

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

---

Annual Celebration of Student Scholarship and Creativity

---

Spring 2013

## A Plagued Mind: The Justification of Violence within the Principles of Maximilien Robespierre

Kevin Lynch  
*Providence College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/student_scholarship)



Part of the [European History Commons](#)

---

Lynch, Kevin, "A Plagued Mind: The Justification of Violence within the Principles of Maximilien Robespierre" (2013). *Annual Celebration of Student Scholarship and Creativity*. 19.  
[https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/student\\_scholarship/19](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/student_scholarship/19)

It is permitted to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) users must make these conditions clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work.

## INTRODUCTION

Maximilien Francois Marie Isidore de Robespierre entered the world with humble beginnings on the 6th of May, 1758. In spite of the immense sufferings he endured in his youth, Maximilien Robespierre persevered through these struggles by dedicating himself wholly to his studies. In keeping with his family tradition, Robespierre became a lawyer in his hometown of Arras, working as tirelessly as he had in his childhood. At a first glance of Robespierre's beginning, it seemed unlikely his life would become as tumultuous as the time he lived. Better yet, it seemed closer to an outright impossibility that he would directly play a role in a revolution that fundamentally changed the society of France, and indeed Europe, forever. The lawyer from Arras rose in simultaneous speed with the French Revolution, although he never saw it completed.

Robespierre's contemporaries often thought of him as the embodiment of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when the course of the French Revolution took a turn for the worst, Robespierre was inevitably associated with that change.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, Robespierre has often been portrayed as the first modern dictator: a man who started with the noble ambition to end monarchical tyranny, but then betrayed this ambition in order to establish a republican tyranny, whose cruelty was worse than that of the monarch's. However, this portrayal deserves some questioning and qualification. For no other participant in the French Revolution deserved the title of "the Incorruptible" more than Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre never wrote, nor uttered

---

<sup>1</sup> John Laurence Carr, *Robespierre: The Force of Circumstance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1972), x.

a word that he did not believe in with the utmost conviction. The idea of accepting a bribe, or raising his social and political standing for his own sake, proved loathsome for Robespierre. He was sincere to a fault, and as a result, he stubbornly refused to compromise his principles, regardless of the consequences. This rigid self-discipline was his greatest strength as a politician and citizen. However, it was also his greatest weakness. Unfortunately, “incorruptible” can only be defined as one who is incapable of becoming corrupted, not one who is incapable of having faults. Although his faults were few, the ones he did have were responsible for both his own demise and the deaths of thousands. These faults were equally and directly linked to the paradoxes of his thought. For example, he championed the rights of the third estate, yet styled his dress and manner like that of a noble. In another instance, he resigned his position at the court of the Diocese of Arras because of his opposition to the death penalty, but then instituted the Terror a decade later. These paradoxes make it harder to discern Robespierre’s intentions, and for that reason, one cannot simply dismiss Maximilien Robespierre as a great evil who compromised his principles for political expediency. His goals for improving France found their roots in his principles, and these goals stayed consistent throughout the course of the Revolution; they did not change. However, the means he used to accomplish those goals did change. As the French Revolution advanced, Robespierre became increasingly afraid of failure. This fear caused him to become paranoid and fatalistic. Robespierre always had a certain degree of paranoia and fatalism throughout his life because of this fear. However, during the Revolution they gradually became more and more obsessive. His paranoia convinced him that France had “internal enemies” bent on derailing the Revolution. His fatalism convinced him the “internal enemies” would succeed if they were not stopped. For these reasons, he felt drastic measures needed to be taken to save the French Revolution. For these reasons, he began the Reign of Terror.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER I: ORIGINS, PRINCIPLES AND AMBITIONS

Robespierre, like so many others of his time, did not have a particularly enjoyable childhood. His father, Francois Robespierre found himself in a pre-marital affair with Jacqueline Carraut.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the town of Arras, noted for its religious piety, frowned on such a relationship, especially a relationship which conceived a child out of wedlock. In order to avoid worsening the scandal, Francois married Jacqueline in 1758 shortly before the birth of their first son, Maximilien Francois Marie Isidore de Robespierre. Francois practiced law, although his talents in his profession lacked any sense of professionalism. He was widely regarded for his idleness, which made him a terrible lawyer who could barely support his family. His father, Maximilien's grandfather, refused to attend his marriage to Jacqueline, and consequentially, refused to offer any support whatsoever. Maximilien's mother was the daughter of a brewer in a village just outside of Arras, in which there was little financial assistance available. It sufficed to say that money was short in the Robespierre household. This family tragedy worsened with the death of Maximilien's mother, who died from complications of giving birth to what would have been Robespierre's fourth younger sibling. Peter McPhee argues that this caused a significant impact on the young Robespierre's development.<sup>4</sup> He does this by mentioning that Charlotte's sister noted the change in Maximilien after his mother's death. "At the news of this death, Maximilien's tears flowed," she reported.<sup>5</sup> She noted that afterwards, Robespierre's character

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

changed from that of a normal child's to that of a "serious, grown-up, hardworking boy."<sup>6</sup> Maximilien's father came in and out of his children's lives shortly after his wife's death, but he eventually left the Robespierre children permanently, which essentially orphaned them.<sup>7</sup> Where he went is not entirely known, all that is known is that the care of the Robespierre children was divided among family members; Maximilien and his brother Augustin lived with their maternal grandparents and aunts, while his sisters Charlotte and Henriette lived with their paternal aunts.

As mentioned previously, the town of Arras was known as the religious center of the Artois region. In addition to Arras' vast array of churches and monasteries, the town also enjoyed relative prosperity.<sup>8</sup> Although a slowly, but steadily increasing minority, Arras still remained heavily entrenched in the feudal system at the time of Robespierre's childhood.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the nobility enjoyed the majority of the prosperity, while the peasants carried the burden of taxation and tithes. The middle class suffered these taxations as well, although they were able to enjoy a certain degree of leisure and comfort. The Robespierres stood as an exception to this rule, however. Although the Robespierre's were considered middle class, they were only so by name. Unfortunately for Maximilien, his father Francois squandered his family's wealth and left them relatively impoverished.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in a city that favored feudalism and the hierarchy it encouraged, Robespierre was put at a serious disadvantage because of his father. Arras' manner of thought, very much in common with other rural societies, was that the crimes,

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

or bad behaviors of one man or woman, could be attributed or suspected to his or her entire family. This both haunted and helped the young Maximilien Robespierre, for it created an introverted, quiet, and in some cases socially awkward young boy, but at the same time, it established an immense ambition and desire to restore the honor of his family name.<sup>11</sup>

Robespierre began his schooling at the College d'Arras shortly after the Jesuit expulsion from France in 1762. This proved significant in the development of Robespierre's principles.<sup>12</sup> Prior to their expulsion, the Jesuit Order dominated the field of education in France.<sup>13</sup> The sudden removal of Jesuits caused there to be a vacuum within the educational process, and thus their roles of educators were quickly, and in some cases, haphazardly replaced by lay clergy.<sup>14</sup> The education of Robespierre came under the jurisdiction of the Oratorians. The Oratorians, unlike the Jesuits, stressed a more theocentric curriculum, in which Robespierre was taught that God did not need to create humanity or the earth itself, but since he did, man was obliged to adore him. This, Carr argues, set the groundwork for Maximilien's Cult of the Supreme Being, which he tried to establish later in his life. The Oratorians also helped form the most well-known characteristic of Robespierre. The Oratorians practiced a rigidly austere lifestyle, in which they denied themselves of anything they considered a worldly luxury. All Oratorians took a vow to live humbly for the entirety of their lives, refusing to accept any gift or compensation for their work. For Carr, this undoubtedly influenced Robespierre's own austerity and rigid code of conduct, for they provided a paternal structure and order to Robespierre's turbulent childhood. The Jesuits taught the classics of course, but the Oratorians took a slightly different approach to

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Carr, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

teaching the classics. The Oratorian method of teaching the classics was unique due to their refusal to omit or ignore certain classical writings.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Jesuits would highlight certain aspects of an ancient's writing to teach, but ignore other writings that were in contradiction to Church teachings.<sup>16</sup> The Oratorians would teach the writing in its entirety and challenge their students to struggle with the text in order to disprove the pagan arguments using their Christian faith.<sup>17</sup> However, this opened the door for an opportunity to make a conscious intellectual choice, meaning, a student may find the writings of an ancient author more suitable for the modern age than that of Church teachings.<sup>18</sup> Carr suggests that the uncensored classical teachings of the Oratorians helped Robespierre develop a method of challenging the old order by using classical logic.<sup>19</sup> To defend his argument, Carr points out that Robespierre read banned books, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, during his time at the esteemed Collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Louis-le-Grand was the last Jesuit educated school in France, and Robespierre attended this Jesuit school only by receiving the generous scholarship from the abbot Saint Vaast for Robespierre's outstanding work in rhetoric. The transition from the Oratorian schooling of uncensored teaching to the more strictly supervised Jesuit schooling proved difficult for Robespierre. Not much is known about the extent of his reading of banned books, or about his Church attendance; however, Robespierre's own words suggest a slightly humorous, yet clearly deistic mindset when he described himself as "a pretty poor Catholic ever since [his] time at

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

college.”<sup>20</sup> The seeds of reform planted themselves as a result of the transition from Oratorian to Jesuit; however, those seeds could not grow without water to feed them. Such water was obtained, both literally and figuratively, when Louis XVI’s coach stopped to hear a young Robespierre give a Latin oration. As the story goes, Louis and Marie Antoinette did not find the rainy weather satisfactory enough to listen through the entirety of the speech, thus they left. Peter McPhee suggests a change occurred in Robespierre on that day, for he noted that Robespierre took offense easily and rarely forgot even the smallest of offences against him.<sup>21</sup> Naturally, Robespierre never forgot Louis’ insensitive and premature exit, and, therefore, Robespierre began his disdainful demeanor towards the monarch.<sup>22</sup>

