

May 1st, 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM

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Robespierre: A Self-Destructed Revolutionary

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March 17, 2019

There are many times in history when division and disunity have impeded progress. In the French Revolution's radical period—a time sparking re-evaluation of the revolution's goals and progress—common aversion to the French government's aristocratic rule succumbed to intense factionalism. Maximilien Robespierre, infamous Jacobin revolutionary, largely contributed to and catalyzed this shift to public disunity. Before, as the government transitioned from monarchy to the First Republic in September 1792 of the Revolution, Robespierre's ideas and institutional reforms matched the wants of the general public and his fellow revolutionaries. Often hyperbolized as “sle[eping] with a copy of Rousseau's *Social Contract* at his side,” Robespierre undeniably embodied the Enlightenment, egalitarian thought and energy that provoked the revolution.¹ However, with time, the disparity between Robespierre's philosophy and those of his contemporaries widened. The crumbling of the largely uniform revolutionary effort triggered the most radical revolutionary phase yet: the Reign of Terror. A watershed period from late 1793 to late 1794, the Terror is marked by silenced dissent and extreme action to protect the progress of the revolution.² In a 1794 speech to the Convention, Robespierre proclaimed, “virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue.”³ To Robespierre, terror and virtue must be reconciled to protect the “republic of virtue.”⁴ Nonetheless, not all the Jacobins and patriots embraced or even condoned this ideal.

¹ Paul Halsall, “Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror,” *Internet Modern History Sourcebook* (1997): <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/robespierre-terror.asp>.

² “The Reign of Terror,” *Mt. Holyoke College*, Accessed November 9, 2018, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist255/kat_anna/terror.html.

³ “Robespierre, ‘On Political Morality,’” *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, Accessed December 7, 2018. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/413>.

⁴ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 227.

While Robespierre behaved with the intention of instigating egalitarian change for all the French people, his bold proclamations and actions supplied the political values only transiently. With time, his radicalism and insistence that his beliefs were objectively right spurred counterrevolution. Not even a public as violently radical as the one that dominated the revolutionary period could overlook the drastic reforms to the calendar, economy, and national religious philosophy. Leaders on the Committee of Public Safety like Louis de Saint-Just shared Robespierre's *Social Contract* based philosophy, yet others such as Camille Desmoulins and Georges Danton conversely rejected Robespierre's approach to governance and change.⁵ Robespierre's public image and extreme rhetoric also made him an easy scapegoat to the public, only further raising the question of his legitimacy and leadership to his colleagues and fellow Jacobins. While Robespierre acted in the name of the "Republic," his uncompromising view of what the "republic of virtue" ought to be further alienated patriots and party members and in turn incited counterrevolution.⁶ Thus, the growing perception of Robespierre as tyrannical and hypocritical catalyzed Jacobin action to bring him to his downfall and eventual execution.

The French Revolution touched all French institutions and social classes: the aristocratic and bourgeois-centered National Assembly; the populace in the streets of Paris; the peasantry in provincial areas. When examining the fierce divisiveness and radicalism that characterized the Reign of Terror and Robespierre himself, one must consider the preceding revolutionary stages.

In the eighteenth century, the autocratic monarchy and their exorbitant spending patterns shaped France immeasurably. The despotic monarchy's growing reputation for decadence—

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

while so much of the country faced famine and misfortune—fomented great public resentment, especially as King Louis XVI increased taxation on the poor to fund the aristocracy’s gluttonous lifestyles. Conflict between the monarchy and the nobility to reform the tax system only exacerbated the situation, leaving the country on the brink of bankruptcy. The Enlightenment thought of the time, shaped by philosophers like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, further justified the concerns of the populace through reason.⁷ The notion that all people had certain unalienable rights and freedoms desacralized the authority of the Church and monarchy. Only through rationalism could tyranny be suppressed.

