The Idealised Revolutionary:

Contemporary French Politics and
the Symbolic Importance of
Maximilien Robespierre

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the connection between images of Maximilien Robespierre and French politics that has existed for over two centuries. It will argue that Revolutionary historiography has been influenced by political trends and events in France since the Revolution of 1789. Furthermore, it will argue that during this period, contemporary French politics shaped historical representations of Robespierre. An examination of representative literature from the entire period demonstrates that the majority of Revolutionary historians have exploited Robespierre's inherent symbolic importance to construct images that would fulfil specific political or philosophical objectives. Consequently, Robespierre became a highly idealised individual whose figurative, or tropological, importance appeared to overshadow his literal importance in many instances. Finally, this thesis will suggest that as a result of these images of Robespierre, other revolutionary figures, notably his colleague Saint-Just, have been obscured.

Key Words:
French Revolution, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Historiography, Symbolic Importance, Image, Tropology

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Over the last four years, many people have been witness to the writing of this thesis. They have endured my absences, as well as sharing in my frustrations and my accomplishments. Throughout it all, they have stuck by me. For this, I would like to thank my friends and family for their support and encouragement. Each of you have played some part in getting me through this.

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Introduction

> "... the analysis of so many conflicting opinions concerning one historical phenomenon is not just a means of whiling away the time, nor need it lead to discouraging conclusions concerning the untrustworthiness of historical study. The study even of contradictory conceptions can be fruitful." – Pieter Geyl[1]

Geyl's suggestion that there is something to learn from differing interpretations seems particularly relevant for historians of the French Revolution. Over the last two hundred years, the Revolution has been subjected to a myriad of interpretations, many of which have provided new insight for scholars. Moreover, these interpretations have given rise to a multitude of conflicting representations that seem to be accepted and rejected with increasing rapidity. Revision necessarily begets evolution, and one element of Revolutionary historiography which has evolved even more dramatically than the general dialogue itself is the images that define the history of the period.[2] One set of images which has undergone particularly dramatic transformation in the last two hundred years pertains to Maximilien Robespierre, deputy from the city of Arras, notorious member of the Committee of Public Safety, champion of the people, and the revolutionary known as the 'Incorruptible'. Robespierre would prove to be much more than just 'one historical phenomenon', however.

Few figures in Revolutionary historiography have evoked such prolonged controversy as Robespierre. Decried by historians as the most odious of villains at certain times and hailed as a model revolutionary at others, Robespierre is arguably one of the most famous figures of the Revolution. In an attempt to explain this celebrity and its subsequent significance, Ann Rigney explains that Robespierre was both "a flesh-and-blood individual ... and a sign of a collective event", and as a result, gave rise to images which had overarching "symbolic

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[1] Pieter Geyl, Napoleon: For and Against (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1949), 16.

importance."[3] Robespierre became a "cultural unit" – his cultural value superseded his historical value, in that he often was discussed more in terms of what he represented than what he actually did.[4] The 'image' of Robespierre in these histories was more than a character sketch of the man, however. Often this literary representation of Robespierre was constructed so as to elicit association of Robespierre with contemporary political figures. This was where Robespierre's symbolic importance lay – in that depiction of him could be used to make people draw parallels between the politics of their own times and the Revolution.

There is another, deeper, level to this concept of 'symbolic importance' which is also relevant to this thesis. It takes shape in Hayden White's theory of the tropology of history. White says that "histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the event they report, but rather as symbolic structures."[5] He argues that histories are figurative interpretations of the subject – 'literary productions' which highlight or downplay certain elements of the past – and as a result, the images in these histories are metaphors. Consequently, White's suggestion that these images "reflect historians' values and conceptual frameworks"[6] helps to explain the origin of Rigney's notion of 'symbolic importance', while at the same time supporting the theory behind this concept.

In the seminal work Metahistory, White constructs a 'theory of tropes' to classify the elements which shape 'histories'. He argues that "the best grounds for choosing one

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[2] 'Image' is defined as "the character or reputation of a person or thing as generally perceived." Concise Oxford Dictionary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 588.

[3] Ann Rigney, The Rhetoric of Historical Representation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 138.

[4] Ann Rigney, "Icon and Symbol: The Historical Figure Called Maximilien Robespierre," in Representing the French Revolution, ed. James Heffernan (Hanover, NH.: University Press of New England), 109.

[5] Quoted in C. Behan McCullagh, "Metaphor and Truth in History," Clio 23, 1 (1993) 23.

[6] McCullagh, "Metaphor," 49.

perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological."[7] In essence, historians write what they do because of specific, underlying factors, rather than a desire for a greater knowledge of the event or subject. Furthermore, White also notes that "the same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical studies, depending on the role it is assigned."[8] The latter statement seems particularly germane to this thesis, and will be explored with regard to the evolving images of Robespierre. Ultimately, these ideas support the notion that symbolic importance often plays more of a pivotal role in histories than literal importance.

While the intent of this historiography is not to study language or the varieties of history that White chronicles, it does need to recognise that images (of Robespierre in this instance) have been constructed by historians.[9] Therefore, White's idea that history is a metaphor seems particularly appropriate when discussing a figure that has been given substantive symbolic importance. Consequently, the term 'tropology'[10] will be used when referring to images of Robespierre in order to underscore their metaphorical nature, and highlight the symbolic, as opposed to literal, importance attached to the Incorruptible in Revolutionary history. In Metahistory, White argues that histories were shaped by 'deeper structures'. It is my contention that these deeper structures, i.e. the historian's 'values and conceptual frameworks', were in most cases shaped by contemporary French politics.

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[7] Hayden White, Metahistory Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, xii. See Metahistory, 1-42 for an explanation of White's categorisation of histories. For a commentary on White's work, see Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History," History and Theory 32, 3 (1993), 273-95.

[8] White, Metahistory, 7.

[9] White is not without his critics, but this thesis does not advocate that his theory of history be accepted at face value. Rather, it suggests that his notion of tropology be employed to better understand the nature of the images of Robespierre.

[10] Meaning the figurative, rather than literal, interpretation of the subject.

This thesis will examine the images of Robespierre constructed over the last two hundred years, and will put forward three main points. First, histories of the Revolution were shaped by the contemporary politics that were part of the lives of historians. The influence exerted by these political battles in turn led to the construction of very specific images of Robespierre.[11] Second, these images of Robespierre evolved over time as the demands placed on them by contemporary politics changed. Third, Robespierre was idealised in many instances, giving him an inflated symbolic importance that tended to obscure the roles of other revolutionaries. This was particularly true in the case of Robespierre's associate on the Committee of Public Safety, Louis Antoine Saint-Just.

French politics has defined itself in terms of the Revolution since 1789, due in large part to a strong "emotional connection" the French have with their collective past.[12] This inclination to use the past to define the present had resulted in a vision of the Revolution which has been inextricably tied to the world in which the historian existed. Norman Hampson explains this phenomenon as follows, noting that

> particular conflicts of their times directed the attention of historians to specific aspects of the Revolution and inclined them to interpret what they found in ways that corresponded to the preoccupation of their own day ... What he writes is, or ought to be, of relevance to a public that relies on him for its knowledge of the past, and the more unstable the present, the more acutely it will be aware of that past.[13]

Historians crafted their vision of the Revolution around the political, social, and cultural battles they were witnesses to. They identified with the aspects of the Revolution that were

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[11] This thesis will argue that specific events and individuals had a very distinct influence on Revolutionary historiography and the image of Robespierre. Therefore, while the events highlighted in this paper, along with relevant narrative that has been included to provide context, are the product of value-judgements on my part, they are the events and personalities that I believe were *most* significant in shaping and reformulating tropologies of Robespierre.

[12] Patrick Hutton, "The Role of Memory in the Historiography of the French Revolution," History and Theory 30, 1 (1991) 68. The Revolution has been a central component of how the French define themselves as a nation.

[13] Norman Hampson, "The French Revolution and its Historians," in The Permanent Revolution, ed. Geoffrey Best (New York: Fontana, 1988), 211.

most appropriate and beneficial to their belief-system, and rejected those that conformed most closely to the principles and agenda of their opponents.[14] The result of this was threefold. First, the history of the Revolution became highly politicised. Second, Robespierre emerged as a focal point and an individual of singular importance in a multitude of interpretations of the Revolution. Third, Robespierre often came to represent different things for different groups, at different times. During the two hundred year period that followed the Revolution, historians fought to identify the Revolution with their traditions and situated Robespierre accordingly, but as the nature of the battle changed, different objectives came to the forefront and different images of the Incorruptible emerged.[15]

Robespierre became the focal point of many histories because he embodied the central elements and themes of the Revolution for these historians. He was a tyrant and a dictator for historians who viewed the Terror as the most destructive phase of the Revolution. He was a misguided dreamer for those who were only willing to accept certain aspects of the Revolution. He was a hypocrite for some of those who admired the Revolution, and a hero for writers who scorned the venality of his colleagues. He was a bourgeois oppressor for some, a flawed but well-intentioned revolutionary for others, and finally, a tyrant once again for historians who introduced gender theory to Revolutionary history. As a result, he became what nineteenth-century socialist historian Louis Blanc referred to as a 'representative

[14] Not only were historians influenced by the politics of the time, they were also influenced by contemporary cultural movements, whether they were Romantic, positivist, or Marxist. Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 212.

[15] It is important to recognise that just as the image of Robespierre evolved over time, so too did the craft of writing Revolutionary history. The field which was once dominated by first-hand, narrative accounts of events, gave way to professional histories with detailed notation and substantive evidence. The speculations of early accounts were replaced by increasingly complex representations, and while Revolutionary history often contained polemical overtones, the burden of proof grew. The desire to redefine the image of Robespierre drove historians to seek out new evidence and re-examine old materials to strengthen their arguments. These developments will be examined as part of this paper.

man'.[16] In essence, the 'symbolic importance' assigned to Robespierre became more important in Revolutionary history than the role he played in the events that transpired between his arrival in Paris in May 1789 and his death on 28 July 1794.[17]

Because of this tendency to emphasise Robespierre's importance, historians have often overlooked the role of other revolutionaries, and thereby denied their agency. One of the clearest examples of this relates to Robespierre's confidant Saint-Just. The young deputy often appears as little more than an appendage to Robespierre; yet if one looks beyond the metaphorical images of Robespierre, there are numerous inferences that Saint-Just was 'more Robespierre than Robespierre himself.'[18] A brief examination of the images of Saint-Just will further illustrate this tendency to portray Robespierre as the 'representative man' to the point that other individuals became simple reflections of him.

Before delving into the world of Robespierrist imagery, it seems prudent to discuss briefly the histories that form the basis of this thesis. Given the enormous extent of printed matter on the Revolution and Robespierre, choosing appropriate material for this paper was somewhat daunting. In order to facilitate this task, histories were grouped ideologically and chronologically, and within each of these groupings, the works that provided the best examples of Robespierrist imagery were chosen. Admittedly, this historiography does not examine every piece of literature on Robespierre, simply because it is not feasible or practical

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[16] Rigney, "Icon," 107. Blanc saw Robespierre in a decidedly different light from his contemporaries, but this description provides an interesting framework for discussing the images of Robespierre.

[17] The objective of this thesis is not to offer the definitive account of Robespierre's function in the Revolution, but rather to outline the wide variety of images that appeared in these histories. This will, in turn, demonstrate the presence of inconsistencies, and that certain interpretations are of questionable value. Alternate interpretations of Robespierre will be explored in the Conclusion of this paper.

[18] Although this phrase was originally used metaphorically, later references of this nature abandoned the figurative overtones, and ultimately serve to call into question certain images of Robespierre.

in a work of this length. As Geyl also said, "I do not claim to give a complete survey, but I do believe I may say that the omissions do not affect the outlines of the general picture."[19]

The first selection of works consists of 'liberal' histories written between 1818 and 1847. These histories were born out of contemporary accounts of the Revolution, but took root in the political opposition to the Ultraroyalism of the Bourbon Restoration. In a multifaceted attempt to defend the gains of the Revolution and legitimise their existence, liberals were forced to rewrite French history in order to make it less contentious. The result was histories that celebrated the early parts of the Revolution, but castigated the Terror and everything associated with it. The most obvious target of this attempt to compartmentalise the Revolution was Robespierre; he emerged as a tyrant and the embodiment of the Terror. The collapse of Ultraroyalism with the Revolution of 1830 led to a re-interpretation of the Revolution, and by 1847, it was nostalgic recollections, a battle against utopian socialism, and the intellectual disenchantment of the 1840s that shaped the image of Robespierre. The tyrant was transformed into an impractical dreamer, but Robespierre was still held responsible for the carnage of Year II. Saint-Just made his first appearance in the world of Revolutionary historiography during this period, but it was only as a bit player. This would be typical until well into the twentieth century.

The next period to be examined covers writings stretching from 1847 to 1932. Utopian socialism had been attacked by some mid-century historians for its fanciful notions, but by 1847, it was becoming an undeniable component of Revolutionary historiography. It was also having an influence on the image of Robespierre. A more powerful tradition, particularly during the latter half of the period, however, was republicanism. Although it had originated in the Revolution of 1789, republicanism became official orthodoxy only in the 1890s;

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[19] Geyl, Napoleon, 11.

thereafter, it played an integral role in shaping national identity in the Third Republic. With the acceptance of republicanism, Robespierre's actions were denounced yet again, as he represented the antithesis of the current socially-conservative Republican ideal. The image changed rather drastically after the turn of the century, however.

Socialism had come to the political forefront in the 1890s, and over the next six decades, it would exert considerable influence in Revolutionary history.[20] Socialist historians portrayed Robespierre as a proto-socialist revolutionary and hero for the twentieth-century working class. This revised image produced clashes between the leading republican and socialist historians of the period that would last well into the 1920s. Within these battles, emphasis on Robespierre as an individual continued, however, and eventually the stigma attached to his name during the nineteenth century gave way to a cult of hero-worship.

This resurrection of Robespierre's image began prior to World War I, and while it continued with the rise of Marxist history during the 1930s, it came to an abrupt halt in the 1940s. Early Marxists were influenced by previous representations of Robespierre as the ideal politician who served in the interest of his country, but this began to give way in the inter-war era as class divisions became more apparent in France. Marxist historiography now focused on long-term social and economic developments instead of political events, emphasising social categories rather than individuals. All of this changed the image of Robespierre, as increasingly he became the representative of the bourgeoisie, in a 'bourgeois' revolution. His status as 'hero' plummeted as the Marxist interpretation of the Revolution became entrenched in France by the 1940s.

Marxist predominance was not truly threatened until the 1960s. This challenge came from what would be known as Liberal Revisionist history, much of which focused on the politics

[20] These histories were not necessarily Marxist, however, and were more similar to the utopian socialism of the 1840s. Marxist history would develop in the inter-war period.

of the Revolution. Although the Marxist interpretation had been questioned as far back as the 1930s, opposition did not crystallise until the late 1950s and fully bloom until the 1960s. There were several reasons for this development. Marxism was on the decline in French intellectual circles generally, and by way of alternative, French historians began to pay more attention to the works of non-Marxist British and American writers. French domestic politics and turmoil in the Soviet satellite states also facilitated the development of Revisionism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Above all, Revolutionary scholarship was no longer as closely tied to French party politics as it had been for the last century and a half, although ideological undertones remained.

Revisionists set out to redefine the Revolution through re-examination of old evidence and introduction of new material, and as a result, the image of Robespierre changed drastically. Increasingly specialised monographs examined the Committee of Public Safety and the Revolutionary Government in far greater detail than before, and shed new light on Robespierre's role. Along with this came biographies of individual Revolutionary figures, studying their role in day-to-day politics more carefully. Because of this focus on 'event history', Revisionism gave a more complex view of its subjects, working against stereotypes rather than trying to create new ones. Less-idealised images of Robespierre evolved; moreover, his 'representative' quality diminished as greater attention was paid to other figures such as Saint-Just. There was no Revisionist orthodoxy to replace the Marxist orthodoxy, however, and by the 1970s, there were also challenges to the Revisionist interpretation.

The final section of this paper considers the cultural and feminist histories that emerged from the 1970s onwards. These histories are to some extent the offspring of the *Annales* school of history; yet, while they turn away from the 'event history' that characterised Revisionism, they retained certain ties to the latter movement. Cultural historians focus on

long-term developments, believing they have greater influence on the course of history than individual events. In spite of this, the new cultural history also shares Revisionism's focus on political history, apparent in the current absorption with political culture and study of shifting value systems rather than the material interests that were central to Marxist history. These histories employ 'alternate' sources such as posters, novels and folklore to construct images of the revolutionaries, but most importantly, they champion the importance of ideology over individual agency.

While cultural histories initially appear to be heading off into uncharted waters, they actually bear many similarities to earlier accounts of the Revolution. They tend to perpetuate the determinism of both nineteenth-century and Marxist histories in their pursuit of over-arching general interpretation. As part of this, they often revert back to the stereotypical image of Robespierre as the tyrant. In this larger sense, tropologies of Robespierre have come full circle. Consequently, Robespierre's symbolic importance remains as much of an issue at the end of the twentieth century as it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[21]

[21] Because the focal point of this thesis is Revolutionary historiography rather than Revolutionary history, there will be no in-depth discussion of the events of the Revolution. For a survey history of the Revolution, see William Doyle, Oxford History of the French Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) or J.F. Bosher, The French Revolution (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988).

Chapter 1

1791-1847

"Of all the men whom the Revolution brought into notice, none has left a name so generally abhorred as Robespierre." – Adolphe Thiers, The History of the French Revolution, v.1, 103.

Thiers' sentiments were representative of a negative perception of Robespierre which was prevalent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Even before Napoleon's coup of 18 Brumaire 1799, historians placed overwhelming responsibility for the bloodshed of the Terror on Robespierre, thus making him the most notorious figure of the Revolution before it was even over.[1] This chapter will focus on the tropologies of Robespierre created prior to 1800 and refined between 1818 and 1847, illustrating the development of these images at a time when the Revolution was still fresh in the minds of the French. These histories set the tone for what was to follow and began the process of investing Robespierre with symbolic importance that would transform him from a revolutionary into a cultural unit.

Robespierrist imagery grew out of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France (1791). Although it was written while the Bourbon monarchy was intact and the Terror had yet to be implemented, the premise of Burke's polemic was so influential that it would indirectly influence interpretation of the Revolution for almost a century. Burke (1729-1797) was one of the foremost conservative political thinkers of the period, and his work was an alarmist reaction to contemporary ideas that there were parallels between the English Revolution of 1688 and the

[1] These histories were greatly influenced by the accounts of those who orchestrated the purges of Thermidor (late July and early August 1794), in which the Robespierrists were eliminated. These individuals were intent on distancing themselves from the Terror and obscuring their association with this 'dark' period in the Republic's history in order to preserve their reputations and political careers. Portraying Robespierre as the villain was the most expeditious means of accomplishing this. The Thermidoreans, as they were known, created the image of 'Robespierre the blood-thirsty despot'.

French Revolution of 1789 that should be celebrated. Beyond this, he was also responding to the destruction of private property and the downward spiral to chaos brought on by the collapse of the Church and the monarchy in France.[2] Examining the situation, Burke was willing to concede reform *may* have been warranted in France, but his was a very circumscribed vision of reform. Burke believed in working with what existed, making minor legislative reforms to elicit change rather than abandoning the status quo. Expressing concerns that were common among the English upper classes, Burke fought to ensure that French 'aspirations' would not cross the Channel and "infect the lower classes."[3] He believed this entailed "protecting the social structure and ownership of property exactly as it was. At the political level it meant protecting the existing political order."[4] In essence, Burke felt the French Revolution did not share the characteristics, nor did it have any of the benefits, of the English Revolution of 1688, and should therefore be arrested.

By rejecting the course of events in France, Burke distinguished himself as one of the earliest political commentators to express the notion that the Revolution had taken a turn for the worse, particularly when it threatened order by disrespecting French tradition and history.[5] One example

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[2] Much of this history was intended as a warning for his Whig colleagues who were beginning to accept French ideas about the "rights of elective majorities and their rights to resist authority." Frank O'Gorman, British Conservatism: Conservative Thought from Burke to Thatcher (New York: Longman, 1986), 93. Burke believed his colleagues completely misread the situation in France, overlooking the implications any trickle-down effects could have on England, hence his strong reaction.

[3] Gregory Claeys, ed., Political Writings of the 1790s (London: William Pickering, 1995), xviii.

[4] O'Gorman, British Conservatism, 14. Burke believed the Glorious Revolution of 1688 "'was made to preserve our ancient, indisputable laws and liberties,'" but he saw no need for further change from this point onward. (O'Gorman, British Conservatism, 14.) Burke believed that society must build on its foundations, not reject them, as the French were doing. Burke stood for everything the revolutionaries fought against, and he attacked the Revolution for the threat it posed to the existing ruling order.

[5] In his eyes, the revolutionaries had taken the ethereal ideas of the Enlightenment to heart, and rather than reforming French society, were intent on rebuilding it from the ground up.

of his attack on the events in France came through in his critique of the National Assembly, in which he noted "this legislative assembly of a free nation sits, not for the security, but for the destruction of property, and not of property only, but of every rule and maxim which can give it stability."[6] This theme repeats itself throughout, but did not find favour with everyone in England.[7] Although not all of Burke's theories were popular, an adaptation of the idea that the Revolution had perverted French society would set the tone for post-Napoleonic histories of the Revolution that characterised only the Year II as evil.

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[6] Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (London: Penguin, 1969), 261. According to O'Gorman, "[o]ne of the central themes of Reflections is the need for government to be consistent with man's nature. Government should arise not from abstract principles but from ethical standards that are not within man's capabilities to alter or determine. Foremost among these is the recognition that government exists to restrain the imperfections in man's nature." (O'Gorman, British Conservatism, 66.) Succinctly, Burke rejected the 'abstract principles' of the revolutionaries, as well as the tyranny of the majority he saw as prevalent. He believed that by destroying their past, the French destroyed any chance of a stable future.

[7] Burke's writings were well received initially, but soon gave rise to considerable opposition among moderate Whigs, who believed in the ideas espoused during the liberal phase of the Revolution. Many tracts rejecting Burke's work were published between 1791-93; one of the more influential writings came from James Mackintosh. Mackintosh wrote *Vindiciae Gallicae*, or, Defence of the French Revolution and its English Admirers against the Accusations of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke (1791). Allied with the radical Whigs, Mackintosh's work was designed as a reply to Burke. Mackintosh spoke of the Revolution as a necessity, brought on by long-standing despotism in France. He also criticised Burke for the latter's fundamental lack of understanding of the Revolution. Along with his colleagues, Mackintosh believed in the general principles of the Revolution, and thus argued to legitimise the actions of the revolutionaries. Moreover, he outlined the premise of future liberal history and validated the Revolution when he stated: "The three Aristocracies, Military, Sacerdotal, and Judicial, may be considered as having formed the French government. They have appeared, so far as we have considered them, incorrigible. All attempts to improve them would have been little better than (to use the words of Mr. Burke) 'mean reparations on mighty ruins' ... But it is objected [by Burke], these institutions might have been *gradually* reformed ... To this argument I confidently answer, *that these institutions would have destroyed* LIBERTY, *before Liberty had corrected their* SPIRIT ... If radical reform is not, at such a moment [as was demonstrated in 1789], procured, all partial changes are evaded and defeated in the tranquillity which succeeds." (Claeys, Political Writings, 302.) Throughout, Mackintosh accused Burke of perpetrating a "political fraud," (Claeys, Political Writings, 362.) noting that "[b]lind admirers of Revolutions take them for implicit models. Thus Mr. Burke admires that of 1688; but we, who conceive that we pay the purest homage to the authors of that Revolution, not in contending for what they *then* DID, but for what they *now* WOULD DO, can feel no inconsistency in looking on France, not to model our conduct but to invigorate the spirit of freedom." (Claeys, Political Writings, 377.) In spite of the fact that Mackintosh later accepted many of Burke's concerns about the Revolution, his reply to Burke laid the foundation for English liberal interpretations of the Revolution, as would be demonstrated in Carlyle's work. In addition, Mackintosh's influence and his idea that the Revolution was necessary would cross the Channel. While it is difficult to measure the extent of Mackintosh's influence, particularly in this thesis, his work was nonetheless important in shaping liberal Revolutionary history. See Claeys, Political Writings, 269-386 for *Vindiciae Gallicae*, and more on Mackintosh.

Burke's conservative philosophy influenced Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), whose Considerations on France (1797) expressed belief that the Revolution was caused by lack of religious devotion in France, and was in fact an act of Divine retribution.[8] De Maistre's primary concern was the Revolution in its entirety, but his work does provide some early insight into the image of Robespierre created immediately following the Thermidorean reaction. Having lived through the Terror, de Maistre initially presented Robespierre as a man who ruled with "iron despotism,"[9] placing the people under his "frightful yoke"[10] In the end, however, he was little more than a criminal and a scoundrel with an appetite for power. Although de Maistre's deterministic view severely limited the agency of the revolutionaries, he was probably the first historian of the Revolution to portray Robespierre as a tyrant. Along with Burke, de Maistre created an overtly negative image of the Revolution, but he took the idea of the 'threat to order' one step further by representing Robespierre as the most notorious of a series of revolutionaries intent on destroying France. Conservatives continued to view the entire Revolution as a threat for decades to come, but this interpretation was rejected by an increasingly influential liberal contingent of Revolutionary historians during the 1820s. The latter did, however, adopt de Maistre's idea that Robespierre was responsible for the extremes of the Revolution. For the next seven decades, Robespierre represented the more troubling elements of the first half of the

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[8] De Maistre was not the first to suggest that the Revolution was the work of Providence, however. This theory probably originated with the Abbé Barruel shortly after the outbreak of the Revolution. In de Maistre's version, the Revolution was a series of crimes against God, and "[i]n order to effect the French Revolution, it was necessary to overthrow religion, outrage morality, violate propriety, and commit every crime. This diabolical work required the employment of such a number of vicious men that perhaps never before had so many vices acted together to accomplish any evil whatsoever." Joseph de Maistre, Considerations on France (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970), 140.

[9] De Maistre, Considerations, 107.

[10] De Maistre, Considerations, 127.

Revolution.

Between 1800 and 1814, there were no significant histories written on the Revolution, primarily because the Napoleonic regime sought to minimise discussion of the Revolution in order to ensure political stability.[11] This situation changed, however, during the Bourbon Restoration of 1815-30.[12] The new regime was a creation of the Allied powers, who were looking for stability based on compromise in France. Yet the new government came to be dominated by Ultraroyalists, who were displeased with the compromise of a constitutional monarchy and yearned for a return to the *ancien régime*. Ultras viewed anything associated with the Revolution as a threat to Bourbon rule, particularly dissident political liberalism, which they believed had its roots in the Revolution. Liberal attempts to gain political representation, or even a voice in government, were repressed. Over the next fifteen years, Ultraroyalists sought to marginalise liberalism to ensure their primacy and privilege.

The best way for liberals to counteract Ultraroyalist politicking became re-examination of the history of France; because of the political climate at the time, it was safer for liberals to write history than talk politics.[13] Over the next decade and a half, historians sought to depict liberalism as an intrinsic element of the historical development of French society. They wished to demonstrate that political liberalism did not present a threat to the monarchy because of its longstanding existence, and to show that liberal desire to participate in the political process was

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[11] Napoleon was trying to create a new social elite out of the remnants of the Revolution and the *ancien régime* – the Jacobins and monarchists. In order to do so, he had to keep old rivalries in the past, and the best way to accomplish this was to prevent any public discussion of the Revolution.

[12] For a detailed history of the Restoration, see Guillaume de Bertier de Sauvigny, The Bourbon Restoration (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967).

[13] Jacques Barzun, "Romantic Historiography as a Political Force in France," Journal of the History of Ideas 2 (1941) 318.

legitimate.[14] The greatest task these historians faced was to make the Revolution history rather than politics. They had to "find a way of defending the Revolution, while at the same time freeing themselves from the charge of *being* revolutionary."[15] If they were perceived as revolutionary, liberals stood no chance of gaining a political foot-hold in the conservative Restoration, and the most obvious way to redefine their revolutionary heritage was to rewrite the histories of Burke and de Maistre.

Eventually, the Ultra contention that revolutionary tendencies and liberalism were linked was successfully countered by the argument that Liberty was ancient and the Revolution inevitable. Because of this victory, liberals were able to minimise much of the stigma that blocked their political ambitions.[16] However, a new attack was launched by the Ultras, aimed at discrediting liberals by claiming that if the Revolution was inevitable, so too then was the Terror. Conservatives hoped to trap liberals in their own argument by associating them with the more extreme elements of the Revolution. The liberal solution to this new challenge was to divide the Revolution into distinct phases, of which they could identify "one as the true Revolution and everything else as a falling away, a betrayal."[17] Liberals were then able to associate themselves with the early, *liberal*, phases of the Revolution, in particular the period from 1789 to 1791-2,

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[14] Conservatives did not appreciate this historical determinism, and saw the Revolution as an aberration in France's history. The Revolution violated the sanctity of the monarchy, clergy, and aristocracy, and brought nothing of value to France. A second reason for liberals to change perceptions of the Revolution was that it served as a way to "split the Conservative coalition of monarch, aristocracy, and clergy which barred their way [to political power]." Stanley Mellon, The Political Uses of History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 4.

[15] Mellon, Political Uses, 6.