However, throughout his life Robespierre could never develop an opinion, or take anything at face value. He needed to find a reason to support and defend his claim. The king’s refusal to listen to Robespierre’s speech hurt Robespierre deeply and began his opposition to the monarch. Robespierre’s idol, Rousseau provided the support needed to justify his anger at the monarchy.<sup>23</sup> Parts of Rousseau’s *Confessions* focused on the French social hierarchy, specifically, on its demoralizing effect on himself as an individual and on the French people in general.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Rousseau explained that his philosophy developed itself out of French society as a coping mechanism, for it provided a relief from the hardships forced upon the

---

<sup>20</sup> Scurr, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Mcphee, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Carr, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

French people by the upper classes.<sup>25</sup> Rousseau wanted to distance himself from the frivolity, carelessness, and flamboyant lifestyle of the upper class by living a more simplistic life.<sup>26</sup> Robespierre viewed the king's action of ignoring his speech as the type of hardship Rousseau complained of in the *Confessions*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Robespierre's love for Rousseau grew to the point where he believed Rousseau to be the model French citizen.<sup>28</sup> To highlight Robespierre's dissatisfaction with the treatment of the third estate, he too would live the simplistic life style encouraged in Rousseau's philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Around 1789, Robespierre wrote his *Dedication to the Spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, in which he described his admiration for Rousseau: "I want to follow in his venerated path...[Rousseau was] the most eloquent and virtuous of men...Divine man (Rousseau), you taught me to know myself: from an early age you made me appreciate the dignity of nature and reflect on the great principles of social order."<sup>30</sup> Robespierre went on to explain that he desired to live the austere and virtuous life of Rousseau "even at the price of [a] premature death."<sup>31</sup> Robespierre's early Oratorian education guided him towards the course of austerity, but it was Rousseau who provided a model on how to live simply. Robespierre's role model also gave Robespierre his most treasured gift, a code of virtues and principles to live by.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>30</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Dedication to the Spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (c.1789), in McPhee, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Carr, 100.

The extent of Robespierre's customization of Rousseau's principles lies only within his fanatic and zealous dedication towards them.<sup>33</sup>

Robespierre finished his schooling in Paris, and received a degree in law. He packed the few belongings he owned and returned to Arras. When Robespierre returned to Arras, he was determined to put his Rousseauian principles to use.<sup>34</sup> Robespierre practiced law in his hometown, as was custom with his family tradition, but excelled in the field to a greater degree than his father ever came close to.<sup>35</sup> During this time, Robespierre encountered his first taste of fame, albeit on a small and local scale, but nevertheless, enough fame to be considered household name in Arras.<sup>36</sup> For the most part, Robespierre was recognized as a talented lawyer, but the root of his fame came from the types of cases he pleaded.<sup>37</sup> According to his sister Charlotte, Robespierre took all cases which required the defense of "the oppressed against their oppressors...the cause of the weak against the strong who exploit and crush them."<sup>38</sup> She went on to explain how "sweet [it is] to devote oneself to one's fellows...[to] so many unfortunates...without support or defenders."<sup>39</sup> Although hyperbolic in the description, Charlotte did not fabricate this aspect of Robespierre's law practice, for he did garner a reputation for championing the legal rights of the poor.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, Robespierre took Rousseau's

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Scurr, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 41.

principles to heart, for as Ruth Scurr mentioned, there were some occasions where Robespierre would represent his defendant free of charge. Like Rousseau, Robespierre wished to help the common French citizen combat the social and legal injustices existing in the French kingdom.

Robespierre became one of five judges promoted to the Bishop's Court of Arras. If Robespierre felt any excitement or accomplishment from this promotion, than the feeling did not last long. One particular case presented an intense conundrum for Robespierre, for it required the young judge to condemn a guilty man to death by hanging.<sup>41</sup> According to Charlotte, Robespierre confessed his sadness over the situation by claiming, "I know he is guilty, that he is a villain, but even so, to cause a man to die!"<sup>42</sup> Again, there exists no way to know if Robespierre actually said this, but the implication of the quote is more important than the question of whether it was said or not. For Scurr believes that Charlotte, for once, did properly quote, or at least paraphrase Robespierre because she argues:

Robespierre struggled to reconcile his public actions with his personal principles and convictions. When this proved impossible, he collapsed, stopped eating, and brooded obsessively. The demands of public responsibility and power filled him with anxiety. He was, in important aspects, constitutionally and temperamentally ill-suited to assume either—but nevertheless intent on pursuing them both.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly such a reaction meant Robespierre did not handle the subject of death well. In an attempt to reconcile his principles with the law of the land, Robespierre began suggesting a reform to the death penalty, in which commoners would receive the same sentence as nobles who broke the law, which was beheading.<sup>44</sup> Robespierre opposed the death penalty, but realized overturning

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

capital punishment was a virtual impossibility; however, he felt his principles obligated him to at least demand a more humane means of execution.<sup>45</sup> Thankfully for Robespierre, the opportunity to run as a representative to the Estates General came shortly after the trial, which may have allowed him to resign his position before he was forced to sentence anyone else to death.<sup>46</sup>

Robespierre's early life provides the foundation of his character and manner of thinking. A number of family tragedies in his youth hardened the young Robespierre, although as many scholars and some contemporaries have noted, it did not completely strip Robespierre of his emotions. Robespierre's schooling formed his principles, and Rousseau's strict adherence to his code of principles, inspired Robespierre to discipline himself in a similar fashion. However, Robespierre held himself to an un-teachable level of strict obedience to his code of conduct. Overall, Robespierre seemed satisfied with his life as a lawyer in Arras, for he was able to content himself as a strongly principled lawyer. However, he soon discovered his own virtue was not enough to end the inequalities he saw as destructive to France. His early ambition of restoring the honor of his family name transported itself to his ambition of improving the rights of the Third Estate. The timing of the Estates General landed perfectly for Robespierre. Robespierre's ambition and fear never combatted each other, but rather, formed a paradoxical dependency. For Robespierre's fear motivated his ambition, and as a result, his ambition could not exist without his fear. This can be proven by analyzing the series of events in his early life. Shortly after his father's failings, Robespierre became totally immersed in his studies, and thus almost completely introverted. Ruth Scurr's example of his breakdown concerning his duty to put a guilty man to death inspired another fear in Robespierre—a fear of having to betray the

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

principles of his beloved Rousseau in order to perform his duty as a judge. His fear drove his paranoia, although at this stage in his life, Robespierre's paranoia was self-centered and focused on his own failings. The fear caused by the case given as an example by Scurr, drove his ambition to seek a representative seat at the Estates General, which might give him the opportunity to change France for the better.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 56.

## CHAPTER II: ROBESPIERRE'S MISSION COMMENCES:

### THE REFORMATION OF FRANCE

By the spring of 1789 Louis XVI could no longer ignore the present situation in France. The power of the monarchy only shadowed its former glory. Louis XVI wished to restore his power as an absolute monarch, but the options available to him were few and far between. Although the number of clamors for liberty and reform were increasing, they played little, if any role in challenging Louis' power at this time. The real force that was stripping the legitimacy of Louis' authority was the devastating financial crisis. Shortly after the Seven Years' War ended, France's economy fell into a downward spiral, a downward spiral which was exacerbated by French involvement in the American Revolution as well as an unrelenting expenditure at Versailles. Clergy and nobles were exempt from taxation, which laid the burden of taxation on the third estate. The third estate hardly possessed the sufficient funds necessary to maintain Louis' court at Versailles in times of peace, let alone in times of two expensive wars. Therefore, the system of taxation failed to support France's financial requirements, which left France with no source of income.<sup>47</sup> Seeing no other option, Louis XVI reluctantly called the Estates General in 1788, scheduling it to meet in May of 1789. Louis hoped this meeting would solve France's financial crisis and restore his absolute power. Little did he know the Estates General meeting in 1789 would accomplish neither one of these hopes. Robespierre, like many of his contemporaries, saw the Estates General not as an opportunity to solve the financial crisis, but as

an opportunity to solve the root cause of the financial crisis. The root cause of the financial crisis was the outdated system of feudal taxation. The opportunity to solve the crisis was the reformation of French societal and political structures.

As soon as the process for choosing representatives began, Robespierre focused all his efforts towards becoming one of those chosen few. As stated beforehand, Robespierre's experiences as a lawyer created a great fear of the inequalities in French society. This fear, combined with Robespierre's determination to follow Rousseau's ideas on duty, created a fanatical ambition to have a role in national politics. However, Robespierre encountered a problem to this ambition. The members of the Estates of Artois considered themselves to be the region's representatives and, thus believed no election was necessary.<sup>48</sup> However, Robespierre's natural talent for politics allowed him to take advantage of the social and political situation. In the spring of 1788, Arras, and the rest of the Artois region, suffered a poor harvest, which caused the price of grain to rise far above the means for most families in the region.<sup>49</sup> Robespierre used this as a launching point for his election campaign. He published a pamphlet titled, "To the Nation of Artois, on the Necessity of Reforming the Estates of Artois," in which he accused the Estates of Artois of being a corrupt force whose mismanagement of funds caused the poor harvest.<sup>50</sup> He went on to argue the Estates of Artois could not possibly be the true representatives for the people of Artois, for they were not chosen by the people.<sup>51</sup> Despite the nonexistence of a

---

<sup>47</sup> George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1975), 19.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

democratic election of representatives, Robespierre campaigned as if democratic elections did exist. To emphasize his point, Robespierre denounced the Estates of Artois as “enemies of the people,” for they deny the poor of justice, or in Robespierre’s words, they deny the “innocent victims of vile, unwarranted persecution” of justice through the use of oppression.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the statement that really ensured his place in Versailles came from his pamphlet “Enemies of the Country Unmasked,” in which he claimed “one trembles when one sees the reasons given for the choice of representatives who will decide the destiny of the nation. May God keep us from such hollow reasons, and inspire in all citizens the spirit of...passion for the public good on which depend[s] the happiness of the people and the safety of empires.”<sup>53</sup> These tactics, though highly exaggerated, were extremely effective, for Arras did elect their representatives to the Estates General. Robespierre was selected as one of those representatives, which thus began his mission to reform France.

