

# Robespierre

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# 1 Robespierre: after two hundred years

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*William Doyle and Colin Haydon*

## **The seagreen incomprehensible?**

Even two centuries after his death, Robespierre can still inspire deep unease or revulsion in France. This is perhaps best shown by the paucity of monuments to the man who was the towering figure of the Revolution. Unlike Danton, whose statue in the Latin Quarter rallies the *patrie*'s youth against the enemy, Robespierre has no statue in the capital. One has to go to Saint-Denis for that – or rather for a large, rather ugly bust, provocatively near the royal basilica. In Paris, there is a Métro station named after him in a working-class district long dominated by the communists; a plaque – recently smashed, but now restored<sup>1</sup> – outside his lodgings in the rue Saint-Honoré; and another in the Conciergerie, erected by the Société des Etudes robespierristes. Even in Arras, his birth-place, the plaque on the house where he lived as a young lawyer is set high up, to prevent vandalism. Unlike Condorcet or Desmoulins, he did not appear on the bicentenary's commemorative stamps. None the less, he was selected for inclusion in a recent poll as one of the figures personifying an epoch in French history. The poll's results revealed that, although controversial, he had a better image than both Louis XIV and Napoleon.<sup>2</sup>

Other polls, in fact, reveal widespread popular ignorance about Robespierre in France (in one conducted in 1988, 29 per cent of those questioned thought he was a Girondin, with only 21 per cent knowing he was a Montagnard).<sup>3</sup> But what is more alarming is the degree to which historians can arrive at diametrically opposed positions on the subject of the Incorruptible. Ernest Hamel, whose hagiographical *Histoire de Robespierre* was published between 1865 and 1867, concluded

<sup>1</sup> Personal observations by W. Doyle, July 1996 and August 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Monde*, 19 September 1996, supplément, p. iv. We owe this reference to Professor Edward James.

<sup>3</sup> F. Crouzet, *Historians and the French Revolution: the Case of Maximilien Robespierre* (Swansea, 1989), p. 26.

that his hero was ‘un des plus grands hommes de bien qui aient paru sur la terre’.<sup>4</sup> Lord Acton, in his magisterial summing-up of his career, famously declared: ‘Only this is certain, that he remains the most hateful character in the forefront of history since Machiavelli reduced to a code the wickedness of public men.’<sup>5</sup> In the twentieth century, he was ‘this great democrat’ and ‘the immovable and incorruptible head of revolutionary Resistance’ in the eyes, respectively, of Albert Mathiez and Georges Lefebvre,<sup>6</sup> whereas Richard Cobb reduced him to ‘a fumbling, prissy, routinal, comfort-loving, vaguely ridiculous, prickly little man’.<sup>7</sup> It was in 1974 that Norman Hampson, in his *Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, came clean about the problem, with a frankness that is unusual among historians. Such, on occasions, are the inadequacies or the complexities of the evidence, that the book’s three fictional commentators – a clergyman who takes Robespierre’s side, a party member, uninterested in the individual, and a civil servant, who remorselessly scrutinises the Incorruptible’s deeds – frequently find it impossible to reach a mutually satisfying conclusion. That historians’ own convictions can colour their interpretations, despite their professional ideals, is plainly a truism. It is the extent of the difficulty respecting Robespierre that is abnormal, and hence peculiarly disconcerting.

Politics provides part of the explanation for this. That the Incorruptible would be a political totem in France after Thermidor or under the Restoration was inevitable; but, as François Crouzet details, he has remained one right up to our own times. In the nineteenth century, left-wing republicans and early socialists took up his cause (though it is worth noting that Hamel was only an unsuccessful republican politician). In England too, as Gwynne Lewis describes in chapter 12, he was greatly admired by the Chartist Bronterre O’Brien. His stock continued to rise in the twentieth century with the triumph of Bolshevism in Russia and the growth of communist parties in western Europe. Mathiez was a member of the French communist party in the early 1920s, Lefebvre was a convinced socialist, and both men were profoundly influenced by Marxism. The impact of these influences can be seen in specific as well as general interpretations. In chapter 6 Frank Tallett, for instance, highlights the strength of Robespierre’s religious beliefs; but, for Mathiez, the cult of the Supreme Being was simply a social programme,

<sup>4</sup> E. Hamel, *Histoire de Robespierre*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1865–7), vol. III, p. 807.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, ed. J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London, 1910), p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> A. Mathiez, ‘Robespierre jeune en Franche-Comté (Pluviôse, An II)’, in his *Autour de Robespierre* (Paris, 1925, repr. 1926), p. 13; G. Lefebvre, ‘Remarks on Robespierre’, *French Historical Studies* 1 (1958), 10.

