



David P. Jordan

Robespierre's revolutionary rhetoric

In geen andere tijd wegen woorden zo zwaar als in tijd van revolutie, zo stelt David P. Jordan. In onderstaand artikel schetst hij hoe Robespierre in zijn redevoeringen het concept van de Terreur inkleurde en zo zijn persoon voor eeuwig met deze radicale fase van de Franse revolutie verbond.

François Furet characterizes the Jacobin Club as one of the principle synapses of the Revolution, a junction through which passed popular impulses and petitions to the Convention and decrees and debates to the people.¹ The image needs nuance. The words with which the Jacobins and the so-called popular movement related to each other are important. It was not only a question of controlling the flow upstream and down, it was also a question of controlling the rhetoric and thus political discourse.

At no other time does the word matter so much in politics as in a revolution. The incessant stream of official pronouncements, propaganda, and slogans, in familiar rhetorical dress, is dammed in and new voices, hitherto largely unheard, take over. Citizens listen because what is said intimately affects their lives and hopes; their representatives listen because – at least in the French Revolution – oratory is the instrument of leadership and persuasion, the essence of politics. All the important leaders of the Revolution, until Napoleon, are great orators. Language itself, in this case French, evolves as it learns how to fight and the conventions of a court society drop along the way. The Jacobins were able, by controlling revolutionary rhetoric in Year II, to determine the language of the impulses set in motion and thus not only prescribed how the revolution was talked about but also which subjects dominated. More self-consciously than most of his rivals, competitors, and colleagues Robespierre set the tone of debate and simultaneously set the revolutionary agenda in Year II (1794). I want to focus here on the

1 François Furet, *Interpreting the French revolution* (Cambridge and Paris 1981) especially 38, 51-52, 56.

Convention session of 17 Pluviôse (5 February 1794) when Robespierre set forth the domestic policy of the Committee of Public Safety. Policy is too concrete a word; it presupposes specific actions and deeds which articulate general principles. Robespierre's discourse was far more abstract, the actions and deeds he announced were more often than not as general as were his principles. He had the most synoptic mind of the major Jacobin leaders, despite his solid quotidian grasp of politics. It was up to his listeners and adherents to make actual what he had articulated.

The Terror is the most problematic and morally fraught episode in the Revolution. So long as it was considered a necessary emergency measure forced upon France by circumstances external to the Revolution, terror was considered by most a justifiable response to Revolutionary crisis. The word *terreur* then meant forcing the nation to obey the new revolutionary government in its struggle to stay alive while punishing those who committed crimes against the Revolution. *Terreur* kept its literal meaning until the last months of 1793; extreme fear, with the added edge contributed by the Revolution of collective fear experienced by a group (or a population), inflicted upon them as a means of governing. This kind of terror is best studied at ground level, and has been well served by several monographs.²

As the ongoing crisis intensified, in the summer of 1793, the meaning of the word changed with circumstances. That summer, General Dumouriez fled and turned his coat, the Convention was purged by the Jacobins, Saint-Just and Robespierre were elected to the Committee of Public Safety, 26 of the 83 departments were no longer under the control of Paris (most notably those in the Vendée and the Midi where civil war raged) and the new constitution was shelved until the end of the war.

The habitual view of the Terror, both at the time and in a vast historiography, is that it was forced upon the Revolution by its enemies, particularly by the Hébertist uprising of September 5, 1793, which put the two popular fire-eaters, Collot d'Hérbois and Billaud-Varennnes, on the Committee of Public Safety and pushed the Convention Assembly toward the frightful

- 2 Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford 1973), and William Scott, *Terror and Repression in Revolutionary Marseilles* (London 1973), are older but still very good local studies of how the Terror worked at ground level in the provinces. More recently see David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York, 2006), and Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge, England, 1996).

