



Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life

Peter McPhee

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For some historians and biographers, Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94) was a great revolutionary martyr who succeeded in leading the French Republic to safety in the face of overwhelming military odds. For many others, he was the first modern dictator, a fanatic who instigated the murderous Reign of Terror in 1793–94. This masterful biography combines new research into Robespierre's dramatic life with a deep understanding of society and the politics of the French Revolution to arrive at a fresh understanding of the man, his passions, and his tragic shortcomings.

Peter McPhee gives special attention to Robespierre's formative years and the development of an iron will in a frail boy conceived outside wedlock and on the margins of polite provincial society. Exploring how these experiences formed the young lawyer who arrived in Versailles in 1789, the author discovers not the cold, obsessive Robespierre of legend, but a man of passion with close but platonic friendships with women. Soon immersed in revolutionary conflict, he suffered increasingly lengthy periods of nervous collapse correlating with moments of political crisis, yet Robespierre was tragically unable to step away from the crushing burdens of leadership. Did his ruthless, uncompromising exercise of power reflect a descent into madness in his final year of life? McPhee reevaluates the ideology and reality of "the Terror," what Robespierre intended, and whether it represented an abandonment or a reversal of his early liberalism and sense of justice.

Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life Details

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From Reader Review Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life for online ebook

Avis Black says

You wouldn't think the French Revolution and its most well-known mass murderer would be dull, but the author manages to make it so. My God, this thing is a plod.

Shawn says

There's no doubt that Robespierre, especially in the last several months of his life, is a problematic figure, but I was pleased to find that McPhee treats him largely sympathetically. I'm always amazed at the great sympathy so many Americans evince for the victims of the French Revolution (and for those of the Russian, as well) including even the King and Queen, (and the Tsar and his family) while exhibiting so little for the hundreds of thousands (at least) of victims of the *ancien regime*. (And I thought Thomas Jefferson must have been rolling over in his grave when Americans were weeping over Princess Diana.)

This is a fair portrait of a man who, dedicated to Enlightenment principles, found himself trapped by the necessity to sometimes betray those principles to defend the Republic against the combined might of the rest of Europe. A tragic figure in the truest sense.

Katherine says

Insanely thorough, unbiased, and informative, but sadly lacking much narrative panache. Also definitely hard to follow if you don't already have a grounding in the French Revolution; some biographies are better about hand-holding the historical background, but my basic understanding of the broad strokes of the French Revolution was not enough for me not to get mixed up hearing terms like Sans-culottes or Girondins.

Konstans says

♥ Kitab?, merkezinde Maximillien Robespierre'in oldu?u iç içe geçmi? halkalardan olu?an bir bütün olarak dü?ünmek mümkün. Aile durumundan, do?umuna, e?itiminden k?sa süren siyasi ya?am?na kadar ön planda ne kadar kendisi olsa da -ki biyografisi oldu?u üzere- asl?nda 18.yy Fransas?n? tan?yoruz bu eserle.

◆ Bu iç içe geçmi? halkalar?n her birinin temsil etti?i üzere, Fransay? arka planda toplumsal, siyasi, ekonomik ve çok az da olsa askeri aç?lardan anlat?yor McPhee. Bu kitab? okuyarak Robespierre'i tan?makla birlikte dolayl? olarak Fransa k?rsal?n? ve kentini, e?itim sistemini, Fransada siyaset yapma ve politika üretme gelene?ini, 18.yy Fransas?n?n ekonomik ya?ant?s?n? ve halk?n içinde bulundu?u maddi ko?ullar? da ö?renebilmek mümkün. Frans?z ihtilaline giden süreci aktar?rken Özellikle Bastille hapisanesinin bas?lmas?ndan sonraki dönemi, Robespierre dönemin bizzat içinde yönlendirici bir figür oldu?undan çok net görebilmek de mümkün.

♣ Kitabın üslubunu nötr diye düşünmek istiyorum, Robespierre'e ne sempati ne de antipati beslemeye yol açan bir tavır var. Kaynak olarak dönemin bazı kaynakları ile beraber Robespierre'in mektupları, konuşmaları, notları, kızkardeşi Charlotte'un anıları gibi kişisel belgeler de kullanılmış.

♠ Biyografinin tek zayıf noktası, Robespierre'e yönelik oluşan muhalefetin ona karşı hiç dolu bir nefrete dönüşmesini detaylarıyla aktaramaması.. kitap, hikayesi birden noktalanan romanlar gibi birden bitti.

