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The Choices of Maximilien Robespierre

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Of all the people who came to prominence in the French Revolution, none has attracted as much attention as this one man, Maximilien Robespierre. In the minds of many observers he is synonymous with the Revolution itself. His political principles were those of the radical revolution—liberty, equality, and the ‘rights of man’ for all men. As for his methods, he will be forever remembered as the man who linked ‘virtue’ with ‘terror’ in a speech made during the height of the recourse to terror, in February 1794, and the man who played a leading role in the notorious Law of Prairial in June 1794 that expedited the procedures of the Revolutionary Tribunal.¹ Yet it was this same man who three years earlier, in late May 1791, had tried without success to get the death penalty abolished in the new constitution that the revolutionaries would give to France.

The problem of Maximilien Robespierre—his choices, his motives, his integrity (or lack of it)—still generates intense controversy. For many commentators the politics, personality, and foibles of Robespierre himself are central to how we interpret the significance of the Revolution and, even more, the revolutionary terror of 1793 to 1794. By loading the blame on to Robespierre, making him ‘take the rap for the terror’, we avoid looking at more profound reasons, more troubling reasons, why terror developed. We can say it was all the fault of that unpleasant Robespierre, that Rousseauist, that paranoid man, that power-hungry dictator, that puritan obsessed with virtue—and forget that terror was in great part the consequence of a set of collective choices made by deputies of the National Convention. So much of the image of Robespierre as the man behind the Terror is invention and myth, begun by men who wanted to divert attention from their own involvement in terror, and elaborated, deepened and reified over the years into layer upon layer of myth—even to the latest, ridiculous story of the “death mask” and its supposedly scientific revelations.² Do I think that Robespierre did terrible things in support of his vision of the Republic? Of course. Above all his part in the Law of Prairial. But that was not how he began, and the trajectory that he and

¹ Robespierre’s much-cited link between ‘virtue’ and ‘terror’ was made in his speech ‘Sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention Nationale dans l’administration intérieure de la République’, 17 Pluviôse (5 February 1794). On the significance and context of his words and how these notorious lines fitted into the rest of his speech, see Marisa Linton, ‘Commentary on Maximilien Robespierre, *On the Principles of Political Morality*’ (1794), in Rachel Hammersley, ed., *Textual Moments in the History of Revolutionary Thought* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, forthcoming 2015).

² I discuss this at greater length in my response to the *H-France Forum* reviews of *Choosing Terror* in *H-France Forum*, vol. 9, Issue 4 (Fall 2014), accessed October 11, 2015: <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol9/Linton5.pdf>.

others took is my subject of my most recent book, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*.³

I have spent many years now trying to work out the enigma that was Maximilien Robespierre.⁴ For me one of the most interesting things about the five years Robespierre spent at the centre of revolutionary politics is what they reveal about the experience of the Revolution. I take the view that we cannot understand Robespierre or his choices without understanding the politics of the Revolution: a politics that were constantly shifting and inherently unstable and that were characterised by conflicting ideas and emotions, fervent idealism, hope, loyalty, wild excitement, suspicion, fear, betrayal, and horror. To think that Robespierre—or any other revolutionary leader—mastered the Revolution is to vastly underestimate the sheer scale of the forces that the Revolution unleashed. The Revolution made Robespierre, and the Revolution destroyed him, just as it did so many others.

Robespierre During the Early Stages of the Revolution

The revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries learned from the experience of France in 1789 that—given the right circumstances—revolution in their own time might be also possible. It was not like that for Robespierre. He was no Lenin, living on the margins of society, dodging the police, agitating for revolution, manoeuvring for power. We tend to view Robespierre's life through the prism of the French Revolution and to forget that when it broke out he had already lived to mature adulthood in the world of the Old Regime. It was this milieu that shaped his attitudes and ideas. Robespierre's intellectual formation was grounded in the currents of eighteenth-century thought, above all the legal culture of the Old Regime, which he had studied and in which he made his career. Two recent studies which have added considerably to our understanding of Robespierre's life before the Revolution are those by Peter McPhee and Hervé Leuwers.⁵ For Robespierre, as for many other revolutionaries, his conception of law would be fundamental to his political ideas.

