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Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life

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Like his spiritual hero, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robespierre retained an enduring affection for dogs. He delighted in their companionship, and after long days spent toiling in the National Convention, was often seen walking his beloved hound, Brout, through the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Such a detail might seem immaterial to other biographers, but it represents the kind of factual embellishment that captures the tone of Peter McPhee's new and highly accomplished study of the person who came to be known as the Incorruptible. McPhee, a specialist on revolutionary France, guides us assuredly from Robespierre's upbringing in Arras, a provincial town in northeast France, through the stormy crucible of the Revolution, which saw him reach the apex of power, to his painful execution in 1794.

In tracing this narrative arc, McPhee's primary endeavour, in which he succeeds admirably, is to humanise a figure commonly depicted as a murderous tyrant, presiding over the bloody maelstrom that swept across France between September 1793 and July 1794. Such a view has traditionally seen Robespierre take on a role analogous to the Roman deity Saturn, ravenously devouring the children of the Revolution, severing the heads of 'frissons' whose counter-revolutionary instincts threatened France's inexorable march toward republican rhapsody. He was the blood-spattered forefather to the despotic progenies of the 20th century, and, according to Lord Action, 'the most hateful character in the forefront of history since Machiavelli'.⁽¹⁾

McPhee rescues Robespierre from such venom, stripping away the layers of myth and prejudice that have set over the years to show us a somewhat tragic figure, more slave than master to the events of his time.

Likewise, MCPhee is able to present his subject in a sincere and sympathetic light without drifting into the realms of hagiography that has defined a competing, if slightly fainter, historiographical trend, which cast Robespierre as a virtuous lawgiver dressed in the robes of Lysurgus. In the 20th century, for instance, it was under the scholarship of academic titans like Albert Mathiez, founder of the Société des études robespierristes, and his successor Georges Lefebvre, that Robespierre's reputation reached the highest registers of acclaim with Lefebvre describing him as the "immovable and incorruptible head of Revolutionary resistance".⁽²⁾

So the life of this Advocate of Arras (as Thomas Carlyle called him) has been vehemently contested between those who see him as the vain and paranoid dynamic at the heart of the Terror, and those who believe him to personify a politics of virtue, uncompromising in his pursuit to defend the principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. With respect to both his defenders and his decriers, Robespierre's portrait has always been at the mercy of their contrasting ideological palates, and is often tethered to the oscillating fortunes of the radical left in republican France. MCPhee's study, however, refuses to be weighed down with any of this ideological baggage, and is defined by an interpretive steadiness that has proved elusive for many.

Like all other studies, MCPhee subscribes to the central idea that Robespierre remains central to understanding the story of the Revolution. As Ruth Scurr has argued in her excellent, and highly acclaimed study: "Robespierre's self and the Revolution cannot be separated".⁽³⁾ Likewise, one of the most influential historians of the French Revolution, and certainly no admirer of Robespierre, François Furet, argued that Robespierre incarnated the Revolution, and was able to articulate its message and meaning better than anyone else.⁽⁴⁾ MCPhee's message is no different.

McPhee begins with Robespierre's formative years in Arras. Born on 6 May 1758, his father, François Derobespierre, was a local lawyer, and while never affluent the family was financially comfortable. However, tragedy struck five years later when young Maximilien's mother died in childbirth. Not long after that his father left in order to take a job in another town, and although making sporadic trips back to Arras never took responsibility for raising Robespierre, and his three younger siblings. Having been farmed out to various aunts and grandparents, Robespierre eventually left Arras in October 1769 to take up a place at an elite secondary school in Paris.

Robespierre's time at Lycée Louis-le-Grand is the focus of chapter two. MCPhee describes the thoroughly humanist programme of study that he pursued for the next 12 years. In addition to the traditional Christian writings of Boussuet and Fénelon, it was Latin, and the history of the Roman Republic that dominated the curriculum. Compared to the absolutism and hyper decadence of the French monarchy, the classical virtues described in the works of Tacitus, Livy, Sallust, and Cicero, resonated powerfully in the imagination of Robespierre. (These were to become the intellectual referents that peppered his political speeches during the Revolution). He was a gifted student, and his proficiency in Latin earned him the sobriquet "The Roman".