♥ Yine de Robespierre bana göre tarihin en önemli figürlerinden biridir. Popüler kültürde kendisine bir türlü yer bulamamasını, insanların kalplerini titreten romantik bir aşk hikayesi barındırmayan yaşam servenine bağlıyorum. Bunun dışında hakkında yazılanların okunması gerektiğini düşünüyüm, düşünceleri, tasarımları ve yaklaşımları ile ilham ya da ibret verici olabilecek birisidir Maximillien Robespierre. kib bye

Alexandra says

It's a running joke in my Revolutions class that I have a little history-crush on Peter McPhee - one that I do all I can to play up, in all honesty. Robespierre has not, however, been my particular revolutionary crush; that's Danton. After reading this biography, I'm half tempted to switch my allegiances... but the larger than life Danton is still more alluring than the somewhat severe Robespierre.

Anyway, this biography is exactly what I was hoping for. It's clearly written and easy to read; I don't know accessible it would be for someone with zero knowledge of the revolution, but I'm no expert and I had no trouble following it. It follows Robespierre's life chronologically - indeed giving a bit of background on his family too - and provides what felt like an appropriate amount of background and contextual information on the realities of life throughout France, reasons for revolution, and attitudes among different groups for the duration of said revolution.

I've not read any of the other numerous biographies of "the Incorruptible," and McPhee gives an interesting overview of them in his final chapter. I know that some have tended towards utter condemnation, but I didn't realise that others turned into panegyrics. This one certainly comes down largely in favour of Robespierre as a man and a politician, demonstrating quite conclusively how consistent his ideals and desires were, even predating the revolution of 1789 that made at least some of those ideas acceptable. McPhee doesn't shy away from the fact that lots of people died in the Terror, but does point out that in no way can the majority be laid at Robespierre's feet - he was horrified by the actions of some deputies in rural France. He also doesn't shy away from the likelihood that Robespierre was in fact going too far, by mid-1794, and may even have been tending towards paranoia.

If you're at all interested in this period, or in how a leader can influence events, this is a really brilliant bio.

georgia ? says

4.5 stars

John Weathers says

An excellent biography of a much maligned and fascinating subject. The author sets himself the task in the introduction of answering the question: "How it could be that someone who articulated the highest principles of 1789 could come to be seen as the personification of the 'Reign of Terror' in 1793–94?" I think he does an admirable job at doing so while placing Robespierre in his context. While certainly coming across as sympathetic to Robespierre, McPhee strikes a nice balance in presenting the various conflicting opinions about Robespierre by his contemporaries and historians and showing these opinions in their context. He also does a great job of staying on his subject and not getting distracted too much by many of the other magnetic personalities that played pivotal roles in the events of the Revolution.

My only criticisms are that McPhee tends to leap about chronologically a bit much when trying to connect details which sometimes causes the reader to lose a proper sense of narrative; and that his great job of staying focused on Robespierre sometimes errs in narrowness and leaves out context that would be helpful in understanding the subject. For example, the relationship between Robespierre and Danton is hardly covered and when Danton is introduced, in many ways he is just a name. While it is one thing to go off giving a micro-biography of secondary subjects, it is another to not quite give them enough flesh to demonstrate their significance in the life of the primary subject.

I happily recommend this biography to those interested in Robespierre, The French Revolution, and the continuing struggle for some of the Revolution's highest ideals.

Gökhan says

Çeviri bence çok kötü maalesef!

Carl says

Maximilien Robespierre was one of the foremost figures of the French Revolution, a super-energetic and remarkable man who was an eloquent speaker, writer and leader. Unfortunately, he was also very polarizing: people either adored him or loathed him. For awhile he was on top of the deadly snake-pit of revolutionary politics, sending counter-revolutionaries to the guillotine by the score, but he scared too many people, and he ended up in the guillotine himself.

The book covers his whole life, from a troubled childhood through his excellent education, and his almost instantaneous rise from an obscure delegate to Paris to the top of the political pyramid.

A problem I had with the book was that it assumes the reader has a detailed knowledge of the French Revolution. The book gives very little background to the biography, which sometimes left me in a fog. Before you read the book you should first read a book about the Revolution.

Noah says

McPhee does a largely admirable job of documenting Robespierre's life, but the book is often lacking in context, leading any reader not thoroughly acquainted with the history of the French Revolution confused at times.

Kettlehewer says

I had Peter McPhee as a lecturer for a French Revolution subject in my second year of university. Excellent lecturer, who is passionate about the subject and really, really knows his facts. We spent one lecture talking about Robespierre, and I was completely fascinated. It was funny to find that one of the best-rated biographies of ol' Maxime was written by my teacher. Go figure.

This biography is very balanced, and gives a very fair view of Robespierre as a person and a historical figure. Refreshingly, there's no slander or inaccuracies here, just facts. I'm not sure if McPhee is a fan of Robespierre himself (though I suspect he might be) - but I certainly am, after having had a peek deep into who Robespierre was. Yes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but he was human, too.