<sup>7</sup> R. Cobb, ‘Robespierre’, in his *Tour de France* (London, 1976), p. 53.

a means of unifying the nation.<sup>8</sup> All this is not to say that historians sympathetic to Marxism might not be critical of some of Robespierre's policies; Albert Soboul was. Even so, it is the new 'revisionist school', invigorated by increasing disenchantment with communism and revolution at the Gulag, and by the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet bloc, that has once more cut Robespierre down to size.

For historians, there are major problems with sources. Very little is known about five-sixths of Robespierre's life, the two principal authorities for his early years contradict each other, and one can only speculate on what made him generally or psychologically the man he was. The Thermidorians not only blackened his memory but possibly also exaggerated his importance for posterity. Many of his papers were destroyed in 1815, whilst proper records were not taken of the Committee of Public Safety's meetings. Above all, in his speeches and publications, designed to persuade his hearers and readers, was Robespierre always convinced of his stance, and did he always mean what he said? Certainly he always appeared to believe everything he said, but how far, in 1793–4, was he fronting the collective stance of the government, and how far was he speaking for himself? His closest associates died with him at Thermidor, so we lack the testimonies which, with most politicians, help to clarify issues of this kind. We also lack any kind of useful table-talk (no doubt it would have been exceedingly dull, interspersed with long silences). All too often, historians are obliged to interpret the evidence without adequate guides – so that the results may say as much about them as about the subject. This is, very appropriately, a particularly horrible case of 'the death of the author'.

Robespierre's speeches elicit a variety of responses from readers. At one level, they display the highest ideals of the Revolution, with their emphasis on liberty, happiness, peace, respect for the people, virtue and love of the *patrie*. But there is the darker rhetoric of plots, enemies disguised as friends, 'fripons', the dangers of calumny, the persecution of the people's defenders, military treachery, the need for purges, the necessity of terror. They can be probing and far-sighted, notably when describing the dangers posed to the Revolution by war, but, especially towards the end, they can display, alarmingly, a slackening grasp of reality.<sup>9</sup> Besides the speeches' content, there is their general character. Sophisticated and erudite, employing classical and historical allusions, they can also, notoriously, be verbose and tedious. The repeated use of the first person singular and the suffocating self-pity – 'A slave of liberty,

<sup>8</sup> A. Mathiez, 'Robespierre et le culte de l'Être suprême', in *Autour de Robespierre*, pp. 94–129.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 10.

a living martyr of the Republic . . . I am the most wretched of men'<sup>10</sup> – are disconcerting. Still more so are the prophecies of his approaching martyrdom and the self-deceiving circumlocutions, veiling the reality of the Terror. The chapters in this volume dealing with Robespierre's outlook and politics make considerable use of his own words; and readers will gather a great deal about the man from them.

A further bar to assessing Robespierre is that his personality excites an intensity of admiration, or loathing and contempt, which is most unusual for a figure long dead. Acton's 'hateful' is significant: it applies to the man himself, not his political actions. Ardent and energetic himself, Mathiez revered his strength of principle and purpose, his perspicacity and commitment. The austere republican Georges Lefebvre admired his integrity, hard work and frugality. By contrast, Richard Cobb, anarchic, fun-loving and generous, revealed, both in his writings and conversation, an utter hatred of Robespierre, 'not only for what he did, what he, so boringly, so labouredly, said, but for what he represented in the form of self-righteousness, unctuousness, obstinacy, lack of understanding of others, and puritanism'.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, his cold-blooded inflexibility and reasoned advocacy of terror have established him as a monstrous archetype of the visionary fanatic, zealous for some fantastic Utopia, prepared to liquidate to achieve it and quite indifferent to human suffering. It is difficult to believe that, in his Identikit picture of Heinrich Himmler's precursors (containing as it does glances towards the Terror, the Republic of Virtue, the lifestyle of the Maison Duplay, even the dog, Brout), Hugh Trevor-Roper was not thinking of Robespierre:

if we look back at the cataclysmic periods of society, at periods of revolution and violent social change . . . [Himmler's] prototype is there. It is the Grand Inquisitor, the mystic in politics, the man who is prepared to sacrifice humanity to an abstract ideal. The Grand Inquisitors of history were not cruel or self-indulgent men. They were often painfully conscientious and austere in their personal lives. They were often scrupulously kind to animals.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, it was perhaps J. M. Thompson who, in human terms, hit the bull's-eye. Throughout his biography, he wrestled valiantly to be fair to his subject, and, when he reached the abandonment of Desmoulins, he meticulously explained Robespierre's point of view. 'It would be surprising', he concluded, 'if, under the circumstances, Robespierre had acted otherwise.' 'But', he added, 'who would not like him better, if he had?'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. X, p. 556.

<sup>11</sup> R. Cobb, *Reactions to the French Revolution* (London, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (London, 1947), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1988), p. 445.



François Furet maintained that Robespierre's personal psychology was irrelevant to an understanding of his significance in the Revolution. At a superficial level, the description of Robespierre as the incarnation of the Revolution is awkward. Whilst he projected himself as its embodiment in his speeches, there is a glaring asymmetry between the tumultuous, titanic events and the small, fastidious, bespectacled lawyer, lacking the hideous passion of Marat or the volcanic personality of Danton. 'O unhappiest Advocate of Arras, wert thou worse than other Advocates?',<sup>14</sup> wrote Carlyle, always anxious to belittle him. His orderly life in the *Maison Duplay* – one thinks of the cakes and the oranges – had nothing in common with the toil, dirt and suffering of 'the people' whom he venerated; given his protected, though modest, lifestyle, his pronouncements on virtuous poverty – 'The people can bear hunger, but not crime'<sup>15</sup> – appear grotesque. Whilst he claimed to represent the people, his dress and manners proclaimed the chasm; and, when in government, he supported the limitation of the sections' meetings and the clamp-down on their politics.

Robespierre's relation to the Revolution as a whole remains the most perennially fascinating issue. How far did *he* make a difference? Was his oratory largely a retrospective justification of events that tidal factors, or other people, had initiated? How far was he the plaything of social forces that he could not comprehend, let alone control? Was his justification of the Terror whilst in power always implicit in the espousal of the Manichaean discourse of the early Revolution, in which the politics of the righteous could not tolerate dissent? Was his political genius simply to let himself be carried to power by the irresistible revolutionary flood? The number of occasions when he initiated policy appears small: the self-denying ordinance of 1791; the establishment of the cult of the Supreme Being; and, one presumes, the passing of the law of 22 Prairial. On the great issue of the war, he was out of step with majority opinion. When in power, he held no departmental brief, assumed no responsibility for practical imperatives such as the organisation of war and provisioning, and remained in Paris. But, precisely because of this, he had time to ponder events and their meaning and, as the government's spokesman, was able not only to announce and vindicate policy but also to invest it with an ideological coherence and moral justification. No one else could have undertaken this rôle so successfully, given Robespierre's prestige in both the Convention and the Jacobin club and his reputation for sincerity. Capable of adapting tactically to the

<sup>14</sup> T. Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, 3 vols. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1888), vol. III, p. 198.

<sup>15</sup> Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. X, p. 560.