[16] Liberal historians "realised that one of the best ways to absolve the Revolution from any guilt was to insist that it *had to be*, that it had been a long time in the making, that it represented an accumulation of history, and therefore that to deny it was to deny time itself." Mellon, Political Uses, 18.

[17] Mellon, Political Uses, 22.

while at the same time distancing themselves from any connection to the Terror. This strategy of championing one aspect of the Revolution and castigating another influenced representations of Robespierre during this period, and was directly responsible for imbuing images with a tropological character for the next century and a half.[18] Liberals realised that by portraying Robespierre as the man responsible for the Terror, they could remove responsibility for the events of Year II from their liberal predecessors and maintain their revolutionary integrity.[19]

The first major liberal writer to enter this debate was Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), who also happened to be the last significant contemporary of Robespierre to write on the Revolution. In her posthumous Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution (1818-21), de Staël rejected de Maistre's view of the Revolution and wrote the quintessential liberal history directly intended to challenge Ultra domination. De Staël's vision of the Revolution centred on arguments that Liberty was a natural element of French history, that the Terror was decidedly 'un-French', and that Robespierre was guilty of derailing the progress of 'Liberty'.[20] These arguments created a strong defence against conservative attacks, but they also resulted in a narrow vision of Robespierre's role that was based as much on personal animosity as first-hand knowledge of events.[21] More importantly, de Staël argued that the Revolution had been

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[18] To Conservatives, who viewed the Revolution as a whole as an abomination and inherently evil, Robespierre was the embodiment of the evils of the period. Regardless of political affiliation, however, both sides generally accepted that Robespierre was the head of the Committee of Public Safety, and ruled in a dictatorial manner.

[19] On 22 September 1793 a Republican calendar was adopted, and the following twelve month period was proclaimed Year II – the second year of the Republic that was formed on 22 September 1792. The phrase 'Year II' is used in this paper to denote the period that roughly coincided with the Terror.

[20] De Staël was the first French liberal to introduce the notion that Liberty was not born out of the Revolution, and had in fact existed for centuries.

[21] De Staël's father was a finance minister who had not fared well during the Revolution. She herself had been forced to live in exile to avoid persecution.

'diverted' by elements from within, namely the leaders of the Terror. The entire Revolution should not however be condemned, just because the government had fallen into the hands of men – the Robespierrists – who were responsible for "the terrible doctrine of establishing liberty by means of despotism."[22] Using Burke's notion of corruption to frame the events of Year II, de Staël's portrayal of Robespierre as the man responsible for the Terror was bitter. Although she saw him as an ambitious man, Robespierre also shared many similarities with *ancien régime* despotism: "... It was known that he was acquainted with no other means of getting rid of competitors than by destroying them through the agency of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which gave murder an air of legality."[23] By portraying the Incorruptible as the man whose "political fanaticism had a character of calmness and austerity which made him feared by all his colleagues,"[24] de Staël perpetuated de Maistre's inclination to attach figurative importance to Robespierre's role in the Revolution. This representation would permeate Revolutionary history over the next decade, and would shape images of the Incorruptible for generations.

During the 1820s political reaction intensified and the regime became increasingly theocratic in nature. Between 1816 and 1820, liberal historians had focused on undermining the connection between the aristocracy and the monarchy, but after 1820, they were forced to change tactics.[25] Attacks were now concentrated on the connection between the Church and the monarchy. This

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[22] Germaine de Staël, Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1821), v. 1, 398.

[23] Quoted in George Rudé, ed., Robespierre (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 128.

[24] Quoted in Rudé, Robespierre, 126.

[25] The royalist Duc de Barry was assassinated in 1820, and the resulting backlash strengthened the conservative domination of the government and the alliance between aristocracy and monarchy, making efforts to split the two futile.

approach was hardly surprising, considering the liberal political tradition had been shaped by Enlightenment philosophy, which had always had strong anti-clerical overtones. Concerns of "undue religious influence in the government"[26] were also predominant among liberals at the time.

A proposed concordat between the papacy and the monarchy in 1817 had provided liberals with an opportunity to highlight the Ultramontanism of the Church and to undermine the union of Church and State during the early years of the Restoration. When negotiations collapsed at the end of the decade, liberals needed to find a new villain on whom to focus fears of theocracy. The Jesuits provided just such a target for liberal anti-clericalism, because of the long-standing negative connotations of the Order.[27] The Jesuits had been expelled from France in 1764, but had been allowed to return in 1814, in the belief that they would shore up the monarchy and counteract revolutionary sentiment. The 'Jesuit issue' reflected the ongoing struggle against the Church as a whole, and it was used to attack legitimist/monarchist/clerical authority during the Restoration, but even more so during the July Monarchy (1830-48). 'Jesuitism' became synonymous with intolerance and 'Ultramontanism' for historians of the Revolution. It was these conflicts that shaped the images of Robespierre in the 1820s.

The next group of historians expanded on the arguments in de Staël's Considerations and contributed to the anti-clericalism of the 1820s. Because of this, they were instrumental in

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[26] Mellon, Political Uses, 129.

[27] The popular perception was that the Jesuits were the leading force of counter-revolution, that they were guilty of 'seducing men's minds', and that they existed outside the rule of law. Other charges included "the order's ... involvement in ecclesiastical disputes; [and] its implication in the legal disputes over the status of unauthorised religious orders." (Geoffrey Cubitt, The Jesuit Myth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 23.) Conservatives held an entirely different view, and believed the abolition of the Jesuits in the eighteenth century had paved the way for the Revolution. As part of this religious dispute, there was also a struggle between the forces of Gallicanism and Ultramontanism. Liberals aligned themselves with the Gallicans and portrayed the Ultramontanists and the Jesuits as

transforming the image of Robespierre as a political despot into one of a religious fanatic. Referred to as the "Siamese twins of revolutionary studies,"[28] Francois Mignet (1796-1884) and Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877) both had "avowed political aims in writing; they proposed to justify the revolutionary epoch and demonstrate that its sequel, the overthrow of the Bourbons, had yet to come."[29]

Mignet's contribution to liberal history was the notion that the Revolution had "transient excesses with durable benefits."[30] His portrayal of Robespierre in The History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814 (1824) was based on this premise; the early liberalism of the Revolution was highlighted and commended, while Robespierre and the Terror emerged as evil counterparts of Liberty. Mignet believed it was 'conduct, not mind' which allowed Robespierre to rise above the other revolutionaries. His "persevering mediocrity," along with the support of an "immense and fanatical sect," placed him at the head of the Revolutionary Government.[31] Mignet bemoaned the men of excess who "massacre in the name of their doctrines: virtue, humanity, the welfare of the people, all that is holiest on earth they use to sanction their executions, and to protect their dictatorship."[32] Mignet was willing to accept that the

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a united front of evil.

[28] John McManners, "The Historiography of the French Revolution," Cambridge Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), v. 3, no.1, 627.

[29] McManners, "Historiography," 625.

[30] F.A.M. Mignet, The History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814 (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1915), 1.

[31] Mignet, French Revolution, 153. Many historians believed that Robespierre was carried into power by a wave of revolutionary fervour that began with the purges of 31 May – 2 June 1793. What had begun as a dictatorship of the Committees quickly became a dictatorship of one man.

[32] Mignet, French Revolution, 220. Robespierre's personal philosophy was allegedly shaped by the dream of a utopian Republic of Virtue in which every citizen would be equal, would have work and would support themselves. There

Revolutionary Government acted within its mandate when it fought to safeguard the Revolution, but he believed the extremism of Robespierre and Saint-Just perverted the Revolution. Their desire to lead the nation signalled the demise of liberalism, but in the end, the Robespierrists were little more than ideologues with delusions of grandeur; their pretensions and their quasi-religious convictions made them despicable.

Within this context, Mignet presented the first strong image of Saint-Just. The young deputy appeared as the ultra-patriot, a "zealous, disinterested, and fanatic partisan"[33] driven by a moral vision of the ideal Republic, but not bound by earthly scruples.[34] He was the perfect counter-part for Robespierre, but in the end he appeared to be more errand-boy than tyrant. Mignet's observations on Saint-Just introduce the possibility that Restoration images of Robespierre may have been somewhat inflated, thus obscuring the role of other revolutionaries. Other historians made similar observations about Saint-Just over the next century, but none abandoned the centrality of Robespierre.

Thiers' work often overshadowed that of Mignet, perhaps because of the tropology which characterised his histories. Thiers developed a dislike for political fanaticism early in his career,

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would be no crime or war, and the Republic would be peopled with highly moral citizens who lived by a republican code of ethics. Many of Robespierre's political decisions and aspirations were directly linked to the concept of such a republic, and during his time in Paris, his speeches reflected his passion for this dream. They also attracted the scorn of many deputies who did not appreciate Robespierre's intentions, and believed these ideas were, in fact, nothing more than a dream. Undoubtedly, this dream was flawed. Robespierre demonstrated an interest in social reform, but knew very little about the everyday life of the lower classes, and the means by which he sough to change their lives were highly impractical. Saint-Just also shared many of these ideas with Robespierre, but his Republic was governed by 'republican institutions', self-regulating bodies which functioned according to the laws of nature. Because of the contentious nature and far-reaching implications of the Republic of Virtue, it has been championed by Robespierre's admirers and scorned by his detractors for much of Revolutionary history, but it is a topic unto itself. For more information on the Republic of Virtue, see J.M. Thompson, Robespierre (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968).

[33] Mignet, French Revolution, 222.

[34] This idea of a 'moral vision' would become particularly important in later representations.

and his personal philosophy was shaped by the "extreme manifestations of religious fervour by Catholic clergy eager to seal and maintain an alliance of throne and altar."[35] Thiers' The History of the French Revolution (1823-27) provided a forum for his anti-clericalism by portraying a dark side of Robespierre which was more overtly and inherently evil than in either de Staël's or Mignet's accounts. According to Thiers, Robespierre "is one of the most odious beings that could have borne absolute rule over men."[36] Robespierre was unique among the revolutionaries, in that "he was a man of a single ruling idea, and of indefatigable perseverance. His devouring ambition was not to be confounded with that of a common usurper aspiring at political tyranny. It was rather that of the founder of a sect, and even a fanatic in his own way."[37] The metaphor of the religious fanatic, rising above simple despotism and corrupting the nation, is centre-stage in Thiers' history, focusing attention on the actions of the Robespierrists and placing responsibility for the events of 1793-94 on them alone.[38] Ultimately, Robespierre personified the spirit of Jesuitism; he was a "proud and blood-thirsty pontiff"[39] spawned by "a sort of delirium of vanity."[40] The former phrase would reappear numerous times during the next century, both establishing and underscoring the symbolic political importance of this idealised portrait.

Both Mignet and Thiers employed elements of Burke in their histories, particularly the notion

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[35] J.P.T. Bury and R.P. Tombs, Thiers - A Political Life (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 4.

[36] Rudé, Robespierre, 132.

[37] Adolphe Thiers, The History of the French Revolution (Philadelphia, PA: Carey and Hart, 1842), v. 1, 302.

[38] Saint-Just's role was not expanded much from Mignet's account, despite the indication he was the willing executioner for Robespierre's 'blood-thirsty pontiff'. He appeared as a man whose mind was "tinctured with fanaticism," but Thiers continued to deny Saint-Just's agency. Thiers, French Revolution, v. 2, 33.

[39] Thiers, French Revolution, v. 3, 51.

[40] Thiers, French Revolution, v. 3, 50.

that the Revolution had gone too far, but modified this argument by splitting the Revolution into distinct phases. The first, 'liberal' phase actually sprang from a tradition long established in French history. Where the Revolution had gone wrong lay in a second phase, when pursuit of liberty had been side-tracked by the men of the Terror. The leaders of the second phase were despotic and fanatical – characteristics which any Restoration reader could immediately associate with the contemporary opponents of liberalism – Ultraroyalists and, especially, the agents of theocracy. The individual who personified these characteristics was identified as Robespierre, although limited recognition was also given to Saint-Just.[41]

The end of the Bourbon Restoration in 1830 marked another change of regime. Royal despotism, *ancien régime* privilege and theocracy died with the Revolution of 1830, but the new Orleanist regime, known as the July Monarchy, remained socially conservative.[42] Although the political structure of French government may not have changed drastically, there were other forces at work that would define Revolutionary history now that the Ultras had been defeated. One such factor was the Industrial Revolution. Industrial development in France was considerably slower than in Britain, but its effects were similar. With industrialisation came an increase in the size of the working class, bringing questions of social welfare to the forefront. In addition, the Romantic literary movement had begun to influence writers in the 1820s. It would take another decade or so for this to impact on Revolutionary history, but the histories that then emerged would be more focused on the emotions and passions of the times. In combination,

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[41] Throughout this paper, it is important to recognise that French readers would readily understand the symbolic association the author was making between Revolutionary figures and contemporary figures, based on positive or negative representations.

[42] For more information on the July Monarchy, see H.A.C. Collingham, The July Monarchy – A Political History of France 1830-1848 (New York: Longman, 1988).

these influences would transform the image of Robespierre yet again. Between Thiers' history in 1827 and the next major French history in 1847, Robespierre was remade from blood-thirsty tyrant to failed revolutionary. Interestingly, one of the more notable histories that reflected this new tropology came from the other side of the English Channel.

Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote his history at a time when accounts of the Revolution were shifting from immediate contemporary polemic into considerations of long-term social and political development. Carlyle (1795-1881) was strongly influenced by German Romanticism, and his transcendentalism often reads more like philosophy than history, but his work illustrates the evolution in imagery that was taking place. Carlyle was driven by "an endless quest for the answers to the questions which troubled his soul,"[43] as well as a curiosity about the frailties of human nature. The events of the French Revolution of 1830 heightened his concern with the social and political inequalities of the time, but it was his strong sense of religion and firm belief in Order which played the most significant role in shaping his history of the Revolution. Carlyle's preoccupation with order was made more acute by the riots and strikes associated with the Reform agitation of the early 1830s. The Reform Bill of 1832 was designed to increase the franchise, but failed to pass in the House of Lords and chaos ensued.[44] In the years that followed, Carlyle "expressed a profound contempt for the way in which the Reform was carried through. In subsequent years, he maintained an attitude of contempt for Parliamentary procedure and ... he was to show that he had little time for the established forms

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[43] Hedva Ben-Israel, English Historians of the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 129.

[44] Under coercion from the monarchy, the Reform Act was passed in 1832. The middle class now had a vote, but the working class continued to be under-represented.

of democracy in use in his day."[45] Carlyle viewed the French Revolution in much the same way, believing the *ancien régime* had little to offer France by 1789. The ideas expressed nearly fifty years earlier in James Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae* resurfaced in Carlyle's writings, particularly in the latter's belief that reform was necessary for a successful future, whether it was in France or England.

Carlyle's The French Revolution (1837) had a dramatic flair which highlighted the initial liberalism of the Revolution, but as with his French predecessors, he criticised the events that came after the summer of 1792. Carlyle employed elements of Burke's arguments when he discussed the destruction of order, but was more influenced by Mackintosh's reply – Carlyle wanted reform before revolution broke out in England. Despite his alarm at the chaos that abounded following the liberal phase of the Revolution, Carlyle's analysis of the causes of disorder led him to a new tropology of Robespierre. Carlyle's 'seagreen' Robespierre appeared as a man of grandiose dreams without talent for governing, but he was not the tyrant or villain he had been ten years earlier. Carlyle saw great ambiguity in the man himself and his plans for France, believing he was caught up in forces beyond his control.[46] Combining sympathy for the man and horror for the times, Carlyle was left with more questions than answers; he wonders

> What his thoughts might be? His plans for finishing the Terror? One knows not. Dim vestiges there flit of Agrarian Law; a victorious Sansculottism became Landed Proprietor ... Peace bought by victory; breaches healed by Feast of Être Suprême; - and so, through seas of blood to Equality, Frugality, worksome Blessedness, Fraternity, and Republic of the virtues. Blessed shore, of such a sea of Aristocrat blood: but how to land on it? Through one last wave: blood of corrupt Sansculottists; traitorous or semi-traitorous Conventionels ... So stalks he, this poor Robespierre, like a seagreen ghost, through the blooming July. Vestiges of schemes flit dim. But *what* his schemes or his

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[45] Ian Campbell, Thomas Carlyle (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), 180.

[46] These included issues such as the aspirations of the people and the social problems of the day.

thoughts were will never be known to man.[47]

The language in this passage is significant because it asserts that there was more to Robespierre than Thiers' 'blood-thirsty pontiff'. Although there is an element of uncertainty, Robespierre appears as a visionary and an idealist, a man with a dream but no clear means of achieving it.[48] Moreover, the Incorruptible emerges as more than a self-serving, ambitious fanatic; he has become a sincere, though misguided, champion of the down-trodden. Carlyle's depiction is thus more complex, yet Robespierre's agency as the source of Terror is diminished. Robespierre has become more a human being, and less of an idealised, representative, demon, but in spite of this, Carlyle still has serious reservations about his connections to the *sans-culottes*. Because of these revisions, Carlyle likely played an important historiographical role in transforming the image of Robespierre by exposing his troubled, Romantic side. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact influence Carlyle's work had on later French historians, it is probable they were at least aware of it and the revised images therein. At any event, the tragic but well-intentioned Robespierre was to become an integral component among the histories of the late July Monarchy.

According to Hugh Collingham, the "year 1830 made historians of the French Revolution move leftwards, and as a liberal interpretation had been a form of opposition to the Restoration, so hostility to the July Monarchy was expressed by republicanism."[49] The emergence of a cult of Robespierre, as well as the publication of Saint-Just's socially-oriented literary aspirations, also served to undermine the stereotypes of the Restoration; "for many republicans 1793 ceased

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[47] Thomas Carlyle, History of the French Revolution (London: Chapman and Hall, 1898), v. 3, 274-5.

[48] Carlyle still believed Robespierre was the dictator, responsible for controlling the Committee of Public Safety.

[49] Collingham, July Monarchy, 261. Collingham discusses the literature of the July Monarchy in the chapter "History and Philosophy", 258-68.

to be an aberration."[50] By the time the history of the Revolution was re-written in the mid-1840s, Romanticism had also flowered, and the period was viewed nostalgically by republicans as the greatest eras in France's history, rather than her darkest hour. The two historians who best illustrate this new republican vision were Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), both of whom published works in 1847 on the cusp of France's third revolution.

Jules Michelet will always be recognised for adding to the stature of Revolutionary history by sculpting the image of a 'Glorious' Revolution, and he served as the Revolution's "most eloquent and extreme spokesman."[51] Although Michelet was deeply patriotic and republican, his vision of the Revolution was not entirely enlightened, however, and like his predecessors during the 1820s, he exercised a strong anti-clerical, and particularly anti-Jesuit, polemic in his history.[52] Michelet continued the fight against the forces of conservatism and championed the Republican cause, noting that for France "to be free, she must make war on the Church, the aristocracy, the conservative bourgeoisie, and the legitimists, all of whom were blinded by the past, unable to see the necessary evolution of the nation towards democracy."[53]

Michelet's History of the French Revolution gave a deeply emotional portrayal of events based on fond recollections of this momentous epoch, and the representations therein were a departure from earlier liberal histories. As part of this new approach, Michelet argued that

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[50] Collingham, July Monarchy, 261.

[51] Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 216.

[52] Over time, Michelet became "increasingly disinclined to draw any practical distinction between Jesuitism and modern Catholicism." (Cubitt, Jesuit Myth, 134.) Michelet's History of the French Revolution is more anti-clerical than anti-Jesuit, and his strong anti-Jesuit convictions are more predominant in other works.

[53] Barzun, "Romantic Historiography," 328.

Robespierre was part of a larger Jacobin agenda for social control. Robespierre became a *part* of the problem, but not the *whole problem*. There was more to the Terror than Robespierre, and because there was more than Robespierre, he could not be held solely responsible,[54] nor could he be wholly representative of that period. Michelet's intention was not to 'excuse' Robespierre, but his history was one of the first to construct an image based more on considerations of contextual events than simple stereotypes. The resultant image was closer to that of Carlyle than Mignet or Thiers, portraying a man who was more flawed than tyrannical, and whose agency was limited by other forces. Consequently, Robespierre appeared as the "most artificial of men," a chameleon who would change his colours to suit the situation.[55] He was a cautious man "who only took one safe step at a time,"[56] and his slow rise to power was neither calculated nor dynamic. Michelet believed Robespierre was pushed towards dictatorship by his supporters rather than seeking it himself. Gaining confidence as he gained momentum, using intimidation to consolidate his authority, Robespierre eventually became a "government unto himself."[57]

Michelet speculated that Robespierre was in search of something greater than a dictatorship of one man, however. In a quote that displays his notorious anti-clericalism, he suggested Robespierre was a man

> less interested in power than in moral authority ... What Robespierre really wanted, his whole life long, was to be the dictator of men's souls, to rule their minds by the triumphant formulation which could sum up the Jacobin faith and before which the

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[54] Michelet believed that Danton was more representative of the Terror than Robespierre.

[55] Jules Michelet, History of the French Revolution (Wynnewood, PA.: Livingstone, 1973), v. 7, 56.

[56] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 6, 254.

[57] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 7, 77.

Gironde, the Cordeliers, France, nay, the whole world would fall on its knees.[58]

Michelet invoked the fear of ecclesiastical authority several times by depicting Robespierre as the prophet who wanted to be worshipped. This 'desire to rule' drove Robespierre, but the situation within France would not allow him his Republic of Virtue; neither the political nor economic context were in his favour.[59] Michelet represented Robespierre as a man who wanted to dominate, not murder. Like liberals before him, Michelet did not deny that Robespierre was responsible for diverting the course of the Revolution. Yet, while Robespierre was undoubtedly the cause of much suffering, Michelet believed any suggestion that he was responsible for the Terror would ignore the larger forces at work. He saw Robespierre as "the serf of the Terror,"[60] a man compelled by '*la force des choses*'.[61]

In Michelet's history, Saint-Just finally came out from under Robespierre's shadow. Whereas Michelet turned away from demonising Robespierre, Saint-Just emerged as a man of blood who

> speaks with the voice of a powerful and high-minded young man who is both pitilessly pure and resigned to an impossible struggle in which he expects to perish. The voice is made of metal, strident as the blade of a sword, it rides high, burnished and terrifying, over all the parties, and all who heard it bowed their heads, all assented.[62]

Michelet's Saint-Just was as extreme as the Robespierre of the 1820s. Placing Saint-Just in the role of Robespierre's evil counter-part, his *doppelganger*, Michelet transferred historical

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[58] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 6, 37.

[55] Michelet believed that while the Committee of Public Safety debated its decrees as a collective, the latter were the work of Robespierre and the other Triumvirs, who used the rest of the Committee to do their bidding.

[60] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 2, 805. A variation of this theory of the 'serf' would reappear in the 1970s in Francois Furet's work.

[61] The theme of 'larger forces at work' would be central elements in both Marxist and cultural history during the twentieth century.

[62] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 6, 264.

antipathy for Robespierre onto Saint-Just, and reinvented him as the 'true' tyrant of the Revolution. Michelet's need to find a new villain grew out of his admiration for 'the people', whom he saw as the real heroes of the Revolution. Robespierre had been the champion of the Parisian *sans-culottes*, and any suggestion that 'the people' had chosen a tyrant would imply that 'the people' had erred, a possibility Michelet was not willing to entertain. Saint-Just, on the other hand, provided a suitable alternative, as he did not have the same connection to the *sans-culottes*.

Although Saint-Just had "discovered the *tone of the tyrant*,"[63] he was not subject to the 'larger forces' at work, as Robespierre was. According to Michelet, Saint-Just stepped out from behind Robespierre in the Spring of 1794, radicalising the Committee of Public Safety by instituting a number of draconian resolutions designed to suppress the counter-revolution. According to Michelet,

> The young man was violent and prodigiously able. He created the Ideal Terror: effective with no blood lost. The art lay in seizing men's imaginations, quick and deep ... The young Saint-Just seemed a Sulla, the very incarnation of the glorious tyrant of Montesquieu's famous dialogue: with this difference, that it was hard to see what proportion of his being derived from fanaticism, what from ideological passion and what from personal.[64]

Through a series of speeches and his actions as a representative on mission, Saint-Just proved himself to be a fanatic driven by a compulsion to purge the Revolution of traitors. Embodying the tyranny of the Revolution, Saint-Just became 'more Robespierre than Robespierre himself', a theme which would be repeated numerous times by historians.

The second major history of 1847 was Alphonse de Lamartine's The Girondists, *or* Personal

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[63] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 7, 192. This implied an inherent evil which had been nurtured under the conditions of the Revolution until it blossomed.

[64] Michelet, French Revolution, v. 7, 81.

Memoirs of the Patriots of the French Revolution. Lamartine was a Romantic poet who had emerged as a leading politician in the 1830s and 1840s. In the latter stages of the July Monarchy, he converted to republicanism and even accepted full manhood suffrage in a bid to increase his personal popularity. He was, however, an opponent of the growing utopian socialist movement, rejecting government intervention in social and economic matters. Over time, Lamartine developed an ideology which blended "Christian morality and revolutionary idealism,"[65] but his true objective was to "rehabilitate the Revolution, by separating its ideals from its crimes and mistakes, and to revive public awareness of the principles of 1789, which he believed should be France's political creed."[66] Lamartine's intention in writing The Girondists was overtly political; it provided him with the means to put himself at the head of the revolutionary tradition born in 1789, while giving specific direction to that tradition. He succeeded, gaining great prestige on the eve of the Revolution of 1848, and becoming the leader of the Provisional Government installed that February.

Lamartine tried to be equitable to Robespierre, while still separating him from the liberal phase of the Revolution. In return for this attempt at 'fairness', he was accused of 'gilding the guillotine' by Chateaubriand, but Lamartine hardly paints a flattering portrait of Robespierre. Lamartine focused on Robespierre's restless character, showing a more humane side to the man, and ultimately going so far as to make him appear a victim of circumstance. Robespierre was portrayed as an enigmatic man who belonged to no party, but who exploited the opportunities presented by the purge of the Girondins in 1793 to further his own agenda of creating the ideal

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[65] William Fortescue, Alphonse de Lamartine - A Political Biography (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 121.

[66] Fortescue, Political Biography, 127. J.P. Gooch believes this history was little more than an elaborate fabrication with little supportive evidence, whose only goal was to glorify the Revolution. J.P. Gooch, History and Historians of the Nineteenth Century (Toronto: Longmans, 1952), 215.

Republic. Lamartine believed that one of Robespierre's greatest faults was his inability to grasp the gravity of the situation in France between 1792 and 1794, creating a serious incompatibility between his dreams and the reality of the day. In essence, he was guilty of adhering "as obstinately to chimeras as to the truth."[67] Nonetheless, Lamartine portrayed Robespierre as the representative man, taking the metaphor to new heights: "He was the entire encorporation of the Revolution – principles, thoughts, passions, impulses."[68]

Lamartine presents Robespierre as the passionate revolutionary, rather than the tyrant, driven by a quasi-spiritual desire to save France from the evils which plagued her. He noted that Robespierre's

> superiority arose from the fact that no one but himself seemed to serve the Revolution for itself, and he elevated himself on his own disinterestedness. The Revolution was in Robespierre's eyes not so much a political cause, as a religion of the mind ... he had at last given grace and persuasion to his language, and made his whole person ... an instrument of eloquence, conviction, and passion ... he was the most convinced man of the whole Revolution; for this reason he was for a long time its obscure follower, then its favourite, then its master, and then its victim ... Robespierre gained and merited the title of *incorruptible*, the most glorious the people could award him, since it was the title of their most perfect confidence, bestowed on him at a time when every one was suspected.[69]

Lamartine's language is as revealing as Carlyle's, and it illustrates his inclination to see Robespierre as an idealist and a dreamer, not a selfish egoist. In this history, Robespierre represented both the positive and negative attributes of the Revolution. His passion and conviction were commendable to Lamartine, but his lack of political acumen and pragmatism

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[67] Alphose de Lamartine, The Girondists, or, Personal Memoirs of the Patriots of the French Revolution (London: G.Bell and Sons, 1913), v. 2, 479.

[68] Lamartine, Girondists, v. 1, 32.

[69] Lamartine, Girondists, v. 2, 192-3.

were troubling. Like contemporary utopian socialists, his intentions were noble, but he was a threat and a failure because he did not understand the world around him.[70] Robespierre was no longer the obvious villain, but he still represented the problematic elements of the Revolution which were central to liberal history. Although Lamartine attempted to contextualise the Terror and Robespierre's role, Robespierre remained idealised. In conjunction with Carlyle and Michelet's images of the flawed dreamer, however, Lamartine's portrait introduced a greater degree of complexity to the images of Robespierre than was present in Restoration histories.

