
H-France Review Vol. 12 (August 2012), No. 113

Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012. xx + 299 pp. \$40 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-11811-7.

Review by Noah Shusterman, Temple University.

Writing a biography of Maximilien Robespierre is a bit like roasting a chicken: a seemingly straightforward task that turns out to be quite tricky to do right. Roast until the breast is cooked, and the dark meat remains raw; roast until the dark meat is cooked, and the breast dries out. So, too, with Robespierre--there is not one Robespierre to explain, but two. There is the idealistic deputy of the Estates-General and the Constituent Assembly who fought for equality and civil liberties and against the death penalty, and there is the Robespierre of Year II who presided over the Committee of Public Safety during the Reign of Terror, when political opposition and moral failure were enough to send someone to the guillotine. Explaining either Robespierre is challenge enough, explaining both far harder.

None of this has stopped people from roasting chickens, nor has it stopped historians from writing biographies of Maximilien Robespierre. After all, the temptations--to focus now only on Robespierre--are many. He came out of nowhere in 1789 and showed an ability to remain in the center of events until the day he died. He exercised an influence on events that seems, in retrospect, far out of proportion to the abilities he possessed. Still, the challenge to say something new is daunting. The countless biographies of Robespierre that already exist are only the tip of the iceberg. Any history of the Revolution has its own interpretation of Robespierre and the role he played.

Peter McPhee's *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* is the latest work to take up the challenge. It is a more than worthy entrant, meticulously researched, quite readable, and, at 234 pages of text, surprisingly brief. It lacks--thankfully--many of the sorts of claims that have marred other studies of Robespierre. There is no explanatory over-reliance on an emotional development gone wrong, no preternatural ability to incarnate Revolutionary ideology. This is, rather, the story of a "young revolutionary who... found himself involved with others in remaking a world in a particular direction and against massive odds" (p. 231) and who possessed "both a capacity to articulate the overarching goals of the Revolution and an adroit pragmatism" (p. 206).

Several aspects of McPhee's interpretation are worth pointing out. Along with McPhee's sympathetic portrait of Robespierre (discussed below), McPhee focuses more than most on Robespierre's background and upbringing, devoting the first sixty pages of the book to Robespierre's life before 1789. Having that much to say about Robespierre's first thirty-one years is not an easy task. There are only two accounts of his early years, from the Abbé Proyart and from Charlotte Robespierre, which McPhee mines as best he can, while noting their limitations. He supplements those sources with a description of the setting in which Robespierre grew up: the heavily Catholic city of Arras; his neighborhood there, with its large numbers of people living hand-to-mouth, its vagrancy and prostitution; the areas where his relatives lived; his transition from the "familiar, intimate world dominated by women" in which he grew up to the "thoroughly masculine" world of Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris (p. 12). It is hard not to appreciate the research that went into this portion of the book, even if it does not make for riveting

reading and the conclusions McPhee makes remain speculative.

Things start to pick up during McPhee's discussion of Robespierre's pre-1789 legal career. There, McPhee is able to put Robespierre into the milieu of Arras' legal and intellectual life, detailing some of his cases and some of the problems he faced, as Robespierre was "torn between need for acceptance in a town he loved and a growing irritation at its entrenched conservatism" (p. 60). McPhee shows a young man who had already articulated two of his key principles: "the poor are deserving of justice in an unjust world; and there should be democratic representation" (p. 56). Arguing against most accounts of Robespierre's life before 1789, McPhee claims it was "far from unremarkable" and had "instilled in Maximilien Robespierre a steely resilience and ambition" (p. 60).

The continued relevance of Robespierre's upbringing comes out in several ways during McPhee's discussion of the Revolution. First, McPhee stresses how ready Robespierre was for 1789. He arrived at Versailles an unknown, yes, but he was already battle-tested by his struggles with the Artois elites. He knew Paris already, if not Versailles. He "possessed a quite extraordinary will, born of thirty years of standing up to the sniggerers and the sanctimonious" (p. 71). Despite his "thin skin" (p. 61), Robespierre was able to handle the barbs of the satirical and right-wing presses. As McPhee points out, by the end of the Constituent Assembly, Robespierre was a popular favorite (making his rivals "livid with jealousy") and "the personification of unequivocal commitment to the principles of 1789" (p. 96).