As political deadlock between institutions continued, in 1789, King Louis XVI called the Estates General for the first time since 1614. The age-old system overwhelmingly favored the First and Second Estates—the clergy and nobility, respectively—and it could no longer accommodate the ire of the Third Estate, which theoretically represented everyone else in France.⁸ The hostility between the three orders grew unsustainable, prompting the National Assembly’s formation. As this political revolution hammered on in the Assembly at Versailles, fear and violence consumed the capital and the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 ignited the popular revolution.⁹ The wave of revolutionary fervor inspired feudalism’s abolishment and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.¹⁰ Despite its universalistic prose and foundation in Enlightenment egalitarianism, the statement targeted the abuses of the old regime.

⁷ Christopher Bertram, "Jean Jacques Rousseau," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/rousseau/>.

⁸ Simon Schama, *Citizens*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989): 231.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alfred Cobban, "The Political Ideas of Maximilien Robespierre during the Period of the Convention." *English Historical Review* 61, no. 239 (January 1946): 65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/554837>.

In the constitutional monarchy stage of the revolution from roughly 1791 to 1793, the Assembly reorganized France. It is at this time Robespierre emerged. At the height of Enlightenment thought, the assembly faced a society wanting comprehensive, egalitarian change, change protecting property rights and extending democracy. However, with time, the struggle for power between the Girondists, led by Brissot, and the Montagnards, guided by Robespierre, Danton, and Hébert, marked the assembly. The Girondists marshaled the declaration of war on Austria to protect the progress of the revolution from domestic enemies, yet instead, they radicalized French politics and eased the shift to a republic. The Jacobin faction's rhetoric of republicanism and Enlightenment thought supplied the revolutionary mood, yet only for a time.

With the inauguration of the Republic, the government entrusted much of its power in the hands of a few men on the Committee of Public Safety, most notably Georges Danton and later Robespierre.^{11,12} As fear amounted that the progress of the revolution would be undone, Jacobins asserted the need to protect their “republic of virtue.” This need was evident in the republican dress of the *sans-culottes*, the suppression of anti-republican media, and the new street names—Montmarat, Mirabeau-le-Patriote, and Helvétius to name a few—glorifying republican figures.¹³ For Robespierre, the protection of the virtuous republic could *only* be achieved through the use of terror. David P. Jordan wrote that out of fear, Robespierre “eventually convinc[ed] himself that only another revolution could save France, and the ‘people’ were the only hope.”¹⁴ Robespierre

¹¹ Because of the drastic changes to the calendar, economy, and religious order in France, the public fell victim to the virtually dictatorial power of the Committee of Public Safety during the Republic.

¹² “The Reign of Terror.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David P. Jordan, “Robespierre,” *Journal of Modern History* 49, no. 2 (June 1977): 285, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1876343>.

demanded that “We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with them.”¹⁵ Largely understanding civic virtue in terms of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Robespierre unleashed the Terror. The period rallied revolutionaries and quelled challengers, employing repressive and intimidatory measures to combat counterrevolution, most notably through frequent executions. While this radicalism cannot solely be ascribed to Robespierre, his role after 1792 as head of the Committee of Public Safety, President of the Constituent Assembly, and chairman of the Jacobin Club gave him the authority to carry out his ideas.

Amidst the Terror, the enactment of radical reforms alienated the public, undermining support for the instrument of these reforms: the Jacobins. In particular, the Convention attempted to excise religion with a secular calendar legally justifying the de-Christianization of France.¹⁶ While Robespierre himself did not spur the adoption of this reform, his acquiescence of the calendar’s effect on the populace demonstrates his self-serving prioritization of personal political stability over the nation’s consternation. Robespierre remonstrated in public speeches and private letters to the Committee that the calendar would erode loyalty to the republic, yet he did nothing to halt the continuation of the reform, thereby condoning its existence.¹⁷ Robespierre’s focus on the political implications of the calendar rather than its indifference to the country’s Christian majority underscores his disregard of the people’s concerns. As long as the people remain ‘loyal’ to the republic and he stays in power, his personal and political needs are met. Robespierre even helped rename one of the Festivals of the new calendar year, despite his disdain for it.¹⁸

¹⁵ “Robespierre, ‘On Political Morality.’”

¹⁶ With the calendar, Christian religions were abolished and their celebrations eclipsed by new secular festivals intended to make a religion of the Revolution itself. In fact, the calendar began with the advent of the Republic.