Like Michelet, Lamartine saw Saint-Just as the real voice of evil. In a brief sketch of the young deputy as he appeared in the fall of 1792, Lamartine assessed his character, noting:

> This young man, mute as an oracle and sententious as an axiom, seemed to have laid aside all human sensibility, to personify in himself the cold intelligence and pitiless march to the Revolution. He had neither eyes, ears, nor hear for anything which appeared to oppose the establishment of the universal republic. Kings, thrones, blood, women, children, people - all that stood between him and his object - disappeared or was destined to do so, for his passion had literally petrified him ... Attached to Robespierre alone, Saint-Just held but little intercourse with the other members. He left his place at the Convention to appear as the precursor of the doctrines of his *master*, and when his speech was finished, he returned to it silent and implacable; not a man but a voice.[71]

Saint-Just was the ideologue, the demonic and fanatical counter-part to Robespierre's well-intentioned, though naïve, revolutionary. He was also a sign of where idealism, when devoid of common humanity, could lead. In the end, however, Saint-Just was unable to exist outside the realms of Robespierre's authority.[72] As in other histories, this representation served to underline

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[70] According to Lamartine, a Jacobin dictatorship preceded Robespierre's rise to power; therefore, the 'Oracle of the Jacobins' could not have been responsible for the Terror. Furthermore, Robespierre "designed the end and the road; the others propelled the machine. Robespierre moved not the wheels. His tribute was - thought." Lamartine, Girondists, v. 3, 110.

[71] Lamartine, Girondists, v. 2, 282. My italics.

[72] Lamartine asserts on a number of occasions that Saint-Just was pushing Robespierre to seize control of the

Robespierre's symbolic importance.

Revolutionary history, at least in the academic sense, was born during the Restoration. It was highly polemical, reflecting the political battles of the day, but it was also highly influential. The foundation for future representations of Robespierre was laid during the Restoration with de Staël's tropology of the despot, Thiers' of the religious fanatic, and the post-1830 image of the well-meaning but dangerous ideologue. Throughout this period, the interpretations of Robespierre reflected developments in contemporary politics, investing the Incorruptible with a symbolic importance that would become intrinsic to Revolutionary history.

As the political climate in France changed, however, so too did the images of Robespierre. Collingham notes that between 1815 and 1847, histories were written to "defend political heroes or attack philosophical enemies;"[73] this point would also hold true for the Third Republic, but tropologies of Robespierre would head off in less-familiar directions before the inception of the Republic in 1870. While these images became more nuanced, representations of Robespierre during this next period continued to be based more on what he allegedly symbolised than a detailed examination of his literal role in the Revolution.

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dictatorship from the Committee of Public Safety, and to make his policies less vague, supposedly so Saint-Just could increase his own authority. Norman Hampson refutes this rather convincingly in Saint-Just.

[73] Collingham, July Monarchy, 262.

Chapter 2

1847-1927

"Robespierre ... seems to have conceived a vindictive and bloody hatred for those he knew to be greater than himself, or likely to stand in his way." – Alponse Aulard, The French Revolution: A Political History, v. 1, 70.

"Robespierre considered nothing but the interests of the Revolution." – Albert Mathiez, The French Revolution, 436.

While great importance had been attached to the tropologies of Robespierre created prior to the Revolution of 1848, the next eighty years saw a significant transition in the nature of these interpretations. The liberal image of the tyrant underwent dramatic transformations that were, in one way or another, linked to the creation of the Third Republic in 1870. Republicans adopted the Revolution as their own, and created a tropology which evolved out of the liberal representation, but was somewhat less extreme. More importantly, however, socialism challenged republicanism as the nineteenth century came to a close. Socialists also laid claim to the history of the Revolution, but they saw something entirely different in Robespierre. While this last set of images developed in the first decades of this century, the earliest challenge to the liberal representation actually came in another history published in 1847.

Michelet and Lamartine's histories had added depth to the Restoration interpretation of Robespierre, but the third major work published that year proved to be the greatest departure to date. Although written with 'the people' in mind, Louis Blanc's *Histoire de la Révolution francaise* (1847-1862) was by no means Romantic or liberal. Blanc (1811-82) dissociated himself from his contemporaries by advancing the idea that the Revolution was the birthplace of the principles of socialism. Influenced by the social theories that had developed in France during the 1820s, Blanc's history was inspired by the rapid industrialisation of the 1840s and

subsequent worker dissatisfaction. The 1840s were characterised by a "new mood that was more intransigent and less idealistic. The evils of the early industrial age could not be entirely ignored ... [and the possibility] of class conflict was growing" more likely.[1] Blanc became a transitional figure between utopian and 'scientific' socialism in that he called for decisive governmental economic intervention on behalf of workers, but did not advocate class warfare of the sort later championed by Marx.

Blanc saw the Revolution as a struggle between the middle class and the people. Within this context, the Year II and the rise of the Jacobins marked "a new stage of the Revolution defined by new principles embodied in new actors; it was the expression of the people's interests against the interests of the bourgeoisie."[2] The leading figure of this new vision of the Revolution was none other than the villain of liberal histories – Robespierre. As leader of the 'new actors' (the Jacobins), Robespierre embodied the 'new principles' which Blanc saw as the precursors to socialism, thus making him the progenitor of socialism and the hero of the working class.

In order to re-invent Robespierre thusly, Blanc had to dissociate him from the extremes of the Terror by undermining "the liberal's image of him as an opportunistic [and unprincipled] dictator."[3] To achieve this, Blanc rejected the notion of the self-serving despot, and portrayed Robespierre as a moderate concerned with the welfare of the people and the Republic. He

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[1] Gordon Wright, France in Modern Times (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 183.

[2] Francois Furet, "Blanc", in A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution, Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds. (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1989), 903. The 'principles' were social reforms introduced by the Jacobins in 1793. They included such things as the imposition of the First Maximum (which regulated prices of essential goods), penalties against hoarding, final abolition of feudalism, a forced loan on the rich, and a General Maximum (which widened price controls on everyday goods). Although these measures were likely motivated more by political expediency than a desire to create an egalitarian state, Blanc believed that Jacobin philosophy was centred around the notion of "a new strong government in the service of the weak", and he admired the concept. Furet, "Blanc", 905. Socialists often gave Robespierre credit for implementing these measures, and their effect would become central to a socialist argument about Robespierrist concerns for the lower classes.

[3] Furet, "Blanc", 905.

struggled to create the Republic of Virtue by introducing reforms designed to aid the working class, all the while fighting tirelessly against the corruption of the bourgeois Girondins.[4] No longer was the Republic of Virtue a tool for extending Robespierre's control over the Convention or the Committee, as the liberals had suggested. Aware of the centrality of the 'villain' in liberal histories, Blanc cast the ultra-radical Hébertist deputies in this role during the Year II,[5] laying blame for the executions which took place between the fall of 1793 and the Spring of 1794 on the *enragés*, as they were also known.[6] Furthermore, he suggested that the Robespierrists rose up that Spring to purge the Convention of the factions when they were no longer able to condone the actions of these extremists.[7] Blanc stated that Robespierre "voulait bien attaquer l'Hébertisme, mais pour sortir de la Terreur, non pour désorganiser le gouvernement revolutionnaire, quand plus que jamais l'unité et la vigueur d'action étaient commandées par les périls de la France."[8] Although Robespierre went too far in supporting the purge of the moderate Dantonists, his actions as a whole were admirable because of his concern for the working class.

Robespierre was anything but a tyrant for Blanc. He believed Robespierre represented the more noble attributes of the Revolution, embodying

> only the good side of Jacobinism: government of the people. The bad side, the Terror, was brought on not only by the Revolution's enemies, who created the 'circumstances'

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[4] This image directly contradicted that of Lamartine, who saw Robespierre as the dreamer who had little understanding of the world of politics.

[5] The Hébertists demanded more state relief for those suffering from the hardships of the Revolution, and were recognised for their social welfare concerns. The demands of the Hébertists were likely more realistic than the vision of a utopian ideal proposed by Robespierre.

[6] There was no evidence to support this assertion.

[7] This was the 'war of the factions' which took place between February and March 1794.

[8] Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Langlois & Leclerq, 1847-62), v. 10, 224.

> that made it necessary, but also by its zealots, who had soon turned into reactionaries (9 Thermidor) or sank into bourgeois corruption.[9]

Jacobinism addressed the concerns of those who had suffered the most during the Revolution, at a time when the bourgeoisie demonstrated little regard for the working classes, and this was what appealed to Blanc. Robespierre's contributions to the Revolution were singular, in that

> Robespierre s'étudiant à tracer à la Révolution sa route entre les deux écueils que, souvent déjà, il avait signalés avec inquiétude: l'excès d'indulgence et l'excès de la rigueur. Mais il lui eût fallu, pour réussir, un pouvoir qu'il n'avait pas. Son autorité morale était immense; son autorité officielle, très-combattue, très disputée, se trouva bien souvent nulle.[10]

Although he was able to guide the Revolution through 'troubled waters', Robespierre's moral authority was not great enough to overcome his lack of political influence. He had been isolated on the Committee not because he was a tyrant, as previous histories had suggested, but because he was the only one who had the courage to dream on such a grand scale. Blanc's history was more than a re-telling of Carlyle's tale, however, and Robespierre was much more than a dreamer. Thermidor proved not to be "a deliverance but a martyrdom, its victim a gentle and inspired enthusiast, a Puritan and a Stoic, the defender of the poor and the clear-sighted apostle of humanity."[11] Robespierre emerges as a Christ figure in Blanc's history, and Jacobinism as a new religion. For liberals, these metaphors had sinister, fanatical connotations, but socialists saw them as a virtue.

As the voice of Jacobin ideology Robespierre was no longer the villain. He now represented the triumph of what Blanc saw as working-class ideals over bourgeois pretensions. He became something of a proto-socialist hero. Because of this, Robespierre,

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[9] Furet, "Blanc", 905.

[10] Blanc, *Histoire*, v. 10, 242.

[11] Gooch, History, 218.

like Christ, "ne fut jamais que l'homme de l'heure présente; mais cela, du moins, il le fut toujours."[12] Rising above party politics, Robespierre became the revolutionary saviour charged with rescuing the people and serving the nation.[13] Thus, Restoration liberal images were transformed because of the changing political landscape of the 1840s. As working-class conditions became an issue, socialists looked to the past for guidance, and found inspiration in Robespierre. Yet, while this tropology set a precedent for future socialists, Blanc was unable to dismiss the stigma attached to the Incorruptible's name. This would be apparent in the next two major histories of the Revolution.

The mid-point of the nineteenth century was chaotic in France. The July Monarchy collapsed in 1848, and gave way to the Second Republic, which only lasted until 1851 and the coronation of the emperor Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. During the Second Empire (1851-70), the revolutionary tradition which had begun in 1789 was perceived to be a threat to the stability of the regime, just as it had been in the First Empire. Memories of the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 were still vivid, and the regime was well aware that it was in its interest to focus the nation's attention on France's growing prosperity, rather than her turbulent past. The status quo was to come undone rapidly however, with the crushing blow dealt to the French army by the Prussians at Sedan on 31 August 1870. Hostilities between the two sides continued throughout the winter, with the Prussians laying siege to Paris. When an armistice was signed in March 1871, many Parisians were unwilling to surrender. A series of confrontations between the French government and Parisians led to rioting; the government abandoned the city and a second siege ensued. Shortly thereafter, the insurrectionaries "established a self-governing 'commune' and called for the conversion of all France into a

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[12] Blanc, *Histoire*, v. 5, 299.

[13] This concept of 'service to the nation' was to become central to an increasingly idealised socialist representation of Robespierre after the turn of the century.

decentralised federation of such municipalities."[14] The siege and the uprising of the Paris Commune lasted nine weeks, but with the assistance of the Prussians, the French government defeated the Communards; twenty thousand died in subsequent repression. The results of the uprising were immediate and far-reaching. The Commune "permanently divided French republicans, embittered the workers, and intensified class conflict ... [and] encouraged the radical workers to justify the use of violence as a political weapon."[15] Marx saw the Paris Commune as the first proletarian dictatorship, but for those on the political right, it reinforced the perceived threat posed by the working classes. The defeats of that year scarred the Republic, but there was another development that would affect images of Robespierre even more.

Although the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 forced the French to re-evaluate their position in Europe, it was the creation of the Third Republic on 4 September 1870 that had the greatest effect on the historiography of the Revolution to date. As noted above, Revolutionary history had been the prerogative of the opposition since the Bourbon Restoration, but within ten years of the Republic's inception, it had become an integral part of the Republican political establishment. Created out of chaos, the government of the new Republic rejected the legacy of the Second Empire and "found in the events of 1789 to 1794 its ancestry and inspiration,"[16] believing the latter period would provide a strong foundation for the Republic and ensure both its stability and legitimacy.[17] Furthermore, the triumph of

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[14] Wright, Modern Times, 216.

[15] Wright, Modern Times, 218. For a more detailed account of the Paris Commune, see Alain Plessis, The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, 1852-1871 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 170-74.

[16] McManners, "Historiography,"642.

[17] Although a republican interpretation of the Revolution was gaining favour, the Third Republic remained socially conservative. This would become apparent in attempts to quell the growing socialist movement in the *fin-de-siecle* era.

republicanism over monarchism in the mid-1870s guaranteed the primacy of this new state-sponsored vision of the Revolution. Not all histories of the period subscribed to this agenda, however, as was demonstrated by the first major history of the Revolution published after the collapse of the Second Empire.

Hippolyte Taine's The French Revolution (1876-93) rejected the Republic's revolutionary heritage in its entirety. With a bias rooted deep in the conservative works of Burke and de Maistre, and a fear born out of the revolt of the Paris Commune, Taine claimed the Revolution brought a century of chaos to France by corrupting the established social order. Driven by a combination of rationalism, moral determinism and social Darwinism, he saw the revolutionary tradition that began during the Enlightenment, and was perpetuated by the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, to be the primary cause of France's decline.[18] The Prussian victory, in conjunction with their annexation of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and the uprising of the Commune, were the latest symptoms of the revolutionary sickness which had destroyed France.[19]

Taine (1828-93) believed responsibility for the corruption of the body politic lay with those who orchestrated the spectacle of the Revolution. Eager to find a scapegoat, Taine targeted the Jacobins as "men who leagued together under the banner of [Rousseau's] *Contrat social* to confiscate property, destroy family life and religion, and to use for their ends the dregs of a society that had lost all traditional restraints."[20] The leader of the Jacobins – Robespierre – emerged as the chief architect of the collapse of the once-

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[18] In the 1870s, a religious order known as the Assumptionists "called on Frenchmen to recognise that defeat was a natural product of seventy-five years of error and sin." Wright, Modern Times, 234. This was typical conservative rhetoric of the period.

[19] In conjunction with these events, the collapse of scientism and rationalism in the 1880s, around which Taine had built his reputation, left him feeling increasingly bitter towards what he saw as the product of "the corrosive 'reason' of eighteenth century *philosophes*" – revolutionary tradition. McManners, "Historiography," 638.

[20] McManners, "Historiography," 640-1.

mighty nation. Rather than portraying him as a despot or villain as Thiers and Mignet had done, however, Taine depicted Robespierre as little more than a charlatan and an empty-headed speculator. According to Taine, his agenda was "certainly the most impotent and the most mischievous, for it is organically short-sighted...beyond its own coterie and club it distinguishes nothing, while in the vagueness and confusion of the distance it sets up the empty idols of its own Utopia."[21] Although Taine used Revolutionary history to attack contemporary socialism and the Communards, his main preoccupation was the destruction of order brought about by Robespierre and the Jacobins.

Through deception and coercion, Robespierre undermined the government of the First Republic and created an ideologically narrow dictatorship which was obsessed with the vision of a socialist Republic of Virtue. Taine attacked Robespierre's agenda, stating "[n]o light reaches eyes which regard blindness as clear-sightedness; no remorse affects a soul which erects barbarism into patriotism, and which sanctions murder with duty."[22] Delusion and a penchant for legitimising violence characterised Taine's hostile portrayal of Robespierre. The Incorruptible's greatest crime, however, was that he had become a *cuistre*.[23] Convinced of his own innocence, Robespierre became the ultimate hypocrite by

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[21] Hippolyte Taine, The French Revolution (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1876-93), v. 2, 16. Not only was Robespierre a despicable individual, but Taine believed the revolutionary government was illegal, deficient from the outset, and was made even worse when it fell into the hands of the Jacobins, the most odious of the revolutionaries, "born out of social decomposition like mushrooms out of compost." Taine, French Revolution, v. 2, 12.

[22] Taine, French Revolution, v. 2, 23.

[23] Taine, French Revolution, v. 3, 145. Literally, a *cuistre* is a smug, self-righteous person critical of the morals of others. Whereas Robespierre was 'flawed', Saint-Just appeared to be evil incarnate, empowered by his ability to intimidate: "When Saint-Just, in the name of the Convention, affirms anything, it must be believed; his dissertation is a peremptory injunction and not an effort of reason; it commands obedience; it is not open to examination; it is not a report which he draws from his coat pocket, it is a bludgeon." (Taine, French Revolution, v. 3, 189.) Saint-Just became the voice of authority which Robespierre used to control dissension, but there is little insight into Saint-Just in this history.

condemning those around him for crimes of which he himself was guilty. In the end, he embodied the evils of the Revolution:

> Such is the scenic exterior of the Revolution, a specious mask with a hideous visage beneath it, under the reigns of a nominal humanitarian theory, covering over the effective dictatorship of evil and low passions. In its true representative body [Robespierre], as in itself, we see ferocity issuing from philanthropy, and, from the *cuistre*, the executioner.[24]

Taine believed the pretensions of greatness that emanated from the Revolution were nothing but falsehoods that camouflaged the evil of men bent on self-aggrandisement. Robespierre represented the baseness of mankind, but also the evil spawned by the Enlightenment.[25]

Although Taine shared a dislike for Robespierre with Mignet and Thiers, he was closer ideologically to de Maistre than the liberal historians. Taine saw the *ancien régime* as the halcyon era of France; all that followed had served to weaken the nation, leaving her vulnerable to the Prussians and the working-class Communards. The annexation of Alsace and Lorraine merely served to highlight the weaknesses brought on by a malaise which had taken root a century earlier. Taine's worldview, coupled with his unwillingness to subscribe to Third Republic politics, isolated him, leaving him with little more than fond memories of an age long gone. His attacks on the Revolution were consistent, but his work was not so much a history as a list of crimes against France. Not surprisingly, his history was not well received in the Third Republic, and he was resoundingly denounced by Alphonse Aulard.[26]

By the mid-1880s, the centenary of the Revolution was approaching, and the government was beginning to recognise the value of Revolutionary history. The

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[24] Taine, French Revolution, v. 3, 168.

[25] Taine believed Robespierre and Saint-Just used the guillotine so freely because it was "the only machinery they possess for governing the country, for they have deprived themselves of all other. Their engine has to be exhibited, for it works only on condition that its bloody image be stamped indelibly on every body's imagination." Taine, French Revolution, v. 3, 119.

[26] Although he had begun writing before the Third Republic adopted its policy of Revolutionary republicanism, Taine's later volumes clashed with the new agenda.

Revolution was now officially recognised as a positive event, but Republican politicians had a very specific vision of which revolutionary values they would promote. This would be limited to the concepts of political democracy and the republican form of government; the so-called 'policies of 1793' were notably absent from Republican Revolutionary history. The Republic remained socially conservative even after the monarchists were defeated, and the republican right had no intention of allowing their Revolutionary tradition to be used to foster social change. With the political changes came other developments that would significantly alter Revolutionary history. In the mid-1880s, Alphonse Aulard was chosen as the Republic's official historian of the Revolution, but there was another development of the 1890s which was perhaps more important. During this decade, a "sort of industrial revolution ... [was] taking place in French historiography, characterised by detailed researches, division of labour, technical expertise and vastly increased production."[27] History as a discipline became professionalised, and unsubstantiated allegations which had been part of earlier histories were becoming increasingly less acceptable. The burden of proof had shifted considerably. This became apparent during the next century, and will be further discussed in subsequent chapters.

In conjunction with these developments on the academic front, France was recovering from the humiliation of 1870-71 by the 1890s.[28] Many of the challenges faced by the

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[27] McManners, "Historiography," 642. Much of this professionalisation took place under Aulard's leadership, and was stimulated by his practice of thorough researching and documentation. Prior to this, many histories were little more than personal reflections on the Revolution. Aulard also added to Revolutionary history by introducing a number of new sources of historical information, including archival material.

[28] The decade was far from stable, however. See Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux, The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War 1871-1814 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 147-209 for details.

Republic over the past two decades had been overcome, but the republican government had moved to the right during the 1880s. It now stood

> for the defence of the democratic republic, the struggle against clerical influence, the championship of a kind of nationalism which was drawn from the Revolution but which was now imperialist as well, and [those in power] showed no marked concern for reform of the social order.[29]

During this period, the 'new Right' made their presence known. This ultra-conservative bloc shared many of Taine's opinions, particularly those on restricting suffrage and the evils of parliamentary democracy. Instead of marglinalising the working classes, however, this group fostered cohesion on the left under people like Jean Jaurès.

During the 1890s, conservative republicanism seemed to be characterised by endemic corruption and the domination of narrow vested interests.[30] In the final years of the decade, a reaction against right-wing republicanism emerged out of "the rapid growth of the industrial working class, produced by the accelerated economic expansion, and ... its organisation in support of socialism."[31] The development of socialism challenged the conservative republican monopoly on a number of levels, and over the next two decades, socialists clashed with republicans for control of the Revolutionary heritage. The result was a new style of republican history which sought to expose the dangers of socialism, and which premised itself around the principle of republican defence.[32]

The importance of Revolutionary history was fully sanctioned by the Third Republic with the appointment of Alphonse Aulard (1849-1928) to the newly created Chair of the History

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[29] Paul Farmer, France Reviews its Revolutionary Origins (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 53.

[30] See James McMillan, Twentieth Century France (New York: Edward Arnold, 1992), 15-7 for an explanation of the corruption surrounding the separation of Church and State in 1905.

[31] Farmer, Revolutionary Origins, 54. Socialists of the period were not opposed to the republican form of government, but rather the conservative elements within.

[32] The emergence of socialism will be discussed further below.

of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne in 1891. Although such a position was significant in itself, it was Aulard's attempt to endow the history of the Revolution with a specifically republican character which changed the nature of that history.[33] Throughout his tenure as the Chair, Aulard's work glorified "the moderate republicans of the early revolutionary years."[34] He was aware that it was politically expeditious, as well as culturally necessary, to create a strong republican heritage for the Republic to make up for the embarrassment of 1870-71. Aulard also believed it was necessary to keep the history of the Revolution out of the hands of socialists. Denying the Left access to the Revolution would deny socialists a revolutionary tradition which could give the movement the legitimacy Blanc had sought fifty years earlier.[35]

Taking his cue from Michelet's history, Aulard envisaged a glorious Revolution which was the birthplace of Republicanism.[36] Like the liberals, Aulard believed the early years of the Revolution saw great advances, but he saw the Terror differently. While Aulard viewed the Year II as somewhat of a black mark, he came close to "justifying the Terror as a patriotic necessity."[37] The development of republicanism over-rode any concerns of bloodshed. Aulard premised his history on the idea that the Revolution "represented the advent of a democratic republic," in spite of the fact that he disliked the events and the personalities of the Year II intensely.[38] Robespierre was not Aulard's focal point, however. Aulard is perhaps

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[33] Aulard was more focused on analysis of evidence than reliance on memory, making him a fastidious and somewhat unique historian for the period, but he was criticised by other historians for his over-zealous use of official reports.

[34] Wright, Modern Times, 84.

[35] McManners, "Historiography," 645. Because of Aulard's interpretation, socialists were forced to create their own unique representation of the Revolution.

[36] The principles of the Revolution implied democracy and republican government for Aulard.

[37] Gooch, History, 239.

[38] Francois Furet, "Academic History of the Revolution", in A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution, Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 887. Aulard was troubled by the fact that the Revolutionary Government did away with the Rights of Man and summarily dismissed the Constitution of 1793, but he understood that this was necessary.

best known for his admiration of Danton, whom he saw as the model republican revolutionary.[39] According to James L. Godfrey, Aulard "saw in Danton the spirit of the embattled Revolution, the incarnation of the national defence against all of its foes."[40] In a Republic that was rewriting its history and attempting to define itself around the 'principles of '89', Danton emerged as one of the few who did not have the blood of the Terror on his hands, and could in fact be seen as a martyr to the republican cause. By choosing Danton as the hero, Aulard cast Robespierre in the role of villain once again.

Aulard began The French Revolution: A Political History 1789-1804 (1905) with a scathing indictment of Robespierre, combining Mignet's image of a conniving revolutionary with Taine's man of little substance. Like Third Republic socialists, Robespierre was blinded by the perceived righteousness of his course of action and unwilling to accept the political and economic realities of the Revolution as impediments to his grand design. He undermined his own attempts to create the Republic of Virtue and alienated deputies with his conviction of his own incorruptibility and infallibility. In the end, it was overwhelming ambition that drove Robespierre to act as he did.[41] Early in his history, Aulard was reluctant to condemn Robespierre entirely, because:

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[39] Georges-Jacques Danton had earned a reputation as a dynamic speaker and leader of the Parisian working classes in the early years of the Revolution. After being elected to the Convention, he was involved in organising the war effort, and for this he became known as a patriot. He was also part of the original Committee of Public Safety, and along with Robespierre and the journalist Marat, served as one of the central revolutionary figures in the years prior to the King's execution. [These three were loosely referred to as a triumvirate during the early years of the Revolution, but mentions of a Triumvirate in the Year II were referring to the Robespierrist trio of Couthon, Saint-Just, and Robespierre.] Danton left the Committee before Robespierre was appointed, and over the next year the two clashed several times, supposedly because of Danton's treason. The latter was denounced by Saint-Just and executed on 5 April 1794. Revered by some historians for his sacrifice and patriotism and scorned by others for his venality, Danton always stood in sharp contrast to Robespierre.

[40] James L. Godfrey, "Aulard", in Essays in Modern European Historiography, William Halpern, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 23n.

[41] "Robespierre, like Marat, seems to have conceived a vindictive and bloody hatred of those he knew to be greater than himself, or likely to stand in his way." Alphonse Aulard, The French Revolution – A Political History, 1789-1804 (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1910), v. 1, 70.

> [i]t is just possible that he was never the dictator he seemed - that they [the other members of the Committee of Public Safety] used him, and then, when he appeared likely to become dangerous, accused him of conspiring with Couthon and Saint-Just to form a triumvirate, and brought him to the guillotine. On the other hand, their fears, which seems to have been genuine at the last, may have been so from the first.[42]

Aulard's uncertainty did not last long, however, and he noted that by the Spring of 1794 the "dictatorship of the Committee evolved into the dictatorship of Robespierre."[43]

Like Taine, Aulard believed that over the course of the Revolution Robespierre's true nature had become apparent. He had lost touch with reality, and was driven by delusions.[44] In the end, Aulard saw Robespierre as a man who

> followed the movements of the populace far more than he led them. It is for this reason that he seems to us today a hypocritical demagogue, and also because he points out the desirable but not the possible; he says what ought to be done, but never tells one how to do it.[45]

It was this sanctimonious impostor that Aulard disliked so intensely. Just as Lamartine had argued, Aulard believed Robespierre perverted the Revolution, posing as a mystical prophet, but having nothing to offer.[46] He stood in sharp contrast to Danton, who had had a pragmatic vision for the Republic which would have rallied all patriotic elements in the battle against foreign invasion. Like socialists in the Third Republic, Robespierre clutched at a hazy utopian ideal in the distance but had no grasp on the impracticalities of his dream. Aulard's state-sponsored vision of the Revolution rejected the notion that socialism provided a viable alternative to republicanism. Just as Robespierre's socialist dreams destabilised the republican Revolution by promoting an unrealistic and divisive Republic of Virtue, so too

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[42] Aulard, French Revolution, v. 1, 70.

[43] Aulard, French Revolution, v. 2, 286.

[44] Aulard introduced an interesting theory here which foreshadowed one of the central tenets of Marxist histories which stated that Robespierre was the 'mouthpiece' of the Committee of Public Safety, and while he appeared to control the dictatorship, but was little more than the most prominent figure.

[45] Aulard, French Revolution, v. 3, 87.

[46] This was where the similarities between the two ended.

would the socialists upset stability within the Third Republic during the turmoil of the pre-war era.

The French Left had been particularly fragmented during the first two decades of the Third Republic. In the 1890s, the word 'socialism' "had no definite meaning, other than denoting the creed of those who favoured the reorganisation of society on some kind of collectivist basis."[47] Within a decade, however, the Left had organised itself enough to present strong opposition to conservative republicanism. They were led by men who believed they were the "heirs of an indigenous French revolutionary tradition and that their task was to complete the great exercise begun in 1789."[48]

Undoubtedly, the development of socialism brought considerable upheaval to the Third Republic in the two decades prior to World War I.[49] The growth of workers' movements and socialist political organisations[50] brought the concerns of the lower classes to the public's attention in dramatic fashion. Violent street demonstrations and general strikes became increasingly commonplace, particularly in the period between the formation of the SFIO in 1905 and the outbreak of World War I. Moreover, alarm over widening social division within France was exacerbated by fears of renewed war with Germany. Throughout all of this, there

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[47] McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 23. Socialists were "bitterly divided ... over dogmas, strategies and personalities." (McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 23.) Jaurès clashed with Jules Guesde, the leading Marxist socialist of the period, who had been part of the Paris Commune uprising of 1871. He was a strong doctrinaire, and while his position was less dogmatic in the 1890s, he returned to his roots in the decade prior to the war, proving to be a constant foil for Jaurès, who had supplanted him in the early 1900s.

[48] McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 24.

[49] See McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 3-65, and Mayeur and Rebérioux, Third Republic, 209-320 for further details.

[50] Such as the SFIO – the *Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvrière* – the French Section of the Worker's International, and the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), which was something like a trade union branch of the Socialist Party.

were questions about what role socialists could be expected to play at a time when French unity was essential.