During the late 1780s, the period in which the political situation was rapidly deteriorating, largely through the actions—and inactions—of the monarchy and sections of the nobility, Robespierre was living an obscure and blameless life as a provincial lawyer, a respectable and, to outward observers at least, slightly dull existence. Like many of his contemporaries, he watched with wonder on the sidelines as the state teetered on the brink of a financial and political collapse. When Louis XVI called for elections to the Estates General, Robespierre seized his moment and won election as one of the 1,200 deputies. Here he was for a long time obscure, insignificant, and disregarded; he played no notable role in the Revolution of 1789 that turned the Estates General into a National Assembly and transformed absolute monarchy into constitutional monarchy.

³ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ In a recent blog I discuss how Robespierre and the French Revolution helped shape my own personal trajectory from amateur enthusiast to professional historian. Marisa Linton, 'Understanding Robespierre, Choosing Terror, and the Road to Thermidor', *The French Revolution Network*, July 28, 2015, accessed October 11, 2015, <http://revolution.hypotheses.org/211#more-211>.

⁵ Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: a Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); and Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

From the outset Robespierre was a radical democrat. He protested against the distinction that the Assembly made between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ citizens, declaring that the rights of man should be for all, regardless of birth, regardless of wealth; he declaimed against slavery in the French colonies; he defended the civic rights of religious minorities; he opposed the death penalty; and he spoke passionately for liberty of the press. He was not one of the (admittedly very small) number of revolutionaries who argued that women should have a political voice, but before the Revolution he had supported the rights of women to participate in provincial academies—a progressive step for the time—and he regularly attracted a large number of women amongst his supporters in the galleries, much to the annoyance of his opponents.⁶ What brought him to public notice was his dogged persistence; his refusal to change his views under pressure or enticements of wealth or position; and the way he lived his life according to his principles. He was seen as sincere: he could not be bought. It was in 1790 that journalists in the Jacobin Club first started to call him ‘the Incorruptible’, a name that became fundamental to his political identity. The conservatives in the Assembly first ignored him and later ridiculed him. The leaders of his own side, the ‘triumvirs’, the Lameths, Barnave, and Duport, leading lights in the Jacobin Club, were friendly with him, but also condescending. They not unnaturally assumed that they themselves, men of the pre-revolutionary social elite, would be the new leaders of the Revolution.

Robespierre’s political principles owed much to the eighteenth-century idea of virtue, a word which, as I argued in an earlier book, had a range of derivations, mingling classical republicanism, natural virtue, religious thought, and the theme of self-sacrifice for the public good. To be politically virtuous meant that one was ready to put the public good before any other consideration. The concept of virtue had both political and emotional resonances: it recalled both the political formulations of Montesquieu and the emotional authenticity associated above all with Rousseau.⁷ There were always doubts about the authenticity of virtue; for how could one tell whether a public figure was truly virtuous, or whether he was speaking a rhetoric of public service in order to disguise his own ambition and corruption?⁸ Yet despite these doubts, the belief that politicians should be virtuous became a key tenet of the Revolution from its earliest days, at a time well before Robespierre had any influence. Revolutionary politicians had to cultivate public opinion, play to the gallery, and establish their integrity in the eyes of their audiences. Their speeches, their actions and their conduct were subjected to an unprecedented level of public scrutiny, above all by the revolutionary press. In principle revolutionary leaders were supposed to be ready to put the public good before anything else, before their own self-interest, and before personal loyalties to friends and family; they ought to be devoid of personal ambition, egoism or the desire for glory, ready to sacrifice their own interests for the public good. The new men who came to the

⁶ On Robespierre’s support for women to take an active part in the public and intellectual sphere of provincial academies, see Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, ‘Robespierre, Old Regime Feminist: Gender, the Late Eighteenth Century and the French Revolution Revisited’, *Journal of Modern History* 82:1 (2010): 1-29.

⁷ On the eighteenth-century language of political virtue, see Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001). On the derivation of Robespierre’s political ideas see Marisa Linton, ‘Robespierre’s Political Principles’, in Colin Haydon and William Doyle, eds., *Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ Doubts about humanity’s capacity for authentic virtue were raised by several seventeenth-century thinkers, such as the moralist La Rochefoucauld and the Jansenist theologians Nicole and Esprit, who saw all virtue as a manifestation of pride and self-interest. See Linton, *Choosing Terror*, chapter one.

forefront of political life were obliged to negotiate this changed cultural landscape in which their own ambition was considered as inherently suspicious, their true identity subject to public scrutiny.