¹⁷ David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York: The Free Press, 1985): 193.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Robespierre's inconsideration extends to his tyrannical imposition of the deistic "Cult of the Supreme Being" or "Cult" on the French people. Much like with the Terror, Robespierre failed to acknowledge that his perception of necessity—namely, for everyone to support the Supreme Being—differed from that of the public.¹⁹ Robespierre wrote that by "distorting the Supreme Being, [the priests] destroyed Him ... [They] created God in their own image; they ... made Him jealous, capricious, greedy, cruel, and implacable."²⁰ His critical tone here reveals the extent to which his personal deism colored his scorn of the Christian faith. Thus, Robespierre illustrates the 'need' to mirror Rousseau's vision of a civic religion intended to endow morality in its citizens rather than suppress it.²¹ In addition, his decision to put forth a measure in which the political considerations are impossible to ignore reveals his fierce loyalty to his idealist principles. While his will to revive the national character at the risk of ruining his reputation is commendable, his reforms simply were not what the majority Catholic populace wanted. As expected, after Robespierre's proclamations, violent Catholic revolutionaries responded with great animosity.²² Robespierre is not the sole source of this reform and its startling effect on the public, yet given he serves to represent the ideals of the Jacobins and ideally the people, the extent his personal philosophy affected the "Cult" makes his bias to its validity undeniable.

By drawing exclusively from his own Rousseau-based philosophy and religion in the "Cult," Robespierre not only overlooked the wants of the majority Catholic country, he failed to

¹⁹ Rooted in his condemnation of the dechristianization policies, Robespierre's work denounced the leaders of the Cult of Reason as aristocratic and ushered the notion of the immortal soul. He colored the clergy and monarchy as enemies of the free people of France. The decree associated with this reform instructed the French people how *best* to privately worship the Supreme Being rather than Christian figureheads.

²⁰ Maximilien Robespierre, "On the Cult of the Supreme Being," in Robespierre, ed. George Rudé (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967): 71.

²¹ "Jean Jacques Rousseau."

²² Cobban, 65.

recognize his own abuse of power. Robespierre envisioned the Republic as a buffer against the evils of the preceding, powerful monarchy, yet his uncompromising execution of the “Cult of the Supreme Being” parallels the tyranny characterizing Louis XVI’s regime. The sudden, unexpected nature of the Decree and Festivals’ implementation only validates Robespierre’s role as a tyrannical puppet master rather than a representative of the people. In fact, in a haunting political cartoon published prior to his execution in 1793, Robespierre, dressed in the clothes he wore at the Festival of the Supreme Being, guillotines the executioner.²³ The “monstrous forest” of guillotines behind him, each labeled for a different category of Robespierre’s ‘victims,’ demonstrate Robespierre’s alienation of different groups in France.²⁴ However, in referencing the religious reform through Robespierre’s clothes and drawing attention to the obelisk inscribed “Here Lies All France,” the cartoonist conveys that through the new reform’s sweeping effects on the nation, Robespierre has “guillotined all of France.”²⁵ The cartoonist thereby highlights Robespierre’s excessive power in dictating the fates and beliefs of all of France.

While Robespierre upheld his principles dutifully with the “Cult,” his unwillingness to compromise also drove him apart from his companions. After the Festival of the Supreme Being, an event orchestrated by artist Jacques-Louis David, memoirist Marc Antoine Baudot recalled that “there was a considerate gap between his colleagues and himself ... I am inclined to think that it was due to the detestation of Robespierre.”²⁶ The visible space between Robespierre and his colleagues insinuates the danger of supporting, being associated with, or being physically

²³ See Appendix A.

²⁴ Schama, 851.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

proximal to the radical, uncompromising Robespierre. Similarly, writer Joachim Vilate reflected that at the event, “while the rapturous crowds shouted ‘Long live Robespierre!’—shouts that are a death warrant in a republic—his colleagues, alarmed by his presumptuous claims, provoked him with sarcastic comments.”^{27,28} One may ask, ‘what caused his fellow revolutionaries to stealthily mock him and conspire against him six weeks later?’, yet the answer is apparent. Robespierre was blind to the Revolution’s political realities and in turn, blind to the changing perception of him.²⁹ No one brought Robespierre down but one: himself.

