

# Robespierre, An Indecisive Revolutionary

by *Annie Jourdan*

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**Was the “Terror” Robespierre’s fault? His name alone has symbolised revolutionary tragedies for two centuries now. Nonetheless, it is a whole different protagonist, once cautious, discreet and indecisive, that the historian, Jean-Clément Martin, invites us to rediscover.**

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Reviewed : Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre. La fabrication d'un monstre*, Paris, Perrin, 2016, 364 pages, 22,50 €.

Robespierre is on a roll at the moment. His manuscripts, sold to the National Archives in May 2011, probably contributed to a renewed interest in his persona. Since then, a significant number of biographies have been dedicated to him, which means that there are still things to be said about the man they call the Incorruptible. In 2012, the Australian historian, Peter McPhee, published *Robespierre. A Revolutionary Life* (Yale University Press); Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc released *Robespierre. La fabrication d'un mythe* (Ellipses, 2013) and Cécile Obligy wrote *Robespierre ou la probité révoltante* (Belin, 2013). Then Hervé Leuwers published *Robespierre* (Fayard, 2014), taking advantage of recently discovered manuscripts and unpublished archives. Two years later, Jean-Clément Martin contributed too to his new literature and proudly renewed the “biographical pact” by refusing to include any psychological approach, sentiment or sensationalism.

The author, a distinguished professor of the Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and former director of the *Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française* (Institute of History of the French Revolution), had already met many challenges prior to this one. For a few years now, he has been studying this « fantasy machine » that the French Revolution<sup>1</sup> has become. This

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<sup>1</sup> J.-C. Martin, *La machine à fantômes. Relire l'histoire de la Révolution française*, Vendémiaire, 2012, p. 9.

fantasy concerns Robespierre more than any other historical figure of the Revolution, since he has been “historically portrayed as a bloodthirsty revolutionary” (p. 11). Therefore, this biography offers continuity to J.-C. Martin’s earlier works that patiently dismantled misconceptions about the history of France, and, in particular, the French Revolution.

## **An ordinary Frenchman**

The author first questions what characterised the young Robespierre and realises that he was far from being the only one to have experienced family ordeals. How many other contemporaries had not had a solitary childhood? From this point of view, Robespierre is to be less pitied than Bonaparte. Napoleon’s father passed away early on and the child was then taken to a foreign and distant country. The young man from Arras, however, was not unhappy and this is reflected in the fact that he completed his studies and his school years went well. Martin convinces us rather easily that the young Robespierre did not lead a difficult life. Once he finished his studies, he became a lawyer and successfully established his office in his hometown. He knew how to banter and write poems and he participated in provincial academy contests. His social skills, however, had limits since he never decided to become part of the freemasons, unlike many men of his social status during that century. Robespierre was not a great adventurer either, like the young Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who went wandering from Geneva to the United States of America, including trips to the Netherlands and England, looking for a great future. At the beginning of his career, Robespierre fit in perfectly with the high society of Arras and seemed to share its values. He only decided to leave during the 1789 elections, when, with no real other opportunities, he became the representative of cobblers – of the common people. Still, he did not have the audacity of pre-revolutionary pamphleteers, such as Sieyès, Condorcet or Pétion. He was more of a legalist. The only progress in his political opinion was his utmost belief that all should be represented, whether they are members of a corporation or not. The little provincial lawyer did not present any particularity at the time that could have explained his future fame.

He first acquired his reputation at the Constituent Assembly, thanks to his great political acumen and his principles rather than his social or economical commitments. He barely talked about the 1789 riots or the difficult access to supplies. Institutional questions, such as the King’s veto, the martial law– decreed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 1789 – or the right to vote, fascinated him much more. He was not as taciturn as he is usually depicted either. In fact, he cultivated relationships with renowned patriots such as the Roland family. From that moment on, he was part of the Jacobin club – the Friends of the Constitution. Unlike Danton or Marat, who were passionate in their commitment, the young man from Arras was more discreet. Even Pétion was more daring. Robespierre was probably still searching for his style while pursuing his apprenticeship as deputy of the nation. Not only did Robespierre not make any radical proposals, he also remained a legalist and certainly not a republican. He still was not one in

July 1791, when a trend started in favour of the republic in reaction to the King's flight to Varennes (p. 126). In the meantime, however, he had expressed himself in favour of the common people. He criticised the limited franchise, which excluded a vast part of the French citizens from the elections; he talked in favour of the freedom of the press and the freedom of opinion. Above all, he proved that he did not follow political trends – whether they were moderate, as the Feuillants', or radical, as the Cordeliers'. From July 1791 onwards, Robespierre represented the club of the Jacobins and its principles. The Varennes episode also confirmed what he continuously predicted: the court was plotting against revolutionaries, following the example of the new candidates for emigration. Had he finally found his style?

Jean-Clément Martin, however, does not conclude that the Incorruptible, as they called him, was at the height of his glory. He became part of the popular trio of deputies after the Constituent Assembly: Buzot, Pétion and Robespierre were thus acclaimed by the crowd and crowned with oak wreaths. Nonetheless this success had no direct consequence for Robespierre since Pétion was elected mayor of Paris. In fact, when he returned to the Jacobins, the Incorruptible man had to confront new rivals – the future Girondins – who would exert a great influence in the Legislative Assembly as well as in the Jacobin club, especially concerning warfare. The quarrel started in December 1791, continued during the next year and resulted in an irreversible separation between the Incorruptible and the Girondins, especially as other subjects of discord progressively added up. The fact that war was declared in April 1792 showed that Robespierre's rivals won and that he had not been able to impose his convictions.

