

# “Revolutionary politicians were more than an ideology on legs”

Edwina Hagen

---

*Edwina Hagen is a cultural historian and is an assistant professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She is an editor for Historica.*



Marisa Linton. Source: author's collection

**Marisa Linton (1959) is emeritus professor at Kingston University London. She has published numerous books and articles on the French Revolution, including *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* in 2013 and, most recently, *Terror: The French Revolution and its Demons*, with Michel Biard (2021). Linton regularly appears in the media and gives many public lectures about her work, in which she tries to unravel the enigma of the Terror. “A bloodless intellectual history approach offers too little explanation. Political ideas were important, but the Revolution was also a time of heightened emotions. The revolutionaries were people of flesh and blood. It is in fact absurd not to take their feelings into account as possible political motivations.”**

**For about thirty years you have been focusing on what is the ultimate issue in the historiography of the French Revolution: how should the Terror be interpreted?**

Yes, this complex question continues to intrigue me. The Revolution abolished the privileges of the upper classes and the Church, gave individual citizens their own platform through the press and politics and founded a liberal parliamentary democracy based on the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity. Why did that revolution turn so quickly into a republican dictatorship that guillotined not only its enemies but also its former friends? Unlike previous historical periods of terror (persecution of witches and ho-

mosexuals, for example), legalized methods of terror were deployed during the French Revolution to explicitly defend democratic values. As the title of my penultimate book *Choosing Terror* suggests, I strongly adhere to the notion of individual agency in this context: the revolutionary individual may have been subject to all kinds of social structures, but ultimately he or she always had a certain degree of freedom of action. I reconstructed the complex web of personal relationships and social networks that shaped everyday experiences of revolution. On this basis I concluded that personal ties and emotional factors also influenced decision-making in the French National Convention. It will come as no surprise that fear played a major role in this, but so did affection, ambition and enmity, mistrust and duplicity. Demonization by contemporaries (and historians) of Maximilien Robespierre as the sole architect of the Terror can therefore be contrasted with tactical choices that other revolutionaries made, both individually and collectively, and which also led to violence. In this way, my work constitutes a corrective to the socio-economic and ideological determinism of so many older, more structuralist histories of revolution. Politicians who, over time, chose state terror did so for a variety of reasons. In my opinion, what was important here was their shared commitment to the ideology of virtues, a language that the eighteenth century borrowed from classical republican antiquity. According to the thesis of the French historian François Furet, this political language of virtue contained the seeds of Terror. According



Marisa Linton and Edwina Hagen at the conference “Character Assassination, illiberalism, and the Erosion of Civic Rights” Spui 25, 22 June 2023  
Source: author’s collection

to him, the pressure to maintain a reputation for virtue would have inspired a lot of fear, because anyone who was exposed as not virtuous could end up on the guillotine. While Furet sees a very direct relationship between virtue and terror, I think that this dynamic only played out briefly in the year of the actual Terror itself, 1793. It was not the language itself, which had existed for much longer.

The connection between Enlightenment and Revolution is notoriously complicated. I also oppose the thesis of my British colleague Keith Baker, who states that elements of revolutionary political culture started in the mid-eighteenth century. I already see signs of this in the opposition to absolutism in the late seventeenth century. The word ‘virtue’ is of course rather archaic for us now; we no longer use it in a political context. During the Revolution it functioned as an ideological weapon against the financial and sexual corruption as remnants of the *Ancien Régime*. The revolutionary leaders were really completely obsessed with it. They examined its presence very critically, with themselves, but also with others, out of sheer fear that the other person’s political identity was unreal or not transparent, with the associated risk of conspiracies. This obsession with authenticity caused much of the escalating political tension. Men like Georges Danton, Louis-Antoine Saint-Just and Camille Desmoulins, whom I am currently studying, can nevertheless be regarded as the first

professional politicians in the modern sense. They made a distinction between their reputation to the outside world, a reputation for virtue, which amounted to what we now call authentic integrity, and what they felt deep within.

