
MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE AND THE REIGN OF TERROR IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Richard Adewale Elewomawu

Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa, Kogi State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Man's liberty from fiefdom and serfdom can be traced to the French Revolution that took place between 1789 and 1794. The ordinary people of France took to the street destroying all the institution of their rulers, killed and obliterated the Royal family and the nobles, drafted a new constitution and instituted Representative government. The new government declare all citizens equal irrespective of their origin. During this revolution arose an obscure man, Maximilien Robespierre, who later became the most popular personality of the revolution. There has been a sharp divide among historians and other scholars as to the real contribution of Robespierre in the Revolution. Some scholars see Robespierre as the pillar and the hero of the revolution while others perceived him as the man who unleashed terror on the people of France through the revolution. This study examines the influence of Maximilien Robespierre on the French Revolution exploring the polar views of several historians and scholars on the unending debate.

Keywords: Robespierre, Revolution, Terror, Virtue

One of the most controversial and unresolved issues in the French Revolution is the representation of Maximilien Robespierre. Prior to the Revolution, Robespierre was virtually an obscure person in France. The revolution 'gave birth' to so many children such as Danton, Brissot, Saint-Just, Collot d'Herbois, Couthon, Marat etc but none was as famous or notorious as Robespierre. This is due to his principal roles in the Terror years after the execution of King Louis XVI. Some described him as a tyrant, despot, sadist and narcissist. While others have presented him as a hero, saint, prophet, visionary leader, defender of the poor and the pillar of the French Revolution. These diverse views about Robespierre makes him an interesting topic to study. This research will attempt to examine the various views on Robespierre: was he a hero of the revolution or the villain? Did the French Revolution destroy him, or did he destroy the revolution? Through the views of eminent scholars of the French Revolution, this study will try to x-ray the kind of person Robespierre was; was he really a monster? What were the intentions of Robespierre in the revolution? Was he a hypocrite or did he intend well for the revolution?

The personality of Maximilien Robespierre in the French Revolution is a topic that has deeply polarised academic researchers. It is almost impossible to come across a moderately-viewed or middle-viewed scholar on this topic. It is usually ‘pro-Robespierre’ or ‘anti-Robespierre’. The pro-Robespierre such as Peter Mcphee, Marisa Linton, George Rude, John Merriman, J. M. Thompson and so on see him as not only “the Revolution’s outstanding leader at every stage of its most vigorous and creative years; but also as the first great champion of democracy and the people’s rights which represents greatness”.¹ Jonathan Israel, Simon Schama, Colin Jones, John Hardman, Jean Artarit and so on portray him as a “paranoid psychopath, a vicious narcissist, one of the greatest exterminators of innocent people and studying him was a journey into the heart of darkness”.² To Jonathan Israel and anti-Robespierre, Robespierre was a monster, blood-sucker who enjoyed the use of terror to suppress opposition. However, this study finds the latter view to be too much of an exaggeration. Robespierre was formed by the circumstances he found himself and was actually a victim of conspiracy of his colleagues.

After the overthrow of the Monarchy, the legislative Council and the existing constitution were dissolved. On 20th September 1792, the National Convention came to power after a new election was held. The new National Convention declared France a Republic, drafted and adopted a new constitution with a bicameral legislative council. A directory of five members with five years’ tenure was elected from the council. The properties of the nobles and clergies were confiscated and redistributed to farmers. Price for staple goods were fixed, new national calendar was created, and a temporary government was formed. This temporary government was known as the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security. These committees were later dominated by the Jacobins, a group of staunch supporters of the revolution with some extreme views against opposition to the revolution.

During the reign of the committee of public safety which is generally regarded as ‘the reign of terror’, thousands of people were killed. A lot of these people were executed through the ‘guillotine’. The guillotine was like a ‘National executing Razor’ which was used to chop off the heads of anti-revolutionaries. It was usually like a ceremony where the people gathered to watch the executions. The deposed king and queen were put to death with the guillotine. The reign of terror was a period of fear in France and perceived opposition was intolerable. The reign of terror was ignited by the Law of 14 Frimare and sealed with the Law of Praimaire. Trials of suspects became mere formalities, people were convicted and killed by mere suspicion or a show of unenthusiasm towards the revolution. Despite the bloodletting by the National Convention, Mcphee argues that “there was no one moment at which the National Convention decided upon a

¹ G. Rude, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (London, 1975), p.213

² Eli Saga in P. Mcphee, the Robespierre Problem: An Introduction, *H-France Salon*, Vol. 7, Issue 14, No. 1 (2015), pp. 1 – 11, p. 2

system of government which they called ‘The Terror’³. But Linton claims that “for the first time in history terror became an official government policy, with the stated aim to use violence in order to achieve a higher political goal”.⁴ The revolutionaries who spearheaded this carnage and terror on France were the members of the Committee of Public Safety. Members included Couthon, Danton, Carnot, Barere, Saint-Just etc. and it was led by no other than Maximilien Robespierre.