Similarly, in failing to personify his principles, Robespierre’s actions illustrate his own hypocrisy. In *Choosing Terror*, Linton writes, “[b]y 1794 any ambitious man knew how to adopt the language of selfless patriotism, to present himself as a man of virtue.”³⁰ Thus, with the growing prevalence of ‘selfless patriots,’ a fundamental question arose: should one believe in the integrity of a given man because they “adopt[ed] the language of selfless patriotism” and image of virtuosity normalized at the time? Within a Rousseau-based ideology of virtue, all men are of equal value. Nevertheless, Robespierre compiled lists of those with greater or lesser talents and adopted tactics of “the old regime ministers whose politics he so detested; the ends justify the means.”³¹ Much of Robespierre as well as Saint-Just’s private lists of preferred patriots were disseminated after Robespierre’s execution, yet the presence of Robespierre’s inner circle—

²⁷ “Witnesses to the Festival of the Supreme Being (1794),” *Alpha History*, June 16, 2018, <https://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/witnesses-festival-supreme-being-1794/>.

²⁸ Joachim Vilate was an ardent revolutionary figure on the Committee of Public Safety and a member of the jury of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

²⁹ Jordan, “Robespierre,” 290.

³⁰ Linton, 232.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

including Saint-Just and Couthon—made his favoritism apparent to outsiders.³² Robespierre's need to maintain the Jacobin Club's reign with those he knew or felt he could rely ignored the principles he spoke of so eloquently. In fact, by alienating enemies to the Republic and rewarding only his confidants, he created an atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust between factions. The inauthenticity of Robespierre's virtue thereby undermines its validity; virtue is not inherent in everyone, but supposedly only in those chosen by Robespierre.

As the public image for the Jacobins, Robespierre's frequent, polarizing rhetoric only exacerbated his alienation of both party members and the public. In "On Political Morality," he justified the Terror, rationalizing that the ends justifies the means.³³ The persuasive nature of the speech bridged his audience and him. Rather than inspiring patriotism, Jordan suggests that the "revolutionaries did not like to be reminded of the deeds they were doing, and especially these deeds that ran so counter to so much they had grown up with."³⁴ By ceaselessly providing a moral and philosophical justification of the Terror, Robespierre conversely only reminded revolutionaries of their unwarranted violence.³⁵ Given he spoke so frequently and ardently about the Terror even as its validity came into question, Robespierre was an easy target to the public, practically "prepar[ing] for his own indictment."³⁶ Saint-Just shared his views, yet he did not proclaim them on every corner and alienate those who disagreed with him like Robespierre.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Robespierre, 'On Political Morality.'"

³⁴ Jordan, *The Revolutionary*, 183.

³⁵ Ibid., 184.

³⁶ Ibid., 183.

While Robespierre *tried* to maintain relations with Jacobins who differed from him ideologically and politically, his hypocrisy and lack of genuineness undermined these relations and thereby his political credibility. In January of 1794, Robespierre tried to “hold out a lifeline to Camille Desmoulins, to save him at the price of Desmoulins’ repudiation of both his friends and his writings.”^{37,38} Desmoulins had issued a passage in *Le Vieux Cordelier* cryptically satirizing the French government and Convention, insinuating Robespierre’s leadership shortcomings in such a watershed era.³⁹ Robespierre, in turn, characterized Desmoulins as simply “a thoughtless child ... who had been led astray by bad company”: a clear image of innocence.⁴⁰ Robespierre’s will to extricate Desmoulins from blame indicates his fear of the fragility of his ties with the Dantonists, whom Desmoulins aligned with. However, given Robespierre’s authority and public image, his assertions also unveil his intent to reclaim power over Desmoulins and the narrative being told; if Desmoulins is just “a thoughtless child,” what merit can his work have? A few days later, Desmoulins lamented, “Robespierre’s intention is to reproach me using the language of friendship...Robespierre said my issues must be burned; I reply to him, in the words of Rousseau: burning is not the answer!”⁴¹ By referencing the famed words Rousseau told his enemies, Desmoulins illuminates Robespierre’s duplicity in placing private friendship above the needs of the republic, a contradiction to Robespierre’s emphasis of

³⁷ Camille Desmoulins was a notable French journalist and Dantonist who targeted Robespierre’s tyrannical, radical ideas through his writings. Robespierre and Desmoulins were once schoolmates.