The proceedings of the Estates General did not commence on the 8th of May as planned. Unfortunately for an anxious Robespierre, the Estates General decided to postpone the meetings in order to allot more time to the representatives who had not yet arrived. When the proceedings did begin, there still remained some representatives who were still traveling, but the situation was too dire to waste more time. When the Estates General did begin, the discussions quickly veered away from finding a solution to the financial crisis to the problem of representation.<sup>54</sup> The organization further degenerated when each individual estate began discussing these issues

---

<sup>52</sup> Robespierre, *To the Nation of Artois, on the Necessity of Reforming the Estates of Artois* (1788), quoted in Rudé, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Robespierre, *Enemies of the Country Unmasked* (1788), quoted in Rudé, 24.

<sup>54</sup> David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 44.

amongst themselves as opposed to discussing the issues in an open dialogue between estates.<sup>55</sup>

Robespierre responded directly to this swift degeneration in a complex manner:

[My] thoughts...were more intoxicating and yet at the same time melancholy...I asked myself, what muddled minds, what ambitious, vile men, for their own interests, are trying to...dissipate this glory (the Estates General meeting) like insubstantial smoke dispersed on the wind...I was not previously aware just how far the mutual ties extend that unite us all to this soil, to the men who are our brothers, but I understood it in that instance.<sup>56</sup>

From this quote, one could argue Robespierre probably found some satisfaction in the course of the Estates General, for the direction of the discussions did veer towards the subjects he hoped would be addressed. However, Robespierre does not address his satisfaction with the direction of the Estates General until the end of the quote. The vast majority of the quote suggests an angry frustration with the isolation of discussions between each individual estate. In theory, Robespierre should have contented himself with the fact that discussions about the political structure of France were actually occurring. After all, the true purpose of the Estates General was solely to find a solution to the financial crisis, not to discuss an overhaul on the role of the French monarchy. Therefore, at the onset of the Estates General, Robespierre's belief that the proceedings would provide an opportunity to change France was a product of his own optimistic expectations of the Estates General. However, it should be noted that Robespierre was far from the only representative who saw the Estates General as a chance to reform France. Nevertheless, this opportunity was not guaranteed. Robespierre's opportunity had presented itself, but he was still unsatisfied. Not because he believed the opportunity for reform was not present, but because he believed the opportunity could be utterly meaningless. Robespierre may have found the opportunity meaningless because he was likely aware of Chrétien Francois de Lamoignon's

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 45

*Principles of the French Monarchy*, written two years prior to the Estates General. Louis XVI had strong reserves about calling the Estates General, but Lamoignon persuaded him to favor calling the Estates General by reminding Louis of his pamphlet which assured the king that the meeting's purpose was meant to solve the financial crisis and not challenged the notion "that the king is the chief sovereign of the Nation and...[France's] legislative power resides in the person of the King, independent of and unshared with all other powers."<sup>57</sup> Although the direction of the Estates General steered away from the financial crisis, Robespierre likely believed the precedent it set for the Estates General ruined any opportunity for true reform. Meaning, the discussion of representation and the role of the monarchy probably caused some initial excitement for Robespierre; however, that excitement quickly died out when the individual estates discussed these topics individually rather than collectively. The reason why Robespierre's excitement dwindled was due to the voting structure of the Third Estate. Because the estates were discussing these topics individually, Robespierre knew the first and second estates would simply outvote any resolution the third estate conceived. However, it is unlikely Robespierre anticipated this individual break-down of discussion to be to the benefit of the claims of the third estate. For this isolation led to the formation of the National Assembly.

In many ways, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1789, marked the true beginning of the French Revolution, for the third estate had officially formed the National Assembly on this date. The formation of the National Assembly was unprecedented in France. The French monarchy certainly had encountered revolts and challenges in the past; however, the purpose of France's previous revolts was not to limit monarchical power, nor was it to increase the representation of the third estate. For this reason, the actions taken by the National Assembly were unlike any previous forms of

---

<sup>57</sup> Chrétien Francois de Lamoignon, *Principles of the French Monarchy* (1787), quoted in Scurr, 63.

dissent against the old order. The National Assembly wasted no time in forwarding its objective. Claiming to be the representative body for all of France, the National Assembly invited the first and second estate to join them. The reactions of the clergy and nobility were mixed. Most clergymen and nobles did not join, but that is not to say the National Assembly did not have a fair share of supporters. For example, the Abbé Sieyès became one of the most passionate supporters for the Revolution in its early days. Robespierre even applauded Sieyès for his decision to support the third estate.<sup>58</sup> However, the point remains that few members of the clergy or nobility agreed to join. The refusal of most members of the first estate to join angered Robespierre the most, for Robespierre owed his education to clergy members and, consequently, felt betrayed by their refusal.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, when certain clergy members accused the third estate of allowing the people of France to starve due to their delaying of the process, Robespierre lost his temper and delivered his first recorded speech in the Estates General: “Go and tell your colleagues that if they are so impatient to assist the suffering poor, they had better come hither and join the friends of the people...let [yourselves] forego that luxury which surrounds [you] and that splendor which makes indigence blush; let [yourselves] resume the modesty of [your] origin.”<sup>60</sup> From this speech, one can see Robespierre’s frustrations with the reluctance of the other estates to join the National Assembly. In this speech, Robespierre argued the notion of the clergy belonging to an estate separate from the third was ludicrous if clergymen remembered the poverty and simplicity of the early Church.<sup>61</sup> Essentially, Robespierre argued that by refusing to join the third estate, the clergy were acting in direct opposition to the original purpose of the

---

<sup>58</sup> Scurr, 88.

<sup>59</sup> Carr, 38.

<sup>60</sup> Scurr, 89.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Church, which was to help their fellow poor, rather than act as a weapon of the wealthy and powerful.

Despite receiving little support from the first and second estates, The National Assembly pressed onward. On June 20, 1789, the National Assembly attempted to meet with the members of the first and second estates who agreed to join them. However, the members of the National Assembly soon discovered that the doors leading into the meeting place were locked and guarded by soldiers. In response to this, the members of the National Assembly, Robespierre included, swore the famous Tennis Court Oath, in which they pledged to not disband until they wrote a constitution for France.

The road to reforming France remained shaky at this point. The locked doors that led to the Tennis Court Oath likely frightened, and certainly frustrated Robespierre. However, one could reasonably infer that the National Assembly's swearing of the Tennis Court Oath reinvigorated the optimism Robespierre felt at the beginning of the Estates General. What happened next presented a new problem for Robespierre—his struggle for recognition. Louis XVI made the mistake of insisting the estates remain in separate chambers, and subsequently ordered members who had joined the third estate to return to their original positions.<sup>62</sup> This order likely caused some alarm in Robespierre. There is a large possibility that Robespierre was well aware of France's history with absolutism. Therefore, when one takes into account Robespierre's tendency to exaggerate and assume the worst of situations, the king's order probably put Robespierre in a state of despair and helplessness. In an arguably pyrrhic victory for Robespierre, his state of despair was alleviated, but not his feeling of helplessness, for there exists no record or evidence of Robespierre actively protesting against the king's order. Honoré Gabriel Riqueti,

comte de Mirabeau, contrarily, did protest. In response to Louis' order, Mirabeau exclaimed "we are here by the power of the people, and we will not leave except by the force of bayonets."<sup>63</sup> This highly charged language of Mirabeau received rapturous applause from his colleagues and effectively tipped the balance of control towards the National Assembly.<sup>64</sup> Mirabeau made this exclamation on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, and, although this statement was short, it proved enormously effective for four short days later on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, Louis XVI rescinded his order and commanded the nobles and clergy to join the National Assembly.<sup>65</sup> Mirabeau became the celebrated hero for the third estate, and champion for the oppressed lower classes. This outcome is what made Mirabeau's statement a pyrrhic victory for Robespierre. On the one hand, Robespierre's goal of reforming France was now made possible, for the power and momentum now rested with the National Assembly; on the other hand, Robespierre's vanity and ambition suffered because it was not he who defied the power of the king. In the early phases of Robespierre's political career, i.e. during the Estates General, he struggled for recognition.<sup>66</sup> Although there is no definitive way of knowing, one can assume Robespierre may very well have tried to speak on several occasions during the meetings, but got shouted down by other, more powerful speakers.<sup>67</sup> This is not to say Robespierre held disdain towards Mirabeau. Robespierre admired him greatly, but envied his leading role in championing the liberties of the third estate.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Luttrell, *Mirabeau* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 121.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, Robespierre's demeanor remained happy overall, for he did note in a letter to one of his friends back home, "the present Revolution has produced greater events in a few days than the whole previous history of mankind."<sup>69</sup> However, the time of Robespierre's failure to be heard did not last long. He arduously and obsessively studied the great speakers of the Estates General, most notably Mirabeau and quickly adapted their techniques in order to win time for his own voice to be heard.<sup>70</sup>

The year of 1789 marked an important and definitive change in Robespierre. His dream of reforming France into a moral and just society became more than just a dream in 1789; it became a possibility. Ecstatic to have the opportunity to bring forth a France modeled after the principles of Rousseau, Robespierre's ambition reached a new height. However, this new ambition put an enormous pressure on Robespierre. As stated beforehand, Robespierre experienced trouble arguing his points, with the exception of one small, known speech against the clergy. The stronger speakers, such as Sieyès and Mirabeau, dominated the floor for arguing for the rights of the third estate. Although the arguments of Sieyès and Mirabeau were in a similar direction to the course Robespierre wished France to move, he believed their points did not push for enough progress. Robespierre plagued himself by wondering how could bring about Rousseau's ideal form of government without having the strength or talent to grab the attention of his fellow representatives. Although Robespierre always had a fear of failure, the events of 1789 heightened that fear. 1789 saw the beginning of Robespierre's fatalistic view of situations. 1789 saw how quickly Robespierre came to suspect and fear the worst. Although very slightly noticeable at the time, 1789 marks the beginning of Robespierre's fatalism and paranoia. His

---

<sup>69</sup> Robespierre, "Letter to Antoine-Joseph Bruissart," quoted in Luttrell, 124.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

speech against the clergy provides an excellent example of how Robespierre's fatalism and paranoia influenced his thinking. Robespierre knew the immense power of the Church in both a spiritual and secular sphere. Therefore, Robespierre knew reform would be impossible without the blessing of the Church. When many of the clergy members refused to join the National Assembly, and accused it of acting against the interest France, Robespierre panicked. He passionately accused the Church of betraying its mission, for he believed if he could not win over the clergy, reformation would prove impossible. Another example of paranoia and fatalism interfering with his thought process can be found in his pamphlet *The Enemies of the People Unmasked*. He wrote this pamphlet during his campaign to be a representative of Artois. It is in this pamphlet that Robespierre first mentions his fear of "internal enemies." The "internal enemies" were trying to block his bid for properly representing the people of Artois, so Robespierre began a biting criticism and campaign against them. The seeds of paranoia and fatalism permanently planted themselves in the mind of Robespierre in 1789. However, the progress made by the National Assembly managed to suspend the consequences of these thoughts, for at this time Robespierre could focus on the progress of the Revolution as opposed to the opposition of the Revolution which dominated his later thoughts.

