembly in September 1791, Maximilien Robespierre was chaired from the chamber by a group of Parisians to shouts of “Vive l’Incorruptible!”, a reference to the nickname he had enjoyed for several months.¹ He had also made some close political friends: in particular, Jérôme Pétion (who had been chaired from the session with him), Camille Desmoulins and Georges Danton. But across the next thirty months Robespierre agreed – however reluctantly – that all three should be tried for capital offences. How had friendships come to this? What was the relationship between friendship and politics? And what effects may the deaths of erstwhile friends have had on Robespierre’s health and his political judgment?

After his return to Paris from a brief holiday in November 1791, Robespierre wrote glowingly to his best friend Antoine Buissart in Arras about the affection showered on him at the Jacobin Club and in public. On the day of his return, he had gone directly to the Club, where he was made its president on the spot. In particular, he had been delighted to see his friend Jérôme Pétion, victorious over Lafayette in elections as mayor of Paris: “I supped the same evening at Pétion’s. With what joy we saw each other again! With what delight we embraced! ... The burden with which he is charged is enormous, but I have no doubt that the love of the people and his qualities will give him the means to bear it. I will have supper at his house this evening.”²

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¹ *Œuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre* [hereafter *Œuvres*], 11 vols (Ivry, 2000-2007), VII : 754–759.

² *Œuvres* III : 130–131.

The friendship dissolved into hatred over the next year. An isolated Robespierre had stood against the declaration of war on Austria pursued by Pétion and his Brissotin or Girondin allies over the winter of 1791-1792, and their rage mounted as his predictions of military collapse proved correct. Robespierre's campaign against the war had been vindicated. By mid-1792 he was as popular as he had been a year before. Following the overthrow of monarchy in August 1792, Robespierre was chosen the first deputy for Paris to the new National Convention. He had defeated Pétion for first place, and the latter withdrew. Danton was then elected second, and Desmoulins sixth. A furious Pétion decided to stand for a provincial seat.

He and other leading Girondins convinced themselves that Robespierre had sought to have them arrested in September 1792 so that they might suffer "the vengeance of the people" during the prison massacres. One year after Robespierre's delight in being able to dine with Pétion in November 1791, the friendship was in tatters and Pétion publicly rounded on his former friend. On 5 November 1792 he was one of those who launched an attack on Robespierre for allegedly dictatorial ambitions, calling for him to be banished. After Pétion was unable to deliver his prepared speech to the National Convention, he decided to publish it:

Robespierre's character accounts for what he has done. Robespierre is very touchy and mistrustful; he sees plots, treachery, precipices everywhere. His bilious temperament ... never forgiving anyone who has wounded his pride, and never recognizing his misdeeds ... wanting more than anything the approbation of the People, constantly courting it ... which may have led to the belief that Robespierre aspired to the heights and wanted to usurp the powers of a dictator.³

In his 30 November issue of his newspaper, Robespierre responded with a long, scathing critique of Pétion's discomfort with the revolutionary actions of *sans-culottes* on 10 August, claiming that Pétion's chagrin at his popularity had led him to opt to sit as a deputy from outside Paris:

I admit my sins; although others, more easily able to judge, say that I am as easy-going, as good-natured in private life as you find me touchy in public life; you have had long experience of this and my friendship towards you has long survived conduct which offended most of my sentiments. You know how hard you had to work to tear from my eyes the blindfold which [esteem] had placed there.

The friendship and political alliance was over.⁴

The Brissotins had been extraordinarily inept for, as the military crisis worsened dramatically in early 1793 and the Vendée rebellion swelled in size and menace, they sought scapegoats in the Parisian *sans-culottes*. While Pétion called on "respectable men of means ... to drive these poisonous insects back into their dens," Robespierre regretted that the "hard and merciless" rich had prevented the people from reaping "the fruit of

³ Louis Jacob, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains* (Paris, 1938), 127.

⁴ *Œuvres* V: 97–115, 140–159.

their labours.”⁵ The Girondins launched their campaign against Robespierre and Marat, against Parisian radicalism, at the worst possible moment. At the very time that their leaders decided that “Paris” was the problem, their close ally General Dumouriez deserted. On 12 April 1793, Pétion as Minister for Justice had deviated from a debate to threaten that “it is time for the traitors and the slanderers to go to the scaffold; and I promise here to pursue them to the death,” evidently including Robespierre. When Robespierre interjected to tell him to “stick to the facts!”, Pétion promised that “It’s you I’ll be pursuing.” Three days later the Convention was interrupted by delegates of the Paris sections with a petition in retaliation, denouncing the conduct of 22 prominent Girondin deputies.⁶ Pétion was one of those expelled on 2 June, fleeing and living in hiding until committing suicide in June 1794.