I really recommend this biography to anyone who just wants the facts and wants to bypass the centuries-long drama over who people think Maximilien Robespierre was.

Peter Pinkney says

At last a book that gives a fair, and dare I say it, positive view of Robespierre. I have long been an admirer of The French Revolution and especially of Marat and the great Robespierre. Most books are sympathetic to the great orator Danton and to the poster boy of the revolution Camille Desmoulins. They all vilify Robespierre, even the ones that pretend to give a fair assessment such as Ruth Scurr.

This book, which is well researched and written, tells of the real Robespierre, a humane man who cared about equality, and fought to rescue the people from despair and poverty. This is the real Robespierre, the man who became the scapegoat for the excesses of others.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

In *Danton*, the 1983 biopic based on the life the French revolutionary, the eponymous hero, standing on the threshold of execution, says that "Everything might go on fine if I could give my legs to that cripple Couthon and my balls to Robespierre."

George Couthon, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, the dictatorial body that presided over the Reign of Terror, was indeed a cripple. Maximilian Robespierre, likewise a member of the Committee of Public Safety and Danton's nemesis, was the Revolution's virginal ascetic, the virtuous 'sea-green incorruptible.'

Put another way: sans balls! He was not as other men; he was not as the sybaritic Danton, perfect in his

imperfections. I wish I could be sure that Danton actually said those words, that they did not simply emerge as a piece of poetic licence; for they really do, in all their crudity, cut to the heart of the matter and the man; they cut to the heart of the high priest of the cult of virtue. Personally I can think of no better epitaph.

These thoughts were brought on by my reading over the weekend of *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, a new treatment by Peter McPhee, professor of history at the University of Melbourne and a specialist on France. I think I must be the last person to be reviewing a book on Robespierre, for I have no sympathy whatsoever for the subject, the first of history's modern fanatics. I'll try my hardest to be fair but do treat my words with a modicum of caution!

I can certainly be fair to McPhee, whose work is balanced, lucid and scholarly. Any biography of Robespierre presents difficulties because he left little in the way of personal introspection, anything that would give a clue to his psychological makeup. But the author builds up a careful portrait, drawing on what contemporary evidence is available.

The chapters on his early life and schooling are good, showing the boy as the father of the man. Robespierre was one of the brightest pupils at Louis-le-Grand, the leading school in France at the time, where he immersed himself in the Roman classicists, particularly Cicero. He also read deeply into the work of Montesquieu and Rousseau.

Virtue and what it means to be virtuous was to emerge as the leading theme of Robespierre's life. In 1789 he wrote the duty of rulers was "to lead men to happiness through virtue, and to virtue through legislation." There is an echo here of the American Declaration of Independence, which, among other things, defines the pursuit of happiness to be an inherent right. But America was fortunate enough to escape real definitions of happiness and how the elusive creature was to be caught; France did not. The chimera was to be conjured up in the so-called Republic of Virtue, Robespierre's legacy to history.

The paradox is that by any measure Robespierre began as a decent human being, genuinely concerned with the various abuses suffered by ordinary people under the old political order. Though of the left, he began his career as a moderate. He was opposed to the declaration of war against Austria in April, 1792, a step urged on by the Girondins, and he was initially opposed to the overthrow of the monarchy later that same year. He also argued against the expulsion of the Girondins from the Convention after the political mood had turned against them. But as the climate turned radical Robespierre turned more radical. A member of the Mountain in the Convention, he was, for a time, their Mohammad.

Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death*, upon which the above named movie was based, has some fascinating exchanges between Danton and Robespierre. Picture the scene: it's the spring of 1794, the height of the Reign of Terror. Danton argues that enough is enough, that the Revolution is drowning in blood. In response Robespierre says that the social revolution isn't over yet and he who makes half a revolution digs his own grave. For him Terror had become the emanation of virtue, the only certain way that France could attain revolutionary happiness.

McPhee does a superb job in sailing through these stormy waters. He shows a man who came to believe that the destiny of the Revolution ran through his own person. For him patriotism was a black and white issue, with good revolutionaries on one side and evil counter-revolutionaries on the other. In other words, by 1794, Robespierre was no longer capable of discriminating between dissent and treason. Not even friendship got in the way. This absence of subtlety was to consume Camille Desmoulins, once his most intimate associate, insofar as this priggish man could be close to any individual.

Blind fanaticism was the corruption at the heart of virtue. The decisive moment here, the moment that foretold Robespierre's doom, was the French victory over the Austrians at the battle of Fleurus in June 1794. All at once the military crisis had passed; France was no longer in danger; the justification for the Terror was over.