Despite the fact that the Girondins took over prominent positions as early as the opening of the Convention, Robespierre refused any appointment at the court of law. He aimed to remain in office as the “inconvenient supervisor” – either for the Jacobins, or the Assembly. This renunciation allowed him to reinforce his status as an incorruptible man. All, except him, pursued positions for reasons that were not always innocent. We could add the following argument to J. C. Martin's work: That was possibly the reason for his lack of haste in performing public offices (p. 169). His distancing from power contributed to strengthening the image he had acquired since September 1791. However, as the author reminds us, Robespierre remained “on the sidelines”. At that time, the most powerful man was actually Danton and the real statesmen were the Girondins. These were the people who tried, in vain, to ostracise Robespierre and make him unpopular.

Robespierre's public figure was built-up from his constraints, confrontations and denunciations. The inclusion of that man's action and reaction network is surely the most interesting and innovative part narrated in Martin's biography of him. Robespierre became prominent thanks to the interactions and the positions they led to.

## The traps of the Revolution

This approach highlights Robespierre's tendency to act as an arbitrator. Although he was tenacious in his opinions, Robespierre was the person who related to patriots. The Girondins' intolerance pushed him towards the left wing, although he never joined Marat's party. In reality, he loathed the extremes. In 1793, Danton organised tough law enforcement interventions and called upon the people and the Convention to be "terrible" towards their enemies. Once again, Robespierre remained discreet.

Robespierre played the arbitrator, even after the demise of the Girondins, when he intervened with the Jacobins in order to put a halt to the war taking place between the Hebertists and the Dantonists – followers of Jacques Hébert and those of Danton. Robespierre tried to reason with Camille Desmoulins several times; alas, in vain. He was also the one to protect the 73 Girondins sympathisers that Hébert would have wanted to see judged as soon as possible. However, he did not create the revolutionary court or put "terror" on the agenda. It was not him either who invented the cult of the Supreme Being. Other members of the Convention preceded him. The author is so convinced about this that he calls his "hero" an "indecisive leader", and rightly so. During all these months, Robespierre followed the current as much as he inspired it. This is something that has not been brought up until now.

Robespierre did not avoid the traps in which fell the Revolution's consecutive leaders. Once Hébert and Danton were guillotined, the road seemed clear for the Incorruptible to achieve dominance. In fact, as soon as the 11 Germinal (31<sup>st</sup> March 1794), he tested his authority at the Convention by prohibiting the questioning of the Committee of Public Safety's decision concerning Danton. The tone was sharp. The same shift was perceptible in his friend Couthon, who demonstrated a rigidity never seen before. It is difficult to know why. Like the author, we can only offer a few suggestions (p. 264). Both men indeed did not reassure the Convention regarding their intentions. The impatience of their contemporaries to get rid of the Public Safety's dictatorship and that of those who exerted it undoubtedly dates back from that period. This impatience was openly expressed during the discussion about the 22 Prairial (10<sup>th</sup> June 1794) law. For the first time in quite a long time, several deputies protested and went as far as positioning themselves against certain articles of the law. Meanwhile, there was a rumour that the Republic was governed by Robespierre alone and that he was the "Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces" and the "King of France and Navarre". The British press spread the rumour and Barère became its spokesperson. That perfectly exemplifies the trap of popularity during a revolution: without popularity, you have no power and with too much of it, suspicion grows concerning the thirst for power. Moreover, Robespierre fell into the trap of meddling with everything and distrusting all. He took control of the National Police Office, appointed close friends of his to institutional positions and presided the Superior Being celebration. He imperiously imposed the law of the 22 Prairial, which terrified the deputies: the scheming politicians who felt threatened took advantage of the situation. Robespierre became aware of this danger at the beginning of the month of July 1794 and retired from public life,

but the damage was done. He put himself forward too much. His enemies took advantage of the situation to attribute the condemnations and arbitrary executions, which had surged since his departure,<sup>2</sup> to him. Robespierre, as a legalist, was then accused of being responsible for abusing his power, before becoming the ultimate terrorist. The day after 9 Thermidor (27<sup>th</sup> July 1794), this image of him, fabricated by his opponents out of thin air, was to be the lasting one. The author demonstrates this image-building in a very convincing way and reminds us that, only a few weeks later, Tallien invented the expression “terror system”, which had characterised the period in question and was to prevail. A new legend was born.

Robespierre himself preferred the term justice to the one of terror and tried to impose his point of view on that question for a long time. Judicial policies in the year II should have put an end to one another’s wrongdoing. The organisation of powers had been reviewed and corrected and a complex hierarchy had been put into place to control the acts of inferior authorities, whether they were revolutionary committees or mission representatives. However, this new organisation of revolutionary institutions needed time to become fully functional and the 9 Thermidor prevented these effects from happening and having a positive impact.

Robespierre’s new biography restores a human dimension to the persona. He was neither God, nor devil! He was simply a man entangled in the dilemmas of this uncanny event that he could only manage at one point before it was too much for him. The Thermidorians chose Robespierre to be their scapegoat in order to bestow upon him the entire responsibility of all revolutionary tragedies. Nonetheless, he was not the sole culprit and the author invites his contemporaries, readers and historians to be aware of and raise awareness about that fact.

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<sup>2</sup> From the 27 Germinal and 19 Floréal of Year II onwards, the revolutionary justice was based in Paris, which explains the rise in the number of suspects.