He left the college in 1781 and returned to Arras to begin his career as a provincial lawyer. In chapter three, MCPhee notes that it was during this time that the content of his core moral assumptions began to take shape, and he utilised the forum provided by the courts to defend the underprivileged, and attack the frivolous wealth of the rich. His legal speeches were pitched in a decidedly accusatory key, and were loaded with broad and bold pronouncements concerning the wider inequalities he perceived in society. But it was only a short time before it became obvious he had reached the zenith of cultural and intellectual life in Arras, and exhausted his potential in the Artois province.

When the Estates-General was formally summoned by Louis XVI in 1789, Robespierre was given the chance to articulate these grievances to a national audience. Chapter four details Robespierre's successful campaign to be elected as a deputy to attend this historic gathering in Versailles. He presented himself as the defender of the interests of working people, fulminating against the poverty from which the poor suffered,

and his writings and speeches were laced with a rich odium towards the moneyed and powerful.

Chapter five takes us to Versailles and the beginning of the Revolution. McPhee describes Robespierre's reactions to the momentous events of that year, such as the storming of the Bastille, the municipal revolutions (known as *la Grand Peur*), the August decrees on feudalism, and the drafting of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. In the latter case, Robespierre played a distinctly minimal role – this was the time of Sieyès – other than the occasional intervention in support of progressive taxation and freedom of the press, and to advocate that office holders reflect the will of the people. However, even if his thumbprints were light on the Revolution's early days, McPhee notes how Robespierre was more attuned to the revolutionary forces at work than many of his contemporaries. In comparison to others, stunned by the dizzying speeds with which France was changing politically and socially, 'Robespierre was one of those who understood what the Revolution might entail' (p. 68). He was not indifferent to the initial outburst of violence that accompanied the Bastille's fall, but he was prepared to accept that the downfall of stubborn oppression would not transpire without some inevitable episodes of bloody retribution. During these first years of constitutional monarchy Robespierre also began to elaborate on his conception of political legitimacy, attempting to reconcile Rousseau's ideal of direct participation in political life with the genuine exigencies of governing a large country. He also confronted the enduring tension faced by many republicans at this time, namely that only a virtuous citizenry could enable a true democracy to thrive, but the people, while naturally good, had been morally corrupted beyond recognition by centuries of monarchical and despotic rule.

From the middle of the 1790s, Robespierre began to receive increased attention and popularity. In chapter six, McPhee describes his steady rise in the public conscience. We are treated to neat anecdotes regarding Robespierre's seeming popularity with women, and the new friendships he formed with other aspiring figures of the day, such as the young lieutenant colonel of the National Guard, Louis-Antoine Saint-Just. Robespierre was never charismatic, and he never possessed the rhetorical thunder that his friend Danton did, but his increased stature in the Jacobin Club, and in the Assembly, was based on 'a combination of extraordinary resolve and compelling argument' (p. 97). He was relentless, and his untiring commitment to the principles of the Revolution had led to a new sobriquet in 1791: Incorruptible

In October 1791 Robespierre left Paris, and returned briefly to his hometown of Arras. But after a fairly mixed reception both publically and personally, he decided to leave again, and travel the surrounding countryside to see friends, and ponder the tumultuous events of the last couple of years. It was at this time that he penned his most passionate and heartfelt reflection: *Dedication to the Spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. While McPhee draws the parallels between two men who had lost their mothers in childbirth, and then seen their fathers desert them, he argues that the source of Robespierre's affection was not based on any comparable domestic experience. Instead, Robespierre, no different from many of his generation, identified with Rousseau's republic of virtue, and the extraordinary manner in which his writings served as a means of interpreting the Revolution. One aspect of this reverence that McPhee skims over is the notion of emulation. The concept, and practice, of emulating heroes of former times is central to the republican tradition (and in much need of further investigation), and was key for many of the revolutionaries, especially Robespierre. With a kind of Cynic determination, he wished to emulate the example of Rousseau – 'that subtle Diogenes' as Kant called him – by living in accordance with the principle maxims of his own moral doctrine.⁽⁵⁾ This is something that McPhee does not explore enough, but which might have brought into sharp relief a side of Robespierre that was central to his moral and political behaviour.