changing circumstances of the Revolution whilst retaining his fundamental principles, he was able to provide later generations of the left with a seemingly consistent inspiration. It was in this way, for Furet, writing in 1978, that he had, irrespective of his personal shortcomings or strengths, 'the strange privilege' of incarnating the Revolution. More than any other politician, he was able to articulate its language. When he died at Thermidor, the Revolution died with him.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, for the discourse of terror and the novel linking of terror and virtue that Robespierre is, above all, remembered. Here, problems abound. How did the man who, in the Constituent, had argued against the death penalty's retention become the Terror's principal proponent? Why is he chiefly associated with it, when Carrier, responsible for the *noyades* at Nantes, and Collot d'Herbois and Fouché, overseers of the *mitrillades* at Lyon, had so much blood on their hands? Why did he not, after the victories over the counter-revolution and Fleurus, seek, like Lincoln, 'to bind up the nation's wounds', instead of continuing to denounce the 'fripons' and 'scélérats' to the end? A number of the chapters in this volume are concerned with these questions. Marisa Linton examines Robespierre's justification of terror in the context of his wider political thought, whilst Geoffrey Cubitt describes the hold which conspiracy theories exerted on his mind. Norman Hampson charts how Robespierre's attitude to the Terror was often rooted in characteristics which were evident in 1789, or earlier, and how these developed, moving towards a ghastly crescendo, as he had to come to terms with the ever-changing revolutionary situation. And, as David Jordan argues, it is his neat, reasoned formulae, justifying terror as an emanation of virtue, rather than the deeds of the ultra-terrorists, that are remembered, making Robespierre, like Machiavelli, an immortal apologist for political ruthlessness. Once adopted, these formulae prevented him changing tack as the republican armies triumphed and, applicable in so many contexts, they have an especially appalling resonance in the twentieth century.

As the archetypal revolutionary terrorist, Robespierre has repeatedly been depicted in literary works – a subject which Malcolm Cook and William Howarth investigate. In the greatest drama depicting the Revolution, Büchner's *Dantons Tod*, he is less interesting as an individual than as the embodiment of the historical forces against which the tragic Danton finds himself pitted.<sup>17</sup> None the less, it is as the single-minded, ruthless, calculating puritan in power, dyspeptic, unattractive, but very dangerous, that Robespierre has most to offer the modern playwright.

<sup>16</sup> F. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), pp. 82, 87.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 15.

In this guise, he is reborn in Anouilh's *Pauvre Bitos*, set in the 1950s, as the persecutor of wartime collaborators and right-wing profiteers. Again, in Andrzej Wajda's film *Danton* (1982), the parallels between revolutionary France and communist Poland – with bread queues, show trials and the language of liberty masking repression – and between Robespierre and Jaruzelski are wonderfully effective (it was a lucky coincidence that the general, like the Incorruptible, so often wore tinted glasses). In French novels, too, it is the repellent aspects of Robespierre that are to the fore. It is noticeable that Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992) portrays a more human Robespierre than any French novelist has yet dared depict.

After news of Robespierre's death had reached Oxford, a fellow of Brasenose wrote: 'Glad the infamous Robespierre is gone at last. Gone to hell as sure as he's born, and Barrere [*sic*] and all the Tribe of them. I only wish that all the French Convention were gone with 'em – Aye, and the French nation too.'<sup>18</sup> Since 1794, the influence of partisanship – both hostile and adulatory – has suffused studies of Robespierre and the Revolution – if less forcefully expressed. However, by 1935, another Oxford don, J. M. Thompson, thought such distorting bias was at an end among professional historians. Accepting the methodology of 'scientific history' and optimistic that its ideal of impartiality was attainable, he observed:

for 140 years, historical opinion about Robespierre and the Revolution has swung to and fro, under the impulse of personal predilection, or political passion. But two steadying influences have gradually come into action – the publication of original sources, and freedom of historical study. The first of these cannot be taken away; the second may be withdrawn, but only for a time . . . There is a growing consensus of informed opinion, establishing conclusions which will not easily be upset.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, despite such high hopes, Thompson's pendulum has, inevitably, not stopped swinging. In 1978, Furet had to insist that 'the French Revolution is over' and could therefore be studied dispassionately,<sup>20</sup> whilst, with the approach of the bicentenary and during the celebrations, political divisions among French historians, and their impact on their interpretations, were glaringly in evidence. The debate about Robespierre and his rôle in the Revolution will go on. None the less, the current state of play is worth describing as a prelude to the detailed chapters in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in L. G. Mitchell, 'Politics and revolution 1772–1800', in *The History of the University of Oxford V: the Eighteenth Century*, ed. L. S. Sutherland and L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1986), p. 185.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Robespierre*, p. 633.

<sup>20</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, pp. 13–109.