So, who was Maximilien Robespierre? Born on 6th May 1758 in Arras, a small town in the province of Artois. His father was François Derobespierre who was a lawyer from a middle-class family of lawyers. His mother was Jacqueline who died when Maximilien was six years old due to complications from childbirth. François became unstable and desolate, went to Munich, Germany and even though he came home occasionally due to financial crisis, he never gave time to Maximilien and his siblings any more. Having lost parental care, Maximilien had to move to stay at the brewery of his grandparents.⁵ He was an intelligent pupil. This gained him scholarship to study at the best school in France, the College of Louis Le Grand in Paris. He stayed there for twelve years between 1769 and 1781 where he claimed to have had contact with J. J. Rousseau. He became a licensed lawyer in May 1781. On several occasions, he was reprimanded by the Bar bench for his derogatory remarks about the aristocrats.

On his return to Arras, he continued his law practice defending the poor against the nobles. He believed that the poor are deserving of justice in an unjust world and there should be representative government. He gradually gained the reputation of ‘the people’s lawyer’ and later ‘the incorruptible’. Robespierre was living an obscure and blameless life as a poor provincial lawyer. He lived a solitude and isolated life. Robespierre’s sister, Charlotte said “a total change came upon him, forming like all other children of his age, he was thoughtless and turbulent and flighty. But since he became the family head, so to speak, by virtue of being the eldest, he became settled, responsible and laborious, he spoke to us with the kind of gravity which impressed us. If he was to take part in our games, it was in order to direct them. He loved us tenderly and there were no attentions and caresses that he did not lavish upon us”.⁶

He generally developed into a radical democrat who believed in equal rights for all regardless of birth or wealth, defended the civic rights of religious minorities, against slavery in French colonies, opposed death penalty and upheld liberty of the press. When someone was condemned

³ P. Mcphee, *the Robespierre...*, p. 7

⁴ M. Linton, *Robespierre and The Terror*, ([https://www.academia.edu/5514329/Robespierre and the Terror?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/5514329/Robespierre_and_the_Terror?auto=download)), Accessed on 7/4/2017

⁵ P. Mcphee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*, (London, 2012), p. 2 - 4

⁶ J. Merimann, ‘Class Lecture’ <http://brewminate.com/maximilien-robspierre-and-the-french-revolution-rise-to-revenge/>, (2008), p. 1 Accessed on 01/04/17

to death “I know very well that he is guilty, but I cannot imagine to send someone to his own death” was Robespierre’s anguish. He saw capital punishment as unjust, irreparable, degrading and ineffective.⁷ Like other revolutionaries, Robespierre was greatly influenced by the enlightenment works of Montesquieu, Diderot and especially Rousseau. The writings of these philosophers helped to form the mind and heart of ‘virtue’ and ‘general will’ in Robespierre.

His prophetic instinct was displayed with his opposition to the declaration of war against the neighbouring countries. He said “the danger to the revolution did not come from a handful of emigres in Germany, but from within France. The most extravagant idea that can arise in a politician heads is to believe that it is enough for people to invade a foreign country to make it adopt their laws and their constitution. No one loves armed missionaries. The declaration of the rights of man is not a beam of sunlight that shines on all men, and it is not a lightning bolt which strikes every throne at the same time. I am far from claiming that a revolution will not eventually influence the fate of the world, but I say that it will not be today”.⁸ He lost the debate and the war proved costly for France and the revolutionaries later played into the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte. His statement is still reflected in global politics today with the constant invasion of third world countries by the advanced ones. Revolution also spread to other countries and has never ceased.

For the revolutionaries of Jacobin group especially Robespierre, Virtue was central to the revolution. Virtue represented honesty, strength and purity of intent. "To be politically virtuous meant that one was to put the public good before any other consideration".⁹ The revolutionary leaders had to be altruistic and ready to die for the revolution. That is, public interest over their own interests, no egoism or desire for glory. There must not be any gap between words and deeds. Therefore, "authenticity was central to Robespierre's political identity and to his actual pre-eminence".¹⁰ In February 1794, Robespierre notoriously linked 'virtue' with 'terror' when he said, "terror without virtue is cruel but virtue without terror is impotent".¹¹ In doing this, he believed that a virtuous man naturally develops a fearless and guiltless conscience. This encouraged him to assert that "in the hands of a man of virtue, terror is a form of justice".¹²