Law of Suspects (September 17, 1793), the central legislation of terror. If the Revolution was to survive, the rationale runs (and ran), the most vigorous measures had to be used. The more sensible Jacobins – René Levasseur (de la Sarthe) is a good example³ – defended the Terror in practical terms as a temporary response to extraordinary circumstances, and he is representative of the range of Jacobinism, from the foot soldiers to the ideologues. Levasseur was a regicide, a *robesspierriste*, albeit one with reservations about the Incorruptible, and he survived Robespierre's fall. He had been sent *en mission* by the Jacobins which testifies to the purity of his radical credentials, and he proved himself a war hero at the battle of Hondschoote (September 8, 1793). He was also instrumental in the destruction of Pierre Philippeaux, his colleague from Le Mans who went to his death as a Dantonist; but he seems to have been uninterested in philosophical refinements and justifications for terror. He never spoke before the Convention (nor at the Jacobins it appears), and even from exile – he was among the scores of living regicides who were driven from France by the Restoration. He defended his actions, accepted the denouncement of 'terrorist' as a badge of revolutionary conviction and the necessity of violence, but never mentioned Robespierre's vision of terror as a weapon in the crusade for virtue. Kept in this register of self defense, a legitimate and even historically natural response to fear and threat, the terror then did not need – and continues for many writers not to need – any moral justification. Its practitioners are absolved in the name of necessity, as Levasseur let himself off the hook. This has been, until recently, the historical orthodoxy, an *apologia* for the Terror. It has the defect of lumping two different terrors into a single phenomenon.

Terreur, when considered as a deliberate policy not just to defend and save the Revolution by eliminating its enemies but as a weapon for transforming the Revolution and those it should benefit, is best understood as an ideological phenomenon. This approach describes the limited scope of this essay. As an ideology, terror is not tied to circumstances, but has its own driving force. The use of terror in this sense had been presented at the Paris Jacobin Club before the insurrection of September 5, 1793 which, in the conventional view 'forced' terror (and the Maximum) upon a reluctant Convention. Lucien Jaume argues that ideological terror can be traced back at least to August 10. The arrival of the *fédérés* who came for the *fête de la*

3 The *Mémoires de R. Levasseur (de la Sarthe), ex-conventionnel* have been republished (Paris 1989).

fédération in July and would stay to storm the Tuileries and dethrone the king, provided the catalyst.⁴ The so-called Hébertist insurrection in September only gave the Jacobin ideological initiative the popular support it needed. François Furet, in a famous argument, insists terror is inherent in the ideology of the Revolution itself, and the exclusions from the body politic of the privileged orders, first demanded by Sieyès in his 1788 pamphlet, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-Etat ?*, are a first step toward terror.

There is one further ingredient in ideological terror before it is given its definitive philosophical form by Robespierre. Saint-Just, in his *Rapport sur la nécessité de déclarer le gouvernement révolutionnaire jusqu'à la paix*, had chillingly argued, 'You have to punish not only the traitors, but even those who are indifferent; you have to punish whoever is passive in the republic, and who does nothing for it.'⁵ This extended the terror from deeds to motivation, from the external to the psychological, and thus expanded terror infinitely, both in duration and potential victims.⁶ The majority of those sent to the guillotine in Year II, according to the figures assembled by Donald Greer,⁷ mounted the scaffold for 'revolutionary opinions' or 'conspiracy', neither of which crimes involves action. In Saint-Just's view their crimes were committed before they were expressed or committed, as 'revolutionary opinions' or 'conspiracy'.

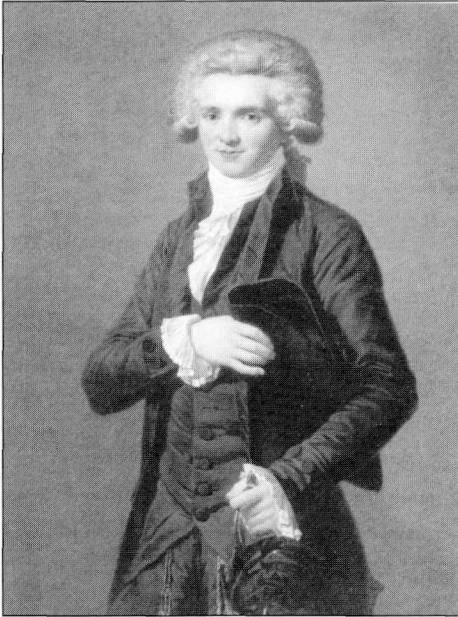
Although Saint-Just here remains in the register of defense and punishment and makes no arguments for Terror as the tool for creating virtue, he has introduced not only a shift in emphasis but in purpose. Detaching terror from circumstances (whether self-defense or revolutionary compulsion), which Saint-Just has already begun and which Robespierre would complete, moved the terror inward, so to speak, and in doing so closed debate on a subject that even before Robespierre's Pluviôse speech had

4 See L. Jaume, *Le discours jacobin et la démocratie* (Paris 1989) 117, where he specifically credits Royer, the 'porte-parole' of the *fédérés* at the Jacobins.