### CHAPTER III: FINDING HIS VOICE:

#### ROBESPIERRE, THE SUCCESSOR OF MIRABEAU AND HERO OF THE PEOPLE

The chaotic process and outcome of the Estates General served as an interesting and effective precursor to the chaos that plagued France throughout its long Revolution. During the Estates General, order quickly collapsed. Although the order in the Estates General did enjoy periods of restoration, the periods in which order did exist were always brief, unstable, and always collapsed to chaos again. However, in the time between June and July 1789 many felt the time of chaos would soon end. France was experiencing a Revolution; however, the Revolution was proceeding in a peaceful manner. Although arguments were filled with language that suggested violence would ensue, no such violent acts occurred. Louis did initially refuse to move to the Tuileries Palace in Paris, but gave into the mob's demand that he do so, seeing no other option in October of 1789. Because of this fear of mobs, the Assembly's mission to draft a constitution for France received no serious threats of opposition from either Louis XVI or the former members of the first and second estates. This period between the early autumn to late fall of 1789 was chaotic, but relatively bloodless. The chaos, however, soon spiraled out of control even more so because the speed of the Revolution was accelerating faster than anyone could keep pace with. As a result, the Revolution lacked the two necessary elements for a peaceful transition of power—unanimity and simplicity. By early September, the only agreements made by the Estates General were the moving of the king from Versailles to the Tuileries, and the writing of a constitution for France. Unfortunately, no unanimity existed in terms of how the constitution would be structured and implemented. The issue of a power vacuum during the

duration of the writing of the constitution presented another problem. On top of both these problems was the issue of completely changing the foundations French society. France knew no other form of government besides absolutism. The entire social and political structure flowed from a rigid hierarchy. Therefore, the problems produced by this hierarchy proved far too entrenched and complex to be resolved overnight by the writing of a constitution. These problems sparked a plethora of debates that lasted from the autumn of 1789 to the summer of 1791. In the aftermath of these debates Robespierre emerged as a national political figure.

The writing of the constitution was Robespierre's chance to shape the government of France in accordance with his principles. Therefore, Robespierre needed his voice to be heard. As previously mentioned, Robespierre experienced difficulty obtaining the opportunity to speak during the Estates General. However, Robespierre found no such hardship in finding the chance to speak during the latter half of the National Assembly (and later the National Convention), for his membership with the Jacobin club provided him this opportunity.<sup>71</sup>

As the debates over the constitution began, so too did the formation of political clubs. Robespierre's decision to join the Jacobin Club initiated his identification with the left.<sup>72</sup> The importance of Robespierre's membership within the Jacobins did not end there, however. To interject for a moment, it is important to note that the Jacobin stance on constitutional issues in the years 1790 to 1791 was significantly more moderate than the stances it took by 1792.<sup>73</sup> For this reason, there were disagreements within the Jacobin Club itself. Nevertheless, as a whole, the Jacobin Club was recognized as a liberal faction. Members certainly had their disagreements

---

<sup>71</sup> Carr, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

amongst one another, but the majority of these differences were not drastic enough to make certain members believe they should belong to a different club.<sup>74</sup> Meaning, the Jacobins regarded themselves as a single group, despite small discrepancies in their views of the constitution. Therefore, even though Robespierre likely held more radical views than some of his other members, he would not be shouted down for stating his opinion, for his opinion was not drastically out of tune with other members.<sup>75</sup> For this reason, Robespierre was able to find opportunities to speak. Because the Jacobin Club had fewer members than the entirety of the National Assembly, as well as a commonality of opinion, it was easier to speak without being interrupted. When Robespierre got his chance to speak in front of his fellow Jacobins, many were quick to realize the power behind his principles.<sup>76</sup> Such members who recognized his ability to apply morality and principle to the process of writing the constitution were, but not limited to, Sieyès, Georges-Jacques Danton, Marat, and Camille Desmoulins.<sup>77</sup> The support and trust of his fellow Jacobins propelled Robespierre to become a national political figure. With their help, Robespierre could now ensure he would have the opportunity to speak. Meaning, the Jacobins had enough members in their ranks to prevent anyone from shouting down, and thus preventing, one of their members from speaking.<sup>78</sup> The importance, benefits, and rewards of his membership in the Jacobins did not immediately present themselves to Robespierre; however, they would prove invaluable after the constitutional debates had ended in 1791.

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 33.

Despite the help from his fellow Jacobins, Robespierre still played a very small part in the constitutional debates. Although his recognition was growing, he still lacked the ability to control the direction of the debates' proceedings. He still lacked the ability to seize the full attention of the National Assembly. This likely frustrated Robespierre, as well as filled him with jealousy towards Mirabeau. Mirabeau was the hero of the Estates General and still dominated the constitutional debates. Mirabeau's position produced more than jealousy from Robespierre. In the very least, Robespierre disliked Mirabeau; however, Robespierre's feelings may have bordered on hatred, for Mirabeau's beliefs were in diametric opposition to Robespierre's. During the constitutional debates, Mirabeau argued the continuation of the monarchy was dependent upon giving Louis XVI the right to an absolute veto.<sup>79</sup> He further insisted that Louis have the right to manage French foreign policy, most notably the right to declare war, free from the control of the National Assembly.<sup>80</sup> The motion to give Louis XVI control of foreign policy passed, but the absolute veto was compromised with a suspending veto at the insistence of Sieyès.<sup>81</sup> Certainly these notions seemed outrageous to the republican Robespierre. However, one should note that in 1790, it remains unclear whether Robespierre had openly identified himself as a republican; although even if he did not, many of his colleagues in the National Assembly probably regarded him as a republican anyway.<sup>82</sup> Robespierre argued passionately against Mirabeau's measures. He carefully prepared a speech in which he pleaded with his

---

<sup>79</sup> Luttrell, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

colleagues to stay true to their “fundamental principles of liberty, equality, justice, and reason.”<sup>83</sup> He insisted that the creation of new laws should have a checking mechanism, but argued the creation of laws in benefit of the people would be impossible with the king’s veto Robespierre never got the opportunity to make this speech. However, he did have it published in Camilles Desmoulins pro-revolutionary newspaper, the *Vieux Cordelier*.<sup>84</sup> Desmoulins’ *Vieux Cordelier* set the groundwork for Robespierre to succeed Mirabeau as the hero of the Revolution. Even Mirabeau himself predicted Robespierre as his successor to a certain extent by claiming “That man will go far. He believes every word he says.”<sup>85</sup> Mirabeau was still the hero of the Assembly, but through the use of the *Vieux Cordelier*, Robespierre was slowly becoming the hero of the people, specifically, the sans-culottes of Paris.

The views of the sans-culottes Parisians found more similarities with Robespierre than Mirabeau. Thus, when these enragés began to hijack the direction of the Revolution, they propelled Robespierre as their de facto leader. As Robespierre continued to publish in the *Vieux Cordelier*, his population with the people only grew stronger. By the end of the constitutional debates in 1791, Robespierre was a virtual celebrity to the people of Paris. As a result of this immense popularity, virtually every member of the Assembly had become familiarized with Robespierre’s name. Naturally, a man with this much popularity among the people found ease in holding the floor of the Assembly. Realizing the potential in having a practically unlimited amount of speaking time, Robespierre began to steer the Assembly towards establishing France as a “republic of virtue.” The days of the shy provincial lawyer from the Artois region had ended by the late spring of 1791. However, the obstacle of the king still remained for Robespierre.

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 200.

Louis XVI may not have enjoyed Robespierre's popularity in Paris, but he did have considerable support in rural France. Upset with the growing radicalism within the revolution, many Frenchmen began a counterrevolution with the help of the clergy and émigrés. This counterrevolution threatened more than just a civil war; it held the possibility of a multi-front war, for Leopold II, the Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of Austria with the cooperation of Frederick William II of Prussia, issued the Declaration of Pillnitz, which stated that if any harm should befall any member of the royal family, it would be considered an act of war.

Mirabeau died in early April of 1791. By the time of his death, Robespierre already enjoyed enormous support from Parisian citizens. Within a month's time, this respectability translated to the Assembly. Robespierre became a dominant speaker. Few Frenchmen had not heard of his opinions, his principles, and his "incorruptibility." Robespierre earned his title of "The Incorruptible" through his own merit. Indifferent to bribes, passionate in his beliefs, and dutiful to the point of fanaticism, Robespierre worked himself to exhaustion in the months following Mirabeau's death, and was widely respected for his tireless efforts. Even Robespierre's detractors experienced difficulty trying to paint him as a Machiavellian bent on increasing his own power. Indeed, he won the love and respect of the Parisian citizens because he honestly believed his pursuit of gaining more political influence was meant solely for creating a better France. Unfortunately, his good intentions became a victim of his own thought process. Robespierre failed to see any situation in an optimistic light. The summer of 1791 marked the first time where his paranoia and fatalism became actual, dangerous threats, for he now had a pulpit to spread these thoughts beyond the confines of his own mind. The counterrevolution that formed, in combination with the Declaration of Pillnitz caused Robespierre to become more

---

paranoid with each passing day. Robespierre became convinced of “spies in every quarter of the city and murderers assigned to assassinate patriots.”<sup>86</sup> With his newly gained influence, Robespierre quickly convinced others of these fears. The ones who were affected most by this fear of Robespierre’s were his fellow Jacobins and the sans-culottes. Robespierre’s influence was strong enough to change the course of the Revolution. He did so in the summer of 1791. Unfortunately, the course he set for France was a destructive course of paranoia and fatalism. Robespierre, along with the majority of his Jacobin colleagues and sans-culottes, truly believed that so long as Louis XVI remained King of France, the Revolution was doomed to failure. As a result, Robespierre began a desperate campaign to “save” the Revolution from tyranny. The only true way to ensure the success of the Revolution was to establish a republic.