### Robespierre today

That Robespierre remains as controversial as ever, two centuries after his death, is an embarrassment to most historians. At the time of the bicentennial celebrations of the Revolution in and around 1989, hundreds of scholarly gatherings were devoted to it all over the world, and the number of publications ran into thousands. Inevitably Robespierre figured in many of these; but he was not the main focus of any. Despite general agreement that, for better or worse, the Incorruptible was the outstanding figure of the Revolution, no important publication commemorated the fact. Only one French conference was eventually organised around him, in his native Arras.<sup>21</sup> It was planned before the bicentenary and eventually met fully four years after it. Participation was international, and ran to 200 attenders, but a suspiciously large number of the leading French authorities on the Revolution contrived to miss it. Two other, much smaller gatherings in 1994 marked the bicentenary of Robespierre's death in Thermidor. Both were organised outside France. One, held in England, produced the present volume; the other met in the Netherlands and later published proceedings of its own.<sup>22</sup> What these belated, scattered and diffuse conferences on Robespierre's historical importance had in common was a resolute determination to avoid the central issue.

There were sound grounds for doing so. From a scholarly point of view the question of Robespierre and the Terror had been debated to death, and there was no new evidence. Any attempt to address it afresh risked degeneration into sterile polemics. Besides, obsession with this problem had diverted attention from other aspects of the man about which there was more to be said. And so the Arras conference consciously dwelt on the evolution of Robespierre's idea of the Nation, his economic views and instincts, and his attitudes to international questions. The Amsterdam colloquium concentrated on his character, his discourse and contemporary perceptions of him. The present collection devotes considerable space to later perceptions, fictional as well as historical, while attempting to review the full range of his ideas. In the event, it proved impossible to avoid the unmentionable entirely. At Arras, an open call for papers brought the attendance of substantial numbers of the old intellectual left, led by the redoubtable Claude Mazauric, who had criss-crossed the country throughout 1989 extolling

<sup>21</sup> J.-P. Jessenne, G. Deregnaucourt, J.-P. Hirsch and H. Leuwers (eds.), *Robespierre: De la Nation artésienne à la République et aux Nations* (Lille, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> A. Jourdan (ed.), *Robespierre: figure-réputation*, Yearbook of European Studies IX (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1996).

the merits of the Incorruptible against a background of official silence.<sup>23</sup> Mazauric, it is true, confined himself to admiring the purity and inflexibility of Robespierre's principles, leaving his audience to draw any conclusions;<sup>24</sup> but one at least of his fellow participants insisted on interpreting the notorious law of 22 Prairial as a humanitarian measure.<sup>25</sup> At Amsterdam, a much less partisan Bronislaw Baczko admitted that there was nothing new to be said about Robespierre and the Terror, but offered his reflections anyway since the question was too important to ignore.<sup>26</sup>

He was right; and paradoxically, while conferences devoted entirely to Robespierre could skirt around the issue, works on the Revolution in general could not. The point at which they chose to end was a judgement in itself. A scholarly concern not to be mesmerised by the drama of Thermidor led two of the more successful recent general surveys to bury the fall of the Incorruptible in a longer continuum of events. Though bound by the demands of a series to take his story down to 1815, D. M. G. Sutherland roundly declared that the Revolution was not over in July 1794, as the continued vitality of counter-revolution showed. And Robespierre had been overthrown by 'a cabal of ultra-terrorists', implying that responsibility for the Terror was at least shared.<sup>27</sup> Four years later, one of the present authors chose to end *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* in 1802, and not even to make a chapter break with Robespierre's overthrow. His so-called dictatorship, it was argued, was not so much a reality as a political insult, and became a retrospective justification propagated by those who had destroyed him.<sup>28</sup> Neither Sutherland's study nor the *Oxford History* denied his importance in the Revolution, both before and after his death. He was not blamed above others for the Terror that he was far from alone in defending; nor were the Terror and the Republic of the Year II presented as the inevitable climax of all that had occurred since 1789, much less the essence of the entire Revolution.

These perceptions were not shared by most of the other general works appearing around the time of the bicentenary. The classic interpretation, going back to Jaurès and Mathiez, had presented the coup of Thermidor

<sup>23</sup> S. L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution. Disputed Legacies, France 1789–1989* (Ithaca and London, 1995), pp. 447–8.