5 Saint-Just, *Œuvres choisies* (Collection idées: Paris 1968) 169. 'Vous avez à punir non seulement les traîtres, mais les indifférents mêmes; vous avez à punir quiconque est passif dans la République et ne fait rien pour elle; car, depuis que le peuple français a manifesté sa volonté, tout ce qui lui est opposé est hors le souverain; tout ce qui est hors le souverain est ennemi.'

6 In the same speech Saint-Just insists: '(...) tous les ennemis de la République sont dans son gouvernement' and: 'Vous n'avez plus rien à ménager contre les ennemis du nouvel ordre de choses, et la liberté doit vaincre à tel prix que ce soit.'

7 D. Greer, *The Incidence of the terror during the French Revolution. A statistical interpretation* (Cambridge 1935; reprinted, Gloucester 1966).



Portrait of Robespierre by Pierre Roch Vigneron (1791) in: David Andress, *The terror. The merciless war for freedom in revolutionary France* (New York 2005).

been relatively insignificant. It would be virtually impossible, leaving aside political considerations, to debate the meaning of a crime that was committed in the minds of men.

Of all the great events and movements in the Revolution the Terror is the least debated. There are, to be sure, calls for vengeance – the counterrevolution at Lyons called forth such rhetoric at this very moment – punishment, and intimidation, but these are not publicly argued so much as echoed and reiterated. And such demands are uniformly concerned with specific deeds that need punishment. Even the terrible Law of Suspects, the central legislation of the Terror (September

17), was not debated. Perhaps terror is inherently beyond debate precisely because it is an instrument to silence debate, and is motivated by fear.

Moving the debate away from circumstances effectively cut the ground from under those who saw it tied to the war, self-defense, and revolutionary discipline. Danton is the most famous victim of this Jacobin alchemy. He and the so-called 'indulgents' go to their deaths because they insisted the emergency measures, especially the Terror, could be gradually abandoned as the war situation improved. Danton's tragedy was to be three months premature in his call for the end of the Terror. The Jacobin shift of emphasis and purpose also, ironically, took away from the terrorists the rationalization of necessary violence. Official violence was about to become not only bureaucratized but morally beneficial, and those who, like Levasseur, resorted to violence out of the conviction of necessity and self-defense, would be deprived of their rationalization.

On December 5, 1793 (15 Frimaire) Robespierre intervened in response to a manifesto from Pitt (November 19) disclaiming any territorial ambi-

tions, insisting on England's sole motive as defensive, and reaffirming her determination to struggle against a doctrine 'that leads to the destruction of societies and the ruin of individuals.'⁸ Robespierre's defiant response is perhaps his earliest use of the word *terreur* in the special Jacobin sense under consideration here:

'The kings in coalition against the Republic make war on us with their armies, with intrigues and with slander. We will oppose to their armies our braver armies; to their intrigues the vigilance and terror of national justice; to their slanders, the truth.'⁹

Terror is the just response to intrigues in foreign affairs, those of the monarchical enemies; it is but a short step to domesticating the idea and turning it against French citizens. The full-blown theory of revolutionary terror does not yet exist, but the pieces are coming together.

We tend to forget, reading Robespierre, that behind his abstractions, his elevated rhetoric, his dense juxtapositions, lie the events of the Revolution to which he is responding. Between the declaration of Terror as the order of the day (October 10, 1793) and Robespierre's philosophy of terror in February lies a confused tangle of history which can only be selectively sketched here. The law of Revolutionary government had been passed on December 4, 1793, just as the massacres at Lyon were being perpetrated. By the middle of the month the British, bombarded by the young Napoleon Bonaparte who thus exploded into history, had evacuated Toulon. The foreign crisis seemed momentarily resolved. Attention turned to domestic matters. In early January Fabre d'Eglantine, Danton's friend and the poet of the revolutionary calendar, and most recently the creator and denouncer of the 'Foreign Plot', had himself been arrested, one of the first important Jacobins to fall. The following month, on February 5, 1794, Robespierre presented 'The Moral Principles that Ought to Guide the Domestic policies of the National Convention.'¹⁰ The title itself is instructive and indicative of Jacobin politics.

8 '[Q]ui tend à la destruction des sociétés et à la ruine des individus.'

