

VIRTUE AND TERROR (REVOLUTIONS) BY MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE



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Slavoj Žižek presents
ROBESPIERRE
VIRTUE AND TERROR



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Review

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About the Author

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Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic. He is a professor at the European Graduate School, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London, and a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His books include *Living in the End Times*, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, four volumes of the *Essential Žižek*, and many more.

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Robespierre's defense of the French Revolution remains one of the most powerful and unnerving justifications for political violence ever written, and has extraordinary resonance in a world obsessed with terrorism and appalled by the language of its proponents. Yet today, the French Revolution is celebrated as the event which gave birth to a nation built on the principles of enlightenment. So how should a contemporary audience approach Robespierre's vindication of revolutionary terror? Žižek takes a helter-skelter route through these contradictions, marshaling all the breadth of analogy for which he is famous.

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Grappling with the "Incorruptible" and his vision in the present day & age

By Amit Kumar Banerji

The very first point that should be made in this review is that this work is not, strictly speaking, for the layperson. If you do not have an adequate understanding of the chronology of the events, figures and terminology of the French Revolution then more likely than not you will be stumped by the introduction of the controversial philosopher Zizek and the even more enigmatic subject matter in question, Maximilien

Robespierre.

A quiet and soft-spoken lawyer from Arras who gave up a judgeship because he could not countenance passing the death penalty in murder cases, Robespierre gained a reputation as the defender of the virtuous & the poor and was elected to the Estates-General in 1789 as a member of the Third Estate. Initially ridiculed for his weak speaking voice and ignored in the National Assembly, Robespierre soon gained the full attention of not only the Assembly but also a vast sea of admirers outside it. His democratic positions & proposals, such as opposition to censorship & the death penalty, against the property qualification for voting rights, for civil rights for Jews in France, and against the institution of slavery to name but a few won him many supporters. Robespierre's unimpeachable personal integrity was such that soon people, even his opponents, began acknowledging him as the "Incorruptible." Immune to bribes, flattery and threats, Robespierre was (and remains to this day) an exceptional politician in that he refused to compromise on principles even if they went against popular opinion (as evidenced during his lonely and unpopular opposition to the drive towards war in 1792 when he lost nearly all of his popularity and acclaim for his principled stand).

It was Robespierre's self-denying proposal that ensured that members of the Constituent Assembly would not be eligible to sit in the Legislative Assembly. The Jacobin Club, the home of the "Society of the Friends of the Constitution," was where Robespierre and other democrats expounded on their political views during the period of the Legislative Assembly. After the horrific massacre of unarmed & peaceful protesters by the royalist reactionary Lafayette at the Champs de Mars in July 1791 it was Robespierre who almost single-handedly rebuilt the Jacobin Club and strengthened its links to its provincial branches thereby making the Jacobin a more coordinated and cohesive body.

Astute and lucid, Robespierre was the only politician of national stature who critically, vocally and bitterly opposed going to war in 1792. There were a handful of revolutionaries, Panis, Santerre, Anthoine, Desmoulins and Billaud-Varenne, who were with Robespierre on this issue but of course they did not carry weight, not yet at least, on their own at this stage of the revolution to take part in the great debate that Robespierre carried out against the chief advocate of war, Brissot. Robespierre clearly foresaw, whether shackled by the chains of slavery or not as claimed by the opportunist Brissot, the people of Europe, or anywhere for that matter, would not welcome "armed missionaries" and he also warned that the only people to benefit from war would be profiteers and military officers and in one prophetic speech saw the revolution being ended in a dictatorship by a general.

It was the insurrectionary Commune directed by Robespierre which finally delivered the death blow to the monarchy during the Revolution of 10 August and paved the way for the establishment of the First French Republic. He was elected to the National Convention in September 1792 and aside from Jean-Paul Marat was the only middle-class politician who enjoyed the unalloyed esteem and adoration of the Sans-culottes, the people of the forty-eight sections of Paris, whose consent and support until 9 Thermidor was essential to any revolutionary government in the capital. In July 1793, with every other major politician having failed to come to grips with the running of the war against the reactionary powers of Europe, Robespierre was hailed as the "man of destiny" when he was elected to the Committee of Public Safety. It was an election which Robespierre accepted only with reluctance. The Committee of Public Safety was since April 5, 1793 the key organization created by the National Convention specifically commanded to harness the material and human resources of the French nation and direct the war effort to a successful conclusion. The stream-lined Committee of Public Safety had evolved from its predecessor the Committee of General Defence, an ungainly committee of twenty-four members, which had been created in January 1793. Apart from its large numbers the Committee of General Defence had also been hampered by the fact that its meetings were held in public (hardly conducive to running a defensive war effort to protect a fragile Revolution & Republic) and with limited powers. The Committee of Public Safety rectified those shortcomings.

The Committee which remained in office from July 1793 to July 1794, using a number of policies including the controversial "reign of terror" would see to the successful defense of the Revolution. In July (Thermidor of the Revolutionary Calendar) 1794 Robespierre and other prominent members of the Jacobin Club were

overthrown and executed. Did 9 Thermidor occur because revolutionaries such as Tallien and Fouché, disgusted with the excesses of the reign of terror and fearful of a dictatorship by the Incorruptible, acted to save the Republic? Unlikely, especially if one knows their records during the period. In fact, people such as Tallien and Fouché had been recalled to Paris precisely because the Robespierrists wanted them to answer charges for committing excesses in the name of the Convention and thereby bringing the Revolution into disrepute. Fouché, for example, on missions for the National Convention had played a conspicuous role in the "Dechristianization" campaigns, an activity vehemently deplored by Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety because it inflamed neutral or even pro-revolutionary opinion, and thereby added unnecessarily to the list of counter-revolutionaries.