Robespierre's reputation did not stem simply from the fact that he used the trope of 'the man of virtue', ready to sacrifice himself and all he held personally dear to the public good—as I showed in *Choosing Terror* many people did that. Robespierre's real strength was that he spoke the language of virtue with utter conviction. Whilst Robespierre's political categories derived above all from Montesquieu and the classical republican tradition, when he spoke about how he *felt* about virtue—which he so often did—he did so with *sensibility*, after the manner of Rousseau, which in turn gave him access to the aura of 'true feelings'.⁹ Mirabeau is supposed to have said about Robespierre: 'That man will go far, he believes what he says.' Moreover Robespierre understood that words alone were not enough: there must be no gap between words and deeds. His manner of life—simple frugality and personal morality—bore witness to his sincerity. At different times in his career his numerous enemies tried to 'dig the dirt' about his private life, but the evidence they turned up was thin indeed. He had what came to count most in revolutionary politics—credibility.¹⁰

One person who recognized this aspect of Robespierre was William Augustus Miles, a spy for the British government who, ironically, was welcomed into the Jacobin Club. (Suspicion of foreigners came later, after the outbreak of war in 1792). What he saw in Robespierre was authenticity:

He is cool, measured, and resolved. He is *in his heart* Republican, honestly so, not to pay court to the multitude, but from an opinion that it is the very best, if not the only form of government which men ought to admit. Upon this principle he acts, and the public voice is decidedly in favour of this system. ... I watch him very closely every night. I read his countenance with eyes steadily fixed on him. He is really a character to be contemplated; he is growing every hour into consequence, and, strange to relate, the whole National Assembly hold him cheap, consider him as insignificant, and, when I mentioned to some of them my suspicions and said he would be the man of sway in a short time and govern the million, I was laughed at.¹¹

Authenticity was central to Robespierre's political identity and to his eventual preeminence.¹² Yet his reputation was acquired over years during which he was regularly mocked by his

⁹ On the emotional registers that Robespierre employed in his speeches, see David Andress, 'Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre's Sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution', *Representations* 114:1 (Spring 2011): 103-28.

¹⁰ Marisa Linton, 'Robespierre et l'authenticité révolutionnaire', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 371 (janvier-mars 2013): 153-73.

¹¹ Miles's letter, written 1 March 1791, is cited in greater length in Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 86.

¹² At the time I was writing *Choosing Terror*, contemporary politics in the United Kingdom was all about 'spin', 'soundbites', and politicians who were more or less openly ambitious—and these were the politicians of the 'Left'. I watched all this with interest, both from a personal viewpoint and as a historian. I had long thought that as historians we tend to underestimate the overwhelmingly *political* nature of the French Revolution, and how revolutionary leaders operated, above all, as politicians. In some ways politicians may have a better insight into the lives and choices of the French revolutionaries than historians do. I became increasingly aware of the

opponents and underestimated by leaders of his own group, the Jacobins. And all his authenticity and personal integrity would have amounted to nothing if men who were important figures and leaders in the first stages of the Revolution, men such as Lafayette, Mirabeau, d'Orléans, and the triumvirs, had not lost credit with revolutionary public opinion which became disillusioned with them for seeking to use their political influence to facilitate their personal ambitions and for employing a rhetoric of political virtue in which they did not appear to actually believe.

Not even Robespierre's most cynical detractors have said that he was corrupted by a desire for wealth. It has often been said, however, that he was corrupted by the desire to 'get power' and make himself a leader of the new political order. Two choices made by Robespierre call into question this characterization of him as a man who sought power for himself. The first of these was his successful proposal of a self-denying ordinance in May 1791. This provision, which blocked anyone who had been part of the National (Constituent) Assembly from entering the coming Legislative Assembly, had far-reaching consequences. Its principal tactical purpose was to block the ambitions of the triumvirs whose integrity Robespierre and the other radical Jacobins now doubted. At the same time, however, Robespierre was consciously sacrificing any ambitions he himself might have had to be a leader in the years to come. He was hardly to guess that within ten months the Legislative Assembly would plunge France into war and that, consequently, a second revolution, this time to overthrow the monarchy, would make France a Republic and bring into being a new assembly, the National Convention. It was as a member of the Convention that Robespierre would come to political power in circumstances he could not have foreseen in 1791.