9 *Cœuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, tome X, *Discours* (5^e) partie, 227. Les rois coalisés contre la République nous font la guerre avec des armées, avec des intrigues & avec des libelles. Nous opposerons à leurs armées des armées plus braves; à leurs intrigues, la vigilance & la terreur de la justice nationale; à leurs libelles, la vérité.

10 'Sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention nationale dans l'administration intérieure de la République.'

If one had to choose a representative Robespierre speech, or more generally a representative Jacobin speech, this is arguably the one. All the fundamental concerns of Jacobinism are present. Democracy is, for them, to be founded on a necessary and preemptory exclusion. Only those who are worthy are to be included in the new republic. The purifications at the Jacobin Club determined worthiness by judging the revolutionary biographies of all their members. Saint-Just's expression of the idea is more brutal and succinct than Sieyès's loathing of the privileged orders and his argument that the Third Estate contains all that is necessary for the nation: 'what makes a Republic', Saint-Just says: 'is the total destruction of all that is opposed to it.'¹¹ This is one of the paradoxes of Jacobinism. Because there is only a single truth, unanimous adherence is the only acceptable possibility. Those who are the minority do not get their rights protected, they get expelled, or worse. To create democracy one must behave undemocratically.

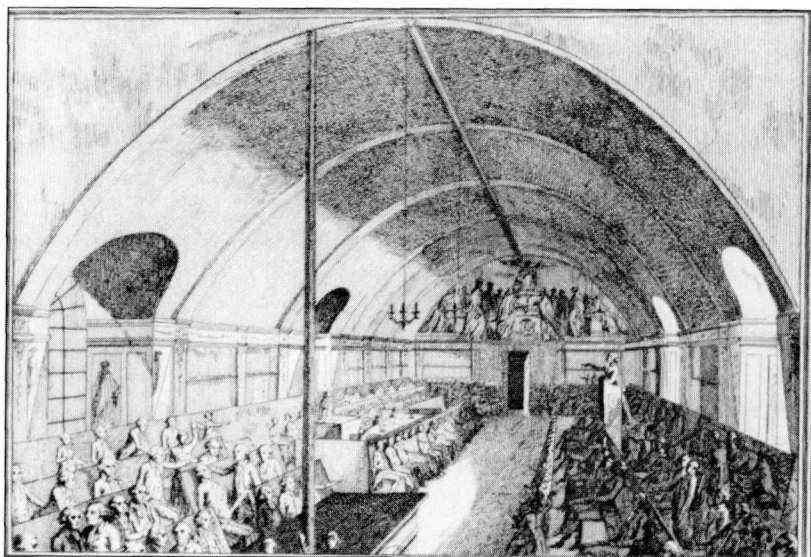
The experience of revolution led the Jacobins increasingly to blur the distinctions between an emergency government and a constitutional one, or at least a regular government and a necessary government. Terror until peace, proposed by Saint-Just in October, 1793, would become in Robespierre's formulation, terror until virtue is achieved. Jacobin rule, and the Terror, looked increasingly permanent. Robespierre argues that the Terror is 'less a particular principal as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the most critical needs of the country.'¹² Terror is here no longer a means of compelling the country to submit to revolutionary discipline or rectitude: it is now an emanation of democracy.

Much the same is true of the Jacobin insistence on the need to regenerate the people. There had been earlier formulae: education, new laws and institutions, even the later Festival of the Supreme Being, which Brissot had made in 1792, was the weapon of regeneration. At the time Robespierre thought these were extravagant claims for the energizing and restorative values of war, which would invigorate the nation and call forth patriots, while simultaneously exposing the duplicity of the king. He argued strenuously against the Brissotins, to no avail. The Jacobin Billaud-Varenne went much farther the following year. It was not the war that would regenerate France, but a reworking of human behavior:

'We must, so to speak, recreate the people we want to make free, for we must destroy ancient prejudices, change old habits, purify depraved affectations,

¹¹ Quoted in Jaume, 12.

¹² Quoted in Jaume, 13.