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

CHAPTER IV: A REVOLUTION IN PERIL:  
THE REGICIDE, REPUBLIC, AND THE WARS

On the surface, it seems as though Robespierre enjoyed overnight success with the death of Mirabeau. To some extent, this claim is true. In the months leading up to Mirabeau's death, Robespierre had already gathered a healthy support from Jacobins and sans-culotte alike; therefore, the stage for increased political power was already set. Throughout the months of April and May, Robespierre burst onto the political scene. Although the Jacobins and sans-culottes may have sided with Robespierre at this point, there still remained a sizable amount of members in the Assembly, as well as, other moderate Parisians who were more hesitant to accept Robespierre's warnings and fears. This changed almost as quickly as Robespierre's rise to national politics; however, the reason for the change was more the result of luck and timing, rather than any savvy political tactics taken by Robespierre. Nevertheless, the royal family made a run for Austria on the night of June 20, 1791. Approximately 130 miles later, the family's escape failed, which resulted in their capture in the town of Varennes. The royal family's flight completely discredited the monarchy in Paris. Few, if any members of the Assembly still openly defended the king's decision. The flight to Varennes marked the turning point in the French Revolution. When the king returned, the radical stages had already begun.

The royal family's attempted escape did not change any of Robespierre's thoughts or fears; it only confirmed them. The opinions of many other members of the Assembly, as well as, moderate Parisians did begin to shift after the king's return, however. The flight to Varennes

---

<sup>86</sup> Scurr, 127.

completed the change in the Jacobin club to openly advocating for a republic. If there remained any Jacobins still sympathetic to the monarchy before the king's flight to Varennes, they either left the Jacobins after this incident, or fell into the same opinion shared by the majority of Jacobin members. While few members of the Assembly, who did not belong to the Jacobins, began calling for an end to the monarchy, many now questioned the king's support. Robespierre wasted no time in capitalizing on this shift of opinion. Shortly after the king's return, Robespierre addressed his fellow Jacobins as well as the other members of the Assembly: "This could have been the best day of the Revolution, and it might still be."<sup>87</sup> This likely excited his fellow Jacobins; however, he also addressed the non-Jacobin members of the Assembly by stating his fears: "What scares me gentlemen...is that since this morning all our enemies speak the same language as us...look about you, share my fear, and consider how all now wear the same mask of patriotism."<sup>88</sup> As a man of principles, nothing angered or scared Robespierre more than insincerity. Though Robespierre would still regard anyone who openly declared themselves against the Revolution an enemy, he could still hold a certain degree of respect for their honesty. For the Frenchmen who participated in the counterrevolution, the ones who wore the "mask of patriotism," Robespierre felt nothing but contempt.

To reiterate, the king's flight on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June marked the beginning of increased radicalism and violence in the Revolution. Within a few weeks of the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, France was celebrating the second year anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Unfortunately, this celebration on July 14, 1791, became stained with blood. The radical enragés in Paris gathered into an angry mob in the Champ de Mars. These enragés were infuriated that the Assembly still supported a

---

<sup>87</sup> Jordan, 109.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

constitutional monarchy after the king had attempted to escape to Austria. At this time the moderates still held the most sway in the Assembly. Therefore, most argued the king's escape was not the fault of his own, but rather a plot planned by counterrevolutionaries to kidnap the royal family.<sup>89</sup> Clearly, the enragés did not find the Assembly's reasoning satisfactory. Although there exists no writing or other form of evidence, which can indicate that Robespierre disagreed with the Assembly's stance, one can safely assume, with a fair degree of certainty that he too did not agree with the Assembly's position.<sup>90</sup> If Robespierre did in fact disagree with the Assembly's decision, a question of why did he not join the mob himself, or in the very least, endorse the mob's violent behavior, arises.<sup>91</sup> Scurr suggests Robespierre's decision, or lack thereof, was a result from a clash of conflicts.<sup>92</sup> Meaning, Robespierre believed the mob of enragés violent response was reasonable and justified; however, despite his criticalness of the Assembly, his principles forced him to recognize the legality of the Assembly's decision.<sup>93</sup> One could criticize Scurr's answer by claiming Robespierre acted in a hypocritical way. One could question if Robespierre recognized the legality of the Assembly's decision, why would he question the king's legality of absolutism in the first place. Scurr does not address this seemingly hypocritical conundrum of Robespierre. To defend her answer, however, one must look back to Robespierre's principles. To Robespierre, opposing the king's absolutism was justified, for it was not sanctioned by the will of the people. The Assembly, however, was formed by the will of the people. Because the Assembly was formed by the will of the people, Robespierre could not, in

---

<sup>89</sup> Rudé, 114.

<sup>90</sup> Scurr, 170

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

conscience, oppose their decision. The Assembly's decision carried consequences, however. The mob refused to disperse, despite multiple attempts by Lafayette and the National Guard. Seeing no other option, Lafayette gave the National Guard permission to open fire, resulting in the deaths of an unknown number of Parisians. Robespierre's only response to the situation after the shootings had occurred. The response he gave showed his neutral reaction: "Let us weep for those citizens who have perished: let us even weep for those citizens who...were the instruments of their death. Let us in any case try to find one ground of consolation...let us hope that all our citizens, armed as well as unarmed, will take a warning from this dire example..."<sup>94</sup> In terms of the rest of Paris' response, the blame was allocated to the king. Although Lafayette gave the order to fire upon the crowd, many argued this tragedy would have never occurred had the king not attempted to escape.

The massacre at Champ de Mars furthered the radicalism in the Revolution. This event pushed more of the moderate Parisians into the arms of the enragés. This also furthered Robespierre's own power and influence. To the enragés, Robespierre was their incorruptible hero. They loved Danton for joining them in the fields of the fray, they loved Marat and Desmoulins for spreading their opinions to more people, but they loved Robespierre most of all for giving them a voice in the destiny of France. The scene at the Champ de Mars frightened France. Many feared this event would spark a civil war within Paris itself. Thankfully, no such event occurred. The remainder of the year 1791 passed peacefully, and yet, uneasily. The constitution for a constitutional monarchy was officially ratified in September of 1791, and did so without any violent opposition; however, the approval of the monarchy began to fall slowly, but surely with each passing day that led into the year 1792. By April of 1792, the king's

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 171.

decision of war commenced the final stage of Robespierre's involvement in the Revolution. It also guaranteed the end of the Bourbon Monarchy.

The constitution that established France as a constitutional monarchy enjoyed a short existence. Rural Frenchmen, the British, Austrians, and Prussians were well aware that Louis' throne was in an unstable condition. Although the counterrevolutionaries, who were mostly comprised of émigré nobles, enjoyed considerable support from the French in the Vendée region, the Austrians and Prussians, they still feared the revolutionaries' control of Paris. This fear, obviously, forced all of the Revolution's opposition to focus on Paris carefully. Therefore, the threat of war strained the relationship between Louis XVI and the Assembly, as well as radical Parisian citizens. By the end of 1791 and the beginning of 1792, the threat of war became an even greater reality. Austrians had begun to amass a sizable force on the frontier. As a result, the Assembly, Paris, France, and most importantly, the Jacobins themselves began to divide on this issue of war.

The division within the Jacobins is often understood as a division of opinion between Robespierre and Brissot; a division between what would become the Montagnards and the Girondists. A very important distinction between the two must be made. Both Girondists and Montagnards were Jacobins. Meaning, both held radical views regarding the position of the monarchy—a republic should replace it. The only contention that existed between the Montagnards and Girondists was the positions each side took on the subject of war. Girondists favored war with Austria and Prussia, Montagnards opposed it. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, Brissot made a speech in support of war with Austria. He said “war is necessary to France for her

honor...war is a national benefit...[this war is] a crusade for universal liberty.”<sup>95</sup> In this speech, Brissot argued in favor of the war by littering his speech with altruistic and patriotic rhetoric. His argument in favor of war centered upon the idea that a war with Austria would unify the French under the cause of the Revolution. Therefore, Brissot concluded, a war would strengthen the Revolution by giving it a stronger support among the French people.

Robespierre and the Montagnards believed just the opposite. Brissot received widespread support for his pro-war stance. The support among the French citizens frightened Robespierre, but their support was not necessarily problematic. What was problematic for Robespierre was that Brissot’s pro-war argument also received the support from much of the Assembly, a good number of his fellow Jacobins, and perhaps worst of all, from King Louis XVI. On January 2, 1792, Robespierre delivered a passionate speech to the Jacobins, specifically targeted towards Brissot and his supporters, urging them that the war would ruin the Revolution:

Is this the war of a nation against other nations or a king against other kings? No. It is a war of the enemies of the French Revolution against the French Revolution...the most numerous and dangerous of [the Revolution’s] enemies...are among us. War is always the first desire of a powerful government that wants to become more powerful...What matters, above all else is...to enlighten the nation on its true interests...not to deprive liberty of its last resource by misleading the public mind in the present critical circumstances...given the circumstances...I wonder whether the war to be waged will be the one that enthusiasm promises us...I have proved what was clear to everyone that the proposal for the present war was the outcome of a plan formed long ago by internal enemies of our liberty...You have yourselves acknowledged that the war was pleasing to the émigrés, that it pleased the ministry, the Court intriguers...whose leaders...have directed every step taken by the executive power [the king]...all the trumpets of the aristocracy and the government are sounding the signal for it [the war] in unison.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Jacques Pierre Brissot, *On the War* (December 29, 1791), in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2007), 26.