<sup>24</sup> Jessenne *et al.* (eds.), *Robespierre*, p. 232.

<sup>25</sup> L. Abdoul-Mellek, 'D'un choix politique de Robespierre: la Terreur', in Jessenne *et al.* (eds.), *Robespierre*, pp. 191–203.

<sup>26</sup> B. Baczko, 'Robespierre et la Terreur', in Jourdan (ed.), *Robespierre*, pp. 153–67.

<sup>27</sup> D. M. G. Sutherland, *France 1789–1815. Revolution and Counterrevolution* (London, 1985), pp. 248–9.

<sup>28</sup> W. Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), p. 281.

as the end of the Revolution, aborting both its social promise and the resolute elimination of those who threatened it. This tradition lost much of its pugnacious vigour after the death of Albert Soboul in 1982. In English, its final twitch came from George Rudé, an earlier biographer of Robespierre,<sup>29</sup> whose last book was a general history of the Revolution. Although it did not stop in 1794, Rudé's account rapidly petered out after that date. Thermidor was the end of 'not only a man or a group but a system', when the Revolution turned sharply off course into 'something of an anti-climax'.<sup>30</sup> The fullest recent statement in French of the classic viewpoint came in a dictionary of over a thousand pages published under the posthumous editorship of Soboul.<sup>31</sup> The entry on Robespierre was the work of Mazauric, who described him as the central figure of the Revolution, the very incarnation of its 'profoundly levelling [*roturière*] and democratic essence'. He was a man of humanity, yet 'naturally the theoretician of terror as a legal terror, the substitute for popular violence whose fragility and disorder divided more than it brought together'. Mazauric also wrote the article on the Terror. Here, after much equivocation, the essential point eventually emerged. 'Whether we like it or not, the episode of the Terror is all of a piece [*fait 'bloc*'] with the whole movement of the democratic and liberal Revolution of 1789.'<sup>32</sup>

Mazauric did like it: but ironically, apart from that, his judgement on Robespierre and the Terror differed little from the verdict of his bitterest opponents. They too thought 1789 and 1794 were all of a piece, and that Robespierre epitomised the whole frightful episode. Theirs proved the dominant perception of the Revolution in 1989, and they were led from the front by François Furet. He had once thought differently. When, in tandem with Denis Richet, he had made his first foray into revolutionary historiography in 1965,<sup>33</sup> it had been to depict the period 1791–4 as an aberration, the Revolution skidding off course. Tellingly, they did not end the story at Thermidor, because Robespierre's fall simply represented a return to the original script. Over the next few years, however, Furet's perceptions changed. By 1978 he saw the Revolution as locked from the start into a discourse of popular sovereignty whose only possible and logical outcome was terror, since it did not recognise the legitimacy of political dissent.<sup>34</sup> And 'what makes Robespierre an immortal figure is not that he ruled for some months

<sup>29</sup> G. Rudé, *Robespierre. Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (London, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> G. Rudé, *The French Revolution* (New York and London, 1988), pp. 111–12.

<sup>31</sup> A. Soboul (ed.), *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> 'Terreur', in *ibid.*, p. 1025.

<sup>33</sup> F. Furet and D. Richet, *La Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1965).

<sup>34</sup> Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*.

over the Revolution; it is that the Revolution speaks through him its most tragic and purest discourse'.<sup>35</sup> When he fell it ended, in the sense at least that this Jacobin discourse was abandoned, along with the limitless ambitions which it articulated.

Ten years on, Furet's later views had not changed. The requirements of the general history of France between 1770 and 1880, which he published the year before the bicentenary,<sup>36</sup> precluded him ending in 1794; but his appraisal of Robespierre<sup>37</sup> echoed often word for word what he had said before: 'the Incorruptible ended up as the Revolution incarnate', and in Thermidor 'the Revolution left the shores of Utopia' and 'real life resumed its rights'.<sup>38</sup> A fuller articulation of his viewpoint came in the critical dictionary of the Revolution which he orchestrated the next year, in a conscious challenge to that of Soboul.<sup>39</sup> Entries were chosen on interpretative rather than inclusive grounds, but Robespierre could not be omitted on either. Furet, while reserving the Terror for himself, left the entry on the Incorruptible to a young acolyte. Patrice Gueniffey did what was expected of him. There was terror, he argued, in Robespierre's very rhetorical strategies, admitting no sincere disagreement with his own conception of the truth.<sup>40</sup> Like Furet, Gueniffey emphasised that after 1789 Robespierre had no private life. Politics was everything, and he made no distinction between his personal ambitions and the public welfare. His genius was to go with the flow, never leading but following, at least until he attained supreme power. By then that meant acquiescing willingly in the Terror from which his name is inseparable. At the Amsterdam colloquium five years later, Gueniffey substantially repeated this appraisal.<sup>41</sup>