**How did you come to be involved – as a young woman from a non-academic background – with the politics of the revolutionary period for so long and so intensively?**

I am indeed what they now call a first-generation student and a second chancer. My Italian mother died when I was fifteen, and my English father became seriously depressed afterwards. I took care of him and was left to my own devices. The teachers at school showed little understanding of my situation and I underperformed. My lifelong interest in the Revolution began with the happy coincidence that one day, when I was twenty-three and by then a single mother of a one-year-old son, I went to see Andrzej Wajda’s French-Polish film *Danton* (1983) in the cinema. The crucial significance of that moment underlines for me how important the route of fiction can be to taking the path of professional historical practice. I now see the pitfalls of cinematographic historical representation, but then I was really captivated by that film. I thought, this is so interesting, so much more dramatic than much of British history. Inspired by this, I bought a popular history of the French Revolution – by Christopher Hibbert. Then I read Norman Hampson’s *Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, and George Rudé, *Robespierre* (1967) with excerpts from Robespierre’s speeches. Then there was no stopping me. I read the entire Revolution offering from the local public library and started ordering books through my library’s interlibrary loan system. A great resource, and free. I spent maybe a year reading whatever I could get my hands on. Other books I remember from that time that had a major impact on me included Thompson’s biography of Robespierre and R.R. Palmer’s *Twelve Who Ruled*. I expanded my search for reading material to other times and periods, European and British. But the French Revolution was the subject I was obsessed with. I went to university in 1984, just to read more books and get a scholarship to do so – that was still possible then. I chose Middlesex Polytechnic because it was accessible from where I lived in London, and because it offered a course on the French Revolution. I didn’t apply to a ‘real university’ because I doubted I would be good enough. At that time I could not have imagined that I was good enough to become a professional historian. In 1988 I graduated and received a major fellowship from the British Academy; later a Royal Historical Society Fellowship. Five years later I obtained my PhD on *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* from the University of Sussex.

**When you now look back on your impressive oeuvre, do you think that your historical-scholarly preoccupations could have had something to do with themes from your own ‘turbulent’ personal biography, whether consciously or not?**

That I know for sure. Personal experiences are formative, they shape your professional identity as a historian. This applies to all historians, with no exceptions. Our own preoccupations, our experiences, the questions we have about life, all determine the way we practice our profession. There’s nothing wrong with admitting that. History is not an ‘objective thing’. When I look back now, I see that my background and environment fuelled my great interest in politics and the questions I started asking about the past. Middlesex was not a predominantly white, middle-class institution. It was a very activist place – which gave me the impulses to think about the lived reality of radical politics. In turn, I related the experiences I gained in this environment to the way I approached the French Revolution. It was a lively time; I arrived in the middle of the 1984 to 1985 miners’ strike, in which Middlesex students supported the striking South Derbyshire miners, and I became very closely involved. Later there were occupations when attempts were made to close and sell the site on White Hart Lane, where the humanities were taught. Middlesex had great teachers. At the time, the history department included Norman Levy and Baruch Hirson, both of whom had been imprisoned in South Africa for their opposition to the apartheid regime. Both taught me a lot, and both were, in their different ways, excellent. And all the more interesting because they were also activists, who had lived their history and their politics. For example, I remember an inspiring lecture that Baruch Hirson gave, without any notes, on Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. When I started writing about politics, I incorporated my insights, partly derived from my own lived experience, into my approach. I wanted to explore the subject of revolution in my own way, follow the thread of the words and actions of the revolutionaries themselves and see where this thread led me. I wrote my dissertation on the politics of virtue in Enlightenment France – to understand the old regime before the Revolution. But most of what I’ve published since has been about the French Revolution, including *Choosing Terror*.

**Does this therefore imply that female historians write a different kind of history than men? After all, they have different life experiences.**

No, I don’t think so. Perhaps women have a slight tendency towards placing slightly different accents. I see myself as a hard-core political historian of revolution. I always knew that if I wanted to write about French revolutionary leaders, I would write mainly about men, in part for practical reasons. Women were informally involved in political events through their husbands, but had no voice in parliament. Relatively little source material has survived from them. The fact that, as a female historian, I did not limit myself to ‘women’s history’ was quite new in the 1980s.