Robespierre's speech against the war, in tragic irony, predicted the circumstances that would exist during the Terror. Meaning, Robespierre did not predict the erection of the Terror itself, but he did predict the totalitarian regime that would result from the war. During the time of this speech, however, Robespierre envisioned the king would be the one who reestablished his absolute power as a result of the war. He snidely questioned the Jacobins (or Girondists) in the same speech by relating them to the "internal enemies:" "Ministers, you [the Jacobins] admit, are the enemies of patriots, moderates, for whom they have declared themselves, want to make our constitution aristocratic; and you want us to adopt their plans?"<sup>97</sup> By phrasing his question in this way, Robespierre clearly meant to say that Brissot and his Girondists were playing right into the royalist plot. Despite the logical questions and consequences Robespierre posed in this speech, it changed nothing. Robespierre did not lose any support from speaking against the war, but he failed to gain any support from the other side. The same can be said in response to Brissot's speech. Unfortunately for Robespierre, the Girondists held the majority of support of non-Jacobin members in the Assembly and, in addition, had enough Parisian citizens to support their pro-war stance to prevent an angry mob from forcing the Assembly to disagree. As the year 1792 progressed, little time was given towards debating the war. Robespierre and his Montagnard supporters still argued against the war, but in vain. On April 20, 1792, war was declared against Austria.

By declaring war, Louis sealed his fate. Unlike the Austrians, the French were unprepared for the war. This, obviously, caused the first couple of battles against the Austrians to end with disastrous results. As will be seen, insurrection that occurred on the tenth of August,

---

<sup>96</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *On the War* (January 2, 1792), in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2007), 26-28.

suggest that public opinion had quickly turned against the war. Public opinion of the war likely reached its lowest point on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, when the Duke of Brunswick issued the Brunswick Manifesto. Not only did the Brunswick Manifesto state Prussia's intent to join Austria against France, it also stated the intention to return royal power and stability to France. Another by-product of this manifesto was the disastrous effect it had on the reputation of Louis XVI. Any sympathy Louis might have gained from the Girondists vanished. Girondists had already become frustrated with Louis, for just a few weeks earlier in June, the king had vetoed a number of their proposals to establish a force of 20,000 national guardsmen outside of Paris. In what seemed to add insult to injury, Louis also insisted on keeping his Swiss Guard, ignoring Girondist requests to remove them. Although Robespierre did not celebrate the circumstances, the early failures of the war convinced the Parisian citizens that Robespierre was not only right about the war, he was the only one who truly had their best interests at heart. Up until this point, Brissot remained influential enough to challenge Robespierre on his position on the war. After the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, Robespierre became the most influential politician in France.

The Girondists still had sway in the Assembly. Their insistence on war had actually won them a number of converts towards their cause. Even though Robespierre disagreed with their war stance, the Girondists were still Jacobins who passionately desired of a republican France. Therefore, perhaps unknowingly to Robespierre, the Girondists pro-war stance did help further the Revolution towards Robespierre's favor. For the war had begun to take its toll on the Parisian citizens. With soaring bread prices and an acute awareness of the Assembly's failings to deliver the promises made in the constitution, the enragés, largely encouraged by Danton, attacked the Tuileries on the tenth of August. In the midst of the carnage between enragés and

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 30.

the Swiss Guard, Louis and the royal family fled to the National Assembly's chamber for safety. After massacring the Swiss Guard, the *enragés* burst into the Assembly and demanded that they abolish the monarchy. Perhaps the sheer number of *enragés* who stormed into the Assembly provided enough persuasion for the members of the Assembly to suspend, but not depose, the monarchy. In the aftermath of the tenth of August, the Assembly agreed to create a convention tasked with the question of the monarchy and addressing the issues of the constitution.

August 10, 1792, marked another change in the Revolution. The events that took place this day moved the Revolution towards its most radical phase. The Danton-encouraged *enragés* responsible for the 10th of August also gained control of the Paris Commune, in which they exercised enormous influence and power. The *enragés* in the Paris Commune authorized the arrest of anyone they deemed or suspected to be a counterrevolutionary. They also successfully lobbied to incarcerate the royal family under their watch. An example of the extent of the Commune's radicalism was given on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1792. The news of Brunswick's crossing of the frontier reached Paris that day. This sparked a chaotic fear throughout Paris. The Revolution was in danger. This fear resulted in the massacring of prisoners arrested on the Commune's authority. As for Robespierre's response to the Commune's hijacking of the Revolution and massacring of their prisoners, he said nothing<sup>98</sup>. Robespierre previously warned against the dangers of a premature insurrection, which he argued, would strengthen the royalist cause, but he clearly did not bring this warning up again when he noted the insurrection's relative success.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, the attacking of the Tuileries and demand for the abolition of the

---

<sup>98</sup> Rudé, 192

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

monarchy was, in theory, the will of the people. Therefore, Robespierre dared not speak against their actions.

By the end of November, the French forces had successfully halted the advance of Prussian and Austrian forces. This, however, did not help quell French fears of the war stopping the Revolution. The Prussian and Austrian advances may have been stopped, but the tide of the war was still not in France's favor. France itself, moreover, was in turmoil. France was nominally a republic, but still had no real governing body or constitution. Robespierre proposed a solution to the chaotic political vacuum, a solution that served as a precursor to the Committee of Public Safety.<sup>100</sup> Robespierre's proposition was the establishment of a revolutionary tribunal. This tribunal's duties did entail some vague descriptions of governmental duties, but the main purpose of this tribunal was to monitor counterrevolutionary activities.<sup>101</sup> The revolutionary tribunal was less extreme than the Committee of Public Safety in its persecutions, executing only twenty-eight people between August and December.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, the danger of it becoming extreme became a reality when it remained in existence after the National Convention's elections were held.<sup>103</sup>

The National Convention was established shortly after the revolutionary tribunal, on September 20, 1792. Robespierre was elected to the National Convention with ease, as was Danton, Desmoulins, Marat, and Robespierre's new enemy Brissot. The debates during the infancy of the Convention were mainly an interchange of attacks and accusations between

---

<sup>100</sup> Jordan, 172.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 173

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Robespierre and Brissot, or more generally, between the Montagnards and Girondists. In the same week of the National Convention's first meeting, Girondists accused Robespierre of trying to become a tyrant, and cited his role in and support of the Paris Commune.<sup>104</sup> This charge carried more serious implications when one considers Robespierre also instituted the revolutionary tribunal before the Convention had been formed. Because Robespierre created this secret police force before the Convention, the tribunal, in theory owed their allegiance to no one else but Robespierre and the Commune. Their main charge against Robespierre was his refusal to condemn the Commune's massacres on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September. Robespierre's defense, though successful, showed a cold rationale, when he stated "it is certain that one innocent person perished...we should weep, citizens, at this cruel mistake, and we have wept over it for a long time...but let this grief have an end, like all mortal things...weep instead for the hundred thousand victims of tyranny."<sup>105</sup> In this speech, he neither justified, nor condemned the actions of the Commune that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of political prisoners. Robespierre reminded his accusers that they were in the midst of a revolution. In order to achieve liberty, Robespierre argued, blood would inevitably be spilled. He closed his defense by countering that the illegality of the Commune's actions in the September Massacres were illegal, but noted "the Revolution is illegal: the fall of the Bastille and of the monarchy were illegal—as illegal as liberty itself."<sup>106</sup> He reminded his accusers that they must have known this inevitability when the Revolution began. The accusations against him ceased. These debates lasted through late September and October, ending in the beginning of November. The debates must have taken

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

their toll on Robespierre, for he remained absent from the Convention for the remainder of November, returning only when the Convention began debating whether or not Louis XVI should stand trial.

During Robespierre's long absence from the Convention, the revolutionary tribunal was disbanded. This did not alarm Robespierre, but the fact the Convention was even questioning to put Louis on trial did. On December 3, 1792, Robespierre delivered an infuriated and charged speech, reprimanding the Convention for foolishly proposing a trial. The main charge of his speech was the hypocriticalness of the Convention's decision:

There is no trial to be held here. Louis is not a defendant. You are not judges. You are not, you cannot be anything but statesmen and representatives of the nation...Proposing to put Louis on trial...would be a regress towards royal and constitutional despotism; it is a counterrevolutionary idea, for it means putting the Revolution itself in contention...if Louis is acquitted, if Louis can be presumed innocent, what becomes of the Revolution...You are confusing the situation of a people in revolution with that of a people whose government is soundly established...I myself abhor the death penalty...I asked for the death penalty to be abolished...[my] highest principle of reason seemed to it [the Assembly] to be moral and political heresy...but...by what fluke do you now recall them to plead the cause of the greatest criminal of all...I utter this deadly truth with regret, but Louis must die, because the homeland has to live.<sup>107</sup>

With this speech, Robespierre attempted to convince the Convention that Louis was already condemned. The members of the Convention condemned him themselves when they suspended the monarchy. He coldly, though logically, reminded the Convention that a trial is necessary only in times of peace, but they are not at peace, they are at war, and in the midst of a revolution on top of that. Being in such a state, Robespierre argued that the rights of any individual must be suspended until stability, peace, and order were restored. Robespierre reconciled his principles

---

<sup>107</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *On the Trial of the King* (December 3, 1792) in *Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, 57-65.

with demanding the death of Louis XVI in two ways. Firstly, he believed that Louis' death was indirectly favored by the will of the people; meaning, he knew the will of the people demanded a republic, but believed a republic could not exist so long as Louis posed a threat to it. Secondly, his principles dictated that he must follow the laws of the land if the laws of the land are the result of the people's will. Even though he deplored the death penalty personally, the people sanctioned the death penalty as an acceptable form of punishment. Therefore, he argued no exception should be made. Giving Louis an exemption, he stated, would be an affirmation of his feudal rights that the Revolution supposedly abolished. Robespierre also said Louis' death is necessary for the republic to continue, but he also argued that Louis was a traitor, and even though he does not agree with the death penalty, the law states traitors are to be put to death.