It is true that Robespierre could be a difficult friend. Years earlier, in 1790, pressures of work and worry were already taxing him to the point of irritability. In an issue of the *Révolutions de France*, its editor, Robespierre’s old schoolmate Camille Desmoulins, had reported, incorrectly, that Robespierre had criticized to a crowd of citizens in the Tuileries gardens Mirabeau’s successful motion on peace and war. Robespierre took exception to the error and asked Desmoulins to insert a formal correction. Desmoulins was astonished that such a minor error should require rectification; more so, he was puzzled by Robespierre’s prickly tone: “you should at least greet an old classmate with a slight inclination of the head. I like you no less for being faithful to your principles even if you are not so to friendship.”⁷ But they seem to have made their peace: a few months later Robespierre, with Pétion, was witness to the marriage of Camille and Lucile Duplessis.⁸

Across the next three fevered years of the Revolution, 1791 to 1793, Robespierre’s closest and most admired friends were Desmoulins and his fellow democrat and republican Georges Danton. Together with their Jacobin allies they supported the Convention’s 1793 policy of “terror until the peace,” the introduction of executive committees with sweeping powers, of national mobilization for war and temporary controls on civil liberties. The achievements of the Committee of Public Safety and the Convention were astonishing. But in December 1793, at the very time when the greatest military gains were being made, but all still remained in the balance, Danton and Desmoulins decided that the time was right for a change of direction, coinciding with

⁵ Marc Bouloiseau, *The Jacobin Republic 1792–1794*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Cambridge and Paris, 1983), 64.

⁶ *Œuvres*, IX: 416–421, 433–434. Robespierre decided against joining Desmoulins and fifty other Montagnards who openly expressed support for Marat, earning him a later rebuke that he was jealous of Marat’s notoriety: Olivier Coquard, “Marat et Robespierre: la rencontre de deux politiques révolutionnaires,” in *Robespierre: de la nation artésienne à la République et aux nations. Actes du colloque, Arras, 1–2–3 Avril 1993*, ed. Jean-Pierre Jessenne, Gilles Derégnaucourt, Jean-Pierre Hirsch and Hervé Leuwers, (Villeneuve d’Asq, 1994), 164–165.

⁷ *Œuvres* III : 83–84 ; Jules Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins and his Wife; Passages from the History of the Dantonists founded upon New and Hitherto Unpublished Documents*, trans. Cashel Hoey (London, 1876), 14; Jean-Paul Bertaud, *Camille et Lucile Desmoulins. Un couple dans la tourmente* (Paris, 1986), 101–102. Desmoulins, in fact, had been three years behind Robespierre at school.

⁸ *Œuvres* III: 100; Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins and his Wife*, 137–40. On the marriage see Bertaud, *Camille et Lucile Desmoulins*, ch. 4.

public charges of corruption being made against Danton.⁹ Robespierre had previously had to defend his old ally Danton repeatedly against charges that his behaviour and personal ties were questionable. He now had to intervene to prevent the Jacobin Club from expelling him on the spot.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Danton continued to call for greater “economy in the blood of men.” As others grumbled against Danton, Robespierre defended him once again: true, he could have acted sooner against Dumouriez, Brissot and their accomplices, but:

we owe many victories over the enemies of the People to him. I state this in relation to politics; I have watched Danton ... I have seen him always the same and I have always met him on the same patriotic path. ... the difference between us came only from the difference in our temperaments ...¹¹

Of equal standing to Danton was Camille Desmoulins. In early December 1793, Desmoulins launched his newspaper the *Vieux Cordelier*.¹² Desmoulins was attacked in the Jacobin Club for having written sympathetically of the Girondins that “they die as republicans, as Brutus died”; Robespierre again felt impelled to defend a friend and revolutionary: “I knew Camille in college, he was a fellow student, he was then a talented young man without mature judgement. Since then Camille has developed the most ardent love of the Republic; ... one must not look only at one point in his moral life, one must take the whole; one must examine him as a whole.”¹³