³⁸ Linton, 212.

³⁹ *Le Vieux Cordelier* was a French political magazine and paper. Desmoulins challenged Robespierre’s notion of virtue blatantly. He questioned that “‘If all the citizens are virtuous, what need is there of a Republic?’—and asserted that, even if the Committee were composed of the wisest and best statesman in the world, it could not expect to go uncriticized,” from Thompson 132.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Linton, 212-13.

civic virtue. Additionally, Desmoulins reveals Robespierre's will to take the easy way out—in this case with burning—rather than confront the real problem: the fragmented relationship between himself and the Dantonists.

In face of this public accusation in front of *all* the Jacobins, Robespierre simply retracted his demand for the passages to be burned. Only when the view of Desmoulins as an untrustworthy man “deliberately setting himself in opposition” of Robespierre solidified did Robespierre oust Desmoulins from the club.⁴² Given Robespierre's emphasis of quelling opposition, not removing Desmoulins would have advanced the idea that opposing the virtuous leader was acceptable; Robespierre had virtually no choice politically not to remove Desmoulins. Robespierre's lack of political courage is thereby evident. Rather than challenge the remarks made against him, Robespierre overlooked them for the sake of political expediency. Through this hypocritical prioritization of his own reputation, Robespierre alienated those closest to him to protect the ‘Republic,’ a mask for himself. Unexpectedly, Robespierre later acquiesced to Desmoulins' arrest and execution; perhaps Desmoulins was wrong about Robespierre's prioritization of private friendship over the Republic.

Likewise, in choosing to align himself against the Dantonists for the sake of self-preservation, Robespierre demonstrates tyrannical, uncompromising tendencies. Danton, previous leader of the Committee and ardent revolutionary, tried time and time again to convince Robespierre that Collot and Billaud had intentionally severed their friendship.⁴³ Nonetheless, Robespierre dismissed these remarks. In *Citizens*, Schama deplors that Robespierre “demanded

⁴² J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1996): 132.

⁴³ Schama, 816.

that Danton sacrifice the self-evidently corrupt as the price of his own self-preservation,” a demand demonstrating his inflated sense of self as the one who must be preserved.⁴⁴ While Robespierre readily condemned, criticized, and even executed his opposition to protect himself, he failed to recognize the vice of his tyranny. In unequivocally approving the confirmation of Danton’s execution in trial without much consideration of Danton’s possible innocence, Robespierre’s unrestrained control is undeniable.⁴⁵

One must note that while Robespierre “was distrusted as too radical, although he was thought too uncompromising and too austere, still he was called to power.”⁴⁶ He had a true revolutionary voice and rallied revolutionaries even if he alienated some. In addition, his radicalism met the radicalism of the revolutionaries. However, first and foremost—as unpopular as his personal philosophies and their implications became—the public greatly benefited from Robespierre’s vision of virtue. In insisting the French populace was the “antithesis of both old and new elites” and in turn, morally superior, Robespierre elevated their status and rights.⁴⁷ Robespierre was firm about the need for a national education system and protection of property rights for all citizens; he approached governance with the intent of liberating the populace and the neglected *sans-culottes*, even if he did not always deliver.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, while he never deterred from the use of force in getting what he wanted, his commitment to raising a virtuous country is commendable. In addition, Robespierre’s depth of private virtue communicates his

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jordan, *The Revolutionary*, 183.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 156-157.

loyalty to his principles, even if he contradicted his idea of virtue in public. Robespierre was cautious about socializing in a manner consistent with the old regime and maintained his authenticity outside of the public setting; he rarely went out into society and lived modestly as a long time lodger at the home of master carpenter Maurice Duplay.⁴⁹ The fact that Robespierre was not after material gain furthers the legitimacy of his beliefs, even though he took them too far with his rhetoric and reforms.⁵⁰