Much to Robespierre's chagrin, Louis was given a trial anyway on December 10, 1792, exactly a week after Robespierre implored the Convention not to grant the king this opportunity. Thirty-three charges were brought against Louis. In summation, the charges essentially blamed Louis for every riot and massacre that had taken place, as well as every war France was currently involved in. The overriding theme of the charges was clear. Louis had betrayed the French people by being responsible for the deaths of thousands. The defense, obviously countered that Louis' reign had always been in the best interests of the people. The verdict, however, unanimously voted Louis XVI guilty. A number of deputies abstained, but none voted for his acquittal, let alone his innocence. As for Louis' punishment, the sentence to death passed by a small majority, but a majority nevertheless. Louis XVI was executed by guillotine on January 21, 1793. Robespierre did not attend the execution.

At this point, one can see Robespierre rapidly moving towards the mindset he had during the Terror. If he had any doubts to his fatalistic and paranoid view towards the progress of the

Revolution, they were quickly vanquished with Louis XVI's flight to Varennes. To Robespierre, this proved his paranoid and apocalyptic instincts correct. Most dangerously, this fear of Robespierre also spread from his own mind to the minds of many Parisians and certainly Jacobins. His fatalistic tendencies also caused a deep distrust of the pro-war Girondist faction that split from the Jacobins. Robespierre predicted the war would ruin all the liberties won with the progress of the Revolution. As dangerous as fatalism can be, Robespierre's fatalistic view of outcomes was correct. The Terror confirmed all the dangers Robespierre feared would happen as a result of the war; however, it is unlikely that he envisioned the Terror as the embodiment of that fear. With near certainty, Robespierre believed the war would strengthen the monarchy back to its absolute power, thus rendering the Revolution meaningless. The situation was dire. Once France experienced its first setbacks in the war, chaos erupted. Parisian mobs rioted and ruled the day in the summer of 1792. Clearly, the influence of Robespierre's "share my fear" speech reached a wider audience than just the Jacobins. Unlike Marat, Robespierre never openly supported the actions taken by the enragés during the insurrection on August tenth, or the September Massacres; however, his speech to the Convention in defense of himself suggested that he hardly opposed their actions. Seventeen ninety-two marked a dangerous change in the mind of Robespierre. It was at this point, where his paranoia and fatalism became obsessive. The enemies of France marched closer and closer to Paris, threatening to stop the Revolution in its tracks, but worst of all for Robespierre, his fear of internal enemies became the root cause for all of the Revolution's dangers. Robespierre convinced himself, as well as many others, that the war was the ultimate plot of France's internal enemies to stop the Revolution. Previously to 1792, whenever the Revolution scored a victory, Robespierre's paranoia and fatalism subsided, only rising again when a new problem developed. By 1792, the situation had regressed

dramatically, for the victories won by the Revolution no longer satisfied Robespierre. The war, for Robespierre, proved the internal enemies were winning in their attempt to derail the Revolution. Therefore, the overthrow of the monarchy failed to subside Robespierre's paranoia and fatalism. Overthrowing the monarchy was not enough, France's external enemies posed a constant threat at restoring the monarchy, and Robespierre believed the success of the external enemies in the war was a result from support of France's internal enemies. If the Revolution was to be saved, Robespierre concluded that France must destroy its internal enemies. Others shared this sentiment as well. Although still morally opposed the death penalty, Robespierre quickly justified its use with his principles by arguing the will of the people is for France to establish a republic. To accomplish this goal, the Revolution must end any opposition it faces within France.

## CHAPTER V: RISE AND FALL OF THE TERROR

The death of the king removed France's greatest obstacle posed against Robespierre's desired republic of virtue; however, the king was hardly the only obstacle. The execution of Louis XVI only won France more external enemies. In light of recent military successes, however, Robespierre did not perceive France's external enemies to be the main obstacle preventing the Revolution from succeeding. Robespierre knew something must be done. Danton provided that solution. Danton insisted on resurrecting the revolutionary tribunal that existed after August tenth, and demanded more immediate powers be given to it by the Convention.<sup>108</sup> Danton concluded that France had no other option if it wished to stop the civil strife and mob violence that seemed to become more and more prevalent in France.<sup>109</sup> Robespierre wholeheartedly agreed with Danton's proposal and fought tirelessly to pass this motion in the Convention.<sup>110</sup> The reasons for reestablishing the revolutionary tribunal differed between Danton and Robespierre, however. This difference would cost Danton his life in a little over a year's time. Danton wished the tribunal to help bring order to Paris and stop the mob violence through the use of drastic punishments, whereas Robespierre saw it as a perfect weapon to use against internal enemies.

The Girondists opposed the resurrection of the revolutionary tribunal. The images of August 10, 1792, and September 2, 1792, were images of horror, rather than republican triumph.

---

<sup>108</sup> Jordan, 195.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

In addition they also proposed that the sentence of the king should be decided upon by the appeal of the people, rather than the Convention. Therefore, the Girondists knew themselves to be in a dangerous situation, fearing they may share a similar fate to the Swiss Guards in August and the prisoners in September. In the fall of 1792, the Girondists put Robespierre on the defensive, accusing him of attempting to establish a tyranny. In the winter of 1793, Robespierre put the Girondists on the defensive by accusing them of being the internal enemies conspiring for France's downfall: "tyrants unmasked are nothing," he said, but he did not stop there, for he attacked the Girondists leadership directly by claiming, "Brissot [you] were the first apostle of the war...[to the Convention:] if you wish, I will raise a corner of the veil."<sup>111</sup> Here, Robespierre implied Brissot was an internal enemy, but has been revealed. Danton and Robespierre clearly emerged the victors from the debates concerning the resurrection of the tribunal, for the motion passed, and created the Committee of Public Safety in April of 1793. No Girondists were elected to the Committee of Public Safety.

The Girondist situation only worsened. By the early summer, Jacques Hébert, a member of the Paris Commune that presided over the September Massacres, gathered a significant following known as the Hébertists, and demanded the expulsion and arrest of Girondists within the National Convention. After both threats of and the use of violence against them, he succeeded, and the order to arrest Girondists was issued. Robespierre joined Hébert in the attacks on the Girondists. His reasoning for doing so, however, was more out of convenience rather than a liking of Hébert.<sup>112</sup> Robespierre's feelings towards Hébert were mixed, but he did agree the Girondists needed to be ousted from power. On the second of June 1793, the Girondists were

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 208.

arrested. Their trial took place on October 24, 1793, in which they were found guilty and sentenced to death by guillotine on October 30, 1793.

The Girondists were just one of many examples of groups of individuals condemned to death. Unlike previous riots and massacres, Robespierre played a more direct role in the condemnations made by the Committee of Public Safety. Yet, one cannot accuse Robespierre responsible for the start of the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre's accountability within the actions of the Committee, and later the Terror are mainly that of compliance and execution, rather than the designer of the institutions. Even the law of the 22 Prairial, which was the climax of radical violence within the Revolution, was not the work of Robespierre. He did, however, agree with the law's necessity, and enforced it with deadly efficiency. One could rightfully question if Robespierre's actions on the Committee of Public Safety contradicted his principles. All of his principles led him to advocate for the freedom of speech and press, as well as the abolition of the death penalty. Yet the Terror and Committee of Public Safety served as the antithesis of all these principles. Robespierre's defense of his actions on the Committee showed an unnerving justification, and yet, his justification had more dangerous implications than hypocritical ones.<sup>113</sup> He reasoned, "Revolutions are made to establish the rights of man. Therefore, in the interest of these rights, it is necessary to take all measures required for the success of revolutions...The revolutionary interests might require the repression [of rights]...I declare that laws expressly made for the Revolution are necessary, even if contrary to the freedom of the press."<sup>114</sup> In this specific instance he was speaking of repressing the freedom of the press, but from this reasoning, one can infer he used the same logic to justify the repression

---

<sup>113</sup> Scurr, 270.

of the right of the accused to defend themselves in a trial. Trials were given to ones accused of violating the revolutionary laws created by the tribunal and Committee; however, the trials could hardly be considered fair. Judging by the estimates of the death toll during the Reign of Terror, one can easily see the number of condemned or awaiting condemnation was significantly higher than the number acquitted.

Robespierre justified the actions of the Committee on several occasions. Some argue this may show Robespierre questioned the morality of his actions himself. While certainly in the realm of possibility, this argument does not match Robespierre's personality. The content of his defenses should be given more scrutiny towards discovering Robespierre's sentiments of the Terror, rather than the quantity of times he defended it. Judging from the content of his speeches on the subject of the Terror and Committee, it appears more so that he felt the Terror a necessary and temporary evil, rather than an excessive institution of repression. McPhee makes a strong case for this claim. He countered that Robespierre had a hierarchy of principles, in which all were important, but the satisfaction of the people's will was paramount.<sup>115</sup> All of Robespierre's principles were derived from and an extension of Rousseau's. Therefore, for Robespierre to act in accordance with his principles he would need to match his actions with the words of Rousseau.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, McPhee argues Robespierre's justification of the Terror and Committee was more a result of misinterpretation, rather than a decisive disregard of his principles, aimed at the purpose of trying to become a tyrant.<sup>117</sup> This misinterpretation can be seen in Robespierre's

---

<sup>114</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Le Patriote Français* (1793), in Scurr, 270.