After considerable infighting among the socialist factions in the late 1890s and early 1900s, 'independent' socialists led by Jaurès emerged as the dominant group to challenge the Republican representation of the Revolution. In order to present a united front, socialists united under the common banner of the SFIO, which served as the political representative of the working classes. In spite of continuing struggles over doctrine,[51] Jaurès emerged as the spiritual leader of the SFIO. His first task was to channel the energy of the socialists, and he believed a socialist history of the Revolution would be the best way to provide direction for the movement.[52]

Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) expanded upon Blanc's socialist account of the Revolution with his *Histoire Socialiste de la Révolution francaise* (1910).[53] Although Jaurès used much of Aulard's work as a foundation for his own history, he stood apart from the republican tradition because of his socially-oriented interpretation of the Revolution. Jaurès was reluctant to accept that the outcome of the Revolution was as positive as the Third Republic contended,[54] and he was unable to dismiss the excesses of the Terror as a 'necessary evil'. Jaurès' socialism had been shaped by belief that there was a humanitarian

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[51] Jaurès clashed with the Marxist Guesdists on numerous occasions between 1905 and 1914. To make matters worse for the socialists, "the dogma of non-participation in so-called bourgeois cabinets banished French socialists to the political wilderness for thirty years," and effectively eliminated Jaurès' chances of becoming prime minister. McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 26.

[52] As World War I became increasingly imminent, Jaurès was condemned by ultra-nationalists for his pacifism, and was eventually assassinated at the end of July 1914.

[53] Originally published 1900-03. There have been a number of comments from various historians that Jaurès history was 'more social than socialist', such as Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 222, and McManners, "Historiography," 645. Regardless, it was significantly different from contemporary histories.

[54] Jaurès' concern was with the lower classes, and the majority of the liberal historians only examined the Revolution in terms of the effect on the middle and upper classes, who fared better after the Revolution than the *sans-culottes*.

element to civilisation, not just economic determinants as the Marxist socialists claimed.[55] Throughout, his history hinged on the premise that it was necessary "to root tomorrow's revolution in the French democratic tradition."[56] More specifically, his intent was to create an interpretation of the Revolution which would give Third Republic socialists a heritage rooted in democracy rather than violent upheaval. Jaurès wished to demonstrate that social change brought about by revolution was inherent in French history, but he was also "anxious to 'save the proletarian revolution from the sickening odour of blood and hatred which had remained attached to the bourgeois revolution.'"[57]

Jaurès sought to define "what was great in the Revolution by measuring it against the socialist ideal"[58] of an egalitarian state. To do this, he focused on what he qualified as Robespierre's policies of 1793, both social and political.[59] Portraying Robespierre as a credible leader who demonstrated concern for the working class, Jaurès made the Incorruptible the best representative of a tradition of revolutionary socialism which was not explicitly tied to violence.[60] Jaurès focused on Robespierre's moderation rather than any specific policy, and in doing so, constructed a tropology of an idealised socialist hero.[61] He highlighted "les service immenses de Robespierre, organisant le pouvoir révolutionnaire,

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[55] Jaurès did not reject Marxism entirely, however.

[56] Mona Ozouf, "Jaurès", in A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution, Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 958.

[57] McManners, "Historiography," 645.

[58] Ozouf, "Jaurès", 951.

[59] See Note 2 for an explanation.

[60] Although the Hébertists had been more overtly socialist than the Robespierrists, their radicalism made them more useful to the Guesdists than Jaurès.

[61] Robespierre embodied some, but not all, of the characteristics Jaurès was looking for in a revolutionary socialist role model. Consequently, Jaurès was forced to overlook some of Robespierre's more questionable characteristics in order to highlight his attributes.

sauvant la France de la guerre civile, de l'anarchie et de la défaite," particularly after the purge of the Girondins on 31 May 1793.[62] The theme of 'service to the nation' is more clearly defined in this account than in Blanc's, and takes on new meaning in light of the threats of war with Germany, the pre-war political chaos, and ministerial instability which plagued the Third Republic. Jaurès also reiterated Blanc's assertion that Robespierre's responsibility for the Terror was limited, arguing that repression against counter-revolutionary forces was intended to be swift, and followed by a return to the true objective – a program of social reformation and regeneration. "Ce n'est à aucun degré un programme de dictature permanent,"[63] according to Jaurès, thus introducing the idea of a 'dictatorship of necessity'. This theme would continue to be popular among socialist historians. The dictatorship was thus redeemed by giving it a specific mandate and limited life-span, although Jaurès expressed his displeasure with the violence of the Terror and Robespierre's involvement in it.

Much of Jaurès' portrayal of Robespierre was centred around his struggle against the factions in the Spring of 1794, which Jaurès associated with his own fight against the Guesdists. Jaurès felt he shared a spiritual connection with Robespierre because of their respective struggles, stating: "Je leurs dis ici, sous le soleil de juin 93 qui échauffe votre âpre bataille, je suis avec Robespierre, et c'est à côte de lui que je vais m'asseoir aux Jacobins."[64] Although Jaurès was the dominant force among the pre-war socialists, conflict within the party made his objective of a peaceful revolution less than certain, just as it had undermined Robespierre's dream of a Republic of Virtue. In spite of this common bond, Jaurès believed

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[62] Jean Jaurès, *Histoire Socialiste de la Révolutoin francaise* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1970), v. 6, 516.

[63] Jaurès, *Histoire*, v. 5, 530.

[64] Jaurès, *Histoire*, v. 6, 203.

Robespierre's positive contributions to the Revolution ended in the Spring of 1794 after the purge of the factions, when he abandoned the socialist principles that had guided his actions so decisively the previous summer. This, in turn, reflected Jaurès' concern about what would happen if Third Republic socialists gave in to the temptations of violence.

In spite of this fall from grace, Robespierre distinguished himself through his attempt to safeguard the Republic, and emerged as the valiant revolutionary who championed the cause of non-violent change through social reform. Given a choice, Jaurès noted that he preferred "l'orgueilleuse prudence de Robespierre" to the rash actions of more radical deputies who won the admiration of the Guesdists.[65] Robespierre was not without his faults, but he was the closest approximation of the ideal Jaurès was searching for. The Incorruptible had demonstrated that democracy and socialism were not incompatible, and thus he became an idealised model for the socialist revolutionary who would facilitate proletarian revolution in the Third Republic.

Jaurès had provided an alternative to Aulard's republican vision, but he was not the only historian to renounce nineteenth-century representations of Robespierre. Through an interesting twist of fate, the new voice of social history after Jaurès' death would also prove to be Robespierre's most fervent admirer – Albert Mathiez (1874-1932). Mathiez had been a student of Aulard who had entered the discipline of history with a "precocious political commitment to the left, halfway between sentimental Jacobinism and doctrinal socialism."[66] Because of this, his views on the Revolution were similar to those of Blanc,[67] but his politics were more radical than those of Jaurès. Driven by a belief that Robespierre had been

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[65] Jaurès, *Histoire*, v. 5, 346. This included people like the journalist Marat.

[66] Furet, "Academic", 890.

[67] Both saw Jacobinism as the forerunner of socialism, and Robespierre as the embodiment of the virtues of the Revolution.

viciously slandered and Danton inappropriately revered, Mathiez took it upon himself to rehabilitate Robespierre's character and undermine the Republican representation of the Revolution.

Mathiez's personal philosophy was shaped by a virulent distaste for Republican politics. Nonetheless, he rejected the extremes of Marxist ideology in favour of an interpretation which was influenced by Jaurès' writings on the ideas of historical materialism and class struggle.[68] Mathiez's view of the Revolution was also strongly influenced by the world around him. Deeply troubled by corruption[69] and the chaos of World War I,[70] Mathiez's histories were striking allegories, invoking the past to condemn the present.

> Originally a pacifist, the outbreak of war in 1914 turned him into something of a jingo[ist]. When there was talk of a negotiated peace he denounced the defeatism of the arch-enemy in *Danton and the Peace* (1917). *Victory in the Year II*, in the same year, was a response to demands for total mobilisation. He celebrated [Third Republic politician Tiger] Clemenceau's attack on foreign agents and French spies, in 1918, with *The Revolution and the Foreigners*; a fair number of them, of course, turned out to have been Dantonists or could more or less plausibly be accused of having links with Danton. The Russian Revolution, which Mathiez welcomed, served to justify the Terror.[71]

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[68] Morris Slavin and Agnes Smith, Bourgeois, Sans-culottes, and other Frenchmen (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1981), 121.

[69] High ranking government officials were implicated for their involvement in scandals on numerous occasions, bringing down governments and leading to chronic ministerial instability. It was "a period when ministers were more interested in seeking personal gain than in relieving the depressed social and economic conditions of the working class." (Slavin and Smith, Bourgeois, 119.) There was also a substantial gap "between the revolutionary rhetoric of the republicans in power and their meagre accomplishments" (Slavin and Smith, Bourgeois, 119.) which distressed socialists even further. The scandals included incidents such as the Panama Scandal, the Dreyfus Affair, and the corruption surrounding the Separation Bill of 1905. See Mayeur and Rebérioux, Third Republic, 72-267 for details.

[70] Mathiez had criticised the war dictatorship of World War I France, favouring Bolshevism as a political alternative, and many of his writings on the Revolution were in fact an attack on the government of 1914-18. Mathiez was so incensed by the way in which France was governed during this period that he rewrote the history of the Year II, presenting it as a glorious period in France's history which was vastly better than that which she was forced to endure during the war. (Francis Acomb, "Mathiez," in Essays in Modern European Historiography, ed. William Halpern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 233.) As a direct result of this, he was passed over for a position at the Sorbonne when Aulard resigned the chair of the History of the French Revolution in 1924; (Acomb, "Mathiez,"226) Mathiez did become an assistant lecturer at the university after several years, but died suddenly in 1932.

[71] Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 222.

Mathiez was intrigued by the events of the 1917 revolution in Russia,[72] and while he rejected the Marxist element,[73] he applauded the Revolution because it "toppled the old regime of aristocracy and autocracy ... [and] rid Russia of its 'Girondin' government which had failed to solve the agrarian question or prosecute the war effectively."[74] Mathiez drew inspiration from the events in Russia, and went so far as to state that the Bolsheviks reincarnated the Montagnards of 1793. Lenin appeared as the new Robespierre in this tribute to the triumph of socialism.[75]

Mathiez's writing was also motivated by a virulent hatred of Aulard, whom he saw as little more than an official propagandist. Disdaining his teacher's representation of Danton,[76] Mathiez built his histories around an idealised portrait of Robespierre as the leader 'for all ages', "a proponent of social action and democracy, a 'modern' man rather than an outdated historical figure [such as Danton], the very type of leader who was needed in the Republic of Comrades."[77] Mathiez became renowned for the epic battle he waged with Aulard. The two originally clashed over the importance of religious groups during the Revolution, but it was

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[72] The Russian Revolution had bolstered the hopes of French socialists who had been dreaming of overthrowing the bourgeoisie, but it was unlikely to be repeated in France. The events in Russia actually had a negative impact on socialism in France. The conservative Right saw socialists as an growing threat to the stability of the Republic, particularly in light of widespread worker demonstrations between 1917-20. Fears of a Bolshevik uprising were used to gain support for the Right in elections, and representation of the Left in the Chamber was significantly reduced until the late 1920s.

[73] He believed German Marxist influences had corrupted French socialism. Slavin and Smith, Bourgeois, 123.

[74] Slavin and Smith, Bourgeois, 123-4.

[75] Mathiez allied himself with the Communists after their split from the Socialists in the early 1920s, believing they were the only group who had not compromised themselves, and he attacked conservative republicans repeatedly. Within a matter of years, Mathiez left the Communist party because of the pressure being exerted by the Russians over the French wing of the party, returning to independent socialism. He began to call himself a Marxist in the late 1920s, reinforcing his ties with Marxist history, but denouncing these shortly thereafter, and ultimately broke with the Marxists in 1931 over his disgust with Soviet historians, whom he saw as the Russian equivalent of Aulard – little more than Stalin's propagandists.

[76] Mathiez saw Danton as a "corrupt bourgeois opportunist," (Wright, Modern Times, 84.) representing the venal politician of the Third Republic.

[77] Slavin and Smith, Bourgeois, 122.

the significance of Jaurès' class-based interpretations which convinced Mathiez to change his course of study. This in turn shifted the nature of the argument with Aulard.[78] Explaining the 1908 split from his mentor in a letter to the American historian Louis Gottschalk, Mathiez stated that he was not willing to be part of Aulard's political agenda of glorifying the Republic. In his own words, his works caused an uproar because

> I have embarrassed the republican defence politics of Aulard ... who, systematically, did not wish to draw attention to the primordial role of the bourgeoisie and to the misery of the people, who played the role of the dupe. In other words, I departed early from the apologetical theses of the master as soon as I perceived whither they led.[79]

This schism was characterised by increasingly vitriolic salvos of polemic and rhetoric, which lasted for twenty-four years and only ended when each of the combatants was dead.[80]

Mathiez's revised interpretation of Robespierre was centred on an absolute conviction that Robespierre was not "the blood-stained puppet of Thermidorean fabrication, but ... [rather] a just and clear-sighted statesman who lived but for the good of his country."[81] Mathiez's

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[78] Acomb, "Mathiez," 230. The political and social background of each historian likely played a part in the debate as well. Aulard was a bourgeois republican and Mathiez was a proletarian socialist who saw the Republic as the oppressor.

[79] Acomb, "Mathiez," 230.

[80] Aulard died in 1928, but Mathiez continued to harangue against Danton and praise Robespierre until his own death in 1932. Shortly after Mathiez parted ways with Aulard, he formed the *Societé des Études Robespierristes*, with the intent of studying and writing on Robespierre's role in the Revolution. This was a highly significant development in Revolutionary history. For the last century, Robespierre had been the most negative element of the Revolution, but with the creation of this publication, the image was completely transformed. This was only possible because of the political realignment of Revolutionary history through the emergence of socialism. Mathiez wrote and edited the *Societé*'s journal *Annales révolutionnaires* (1908-23), which appeared as direct competition to Aulard's publication *La Révolution francaise* (1881-1916). When *Annales* amalgamated with another Robespierrist journal, *Revue historique de la Révolution francaise* in 1924 to become *Annales historiques de la Révolution francaise* (AHRF), Mathiez continued to do most of the writing and editing himself, and the journal became even more Robespierrist in nature. *Annales* remained the leading Robespierrist historical organ even after Mathiez died, with Georges Lefebvre serving as the new editor. Lefebvre continued to focus the attention of the journal in the same direction until his own death in 1959. AHRF is still published today, but a detailed examination of Mathiez's writings in this journal is beyond the scope of this paper. Several of his articles were incorporated in books, and these provide sufficient insight into his views on Robespierre.

[81] Albert Mathiez, The Fall of Robespierre and Other Essays (London: Williams and Norgate, 1927), ix-x. My italics. Mathiez and Aulard's rivalry is evident in this book, especially when Mathiez refers to Aulard as 'the personal enemy' of Robespierre. The basic premise of nearly every history written by Mathiez was that negative images of Robespierre were based on incorrect or incomplete readings of events, and that the evidence used to

intention was to refute assertions that Robespierre had undermined the Revolution, by focusing on the "*immense services* [he had] rendered"[82] during his time in Paris. In this respect, Mathiez's work shared striking similarities to those of Jaurès. He believed that Robespierre's actions, particularly during the Year II, were designed to safeguard the Revolution, even though the choices he made were often difficult and unpopular. Moreover, Mathiez also believed Robespierre's policies had been legitimised by the material conditions of the working class. He stated that "the dictatorship of the Year II and its leaders were now justified not by the external circumstances with which they had to cope but by the class politics they instituted against the bourgeoisie in the service of the poorer masses."[83] The Terror was excused because it was targeted against the bourgeoisie, with the intent of providing relief to the poor.[84] Although Mathiez was more concerned with reducing culpability than he was in finding the origins of socialism, the influence of Jaurès' writings and Mathiez's own involvement with the socialists resulted in an expeditious manner of explaining Robespierre's actions. Terror contributed to the development of socialism, and Robespierre, because of his status as the leading figure of Year II, deserved to be recognised for his contributions to this development.

Mathiez's The French Revolution (1922) is perhaps the most striking example of his admiration for Robespierre. In it, Robespierre appeared as the eloquent "champion of the people"[85] whose election to the Committee of Public Safety elevated the dictatorship to a

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convict him was circumstantial at best. Many of Mathiez's arguments were somewhat problematic for his critics, however, because a number of his histories suffered from the same deficiencies he perceived in the work of others.

[82] Mathiez, Fall, 184.

[83] Furet, "Academic", 892. Mathiez did not believe the Committee of Public Safety was comprised of socialists, but the fact that the bourgeoisie acted on behalf of the lower classes was significant in and of itself.

[84] Like Jaurès, Mathiez believed Robespierre used the interim dictatorship to realise social concerns.

[85] Albert Mathiez, The French Revolution (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964 (Originally 1922)), 78.

higher plane. Mathiez continued to reiterate that Robespierre brought a sense of direction and purpose to the Committee, and because of this, his political importance was immense. Portraying Robespierre as the voice of authority, Mathiez sculpted the image of a man whose actions were "national and democratic,"[86] in that they served the interests of the nation and were dictated by the will of the people.

Robespierre's exceptional and singular personal virtue came from "[t]he fact that he did not despair, that he accepted power at such a moment, that he bore such a crushing burden without faltering, and that he succeeded in raising the Republic from the abyss"[87] of the Terror. There was no attempt to deny the existence of a dictatorship in this or any other history by Mathiez, but focus shifted to the services rendered to the nation at a time when no one else was able to provide strong leadership. In the end, Mathiez placed responsibility for the Terror on the "wretches who had abused the unlimited powers entrusted to them for the public salvation."[88] These were the deputies who undermined Robespierre's authority and subverted the Committees of Public Safety, but they were also the Republicans who undermined the integrity of the Third Republic. At times Mathiez's allusions are very direct, and charges of corruption during the Revolution could just have easily been accusations of venality in the Third Republic. Thermidor represented the point at which Robespierre was transformed from mere mortal to revolutionary martyr, and symbolised the triumph of the 'brigands' over the rule of Reason and Truth.[89] The Revolution ended with Robespierre in

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[86] Mathiez, Revolution, 355.

[87] Mathiez, Revolution, 350. Passages such as this highlight the similarities which Mathiez believed existed between the chaos of the First and Third Republics.

[88] Mathiez, Revolution, 489.

[89] Mathiez, Fall, 222.

each of Mathiez's histories. There was simply nothing else to say after the death of such a great man who embodied the Revolution so completely.

In a collection of essays entitled *Robespierre terroriste* (1922), Mathiez addressed various aspects of the Robespierrist legacy that had developed over the last decade, summarising the entire Robespierrist historical movement of the 1910s and 1920s in the essay entitled '*Pourquoi Nous Sommes Robespierristes*'. He also used this work as a platform from which to lash out at the shortcomings of the Republic in the early 1920s. Mathiez explained that Robespierrists cherished their idol because of the way in which he governed, the social philosophy which drove him, and the fact that he led by example in such troubled times. Robespierre's spirit was eminently French, and he was a man of virtue in a republic of vice:[90]

> Nous aimons Robespierre parce qu'il a incarné la France révolutionnaire dans ce qu'elle avait de plus noble, de plus généreux, de plus sincère ... Nous aimons Robespierre parce que son nom, maudit par ceux-là mêmes qu'il a voulu affranchit, résume toutes les iniquités sociales dont nous voulons la disparition.[91]

Robespierre embodied the political ideal for Mathiez, and the historian's admiration transformed Robespierre from the villain of the Revolution into its hero – the socially-conscious revolutionary to be revered for all eternity. Mathiez added to Blanc and Jaurès' images by re-conceptualising Robespierre's role, adding a new level to the tropology by making him into more of a saviour than a socialist. The Incorruptible had become the "incarnation of merciless and uncompromising battle on behalf of the people."[92]

Robespierre came to represent two very different things in the period between Blanc and Mathiez. He symbolised the speculative, hypocritical politician and the proto-

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[90] Albert Mathiez, *Robespierre Terroriste* (Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1921), 187. The association between the ideal and reality would have been difficult for the reader in the Third Republic to ignore.

[91] Mathiez, Terroriste, 188.

socialist revolutionary ideal, but in the end, the latter interpretation triumphed. Robespierre had become the Revolutionary saviour, but Mathiez's demi-god would not reign for long. The tropology of the revolutionary messiah died along with Mathiez in 1932, but there were larger developments that would shape images of the Incorruptible in the long term. Socialism supplanted republicanism during the inter-war period, at least in the intellectual sense, but French domestic politics combined with events abroad to push the moderate left to the side. Along with the moderates went the image of Robespierre as the embodiment of revolutionary socialism. Over the next five decades, historians of the left would refine Mathiez's image, and while the tropology of the *buveur du sang* was now in the past, the misgivings of earlier conservatives and liberals would never disappear entirely. They would, however, reappear in a different guise.

[92] Furet, "Academic", 885.

Chapter 3

1932-1982

"It was Robespierre above all who ... assured the [Committee of Public Safety] of some degree of permanence by defining and defending their policy in the Convention and at the Jacobin Club." – Georges Lefebvre, The French Revolution, v. 2, 63.

"They were both too conscious of the interests of the bourgeoisie to give their total support to the *sans-culottes*, yet too attentive to the needs of the *sans-culottes* to find favour with the middle classes." – Albert Soboul on Robespierre and Saint-Just, The French Revolution, 412.

Mathiez had done a remarkable job of resurrecting Robespierre's character, but the tropologies created by subsequent historians were less generous. Although Georges Lefebvre in 1930 highlighted Robespierre's contributions to the Revolution, the Incorruptible was no longer the revolutionary hero when Albert Soboul wrote his own account thirty years later. This was largely due to the development of a Marxist hegemony within Revolutionary history. Between the mid-1930s and the early 1980s, the socio-political focus of earlier French histories took on a Marxist character which proved to be the downfall of Mathiez's tropology.[1] While the demise of Robespierre as the revolutionary hero did not usher in the return of the blood-thirsty tyrant, Marxist histories did introduce a new evil – the tyranny of an entire class.

Socialism remained strong in the inter- and post-war periods, especially among the French intelligentsia, but Jaurès' idea of the peaceful revolution was being pushed aside by a growing Marxist contingent among the socialists. This occurred for three reasons. First, the militant Left became a significant political force during the 1930s, in part because of the rise of right-wing fascist movements. In order to combat the spread of fascism throughout

[1] As had been the case during the Third Republic, Saint-Just continued to be overshadowed by the dominant image of Robespierre. Any reference to Saint-Just in the following histories adds little insight into his role, and for that reason he is not part of the discussion in this chapter.

Europe, a coalition known as the Popular Front was formed among Communists, Socialists, and Radical Republicans. This coalition gained power in 1936, but while many believed this was a substantial move towards the dream of a communist state, the government proved to be far from revolutionary.[2] Nonetheless, the Popular Front demonstrated the power shift that was occurring on the Left as the working class radicalised and Communists slowly supplanted Socialists. Second, and more importantly, there was a continuing trend among the Communist/Marxist contingent to look fondly at the events in Russia. In the decades that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917, much of the French Left revered the Soviets for the example they had set by realising the dream of a proletarian revolution. Marxist politics spilled over into the intellectual world, and led to a fascination among historians with the concept of a class-based revolution. This in turn gave rise to an interpretation of the Revolution which combined elements of Marxism, Leninism, and Jacobinism in a movement which became known as '*la Vulgate*'. Once established, this movement quickly became entrenched in intellectual circles.

Class-based interpretations of the Revolution gained favour for the reasons mentioned above, but they gained momentum because of a third factor: the condition of the working class in the Third and Fourth Republics.[3] During this period, "class distinctions remained real and deep-seated. Workers were still marginalised, segregated from the bourgeois world not just by gaps in income and living standards but, more fundamentally, in mentalities and ways of life."[4] Bourgeois oppression and class conflict continued to exist, and during the inter-war period, Revolutionary historiography began to take on a more rigidly-defined identity:

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[2] For more on the Popular Front, see Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, The Decline of the Third Republic 1914-1938 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 285-334.

[3] The Third Republic lasted from 1870 to 1940, the Fourth Republic from 1944 to 1958.

[4] McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 172.

> Interpretation of the Revolution from anywhere left of centre increasingly corresponded, at least in general terms, with the Marxist interpretation. This was perhaps facilitated by a preoccupation with polemicism rather than theory within formal Marxism at the time: generally unconcerned with scholarly exposition, Marxists for the most part simply used history in the service of contemporary political purposes. Increasingly, therefore, the official historiography of the Revolution not only reflected, but *was taken to be* – even by the Marxists – the essence of socialist history.[5]

Marxism became the order of the day, and once Revolutionary history was identified with Marxism, "to challenge it was to confess oneself both reactionary and unpatriotic."[6]

The Marxist interpretation of the Revolution was shaped by Marx's theory that history was made up of a series of class struggles driven by economic and social concerns.[7] In the case of France, feudal nobles had dominated the lower classes and had established themselves as the ruling elite during the *ancien régime*. With the development of capitalism in the years leading up to 1789, a new class, the bourgeoisie, emerged as a new and powerful force. The bourgeoisie challenged the feudal nobles for control of society as they became more powerful, but the bourgeoisie were forced to seek assistance from the lower classes to defeat the aristocracy. The bourgeoisie were able to succeed with their support, but turned on the proletariat during the Terror and enslaved them once again. The next stage in this process was to be the development of class consciousness among the proletariat, followed by their revolt against the bourgeois oppressors and the creation of the ideal communist state. This failed to happen in the French Revolution, but nonetheless the triumph of the bourgeoisie

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[5] George C. Comninel, Rethinking the French Revolution (London: Verso, 1987), 15. As noted in the previous chapter, Revolutionary history was becoming more academically oriented, but Marxists were not overly concerned with the burden of proof. They were more inclined to fit the 'evidence' to their interpretative model.

[6] Hampson in Best, "The French Revolution," 226.

[7] Because of limitations of space, this is only a cursory examination of the central points of the Marxist interpretation. For an in-depth study, see Francois Furet's Marx and the French Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) or Paul Hirst's Marxism and Historical Writing (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

over the upper classes represented the first stage of Marxist revolutionary development.[8] Historians believed it was only a matter of time before the next stage was realised in France, and that their works would expedite the process.

Marxist histories proved to be different from nineteenth-century accounts of the Revolution in a particularly noteworthy fashion. Throughout, Marxist historians focused on the influence of classes rather than individuals in shaping the course of events. Because of this, individuals (like Robespierre) served as representatives of larger classes at work, a fact which is apparent in more dogmatic works. Individual agency amounted to little, and as a member of the *petit* bourgeoisie, Robespierre represented middle-class concerns rather than those of the working class as Mathiez had claimed. Class-based interpretations therefore renounced previous socialist tropologies of Robespierre that portrayed him as the champion of the people, but nonetheless continued to underscore his symbolic importance.

As influential as he had been, Mathiez's death did not leave a great void in Revolutionary history. The Sorbonne was replete with Marxist historians in the 1930s, and Georges Lefebvre (1874-1959) supplanted Mathiez as the leading voice in Revolutionary history upon the latter's death. Lefebvre took over the AHRF in 1932, and was appointed to the Chair of the Revolution in the same year,[9] but it is important to stress that he did not succeed Mathiez.[10] Expanding on Mathiez's social perspective by highlighting class conflict in the

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[8] For many Marxists, the Russian Revolution of 1917 represented the next stage, the proletarian revolution, hence their fascination and reverence for the example it presented to the French working class.

[9] Mathiez had not succeeded Aulard to this post. Aulard was replaced by a republican non-entity upon his retirement, but Mathiez's virulent rhetoric made him the de facto Revolutionary historian after Aulard's death.

[10] Richard Cobb denied there was a relationship between Mathiez and Lefebvre, as other historians have either implied or claimed to have existed. He states that Lefebvre was neither Mathiez's student nor his successor – "master and pupil had been born in the same year and had only met twice. Lefebvre himself was insistent that his development and interests had always been very far from those of the polemical *robespierriste* historian. There was no Mathiez-Lefebvre school." (Richard Cobb, A Second Identity – Essays on France and French History

Revolution, Lefebvre broadened this historical focus to include the lower classes, in the process pioneering 'history from below'.[11]

Although Lefebvre was influenced by Jaurès, he was not as enraptured with Robespierre as the great socialists before him.[12] This was largely because he saw Robespierre as the personification of the quintessential *petit bourgeois*. Lefebvre did not reject Mathiez's work, however, because of his admiration for Robespierre's strong sense of patriotism[13] and his contributions to the Republic. He believed Robespierre represented the ideal patriot during the chaos of Year II, defending the Republic rather than undermining it as the revolutionary zealots had done.[14] Lefebvre continued Mathiez's rehabilitation of Robespierre in a superficial sense, but he saw Robespierre as the venerable revolutionary rather than the inspired demi-god.[15] Lefebvre avoided the emotional or intimate portrait of Robespierre that had been central to Mathiez's histories, instead representing him as both pragmatic and flawed. This approach was one of the most significant departures to date in Revolutionary history, in that it acknowledged both positive and negative attributes.

