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Colin Jones, *The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 572 pp. Maps, notes, and bibliography. \$32.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0198715955; \$13.79 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0191025044.

Reply by Colin Jones, Queen Mary University of London.

If someone told me that a fellow historian had written a book presenting the period of Revolutionary Government as “Robespierre’s terror” and Robespierre as a “megalomaniac” and “machine politician,” I would be linking arms with Peter McPhee to launch a withering critique. How disconcerting, then, to find that the recipient of Peter’s attacks is myself and the book in question my latest monograph.

Peter and I discussed “The Robespierre Problem” in a much-watched H-France 2014 videocast.^[1] His comments now seem a continuation of that discussion rather than a review of the book. He devotes roughly three-quarters of his comments to my interpretation of Robespierre, finding my portrait of the man “unconvincing, even tendentious.” *The Fall of Robespierre* does not set out to be a chapter in the biography of an individual, but a history of a day, an event, a *journée*, and a city. It does not seek to paint a portrait, but to depict convulsive collective action across a political landscape. He says some nice things about the book, for which I am grateful; but, losing sight of its rationale, I fear he ends up giving only a poor sense of what it seeks to do. He certainly misunderstands its argument about Robespierre. I think I owe it to my book and its potential readers to offer a reply, and I thank H-France for this opportunity.

While most accounts of the 9 Thermidor *journée* follow Peter in placing Robespierre centre stage, *The Fall of Robespierre* views the day in a “de-centred” way that seeks to open up fundamental questions about revolution, violence, politics, Parisians—and terror. Peter does not mention, for example, the work’s most unusual feature, namely, that it is written as a “day narrative,” told in 24 hourly chunks. I wanted thereby to bring questions of time and timing to the heart of my analysis and to convey the sense that the day’s outcome was highly contingent on what actually happened during it. I conjoin this hour-by-hour pacing with roaming over a wide range of locations across the face of the city. By using a real-time, multi-perspectival approach, I hoped to get a grip on the aims, intentions and actions of all the players on the day, particularly Parisians.

As regards the role of Parisians, Peter comments that “[h]istorians have long known that the fall of the Robespierrists was sealed by the nature of the popular response to their arrest.” But this completely misses the point. Almost to a man or woman, historians have claimed hitherto that Parisians expressed indifference to the fate of Robespierre on 9-10 Thermidor. In my

account, the fall of Robespierre was a triumph for the people of Paris. Mobilised en masse, they showed ardent enthusiasm in overthrowing him.[2]

The same was true of Robespierre's fellow politicians. Peter faults me for not grasping that in the summer of 1794 Robespierre was a "committed democrat struggling with competing visions of the people's will." I thought I did, but importantly I didn't stop at Robespierre. The Convention was full of equally committed democrats facing just that dilemma. Their opinions and actions, as much as Robespierre's, are part of my story. Their growing doubts about Robespierre crystallised into a *prise de conscience* about the need for immediate defensive action following his menacing and provocative speech on 8 Thermidor. Robespierre thought only he could save the republic. Almost the entire political class feared he was posing a threat to its survival. I have tried to find out why that should be.

The Fall of Robespierre tells a story that is much bigger than a single individual—even Robespierre. Yet as the brunt of Peter's critique concerns Robespierre, particularly his involvement in government and his relationship to Terror, it is to Robespierre that I now turn.

Peter claims that I argue that Robespierre "did not actually do or manage anything concrete during the Revolution." I find this surprising (as well as untrue), for I believe he is criticising an approach that I derived from his own excellent biography.[3] In it, he highlighted Robespierre's striking lack of managerial or executive experience prior to his election to the CPS. In researching my book, I sought to see whether that lack of prior experience might still be pertinent in the run up to 9 Thermidor. I discovered that overall it did.

In terms of what Robespierre offered in government, Peter gives us the heroic narrative of Year II, during which Robespierre served on the Committee of Public Safety (CPS): "[Robespierre's] contributions were enormous, from commenting on major legislation in hundreds of speeches to drafting a new Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1793 to being a member of a wartime executive in 1793-94 that, against all the odds, saved a nation from invasion and a revolution from bloody reversal."