The former Jacobin church on Rue Saint-Honoré where the Jacobin club met and discussed the progress of the French Revolution in: G. Rudé, *Robespierre. Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (London 1975) 40.

check superfluous needs, extirpate inveterate vices. Thus we need strong action, vehement impulsion, sufficient to develop the civic virtues, and to suppress the passions of indecent desires, of intrigue, and of ambition.¹³

There is no way of knowing what was in Robespierre's mind when he wrote the speech of 17 Pluviôse. He was not a forthcoming man. Although he spoke often about himself he did so not with the self-righteous candor of Rousseau, but in abstractions: he was the voice of the people, the voice of the Revolution. We have only his words, cut adrift from their motives, and we are left to ponder their origins. He may not have been transparent, but he was a careful and lucid writer whose words are instructive and revealing.

Not only is Robespierre able to control whatever discussion of the Terror there was by fixing the parameters of debate in the Pluviôse speech, but in elevating the discussion to an abstract plane he effectively silenced any discussion of the Terror as a temporary and necessary response to circumstances. It was no longer a strategy or an expedient of government, a necessary world in which the survival of the Revolution absolved men of many acts. Terror was, rather, a principle of democracy, inherent in its

13 Quoted in Jaume, 111

struggle for realization. He additionally distanced himself from the actual acts of terror in this speech by his rhetorical choices. It is doubtful that he had any feeling for those who were terrorized for he seems not to have thought much about them. They too were abstractions, enemies, traitors, and aristocrats who had to be unmasked; but they were not individuals. His moral stance was clear and exonerated him and his ideals. He treated terror as a series of necessary actions whose goal was the achievement of a virtuous society. This utopian, even millenarian thinking was not new to the Revolution, but its attachment to terror was. Terror, now the law of the land, would be exercised against all those who blocked, opposed, corrupted, criticized, or disapproved of virtue. There was, for Robespierre, no need to apologize or excuse terror since it brought the nation closer to the goals of the Revolution. He had no sense of any personal psychological needs or drives, no sense of any desire for satisfaction or gain, even no sense of a love of power. He was only the instrument of the Revolution, the man through whom the Revolution spoke.¹⁴ A special kind of vanity.

He begins by insisting that heretofore the Revolution had been instinctive, reacting to circumstances as they arose. The sole guide to behavior was 'love of the good and a feeling for the needs of la Patrie.' There was no 'exact theory of the precise rules of conduct, for we hadn't the leisure to make one'.¹⁵ Now the time has come. First he presents a parallel series of antithesis, a familiar *robesspierriste* rhetorical device:

'We want to substitute in our country morality for egoism, probity for honor, principles for habits, duties for etiquette, the dominion of reason for the tyranny of fashion, the scorn of vice for the scorn of misfortune, courage for insolence, the greatness of the soul for vanity, the love of glory for the love of money, good men for good company, merit for intrigue, genius for cleverness, truth for brilliance, the charm of happiness for the *ennuie* of voluptuousness, the grandeur of man for the pettiness of the great, a magnanimous, strong, happy people, an amiable people, for frivolity and

14 I make this argument at length in my *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (New York 1985) *passim*.

15 Robespierre, *Œuvres*, X, 351. 'Mais, jusqu'au moment même où je parle, il faut convenir que nous avons été plutôt guidés, dans des circonstances si orageuses, par l'amour du bien et par le sentiment des besoins de la Patrie, que par une théorie exacte et des règles précises de conduite, que nous n'avions par même le loisir de tracer.'

misery. In a word, all the virtues and all the miracles of the republic for all the vices and all the absurdities of the monarchy.¹⁶

This can be read literally as a kind of revolutionary romanticism – some prefer fustian – but I think his intention is not to make a rhetorical catalogue of opposites. He is thinking of democracy, or a republic, in the terms that Montesquieu made famous in *l'Esprit des Loix*. Early on in his great treatise Montesquieu sets out the 'principles' of the three kinds of government – republic (which has both an aristocratic and a democratic form), monarchy, and despotism.¹⁷

'A great deal of probity is not necessary for a monarchical or a despotic government to maintain or sustain itself. The force of laws in a monarchy, and the constant threat of the prince's might in a despotism are sufficient to regulate or control all. But in a popular state one additional quality is needed, which is VIRTUE.'¹⁸

When Virtue is lost, he continues in a qualification Robespierre will twist, 'ambition fills men's hearts ready to receive it, and avarice affects all.'¹⁹

'Despotism is at the other end of the spectrum. Its principle is fear: Just as virtue is fundamental to a republic and honor to a monarchy, FEAR is fundamental to a despotic government. Virtue is completely unnecessary and honor would be dangerous.'²⁰