<sup>115</sup> McPhee, 114.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

own words, when Robespierre claimed, “nobody has given us a truer picture of the People than Rousseau, because nobody loved it more: ‘the People always want what is good, but it does not always perceive it’...but it’s natural goodness predisposes it to being duped by political charlatans. These men are well aware of this and take advantage of it.”<sup>118</sup> With these words of Robespierre, McPhee argues that Robespierre erroneously took Rousseau’s quote to mean the people are so innocent and naïve that they cannot perceive the traps set by “political charlatans” to take advantage of them; therefore, one of the people, i.e. Robespierre, must expose these “political charlatans” and destroy them in order for the good to prevail. McPhee’s argument of misinterpretation is a strong one; however, he fails to realize a number of other implications in this quote of Robespierre. The reason for this failure is that McPhee does not take his argument far enough. McPhee rightly theorizes that Robespierre’s misinterpretation of this quote caused him to justify the Terror, but he fails to explain how Robespierre misinterpreted Rousseau. Robespierre’s misinterpretation of Rousseau resulted directly from his fatalism and paranoia. For example, Robespierre, as has been stated, always jumped to the most extreme and worst of conclusions, rarely seeing an optimistic ending to any scenario. Rousseau’s words were that the people “[do] not always perceive” what is good. By arguing the people’s “goodness predisposes it to being duped,” Robespierre exaggerated Rousseau’s words to the extreme by arguing the people will never see the good behind the Terror, so long as the internal enemies survive to cloud their sense of right and wrong. Robespierre exaggerated Rousseau’s claim because he fatalistically assumed that the people could not figure out the danger of internal enemies by themselves. It is important to note that by the time of September 1793, Robespierre no longer had the ability to see any outcome in an optimistic fashion, and for this reason, his fatalism was at its highest point, and would remain on this high point until his downfall. The reason for the

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 115.

rise for his unwavering fatalism is directly related to the growth of his paranoia. While sitting on the Committee, Robespierre could see nothing but internal enemies everywhere. As Louvet, a Girondist in the National Convention, astutely observed back in November of 1792, Robespierre “sees plots, treachery, [and] precipices everywhere.”<sup>119</sup> Robespierre had become so paranoid of France’s internal enemies by the time of the trial of Louis XVI that any possibility of seeing the outcome of the Revolution in an optimistic light was rendered hopeless.

By September of 1793, Robespierre began to execute these “internal enemies” at an unprecedented level. The extremes taken by the Committee, almost entirely under Robespierre’s control, began to draw criticisms from the likes of people who had initially supported its creation. Danton and Desmoulins, once Robespierre’s closest allies, began to question the direction of the Revolution. Although there protests were few and mild at this point, it took only six months for Desmoulins, and seven months for Danton to be accused of counterrevolutionary sentiments and consequently executed by their former friend Robespierre. Others, however, voiced their criticism more boldly and frequently than Danton and Desmoulins at this point. On September 25, 1793, Robespierre defended the actions taken by the Committee of Public Safety:

Only the most extreme ignorance...could claim that in such circumstances a man would not be an enemy of the homeland if he made a cruel game of degrading those at the helm of affairs, of hampering their operations and slandering their conduct...The Committee of Public Safety sees betrayals in the middle of victory...our work is criticized in ignorance of its motives; people want us...to give the traitors time to escape...I will tell you how treacherous and extensive is the scheme for bringing us down and dissolving us; how the foreigners and internal enemies have agents paid to execute it; I will remind you that faction is not dead; that it is conspiring from the depths of its dungeons...it is weakness towards traitors that is ruining us...People feel sorry for the most

---

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 141.

criminal individuals, for those who expose the homeland to enemy steel...I myself only know how to feel sorry for unfortunate virtue.<sup>120</sup>

The attitude Robespierre expressed in this speech was the stance he took for the remainder of his life. The vehemence present in this speech shows there was no turning back for Robespierre at this point. This speech provides a good example of the extent of Robespierre's fatalism and paranoia. The main point Robespierre wished to make was that the internal enemies were the only force preventing the success of the Revolution and the triumph of the republic. Therefore, he pleads to push onward in the persecutions; he pleads to let the Committee finish what it had started, or else he warned, all is lost. This speech became the turning point of the Convention's opinion of Robespierre. He still had the support of the enragés and much of the Montagnard faction, but still alienated the remainder of the Convention, as well as many of his former allies, such as Danton and Desmoulins. The alienation came as a result of his harsh ultimatum present in the speech. Robespierre's ultimatum shows the extent of how paranoid of internal enemies he had become. Robespierre stated that anyone who sympathizes with the "traitors," or impedes the process of the Committee of Public Safety, or even questions their motive was to be considered an enemy of the republic. The most frightening and arguably tragic aspect of this speech, however, cannot be plainly seen within his words, but can easily be inferred. Robespierre's highest principle was that a government should be an expression of the will of the people. By claiming anyone who opposed the Committee of Public Safety, controlled by Robespierre was an enemy of the people, Robespierre implied that any action taken by the Committee of Public Safety was an expression of the will of the people. Therefore, anyone in opposition opposed the people. Anyone who opposed the people was a traitor, and the punishment for treason was death.

---

<sup>120</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *In Defense of the Committee of Public Safety and Against Briez* (September 25, 1793), in *Robespierre Virtue and Terror*, 73-79.

As the Terror progressed through the remainder of 1793 and into 1794, it increased in ferocity. Robespierre's defense of the Committee explained what qualified as a treasonous act. Therefore, Robespierre concluded even members of the Convention were not exempt from investigation. Even though the members of the Convention were elected through the will of the people, Robespierre now believed if the elected officials did not meet his standards of a revolutionary, then he would punish them for betraying the people. Ultimately, this brought about his downfall. By the summer of 1794, much of the Convention members accused Robespierre of tyranny. In his last speech on July 26, 1794, Robespierre defended against these claims, but also suggested the need to "purify" the Convention. This was the final straw for the Convention. Robespierre never finished that speech. Before he finished his defense, the Convention, for the first time since his early days in the Assembly, shouted him down. The Convention then ordered the arrest of Robespierre as well as any of his known supporters. Robespierre, wounded from a gunshot wound, was arrested that night at the Hôtel de Ville. He was executed by guillotine the next day.

## CONCLUSION

In his short life, Maximilien Robespierre accomplished more change in France than any one that preceded him. If anything can be said with certainty about Robespierre, it would be that he had an acute sense of awareness. The hardships he experienced in his early life made him aware of the injustices that existed under France's feudal society. From a young age, he promised himself to change France for the better. His determination to achieve this goal fueled an ambition that could not accept failure. Unfortunately for Robespierre, he applied too much pressure on himself. As he came to believe that his duty to change France was some sort of divine mandate, he quickly became swallowed in the momentum of the French Revolution. Despite all of the adaptations Robespierre made towards the political climate in France, he could not adequately operate in the tumultuous times. Because of his inability to function in the chaos, confusion, and turmoil that defined the French Revolution, Robespierre became increasingly fatalistic. Robespierre's increasing fatalism can be traced to his initial fear of failure. As he began to fear that he could not change France, he became convinced the Revolution was doomed. When events turned to his favor, his paranoia of internal enemies trying to stop the Revolution's progress consumed his thoughts, and thus prevented him from ever escaping the debilitating effects of a fatalistic view.

Despite these flaws, Robespierre continued to devote himself towards his dream of a better France. His principles, derived from Rousseau, served as the basis of all his political actions and opinions. With each progressive step the Revolution took towards abolishing the feudal system, Robespierre desired even more change. This desire for change could not be

satisfied until a republic of virtue had been successfully established in France. Unfortunately, Robespierre's paranoia and fatalism drove him into the arms of radicalism. He wished to see Rousseau's ideal government become a reality more than anything else. Therefore, despite his utter hatred for the death penalty, Robespierre quickly justified its use in order to accomplish the creation of a republic of virtue. In some ways, the justification for the death penalty was a Machiavellian "ends justify the means" argument. In addition to this, Robespierre accepted the necessity of violence as an inevitable by-product of a revolution. Robespierre, however, always lamented the need to use the death penalty, or at least claimed to lament its use. Since he always made a point to mourn the use of the Terror, one could reasonably believe that Robespierre honestly did hate the use of mass executions. Another argument that supports Robespierre's regret to have to use the Terror as a means to achieve a stable republic can be found with his initial opposition to the war with Austria and Prussia. Another argument that supports this claim is that Robespierre did not create the Committee of Public Safety himself. He only served on it in a manner, which he believed executed the Committee's purpose. To clarify, his main reason for opposing the war was that he believed it would result in the necessity of a tyrannical regime. To an extent, he was correct, however, he became the very thing he feared would end the Revolution. One may wonder why Robespierre came to favor The Terror's regime, which in many ways resembled the modern totalitarian state, when he had previously warned that such a form of government would be the Revolution's undoing. Firstly, the tyranny Robespierre thought would result from the war was a return to an absolute monarchy. Under the constitution that established France as a constitutional monarchy, the king was given the power to wage war. With a war in place, Robespierre feared that emergency powers would be given back to the king, which would thus end the Revolution. Meaning, at the time war was being considered,

Robespierre could not have foresaw the overthrow of the monarchy, but he could see the possibility of the king gaining enough power to disband the National Assembly as a result of the war. Using the same logic of emergency powers, however, Robespierre used the war as a reason to defend the Committee of Public Safety's power to charge, and try any suspected enemies. For Robespierre this was not a hypocritical compromise of his principles. This was an unfortunate necessity that resulted from the dire situation the Revolution was in. The reason why Robespierre's actions on the Committee resulted in the Reign of Terror was his fatalism and paranoia. He became so paranoid that "internal enemies" would unwind the delicate fabric of the Revolution, that he began a proverbial witch-hunt of all he suspected to be an enemy of the Revolution. Unfortunately, this paranoia only increased his fatalistic view of the Revolution. By 1793 his paranoia had driven his fatalism to the point of no return. Meaning, Robespierre had become so fatalistic, that he saw no other option to save the Revolution aside from the Terror. One should note that his fatalism and paranoia are notions that are meant to explain why Robespierre justified the Terror, not to defend his decision. The Terror shook the foundations of France, and exacted a terrible toll. The Terror's very existence is owed to Robespierre. Without him, the Terror could not have sustained its efficiency. For the French citizens, the Terror was, and remains a symbol of repression and evil. For Robespierre, the Terror was the last, terrible necessity needed to establish a republic of virtue—a republic, which he believed would serve as a model for the world to follow.