His credibility and popularity grew as the revolution progressed receiving several admiration

⁷ Robespierre had sleepless nights over death sentences. See J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (New York, 1988), p. 189. M. Linton, The Choices of Maximilien Robespierre, *H-France Salon*, Vol. 7, Issue 14, No. 3, (2015) pp. 1 –10, p. 1 and P. Mcphee, *Robespierre...*, p. 142

⁸ See J Merimann, ‘Class Lecture’.... p. 2 and Linton, op. cit. (2015), p. 10

⁹ M. Linton, *Robespierre and...*, p. 3

¹⁰ M. Linton, *Robespierre and...*, p. 4

¹¹ M. Linton, *Robespierre and...*, p. 1

¹² M. Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution*, (Oxford, 2013) p. 288

letters from people all over France. He spoke sixty-eight times in the Assembly of 1789. Mirabeau, the chief advisor to the King said of Robespierre, "that man will go far, because he believes every single thing that he says".¹³ He seemed rigid in his principles, plain and unaffected in his manners. Carlyle, an English writer said Robespierre "is anxious, slight, an ineffectual looking man in spectacles, his eyes troubled, careful, with an upturned face, but he spoke with an intense passion and conviction, a believer in all that he said".¹⁴ As his popularity increased, his influence on the progress and direction of the revolution also increased. This influence has also been capitalised on by his critics to vilify him as the monster who terrorised France. But Linton asserts that 'terror' was a "collective choice made by deputies of the National Convention. And much of the image of Robespierre as the man behind the Terror is invention and myth propagated by men who wanted to divert attention away from their own involvement in the Terror".¹⁵

Robespierre believed that terror wielded by virtue was the pillar of liberty. And his acolyte, Saint-Just gave nothing less when he said "between the people and their enemy, we will be governed by ironness not justice. We must punish not only the traitors but also those who are neutral. Since the French people have declared its wish anyone who is opposed to it is outside the sovereign body. And anyone who is outside the body is an enemy. The republic conceit in the extermination of all who oppose it".¹⁶ Under the reign of terror, hundreds of people were exterminated in Western France and the Committee made thousands of convictions and deaths in Paris and other places. Robespierre was approached and blamed for everything as the leader of the Committee. Even he believed that he represented the revolution hence the greater desire to keep it alive.

By the time the Republic was declared, and the king dethroned and subsequently executed, France was faced with four very fatal situations. Externally, France was under severe attack from six countries causing tension in the new Republic. Internally, the Royalists who still believed in the Monarchy were asking for Dauphin, the son of King Louis XVI to be installed as king. The price of bread was again rising while money was losing value. Lastly, the revolution was faced with serious rebellion in the west of France, Vendee, Lyon and Marseilles. "The advent of foreign war created a political climate in which toleration of opposing views, much less outright dissent, became increasingly difficult".¹⁷

¹³ M. Linton, Robespierre and..., p.4

¹⁴ M. Linton, Robespierre and..., p. 4 and M. Linton, *Choosing Terror...*, p. 86

¹⁵ M. Linton, Robespierre and..., p. 1

¹⁶ M. Linton, The French Revolution's Angel of Death, *History Today*, Vol. 68, Issue 1, (2015)

<http://www.historytoday.com/marisa-linton/french-revolutions-angel-death>, accessed on 01/04/17

¹⁷ P. Hanson, *Contesting the French Revolution* (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 109. See also M.Linton, The Terror in the French Revolution, <http://www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/chapter1/interviews/file> to

Jonathan Israel castigated Robespierre as megalomaniac, vindictive, paranoia, adroit and authoritarian. "His arbitrariness and intolerance infused Robespierre dictatorship - dishonest, hypocritical, and cromwelliate to the core".¹⁸ He argues that Robespierre was inert and moribund with his ideology too threadbare and remote from essential principles of the revolution. Even though Robespierre was absent for 45 days when 1,285 people were sentenced to death, Hardman still see him as a police boss and France was his police state with his legacy just as every dictator of the left.¹⁹ This was evident in the lack of protest against his execution. "He was a mediocre figure strutting and fretting on the historical stage, narcissistic and remarkably odd" were the opinion of Ruth Scurr.²⁰ Robespierre has received some extreme and damaging criticism and his upbringing has been exploited by some of his critics. One of such was the conclusion of Jean Artarist on him. Robespierre was a "repressed homosexual with a castration complex, a misogynist, and a pathological narcissist constantly searching for a good father and an all-powerful mother".²¹ Robespierre had a torrid and broken childhood. This is assumed to have influenced him tremendously. It probably accounted for his defenceless nature. That is, his inability to save himself in the last hours even though he could. He seemed to still have that feeling of his father's guilt which could basically mean 'the death of his childhood'. He attached more importance to the people and his family over himself. He felt that he represented the revolution and anyone against him was against the revolution. Even his contemporaries who conspired against him condemned him. Dubois de Crance said "Robespierre had planned the total destruction of the Convention". While Merlin De Thionville also said "his intellectual faculties were always limited with little imagination and flexibility. Robespierre had no talent and history will say little of this monster". How terribly wrong a statement! Even Barere vilified Robespierre but later said "he was a man of purity and integrity, a true republican".²²