And Fear is no temporary expedient, no simple response to circumstances:

16 Robespierre, *Œuvres*, X, 352. 'Nous voulons substituer, dans notre pays, la morale à l'égoïsme, la probité à l'honneur, les principes aux usages, les devoirs aux bien-séances, l'empire de la raison à la tyrannie de la mode, le mépris du vice au mépris du malheur, la fierté à l'insolence, la grandeur d'âme à la vanité, l'amour de la gloire à l'amour de l'argent, les bonnes gens à la bonne compagnie, le mérite à l'intrigue, le génie au bel esprit, la vérité à l'éclat, le charme du bonheur aux ennuis de la volupté, la grandeur de l'homme à la petitesse des grands, un peuple magnanime, puissant, heureux, à un peuple aimable, frivole et misérable, c'est-à-dire, toutes les vertus et tous les miracles de la République, à tous les vices et à tous les ridicules de la monarchie.'

17 Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1951-58), II, Livre III, Chapitre 1. All references will be to this edition.

18 Montesquieu, III, 3, 251.

19 Ibidem, III, 3, 252.

20 Ibidem, III, 9, 258.

'A moderate government may, whenever it wishes and without risk, relax its principles. It supports itself by its laws and its inner strength. But when, in a despotic government, the prince ceases for a single moment to keep his sword suspended over his subjects, when he cannot instantly destroy annihilate those who hold the most important positions, all is lost. The essence of this government is fear and when it no longer is felt, the people have lost their protector.'²¹

These arguments and distinctions were as familiar to Robespierre's contemporaries as they were to him. The *philosophes*, along with some of the books and thought of Greco-Roman antiquity, provided a freemasonry of reference and argument for the revolutionaries. Robespierre's variations on these themes originally composed by Montesquieu, were both understood and original. 'In order to found and consolidate democracy, in order to reach the peaceful regime of constitutional laws', he argues, 'we have to end the war of liberty against tyranny and successfully get through the storms of the Revolution.' To do so he continues, echoing Montesquieu, 'the spirit of the revolutionary government' must be 'combined with the general principles of democracy'.²² Presumably the 'spirit of the revolutionary government' is the work of the Committee of Public Safety and the Terror, which seems here to be offered as a temporary expedient, an incorrect inference he will shortly clarify.

Robespierre accepts Montesquieu's definition of the spirit of democracy almost verbatim:

'And what is the fundamental principle of a democratic or popular government; what is, so to speak, the essential spring that sustains it and gives it movement? It is virtue. I am speaking of that civic virtue that did so much in Greece and Rome and which should produce even more astonishing results in Republican France. I am speaking of that virtue which is none other than the love of *la patrie* and its laws.'²³

At this point he diverges sharply from Montesquieu.

War and the imagined republic of virtue trump Montesquieu. Robespierre returns to his bellicose manner. 'We have to destroy the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with them.' The first maxim in

21 Ibidem, III, 9, 259.

22 Robespierre, X, 353.

23 Robespierre X, 353.

the war should be: 'one leads the people by reason and the enemies of the people by terror.'²⁴ To this point he is speaking of the first sense of terror I identified at the beginning of this essay, the temporary use of fear to impose discipline and destroy one's enemies. He continues, however: 'If the spring of popular government at peace is virtue, the spring of popular government in revolution is simultaneously *virtue and terror*. Virtue, without which terror is wicked; terror, without which virtue is impotent.' The yoking of virtue and terror is a stark departure from Montesquieu. As is his rhetorical emphasis on what he is saying: 'The government of the Revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.' A clever phrase that uses despotism as a positive aspect of the Revolution. Indeed it is a phrase that is not unlike Karl Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' a necessary bridge from revolution to republic (or Socialism). At this point in his argument Robespierre adds an even more radical idea:

'Terror [he says] is nothing more than prompt, severe, inflexible justice. It is thus an emanation of virtue. It is less a principle in itself as a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of *la patrie*.'²⁵