No one who was a member of the CPS did nothing, of course. But can we be more precise about his own workload in it? He signed remarkably few CPS decrees. In his year of committee service, over half of the 146 occasions on which he spoke publicly were in the Jacobin Club.[4] In the last month or two, he was speaking almost exclusively in that location: on fifteen occasions between his last two Convention speeches (12 June and 26 July), while absenting himself completely from Convention and CPS alike. Peter faults me for saying that Robespierre was "assiduous" in his attendance at the Club in the period immediately leading up to 9 Thermidor. Between 9 and 26 July, he attended 7 out of a total of 8 meetings—"assiduous" in anyone's book. In the Club, moreover, he overtly attacked his colleagues, with the intention of weakening a government of which he still formed part that was indeed "against all the odds, sav[ing] a nation from invasion and a revolution from bloody reversal."

Peter's heroic narrative thus really does not work for the period studied. Nor do his efforts to explain or excuse Robespierre's extraordinary, antagonistic absenteeism at the end of his life by invoking illness (to which his review devotes two whole paragraphs). Robespierre's illness is Peter's hobby-horse, but it doesn't convince. In February and March 1794, Robespierre really was ill and it was the talk of the town. Yet in Messidor and Thermidor there is no mention

whatever of illness in any Parisian venue, and Robespierre's own words were delphic at best. On 8 Thermidor, his long speech made no mention of illness. Was he too ill to say he was ill? Doubtless, of course, he was in a state of acute nervous agitation. But, as Martyn Lyons showed long ago, which deputy wasn't? [5] Robespierre's "illness" simply won't wash as an explanation for his conduct.

Robespierre's CPS colleagues certainly did not buy into the illness alibi. Their diagnosis of Robespierre's condition in these months was straightforward: he simply did not have his shoulder to the wheel. Indeed, by the end, they thought with some justification that he was trying to blow the wheels off the wagon! The main policies which he sponsored (the Supreme Being, the 22 Prairial law) were divisive within the government committees, as was his creation with Saint-Just and Couthon of a CPS Police Bureau which sought to remove policing of terror from the Committee of General Security (CGS). Ironically, the evidence Peter presents of Robespierre's work in the Bureau confirms his colleagues' doubts about his full engagement. It suggests a man who had lost a proportionate sense of the huge tasks of government.

It is a very long way from the piddling minutiae of the Police Bureau to "Robespierre the Megalomaniac," central figure of "Robespierre's Terror" that Peter claims I also portray. "Megalomaniac" is not my kind of label: retrospective clinical diagnosis of historical figures is never a good idea. In regard to Robespierre's conception of power, I highlight his identification with the people to a degree that he believed he embodied it (very much a standard view) but see this identification as a more defining character trait than Peter, and one which took Robespierre into troublingly narcissistic territory. I do also think Robespierre could be frightening and scary: the evidence is not lacking. But I do not claim that any stage of the period of Revolutionary Government can be characterised as "Robespierre's Terror." My book rejects centring the period of Revolutionary Government as much as 9 Thermidor itself around any one individual. No one owned "the Terror" (a term, moreover, that I specifically reject, as Peter notes, and do not employ in my narrative of the day).

The Fall of Robespierre highlights how Robespierre's colleagues, rather than he, ran government in the period before his removal. It explores how across Year II the implementation of policies, including the deployment of terror, was undertaken by a whole range of other actors too, across the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the municipality down to sectional committees. State-legitimised terror was not a one-man show. But Robespierre was more deeply involved in it than Peter seems willing to allow--and this is a point that needed emphasis.

Terror had been and remained one of Robespierre's specialisms within the CPS. It has long been acknowledged that in his speeches, for example, he wrote the script for terror, providing state violence with moral legitimation. [6] His CPS colleagues were grateful for his efforts in this domain, though they came to worry that Robespierre was going off-piste, and converting his celebrity into a "despotism over public opinion." Contrary to Peter's assertion, I don't argue that Robespierre himself "manufactured" a "cult of celebrity." Celebrity was already out there in the world. [7] But I do contend that Robespierre was adept in the processes of celebrity-making. He contributed mightily to his own mediatisation, keeping fan letters (and some hate letters), for example, playing outrageously to the public galleries in Convention and Club, and taking exceptional care to ensure his words were reported verbatim in the press. Protestations against one's own celebrity, moreover, constitute one of the oldest tricks in the celebrity playbook.