Towards the end of 1791 the issue of war began to rear its head. Chapter eight examines Robespierre's critical engagement with Brissot and the Girondins who advocated an expansionary war of liberation. In contrast, Robespierre argued for a war of defence, advocating the armed mobilisation of the National Guard to defend *la patrie* if its frontiers were breached. But on this issue he cut a rather lonely figure in the Legislative Assembly, facing a torrent of personal invective over his position on both this issue, and the general direction of the Revolution. Overall, McPhee tells us, it was a 'difficult period for Robespierre' (p. 116). It is around this time that he began to complain about his physical health; the constant demands of his work, coupled with the strains of propelling the revolutionary project further, beginning to take their toll.

After France declared war against Austria on 20 April 1792, Robespierre focused his efforts on ensuring firstly that France would triumph, and secondly that it was done in the name of universal principles against tyrants, and not in the name of aggressive expansion against peoples. Indeed such hostility towards territorial expansion fed into his initial hesitations over the idea of a republic. From the writings of Plutarch, Tacitus, Livy, and, of course, Rousseau, Robespierre knew that the survival of republics was fixed to their size, and were unlikely to function effectively, if at all, across large territorial regions. This was the source of his reluctance to call for a republic following Louis XVI's capture at Varennes in June 1791.

By the middle of 1792 Robespierre's brand of politics, with its emphasis on popular sovereignty, direct political action, mass mobilisation, and civic virtue began to dovetail with the prevailing concerns and demands of the Parisian masses. Chapter nine describes Robespierre's reactions to the seminal events of the early 1790s, all of which marked a turning point in the Revolution. The first was the overthrow of the monarchy in August 10 1792, while second was the trial and execution of the king. In the latter case, Robespierre had to reconcile his proclaimed abhorrence of the death penalty with the certainty that 'Louis must die because the homeland must live'. Louis Capet was eventually executed, but in accomplishing this act of revolutionary justice, the French invited a new set of dangers. It intensified the threat of foreign invasion on the part of Europe's remaining royal powers, and opened up the ideological cleavages across the nation; fissures that would soon come to define Robespierre's mental landscape. It was also during this tumultuous period that Robespierre offered a restatement of his political philosophy by drafting a new *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. McPhee gives us a thorough overview of the various dimensions to this document, including the powerful sense of internationalism and fraternity that shaped it.

By the summer of 1793 the Republic was truly *en danger*. Insurrection had erupted in the Vendée while foreign armies were swarming into the country. Robespierre was worn out, and as his physical strength waned the enemies of the revolution, disguised in the costumes of patriots, grew inexorably in his mind. He now catalogued the forces of the Revolution into a dangerous set of binary distinctions: friends and enemies, patriots and traitors, liberty and tyranny. Such a mind-set typified the members of the Committee of Public Safety, which Robespierre joined in July 1793 as a member without portfolio. Chapter ten explores Robespierre's first month as a member of this de facto government, focusing on his endeavour to devise modes of civic regeneration for the nation. McPhee also explores the nature of what is known as 'the Terror'. Instead of casting Robespierre as prime architect he argues that it was 'the desperate nature of the crisis of mid-1793, and the lack of resources to deal with it, that forced the deputies into reluctant suspension of civil liberties they would normally have seen as untouchable' (p. 165). 'The Terror', McPhee argues, should not be seen as a 'monolith' but as a

series of emergency measures designed to defeat invading armies and counter-revolution in all its guises, to meet the grievances of urban and rural people, and to control the actions of militants who claimed to represent the people's will (pp. 165-6).

By 1794 Robespierre was physically and emotionally shattered, and long bouts of illness meant that he was away from the Committee and National Convention. The Republic was struggling for its very survival, and Robespierre saw conspiracy and threat lurking in all places, including in the words and deeds of some of his closest associates, Danton and Camille Desmoulins. Appeals to terror as an escort to virtue became more frequent, and the war had 'fundamentally changed Robespierre's attitude to bloodshed'; it was now seen as 'part of the machinery of government' (p. 194). Chapter 11 explores the last year of Robespierre's life, and pays particular attention to his final strategy to accelerate the process of civic regeneration: the Cult of the Supreme Being. For McPhee this represented an attempt to 'resolve the central conundrum in his understanding of the Revolution' (p. 197).