A second occasion when Robespierre publicly chose his beliefs over personal advantage and ambition was during the debates held in the Jacobin Club over the winter of 1791 to 1792 as to whether France should go to war with the foreign powers sheltering French émigrés. When Robespierre confronted Brissot, who was spear-heading the drive to war, he was putting his sense of what was right before political popularity, whilst other Jacobins, such as Danton, who had at first opposed the war, backed off when they saw which way the wind was blowing. The Brissotins played the patriotism card against Robespierre, saying that he was acting in bad faith in the pay of the court, a conspirator against the Revolution. One of Brissot's supporters, Louvet denounced Robespierre on the floor of the Jacobins, saying that his stubborn opposition to war cloaked his ambition to achieve personal power: 'You despair of the patrie, your doubts insult the nation ... You are almost alone, and almost alone... you still hold in suspense the opinion of a great number of the people.'¹³ For some months Robespierre became a relatively isolated figure in the Jacobin Club as around him the popular patriotic and militarist enthusiasm intensified. It was only when the war, declared in spite of his efforts, went badly for France, that Robespierre regained his preeminence and indeed

importance not just of what revolutionary leaders said, but of the need for them to close the gap between what they said and what they did—in other words, to demonstrate the *authenticity* of their politics. I had originally intended *Choosing Terror* to be mostly about 'virtue' and political 'friendships' but eventually I realized that it was equally about 'authenticity'—hence its final title. Ironically, the sudden and overwhelming support shown for Jeremy Corbyn, who in September 2015 was elected as leader of the U.K. Labour Party on an overwhelming mandate, has been followed by a sudden surge of media interest in the critical importance of 'authenticity' and 'emotion' in politics. Nor am I alone in seeing certain striking parallels between Corbyn and Robespierre (that is, Robespierre in his earlier political career—before his choices during the Terror transformed him and how we see him).

¹³ Cited in Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 120.

consolidated it. He was able to say that he had warned that a war would be disastrous for France.

Robespierre and Power

Historians who have argued that Robespierre's choices were about getting him power fail to appreciate how much of Robespierre's career was about *not* being in power. What mattered to Robespierre far more than power was being in the right and being able to think of himself as being in the right. This characteristic did not always make him likeable—it fed his tendency to be self-righteous—as many of his detractors have noted. It was also one of the reasons why he saw his opponents as acting in bad faith, simply because they did not see things as he did—though to be fair this was a very common reaction in revolutionary politics and Robespierre was far from alone in taking this attitude, damaging as it was for the political process. But his determination to act according to his conscience was also his strength and a large part of the reason for his ascendancy.

The transition from opposition to ruling group was a decisive moment for the leading Jacobins, not least Robespierre himself who had always been more at home criticising the shortcomings of others than being the man at the helm of the ship. Once Robespierre entered the Committee of Public Safety on 27 July 1793, his position was transformed. Being in power offered new opportunities for forging a successful career in revolutionary politics. In the summer of 1793 many members of the Jacobin Club, especially those who were also deputies (the Montagnards), expected to be rewarded for their devotion by material and career benefits. Robespierre entered power with considerable caution. He understood the importance of how a revolutionary politician lived. Since he was in the service of the public he had to be accessible to the public. He did not live secluded behind the high walls of a palace, did not have a bodyguard, and did not keep a carriage. He ate frugally (again, this came naturally to him) and was wary of dinner invitations to expensive restaurants.¹⁴ In the Year II this demonstration of modest living and accessibility was expected of the Revolution's leaders, even if, as a consequence, they risked their lives and were vulnerable to assassination by the people who hated them—and there were many of these. The assassination of the Montagnard deputies Lepelletier (in a restaurant) and Marat (in his bathtub), along with further attempted assassinations (both directed against Robespierre) in May 1794, must have added considerably to the revolutionary leaders' state of tension.¹⁵

A central part of *Choosing Terror* addresses the growing climate of fear which haunted the revolutionary leaders, including Robespierre. Much of this fear was about their fellow revolutionaries: the revolutionary leaders feared the royalists and their enemies on the battlefields, but they also feared men who were on their own side. I described this as the 'politicians' terror'. This was the terror that revolutionary leaders meted out to one another. In some ways it paralleled the wider Terror but it also had particular characteristics of its own. The revolutionary leaders were themselves 'subject to terror'. This took two forms.