McPhee describes Robespierre's 1791 return to his native Artois as both a "chastening and instructive experience" (p. 109) and "a turning point in his life, confronting him with the hard realities of provincial responses to the Revolution and ultimately convincing him of his own future priorities" (p. 98). Robespierre saw that discontent with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy had turned people against the Revolution and that the edicts of August 1789 had not resolved the issues most important to the rural population (p. 109). He saw too how unprepared the region was for war, which led to his opposition to the "bellicose noises" (p. 110) the Girondins were making in the winter of 1791-1792, even though that opposition would make him into an "object of scorn" (p. 116). Robespierre's ties with his native Artois did diminish as the Revolution progressed. He came to see himself as a Parisian and national politician instead of an Artesian one, and stopped paying attention to rural issues (pp. 132, 134). Still, even at the height of The Terror, Robespierre had to deal with issues going on in his hometown, as well as the pressures of maintaining his relationships with his sister, Charlotte, and with his friends, the Buissarts (pp. 195, 208). McPhee also stresses the importance of Robespierre's studies of the ancient world in shaping his political worldview. His belief in the importance of virtue (pp. 17-18, 172), his opposition to excessive inequality (p. 151), the importance of public participation in politics (p. 152), and his views on education (p. 162), according to McPhee, all grew out of his studies of ancient Sparta and the Roman Republic. McPhee also links Robespierre's tendency to see events in terms of plots and conspiracies to his reading of Cicero and his understanding of the Catiline conspiracy (pp. 172, 185).

McPhee is generally convincing in stressing the importance of Robespierre's background and its continuous relevance during the Revolution. If anything, there are times when it seems that this aspect of McPhee's interpretation of Robespierre would have been better served as the centerpiece of its own study. As it stands, McPhee has a tendency to cram too many details into too little space, and some events of the Revolution can lack drama. The buildup to the Girondins' expulsion from the Convention is oddly anticlimactic, as is the discussion of the downfall of Hebert and his followers. The drama does pick up significantly at several points, particularly when McPhee is discussing Robespierre's role in Danton and Desmoulin's downfall, and in McPhee's riveting account of the days of 8-10 Thermidor.

Those who take the most issue with McPhee's book, though, will be those who find it too apologetic. McPhee's Robespierre is a man led by his principles, who refuses to sacrifice the ideals of 1789, and who sacrifices everything for a cause he believes in. While this is not as full-throated a defense of

Robespierre as those of Albert Mathiez or Ernest Hamel, and there is no argument (as with Slavoj Žižek) for the continued relevancy of Robespierre's politics, McPhee still makes clear that much of his motivation for writing the book was that "scholars continue to make wildly erroneous statements about Robespierre." Chief among these is the blame given to Robespierre for the Terror, which was "not his work, but a regime of intimidation and control supported by the National Convention and 'patriots' across the country" (p. 229).

Some parts of this interpretation are quite plausible and, as McPhee points out, too often forgotten. It is hard to argue with McPhee's contention that the overthrow of Robespierre was "a stampede by guilty men" (p. 217) who proceeded to make Robespierre into a "scapegoat" for the Terror (pp. 212, 217). Many of the worst of the Terror's atrocities were committed by men who survived Thermidor. Not everyone will agree with McPhee's interpretation of the Terror itself, which he sees not as an inevitable result of any ideology (let alone Robespierre's), but as the result of "haphazard" emergency measures meant to "defeat the invading armies and counter-revolution in all its guises, to meet the continuing grievances of urban and rural people, and to control the actions of militants who claimed to represent the people's will" (p. 165). Still, this is a version of the "thesis of circumstances" and as such has always had its defenders and its detractors.