The final chapter (titled 'The unhappiest man alive') looks at July 1794, Robespierre's last month. By this stage of McPhee's study we are reading the story of a somewhat tragic figure; paranoid, on the brink of physical collapse, with no family life to speak of, and who had become unable, McPhee states, 'to

distinguish between dissent and treason? (p. 216). His death was equally painful. During his arrest he was shot in the jaw, and after lying in agony for 17 hours was executed by guillotine, but not before the executioner ripped away the bandages holding his jaw together, prompting a 'hideous roar of pain' (p. 220).

McPhee marshals a mass of primary and secondary materials to give us a marvellously compelling, and highly erudite study of Robespierre (although, as he makes clear in the acknowledgements, recent acquisitions of Robespierre's first drafts of some of his speeches by the Archives Nationales happened too late to be included in his study). The question is: what distinguishes McPhee's book from the others, especially that of Scurr's, which arguably gives a more complete picture of 18th-century France, and the context in which Robespierre rose to power?

The answer comes in three parts. First, McPhee continually draws us back to Robespierre's upbringing in Arras, and at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. He accentuates the importance of these formative years not only on Robespierre's philosophical development, but also on his political considerations. 'From the outset of the Revolution', McPhee remarks, 'Robespierre had been caught between his commitment to the general direction that the revolutionary reform should take and his role as a deputy of a province with distinctive characteristics and privileges' (p. 98). The vector of Robespierre's thoughts and actions is continually assessed with reference to his past, making for a richer, more complicated Robespierre, one possessing concerns and considerations outside of the violent world of Year II.

It is certainly a more complete image than we have been treated to in the past. Second, McPhee's study shows the central dynamo at the heart Robespierre's thoughts and actions, which was a determination to propel the revolutionary enterprise forward, and avoid at all costs its stagnation.⁽⁶⁾ For Robespierre, and the Jacobins, the revolution must move forward or face collapse. Yet while he helped to accelerate that progress, McPhee shows us that Robespierre never stood back or above it. Just like everyone else, he was swept up and tossed around in the Revolution's powerful torrents, often unable to control the revolutionary forces that he unleashed from the centres of power. Finally, the clue of McPhee's great contribution lies in the book's title. It was a real 'Revolutionary Life' because while the Revolution made Robespierre it also destroyed him. More than any other biographer, McPhee focuses on Robespierre's fading physical condition, humanising a man who was slowly stripped of his Incorruptibility. Colin Jones sums this up well in the book's cover blurb: 'Robespierre emerges less as the man who ruined the Revolution than as a man the Revolution ruined'. Writing in 1941, the historian Marc Bloch wrote: 'Robespierrists, anti-Robespierrists, we've had enough. We say, for pity's sake, simply tell who was Robespierre?'⁽⁷⁾ McPhee's excellent book reminds us that behind all of the myth, all of the hatred and the praise, he was a man of flesh and blood.

Notes

1. Lord Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, ed. J. N. Figgis & R. V. Laurence, (London, 1910), p. 300.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Georges Lefebvre, 'Remarks on Robespierre?', trans. B. F. Hyslop, in *French Historical Studies*, 1, 1 (1958), 10.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, (London, 2006), p. 6.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. François Furet, *La Penser la Révolution française*, (Paris, 1978).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On the concept of the philosophical life see Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, (Paris, 1995) & idem., *La Philosophie comme manière de vivre*, (Paris, 2003). On Rousseau and philosophy as a way of life see Bernard Groethuysen, *Philosophie de la Révolution française*, (Paris, 1956); Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago, 1988); Raymond Trousson, *Rousseau et sa fortune littéraires*, (Ducros, 1971). On Rousseau and Robespierre see Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution*, (Ithaca, NY, 1986), chapters 8 and 13.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. This aspect of Jacobinism has been well made by Patrice Higonnet in his *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution*, (Cambridge, MA, 1998).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien*, (Paris, 1949), p. 70.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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