Despite Robespierre's commitment to his private virtue, some of his closest allies blatantly called Robespierre out for his hypocrisy and duplicity. In his *Fragments*, seasoned Robespierre ally Louis de Saint-Just prophesied that the inevitable government failure was a product of Robespierre's tyranny: "One tries to be rigorous in one's principles, when one destroys a bad government; but it is rare that, if one governs in one's turn, one does not soon reject these same principles in order to substitute one's own will."⁵¹ The timing of his iteration, at the dangerous peak of Robespierre's power, displays Just's implicit dissent of Robespierre's "substitut[ion of his] own will." Rather than assuming a radical view of virtue *for* the Republic and to *protect* the precarious progress of the Revolution, Robespierre's virtue-guided governance serves his own ambition rather than the general will, making it unjustifiable. In recognizing that "power ha[s] a tendency to corrupt," Saint-Just raised the question of how or if the Republic could be sustained with a figurehead such as a Robespierre.⁵² Given Saint-Just's position as one of Robespierre's most reliable allies, his critique speaks to the severity of Robespierre's behavior

⁴⁹ Linton, 212-213.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 254.

⁵² Ibid.

and calls into question his credibility as a tyrant adamant about the need to protect against tyranny. Just was a steadfast supporter of his political agenda, yet his circumspect attitude towards Robespierre's selfishness, inflexibility, and unpredictability reflects the shortcomings of Robespierre as a peer and leader, not an ideologue. Just stood by Robespierre until his death and was guillotined right alongside him, yet Just also understood the legitimate virtue of dying *for* the Republic.⁵³

Given the threat of assassination and the concept of heroic virtue through self-sacrifice loomed, Robespierre's fervent patriotism and virtuosity in his final days demonstrate his last opportunity to salvage his poor reputation through martyrdom. In fact, if Robespierre did indeed attempt suicide, it can be interpreted as an attempt to amend his reputation before the inevitability of execution or assassination. Dying at the hand of the guillotine or another suggests 'loss' to opposition and that one is no longer virtuous, so suicide could have served as an unintended opportunity for Robespierre to control the narrative of his death and cast himself how he wished.⁵⁴

At the time, neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis David's raw depictions of deceased revolutionaries served as reminders of the possibility of death yet also the virtue inherent in dying for the good the Republic. In the political propagandist and memorial painting *The Death of Marat* (1793), David offers a depiction of the deceased journalist and Montagnard leader Jean-Paul Marat.⁵⁵ In the work, Marat's knife wound and the bloody bathwater hint at the earlier

⁵³ Thompson, 269.

⁵⁴ Two assassination attempts were made against Robespierre in May 1794 alone, so it's reasonable to infer he was conscious of his increasingly poor reputation. Additionally, it is historically ambiguous whether or not Robespierre attempted suicide or was shot, from Linton 247.

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Marat was brutally murdered by Charlotte Corday after the purge of the Girondists from the Convention. Corday entered Marat's home and killed him with a knife while Marat bathed. See Appendix B.

violence. Nonetheless, the contrast between the dark, blank background and Marat's glowing yet hollow body creates a visual analogy between Marat and images of the crucified, dying Christ.⁵⁶ David's portrayal of Marat as a martyr of liberty—one who died for the Republic—provides a framework for the emulation of republican virtues.⁵⁷ The Jacobin Clubs supported this notion in adopting celebrations of the Cults of the Martyrs of Liberty to honor noble figures like Marat.⁵⁸ The Committee of Public Instruction similarly propagated the virtuosity of Marat with representations of him “supported by palm branches, symbolizing their martyrdom, and ... held by chains of laurels, which symbolize their victory over death” on the cover of the *Étrennes* popular almanac.⁵⁹ The popular portrayal of esteemed revolutionaries as martyrs thereby created a space for Robespierre to do the same, providing context for his behavior as his inevitable death neared.

In a speech leading up to his death, Robespierre claimed, “I feel myself increasingly disposed to attack with energy the scoundrels who conspire against my country and against humanity.”⁶⁰ His creation of an ‘us vs. them’ situation between himself and the ‘enemy within’ illustrates his noble call to action to protect the Republic and greater humanity. Later in the speech, he patriotically exclaimed:

...I have lived long enough. I saw the French people rise up from degradation and servitude to the heights of Glory and Freedom. ...Accomplish, Citizens, accomplish your

⁵⁶ “David and the Death of Marat,” *Khan Academy*, Accessed December 2, 2018. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/neo-classicism/a/david-and-the-death-of-marat>.