(London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 98. Cobb was a student of Lefebvre, and spent time with his teacher outside the confines of academia in Lefebvre's later years.) Lefebvre even criticised Mathiez shortly after he died "for his dependence on flair, on the *document unique*, to prove points about which he had already made up his mind." (Cobb, A Second Identity, 95.) Historians have made the most of the similarities between the two men without fully recognising the different agendas that motivated each of them.

[11] Lefebvre proved to be somewhat of a more well-rounded, and less extreme, historian than Aulard or Mathiez, who had limited themselves to the political and religious history of the Revolution. His only real antagonist was Alfred Cobban, whom he clashed with in the final years of his life.

[12] Lefebvre saw himself as a product of both Guesde and Jaurès, but "he did not make the mistake of Guérin and so many Soviet historians and lend to eighteenth-century society the class divisions of a later, industrial age." Cobb, A Second Identity, 95.

[13] Cobb, A Second Identity, 98.

[14] It has been suggested that Lefebvre wrote one of his greatest histories, *Quatre-Vingt Neuf* (1939) to rally the French people in support of the Republic in the year leading up to World War II, hence his admiration for Robespierre.

[15] He did believe Robespierre's responsibility for the dictatorship of Year II had been exaggerated, as Mathiez claimed.

In The French Revolution (1930), Lefebvre advanced the theory that Robespierre's authority arose from his role as spokesman for the Revolutionary Government.[16] In so doing, Lefebvre summarily rejected previous claims that Robespierre had acted in a dictatorial manner, without partaking in Mathiez's hero-worship. This concept was complemented by the assertion that it was Robespierre's clarity of thought which saw France through the Terror. Robespierre distinguished himself because of his singular concern for the sanctity of the Revolution and the security of the Republic, and he committed himself to preserving the gains made early on in the Revolution. He was the most dedicated member of the Committee of Public Safety,[17] and because of this singular commitment to the Republic, Robespierre had a unique role. He, "more than any other person, assumed the terrible responsibility for saving the Republic at the height of the storm which he had vainly sought to avert."[18] His conviction dictated his course of action, and it was his passion to save the Republic which set him apart from his colleagues.[19]

As the counter-revolution gained strength and the war against the Allies expanded, Robespierre's mandate became one of governing "in the name of the Convention, at the same time controlling it, and to restrain the people without quenching their enthusiasm."[20] He was now responsible for directing the Revolution, in a spiritual sense if nothing else, but his mission was to safeguard the Republic, not rule over it. Through his position as spokesman

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[16] Although Aulard had introduced this idea in the nineteenth century, it became the focal point of Lefebvre's history.

[17] The others were preoccupied with petty squabbling and furthering their own bourgeois interests, rather than the welfare of the Republic.

[18] Georges Lefebvre, The French Revolution (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962 (Originally 1930)), v. 2, 63. Robespierre was virtually the only deputy to oppose the war in 1792, and had spoken out against it numerous times in the Convention.

[19] Lefebvre believed that more than anyone else, Robespierre had played the integral role in crushing the counter-revolution and bringing about French victory against the Allies.

[20] Lefebvre, Revolution, v. 2, 64.

for the Committee, Robespierre was provided a unique opportunity to do just that, and he used his authority to ensure victory. Conceding that Robespierre's role became highly controversial in the months leading up to Thermidor,[21] Lefebvre nonetheless defended the Incorruptible. He claimed that while Robespierre's actions appeared frenetic and authoritarian, they were in fact the product of his sincere devotion to the Revolution. Each alleged instance of 'tyranny' was part of an attempt to create 'unity of action' in government, and his actions were those of a patriot, not a despot. During the Spring and Summer of 1794,

> [i]t was he who had defended the policies of the Committees, with as much clear-sightedness as courage, in the Convention and at the Jacobin Club. [And while t]he Cult of the Supreme Being and the Law of 22 Prairial had made him conspicuous ... he exercised no power of his own in the Committee of Public Safety. He was one of the last to enter it, he did not choose its members, and he did not even preside. He acted only with the approval of his colleagues. Nevertheless, his undeniable ascendancy, his imperious eloquence, his inflexible refusal to compromise (which won him praise as 'incorruptible'), his pitiless severity towards traitors, and his tendency to suspect all opponents of being connected with them earned him, even at the Jacobin Club, the accusation of exercising a 'tyranny of public opinion'.[22]

According to Lefebvre, the negative image of Robespierre was based on appearance and nothing more, particularly since there was no evidence to support the allegation that Robespierre controlled the Committee. Undoubtedly, he compromised his position with a series of poor choices that fateful Spring, but there was nothing underhanded in his intentions.

While the inter-war period was characterised by its focus on the importance of class over the individual, Lefebvre's history was less reliant on the theory of class conflict than later accounts. This stemmed from his reluctance to accept doctrinal Marxism, and allowed him to applaud Robespierre's contributions without dwelling on his shortcomings. In spite of his

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[21] The purge of the factions, his prolonged absences from both the Committee and the Convention, and the Law of 22 Prairial all reflected negatively on Robespierre.

[22] Lefebvre, Revolution, v. 2, 131-2.

noble intentions, Robespierre's social concerns were overshadowed by the desire to protect the Revolution, and in the end, the two proved to be mutually incompatible. Although Robespierre was not the typical bourgeois,[23] Lefebvre's approval of the Incorruptible was limited to his contributions to the State; his 'social' policies formed the negative side of the image.[24] Robespierre represented sacrifice and patriotism more than social consciousness for Lefebvre. He embodied the politics of republican defence, a theme that was central to both Jaurès in the pre-World War I era and Lefebvre in the inter-war period. By removing Robespierre from Mathiez's pedestal, Lefebvre presented one of the first multi-faceted portraits of Robespierre and expedited the transition from Third Republic socialist history to Fourth Republic Marxist history.

With the post-war era came a change in French Revolutionary historiography. The late 1940s through to the mid-1960s were dominated by the political centre, but the success of the Communists in the resistance movements of the War combined with ongoing worker discontent during the 1950s to give the Communists a strong base of political support, which spilled over into the academic world and ensured the intellectual strength of Marxist history.[25] As Revolutionary history became increasingly Marxist in character during this period, historians rejected both Lefebvre and Mathiez's tropologies, and Robespierre came to be representative of the classic bourgeois oppressor. One of the earliest examples of this new interpretation came from Daniel Guérin. Guérin (1904-?) was committed to doctrinal Marxism, and strongly believed the ongoing Fourth Republic conflicts between the

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[23] He "distrusted industrial capitalism ... [because] it would produce a numerous proletariat, which seemed ... incompatible with political democracy." Lefebvre, Revolution, v. 2, 327.

[24] Lefebvre believed Robespierre's social contributions were to the Revolution were minimal, and as Soboul would suggest in the 1960s, were motivated by political aspirations more than concern for the lower classes.

[25] For more on post-war France, see McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 134-85.

proletariat and the bourgeoisie originated during the Revolution of 1789. In Class Struggle in the First French Republic (1946),[26] Guérin framed the discussion of the Revolution around bourgeois oppression and exploitation of the '*bras nus*' – his term for the working class. Guérin believed the bourgeoisie used the *bras nus* to wage war against the aristocracy and the Allied Powers.[27] Accordingly, the Republic was governed by politics of expediency and controlled by a bourgeois Jacobin dictatorship, in which Robespierre served as the agent of the bourgeoisie and ruled according to their wishes. The positive tropologies of socialist history had given way to negative imagery once again, but to Marxists, Robespierre represented the oppressive bourgeoisie rather than the ambitious despot. The evil of one man had become the evil of an entire class.

Robespierre was defined by his "subtle ingenuity, his unique talent for doing a balancing act and his gift for adapting the absoluteness of ideas to fit the always relative needs of public action."[28] The opportunist of the nineteenth century appeared to be re-emerging, but Guérin also saw Robespierre as the charlatan of yesteryear, presenting himself as a mediator between the bourgeoisie and the *bras nus* – the man who appeared to facilitate peaceful change. This was little more than a pretence, however, as Robespierre was unwilling to give in to the proletarian demand for direct democracy.[29] Rejecting the idea that Robespierre championed socially-conscious legislation because of a desire to reform society, Guérin claimed the legislation of 1793 was nothing more than a measure of expediency designed to garner the

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[26] Originally published as *La lutte de classes*.

[27] Both of these conflicts were driven by bourgeois economic and political concerns.

[28] Daniel Guérin, Class Struggle in the First French Republic (London: Pluto Press, 1977), 81.

[29] Marxists saw direct democracy during the Revolution as the eighteenth-century equivalent of the modern communist state.

support of the working classes.[30] Robespierre's so-called reforms were designed to "make concessions to the *bras nus*, without allowing them anything vital."[31] Mastery of subterfuge became the mainstay of the Robespierrists in the Year II, but it was not long before Robespierre's allegiances became apparent.

Guérin believed that between the Summer of 1793 and the Spring of 1794, Robespierre was engaged in a covert attempt to subordinate the *bras nus* to bourgeois economic concerns, using supposed reform measures to earn their support while fulfilling the wishes of the bourgeoisie.[32] Once it appeared that bourgeois victory against the counter-revolution and the Allies was on the horizon, the bourgeoisie decided the *bras nus* had become a liability. They moved to destroy the political power of the *bras nus*, attempting "to smash the movement by depriving it of those it considered its leaders."[33] The Hébertists, who were likely the real voice of the *bras nus*, were eliminated in the war of the factions. Their defeat marked the end of *bras nus* political aspirations for all intents and purposes, and unmasked Robespierre for what he really was. Believing that "[a]s Robespierre and Saint-Just became less and less answerable to popular pressure, they became daily more subject to pressure from the rich property owners,"[34] Guérin was convinced Robespierre's authority on the Committee was little more than an exercise in bourgeois manipulation. After the purge of the Hébertists, it became obvious where Robespierre's allegiance lay, and on the occasion of Danton's execution, "as on so many others, Robespierre acted on behalf of the revolutionary

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[30] This theory gained considerable support among Revisionist historians after the 1960s.

[31] Guérin, Class Struggle, 157.

[32] See Guérin, Class Struggle, 155-75 for a detailed explanation.

[33] Guérin, Class Struggle, 196.

[34] Guérin, Class Struggle, 232.

bourgeoisie."[35] Robespierre was only a tool of the bourgeoisie, however, and his usefulness was limited. This too became apparent in the Summer of 1794.

In a sign that the *bras nus* had served their purpose, the 'socialist' economic measures of the previous year were repealed during the Spring of 1794.[36] The *bras nus* were then subjected to the tyranny of the middle class when it became apparent they formed a barrier to bourgeois objectives, but they were not the only ones to suffer at the hands of the bourgeoisie. By this point Robespierre was also becoming more of a liability than an asset.[37] Despite grandiose dreams of a utopian Republic, Robespierre was not strong enough to defeat the bourgeoisie, and his downfall became imminent as the revolutionary bourgeoisie consolidated their political and economic gains. The bourgeoisie had used Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety to shape the First Republic, as well as to curtail the growing pressure from the *bras nus* during the winter of 1793-4, but Robespierre was unable to facilitate the total economic domination they desired. Several years later, the bourgeoisie turned to Napoleon Bonaparte to complete the task.

As Revolutionary history became intertwined with Marxist dogma, theories of class conflict drew distinct lines between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The economic realities of the Fourth Republic kept these tropologies alive, and in this setting, Robespierre took on a renewed symbolic importance as he came to represent the evils of an entire class which oppressed and exploited to meet its agenda. As the agent of bourgeois repression, Guérin's Robespierre stood apart from all previous tropologies of the Incorruptible, owing

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[35] Guérin, Class Struggle, 242.

[36] The process was gradual, so as not to alienate the *bras nus* should the bourgeoisie need their assistance at a later date.

[37] Guérin believed Robespierre and the revolutionary bourgeoisie clashed during that spring over the means by which order should be restored to the Republic. Robespierre was an impediment to bourgeois economic aspirations, and as a result, the bourgeoisie turned on him just as they had on the *bras nus*.

nothing to the socialists and having only a superficial likeness to nineteenth-century representations. The central issue for defining Robespierre had become his 'policies' of social reform, and whether they were motivated by genuine concern or political expediency. On this matter, socialists and Marxists disagreed. The application of Marxist theory to Revolutionary history created an image of Robespierre which was one of the most unique to date, but in the end, Guérin's portrayal of Robespierre as the agent of the bourgeoisie would be as fleeting as those that came before it.

Guérin had rejected the socialist tropology of Robespierre, but he was only one example of a number of Marxist historians in the post-war era to disparage Robespierre. Lefebvre's student Albert Soboul added fuel to the Marxist fire in the 1960s with his own account of the Revolution.[38] The economic boom of the 1940s and 1950s had carried over into the 1960s, but as had been the case in the previous decades, the relative prosperity of the bourgeoisie outstripped that of the working class. During this time of continued class conflict and strident intellectual Marxism, Soboul scorned the role of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. He noted that while the "needs of national and revolutionary defence forced [the bourgeoisie] to follow a political course favouring the masses," it was "a politics of principle for some, a politics of expediency for others."[39] This would become apparent in his portrait of Robespierre. Continuing the Marxist tradition of 'history from below', Soboul devoted his attention to the *sans-culottes*, a large and rather amorphous group comprised principally of artisans, shopkeepers, and manual workers – the contemporary equivalent of the Marxist proletariat.[40]

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[38] The Fourth Republic had ended in 1958, paving the way for the Fifth Republic, which is still in place today.

[39] Frank Kafker and James Laux, eds., The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations (New York: Random House, 1968), 145.

[40] As with Guérin, Soboul believed the *sans-culottes* had been exploited by the bourgeoisie, but he also argued that their importance had been underestimated in the past. Many previous historians, particularly Taine, had claimed that the *sans-culottes* were disorganised rabble, incapable of acting without the leadership of the bourgeoisie.

It was in these histories that the Marxist notion of bourgeois exploitation found one of its most ardent voices.

Taking up where Lefebvre left off when he died in 1959, Soboul (1914-82) became both editor of AHRF and the new Chair of the Revolution, ensuring the primacy of Marxist Revolutionary history into the Fifth Republic. Unfortunately for Soboul, he became the Chair just as the Marxist hegemony was facing a 'Revisionist' onslaught, led by British and American historians who did not accept class-based interpretations. Soboul steadfastly refused to abandon Marxist orthodoxy, in spite of mounting evidence that contradicted the theory of bourgeois Revolution.[41] Soboul clung desperately to his intellectual heritage even as the French intelligentsia abandoned it; by the late 1970s he had become the hackneyed voice of an ideology which was past its prime, but his earlier work on the *sans-culottes* was nonetheless insightful.

In Soboul's seminal work, The Parisian *Sans-Culottes* and the French Revolution, 1793-4 (1964), he highlighted the actions of the *sans-culottes*. Again, the *sans-culottes* fell victim to bourgeois politics, but in this instance, Robespierre was representative of the bourgeoisie as a class, rather than their agent. The scale of responsibility had been increased, but Soboul's focus remained linked to the concept of classes, rather than individuals. Guérin's claims that Robespierre had acted as a mediator between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie were also abandoned, and he became a more contemptible figure. Much of this representation centred on Soboul's rejection of Mathiez's claim that the events of the latter half of 1793 were characterised by a Robespierrist attempt to establish social democracy.[42] Although the

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[41] This came in the form of works from George V. Taylor and Elisabeth Eisenstein, among others. There were other factors involved that will be explained below.

[42] Albert Soboul, The Parisian *Sans-culottes* and the French Revolution, 1793-4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 4.

bourgeoisie in general are criticised, Soboul's contempt is levelled at Robespierre for exploiting the *sans-culottes* to defeat his enemies, enticing them with false promises of social reform, and turning on them once they had served their purpose. While Soboul agreed with Lefebvre and Mathiez that Robespierre was a seminal figure, he argued that Robespierre's social policies were

> only adopted as a tactical necessity, sometimes as a pretentious after-thought. The crises from the spring to the autumn of 1793 made the popular alliance necessary: the *sans-culottes* represented the force which enabled the small section of the politically-conscious bourgeoisie to crush the aristocracy and its allies.[43]

Although Soboul was willing to concede that Robespierre was concerned about the welfare of the Republic (as Lefebvre claimed), he believed Robespierre was an opportunist, caught between what he wanted to do and what he needed to do to realise his dream of a Republic of Virtue.[44] In the end, however, it became a matter of serving class interests, and Soboul could not condone the blatant exploitation of the *sans-culottes*, regardless of Robespierre's objectives. Once again, the intention behind social reform became the yard-stick by which Marxists judged Robespierre

Soboul's major survey work, The French Revolution 1789-99 (1974) took the images in *Sans-culottes* one step further by providing a more detailed representation of Robespierre. In doing so, Soboul created a tropology which bore superficial similarities to Lefebvre's at times, but which remained tied to the concepts introduced in *Sans-culottes*. Soboul believed that Robespierre was

> [f]arsighted and courageous ... eloquent and disinterested, he was the only man in French history to merit the description of 'incorruptible' and he enjoyed the confidence of the *sans-culottes*. Though committed to his principles, he was nevertheless capable

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[43] Soboul, *Sans-Culottes*, 27.

[44] Soboul did not believe the ideas of social reform espoused by the Robespierrists were particularly unique, and suggested many of their ideas were borrowed from the *philosophes*. Soboul, *Sans-culottes*, 67.

> of moulding his policies to the needs of the situation and was statesmanlike in his political manoeuvres.[45]

Although he thus recognised there were attributes that set Robespierre apart from other revolutionaries, Soboul remained unwilling to accept that his actions had been motivated by genuine concern for the lower classes. In a theme which hearkened back to Guérin's concept of the intermediary, Soboul noted that both Robespierre and Saint-Just were "too conscious of the interests of the bourgeoisie to give their total support to the *sans-culottes*, yet too attentive to the needs of the *sans-culottes* to find favour with the middle classes."[46] To support further the claim that Robespierre was driven by his own politics of expediency, Soboul pointed to the Ventôse decrees of February 1794. The decrees, which promised land to revolutionary patriots (the *sans-culottes*), had been held up by Mathiez as a symbol of the Robespierrist commitment to social welfare. Soboul rejected this idea, stating that "in order to defeat the Gironde it was necessary to give the *sans-culottes* hope that the Jacobins were moving towards social democracy and thus interest them in a Jacobin victory."[47] Once again, reform was little more than a pretence. Without rejecting the socialist tropology outright, Soboul undermined it by highlighting the bourgeois opportunism of Mathiez's hero.

Marxist ascendancy began to crumble in the 1960s as Revisionist interpretation gained strength, but there were other factors that brought down the existing hegemony. Strong showings by Socialists and Communists in elections during that decade continued to be overshadowed by conservative elements in French politics, and the Marxist intellectual vanguard seemed to be lagging behind as the world changed. Increasing social and political

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[45] Albert Soboul, The French Revolution 1789-99 (London: NLB, 1974 (Originally 1962)), 325.

[46] Soboul, Revolution, 412.

[47] Soboul, Revolution, 308.

consciousness among an exploding French university population, combined with dissatisfaction over university conditions, the antiquated politics of the 'orthodox Left',[48] and protests against the Vietnam War brought tensions which had been fermenting for years to a head in May 1968.[49] Despite initial reluctance, Communist leaders did join with student radicals in rebellion against the Gaullist regime. Relations between the two groups were uncomfortable however and Communist officials were quick to reach concessions with the government, alienating parts of the intellectual left. The entire episode proved to be deeply disturbing for the French, but did not have quite the impact in intellectual circles of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.[50] Intellectuals became disenchanted, questioning the value of a Marxist ideology which endorsed these actions. Ultimately, the great Marxist State itself had undermined their belief systems. These events served to highlight the fact that Marxism had been unable to evolve in the face of the political and social change that characterised the 1960s and 1970s, and the demise of the Marxist intellectual orthodoxy was only a formality from this point onward.[51] Between 1968 and Soboul's death in 1982, intellectual communism slowly disintegrated, giving way to a revitalised socialist movement which had endured since the 1890s.[52]

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[48] Students decried ties to Stalinism among the Communists.

[49] The government harshly repressed the resulting student demonstrations, but this was met with massive protests by workers and students, demonstrating against the abuse of power by the 'bourgeois' Gaullist State. See McMillan, Twentieth Century France, 177-182 for further details.

[50] By the 1960s, political communism was no longer as regimented as it had been under Stalin, but Czech attempts to liberalise the Soviet satellite proved unwelcome. The Soviets, along with the East Germans, Hungarians and Polish invaded Czechoslovakia, crushing the revolt and purging the Communist party. The Soviets succeeded in destroying the reform movement, but evoked world condemnation for their actions.

[51] Much of this was linked to the ongoing legacy of Stalinism among intellectual and political Communists.

[52] The demise of Marxism did not mean the demise of class-based interpretations, nor did it give rise to a new socialist orthodoxy. Beginning in the late 1970s French Revolutionary history became highly fragmented, and a number of new schools of thought emerged. These will be discussed in the following chapters.

One Marxist who weathered the general demise of the 'school' was George Rudé, perhaps because he was less dogmatic. Rudé's first work, published in the 1950s, was on the Revolutionary Crowd. It typified the 'history from below' approach and reflected desire to give agency to the masses. Through careful examination of previously ignored documentation, Rudé compiled a socio-economic profile of the Parisian crowd which effectively undermined previous descriptions of the Crowd as little more than criminal rabble.

When he turned to 'high politics', Rudé (1910-?) did not accept the negative tropologies of Robespierre that were tied to Marxist rhetoric, but he also believed that Mathiez's representation was exceedingly shallow. He shared a common perspective with Lefebvre, however, centred around the belief that Robespierre had acted in the spirit of national defence during his time on the Committee of Public Safety. Rudé wrote two histories that are of particular interest to this paper, the first of which is Robespierre (1967). In this short work, Rudé argues that Robespierre was driven by a desire to do what was best for France and the Revolution. His actions were "determined by a firm and consistent attachment to political principle,"[53] not personal ambition or a whimsical desire to create a Republic of Virtue. Rudé rejected the image of the blood-thirsty tyrant, because of the

> instinct for political realities and the capacity for practical statesmanship that Robespierre displayed in the course of a succession of revolutionary crises, and never more than as the chief architect and guiding spirit of the Revolutionary Government of 1793-4.[54]

Returning to the images of Mathiez and Lefebvre without denying Robespierre's primacy in the events of Year II, Rudé argued that the final outcome in the Summer of 1794 – the

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[53] Rudé, Robespierre, 170.

[54] Rudé, Robespierre, 173. Rudé believed the real criminals of the Revolution were people like Fouché, Collot, and Carrier. As Revolutionary history moved away from Marxism, the nature of social reforms became more of a peripheral issue than in the heyday of class-based histories.

effective defeats of the counter-revolution and the Allied forces – should be used to contextualise the events of that period. Consequently, Robespierre's culpability for the excesses of the Terror was mitigated by his contribution to the nation. Rudé also implied that previous historians had misunderstood Robespierre.[55]

The second work from Rudé is arguably the most thought-provoking Robespierrist history to date. Robespierre – Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat (1975) refines earlier tropologies by suggesting there was an evolution rather than a deterioration in Robespierre's character during the Year II. Detractors had accused Robespierre of abandoning his initial liberalism and views on social democracy in favour of tyranny and dictatorship, but Rudé argued that the events that transpired between 1792 and 1794 transformed Robespierre from a social democrat into a pragmatic revolutionary politician. As the Revolutionary crises worsened and the war against the Allies expanded, it became increasingly difficult for Robespierre to focus on the ideals he had espoused in the early days of the Revolution. As a result, Robespierre was forced to re-evaluate his priorities, and he was compelled to safeguard the Republic at the expense of social reform, even if this meant accepting organised Terror. During this period, Robespierre demonstrated a resolve and integrity generally unseen in Revolutionary politicians, which Rudé believed were apparent when his words and actions were taken as a whole. Rudé felt strongly that the Robespierre of 1794 was not created by an emergent blood-lust or overwhelming ambition.

This metamorphosis should not be seen as evil, or for that matter even unusual, according to Rudé. He believed that while Robespierre's "concern for the common people and the belief in their virtue remained unchanged ... it was inevitable that his new preoccupation with

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[55] Much of Mathiez's work hinged on similar allegations that historians did not understand Robespierre's real role or the evidence before them.

terror and strong government should have changed the order of his priorities."[56] This was partially because implementation of such ideas was becoming increasingly less feasible, but also because his role as the spokesman for the Committee of Public Safety focused his attention elsewhere.[57] Although Robespierre's actions in 1794 seem to contradict his philosophies of 1789-92, Rudé believed that circumstance provoked this evolution.[58] He took advantage of opportunities, but he never wavered in his conviction of what the Revolution was to accomplish; his Incorruptibility set his course, and his political acumen set him apart, but it was patriotism which made him a saviour.

Rudé's most important assertion in this history hearkens back to his earlier work. The claim that Robespierre deserves credit for heading into uncharted waters in the fall of 1793 remains paramount, and returns to the notion that Robespierre should be judged for his contributions.[59] Rudé believed Robespierre was doing what he thought best for France and the Revolution at a time when his options were greatly limited, and in this respect, the similarities to Lefebvre are apparent.[60] Although Robespierre was not entirely driven by *la force des choses*, neither was there any real alternative to the course of action undertaken:

> Let us allow that Robespierre and his colleagues, placed as they were and holding the views that they did in the crucial year 1793, could not resist the pressures of war, civil war, economic crises and counter-revolution which imposed on them solutions that were inevitable if they wished to remain in power and to keep the Revolution on its

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[56] George Rudé, Robespierre – Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat (London: Collins, 1975), 119.

[57] Like Lefebvre, Rudé understood the rationale for portraying Robespierre as the dictator, but contends there is scant evidence to corroborate this theory: "There is certainly nothing in his later speeches to suggest that, all other means having failed, he aspired to play the tyrant ... That he had, since early June [1794], lost confidence in his ability to carry out his aims seems reasonably well established; but this does not mean that he had lost his faith in popular democracy or the ultimate triumph of the cause he believed in." Rudé, Portrait, 127.

[58] See Hampson in Best for a brief explanation of the role of circumstance in Revolutionary history.

[59] Rudé, Portrait, 211. Lefebvre alluded to this, but Rudé presents a more compelling case for this theory.

[60] Rudé also noted that Robespierre did not have the more-obvious choice that Lenin did of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, and he chose incorrectly. Rudé, Portrait, 211.

> course. So, faced with only two alternatives, they had virtually no choice but to act as they did.[61]

In the end, Robespierre's political philosophy had been modified to cope with the exigencies of Year II. In order to retain any hope of realising the Republic of Virtue, he had to ensure the survival of the Republic, and to do so, had to support the Terror. Rudé had taken Lefebvre's suggestion that Robespierre had acted in the best interest of the Republic, and combined it with the idea that he had evolved politically to give his actions meaning. This attempt to contextualise was not an attempt to excuse or obfuscate on the part of Rudé. Removing rhetoric from the discussion allowed him to create the man who made the ultimate sacrifice, but was forced to abandon his dream along the way. Robespierre became human once again, embodying the republican defender as he had for Lefebvre, without the negative connotations which had been associated with his failed social reforms in Marxist history. Robespierre's intentions had been pure throughout, but in order to save the Revolution, he had to sacrifice social democracy. Although a Marxist, Rudé appears as something of a transitional figure in Robespierrist historiography.

The development of class-based history changed the nature of Revolutionary history significantly in the twentieth century, but it also changed the tropology of Robespierre. The introduction of class as the ultimate determinant in political behaviour paved the way for Marxist rhetoric, but it also marked the demise of Mathiez's elegiac tropology. No longer did Robespierre stand for social reform, or even the destruction of Liberty and the Revolution. The Incorruptible came to symbolise the evils of an entire class, representing bourgeois oppression of the proletariat. Not all French historians of the post-war period shared this interpretation, however. Rudé argued that to understand Robespierre's actions, one must take circumstance into account – neither his ideals nor his class provide a complete explanation

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[61] Rudé, Portrait, 212.

for his behaviour. Moreover, while he retains a certain consistency, Robespierre goes through differing phases and evolves. He is not a 'flat', one-dimensional, or static character. All of this leads to the more complex representations that would be developed by Liberal Revisionists.

Chapter 4

1934-1992

"Robespierre possessed, in truth, more the appearance than the reality of individual power."
R.R. Palmer, Twelve Who Ruled, 333.

"Robespierre was more concerned to open the eyes of the misled, whilst Saint-Just though primarily of executing those who were deceiving them in order to sabotage the Revolution."
Norman Hampson, Saint-Just, 168.

Socialist tropologies of Robespierre had elevated his stature to new heights by the 1930s, but these portrayals found more detractors than supporters in the years to follow. As discussed above, Marxists did not see Robespierre in the same light, and neither did a more 'pragmatic' group of historians who came to be known as the Revisionists.[1] The Revisionist movement had its origins in an Anglo-American anti-Marxist/Communist backlash that began in the 1930s, but came to fruition through the writings of the English historian Alfred Cobban during the 1960s.[2] Cobban's work opened the door for a plethora of English and American historians who did not share the French reverence for the Revolution.[3] These historians placed the so-called 'truths' of the Revolution under a microscope, and discovered there were aspects of Revolutionary history that had not been discussed in Marxist histories.

Much of the Revisionist movement revolved around a rejection of the concept that the French Revolution was a 'bourgeois Revolution'. This attack on Marxism served to redefine the burden of proof, or lack thereof, which characterised Marxist histories. Marxists often

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[1] By 'pragmatic' I mean less-ideologically driven.