In the English-speaking world, meanwhile, the publishing sensation of the bicentennial year was Simon Schama's *Citizens*, a self-proclaimed 'chronicle' of the Revolution whose unifying theme was its bestial violence. Schama evidently saw the Terror as the first step on the road to the Holocaust. The law of 22 Prairial was 'the founding charter of totalitarian justice';<sup>42</sup> and extermination was 'the logical outcome of an ideology that dehumanised its adversaries, and that had become incapable of seeing any middle ground between total triumph and utter

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> F. Furet, *La Révolution 1770–1880. De Turgot à Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1988), vol. IV of the *Histoire de France Hachette*, published in five volumes.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150–7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>39</sup> F. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> 'Robespierre', in *ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>41</sup> Jourdan (ed.), *Robespierre*, pp. 1–18.

<sup>42</sup> S. Schama, *Citizens. A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York and London, 1989), p. 836.

eclipse'.<sup>43</sup> The book ended when the Terror did, in Thermidor. A studied, though far from ingenuous, essay in letting the story speak for itself, it offered no final explicit judgement on Robespierre, apart from passing asides. A denunciation was 'crazy enough to be credible' to him;<sup>44</sup> 'in the end, he saw himself as a messianic schoolmaster, wielding a very big stick to inculcate virtue'.<sup>45</sup> The only weapon against which he was helpless was laughter.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless the story as told by Schama is no laughing matter. Although, in the book's most famous phrase, the Terror was merely 1789 with a higher body count,<sup>47</sup> Robespierre was one of the architects of its last great, Parisian, phase. He had to die to end it.

Astonishment has often been expressed that Schama's epic was never translated into French. Did it advance truths that the French found too painful to contemplate? On the contrary, it offered them nothing that they had not already heard from Furet and his cohorts. They claimed to have won the bicentennial argument. President François Mitterrand and the state-sponsored commission for celebrating the bicentenary wished to make its theme the Rights of Man, the Revolution of '89 but not of '94. The Furet school (and outside France, Schama) argued that they were inseparable. The issue surfaced whenever the commemoration escaped the official grip. Paradoxically, the only question that transcended the division was that of Robespierre. There was a good case, repeatedly made by writers in the classic tradition, for regarding the provincial lawyer from Arras, who bored his fellow deputies to distraction, as the most faithful and persistent defender of the Rights of Man under the Constituent. It was often heard from the left in 1989.<sup>48</sup> But for the purposes of the official bicentenary celebrations, his later association with the Terror tainted him beyond redemption. And if, as was now being argued, terror and the terroristic frame of mind were present in 1789 itself, there was no place for even partial recognition of terror's most notorious defender.

In these circumstances, the embarrassment of most professional historians was understandable. Any attempt to focus attention on Robespierre, at any stage in his revolutionary career, risked appearing to condone mass-murder. The embarrassment was compounded by the identity of those still prepared to defend the man of blood as a man of principle. The most vocal, like Mazauric, were professed communists, committed not just to vindicating Robespierre but to an ideology that, by an ironic coincidence, was collapsing or being challenged throughout

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 792.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 808.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 828–9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 844.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447.

<sup>48</sup> See Kaplan, *Disputed Legacies*, pp. 444–50, 456–63.



the world in the very year of the bicentenary. Communist régimes, whether national or local, had always been the only authorities to venerate Robespierre's memory with plaques, shrines or street names. Their discredit now stained his reputation even further (if that were possible) with the sort of guilt by association which he himself had found so persuasive in 1794. The judgements of Furet on Robespierre were certainly influenced by the fact that he had once been a party member himself, now expiating his youthful credulity with the zeal of a convert.<sup>49</sup> And Furet's arguments, though no longer new, gained authority as they emanated from a historian who had seen the error of his ways long before the system which had once deluded him collapsed.