The fourth issue of Desmoulins’ paper, which appeared on 24 December, was explosive. While responding to the counter-attack of the Hébertists, Desmoulins now also made a ringing call for clemency: “you want to remove all your enemies by means of the guillotine! Has there ever been such great folly? Could you make a single man perish on the scaffold, without making ten enemies for yourself from his family or his friends?” The really dangerous enemies of the Revolution were now dead or in exile: the crisis was now over. “I think quite differently from those who tell you that terror must remain the order of the day.” It also contained a direct appeal to Robespierre to remember their days together at the College of Louis-le-Grand: “Oh, my old comrade from college! You whose eloquent speeches will be read again by posterity! Remember the lessons of history and philosophy, that love is stronger and more durable than fear”

The campaign of Desmoulins and Danton was courageous and humane, but stunningly inept, since the crisis was plainly far from over. French troops had suffered a major reverse at Kaiserslautern in late November. There were hundreds of towns and villages on France’s borders whose inhabitants were directly under the control of occupying armies. For Robespierre and republican politicians and officials across the country, every day was a swirl of uncertainty, confusion and fear, matched only by resolve and hard work.

⁹ See Norman Hampson, “François Chabot and his Plot,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 26 (1976), 1–14; David Andress, *The Terror: Civil War in the French Revolution* (London, 2005), 251–253, 261–262.

¹⁰ *Œuvres* IX: 617–19; X: 46, 52–53.

¹¹ *Œuvres* X: 219–225.

¹² Camille Desmoulins, *Le Vieux Cordelier* (Paris, 1977).

¹³ *Œuvres* X: 253–255.

Desmoulins did not learn his lesson from Robespierre, but nor did he want to. Robespierre now criticized Desmoulins for opening his columns to “slanders ... against the revolutionary government and the patriots.” In the end, however, he continued to try to see in Desmoulins a brilliant but occasionally wayward patriot:

Desmoulins does not deserve the acts of severity certain people have whipped up against him; I even think that seeming to want him punished like the great criminals goes against freedom ... I am happy for liberty to treat Desmoulins like a hare-brained child who used to be well-disposed and has been misled through bad company; but we must insist that he prove his repentance for all his stupidities ... I would not have told these truths had Desmoulins not been so pig-headed ...

Robespierre asked that copies of the newspaper be destroyed, to which Desmoulins retorted: “that’s very well spoken, Robespierre, but I will answer you like Rousseau, ‘to burn is not to answer’.”¹⁴ Robespierre was stung and indignant: “how dare you still try to justify works which are the delight of the aristocracy? Learn, Camille, that were you not Camille, people would be less indulgent towards you.” The next day the Jacobin Club began to examine the various issues of the *Vieux Cordelier*. There was little point, concluded Robespierre:

with his redoubtable bludgeon [Camille] deals the most dreadful blow to our enemies; with the most biting sarcasm he rips apart the worthiest patriots. Desmoulins is a strange mixture of truths and untruths, of policy and idiocies...¹⁵

Desmoulins’ refusal to change the editorial slant of his newspaper had exasperated Robespierre, and on 10 January he supported Desmoulins’ expulsion from the Jacobin Club.¹⁶ As was the case in other claims of conspiracy, there was enough evidence of malpractice to make a wider plot believable. Fabre d’Églantine – a close friend of Danton – and Chabot were alleged to be involved in profiting from the liquidation of the East Indies Company, and both claimed knowledge of a wider “foreign plot” in an attempt to implicate others and save themselves.

Robespierre’s speech of 5 February 1794 in response to the campaign of Danton and Desmoulins was his most important of the Revolution. He emphasized “how frivolous it would be to regard a few victories achieved by patriotism as the end of all our dangers.” The armies’ victories in late 1793 did not mean the crisis was over. The gravest dangers now were domestic, but “are not the enemies within the allies of the enemies

¹⁴ From Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, awarded the prize by the Academy of Dijon in 1750. See Claude Mossé, *L’Antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), 120–121.

¹⁵ *Œuvres* X : 311–315.

¹⁶ *Œuvres* X : 326–342. *Vieux Cordelier* no. 6 was dated 10 Nivôse (30 December), but did not appear until 6 Pluviôse (25 January). See Marisa Linton: “‘Do You Believe That We’re Conspirators?’ Conspiracies Real and Imagined in Jacobin Politics, 1793–94,” in *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*, ed. Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser and Marisa Linton, (Manchester, 2007), 136–143; Thomas E. Kaiser, “From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia, and the Terror,” *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003): 579–617; Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins and his wife*, ch. 5.

without?" By then Robespierre was convinced of the conspiracy which had been put in place in 1789.