However, some scholars opine that some of the Terror that took place under Robespierre were actually out of his hands. For instance, during the 45 days that Robespierre was ill and absent from public functions, 1,285 people were sentenced to death. And Palmer argues that "in the final four months of 1793, the committee (of public safety) issued 920 decrees, of which authorship may be confidently ascribed in 272 cases to Carnot (military matters), 244 to Barere (foreign policy), and 146 to Prieur dela Cote d'or (munitions). Robespierre by no means expert in military matters, was responsible for just 77".²³ According to George Lefebvre, "Robespierre

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¹⁸ J. Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, 2014), p. 449 & 557

¹⁹ J. Hardman in P Mcphee, *The Robespierre...*, p.3

²⁰ R. Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 2006), 5, 7, 207.

²¹ J. Artarist in P Mcphee, *The Robespierre...*, p. 3

²² G. Rude, *Robespierre...*, pp. 205 - 207

²³ R.R. Palmer in P Mcphee, *The Robespierre...*, p. 7

should be described as the first who defended democracy and universal suffrage, the intrepid defender of the revolution of 1789. He was a great and peaceable man driven by circumstances to actions"²⁴ like death penalty and press censorship.

Robespierre found himself in some circumstances he could not control as Sonberbielle opined he was "sincere, disinterested, and thorough was his devotion to the republic. He was the scapegoat for the revolution".²⁵ In validating this, Linton claims that "much of the image of Robespierre as the man behind the Terror is invention and myth. The Terror was a collective choice by deputies of the National Convention".²⁶ Unfortunately, Robespierre and Saint-Just became the 'public face of the Terror' while other revolutionaries were wearing 'masks'. Maximilien Robespierre exhibited, as claimed by George Rude, an admirable "boldness of promotion of new ideas and as a strategist of revolution". These complemented his extraordinary persistence and tenacity with which he communicated his ideas with (great) capacity for tactical leadership.²⁷ Thompson concludes that his greatest thoroughness with which he embodied the main ideas and experience of the revolution, from the enthusiastic liberation of 1789, through the democratic aspirations of 1792, to the disciplined disillusionment of 1794"²⁸ was largely responsible for the success of the revolution.

The beginning of the end for Robespierre was the celebration of the festival of the supreme being on 8th June 1794. Some of his colleagues saw it as the 'coronation of Robespierre as king or god'. It was a catalyst for further plots against him. Then he absented himself from the National Convention for about two months, which aided the plots. Finally, he made a tactical error by not providing the names of suspected traitors at Themodir on July 27th, 1794. That soiled his reputation beyond repair leading to his death at the guillotine on 29th July 1794. By this time, he was emotionally and psychologically strained, which were exacerbated by ports of physical ill health.²⁹

But he has always been prepared to sacrifice his life for the revolution. And he expressed his disappointment and frustration when he said "I need to unburden my heart. Everyone is in a league against me and against those who hold the same principles that I hold. What friend of the nation would wish to serve the nation when he no longer is allowed to serve it? Why remain in an order of things in which intrigues eternally triumphs over truth? How may one bear the torture of

²⁴ G. Lefebvre in P Mcphee, Robespierre..., p. 227

²⁵ Joseph Sonberbielle was the personal doctor of Robespierre. See P Mcphee, Robespierre..., p.233

²⁶ M. Linton, The Choices..., p. 1

²⁷ G. Rude, Robespierre..., p. 197

²⁸ J.M. Thompson, Robespierre, p. 591

²⁹ M. Linton, The Choices..., p. 8. See also P Mcphee, Robespierre..., pp. 221 & 234 who identified many facts about Robespierre's ill health

seeing the horrible succession of traitors? I ask for death".³⁰ And he got it. As it is widely known, revolutions eat their own 'children'. So, it was with the French Revolution, "the revolution made Robespierre, and the revolution destroyed him, just as it did many others".³¹