The roots of Robespierre's authority extended beyond celebrity into much vilified practices of patronage.[8] Robespierre was especially excoriating in condemnations of "faction"; yet he devoted much attention to the placement in government, the bureaucracy and the judiciary of individuals whom he personally adjudged "patriots." As it turned out, he was not a very effective patron—a point fully consonant with Peter's low estimation of his managerial competence. (A megalomaniac or machine politician would surely have done better.) He seemed to just let "patriots" get on with their jobs. I show how Robespierre "patriot" appointees in key positions—sinister Dumas at the Revolutionary Tribunal, reckless Payan at the Commune, and well-meaning (if ruthless) Herman in the Civil Administration Executive Commission, for example—could and did use Robespierre's endorsement to legitimate their own power. Robespierre's authority was thus often mediated, relayed, amplified and distorted by the activities of such men. One of the characteristics of Robespierre's involvement with terror was loosely-controlled and quite un-megalomaniacal outsourcing.[9]

Furthermore, Robespierre played an undeniably key role in toughening up revolutionary justice from spring 1794 onwards. He drafted the brief of the Commission d'Orange in his own hand. The terms that he there employed were transferred pretty much verbatim to the Law of 22 Prairial (much to the fury of his colleagues who behind the scenes were initially furious that it had been foisted on them). He played a big part in providing "patriot" personnel for the revolutionary tribunals in Orange, Arras, and Brest, as well as Paris. In addition, he bore a good deal of responsibility for deaths occasioned by the infamous prison plots that caused executions to mushroom in late Messidor and early Thermidor. He allowed his "patriot" client, Herman, Civil Administration Commission chair, to investigate the prisons and to send suspects direct to the Revolutionary Tribunal without referral to the CGS. The prison plot trials that emerged out of Herman's over-enthusiasm to secure convictions and cleanse the prisons generated conviction rates on the flimsiest of evidence that soared to 90 to 95 percent in the days leading up to 9 Thermidor.[10]

Consequently, Robespierre did not need to be physically present in government in the last weeks of his life to share a good measure of responsibility for "the Great Terror," as the period is often called. Along with colleagues, Robespierre had already wound up the clockwork of state terror. He had written the script for terror. He helped staff the institutions of terror. He drafted the workings of the Revolutionary Tribunal. His work at the Police Bureau strove to take over the policing of terror.

Revealingly, on 8 Thermidor, Robespierre was still offering terror his warm embrace. Besides manifesting his wish for what sounded to everyone in the room an extensive mortiferous purge, he called for the strengthening of the Revolutionary Tribunal and more police assiduity arresting counter-revolutionary hordes allegedly thronging Paris. And he bitterly attacked his CPS colleagues for not enforcing the decree he had sponsored for the killing of English soldiers taken prisoner.

I have tried briefly to encapsulate arguments developed in my book showing that Robespierre's fingerprints were all over government policy in Year II relating to the discourses, practices and projects associated with terror. But this is very different from Peter's claims that the book makes a megalomaniac of Robespierre, or turns Revolutionary Government into Robespierre's Terror. Terror was a group effort, often chaotic and haphazard to boot.

I sincerely hope that I will have other opportunities beyond the H-France venue to debate Robespierre with Peter, from whom over the years I have learned so much. We will have to leave it to readers of our work to decide which of our conflicting versions of the man is more convincing. I would like to end this particular exchange, however, by assuring any potential readers of *The Fall of Robespierre* that it is not a biographical study. It is a book about revolutionary and Parisian politics on a dramatic and pivotal day of the French Revolution, with a cast of thousands of individuals--only one of whom was called Maximilien Robespierre.

NOTES

[1] See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=occ7Sp1OpOk>.

[2] For the historiographical consensus, see my “The Overthrow of Robespierre and the “Indifference” of the People,” *American Historical Review*, 119 (2014): 685 & n.26.

[3] Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

[4] Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 10.

[5] Martyn Lyons, “The 9 Thermidor: Motives and Effects,” *European History Quarterly*, 5 (1975): 123-146. See too Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror. Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For more on illness, see my book, esp. pp. 66-67 (and 371n.) and 444-445.

[6] This is not the same as “masterminding” the *jours* of 31 May and 2 June 1793 as Peter claims in an account that I don’t have space here to rebut. For the record, I also note that my “selective assertions” criticised by Peter are in fact largely well-founded.

[7] Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques: l’invention de la célébrité, 1750–1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

[8] John Hardman *Robespierre* (London: Longman, 1999) is the only recent scholar to look in any depth at Robespierre’s patronage, though he arrives at conclusions--Robespierre as “police chief” or even machine politician--that differ markedly from my own.

[9] This is the point I was trying to make about “enfeoffment,” a silly word rightly criticised by Peter. I am currently working on Robespierre’s patronage network.

[10] Annie Jourdan, “Les journées de Prairial an II: le tournant de la Révolution?,” *La Révolution française* [En ligne], 10/2016, mis en ligne le 26 août 2016, consulté le 17 mai 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/1591>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.1591>.

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