In the eyes of the Incorruptible such actions were no better than counter-revolutionary intrigues. Tallien, a vile opportunist, did not even have the excuse of Fouché for taking part in the Thermidorian Reaction. The only excuse this despicable wretch had for turning against the Revolution (but not before he had committed numerous horrors in the name of that Revolution) was that he had fallen in love with a depraved aristocrat, fittingly perhaps, as amoral as Tallien himself. It was precisely this group of corrupt and venal schemers that Robespierre was preparing to strike in Thermidor. Robespierre, during the struggle against the Gironde, had once famously stated that, "Virtue was always in a minority upon earth." Nowhere is this truth more evident than in the gathering of the cabal-compromised revolutionaries, schemers, embezzlers, corrupted politicians—that came together to destroy Robespierre on 9 Thermidor. There were some genuine revolutionaries, such as Barère, who took part, but what they did not realize, as has been stated so clearly by numerous historians, what in fact nobody realized at the time, was that by overthrowing the Committee of Public Safety, they were essentially ending the Revolution.

To paraphrase that distinguished historian of the French Revolution, Albert Mathiez, in the person of the great Jacobin the Thermidorians had slain the democratic Republic for a century. It was in fact many years after 9 Thermidor of the Year II, that Barère, the "weather-vane of the Revolution" bitterly regretted turning against Robespierre on that fateful day. And neither was he the only one; numerous revolutionaries would rue that day in the coming years for supporting the Thermidorians. Furthermore, as Mathiez reminds us, it was a patent lie spread by the Thermidorians that Robespierre had lost all support by 9 Thermidor. Far from it, for example, at Nevers, messengers bringing word of the fall of the great Jacobin and the Robespierrists were immediately put into prison. The Clubs of Arras and Nîmes prepared to send armed detachments to assist Robespierre when they heard of the Thermidorian coup. A number of democrats even committed suicide when they heard of the agonizing events of 9-10 Thermidor. While some would not realize the enormity of 9 Thermidor until it was too late others did not need hindsight to predict what would happen as a consequence of the reaction; a case in point was the representative-on-mission, Ingrand, who, when accosted by the conspirators in the lead up to the ninth of Thermidor and upon being pressed to join them not only refused, but also angrily warned that overthrowing Robespierre would mean nothing less than the death of the Republic. It is in this context that the calumnies heaped on Robespierre during the Thermidorian Reaction and after have to be understood. Consequently, once the Thermidorians had embarked on this sea of lies, reaching the port of royalism was not that difficult.

As a result, it came as no surprise towards the end of the Directory Government that it was a thoroughly debauched Thermidorian, Paul Barras, who was plotting to bring about a restoration of the Bourbons. Robespierre's prescient and gloomy warning about the consequences of going to war in 1792 then came true; in the military coup of 18 Brumaire of the Year VIII the Republic was overthrown in all but in name, ironically by an ex-Jacobin general who had once been a highly regarded protégé of Augustin Robespierre, the younger brother of the great Jacobin.

It is all these issues thrown up by the French Revolution that the philosopher Zizek tries to grapple with in his introduction. The questions of political virtue, the political use of state terrorism, democracy, and other debates which are all to relevant in the 21st century today. Zizek weaves comparisons with other historical events and figures, whether he is successful in making those connections, well, that is left entirely up to the individual reader. The collection of Robespierre's speeches are also very good examples of different stages of

the Revolution and show the progression of events, and eventually the urgency as Revolutionary France fights for its very survival during 1793-1794. What does one make of Robespierre? Well, it really depends, ultimately, on one's own political proclivities and what one thinks of the radical phase of the French Revolution, indeed the purpose of the Revolution. Chou-en Lai had been reputedly asked by a journalist in the 1950s what he thought of the French Revolution. The Chinese revolutionary leader's response was that it was still too early to come to any conclusion, if at all. It is an answer that holds true in the present day and age, and as Zizek says, the perception of the French Revolution oscillates according to the prevailing political climate in a given timeline. However, to give Ernest Hamel the last word, again to paraphrase, one can love or hate Robespierre, but what one cannot do is belittle the man. It was Robespierre and Robespierre alone (not Danton, Brissot, Vergniaud, Roland, Sieyès or the other lesser personalities of the Revolution) who with his tremendous prestige and standing held the various factions of the Revolutionary Government together during the dark days of Year II of the Republic. Consequently, secured from interference and debilitating criticism from all quarters in the shelter of the great Jacobin's unimpeachable reputation, the Committee of Public Safety was able to focus all its energies on the great task of saving the Revolution culminating in the great Republican victory at Fleurus which gave the Revolution a twenty-year period of immunity from the counter-revolution and thereby changed history forever. Whatever one thinks of Robespierre cannot change that particular fact.

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it's good.

By john paul marinelli

Arrived in a timely fashion. Book expands on observations laid out in *In Defense Of Lost Causes*, though with more specific and likely arbitrary examples. It's what one would expect. Only if you have the time to track down all the references will you be able to really judge the thought. But if you're willing to trust Zizek, it's good.

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Three Stars

By Betty Wilson

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