When gender history was on the rise, I set up a ‘Gender and History’ group in Sussex for postgraduate students and interested academics. Glenda Sluga, now a renowned Professor of International History at the University of Sydney, was one of them. For three years we regularly organized conversations about alternative history. It was a very productive time. At the same time, I refused to be pigeon-holed as a female historian working on women’s and gender history. I remember once in the regular history seminar run by the academics, someone had delivered a paper, a rather boring paper, and Rod Kedward – well-meaning – looked at me and other members of the gender and history group and asked if we wanted to ask a question about women and gender. I was shocked at the obvious expectation that women would write women’s history, or pose the gender question. At the time, French revolutionary politics was still a field of research dominated by male historians. Particularly in Britain, there was a feeling that ‘high politics’ was more the domain of men than of women. As a fully-fledged political historian, I have only really been recognized since the publication of *Choosing Terror* in 2013. Yet in the early twentieth century there were some female historians who published formidable scholarly work on the politics of revolution. But lately the number of my gender and compatriots moving into this field has decreased. I am currently one of only a few British women working on the French Revolution.

**The history of emotions offers an important basis for explanation in your studies of revolution. Can you tell us something more about that?**

My interest is to trace the dynamics of revolutionary politics, in particular the role of emotions and personal relationships in what I call the “politicians’ terror”. The Terror meant the deaths of tens of thousands of ordinary men and women. If you look at the revolutionaries directly involved in formal politics, there were eighty-six victims. And that is not a small number when you think of it as a proportion of the deputies in the Convention. The number of deputies who sat in the Convention changed over time, but it started with 748 deputies. It is precisely the deaths of these men that are interesting to investigate in a biographical and meticulous manner. The terror that struck them struck at the heart of the revolutionary project. These prominent figures also left behind a huge trail of published and unpublished sources. Just like today’s politicians, they operated at different levels: ideological, goal-oriented and practical, but also emotional. People are complex. If, as a historian, you do not take this into account in your analyses, politicians from the past become nothing more than lifeless mouthpieces for certain points of view. Furet described Robespierre as ‘the purest mouthpiece of revolutionary discourse’. As if he were nothing more than an ideology on legs! The revolutionaries had their political vision but were also part of a prosopographical set of loyalties, family ties and friendships. And besides being militant, they were completely in the grip of fear, especially in the time of the purges, show trials and



coups that sent one faction after another, Girondins, Hébertistes, Dantonistes and Robespierristes to the guillotine. Yet for many historians of the past, politics was solely about ideas. But then they miss an important dimension. Not the only one, but still. Male colleagues keep emphasizing that I write about the soft side of politics, about ‘girly things’ like friendship and feelings. But the politics-emotion relationship is anything but soft. It is actually ‘hard stuff’. I derive much of my inspiration for my approach to the past from how today’s politicians manifest themselves. In the media you see how they are driven by jealousy, mistrust and ambition. I am especially reminded of the recently released memoir *Politics on the Edge* by British conservative politician Rory Stewart. He could not agree with Boris Johnson’s views on Brexit. At the beginning of September 2019, he was expelled from the Conservative group together with twenty (!) other parliamentarians. A political purge à la Robespierre, but without the guillotine! The purged MPs had supported a motion that would allow the House of Commons to block a no-deal Brexit. Stewart said it’s a miracle some of his former colleagues haven’t committed suicide; he’s thought about it himself, while others have had total breakdowns in public due to the almost untenable nature of their jobs. Stewart can only say this now that he has left politics. What particularly struck me, in light of my own research, is the discrepancy between what a politician shows publicly, their ‘public face’ in the media, and what goes on inside them.

**Most recently you were a historical consultant for a TV series that was billed as a prequel to the 1782 novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. That’s especially fun because you discovered history yourself through the film. I assume you believe that the historiography of revolution should also serve a wider audience where possible?**