For all the intellectual success of Furet (in French) or Schama (in English), it remains true that the general public knows little or nothing about Robespierre.<sup>50</sup> What it knows about the entire Revolution, indeed, is largely confined to grisly images of the guillotine and the Terror. These perceptions were reinforced rather than modified by the publicity of the bicentennial year, as the press, instinctively drawn to reporting the lurid and sensational, happily confirmed its readers in what they thought they knew already. The link to the horrors of the twentieth century was repeatedly emphasised. And in so far as Robespierre was perceived as the architect and perpetrator of terror, he found himself more reviled than ever, and stigmatised as responsible in some sense for political bloodshed long after he himself had fallen victim to it.

Even in Arras his memory is contentious. A bust commissioned by the local council in the 1920s remains securely locked away in the town hall. A much-publicised attempt to erect a statue to him in the communist-run Lorraine town of Thionville failed to raise adequate funds from the public, and received none from the state,<sup>51</sup> even though warmly supported by vocal left-wing groups, including the Arras-founded 'Amis de Robespierre pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution'.<sup>52</sup> This body's activities bore more fruit in the 1993 colloquium in his birth-place. But so far from his remains (supposing that any could be identified) being transferred, as Mazauric advocated, to the Pantheon, Robespierre remained without a monument of any significance in France. The triumph of the Bolsheviks in 1917 ensured that he received fuller public commemoration in Russia than in his native country.<sup>53</sup> But how long,

<sup>49</sup> S. L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution. The Historians' Feud 1789/1989* (Ithaca and London, 1995), chapter 6.

<sup>50</sup> For the depth of French ignorance, see Crouzet, *Historians*, pp. 25–6; Kaplan, *Disputed Legacies*, p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Kaplan, *Disputed Legacies*, pp. 463–9. <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 456–9.

<sup>53</sup> See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Echoes of the Marseillaise. Two Centuries Look Back on the French Revolution* (London, 1990), pp. 70–1.

now that the Soviet Union has gone, will he retain his honoured slot in the Kremlin wall?

In less public scholarly circles, the leading, indeed the only, learned journal devoted entirely to the Revolution, the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, is still published under the auspices of Mathiez's Société des Etudes robespierristes. But it remains sectarian in spirit. Little work by foreigners, and none by associates of Furet, ever appears or is noticed in its pages. And so, although the publication of the present volume and others shows that it is possible with careful planning to discuss Robespierre on more-or-less neutral ground, what seems as absent as ever is middle ground. The closest recent writing has come to that is in fiction. The Robespierre of Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* is neither a bloodless calculator nor a bloodthirsty tyrant. The novel ends, it is true, with the fall of Danton, who is abandoned by 'Max' after betraying his trust. But throughout the story Robespierre is portrayed as honest, humane, a loyal friend, almost amiable. He is progressively caught up by colleagues and circumstances that he cannot control, and his growing anguish is emphasised. The novel is obviously grounded in wide and detailed historical reading; and although there is plenty of artistic licence, the anguish is not pure invention. One of the sources that Mantel clearly used was Norman Hampson's *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*. Hailed by Richard Cobb on its first appearance as brilliant, dramatic, a formidable achievement which made its subject human<sup>54</sup> (praise indeed, given his loathing of 'His Holiness'), it never made the impact it deserved among historians. No doubt its literary approach, the conversation between the characters, disconcerted them. The appeal for a novelist was more obvious. It brought out the ambiguities, uncertainties and genuine difficulties of interpretation thrown up by all the evidence about the man. Historians, perhaps, cannot forgive Hampson for refusing to take a final position on these complexities. Novelists must be allowed that privilege. Robespierre himself once said that the Revolution had taught him the truth of the axiom that history is fiction.<sup>55</sup> The time may have come when fiction contributes as much to our understanding of him as the disagreements of historians, most of them still unable to see him as anything other than a symbol or precursor of things he never intended or even dreamed.

<sup>54</sup> *New Statesman*, 13 September 1974, pp. 349–51.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in N. Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974), p. viii.