[2] Revisionism continues to be a strong force in Revolutionary history today.

[3] Although this process of re-examination and re-interpretation originated with Anglo-American historians, it was also adopted by French historians following the collapse of the Marxist hegemony. Some historiographers have labelled these French historians, particularly Francois Furet, as Revisionists, but they seem to be more suited to a style of history that is referred to as 'cultural' history. For that reason, Furet's work will be discussed in the following chapter.

shaped the evidence to conform to larger, deterministic models of history and in the process ignored or downplayed various elements of Revolutionary history. In their drive to undermine the Marxist interpretation, Revisionists re-examined the historical record, unearthing new evidence and re-interpreting old evidence. This expanded body of evidence was used to illustrate potential shortcomings in the Marxist interpretation, and as the burden of proof evolved among later Revisionist historians, much more of the history of the Revolution was uncovered. The result was a more complex representation of the period that attached less symbolic importance to revolutionary figures than earlier interpretations that were less concerned about the burden of proof.

In addition, Revisionists examined Revolutionary politics in much greater detail than the Marxists, believing they were more than the product of larger social or economic forces. Consequently, their examination of political sources is more thorough, and their conclusions are more sophisticated. Finally, British and American historians were not involved in the ongoing battles that characterised French politics, thus allowing them a degree of iconoclasm their French colleagues could not afford. As part of this process of revision images of Robespierre underwent a number of changes, but in addition, more dynamic tropologies of Saint-Just appeared; the result was a series of representations reflected in the above quotations.[4]

One of the earliest historians to reject the socialist/Marxist perspective was the American Crane Brinton (1898-1968). Among Brinton's works, Anatomy of Revolution (1938), and A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799 (1964), provide insight into the changes that were to take place in Revolutionary history in the post-war era. Anatomy of Revolution is a study of the

[4] It is important to emphasise at this point that the new images were a by-product of this revision, rather than the impetus. Revisionists were generally more concerned with interpretation of the Revolution as a whole than representation of the individual.

dynamics and mechanics of revolutions in the larger sense,[5] but Brinton also examined Robespierre's role in the Revolution of 1789. Running counter-current to the strong Mathiez/Lefebvre tropologies of Robespierre that were predominant in the 1930s, Brinton's history portrayed the Incorruptible as a man driven by "personal ambition and sheer vanity."[6] He became the central figure in a revolution marked by the succession of the extremists over the moderates,[7] an interpretation that was directly linked to Brinton's strong anti-Communist stance.[8]

Brinton saw Robespierre as an eighteenth-century version of Cromwell or Lenin, particularly the latter. Highlighting similarities between the French and Russian Revolutions, Brinton believed these individuals represented a similar evil, demonstrating "a strange variant of Plato's pleasant scheme: they are not philosopher-kings but philosopher-killers."[9] Robespierre and Lenin appeared to bring change and regeneration, but in actuality brought death and destruction. Robespierre fell short of the heights achieved by his 'successor' however, despite the fact that he was "in some ways the most unadulterated seer of the lot."[10] Although Robespierre's vision for the future did not translate into control of the Revolutionary Government, his importance arose from his status as a figurehead within the

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[5] In which Brinton discussed the four quintessential modern revolutions – British, American, French, and Russian.

[6] Crane Brinton, Anatomy of Revolution (New York: Vintage Books, 1965 (Originally 1938)), 115.

[7] Brinton, Anatomy, 154.

[8] Conservatives in the U.S. and Britain disapproved of the Russian Revolution and the spread of communism during the 1920s and 1930s. Much of this was tied to labour unrest and the growth of the union movement, and was exacerbated by the events of the Depression. The Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front movement did little to garner support for the Left, which appeared to be a growing threat to international order. This highlights the parallels between Brinton's image and those of de Maistre or Taine.

[9] Brinton, Anatomy, 157. Brinton saw something perversely noble in Robespierre's actions, for "only a sincere extremist in a revolution can kill men because he loves man, attain peace through violence, and free men by enslaving them." Brinton, Anatomy, 159.

[10] Brinton, Anatomy, 159.

government.[11] Throughout, Brinton's work underscores the quasi-mythical quality of Robespierre as a great figure in the history of modern revolutions, but it also portrays a man who was nothing like the hero of the Republic described by Lefebvre. Robespierre and the Terror represented the ancestral heritage of the chaos wrought in the twentieth century by Communists like Lenin, and later, Stalin. Brinton believed Lefebvre's portrait of Robespierre was as much a threat to Revolutionary history as Marxist ideology was to civilised society.

In A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799, Brinton expands on some of the ideas in Anatomy, but most of this work centred on his rejection of Mathiez's celebrated image of Robespierre.[12] Brinton did not believe there was any evidence to support this representation, believing the nineteenth-century tropology of the prophet to be more accurate. Thus, he reaffirmed the work of Thiers, Taine and Aulard. According to Brinton,

> Robespierre's speeches, his letters and reports are available for all to read, and from their readings no such person as Mathiez imagined can be made out. Robespierre survived [in history] because the Terror was in large part a religious movement, and Robespierre had many of the qualities of a second-rate religious leader. His speeches were sermons ... His churches were the Jacobin clubs, his congregation the few who were 'at the height of revolutionary circumstances' ... Robespierre is less puzzling as a preacher than as a statesman. Intolerant of opponents, very sure of his own righteousness, his own prescience [but] ... in the end [he] exhibited that extreme inconsistency between thought and action which, in men forced to act, is the mark either of the conscious hypocrite or of the religious fanatic. There is no evidence that Robespierre possessed either the intelligence or the courage necessary for such persistent and large-scale hypocrisy.[13]

Robespierre re-emerged as a religious figure, but in this history he was more prophet than blood-thirsty pontiff.[14] With this representation, Brinton returned to the tropology that was

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[11] J.M. Thompson would further develop this line of argument.

[12] Although Brinton despised Marxism, Mathiez was his real target in this history.

[13] Crane Brinton, A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799 (New York: Harper, 1934), 108-9.

[14] Brinton rejected the idea of a Robespierrist dictatorship in spite of the Incorruptible's authority, stating that "[n]o one man – and certainly not Robespierre – ever assumed a predominant position among [the Committee members]. The Committee of Public Safety was sort of a dictatorship in commission." Brinton, Decade, 121.

pervasive in Anatomy – the spiritual leader of a perverse religion. Brinton's work provided a foil for contemporary socialist imagery by re-casting Robespierre in the role of the zealot rather than the saviour, stating in the process that the greatest threat to public order no longer came from the Right – it now came from the Left. Brinton saw Jacobinism, and its successor Marxism, as a danger because of the

> devotional language of the Jacobins, their frequent accesses to collective emotion, their conviction of righteousness, their assurance that their opponents are sinners, direct agents of the devil, their intolerance, their desire for martyrdom ... all these are unmistakable signs of the theological temperament.[15]

Robespierre symbolised the extremism associated with pious devotion, and acted as the grand vizier of a Revolution which served as the precursor to communism. Brinton's role in the development of the Revisionist movement should not be linked to his re-introduction of Robespierre as a religious figure, but rather his rejection of the image of the republican defender. This rejection would be the first of many steps towards a more nuanced portrait of Robespierre which would develop over the next five decades.

The English historian J.M. Thompson (1878-1968) took Brinton's rejection of Marxism in a new direction. Thompson authored a number of works on Robespierre, including Leaders of the Revolution (1932), Robespierre (1935), and Robespierre and the French Revolution (1952), and while he was a student of Mathiez, his admiration for Robespierre was more subtle and refined than that of his teacher. He added both substance and evidence to Mathiez's portrayal, as well as providing further insight into Saint-Just.[16]

According to Thompson, there were two forces shaping the images of Robespierre in the early twentieth century: Mathiez and Marxism, with "the one idolising Robespierre, and finding the essence of the Revolution in a kind of state socialism; the other rejecting

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[15] Brinton, Decade, 159.

Robespierre and his ideas as *petit bourgeois*."[17] Thompson took it upon himself to move away from both of these approaches, which he believed did little to represent Robespierre accurately. Through this work, Thompson brought one theory that was to become central to the Revisionist tropology of Robespierre to the forefront.[18] This was the contention that Robespierre was the predominant figure during the Year II *only* because of his role as spokesman for the Committee of Public Safety. He was not in control of the Committee, nor was he a dictator or a tyrant.[19] Consequently, Thompson mitigated Robespierre's responsibility for the Terror and set the precedent for a new image of the Incorruptible based on something other than Mathiez or Marxism.

In a narrower sense, Thompson saw Robespierre as a luminary figure, "a writer and a speaker whom circumstances and a mistaken ambition thrust into politics," and "when he fell, his memory bore the odium of more crimes than he had committed."[20] Robespierre was driven by "political singleness of mind,"[21] but he was "ambitious not for power to rule but for influence to lead; not for the role of dictator but of a prophet, perhaps a martyr."[22] Still attached to the religious metaphors of the nineteenth century, Thompson replaced negative

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[16] Thompson was somewhat of an anomaly for this period in Revolutionary historiography, as he had no obvious antagonist. Consequently, he was not involved in many of the great polemics his contemporaries engaged in.

[17] J.M. Thompson, Robespierre (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968), xlix. There are shades of both Mathiez and Lefebvre in Thompson's histories, particularly when he justifies Robespierre's role in the revolutionary violence of the Year II.

[18] This ideas was not unique to Thompson, but it was better expressed here than anywhere else previously.

[19] "There is really no evidence that he directed the general policy of the Committee, or even that he took the chair at its meetings. Because he was its spokesman in the house he came to be regarded as the author of the Terror. Because he interpreted the wishes of the dictatorial Committee it was easy to represent him as a dictator. But it was a joint policy and a joint responsibility." J.M. Thompson, Leaders of the French Revolution (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932), 233.

[20] Thompson, Robespierre, xviii.

[21] Thompson, Robespierre and the French Revolution (London: English University Press, 1972), 34.

[22] Thompson, French Revolution, 44. Thompson believed the revolutionary dictatorship was "the work of the whole Committee of Public Safety, backed by the Convention, and accepted by the mass of public opinion;" 97.

connotations with the idea that Robespierre was a spiritual figure whose fate was to lead, and then die, for the Revolution. In spite of this grandiose notion, Robespierre was deeply flawed, and above all was governed by his own inflexible code of morality: "[s]uch was his hatred of the men who had led France into war, such his fear of traitors and counter-revolutionaries ... that he let his conscience overrule his reason, and his reason by *raison d'état*, till the Puritan in him became an Inquisitor."[23] He was corrupted by his insistence on principle over circumstance. Over the course of his five years in Paris, Robespierre had "tricked himself, as many idealists have done, into using bad means for good ends."[24]

Thompson expands on Mathiez's portrait by examining Robespierre's shortcomings as well as his attributes, creating an image of a man who was of singular importance in the Revolutionary context, yet flawed at the same time.[25] Much of this was shaped by Robespierre's faith in something no one else understood – virtue.[26] He was driven by a desire to make the Republic of Virtue a reality, and in the end, it was the Robespierrists' need to convert others which brought them down: "Not content with being virtuous themselves, they tried to impose a 'reign of virtue on others, and suffered a not unusual fate of missionaries."[27] Thompson chose to represent Robespierre and Saint-Just as men who sought to spread the gospel of Virtue,[28] and who were punished for being missionaries amongst savages.

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[23] Thompson, French Revolution, 67.

[24] Thompson, French Revolution, 108.

[25] Robespierre "saw no more effective way to secure purity and efficiency of administration than by a policy of punishment." Thompson, Leaders, 197.

[26] Thompson, French Revolution, 163-4.

[27] Thompson, Leaders, 191.

[28] Thompson saw Robespierre as a "preacher of a difficult creed." Thompson, Leaders, 243.

Thompson was not as sympathetic towards Saint-Just as he was with Robespierre.[29] The young deputy did not play a seminal role in Thompson's vision of the Revolution; his role was limited to that of Robespierre's avenging angel (to follow the religious metaphor). Saint-Just was the enforcer of morality and Virtue, and while this representation was hardly new, Thompson's image was of a more overtly threatening and vicious Saint-Just than in earlier histories. It was also at this point that Thompson made the greatest distinction between the two revolutionaries. He noted that Saint-Just was motivated by desire to safeguard the nation, while Robespierre was driven by animosity and hostility towards his opponents. Saint-Just became the embodiment of Virtue that was real rather than imagined, as it was with Robespierre. Saint-Just acted as the hand of God rather than the common criminal, and for this reason, he was in some ways a greater figure than Robespierre. In the end, "[t]here was no one with more to give to his country - youth, courage, ability, and enthusiasm; yet there was not one of its instruments the blind force of the Revolution more contemptuously used, broke, and flung aside."[30] Saint-Just almost surpassed Robespierre as the Revolutionary martyr, but Thompson stopped short of awarding him this honour. This was one of the strongest tropologies of Saint-Just to date, and would open the door for future representations to address the issue of Saint-Just's agency.

Thompson's final thoughts have been quoted numerous times, but they serve to illustrate the reason for Robespierre's symbolic importance particularly well:

> Robespierre was never a dictator, and part of his failure must be put down to personal qualities which made him unfit for leadership power; but there is enough evidence that he was at once too visionary, too narrow minded, and a man with too little worldly experience or tact to be a statesman. Where, then, did his greatness lie? In the thoroughness with which he embodied the main ideas and experiences of the

[29] He believed Saint-Just was "rescued from idle and even criminal ways by his enthusiasm for Robespierre." Thompson, French Revolution, 73.

[30] Thompson, Leaders, 211.

> Revolution, from the enthusiastic liberalism of 1789, through the democratic aspirations of 1792, to the disciplined disillusionment of 1794.[31]

This image was shaped by Thompson's rejection of the Marxist image of bourgeois oppressor, but also by his rejection of Mathiez's tropology of the revolutionary saviour. Thompson struggled with his heritage, and while his interpretation paid homage to Mathiez's work, it was ultimately grounded in the complexity that came to exemplify the Revisionist movement. Robespierre represented change and a vision for the future, but he also symbolised ideologically narrow politics that were shored up with the threat of the guillotine. He had been the ultimate martyr, willing to sacrifice his life for the nation, but he was also a man who bore the odious burden of his own sins. Thompson's ideas became a stepping-off point for Revisionist histories which followed suit by representing Robespierre as a well-intentioned and forward-thinking man who was corrupted by his own vision of the future, and Saint-Just as the man driven by absolute conviction. More importantly, Revisionists rejected the notion that any one phase of the Revolution embodied its essence.

Before Cobban launched his assault on the Marxist interpretation, there was another history that further shaped the Revisionist image of Robespierre. This came in the form of Twelve who Ruled (1941) by R.R. Palmer, an American who championed the theory of Atlantic Revolutions.[32] Palmer (1909-) followed Thompson's lead by rejecting Mathiez and Marxism, and continued to redefine Robespierre's role on the Committee of Public Safety.[33] He noted that of the twelve men who were to govern France, Robespierre was the most recognisable, having attracted the most attention in the years leading up to the formation of

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[31] Thompson, Robespierre, 279.

[32] This hypothesis suggested that the French Revolution was part of a larger revolutionary movement that swept through Atlantic countries such as Britain, the United States, the Netherlands and some regions of South America.

[33] As with Thompson, Palmer did not wage an overt war against any particular figure among the Marxist historians. This trend was to change during the 1950s and 1960s, however.

the Committee.[34] Within the Convention, he became a "political expert [who] protected the others from hostile party onslaughts,"[35] and it was for these two reasons, Palmer asserted, that he was *perceived* to be its leader. With this statement, Palmer dismissed earlier claims of individual dictatorship, in essence lifting responsibility for the Terror from Robespierre and placing it on the Committee as a whole.

Palmer saw Robespierre as a passionate man, "preoccupied with an inner vision,"[36] who believed very deeply that what he was doing was in the best interest of the Revolution and the people of France. His goal was to create "a state founded upon morality,"[37] and while it was unrealistic, it was not undesirable. He struggled to remain an idealist while others around him grew increasingly disillusioned,[38] but faltered as his dreams of the Republic of Virtue became less likely. In constructing this tropology, Palmer reflects a theme which reappears numerous times in Revisionist literature, noting that it was Robespierre's "weakness, more than with most men, to confuse intention with fact, and to have no conception of how he appeared to others."[39] Cocooned in his fantasy, Robespierre was unable to see what was transpiring around him. He did not see the changes occurring in the Convention, but more importantly, he was unaware that he appeared tyrannical to his colleagues and much of the public.[40] Palmer believed it was this appearance, along with rumour and innuendo, which

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[34] This argument was to become a hallmark of Revisionist discussions of Robespierre.

[35] R.R. Palmer, Twelve who Ruled (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 109.

[36] Palmer, Twelve, 6.

[37] Palmer, Twelve, 272-6.

[38] Palmer, Twelve, 257.

[39] Palmer, Twelve, 333.

[40] The theory that Robespierre was his own worst enemy (because of his inability to understand the repercussions associated with his apparent position in the Committee of Public Safety) was to become an integral component of Revisionist interpretations of Robespierre.

destroyed Robespierre. The greatest impact of Twelve who Ruled, however, lies in the argument that Robespierre had more the appearance of dictatorship than reality. Presenting a strong case for this claim, Palmer sculpts the image of a man who embodied principle and determination, but was burdened with a startling naiveté and a lack of tangible authority over the Committee.

By examining the roles of the individual Committee members rather than focusing on Robespierre, Palmer was able to add several dimensions to the events of Year II. One of the beneficiaries of this was Saint-Just. Saint-Just appeared in a guise very similar to Thompson's tropology – the wicked and unruly child transformed by the Revolution into a man of "principle and determination."[41] It was not long, however, before Saint-Just showed himself to be a "political puritan,"[42] a man bent on protecting what he perceived to be the 'principles' of the Revolution. He

> behaved like one who thought himself above humanity, and made his admirers feel the presence of a demigod ... Saint-Just was a Robespierre drawn in sharper lines, more full-blooded, more impetuous despite his impassive airs, a Robespierre without the wordiness, the indecision, the introversion, and the soul-searching, but also without the saving elements of kindness and sincerity. Saint-Just was an idea energised by a passion. All that was abstract, absolute and ideological in the Revolution was embodied in his slender figure and written upon his youthful face, and was made terrible by the unceasing drive of his almost demonic energy ... He was no lover of blood [but] ... Blood to him simply did not matter. The individual was irrelevant to his picture of the world. The hot temperament that had disturbed his adolescence now blazed beneath the calm exterior of the political fanatic.[43]

Palmer seconds Lamartine's assessment of Saint-Just, once again noting that by the fall of 1793 Saint-Just was 'more like Robespierre than Robespierre himself'.[44] He takes this

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[41] Palmer, Twelve, 10.

[42] Palmer, Twelve, 10.

[43] Palmer, Twelve, 74. In spite of this scathing indictment, there is little evidence presented to supports Palmer's allegations.

[44] This is evidenced by his actions in the Bureau of Police, where Saint-Just demanded arrests while Robespierre asked for more information. Palmer, Twelve, 309.

assertion one step further, however, by describing the passion within Saint-Just. No longer was he the sycophant, the avenging angel. He now symbolised judge, jury, and executioner.

By portraying Saint-Just as more extreme than Robespierre, Palmer, like others before him, called into question the Incorruptible's culpability for the Terror. Whether this was intentional or not, Palmer's tropology of the young deputy once again undermines classic, and contemporary, images of Robespierre as the tyrannical head of the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre had become passionate instead of despotic, naïve instead of dictatorial, and he was thoroughly overshadowed by the tyranny of Saint-Just. By examining the roles of the individual Committee members and refusing to accept that Robespierre was the dictator he had been portrayed as, Palmer added strength to Thompson's arguments and paved the way for an image fraught with ambiguity. This then begs the question: if Robespierre was characterised by ambiguity, could he be said to embody the Revolution?

Histories of the Revolution underwent a significant change beginning in the 1950s because of the work of Alfred Cobban (1901-?). Cobban challenged the orthodox Marxist notion of a 'bourgeois Revolution' in his 1954 lecture 'The Myth of the French Revolution',[45] but the full impact of his work was not felt until the mid-1960s.[46] As the midwife of the Revisionist movement, Cobban played a central role in reconceptualising the Revolution, and in doing so, he provided some interesting insight into Robespierre. In Dictatorship – Its History and Theory (1939), Cobban discussed the emergence and

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[45] Cobban believed "Lefebvre and M. Soboul seem to be putting almost too much meaning ... into [the history of the Revolution], when they reduce the greatest happening in modern history to the deterministic operation of an historical law." (Alfred Cobban, Social Interpretation of the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 8-9.) Cobban and Lefebvre engaged in numerous ideological battles during the late 1950s. These were carried out in various journals, and lasted until Lefebvre died in 1959.

[46] Change also occurred because of a growing sense of disillusionment among French historians who believed there was more to Revolutionary history than the static Marxist interpretation that had dominated the historical landscape for the last generation. Although the Revisionist movement had French elements, however, the majority of adherents were British or American. For an explanation of Cobban's work, and those who followed him, see William Doyle, Origins of the French Revolution (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1-39.

development of 'dictatorship', as well as the theories behind 'dictatorship'. He saw Napoleon as the first modern dictator, and while Cobban gave Robespierre credit as an innovator, he believed Robespierre's quasi-dictatorship was not fully implemented because it was "incapable of putting either its benevolent or its despotic intentions fully into effect."[47] Robespierre was neither in absolute control of the Committee, nor was he able fully to focus his attentions on realising the Republic of Virtue. Much like Thompson and Palmer, Cobban believed that while Robespierre was not a dictator in the strictest sense of the word, he was perceived to be such because "the part he played in the government was so extensive, and his pre-eminence in the eyes of the people so great."[48] Popular perception formed the basis of Robespierre's authority, but there was little political power to go along with this, hence his inability to influence the course of events.

The most interesting aspect of Dictatorship was the idea that Robespierre played a pivotal role as the 'mouthpiece' of the Committee of Public Safety, a role he assumed because he was the only member who "had a public personality adequate to filling the gap between government and people."[49] This assertion had originated in the nineteenth century with Michelet's work, but it did not gain prominence until the mid-twentieth century. It was instrumental in redefining Robespierre's role on the Committee without diminishing his overall significance to the Revolution, and added a new dimension to his symbolic importance. Cobban reiterated Thompson and Palmer's argument that Robespierre was in a position of prominence not because of his personal power, but because of his popular image.

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[47] Alfred Cobban, Dictatorship – Its History and Theory (New York: Haskell House, 1971), 57. This element of Cobban's thesis is interesting, in that he places full responsibility on Robespierre, barely mentioning the other triumvirs, and almost entirely absolving the Committee of Public Safety of any responsibility for the Terror.

[48] Cobban, Dictatorship, 67.

This in and of itself was essential to the survival of the Republic, for Robespierre was "in the popular mind the head of the government, which indeed could hardly have been set up or have survived without his reputation for patriotism, loyalty to the ends of the Revolution and personal honesty."[50]

In a second major work, Aspects of the French Revolution (1968), Cobban examined Robespierre's personal philosophy and political ideas. Although he believed that the moral and democratic principles of the Enlightenment shaped Robespierre's political philosophy, Cobban suggested these principles were undermined by serious incompatibilities between what Robespierre wanted and what was possible. This portrait of Robespierre became a study in inconsistency, in which Cobban focused on Robespierre's proclivity to "maintain one view in theory, while following a very different one in practice."[51] Robespierre's logic was driven by a desire to found a Republic of Virtue based on Enlightenment values, but the circumstances of the Revolution forced him to employ tactics that seemingly went against these principles.[52] In essence, "practical considerations were evidently beginning to outweigh theoretical"[53] for Robespierre.[54] Above all, however, Cobban saw Robespierre as a flawed

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[49] Cobban, Dictatorship, 68. He is called the "mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie" in Alfred Cobban, Aspects of the French Revolution (London: Johnathan Cape, 1968), 153. Although the Revisionists rejected Marxist theory, they often employed Marxist terminology, especially in the early years of the Revisionist movement.

[50] Cobban, Dictatorship, 68.

[51] Cobban, Aspects, 152.

[52] In Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat, Rudé explains quite convincingly that Robespierre's actions were in fact not contradictory, and were determined by a philosophy that employed the most expeditious means to reach the desired end.

[53] Cobban, Aspects, 161. Robespierre did not want the Terror to be anarchic, however, and while he "accepted the need for the Terror, as did all the other members of the Committee of Public Safety ... irregular executions, indiscriminate massacre, were antipathetic to his legalistic mind." Cobban, Aspects, 170.

[54] As Georges Rudé would point out twenty-odd years later, these changes were the result of changing circumstances the Revolutionary Government was forced to contend with, rather than opportunism or hypocrisy.

and inconsistent politician whose grasp on reality was tenuous at best, thus adding to Thompson's image of the Incorruptible.

Cobban's anti-Marxist stance had been directed more towards the Marxist historical interpretation, as opposed to Brinton's attack on the political legacy of Marxism. Ultimately, however, the distinction does not matter much. Over the course of the 1960s, both intellectual and political Marxism suffered serious setbacks that left them shadows of their former selves, as described in the previous chapter. Revisionism gained strength and momentum from these events, but the death of doctrinal Marxism in Revolutionary history did not mark the beginning of a new age of cohesiveness. If anything, the opposite was true. Battles were now waged against a new generation of deterministic French historians who examined the social and cultural elements of the Revolution.[55]

There was little Revisionist writing in the 1970s which is pertinent to this paper,[56] but the 1980s gave rise to a number of works that further refined the images of Robespierre and Saint-Just. One of the most influential Revisionists of that decade was the English historian William Doyle (1942-). In The Oxford History of the French Revolution (1990), Doyle emphasises the role of circumstance, depicting a Revolution driven along by a series of events which was anything but pre-determined. He paints the picture of a nation governed by the Committee of Public Safety, but states that this was because of the Committee's strength in the Convention, not because it was the supreme authority in France.[57] Within this context, Doyle introduced a very different image of Robespierre.

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[55] This development will be addressed in the following chapter.

[56] There is one notable exception to be discussed below – Norman Hampson's Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre.

[57] This argument went against much of earlier Revolutionary history, and challenged claims of a Robespierrist dictatorship once again, but in a different manner.

Doyle's Robespierre was also an idealist who used his position as spokesman for the Committee to champion his agenda in the Convention. In this history, however, Robespierre was becoming increasingly paranoid about subversion as the Year II wore on, rather than drifting into a world of indecision and flexible principles. He instigated campaigns against alleged traitors and dechristianizers, believing both were highly detrimental to the success and safety of the Revolution. According to Doyle, Robespierre's primary focus during this period was the threat to the Revolution and the Republic. Anything that would undermine the stability of the nation felt his wrath, and in the Spring of 1794 he targeted the Hébertists and the Indulgents. Robespierre's condemnations became more pointed when he became convinced the clashes between the two groups were one of the primary divisive elements within the Convention. The 'war of the factions', according to Doyle, resulted from the damage both parties did to the integrity of the Convention as a whole, rather than because they were a hindrance to Robespierre's ambitions (as some historians claimed).

By this point, the Terror seemed to be of little use to most people, but Robespierre was still searching for his dream of the Republic of Virtue and believed he could use the Terror to find it. Over the course of the Spring of 1794, Robespierre "became increasingly obsessed with cleansing the Republic of the corrupt and all who fell short of his exacting standard of Virtue."[58] The trial and execution of the Indulgents marked a turning point in the Terror, after which paranoia became the order of the day. During the four-month period between March and July of that year, members of the Convention were

> struck down more for what they might do than what they had done. Their execution, in fact, marked the beginning of a new phase in the Terror, when people would die for their potential as much as for specific crimes, and sometimes merely failure to match some ideal moral standard.[59]

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[58] Doyle, Oxford History, 273.

[59] Doyle, Oxford History, 274.

Although Doyle does not directly attribute this transition to the Robespierrists, they were the only faction within the Convention to claim the moral high ground. Doyle does not deny that Robespierre appeared to take on the role of dictator during the Spring of 1794, but instead argues that the Revolution had become mired in paranoia and subterfuge by decrees that were the work of the Committee as a whole. Avoiding distinctions made by earlier historians, Doyle portrayed Robespierre as a more integral figure than earlier Revisionists, believing his actions were not easily excused.

Doyle did not suggest that Robespierre had ever intended to be dictator, but instead argued that he was driven by passion, morality and a narrowly defined sense of loyalty:

> Surrounded by rumours of plots, not to mention assassination attempts, yet completely sure of his own rectitude, he took contradiction for bad faith and independence for opportunism. In the end he seems to have concluded that hardly anybody in public life could be relied on, and by saying so openly he ensured that they could not. And by implying that those of whom he disapproved or with whom he disagreed deserved execution, he forced them into destroying him before he destroyed them. Men called him a dictator because they feared moral inflexibility in one who had power.[60]

Rather than challenging the assertion that Robespierre controlled the Committee, Doyle focused instead on his actions while on the Committee. Robespierre used his authority on the Committee to eradicate dissent, and in the charged climate of the Year II, people perceived these to be the actions of a dictator. Doyle saw these as the actions of a patriot, albeit a misguided one. Robespierre represented service to the nation once again, but he was not the republican defender Lefebvre admired. His attempts to defend the Republic were much more circumscribed, more brutal, and more dangerous than Lefebvre believed. Doyle avoids passing judgement on Robespierre, and while the Incorruptible plays a more dominant role on the Committee of Public Safety in this history than in other Revisionist accounts, Doyle

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[60] Doyle, Oxford History, 281.

ultimately contextualised Robespierre by making him part of the larger Revolutionary picture rather than its focal point.