⁵⁷ Ashley Shifflett, “The Cult of the Martyrs of Liberty: Radical Religiosity in the French Revolution” (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2008): 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁶⁰ Linton, 250.

sublime destiny. ... May you constantly deploy that unquenchable energy which you need to put down the monsters of the universe that conspire against you...⁶¹

Robespierre's need to establish his authority as someone who has witnessed the Revolution's low points yet also the "heights of Glory and Freedom" reveals his last bid for political credibility.

The evanescence of Robespierre's life in having lived "long enough" rests the hope in the people who will "accomplish [their] sublime destiny." His imperative sentences and universalistic prose suggest that only through the wisdom he shares can the people triumph. The endless praise of the audience, the Convention, again attempts to convince said audience of his capacity to be a martyr of liberty rather than the perception of him as an inflated, duplicitous tyrant. However, by relying too extensively on the idea of the 'enemy within' and the authenticity of his own virtue—the validity of which had been corrupted through his self-serving nature and actions—Robespierre's arguments failed to resonate with his listeners, particularly his fellow Jacobins. Casting himself as the lone man of virtue amidst a sea of corrupt, ambitious Jacobins only made Robespierre more enemies. His polarizing language forced his colleagues, essentially, to make a choice: stand by him or conspire against him. On the Ninth of Thermidor, Robespierre was shouted down from the Convention and the subsequent day, he died at the hand of the guillotine.⁶² The choice was made, the Terror was over, and the republic of virtue, it was long gone.

The internal politics within the Committee of Public Safety preceding the Ninth of Thermidor are difficult to discern and still much contested by historians.⁶³ Nonetheless, while a clear answer may never be reached concerning what exactly precipitated the Jacobins'

⁶¹ Maximilien Robespierre, "On the Enemies of the Nation," *Creative Commons*, Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/enemies.htm>.

⁶² Linton, 250.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 252.

termination of Robespierre, undeniably, his behavior provides great context into the action the Jacobins took against him. Given his focus on the corruption of others, Robespierre overlooked that many of his enemies loathed him not because of ideological differences, but because of his tyrannical tendencies and deep-rooted self-righteousness. Billaud-Varenne vilified Robespierre for his pride and uncompromising nature; his political alliance with Robespierre in no way halted him from shouting him down in the Convention.⁶⁴ The 22 Law of Prairial only aggravated this atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust in which dissidence led to execution⁶⁵. Within the Committee of Public Safety, the law “ma[de] the deputies acutely conscious of their own increased vulnerability.”⁶⁶ Their fears were not trivial; they feared revenge, their impending deaths. Bardot once wrote that “in the battle of 9 Thermidor it was not a question of principles, but killing.”⁶⁷ The much contested ideology of terror and the “republic of virtue,” though flawed and alienating, dulled compared to the pressing, immediate need to eliminate Robespierre. His agenda had morphed with that of the revolution so much that as Bardot also noted, there was no way out of the “inextricable and sanguinary state of the Republic before the 9 Thermidor except through the death or ostracism of Robespierre.”⁶⁸ Just as Robespierre instigated the Terror out of fear of the dissipation of revolutionary progress, his conspirators saw the danger Robespierre posed to the Republic and acted, despite explicit fear for their own lives and reputations. Fear

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “The Reign of Terror.”

⁶⁶ Linton, 265.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 266.