There are deeper issues here, things the author does not touch, largely, I suspect, because they are beyond the provenance of history, more a matter of philosophical and psychological speculation. What, in the end, would a true Republic of Virtue look like? Could this political Garden of Eden exist beyond the pages of Rousseau and the mind of Robespierre? My own answer is simple enough; that the Terror was to disguise the impossibility of Virtue; it was compensation for frustrated dreams of purity. As I once wrote in a review of *Danton's Death*, Robespierre was the monster of the idea, a prototype for others to come. He is the one historical figure for whom I have a particular loathing. McPhee did well to steer me calmly through a rocky life.

Gabriel says

Excellent! The most complete revision of the literature surrounding the figure of Robespierre and a new analysis of Robespierre's life as a young man and his passionate life for revolutionary change encompassing the struggle for liberty, equality and fraternal values, and his commitment for a free people of Europe from the chains of monarchical life and the privileged seigneurial landowners, nobles, clergy and aristocracy. McPhee does justice to Robespierre and his aim for a French People's Republic, with the intention to foment civic virtues and a democratic culture that would prevent the rise of fascism, uncritical assumption of any kind of unreasonable authority as well as social injustice. In particular, he shows us an uncompromising fidelity of the militant and her will, and a turbulent event gathered together at this time, entailing notions of great courage in order to balance the civic duties of the French Revolution of 1789/the rights of man of 1792 and the war effort against national counter-revolution and the constant attacks received by repressive monarchical regimes of Europe. As the author states in innumerable reports and speeches given by the 'incorruptible' (first from the Assembly, National Convention and then the Committee of Public Safety), Robespierre warned and was against the (start of the) war, violence and condemned the excesses of the military, ministers and delegates in the provinces, which is far from the largely pervasive literature that pinpoints the leader as a tyrant, dictator or a man drawn to the spilling of blood (or even more for those who exploit the figure of Robespierre, for those in the far right, who see him as the embodiment of the start of modern totalitarianism- that is basically those who condemn any social change and anyone who is committed enough to change this crucial system which they justify and give legitimation, that is, protecting certain elite interests)

An authoritative and academic historian's stab to the fraudulent, pseudo-psychological, interested accounts that encompass so many biographies on Robespierre.

Anna C says

"Virtue, without which terror is fatal. Terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice."

Robespierre and I have a difficult relationship. Although I think he was a tortured and brilliant man who has been maligned by history, I can never forgive him for purging the Dantonists. I once had a minor panic attack over the death of Desmoulins and accidentally quoted "Prisoner of Azkaban" ('He was your friend!!! And you betrayed him. He was your friend!').

Peter McPhee's biography of Robespierre is detailed and balanced, almost to a fault. The reader is expected to have a comfortable grasp of Revolutionary history. To his credit, McPhee avoids drama for academic precision- the Girondist and Dantonist purges, which even a talentless director could turn into compelling cinema, are given as much space as Robespierre's prize-winning essay on Rousseau.

Although it makes for dry reading, "Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life" is the best biography I have read of The Incorruptible. The only true misstep comes in the introduction, when McPhee appears to claim that Robespierre is the most difficult biography subject of all time. Aside from that bizarre note, he avoids generalizations or assumptions. These are the facts, laid out accurately and precisely, uncolored by emotion. Though I would not call him a Robespierre apologist, McPhee has divorced his subject from the slanders and outright lies.

In fact, I would call this the Robespierre myth-buster book. McPhee easily dismantles the pop culture portrayal of his subject. Robespierre was not a blood-thirsty monster- he struggled to reconcile his opposition to the death penalty with the political necessity of Louis XVI's death. Additionally, McPhee shows that the worst escalations of the Terror happened when Robespierre was indisposed or ill. He tepidly advances the thesis that Robespierre's enemies sent hundreds to the guillotine to turn public opinion against him, but neither McPhee nor his readers are expected to believe that idea.

I commend McPhee for debunking tenacious myths that appear in even modern scholarship. For example, I had always believed the old story about Robespierre decorating his room with busts and portraits of himself. McPhee produces compelling evidence that this was a slander (in retrospect, it seems odd for a timid ascetic to glorify himself so openly). Additionally, Ms. Mantel had convinced me that Robespierre had an affair with Eleonore Duplay, the daughter of his landlord. McPhee again cites convincing proof that this is a fabricated rumor.

So yes, I don't like Robespierre. I still can't forgive him for killing his best friends. However... he was not a blood-thirsty monster. Maximilien Robespierre was a studious, incorruptible ascetic. He loved the heroes of the classics more than his actual friends, and he idolized the Revolution enough to ignore its flaws. Personally, I don't see him as a cunning, manipulative Game of Thrones character. He may have survived the Revolution, if not for some cringe-worthy political moves and inept speeches before the Jacobin club.