In late March there were desperate meetings between Robespierre and Danton as pressure mounted for arrests. Robespierre remained hesitant—what exactly was Desmoulins' offense?—but others were unrelenting. According to Billaud, Robespierre had to be cajoled into adding his signature to those of the committee members who had decided to act. But sign he did. During the night of 29–30 March, Danton, Desmoulins and others were arrested.¹⁷ They were charged with “a conspiracy aiming at the re-establishment of the monarchy and the destruction of the national representation and the republican government.”

When Danton's first wife had died in February 1793, Maximilien had written a beautiful letter to his friend: “if in the only misfortunes that can crush such a soul as yours the certainty of having a loving and devoted friend may offer you some consolation, I offer it to you. I love you more than ever and until death. At this moment, I am yourself. Do not close your heart against the words of a friendship which feels all your pain.” In April 1794, in contrast, Robespierre's allegations against his former friend and ally went beyond charges of financial corruption to moral impropriety, accusing him of sneering over dinner that virtue was what “he practiced every night with his wife.”¹⁸ Similarly, in December 1790 Robespierre had been a witness to the marriage of Camille and Lucile Desmoulins. But in April 1794, not even the memory of holding their son Horace on his knee could save Camille, or Lucile herself.¹⁹

Shortly after the speech Robespierre again fell ill. He was able to reappear at the Jacobin Club and Convention in the middle of the month but collapsed again on the 19th and did not reappear until 12 March.²⁰ This was only the latest in a series of physical collapses caused by the stress of deep conflict, just as after the confrontation with nobles from Arras in mid-1790, with the Girondins in November 1792, and with the Paris militants in May-June and September 1793.

Robespierre had never been physically robust and had admitted to the Jacobin Club on 15 February 1792 to a concern that “my strength and my health are not great enough.” We cannot be certain about the nature of the illnesses which Robespierre suffered with increasing frequency. It may well be that his decision to sacrifice his health for the Revolution through a relentless commitment to work meant that periods of great

¹⁷ *Œuvres* X: 412–419; Linton, “Conspiracies Real and Imagined,” 143; Norman Hampson, *Danton* (Oxford, 1978), 157–164. At the end of March Desmoulins claimed to a friend that he had tried to see Robespierre but had been refused entry: Bertaud, *Camille et Lucile Desmoulins*, 276 and ch. 9.

¹⁸ *Œuvres* III: 160, XI: 433; Marisa Linton, “‘The Tartuffes of Patriotism’: Fears of Conspiracy in the Political Language of Revolutionary Government, France 1793–94,” in *Conspiracy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Barry Coward and Julian Swann (Aldershot, 2004), 248–249; Hampson, *Danton*, 162–163; Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 2006), 180, 184, 234; J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Oxford, 1935), 463–470.

¹⁹ *Œuvres* vol. III, 100, 274; Claretie, *Camille Desmoulins and his Wife*, 137–140; Bertaud, *Camille et Lucile Desmoulins*, 11, 173, 295. The witnesses to the civil declaration of Horace's birth were Laurent Lecointre and Antoine Merlin de Thionville, now estranged from Robespierre. Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, pp. 280–287 is excellent on the trial.

²⁰ Hector Fleischmann, *Robespierre and the Women he Loved*, trans. Angelo S. Rappoport (London, 1913), 112–115; Jacob, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains*, 132–133; Morris Slavin, *The Hébertistes to the Guillotine: Anatomy of a ‘Conspiracy’ in Revolutionary France* (Baton Rouge and London, 1994), 46–47.

stress like the winter of 1793–1794 made him vulnerable to bouts of anaemia and a psychosomatic disorder. His abstemious diet would only have made him more vulnerable to such exhaustion, and explains why Robespierre several times admitted publicly that he was at the end of his physical strength.²¹

My argument is that by March 1794 acute nervous exhaustion had made Robespierre incapable of effective strategic decision-making in order to “promptly terminate the Revolution to the benefit of the people,” as he had put in six months earlier. His speeches became more agitated and even apocalyptic; his personal and tactical judgment, once so acute, seems to have deserted him. From March, his capacity for leadership was at odds with his reputation.