One statement which no scholar has condemned uptill date is the fact that "because the country (Republic of France) must live, Louis (King Louis XVI) must die". Since almost everyone agrees with this assertion of Robespierre, the consequences which were both internal and external attacks will ultimately be managed by ruthlessness. This is a case of the hypocritical double standard nature of human being who craves for changes (revolution) yet does not want to experience the aftermath. Slavoj Zizek agrees that the pressure on France from foreign powers motivated the terror and in order to establish the fundamentals of democracy, you have to go through these terrors.³² It is also worthy to note that the terror was not used against only nobles, peasants and the anti-revolutionaries, the revolutionaries also used it against themselves. William Reddy argues that "by 1794, the revolution had turned into an emotional battleground, where everyone's sincerity was suspected. The history of the revolution cannot be understood without adequate theory of emotion. People of that time lived out in public their feelings of grief, fear and envy".³³

This was also corroborated by David Andreass as he opined that the Committee of Public Safety members were "consumed by the public work of pushing the revolution onward, running a country and running a war effort".³⁴ The several assassinations attempt on Robespierre terribly contributed to the doubts he had about his colleagues also. Generally, the revolutionaries lost any iota of trust among themselves as emotion of fear engulfed them. "Fear made it difficult for the Jacobin activists in the year two to choose not to support terror".³⁵ Therefore, the strong attempt to stop the wheel of this terror by Robespierre was termed as treachery by his colleagues hence the conspiracy against him.

So, in order to figure out Robespierre, one will have to first figure out the revolution. There is no doubt that the difficult circumstances of his upbringing and the social context he found himself

³⁰ J. Merimann, <http://brewminate.com/maximilien-robepierre-and-the-french-revolution-rise-to-revenge/>, (2008), p. 3 Accessed on 01/04/17. See also M. Linton, *Choosing Terror...*, pp. 262 – 264 and P Mcphee, *Robespierre...*, pp. 214 - 218

³¹ M. Linton, *The Choices...*, p. 2.

³² S. Zizek, *Robespierre or the "Divine Violence" of Terror*, p. 1 <http://www.lacan.com/zizrobep.htm>. Accessed on 01/04/17

³³ W. Reddy in P Mcphee, *The Robespierre...*, p. 8. Most historians term to agree on the existence of fear, envy and plots among the revolutionaries.

³⁴ D. Andress, in a BBC documentary, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suZdYkZ_feM&t=4848s. Accessed on 01/04/17

³⁵ M. Linton, *Choosing Terror...*, p. 288

greatly influenced him. But Robespierre was a "democrat, prophet and puritan not a dictator, and part of his failure must be put down to his personal qualities".³⁶ Though Colin Jones disputes the sick and emotion of fear factor in the Terror claiming that it was a weak excuse of 'poor little Maxie' or 'victim card' and that Robespierre was still very active in his last days with zeal, authority and self-absorption,³⁷ it was obvious that Robespierre was already burnt out, exhausted and close to a breakdown.

A study on Robespierre is a perfect illustration of the serious challenge faced by historians. In an attempt to reconstruct the past, the historian is restricted to the available historical facts which are usually not adequate. Unfortunately, the personalities involved are usually not around to provide answers to the puzzles created by the events of that time. The historians are now left with the challenging task of re-enacting the minds of those personalities objectively. Even though one could say Robespierre was too visionary and less diplomatic as a statesman, without the firm and rigid leadership of Maximilien Robespierre, would the French Revolution have survived? This study finds it almost impossible. He was no doubt a victim of his comrade. The members of Committee of Public Safety collectively agreed to put any form of dissension within the country. There is no evidence to show that any member of the committee opposed 'Terror' on opposition. In fact, people like Collot d'Herbois and Couthon went on irrational executions in the regions, which got Robespierre upset. What we classify as the 'Reign of Terror' was unavoidable in sustaining the French Revolution because of both internal and external pressures. The decision was collectively taken by all the members of the government. Robespierre is irrationally blamed for the consequences of the Terror because he was the de facto spokesman and leader of the committee. And evidence show that some of the decisions and executions were carried out without the knowledge of Robespierre. Maximilien Robespierre was the victim, scapegoat, hero, propeller and pillar of the French Revolution. He brought liberty to man not only in France but all over the world.

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³⁶ J.M. Thompson, Robespierre pp. 587 & 591

³⁷ C. Jones, Maximilien Robespierre: Melancholic Victim of his Own Virtue? research paper presented at the 2015 Society for French Historical Studies Conference, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 18, 2015. *H-France Salon*, vol. 7, Issue 7, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7aPwwx6Y1w>. Accessed on 01/04/17

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