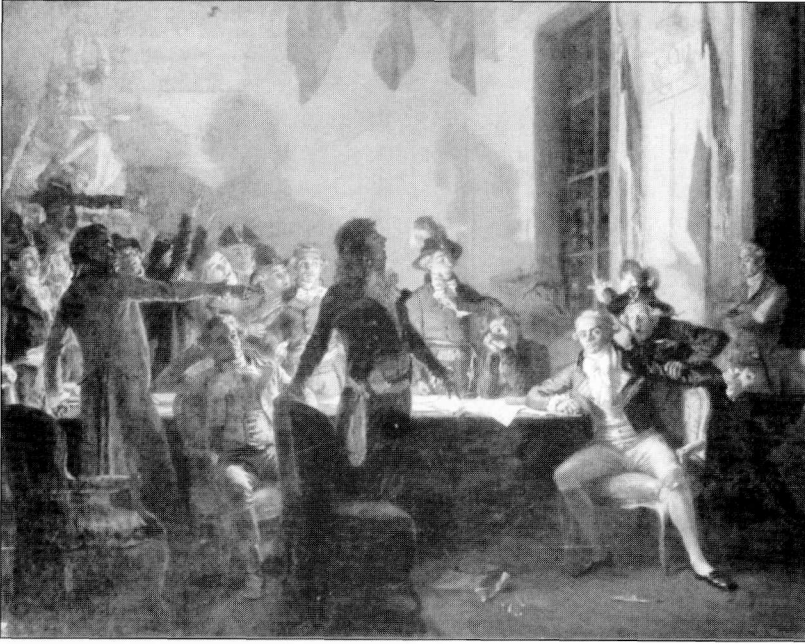
Montesquieu's ideas have been left far behind. Robespierre has now linked terror to justice and thence to democracy, and in doing so, in making it an emanation of democracy, he has freed terror from circumstances and made it, for all practical purposes, permanent. He now adds to this new definition of democracy a familiar Jacobin idea: the need for democracy to exclude from the body politic all those who are not actively involved in the war of 'liberty against tyranny'. He here argues syllogistically: 'The protection of society is owed only to peaceful citizens. In a Republic there are only citizens who are republicans. The royalists, the conspirators', he concludes, 'are nothing but strangers, or rather enemies.'²⁶

Robespierre has become, almost from the moment of his death, the whipping boy of the Terror. All the guilt and complicity, all the cowardliness and fear that swept so many into the vortex of terror, that made men who otherwise were very much like their neighbors – and very much like us – become terrorists, was dumped on Robespierre. Yet he was not the architect of the Terror, which was a collective effort throughout, and he himself, although he contributed significantly to the atmosphere of fear

²⁴ Ibidem, X, 356.

²⁵ Ibidem, X, 357.

²⁶ Ibidem, X, 357.



The night of 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794) when Robespierre fell from power, by Jean Joseph Weerts in: Andress, *The terror*.

and retribution that drove the Revolution for a time, was not among the monstrous terrorists. He was no Carrier, no Fouché, no Tallien, to mention only a few famous names of those who enjoyed their hideous work. He was, like so many of his revolutionary contemporaries, an intelligent, cultivated, socially responsible young lawyer, devoted to his siblings whom he cared for and supported, who slid slowly, even reluctantly, into the Terror. My purpose here is not to trace this slide, a task I have earlier attempted.²⁷ I am here interested in two aspects of the same phenomenon: how Robespierre talks about the Terror, and how he gave the Terror a philosophical (and perhaps moral) justification. It may have been (and remains), in a curious way, less reprehensible to have done hideous deeds than to have talked about them with a kind of cold-blooded reason. This need to fix ideology in words, to fix the rhetoric of the Revolution, provided Robespierre's fate.

In the French Revolution it was not just words that mattered, it was the connections that were made. Because the French revolutionaries held the

27 See my *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*.

immediate past, indeed the entire monarchical and noble past, in contempt – they invented the term *ancien régime* to describe all that came before 1789 – and because they saw the Revolution and their deeds not only as events but as an advent, it was necessary to find pedigrees for what they were doing. Ancient history provided one such lineage, and the names of Caesar and Brutus, Cato and Cicero, were regularly invoked. Another of these linkages was with the *philosophes*. What I have here described in Robespierre's reworking of Montesquieu is in this latter tradition.

He gave the terror a philosophical pedigree, a heritage, at a time when few were willing to speak about what they or others were doing. He did not invent Terror, any more than Machiavelli invented political treachery, but their names have stuck to these practices because they wrote about them. Whether the pen is mightier than the sword cannot be definitively known, despite the declarations of those who live by the pen. But it is most certainly true that the pen is the weapon of memory, and so it has proved in this case. Robespierre's own words have rendered him vulnerable to an accusation of monstrosity. Thus has he been remembered.