The confrontation with two men, Danton and Desmoulins, whom he regarded with personal affection as well as respect, further consumed his emotional and physical resources over the winter of 1793–1794. These were also months when the daily pressures on the Committee of Public Safety were relentless. By the time he had resolved the issue – that Danton and Desmoulins were as much a threat to the victory of the Revolution as the foreign enemy – he was again mentally and physically exhausted. He never fully recovered from the deadly end of his friendships. Less than a fortnight after they were executed on 6 April he could no longer appear in public and did not do so again until 7 May. From 9 February he was exhausted and often ill and was absent more often than not. More than 630 times across five years he had lectured the assemblies or Jacobin Club about the virtues, but in the first seven months of 1794 he made only sixteen speeches in the National Convention, compared with 101 in 1793.

Robespierre’s revolutionary career had been characterized by both a capacity to articulate the overarching goals of the Revolution and an adroit pragmatism: supporting the war only once it had been declared, supporting a republic only once the monarchy had been overthrown, accepting street protest until he entered government. Now in the early summer of 1794 his tactical judgment deserted him. His decision to hold the Festival of the Supreme Being on 8 June, during his term as President of the Convention, exposed him to mutterings about his omnipotence. Pushing through the swingeing Law of 22 Prairial just two days later turned those mutterings to fearful agitation.

His final political confrontation and collapse was brought on by furious exchanges within the committees, when Carnot, Lindet and others accused Robespierre and Saint-Just of behaving like “ridiculous dictators.” When Robespierre’s fortnight as President of the Convention ended on 18 June, he virtually disappeared from public life. We know little of how he spent his time thereafter. It is probable that his health had again failed,

²¹ Jacob, *Robespierre vu par ses contemporains*, 146–147; Max Gallo, *Robespierre the Incorruptible: A Psycho-Biography*, trans. Raymond Rudorff (New York, 1971), 179–180, 222–224, 271–272; André Cadet de Gassecourt, *Une curieuse figure du passé: Joseph Souberbielle, neveu du Frère Côme* (Paris, 1934), 95; Bibliothèque de l’Institut national de médecine, Paris, Non-classés–dossier Joseph Souberbielle; Bernard Nabonne, *La Vie privée de Robespierre* (Paris, 1943), 124, 186–188. Victorien Sardou, who met Élisabeth Lebas in the 1840s, also claimed that Robespierre had varicose ulcers: Sardou, Preface to Stéphane-Pol [Paul Coutant], *Autour de Robespierre: le conventionnel Le Bas, d’après des documents inédits et les mémoires de sa veuve* (Paris, 1901), xii; Ernest Hamel, *Histoire de Robespierre, d’après des papiers de famille, les sources originales et des documents entièrement inédits*, 3 vols (Paris, 1865–1867), vol. 3, 286, 374–375, 412–414.

exacerbated by fears of assassination, and bitterness at the rumours and slanders engulfing him.

His illness meant that he was unable to use the turnaround in the Republic's military fortunes over the next few weeks – notably the great victory at Fleurus on 26 June – to map out a pathway to the return to constitutional rule. When he finally returned to the Convention on 26 July, his failure to name those deputies to be brought to trial for excesses was a crucial mistake.²² He may only have had five or six people in mind, but there were many more with reason to be terrified. At a time when heads were falling like slate tiles, the Convention had had enough. On 9 Thermidor an organised and sustained attack on him in the Convention ended the political dominance – and the lives – of him and his closest allies.

Marisa Linton has recently argued in compelling fashion that the collapse of friendship in the furnace of Revolution preceded political antipathy, at least in the cases of Barnave, Brissot and Desmoulins.²³ She has demonstrated how the status of their friendship was a key factor – if by no means the only one – in political choices and finally denunciation. In Robespierre's case, in contrast, his friendships with Pétion, Danton and Desmoulins collapsed because of politics and were not themselves a cause of political antagonism. On the contrary, the misery occasioned by the emotional and political rupture with Danton and Desmoulins in particular was the cause of a major physical collapse from which he never fully recovered. The personal sacrifice of mental and physical health had taken a deadly toll of the young man. The tragedy of Maximilien Robespierre is that neither he nor those closest to him were able to identify how nervous collapse had impaired his judgment, let alone how it might be cured. His political friends had failed him. By June 1794 he was exhausted, ill, irrational and in despair.

²² Albert Mathiez, *Robespierre, terroriste* (Paris, 1921), 84–87; Paul Barras, *Memoirs*, trans. Charles E. Roche, 4 vols (London, 1895), 1: 205–211; Norman Hampson, “Robespierre and the Terror,” in Colin Haydon and William Doyle, eds, *Robespierre* (Cambridge and New York, 1999), 172.

²³ Marisa Linton, “Friends, Enemies and the Role of the Individual,” in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed. Peter McPhee (Oxford, 2012), 263–277.