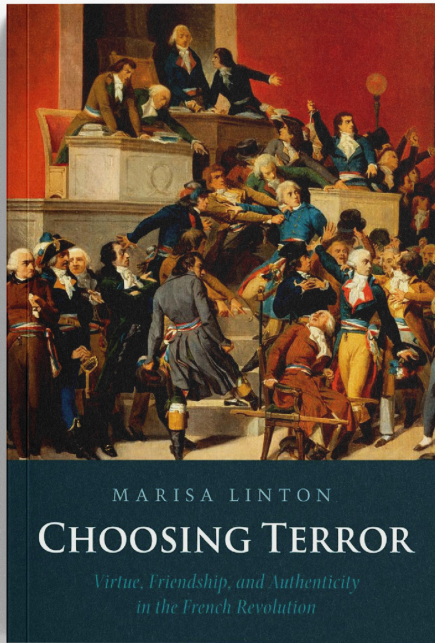
The history of revolution still requires further historical interpretation, by specialist historians and with the help of all kinds of innovative perspectives, such as gender and emotion history. This field of research is only increasing in importance. We certainly live in a time when a look at the world shows us that topics that I have been researching throughout my professional career are still relevant in many respects: revolution, terror, political virtue, political corruption, newly emerging political leaders and especially the power of emotion in politics. Knowledge of the period of revolution has perhaps never been so urgent and of such great current significance as in our turbulent times of resurgent political and climate activism. As a researcher of revolution, you cannot help but notice the many dangers posed by political instability. The chaos of 1793 was also dangerous for the revolutionaries themselves, especially in the then turbulent times of war. Populism and military dictatorship disrupted entire societies. Paradoxically, Robespierre himself warned against a military populist regime. A stable regime is of vital importance, but for this everyone must first have equal political rights. And how do you do that, other than with a revolution?

**A little about your own future. You are only sixty-four and already retired. How does this work?**

My main academic position was at Kingston University. I worked there from 1994 to 2019. Kingston’s history department was a small research support organization for many years and was a good place for me. I loved my students, because I taught many who reminded me of what I had once been: people who were the first generation in their families to go to college. I have also learned a lot from teaching the diverse intake of students in Kingston, which is highly representative of contemporary multicultural London. But things turned grim after the government lifted the cap on student numbers, causing some institutions to see an increase in intake while others struggled to survive. When Kingston management closed the history department in 2019, I took what they like to call “voluntary severance”. Now I only have an honorary status there. Since then, I have not only continued to do historical research, but I have also focused on other matters, such as historical consultancy.

**The French Revolution is a story about the emancipation of the individual, of individual agency. You were able to recognize yourself in this as someone who had to free herself from her social background and that is possibly a psychological explanation for your enthusiastic work ethic and great fascination for this period, you say yourself. But no one does everything on their own. You therefore also argue for the maintenance of facilitating structures.**

Yes indeed. I do not want to conclude with a gloomy conclusion. At twenty-four, I saw an opportunity to reshape my life, to get a second chance, and I took it. It is crystal clear that without the same financial structures it has now become more difficult for someone in my circumstances to build a viable career as a historian. This breakdown is not only detrimental to a few. It also has repercussions on the state of research into the French Revolution in Britain more generally. Despite some individual publications, there has been a decline in both historians in academic positions and doctoral students specializing in the French Revolution. There are several reasons for this. I don’t think the decline is due to a lack of interest among the general public. Students I have taught, sixth graders I speak to and the general public I address generally find the Revolution fascinating and exciting. But they so often assume ignorance; there is also often a kind of nervousness, which partly stems from the decline of French language education in Britain. Unless young people have a French family or background, they rarely know much French and show little familiarity with French culture, politics – or history. When students choose doctoral subjects at a later stage, they are, quite understandably, inclined to choose more ‘global’ topics rather than national subjects, as they are told – probably rightly – that this is more likely to get them an academic job. But when I look back on my own experiences and how, as an adult student, a single parent, without financial resources, and not from a privileged background, I was able to pursue



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



TALLIEN.

On the 9th of Thermidor, Tallien threatened in the Convention to use his dagger if the National Convention did not order Robespierre's arrest. Engraving by Lecouturier after a drawing by Auguste Raffet, Paris, published by Furne and W. Coquebert, 1847. Source: Public Domain

a career in the study of the French Revolution, I am aware of two things: the importance of the crucial decisions I have made, and the importance of a grant system like the funding from the British Academy.

### References

Last June, Linton was a keynote speaker at the international conference *Character Assassination, Illiberalism, and the Erosion of Civic Rights*, held in Amsterdam. This interview was conducted partly during that conference and partly via Zoom. With the permission of the interviewee, I was also able to draw on an as yet unpublished lecture on Linton's personal experiences as a female historian of the French Revolution for the Society for the Study of French History, given at the University of Liverpool in June 2023.

Marisa Linton's lecture during the conference *Character Assassination, Illiberalism, and the Erosion of Civic Rights* in Amsterdam on 22 June 2023, entitled "'I was Always the First to Denounce my Own Friends': Virtue and Denunciation in the French Revolution', can be listened to via this link: <https://spui25.nl/programma/tyranny-and-terror>