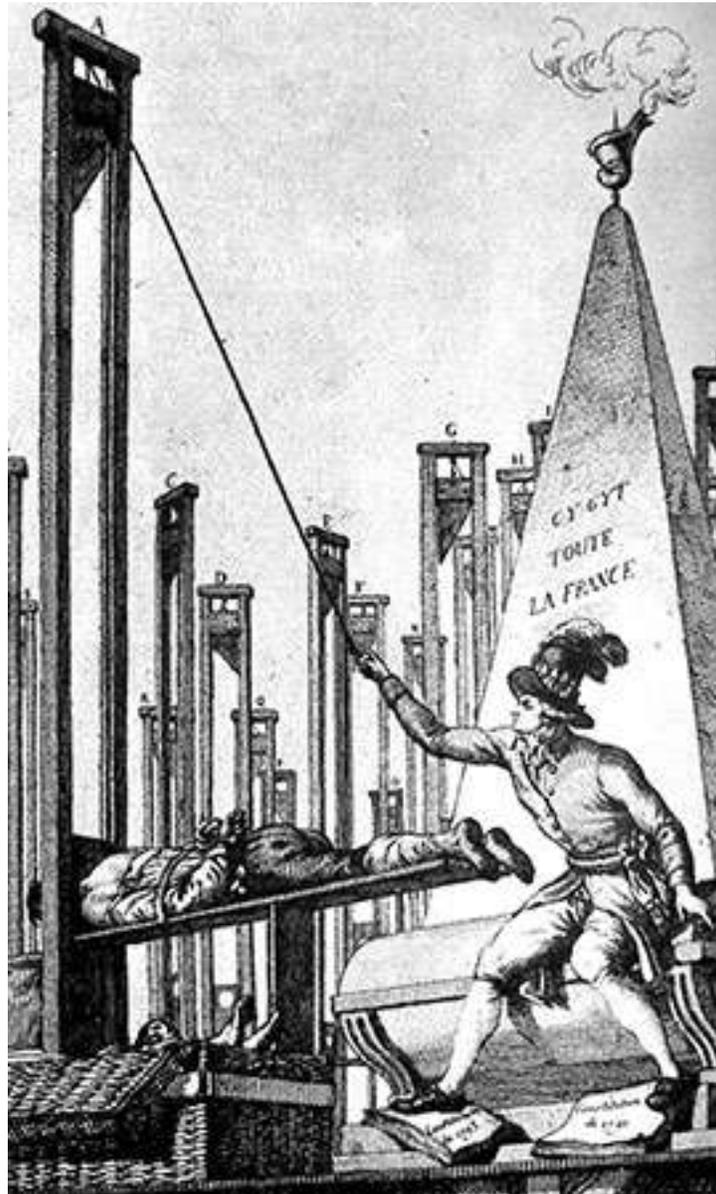
⁶⁸ Ibid.

was Robespierre's chief motivator, and it consequently ruled the eleventh hour decision of his enemies before the Ninth of Thermidor.

With a true revolutionary voice, tremendous authority, and the intent to liberate the populace through governance, Robespierre had the potential for greatness. Instead, his radicalism and uncompromising tyrannical tendencies alienated friends, foes, and common people alike, catalyzing his downfall and eventual execution. Despite the public and Jacobins' scorn of many of his reforms and ideas, Robespierre failed to grasp the political realities of the time. His principles could not and did not parallel those of the people, and his attempts to impose them on others only further severed his ties to the outside world. Evidently, history has been most unkind to Robespierre. In a popular article for *The New Yorker*, the author labeled Robespierre as a headless horseman whose tyranny paralleled that of Stalin and Hitler; he even went as far to claim Robespierre's Terror established the "apparatus for the totalitarian state."⁶⁹ All humans fall victim to the ills of conceit and extremity at times, yet Robespierre's radical convictions fostered unsustainable factionalism that ultimately culminated in the Thermidorian Reaction. To historians, Robespierre still remains a figure of great mystery, yet his contributions to France's discord are glaring, especially when considering him against the backdrop of modern global politics. Today's discord pales compared to the legitimately fatal division of the Revolution, yet with political polarization heightening with every news broadcast, there's no telling if or when the factionalism of the present will reach a breaking point.

⁶⁹ Adam Gopnik, "Headless Horseman," *The New Yorker*, July 06, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/06/05/headless-horseman>.

Appendix A:



“Robespierre guillotining the executor,” Anonymous.⁷⁰ 1793.

⁷⁰ “Robespierre guillotining the executor,” 1793, *Britannica*, Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-Robespierre/media/505619/38500>.

Appendix B:



The Death of Marat, David.⁷¹ 1793.

⁷¹ Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793, Oil on Canvas, 165 x 128 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, <https://www.fine-arts-museum.be/fr/la-collection/letter/d?page=5>.

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