The Revisionist historian who has made some of the more significant advances in analysing the revolutionaries is Norman Hampson, a student of J.M. Thompson. Hampson (1922-) has written extensively on the Terror, as well as on Robespierre and Saint-Just, bringing new evidence and ideas to light. In order to emphasise the importance of Hampson's work, a number of his histories which build on earlier Revisionist images will be examined here, including The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre (1974), The Terror and the French Revolution (1981), and Saint-Just (1991).

Hampson expands on Thompson and Palmer's point that Robespierre was not head of the Committee, arguing that he was able to "exercise a unique moral authority over the Convention, and especially the Jacobin Club, where he could deflect criticism from the Committee."[61] By claiming that Robespierre was not in a position of unchecked power, Hampson supports a tropology of Robespierre as more of a figurehead than a dictator. Like Cobban, Doyle and Rudé, Hampson also believes that Robespierre underwent a change in personality and character between 1793-4. Instead of being caused by external factors (as Cobban alleged), however, this transformation occurred because Robespierre was facing a moral dilemma brought on by internal conflicts over what was desirable and what was necessary.[62] He wanted to stay true to the principles of 1789, but vice seemed to be a serious impediment to Virtue.

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[61] Norman Hampson, The Terror and the French Revolution (London: The Historical Association, 1981), 14. According to Hampson, Robespierre did not have any more control of the Terror than any of his associates on the Committee of Public Safety. In addition, the Terror was not intended to fulfil dreams of a social revolution, regardless of who espoused them.

[62] Hampson, Terror, 24. A prime example of this was the trial of the Dantonists. Hampson claims this action was undertaken at the insistence of Billaud-Varenne and with the support of Saint-Just. Robespierre wholly opposed it initially, but when he saw it could not be prevented, he gave evidence to convict his former colleagues.

In The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre, Hampson notes that while Robespierre was

> the most vocal member of the government and the man who claimed to personify the Revolution ... [he] was far from being the most violent member of the government and perhaps even suspected that he might have been looking forward to the end of the Terror.[63]

He was becoming a moderate among extremists. His isolation stemmed from his adherence to his convictions and the decisions that arose from these convictions, not because of his supposed tyranny. Throughout each of his histories, Hampson redefines Robespierre's role by bringing the actions of other Committee members under closer scrutiny.[64] He provides significant evidence that a number of the other Committee members and deputies were more vicious than Robespierre, but because of Robespierre's status as a figurehead, it appeared as though their actions were his wishes. He was neither the aspiring tyrant nor the dictator. According to Hampson, that distinction may be more suited to Saint-Just.

Hampson takes the next step towards restoring agency for Robespierre's associate in the biography Saint-Just.[65] According to Hampson, Saint-Just was driven by a compulsion to sculpt France into the mythical Republic of Virtue. His

> approach to every problem was to look for 'republican laws' that ought to create a kind of harmonious, self-regulating system that he believed to be characteristic of civil society ... Unlike Robespierre, who saw this as some kind of moral victory of *vertu* over inclination, Saint-Just believed that it would happen spontaneously if society were

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[63] Norman Hampson, The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 260-1. Robespierre's moderation in the spring likely alienated him from the rest of the Committee, according to Hampson.

[64] This group included revolutionaries such as Vadier, Amar, Collot d'Herbois, and Billaud-Varenne. These individuals had been portrayed as intriguers in the past, but their role on the Committee and behind the scenes had been obscured, particularly in the period from the fall of 1793 to Thermidor. This new examination of what had previously been seen as secondary forces is a key to a less idealised representation of Robespierre and Saint-Just.

[65] Hampson's biography is the most current among the handful written on Saint-Just. For that reason, but also because this is a secondary component of this thesis, this paper will only use this history to explore the possibility that Saint-Just may have been more extreme than Robespierre.

> once set on the right lines. Both were agreed that anyone who aspired to sabotage the New Jerusalem must be destroyed as a public enemy.[66]

Saint-Just and Robespierre had different conceptions of how to achieve this Utopian ideal, but they shared a common belief that this dream must not be subverted. Exploring this *raison d'être*, Hampson defines Saint-Just's agenda more clearly than previous historians, attributing his increasing extremism to his own convictions. In the process, Hampson created a more nuanced image of Saint-Just, rather than simply suggesting that he was 'more Robespierre than Robespierre himself.'

In this history, Hampson rejects the notion that Robespierre and Saint-Just were the two-headed monster spreading tyranny and preaching Virtue. Consequently, he takes a crucial step towards separating the two and reconceptualising their respective tropologies in Revolutionary historiography:

> Where the spiritual significance of the Revolution was concerned, Saint-Just and Robespierre pursued parallel rather than identical courses. For both of them it was a kind of moral Armageddon. Victory over foreign enemies and domestic counter-revolutions, which most of the deputies saw as ends, were no more than means that would make possible the moral regeneration of the country.[67]

In order to understand Saint-Just better, Hampson believes that it is necessary to see him as an individual governed by a certainty that political decisions were based on absolutes of right or wrong.[68] There was nothing in between; people either supported a Republic of Virtue which would save to the Revolution, or they did not. Those who did not had to be eliminated so they did not stand in the way. These convictions had developed between the fall of 1792 and the Spring of 1793, and by the fall of 1793, it had become apparent to all that "he had

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[66] Norman Hampson, Saint-Just (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 91. Saint-Just appeared committed to an ideologically narrow conception of the Revolution which had little patience for those who did not respect the laws of nature. 'Republican institutions' – political and social bodies governed by these inalienable laws – were the foundation of his personal philosophy.

[67] Hampson, Saint-Just, 218.

[68] Hampson, Saint-Just, 119.

committed himself to a conception of politics that was suspicious, ideologically Manichean and intolerant of all criticism."[69] More than this, Saint-Just was living in a world of 'absolutes and abstractions', and as with Robespierre, his revolutionary ideology became increasingly circumscribed as civil war, foreign war and the threat of subversion escalated.

Consumed by a passion for creating the perfect Revolution and Republic, Saint-Just lost touch with the realities the Revolutionary Government was facing during the Year II. Consequently, "his temperament, his convictions and the position in which he found himself" were frequently at odds with the rest of the Committee of Public Safety by the Spring of 1794.[70] Like Robespierre, Saint-Just was becoming isolated, but not because of his moderation amongst extremists, as Hampson believed was the case with Robespierre. It was because he was attached to his principles more than any government. The means by which the two men sought to accomplish their shared goal were also becoming increasingly divergent. Saint-Just was becoming "more pessimistic as well as more punitive;"[71] he seemed to be suffering from dementia, and he "had talked himself into a fantasy world of false absolutes, in which the *vertu* of the government contrasted with the turpitude of all those who were less than enthusiastic in their acceptance of its policies."[72]

The Republic was becoming increasingly draconian as Saint-Just began to see counter-revolutionary plots everywhere. By the end of April, 1794 the "Committee of Public Safety

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[69] Hampson, Saint-Just, 139.

[70] Hampson, Saint-Just, 160.

[71] Hampson, Saint-Just, 178. Saint-Just supposedly introduced the Ventôse decrees (February 1794) to furnish patriots with land, in accordance with his desire to create the ideal Republic, but Hampson believed that in reality, the speech he used to announce these land grants was intended to punish those who were making revolutionary goals unattainable. The distribution of property was a secondary matter, largely because Saint-Just's "concern for the poor was genuine but abstract ... He was a "man of gestures, and this was one of them." (Hampson, Saint-Just, 178-9.) Furthermore, Saint-Just acted illegally several times while serving as a representative on mission, believing he was above the law and free to act of his own will.

[72] Hampson, Saint-Just, 187. Saint-Just's motto had become 'No more pity and weakness towards the guilty.'

and the Convention had endorsed his plans for the eradication of dissent and for tight control over the administration."[73] Behind the scenes, however, paranoia and fanaticism were waging a battle against his desire to create republican institutions; it was the former that would triumph. In spite of his influence over the Committee in the early Spring, Saint-Just's authority was also undermined by his continued absences while serving as a representative on mission. When he returned to Paris at the end of June, he was no longer in a position to sway the Committee. It was now in the hands of the radical terrorists Billaud-Varenne and Collot d'Herbois,[74] and the Robespierrists would soon fall victim to extremism that was, as least in part, of their own making.

Hampson believes Saint-Just's vision for France was "wholly impracticable" because it proposed a radically different course from that which the Revolution was heading on; it was doomed to failure because it would punish those who did not fit within his proscribed vision of the ideal society.[75] Saint-Just's actions were influenced by the events of the Revolution, but in the end, he was corrupted by his passion to create the perfect Republic:[76]

> Circumstances had given him his political chance and had helped to shape the direction of his thinking, but it was his own extraordinary will and sense of his own wisdom and

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[73] Hampson, Saint-Just, 203. Saint-Just was more responsible for the purge of the Dantonists than Robespierre according to Hampson. Over the course of that Spring, Saint-Just had become "something of a specialist in the art of proscription" (Hampson, Saint-Just, 193) who was concerned neither with detail nor accuracy, and he saw the factions as an impediment. When passed, the Law of 22 Prairial "gave a more bloody edge to Saint-Just's plans for dealing with the suspects." (Hampson, Saint-Just, 216) Hampson also believed Saint-Just had become more influential in directing the course of the Terror than Robespierre, as the latter drifted further away from reality, and relinquished what little control he had to the more extreme members of the Committee. In this account, the third member of the Triumvirate, Couthon, appears to be more of a lackey to Robespierre than Saint-Just ever did.

[74] Hampson believes Saint-Just would not have objected to the intensification of the Terror these individuals had been proposing, largely because he had contributed more to this than anyone else. (Hampson, Saint-Just, 211.) Saint-Just refused to abandon the concept of republican institutions, however, and that proved to be his downfall.

[75] Hampson, Saint-Just, 231.

[76] Hampson, Saint-Just, 231. "The Terror had produced an absence of opposition rather than any positive consensus and natural inclination towards harmony and co-operation," leaving the Revolution 'frozen', according to Saint-Just. Hampson, Saint-Just, 231.

> rectitude that gave him the fanatical determination to translate the vision into political fact, whatever the human cost. If the sin of Lucifer was spiritual pride, which led him, almost incidentally, to the use of evil as the necessary means to the transcendental end, Saint-Just was Lucifer.[77]

This allusion to Paradise Lost supports Palmer's image of the demonic revolutionary, but it also undermines images of Robespierre as the tyrant. Hampson introduces the probability that there is more to Saint-Just than generally recognised, and in doing so adds credibility to similar suggestions that had been part of Revolutionary history for a century and a half. Rather that simply stating that Saint-Just was 'more Robespierre than Robespierre', Hampson was able to articulate unspoken or under-developed sentiment about the younger revolutionary. In this history, Saint-Just appears to be more willing, and more inclined, to use violence and terror to realise the objective. He was also less confused and less hesitant than the Incorruptible. This new interpretation raises questions as to why Saint-Just remained in the shadows for the majority of Revolutionary history, if even part of what Hampson says is accurate. It seems highly plausible that this tendency is directly linked to the tropologies of the 'representative man', but that issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Ultimately, however, these images of Saint-Just serve to raise more questions about Robespierre than they do to provide answers about Saint-Just.

Histories that provided a new perspective of Robespierre and Saint-Just were characterised by a re-evaluation of Robespierre's role in the Committee of Public Safety. The Incorruptible was relieved of the title of 'dictator', and while he remained a prophet for certain historians, he generally was portrayed as naïve and misguided rather than despotic. By reconstructing and re-evaluating images of Robespierre and Saint-Just, Revisionists have

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[77] Hampson, Saint-Just, 236. By the spring of 1794, Saint-Just had become enraptured with his authority, and there was no escape from the fantasy world which he had become ensconced in: "To crush and to subdue becomes voluptuous pleasure, to which pride gives keener relish, affording a grateful incense of the holocaust which the despot consumes on his own altar ... in the service of omnipotence, pride is insatiable, and, to mollify it, no barbaric act is too great." (Taine, French Revolution, v. 3, 216-7.) Like Hampson, Taine believed Saint-Just's revolutionary blood-lust was fed by pride.

made the Revolution about more than tyranny, despotism, and dictatorship, and in the process, questioned the symbolism previously attached to Robespierre. As a result, Robespierre became more complex and less one-dimensional. He stood for more than tyranny or social reform, but he also stood for less. No longer representative of the Revolution in its entirety or even of one aspect of the Revolution, Revisionists turned Robespierre into somewhat of an enigma. This in turn leads to a Revolutionary history that is about more than Robespierre. By reinventing Robespierre as a revolutionary (albeit a confused and chaotic one) rather than the hero or the villain of the Revolution, he no longer embodied the positive or negative extremes of the Revolution. Revisionists also underscored the possibility that Saint-Just was more inherently tyrannical than Robespierre. Nonetheless, they were unable to dismiss the latter's 'representative' qualities once and for all. This would become apparent in the cultural histories of the 1970s and 1980s, in which Robespierre was portrayed in an entirely different, but not entirely new, fashion which brought the issue of symbolic importance to the forefront once again.

Chapter 5

1965 - 1992

"Robespierre embodied ideology in its purest form." – Francois Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution, 66.

"Montesquieu's dream of the domestication of women was enacted by the male leadership of the French Revolution." – Joan Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution, 38.

As noted in the previous chapter, the demise of the Marxist orthodoxy was not followed by creation of a new hegemony. Although Revisionism proved effective in undermining previous interpretation, it did not produce a new consensus, and over the course of the past three decades, the discipline as a whole has become noticeably fragmented. Out of the battle between Marxists and Revisionists has emerged a new school of 'cultural' history which combines some of the features of both schools, yet is distinct from, and in some regards antagonistic to, its immediate predecessors. Cultural history emphasises the development of new value systems – political or otherwise. With Revisionism it shares concern with ideology, although it goes much further in rejecting, or ignoring, questions of material interest in determining behaviour. On the other hand, cultural history shares with Marxism an emphasis on long-term underlining causes which borders on determinism. The force of circumstance and impact of events plays a minor role in cultural interpretation of the Revolution.[1]

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[1] Although these histories are important because of their effort to chart unexplored historical waters, they can be problematic. According to Hampson, "they tend to be self-verifying, in the sense that 'by taking one factor in history as basic, all others can be reduced to conditions in which it operates.' In the second place, sociological theories leave no room for contingency. Things had to happen that way if their theory is to be valid and what contemporaries saw as choices were in fact nothing of the kind. It may have been so but it is hard to prove that that is how it actually was." Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 232. Cultural historians have also taken a different approach to the issue of the burden of proof than their Revisionist counterparts. In some instances it is similar to the Marxist approach of fitting the evidence to the model, but the situation is generally more complex than that. Many cultural historians have redefined what is to be considered evidence by moving beyond both the Marxists and Revisionists, leaving behind the social, political and economic realms in exchange for the evidence contained in the cultural record of the period. The result is an entirely different burden of proof that often bears

Robespierre's place in cultural history is somewhat paradoxical. Cultural historians downplayed the role of individuals as they shifted their focus from historical events to historical forces. This meant that groups within society had greater responsibility for changes which transpired, but it also meant that individual agency was greatly reduced as human behaviour became a component of those larger forces.[2] While this approach provides a greater understanding of the broader changes transpiring, it can obscure the role as well as undermine agency of individual figures such as Robespierre. Yet Robespierre, as before, can be interpreted as an embodiment of certain ideas or values, and hence he remains prominent, not so much for what he did as what he allegedly represented.[3] As the quotes from Furet and Landes indicate, Robespierre represents much more for cultural historians than he did for Revisionists.

One of the leading figures among this new wave of historical analysis is Francois Furet (1927-). Originally a student of the *Annales*, Furet ended this association in the early 1960s for political and intellectual reasons.[4] Combining with Denis Richet (1927-) during this particularly turbulent period in Revolutionary historiography, Furet searched for a middle ground between Revisionism and Marxism in The French Revolution (1965). Consequently, the tropology of Robespierre in this history falls between those of Lefebvre and Palmer. It should be noted at this point that while Richet wrote the section that covered 1792-95, Furet

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few similarities to Revisionist interpretations but is legitimate in its own right. The end product, however, is often imbued with greater symbolic importance than Revisionist representations of the same subject.

[2] This trend was prevalent throughout cultural history, beginning with Francois Furet and carrying on past Lynn Hunt to feminist historians, but it is not unique to cultural history. Marxist historians also minimised individual decision and action when they made the events of the Revolution functions of 'larger forces'.

[3] As has generally been the case in Revolutionary historiography, Saint-Just disappeared into the background as Robespierre's role became increasingly important. Once again, agency is denied.

[4] Furet had been linked with the Marxists in the 1950s and 1960s but severed this association because of growing ideological differences. He also broke with the proponents of 'history from below' at the same time.

was the dominant partner, and it was his vision that shaped the overall character of the work and the representation of Robespierre therein.

Highlighting Robespierre's admirable qualities and political acumen, Richet depicted a statesman who stood out from his colleagues because of his popularity, not his alleged authority on the Committee of Public Safety. Richet saw Robespierre as a pragmatist who acted as part of a group, and as such, had trouble accepting he was responsible for the atrocities of the Terror. The Incorruptible

> did not try to dominate his colleagues [on the Committee], but he enjoyed a moral authority which he owed to his past record as an opponent of ministerial policies and to the fact that he had managed to avoid compromising himself politically ... Far from being doctrinaire, Robespierre was an outstanding tactician, a politician with a remarkable flair for choosing the right moment, distinguishing between practical possibility and mere conjecture, and going along with popular or parliamentary opinion without allowing himself to be outmanoeuvred by either.[5]

This was decidedly different from their contemporary Soboul's tropology, but it was also more positive than most Revisionist accounts prior to Cobbans' work. Robespierre was not above reproach, however, and he possessed a "natural meanness of temperament, which led him to indulge in personal attacks and jealous suspicions."[6] Furthermore, he was plagued by his dream of the Republic of Virtue, and although Robespierre was "a realistic and efficient leader, [he] was to succumb to the same Utopian fantasies in which Saint-Just indulged."[7] In spite of these shortcomings, Richet's image of the Incorruptible was similar in many ways to Thompson's, particularly with respect to his role in serving the Republic. Consequently, Robespierre appears to be more a victim of historical injustice than the tyrant of the Revolution:

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[5] Francois Furet and Denis Richet, French Revolution (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970 (Originally 1965)), 198.

[6] Furet and Richet, French Revolution, 198.

[7] Furet and Richet, French Revolution, 199.

> [r]arely has a man been as wildly misrepresented as Maximilien Robespierre. The animosity of historians has transformed this scholarly man into a mere demagogue, the moderate politician into a blood-thirsty revolutionary, the skilled parliamentarian into a dictator, the fervent deist into a detractor of religion. Even historians well disposed towards the Revolution have failed to do Robespierre justice ... On the other hand those who ... have idolised Robespierre have probably done just as much to propagate the myth of his inhumanity.[8]

Jaurès' 'moderate politician' re-emerges in this history, and with this came an attack on the trinity of the nineteenth-century historians, Mathiez, and the Marxists. Unwilling to accept the Robespierrist 'myth' as it had been constructed, Furet and Richet reconceptulaised Robespierre in a way which avoided what they saw as the excesses of the past. He became important without being singular *or* tyrannical. The greatest significance of this image, however, was that it demonstrated the magnitude of the intellectual break which was occurring in France during the 1960s. Class-based Marxist interpretations were giving way to Revisionist-influenced accounts, and the ramifications were substantial. French historians were abandoning their intellectual heritage, and in the process, driving the final nail into the Marxist coffin. A new age in Revolutionary history was beginning in France, and Furet would take centre-stage in the intellectual world by rejecting much of what came before it.

Furet and Richet parted company over the course of the next decade, and Furet returned to his *Annales* roots with a more deterministic view in Interpreting the French Revolution (1978). Probably Furet's most influential work, this history was a significant departure from The French Revolution and took aim squarely at the traditions of French history by rejecting them outright. The book centred around Furet's belief that the history of the Revolution had suffered at the hands of those who insisted on commemorating it. He argued that the

[8] Furet and Richet, French Revolution, 196.

Revolution was 'over' and that the time had come to study it, rather than memorialise it.[9] In an attempt to right this 'wrong', Furet provided a new interpretative model. Out of this came a new tropology of Robespierre, and while it was distinct from those of contemporary Revisionist and earlier Marxist histories, the image was not entirely new.

Furet abandoned Revisionist 'event' history, instead focusing on larger forces at work. He emphasised an aristocratic plot that fuelled the chaos of 1789, which in turn "created conflict and justified the use of violence"[10] that characterised much of the next five years. More importantly, the plot gave rise to a distinct revolutionary ideology that determined the course of events more so than any individual or group of revolutionaries.[11] The revolutionaries became "unconscious agents of an ideology they did not understand,"[12] meaning they, and therefore Robespierre, could not be held responsible for the events that led to the Terror, or the Terror itself. Terror was a direct consequence and integral part of the revolutionary discourse, according to Furet.[13]

Furet acknowledged that Robespierre was the leader of the Revolutionary Government, but rejected the Revisionist interpretation, claiming that his authority arose from revolutionary ideology, not personal influence on the Committee. Robespierre was able to govern because the "tendency for ideology to slide toward manipulation was inherent in the

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[9] Furet specifically rejected Marxist history of the Revolution "on the ground that it amounted to an endless refighting of revolutionary battles that had become unnecessary since ... the virtually universal acceptance of the revolutionary legacy in France." Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 233.

[10] Francois Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981 (Originally 1978)), 53.

[11] Throughout Revolutionary historiography, there has been a parallel discussion over whether the Terror was inherent in the Revolution or was the product of circumstance. Revisionists argued it arose as a result of foreign and civil war – circumstance, in other words – but Furet rejected this, emphatically stating it was inherent in Revolutionary ideology.

[12] Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 233.

[13] Furet believed the notion of the aristocratic plot, which propelled the revolutionary discourse, existed as far back as 1789, thus predating the events of 1792-93 which led to the Terror. Therefore, circumstances were predated by an ideology that was inherent.

nature of revolutionary power, which was set up and legitimised by opinion alone without there being any rules for expressing that opinion."[14] Carried to a position of power by ideology, Robespierre was the oracle Lamartine had seen him as, but he now served 'ideology' rather than the Jacobins. In the process of forming this tropology, Furet returned to the theme of misrepresentation which appeared in French Revolution, and attacked other interpretations of the Incorruptible which "detest the man" or "make too much of him."[15] According to Furet, the

> misconception common to both schools arises from the fact that they attribute to the psychological traits of the man the historical role into which he was thrust by events and the language he borrowed from them. Robespierre is an immortal figure not because he reigned supreme over the Revolution for a few months, but because he was the mouthpiece of its purest and most tragic discourse.[16]

In spite of these admonitions, Furet nonetheless elevated the importance of Robespierre. This time, however, it was for his role as conduit. He governed because of the power vested in him by that revolutionary ideology, and the influence it had over the general public, but ultimately he was little more than a puppet controlled by an ideology which was bigger than even he was. This definitive role as the mouthpiece of the 'great revolutionary truth' made Robespierre a highly symbolic figure to both the revolutionaries and Furet. It also meant that "Robespierrist metaphysics was ... not a parenthesis in the history of the Revolution, but a type of public authority that the revolutionary phenomenon alone made possible and logical."[17] The entire notion of the Republic of Virtue became an intrinsic element of the discourse of revolutionary ideology. Moreover, the Revolution was in essence a single block

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[14] Furet, Interpreting, 56.

[15] Furet, Interpreting, 61.

[16] Furet, Interpreting, 61. As noted above, this image was not entirely new. Two notable variations had appeared earlier with Michelet's 'serf of the Terror' and Palmer's 'mouthpiece of the Committee', but neither of these had the same symbolic implications as Furet's image.

and should be viewed as such. It should not be divided into phrases of differing character, as Liberals, beginning with de Staël, had done. Furet believed Thermidor marked "not the end of *the* Revolution, but that of its purest form."[18] Because of this, his tropology is reminiscent of Mathiez's; both saw Robespierre's death as the end of the quintessential phase in the Revolution, wherein its true meaning was more clearly manifest. Representing the Incorruptible as the man who voiced the very essence of the Revolution, Furet raised Robespierre to unrivalled prominence, but he also eliminated Robespierrist agency. This trend would be repeated in other cultural histories, thus elevating his symbolic importance at a time when Revisionists were doing exactly the opposite.

Furet's work brought him considerable acclaim, particularly in France.[19] By rejecting the Revisionist approach and the Revolutionary historiography tradition at the same time, Furet introduced new ideas and interpretations, but in the process he also opened the door for a new generation of 'heretics'. From the mid-1970s onward, Revolutionary history became increasingly diverse, giving way to a myriad of interpretations.

Furet's work emphasises discourse, rather than action, but he was not the only historian to take this approach. American Lynn Hunt also uses language as a means to understand the Revolution, but she takes the approach further by analysing visual representations of Revolutionary values.[20] Hunt focused her attention on the 'political culture' of the Revolution, employing non-traditional sources to examine what had previously been seen as

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[17] Furet, Interpreting, 70.

[18] Furet, Interpreting, 72.

[19] Furet was not as popular with leading British and American Revisionist historians, and often engaged in spirited polemics with his opponents. For an example of one of these exchanges, see French Historical Studies, 16, Fall 1990.

[20] Furet's colleague Mona Ozouf also conducted similar research in France. Birthdates for Hunt and the subsequent historians are not available, but all are still publishing.

'peripheral' elements of the Revolution.[21] Her first major foray into cultural history was Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution (1984). In this work, Hunt focused on the 'rhetoric of Revolution', which she believes framed the events and trends of the period.[22] Because of this reconceptualisation, Hunt was unwilling to accept that the revolutionaries fit easily into Marxist or Revisionist interpretations. She argued that "both end up denying the importance of who the revolutionaries were or what they thought they were doing."[23] Hunt suggested the true nature of the revolutionaries could only be determined through an examination of 'political culture', which she defined as the "values, expectations and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions."[24] In this interpretation, politics could not exist in a separate sphere from the culture of which it was part. Robespierre fit into this revolutionary milieu because he embodied the rhetoric that was given form by the emergent political culture.

Hunt's interpretation was shaped by the idea that the Terror "followed logically from the principles enunciated in revolutionary rhetoric."[25] The latter had evolved from the new political culture, and because of this association, she saw the Terror as

> an emanation of virtue for Robespierre and the other radicals, because it was required for the security of the new republic. In a sense, then, it followed logically from the presumptions of revolutionary language. If the Revolution was in the first instance the

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[21] Hunt's use of non-traditional sources such as engravings, novels, and 'political pornography' in this history underscores the distinction between cultural and Revisionist histories.

[22] Her thesis revolves around the concept that popular culture was politicised during the Revolution, which led to the creation of a new political class. Over time, the distinctions that separated the political realm and the cultural realm became less distinct. For example, *sans-culottes* became both a political and social term.

[23] Lynn Avery Hunt, Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1984), 9. By 'revolutionaries', Hunt meant the common man, not the deputy in the Convention or the Committee of Public Safety member. She believed Revisionists were too focused on the latter, conducting 'history from above' as it were, to fully appreciate the role of the *citoyen*. Marxists were too busy trying to demonstrate how the bourgeoisie oppressed the proletariat to understand their role in transforming the political culture of the period.

[24] Hunt, Politics, 10.

[25] Hunt, Politics, 48.

> founding of a new community, then Robespierre's 'government of the revolutionary' was the enforcer of communitiarian discipline ... it was not conceived as the arbiter of conflicting interests ... but rather as the mechanism for ensuring that individual wills were forged into one, single, general, or national will.[26]

The Terror was not simply an attempt by the Robespierrists to secure political predominance, but also an expression of new collective values.[27] Hunt argued that the "government used the Terror to get control of the popular movement, but without the popular movement there would have been no demand for terror in the first place."[28] Although Robespierre led the Revolutionary Government, the Terror was driven by revolutionary rhetoric that was inherent in the Revolution.[29] Hunt's tropology of the Incorruptible was similar to Furet's; Robespierre was important because of the broad force he represented, but not for much else.

Hunt's next major work, The Family Romance of the French Revolution (1992), further redefined Robespierre's role, in addition to demonstrating the growing scope of cultural history. The title comes from a modified Freudian theory in which each aspect of the Revolution takes on the characteristics, and acts out the role, of a particular family member.[30] Hunt believed this approach was useful for highlighting the transition from the paternalism of the *ancien régime* to the emergent fraternalism of the Revolution.[31] Within this context, the downfall of the monarchy gave way to a new era characterised by the dominance of a 'band

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[26] Hunt, Politics, 46-7.

[27] This was similar to Furet's idea that Terror was inherent in revolutionary ideology, but Robespierre was not controlled by ideology in Hunt's version. The distinction between revolutionary ideology and revolutionary rhetoric is what differentiated between the respective images: "Rather than expressing an ideology ... revolutionary politics brought ideology into being." Hunt, Politics, 13.

[28] Hunt, Politics, 225.