It is with his interpretation of the role that Robespierre played once the Terror began that McPhee will most challenge readers. McPhee does not try to minimize Robespierre's influence on the Committee of Public Safety, as Palmer did; he notes that "Robespierre's standing on the Committee was such that he exerted a powerful overall sense of purpose and direction. There were many specific matters on which he did not have his way, but the key political statements were his" (p. 164). McPhee also notes that Robespierre pressured a "reluctant Convention" to pass the law of 22 Prairial, and acknowledges his role in overseeing the Committee of Public Safety's police force (pp. 192, 212).

These acts are more than balanced out, though, by McPhee's focus on Robespierre's other actions during the Terror. "For Robespierre and republican politicians and officials across the country, every day was a swirl of uncertainty, confusion and fear, matched only by resolve and hard work" (p. 180). When other Jacobins called for the trial and execution of supporters of the Girondins, Robespierre "acted to mitigate the consequences" (p. 171). As for his former allies and friends, Danton and Desmoulins, both victims of the Terror, McPhee writes that their move toward "indulgence" was "courageous and humane, but stunningly inept, since the crisis was plainly far from over" (p. 180). Still, "Robespierre remained hesitant" to agree to their executions, while Collot d'Herbois and Billaud-Varennes were "unrelenting" (p. 190). Although Robespierre came to accept the necessity of capital punishment, "he was personally repelled by violence and horrified by the behavior of Carrier, Fouché and others," (p. 193) "never seems to have lost a squeamishness about physical violence; indeed, he avoided it repeatedly," and there was "no evidence that he attended guillotings" (p. 194) and he even intervened to protect people from the guillotine (p. 213). By June 1794, Robespierre was "nauseated... from illness and despair" (p. 205). McPhee even speculates ("we cannot know with certainty...") that the increased pace of executions during the height of The Terror was "unleashed to discredit him" (p. 212).

McPhee does not defend all the choices Robespierre made (Robespierre's prominent role in the Festival of the Supreme Being, for instance, was a "serious miscalculation" [p. 199]). McPhee tends instead to defend Robespierre himself, as when he writes that "it may well be that Robespierre's decision to sacrifice his health for the Revolution through relentless commitment to work meant that periods of great stress like the winter of 1793-94 made him susceptible to bouts of anaemia and a psychosomatic disorder." As a result, "his personal and tactical judgment, once so acute, seems to have deserted him. From March, his capacity for leadership was at odds with his status and respect" (pp. 188-189).

This, then, is how McPhee roasts his chicken: it is not that Robespierre's ideals changed, or even that the

circumstances of the Revolution forced Robespierre to shift approaches. It is, rather, that Robespierre was "at the end of his physical and mental capacities" (p. 203) and "in the early summer of 1794 his tactical judgment deserted him" (p. 206). When the Battle of Fleurus finally presented "the signal... that the crisis was almost over," Robespierre was too exhausted to see that "a Republic safe for virtuous citizens could be achieved by encouragement rather than intimidation," and Robespierre's failure to notice that would "prove fatal" (p. 206). The tragedy of McPhee's story is not the tragedy of the Terror's victims, or even the tragedy of a Revolution gone astray; it is, rather, the tragedy of "the toll that the personal sacrifice of mental and physical health might have taken on the young man" (p. 221).

It will be interesting to see what impact this study has on interpretations of Robespierre. This book should become the standard reference for Robespierre's background and his early revolutionary career. Changing people's views of Robespierre's role in 1793-1794 will be a bigger challenge. Not all readers will be willing to overlook Robespierre's role in the purges of his political opponents, or his failure to act against the representatives on mission (whether or not he was "horrified" by their actions). The question is how much convincing there is left to do. After so many battles already fought over his legacy, one wonders how many people have already made up their minds about Robespierre.

Noah Shusterman
Temple University
noah.shusterman@temple.edu

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172