¹⁴ On the risks incurred by deputies of the National Convention who were seen consuming luxurious food and wine and dining in expensive restaurants, see Marisa Linton and Mette Harder, "'Come and Dine': The Dangers of Conspicuous Consumption in French Revolutionary Politics", *European History Quarterly* 45:4 (2015): 615-37.

¹⁵ For more on this subject, see Marisa Linton, 'The Stuff of Nightmares: Plots, Assassinations, and Duplicity in the Mental World of Jacobin Leaders, 1793-1794' in David Andress, ed., *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Oxford: Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 2013), 201-17.

First, revolutionary leaders were liable to arrest under the laws that enabled terror, as successive laws removed their parliamentary immunity and criminalised the ‘wrong’ political opinions. Second, they were subject to the *emotion* of terror. Fears that they could not openly acknowledge—because innocence was meant to be fearless and fear was a sign of consciousness of guilt—increased in intensity, above all during the critical period between March 1793 and July 1794. The revolutionary leaders’ growing consciousness of the danger in which they stood undoubtedly influenced their decisions, even though they were constantly insisting—in public at least—that they did not let it affect them. Ironically, leaders had much more cause to fear the Terror than most of the Parisian population. A high proportion of the leaders of the Revolution (above all those who either were or had been members of the Jacobin Club) died violent deaths, either under the guillotine or by their own hand. The politicians’ terror climaxed in a series of trials and executions of revolutionary leaders during the Year II: the Girondins, the Hébertists/Cordeliers, the Dantonists, and—executed without any form of trial beyond identification before the Revolutionary Tribunal—the Robespierrists. These successive factions were accused of being ‘conspirators’, whose professed virtue and love of the patrie concealed the fact that they were financially and politically corrupt, had sold themselves to the royalists and the foreign powers, and were part of a conspiracy to overthrow the Revolution from within.¹⁶

Thermidor and the Fall of Robespierre

It is two hundred and twenty-one years now since Robespierre fell in the political coup that became known as Thermidor after the revolutionary month in which it took place. His fall, when it came, happened with dizzying speed; he went from leader, to ‘conspirator’, to outlaw, to condemned traitor in the space of thirty hours. The coup brought about the deaths of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and 106 others over three days on 10, 11, and 12 Thermidor. The reasons behind the coup are still subject to debate. The traditional view of Robespierre in the weeks leading up to Thermidor is that he was operating a deliberate strategy to retain and extend his grip on power. This is a view that owes much to the Thermidorean accounts of Robespierre as a dictator, motivated by ambition, greed, and the lust for power. The allegation that Robespierre was a ‘dictator’ was already being made about him in the weeks before Thermidor. During the course of the long, involved speech which he made to the Convention on 8 Thermidor, after several weeks of his non-attendance there, he protested against this portrayal of himself, insisting repeatedly on his identity as a man of virtue. Whilst the rhetoric was familiar, tactically the speech represented a key change for it was the first time since he had entered the Committee of Public Safety that he had addressed the Convention not as a Committee member, but as an individual, thus staking everything on the deputies’ belief in his personal integrity. Simultaneously he denounced a number of Montagnards whom he thought of as conspiring against the Revolution and against himself – in his mind the two categories had become one. Yet he refused to reveal their names, terrifying many of the Montagnards who thought that he might have them in mind and, thus, laying the ground for the very conspiracy that he feared—the conspiracy for his opponents to destroy him before he could destroy them. His decision to make this speech was, by any assessment, an irrational act of which even his own friends seem to have disapproved.

¹⁶ On the pervasive fear of conspiracy in revolutionary politics, see Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); and Timothy Tackett, ‘Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792’, *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691-713.