[29] Throughout, Hunt implies that political culture existed in a separate sphere from revolutionary politics, but this is difficult to accept, particularly considering the influence Robespierre had during the Year II. Given the parameters of Hunt's work, it is difficult to deny that Robespierre transcended the boundary between the two worlds by both embodying revolutionary rhetoric and leading the revolutionary government.

[30] For example, the Queen was 'the bad mother', the revolutionaries 'the band of brothers', and so on. Hunt states explicitly that this study is not designed to be a Freudian analysis of the Revolution or the revolutionaries.

[31] Hunt took the revolutionary motto of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' literally.

of brothers', what Hunt calls a "new family romance of fraternity."[32] This band of brothers controlled the Revolutionary Government during the Year II, but Hunt asserts that it would have been naïve to expect the cohesion among the brothers to last long. The logical question then was: "If the father was now absent, should one or more of the sons be imagined as taking his place, or would they remain brothers?"[33] In other words, did one of the brothers – Robespierre – try to assume the role of the father, as had been suggested in pre-Revisionist histories? According to Hunt, none of the brothers, including Robespierre, wanted to be fathers, even though the Incorruptible did emerge as one of the more outspoken brothers. Hunt believes the French did not

> mythologise a living leader [during the Revolution] ... Mirabeau, Lafayette, Marat, Danton and Robespierre all passed from the scene without establishing an enduring cult of their own persons. Moreover, they did not successfully represent themselves either collectively or individually as fathers of the country.[34]

Furthermore, Robespierre did not see himself as any sort of father figure, and only stood apart from the brothers because of his belief in the Republic of Virtue. Hunt's contention is that any individual who ruled as a dictator, as had been alleged in the past, would have appeared as the authoritarian father figure.[35] By demonstrating there was no such figure during the rule of the band of brothers, Hunt is able to undermine claims of a Robespierrist dictatorship, and tropologies depicting him thusly.

In discussing Robespierre's fall from grace, Hunt argues that

> [t]hrough the Revolution, politicians of every faction expressed fear of dictatorship. Robespierre fell from power – as one of the twelve equal members of the Committee of

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[32] Lynn Avery Hunt, The Family Romance of the French Revolution (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1992), 53. This phase of the Revolution lasted from 1792 to the middle of 1794.

[33] Hunt, Family, 67.

[34] Hunt, Family, 71.

[35] Hunt centres her argument on an absence of revolutionary iconography or visual imagery such as posters or pamphlets depicting a dominant father figure, and a multitude of images depicting patriotic brothers.

> Public Safety – because he seemed to be setting himself apart from the rest of the deputies. This insistence of maintaining what Freud called 'the original democratic equality' of each member of the tribe went hand in hand with the radicalism of the French Revolution. All forms of distinction were suspect, as were all forms of power modelled on patriarchy. If fraternity was to be the model for a government based on equality and popular sovereignty, then any suggestion of a father figure was problematic.[36]

Robespierre may not have wished to be a father figure, but his belief in the Republic of Virtue made him different from his brothers; they in turn saw this passion as an attempt by Robespierre to recreate himself as a father figure. The brothers' perception that Robespierre was trying to undermine their collective authority ultimately led to the events of Thermidor,[37] and the collapse of revolutionary fraternity.

In this history, Robespierre was responsible for enforcing the political culture of the Revolution, but it was the 'larger forces' that made Robespierre one of the brothers. The term 'brothers' was, in turn, significant because it implied an equality among men. This equality did not extend to women, however, who were excluded from both the politics of the period and the public sphere by these men. While this issue was not foremost among Hunt's concerns, it had proven to be central in feminist Revolutionary history written in the decade prior to this work's publication. Notwithstanding, Hunt's metaphor of the revolutionary brotherhood supports feminist claims that revolutionary women had been oppressed by a male-dominated Jacobin power structure. These arguments originated in feminist interpretations of the Revolution, but they were also invested with another dimension which was reminiscent of Marxist history – the image of the tyrant.

Revolutionary history had generally been a male preserve prior to the Revisionist movement, but things were to change rather drastically in the 1970s. As mentioned above,

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[36] Hunt, Family, 73.

[37] A father figure remained *in absentia* until a new patrimony emerged under the auspices of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Lynn Hunt emerged as an outspoken critic of the Revisionists, but even more significantly, the feminist movement of that decade added yet another perspective; this too fell under the general umbrella of cultural history. Feminist historians believed the Revolution had a negative impact on women because of the blatant hypocrisy in Revolutionary rhetoric. Seeing parallels between the status of women in the 1790s and 1970s, feminist historians expressed disdain for a Revolution (and a society) which was supposed to bring freedom and equality to France, but only extended the rights of a select few, none of whom were women.

The basis for most feminist Revolutionary histories has been the theory that the Revolution did little to improve the status of women because it was bourgeois, controlled by men who sought to ensure women did not deviate from 'traditional' bourgeois roles. These roles were shaped by Enlightenment philosophy that sought to limit women's influence to the domestic sphere. The tyranny of class once again arose in Revolutionary history, but in this instance, it was women, not the proletariat, who were being oppressed by the bourgeoisie.

Because of a preoccupation with Rousseau and Enlightenment philosophy, feminist historians direct most of their animosity to the men who adopted these ideas – the Jacobins. The latter become the representatives of a greater evil – the oppression of women – but there is also a more specific target in many of these works. Although extensive discussion of Robespierre is rare, his role as the voice of the Jacobins and his 'fanatical adherence' to Rousseauean doctrine makes Robespierre the most important symbol for the repression of women.[38] The tropology of the tyrant has not died and is in fact very much alive, although somewhat elusive, in feminist Revolutionary history.[39]

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[38] Although these histories are somewhat less deterministic than those of Furet and Hunt, they generally fail to differentiate between the policies of Robespierre, the Committee of Public Safety, and the Jacobins. In addition, most devote little attention to the crucial period of the Year II, barely discussing the Terror and focusing their attention on two speeches by Amar (of the Committee of General Security) and the deputy Chaumette, who suggested women "did not have the moral and physical strength for politics because nature destined them for functions within the family." Ruth Graham, "Loaves and Liberty: Women in the French Revolution", in Becoming Visible, eds. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 248.

Joan Landes was likely the most vocal proponent of the bourgeois male oppressor theory.[40] Landes saw the Revolution as a struggle for women to gain access to the public sphere,[41] and in Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (1988) she frames subsequent discussion of women's roles in the Revolution with this idea. Landes believed that the Republic was "constructed against women, not just without them,"[42] noting that the Revolution was characterised by "a specific, highly gendered bourgeois male discourse that depended on women's domesticity and the silencing of 'public' women."[43] Women were intentionally excluded from the new Republic because of its inherently masculine, bourgeois nature. It was Rousseau's vision of separate spheres for men and women,[44] according to Landes, which was responsible for 'banishing' women to the domestic sphere. She argued that an idealised image of the 'virtuous republican woman'[45] – or more correctly, the virtuous republican mother – permeated Jacobin philosophy and politics. While this characterisation was accurate in and of itself, Landes took it to the next level by arguing

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[39] Hunt rejected the idea that Robespierre functioned as a dictator, but she did not explicitly address the issue of whether he was a tyrant. She did, however, believe he functioned as part of a collective rather than an individual figure, thus implicitly repudiating this tropology.

[40] The idea of a distinct bourgeoisie, upon which this argument is based, had been undermined since the 1960s as discussed in Chapter 4, thus leaving a hole in Landes' argument.

[41] By 'public sphere', Landes and other feminist historians meant those areas, both spatial and political, outside the home.

[42] Joan Landes, Women and the Public Sphere of the French Revolution (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 12.

[43] Landes, Public Sphere, 2.

[44] According to feminists, Rousseau's ideas that women's roles were limited to that of the nurturing mother were adopted by the bourgeoisie.

[45] This woman was to be highly moral and chaste, but even more than this, silent and obedient. There was also a strong belief among the middle and upper classes at this time that it was 'unnatural' for women to be involved in politics, as this was a male sphere of influence.

that this image was constructed as part of a bourgeois male conspiracy to exclude women from the public sphere.[46]

Feminist historians generally conceded that the treatment of women prior to 1793 was acceptable, although not commendable. Things changed, however, when the Jacobins came to power in the Spring of 1793. In 'French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man': Olympe de Gouge's Declarations,' Joan Wallach Scott stated that "[l]ess brilliantly than Rousseau, but no less clearly, the Jacobin politicians set forth the terms of their new social order ... [invoking] nature as the origin of both liberty and sexual difference."[47] The Jacobins adapted Rousseauean principles for their own purposes; consequently, Jacobin politics were characterised by the "authoritarianism of Rousseauean doctrines of the general will."[48] This meant the independence of women was subordinated to the general will, which cast them in the role of republican mothers.[49] Robespierre, perceived as the man most responsible for Jacobin interpretation of the general will, was thus responsible for oppressing women.

In this latest incarnation of Revolutionary history, Robespierre re-emerges in the role of the tyrant, or at least the leading representative of an emerging tyranny. Because he is viewed mostly as a symbol of a broad underlining force, Robespierre is seldom discussed directly in much detail, nor has this element of his image been integrated with other, older

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[46] There was a deliberate and concerted attempt on the part of the Convention to limit womens' involvement in the political process, but it was not the conspiracy to oppress women that feminist historians saw it as. The Jacobins were concerned that women were more susceptible to being corrupted by counter-revolutionary forces during the Year II. Women were also playing an increasingly vocal part in the demonstrations and food riots that were plaguing the capital. Thus, all actions and legislation passed by the Convention were overt, rather than covert.

[47] Joan Wallach Scott, "French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man': Olympe de Gouge's Declarations," History Workshop 28 (Autumn 1989) 3.

[48] Scott, "French Feminists," 15.

[49] Rousseau's desire to indoctrinate French society with the benefits of breast-feeding was represented in various revolutionary images, particularly after war was declared in 1792. He believed that breast-feeding was essential to provide a nurturing foundation of strong civic virtues. Graham also suggested that womens' roles in society were limited by "prevalent male attitudes toward the 'unnaturalness' of women in politics or fear of their manipulation by counterrevolutionary forces." Graham, "Loaves," 247.

representations. Gender history is in its early stages, and it seems likely that as study takes on more depth, a one-dimensional image will become more complex.

Some questions have already been raised, however, about this tropology. In 'Loaves and Liberty: Women in the French Revolution', Ruth Graham, for example, ponders whether steps taken by the Montagnards against womens' political clubs in Paris were actually a product of Rousseauean beliefs.[50] Graham sees Montagnard 'repression' as driven by circumstance and as part of a broader drive by the Convention to reassert control over the *sans-culottes* and Revolutionary Crowd.[51] R.B. Rose accepts that Jacobins did believe in gender spheres, but argues that this was nothing new, implicitly raising questions of historical anachronism. He also points to a series of reforms – divorce legislation and abolition of primogeniture – which were anything but repressive for women.[52] At another level, given previous rejection of the interpretation of 'bourgeois Revolution', tying gender to class tyranny appears highly problematic.[53]

What appears most obvious in all of this is the appeal of Robespierre for his symbolic value. Whether discussion turns to gender relations or the emergence of democracy, Robespierre remains central. Cultural historians made Robespierre the voice, the agent, the representative, of ideology, rhetoric, and oppression respectively, but they did not portray

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[50] It should be noted here that there has been speculation among historians of the Revolution and even Robespierre's biographers as to how strongly he adhered to Rousseauean doctrine, or even how well versed in it he was. Furet notes that Robespierre was not a true follower of Rousseau, but rather used the philosopher's name to further his cause, focusing on the abstract rather than the concrete. Francois Furet, Revolutionary France 1770-1880 (Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell, 1988), 144. Others have claimed his knowledge of Rousseau was limited to the Social Contract.

[51] She further notes that "ideology of the revolutionary authorities who distrusted women's political rights movements derived seemingly from Rousseau, but actually from the facts of their lives: France's small-scale, home-based economy needed middle- and working-class women to contribute their special skills and labour to their families." Graham, "Loaves," 252.

[52] R.B. Rose, "Feminism, Women and the French Revolution," Historical Reflections 21, 1 (1995), 187-205.

[53] The *sans-culottes*, for example, were notorious misogynists and the pretext for closure of a women's Revolutionary club was pitched battles with women fish mongers.

him as a revolutionary. Agency was denied almost without exception, and in the process, Robespierre became a function of the larger forces at work. Throughout all of this, the tropology of Robespierre retained its symbolic importance. Never pedestrian, always larger than life, Robespierre's singular connection to Revolutionary history remained sacrosanct.[54] His symbolic appeal is strongest when interpretation is at its most general and causal explanations at their most simple, but the opposite also holds true. As Revolutionary historiography acquires depth and complexity, the symbolic power of Robespierre seems to wane, at least on certain fronts. As new interpretations and new perspectives develop, however, it will most likely be revived. To paraphrase Thompson, Robespierre lived through, and was central to, so much of the most turbulent phase of the Revolution that it is unrealistic to believe that he will ever completely free of symbolic importance. Only time will tell what tropologies lie ahead.

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[54] In the last decade, there have been a number of developments in Revolutionary history. Postmodernism, as well as the symbolic importance of language and the ever-present influences of Furet, have each shaped the debate in their own way. As a result, the history of the Revolution bears many similarities to a new galaxy – it is constantly expanding outward, and it is difficult to predict exactly how this growth will manifest itself. For more on these issues, which are necessarily beyond the scope of this paper, see Jack R. Censer, "Social Twists and Linguistic Turns: Revolutionary Historiography a Decade after the Bicentennial," French Historical Studies 22, 1 (Winter 1999) 139-67.

Conclusions

The great historians of the classical Revolutionary historiographical tradition shared a belief that the Revolution had been a "period of unique importance in French history,"[1] and it is difficult to deny this. Patrick Hutton supports this assertion by arguing that in the two centuries since the Revolution,

> its leading events and personalities remained objects of veneration, places of memory in the deep conceptual structure through which the terms of French politics have been defined and would continue to be tacitly understood.[2]

Within this context, highly idealised tropologies of Robespierre were created. Rigney notes that the way historians represent an event or individual "play[s] an important rhetorical role in endorsing certain actions or programmes."[3] Historians constructed an image of Robespierre which was directly linked to their views of the Revolution, and in the process invested the Incorruptible with a symbolic importance greater than his literal importance in the Revolutionary context. While such representations were politically expeditious, other revolutionaries were overwhelmed by these idealised images. One individual who was constantly overshadowed was Saint-Just. Upon closer examination of Revolutionary historiography, his role as Robespierre's avenging angel is less certain.

Although images of Robespierre have changed considerably since the Revolution, his symbolic importance has remained an integral element of Revolutionary history. His role as the voice of the Committee of Public Safety made him central to the history of the period, and as a result, a cultural component of the French collective consciousness, a figure who

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[1] Hampson in Best, "French Revolution," 222.

[2] Hutton, "Memory," 57.

[3] Rigney, Rhetoric, 174.

evoked specific visual images that were shaped by contemporary politics. As the pendulum of French politics swung from one extreme to the other, so too did the tropologies of Robespierre. The reality that these images were idealised was underscored by the very fact that they were transformed to line up with the prevailing political winds in France. For much of the last two centuries, he was the 'representative man', embodying everything spectacular about the Revolution, but also everything horrific. But he never represented only one thing; the images were far from static.

Negative tropologies of Robespierre developed while his blood was still fresh on the cobblestones. The link between Revolutionary history and contemporary politics was forged in the volatile climate of the Restoration, when Robespierre came to represent the despotic elements from which liberals sought to distance themselves. In the battle against royal despotism and Catholic theocracy, liberal historians like Thiers made Robespierre a representative of tyranny and religious fanaticism. Hence he became the 'blood-thirsty prophet,' a man as extreme and conspiratorial as contemporary Jesuits were alleged to be. As royal absolutism and theocracy gave way to industrialisation, Romanticism, and the social question, the tropology evolved. The religious fanatic became the flawed dreamer as Robespierre came to embody characteristics attributed by their detractors to the utopian socialists; Lamartine's image typified this transition. The symbiotic relationship between Saint-Just and Robespierre developed during this era, and while the former took on an added dimension as Robespierre's role became less certain, Saint-Just remained little more than Robespierre's evil alter-ego.

As the Restoration came to an end, the image of Robespierre changed again, becoming less negative but not entirely positive, either. The Franco-Prussian War did little to foster the image of the social democrat, however, and as republicanism became official orthodoxy,

Robespierre came to represent something else. Aulard devoted himself to a narrow vision of the Revolution which fulfilled the requirements of the State; on his search for a national hero, he discovered Danton, who was less closely tied to social revolution. In sharp contrast to Danton's patriotism, Robespierre appeared as a hypocrite, responsible for social division within France. During this period, socialists also came to realise the value of Revolutionary history, and rejected the republican tropology of the Incorruptible, believing Robespierre embodied the ideals of a democratic socialist republic. Jaurès was the first to construct such an image. He saw distinct parallels between his position and that of Robespierre; they were both trying to unite the Left while at the same time battling extremists. Consequently, Jaurès saw Robespierre as a pragmatist and a patriot, rather than a fanatic or a dreamer. Mathiez's socialism clashed with Aulard's republicanism, partly because of personal animosity but also because of what the latter represented. Robespierre was rehabilitated and refashioned into the champion of the people, but the image was one of the most idealised portraits to date. Ultimately, however, Mathiez's demi-god was too perfect to be real.

Thereafter, Robespierre lost his heroic status as Marxism slowly gained ascendancy among French historians. The ripple effect of the Russian Revolution and continued social strife in France pushed Revolutionary history in a more radical direction, and tropologies of Robespierre followed. The Incorruptible came to represent the tyranny of the bourgeoisie for a generation advocating proletarian revolution. Robespierre had gone from villain, to hero, to villain once again. The process was, however, gradual. Although he worked within the Marxist model of historical evolution, Lefebvre, like Jaurès, saw Robespierre as the republican defender who steered France through the troubled waters of the Terror. Lefebvre's moderation however was replaced by Guérin's doctrinaire approach, and Robespierre became the class oppressor. Guérin returned to the tropology of the tyrant little more than a decade

after Mathiez died, demonstrating the overarching symbolic importance attached to Robespierre as a revolutionary figure. Although Soboul added to this representation, Marxism did not survive the intellectual upheaval of the late 1960s.

As Marxism gave way to Revisionism, new avenues of investigation were opened and old sources re-examined, presenting a more complex portrayal of the Revolution and the revolutionaries. Revolutionary history was also no longer exclusively French, and as a result, less directly tied to French domestic politics. Seizing this opportunity, Revisionists challenged the Marxist class-based representation of Robespierre. Choosing a middle ground between Mathiez and Marxism, Revisionists recreated Robespierre as a figurehead in the Revolutionary Government. Thompson, for example, highlighted Robespierre's role as the voice of the Committee, challenging representations of Robespierre as the dictator. Throughout Revisionist history, the Incorruptible's responsibility for the excesses of the Year II was mitigated. Thus Revisionists reduced the evil connotations associated with Robespierre, and allowed Saint-Just to be part of the larger Revolutionary picture. Consequently, Saint-Just appeared as more vicious than Robespierre, but also more of a political puritan. Saint-Just was redefined as the tyrant living in a fantasy world, driven by circumstance and becoming more extreme with every passing month. He fought for Virtue in a moral vacuum, using violence where Robespierre used ideology. Most significantly, Revisionist history made Robespierre one figure among many, and not the symbol of all that was important in the Revolution.

Cultural historians rejected both the Revisionist concept of event history and the class-based interpretation of Marxist histories. They shifted their focus to larger forces, rather than individuals. As a result, images of Robespierre once again became decidedly tropological as he became the embodiment of principles and ideas. Robespierre functioned as the mouthpiece of revolutionary ideology in Furet's history, ensuring his importance in the

Revolutionary context, but undermining his agency. Hunt's discussion of Robespierre as one of the revolutionary brothers emphasised his symbolic importance, but did little to explain his political actions. This was also the case with feminist histories, which took the image of Robespierre back to its roots by recasting him in the role of the tyrant. While Robespierre may have been a champion of male political democracy, he was also the leader of a gender-oriented despotism which drove women from the public sphere. Cultural historians thus followed a well-trodden path in idealising Robespierre.

As noted in the Introduction, Ann Rigney's work is useful for framing the discussion of Robespierrist imagery. Rigney underscores the significance of the 'representative man' when she notes that historians were trying to "give an individual face" to particular aspects of the Revolution.[4] Furthermore, she states that

> [t]he importance of individualisation and 'human interest' suggests that it is not enough to see the different representations of Robespierre ... exclusively in terms of their signifying function – who or what he 'stands for' in the public eye. The different narrative representations should also be considered in terms of their rhetorical, seductive function.[5]

By this, Rigney meant that each representation of Robespierre had a specific purpose for historians, and that purpose was highly political. Robespierre played a central role in Revolutionary history because he had an inherent symbolic value. This symbolic importance arose from the fact that Robespierre was the revolutionary who remained at, or near, the centre of events for the longest time and in the most spectacular of fashions. Robespierre's connection to the Terror, viewed as the most violent phase of the Revolution, but also the phase in which social and political revolutions co-existed, has shaped all future

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[4] Rigney, "Icon," 119.

[5] Rigney, "Icon," 119.

representations. Because of his role in what has often been considered the defining phase of the Revolution, Robespierre's importance has lasted for over two centuries. Unfortunately, the complex events of this period give rise to conflicting representations of the Incorruptible. Robespierre's involvement in the Terror could be interpreted many different ways, and thus led to histories that emphasised, or more correctly idealised, certain attributes that favoured a particular political agenda.

While historians did not create Robespierre's symbolic importance, they undoubtedly used and shaped it. This process was heavily influenced by contemporary politics, and thus this thesis traces both Revolutionary history for the last two hundred years, and the course of French domestic politics for the same period. During that time, Revolutionary history has been used to attack governments as well as to defend them, and in each instance, Robespierre has been used as a weapon in such battles. Robespierre has generally been discussed more in terms of what he allegedly represented than what he actually did, however. The process of making Robespierre representative of a particular idea, whether it was tyranny, social democracy, or any other concept, is somewhat problematic because it is essentially static. Robespierre, however, evolved over time, as Rudé and others suggested; his politics were determined as much by circumstance as they were by ideology. Idealised images of Robespierre tend to ignore the fact that Robespierre was not the same person in 1794 that he was in 1789.

Two tropologies stand out above the others, although they appear in varied forms. The first was the image of the tyrant, the second that of the flawed politician. Thiers, Mignet, Taine, Guérin, Soboul and feminist historians all presented a portrait of Robespierre as the tyrant, oppressing the people and thirsting for blood (at least in earlier representations). Carlyle, Michelet, Lamartine, Palmer and Hampson highlighted the flawed dreamer, the man

who wanted to serve his country but was not able. These two images emphasise Robespierre's symbolic importance in Revolutionary history by illustrating the flexibility that was inherent in each. For conservatives, the image of the tyrant could be used as a warning against radical political or social change. Conversely, for Marxists or feminists Robespierre could be depicted as an agent of social or gender oppression. The image of the flawed politician fits most comfortably with those in a centrist position – not opposed to reform, but wary of the pursuit of a utopia based on abstract principles. Ultimately, both of these tropologies share commonalties. The most apparent of these is the moniker given to Robespierre – 'the Incorruptible'. It generally refers to Robespierre as a man of principle, but in a negative sense, it was associated with fanaticism, zealotry, and an idealism that bordered on inhumane. Positively, it was associated with honesty, morality, and genuine concern. Regardless of which representation dominates, Robespierre appears as a figure who struggled to put ideals into practice. Herein lies the key to much of the interest he has generated among historians. Although they have not agreed on what Robespierre stood for, historians have concurred that he did represent something significant. Tropologies of Robespierre will continue to evolve alongside Revolutionary history, but regardless of what directions the latter proceeds in, it seems increasingly less likely that Robespierre will ever represent every aspect of the Revolution.

Throughout this paper, the question of agency has been an underlying theme. William Jewett defines historical agency as "the power or obligation of individuals and collectives to act in making their own history."[6] The tendency for historians to idealise Robespierre had denied the Incorruptible, but also Saint-Just, the opportunity to do just that. Historians have focused on what Robespierre represented in order to realise political goals. As a result,

[6] William Jewett, "The *Fall of Robespierre* and the Sublime Machinery of Agency," ELH 63 (1996), 423.

idealised tropologies of Robespierre as the 'representative man' dominated Revolutionary history, but devote little attention to how he attempted to put his ideals into practice. This denied agency on a very basic level, ignoring the difficult, and at times compromising, decisions Robespierre had to make. Furthermore, these representations of Robespierre deny agency to Saint-Just by accepting the stereotype of Saint-Just as Robespierre's executioner. These were not the only ones guilty of minimising the revolutionaries' agency however. Histories that focus on the 'larger forces at work' also denied agency by ignoring 'smaller' questions of whether Robespierre made good or bad decisions given his objectives. Agency for Robespierre and Saint-Just remained a chimera throughout much of Revolutionary history, just as the Republic of Virtue had been.[7]

One of the issues that have been constant throughout Revolutionary historiography is Robespierre's responsibility for the dictatorship of the Year II and the executions that took place during the Terror. Contrary to the tropologies of earlier histories, Robespierre's actions during the Revolution are not certain by any means. New evidence suggests that he did not determine the policies of the Committee of Public Safety or direct its actions, nor was he responsible for the deaths of thousands. Although the Committee did act as a wartime dictatorship, it acted collectively, with no single leader. It seems more likely that Robespierre's prominence in the Revolutionary context arose from his role as the leading spokesman for the Committee, defending its decisions, policies, and actions to the Convention. Robespierre used this platform to introduce a number of his ideas about a

[7] Discussions of agency lead to questions about Robespierre's literal, as opposed to figurative, role during the Revolution, and while this was not the focal point of this thesis, it is possible to make some general arguments concerning these issues. Throughout, negative Robespierrist imagery hinges on the idea that Robespierre was a tyrant, but more importantly, that he served as a dictator during the Year II. Revisionist history goes a long way towards repudiating this claim, but one of the most important assertions to the contrary comes from Saint-Just. During a Committee meeting on 4-5 Thermidor Year II, he stated that "none but the agents of the enemy could represent Robespierre as a dictator, for neither the army, the finances, nor the administration depended on him." (Mathiez, Revolution, 502.) Robespierre functioned as a component of the Jacobin dictatorship, but nothing

utopian 'Republic of Virtue', but claims that he sought to establish a personal dictatorship seem to have little basis in fact. Undeniably, Robespierre attracted more attention than any other Committee member because of his role as spokesman, but it seems questionable that this should translate into responsibility for the Terror. While the Robespierrist nature of the dictatorship seemed to be beyond question during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Revisionist histories have undermined these interpretations by re-examining the evidence. Robespierre's role was no longer so certain; what had previously been portrayed as a Robespierrist dictatorship was becoming a Jacobin dictatorship. Part of this was also the result of the emergence of new tropologies of Saint-Just.

As noted, tropologies of Robespierre have obscured other revolutionaries, particularly his associate Saint-Just. Saint-Just had earned a reputation as a firebrand even before he arrived in Paris,[8] but it was his work on the Committee of Public Safety that would earn him notoriety in Revolutionary historiography. Saint-Just's convictions and temperament likely influenced the course of the Terror, but without extensive research that is beyond the scope of this paper, it is difficult to determine the extent of this influence or say with any certainty exactly what Saint-Just's role on the Committee was. Nonetheless, a growing body of evidence points to the possibility that Saint-Just was more extreme than Robespierre in many regards, and calls many of the existing tropologies of the Incorruptible as the tyrant into question. These new interpretations are the first steps towards re-establishing agency.

As the burden of proof has evolved along with the discipline itself, the baseless statements of the early nineteenth century seem to have faded into the distance. Ideology and doctrinal

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more. There is considerable evidence to support this assertion for those who seek it out. Nonetheless, it was the perception of Robespierre the dictator and tyrant that influenced the majority of future representations.

[8] An associate in Paris had commented on Saint-Just' s "arrogant self-confidence ... his total conviction of his own vocation for leadership; the melodramatic gesturing and Roman posturing, together with the conviction that, at the bottom what mattered was character, and that he had it." Hampson, Saint-Just, 34.

interpretations seem to have given way to a 'pragmatic' approach to Revolutionary history in recent decades, and evidence seems to be the key to credibility among these historians. The results of these changes, however, are not what one might expect. The demise of the Marxist orthodoxy gave rise to a plethora of new interpretations, and in the process, destroyed the certainties about Robespierre that had characterised the historical record in the previous one hundred and fifty years. Certainty gives way to uncertainty, and as it continues to do so, the burden of proof continues to shift. Robespierre will become less important for some historians and more for others, thus underlining the inescapable truth noted in the beginning of this paper – history is forever an interpretation.

Robespierre and Saint-Just fell victim to the National Razor on 28 July 1794. They would be forever linked in Revolutionary history from this point onwards, but Robespierre's symbolic importance will ensure he always remains the more notable, and hence the more idealised, of the two. In the highly charged world of Revolutionary history, the reality is that Robespierre will always have more to offer historians who are searching for the representative man.

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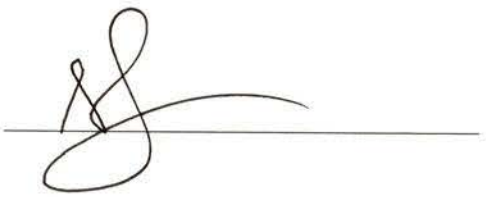
Author 

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