Robespierre was confronted by an ideological dilemma. If he had tried to organise his supporters to resist his enemies amongst the Montagnards he would have been, by his own standards maintained over five years of revolutionary conflict, engaging in a conspiracy. It is evident that maintaining his authenticity as a man of virtue mattered to him more than anything else at that moment—even more than staying alive. His final words in the Convention on 8 Thermidor, after the deputies had declined to endorse his speech by ordering it to be printed, were to reassert his identity as a man who acted alone, not as the leader of a faction: ‘I do not desire the support, nor the friendship of anyone; I do not seek to form a party ... I have done my duty, it is for others to do theirs.’¹⁷ Robespierre had been predicting his own death since the start of the Revolution. The assassination attempts against him had shaken him badly. Now he felt death closing in on him. In the Jacobins that night, he read the speech again, before an emotional audience, declaring it to be his ‘testament of death’. Two of his opponents on the Committee of Public Safety, Collot d’Herbois and Billaud-Varenne were driven out of the Jacobin Club amidst shouts of ‘To the guillotine!’ leaving them in no doubt that either they—or Robespierre—were about to die and, therefore, bent on killing him. Yet at the end of that evening, Robespierre went home to the Duplays’ house where he lodged, leaving his opponents free to organise their defence, born of terror for their own lives, to destroy Robespierre before he could destroy them. If this was Robespierre’s plan to launch a conspiracy to purge the Committees he made a singularly poor show of it. It is not even clear that he conferred with Saint-Just—the man entrusted with the key speech to show that Robespierre and the Committees had patched up their differences. In the speech Saint-Just intended to give the next day, and which he was rewriting on the night of 8 Thermidor, he chose to be loyal to Robespierre, even whilst he referred to Robespierre’s confused state of mind: ‘... to be honest, he [Robespierre] by no means explained himself clearly enough, but his isolation and his bitterness of heart may give him some excuse; he understands nothing of the reasons for his persecution; he knows only his misery’.¹⁸

Much about what happened in Thermidor makes little sense unless we appreciate how far events were driven by virulent emotions, above all suspicion, intense anxiety—and despair. There is ample evidence that in the run-up to Thermidor, the political leaders were suffering from stress, exhaustion—and fear. It is hardly surprising, to my mind, that in those circumstances deputies were sleepless, suspicious, tense, and made decisions they would not have done in normal circumstances. They knew that the politicians’ terror could rebound upon their own heads. They did not have immunity from arrest. Robespierre was no exception; his place at the centre of revolutionary politics did not give him immunity, something of which he was well aware, for he himself had used the principle of no special privilege for national representatives to argue that there should be no immunity for the Dantonists; how then could he expect his own position to be different? His emotional and psychological strain was exacerbated by bouts of physical ill health—a subject on which McPhee has presented the clearest evidence yet. Without detailed medical reports we cannot be sure of the extent of his illness, but whilst it is likely that physical illness was exacerbated by his stressed state of mind, it is evident that mental anguish was what affected him the most. In this he was not alone; an atmosphere of dread permeated the Convention in the summer of 1794.

¹⁷ Cited in Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 264.

¹⁸ Cited in *Choosing Terror*, 265.

For some of the time that I was writing *Choosing Terror* I felt as though I was walking down a road alone as I explored the intense emotions—acknowledged and unacknowledged—and the fraught atmosphere generated within the Convention. But even in the two years since my book’s publication, it has been exciting to me to see that other historians, including Timothy Tackett and Michel Biard, both of whom have spent a lifetime researching the Revolution, have been exploring parallel themes, working to uncover the very real dangers that revolutionary politicians ran and asking how the constant tension in which the deputies lived impacted on their emotions and therefore their political choices.¹⁹

Surprisingly, one dissenting voice is that of Colin Jones. Much of Jones’ long and distinguished career has been devoted to social and medical history—particularly that of dentistry—and he has only lately turned to the study of revolutionary politics during the Terror. Jones explicitly rejects the idea that Robespierre was either physically or *emotionally* unwell in July 1794 and dismisses my own work, along with that of McPhee and Tackett as taking what Jones characterises as ‘the poor little Maxie’ approach.²⁰ His own view of Robespierre’s Thermidor speech is that Robespierre was simply employing a ‘trope of self-sacrificial virtue’ as he had done on previous occasions. The dynamics were far more complex than that. My work (as well as that of McPhee and Tackett) deserves a rather more attentive reading than Jones appears to have given it. Far from singling out Robespierre in isolation, *Choosing Terror* investigates a whole group of people and their individual and collective experiences of revolutionary politics. The revolutionary leaders were complex—as complex as we are ourselves—and to understand them and their choices we need to see them in three-dimensional terms and to reconstruct not just the rhetoric they used but also their ideological beliefs, their tactics, their emotions, and the complex relationship between their personal lives and public identities.

After Robespierre’s death the problem of his authentic identity became part of a battlefield over the legitimacy of the Revolution and even of the morality of the recourse to terror. The fabrication of the myth of Robespierre, which began with the Thermidoreans, is as integral to how the present generation sees the ‘Robespierre problem’ as was the historical reality of his life.²¹ Despite the continued attempts of historians to explain Robespierre’s actual role in the Revolution, the myth that he was the mastermind behind the Terror and the dictator of France

¹⁹ Whilst *Choosing Terror* focused on a relatively small group of revolutionary leaders, most of whom either were or had been members of the Jacobin Club, two even more recent books show that the fears and dangers which beset the leading figures in the Convention were shared to a greater or lesser extent by the Convention as a whole: Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Michel Biard, *La liberté ou la mort: Mourir en député, 1792-1795* (Paris: Tallandier, 2015). For the extent to which purges of deputies continued after Thermidor see Mette Harder, ‘A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor’, *French Historical Studies* 38 (2015): 33-60. Harder’s findings call into question the periodisation of standard accounts of ‘the Terror’ as a phenomenon that was associated exclusively with Robespierre and died with him.

²⁰ Colin Jones, ‘Maximilien Robespierre: Melancholic Victim of his Own Virtue?’, research paper presented at the 2015 Society for French Historical Studies Conference, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 18, 2015. *H-France Salon*, vol. 7, Issue 7, accessed October 11, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7aPwwx6Y1w>.

²¹ See Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, *Robespierre: La fabrication d’un mythe* (Paris: Ellipses, 2013); and Michel Biard and Philippe Bourdin, eds., *Robespierre: Portraits croisés* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); also an edited collection that, like the Haydon and Doyle volume, came out of a conference held for the Bicentenary of Thermidor, Annie Jourdan, ed., *Robespierre—Figure-Réputation* (Amsterdam: Yearbook of European Studies, 9, 1996).

proves more resilient than the historical reality. I have lost count of the number of times that people have happily assured me that Robespierre is easy to understand, ‘he was just like Stalin really’; to which I reply, ‘He was much more complicated than that. The Revolution was much more complicated than that. Robespierre never held the individual power that Stalin had, and he was nothing like as ruthless. If he’d been a Stalin he would have acted first to ensure his enemies were killed and he would have been the victor in Thermidor’. For me, it is the very fact that Robespierre acted as he did in Thermidor that keeps him interesting, that keeps him human, and not the monster of legend.

So what had happened to the idealistic young man who starts out full of hope for a better world in 1789, who tries to get the death penalty abolished in 1791, who sacrifices his personal political ambitions with the self-denying ordinance, who speaks out bravely against Brissot’s reckless and irresponsible plan to wage war in Europe with the ringing words ‘no one welcomes armed liberators’, but who goes on to become an apologist for terror, the man who puts his signature to the arrest of his friend, Camille Desmoulins, who backs the Law of Prairial? The answer to why a man like Robespierre, an idealist and a humanitarian in 1789, chose terror in 1793 lies, not in some warp of his personality, but in the shifting, unstable, and shattering politics of the Revolution. So, if you want to figure out Robespierre, first figure out the Revolution. Admittedly, it may take you a lifetime, but the best history writing does take that long, and some of the best historians of both Robespierre and the Revolution, such as Georges Lefebvre, J. M. Thompson, Norman Hampson, and so many others, did just that, and in the process, they told us about the Revolution, told us about Robespierre – and told us about ourselves.²²

As I said at the start of *Choosing Terror* to understand the French revolutionaries is to better understand ourselves. How can we know what we ourselves might be capable of in such circumstances? If we want to understand why people acted and thought as they did in the past, often in extreme circumstances, then as historians there is no room for complacency. We have cause to be grateful that we have not been confronted with such choices, in such circumstances, and with such tragic consequences as they faced in their own lives. Would we have held onto our humanity, our courage, our loyalty towards our friends? How distant is Maximilien Robespierre from us, after all? The Robespierre problem—is our problem too.

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²² Here I am thinking of the closing lines of Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London: Duckworth, 1974), 301. Hampson’s book is still one of the best studies of Robespierre, not least because it is so resolutely open-minded.

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