H-France Review Vol. 25 (March 2025), No. 21

Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, eds. *Découvrir Saint-Just*. Paris: Les Éditions sociales, 2024. 184 pp. Notes and references. €12.00. (pb). ISBN: 9782353671083

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Louis Antoine de Saint-Just went to the guillotine on 28 July 1794 (10 Thermidor Year II), four weeks before his twenty-seventh birthday. His youth and the brevity of his revolutionary career after his election in September 1792 have always made him a malleable figure: from the model of revolutionary *élan* to the personification of vicious terrorism.[1] Like Robespierre, he is most commonly seen in historical and fictional works as icily ideological, obsessively committed to republican purity and to the pitiless repression of counterrevolutionaries that secured military victory by July 1794 but at a terrible cost of lives. Where Saint-Just differs from his mentor is in the beautiful young face in Prud'hon's famous 1793 portrait, Michelet's "Archange de la terreur," and the often-repeated assertions of his sexual passions.

Saint-Just's was an extraordinary life. He was born in the Nivernais in August 1767 to a former cavalry officer and a bourgeois mother who in 1776 took their family back to the father's village of Blérancourt, north of Soissons in Picardy. His father died the next year. The young man was a talented but erratic student and apparently too unruly for his widowed mother, who in 1786 had him detained for six months in a corrective institution in Paris. He was by then working on an extraordinary work of poetry, *Organt*, 7,800 verses recounting the search by a knight for his father, the archbishop of Reims, which in the process mocked salaciously the court, the clergy, and the society of orders. It was promptly banned on its anonymous publication in May 1789. Saint-Just was in Paris in July, then flung himself energetically into local politics in Blérancourt.

In August 1790, as a young lieutenant colonel of the National Guard of the department of Aisne, Saint-Just wrote an effusive letter to Robespierre, then starting to make his mark in the National Assembly. Saint-Just was about to turn 23 years of age; Robespierre, 32. The two finally met when Saint-Just succeeded in being elected to the National Convention in September 1792, its youngest member. He first caught attention with an uncompromising proclamation of Louis's guilt on 13 November: "on ne peut point régner innocemment…tout roi est un rebelle et un usurpateur" (p. 42). On 19 December he was elected president of the Jacobin Club for a session: he had arrived politically. He was elected to the Committee of Public Safety on 10 July 1793, where he became a close ally of Robespierre. Saint-Just became prominent for the success of his delegations as a deputy-on-mission, first in March 1793 to implement the conscription levy in the departments of Ardennes and Aisne. He was then sent on mission with Philippe Le Bas to rectify the performance of the Army of the Rhine in October-December 1793 and the Army of the Nord in January-February 1794. He

contributed significantly, as well, to the decisive victory of republican armies at Fleurus on 26 June. Throughout he showed no quarter to the recalcitrant or the hesitant, purging local administrations and ordering the execution of soldiers and officers who retreated. Like Robespierre, Saint-Just was ultimately the victim of his own uncompromising success, as military victories undermined the logic of the continued suspension of civil liberties and alienated peers such as Lazare Carnot, who described them as "dictateurs ridicules."[2]

Rather than the usual representation of Saint-Just's actions as the antithesis of respect for the rights of man, Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc instead present him as a warrior for those rights as expressed in the Constitution of 1793 and its revised Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, to which he was a major contributor. This is a slim and modestly priced volume in *livre de poche* format. After an introduction to Saint-Just's life and ideology by Belissa and Bosc, there are eleven brief excerpts (listed below) from Saint-Just's speeches and writings, followed by commentaries from the editors, suggested further reading, and a chronology. Ten of the eleven excerpts are from a sixteen-month period between November 1792 and March 1794. Les Éditions sociales have published the book as the twentieth in its collection of "Les propédeutiques," from the Ancient Greek *propaídeusis*, meaning a preparatory or introductory education. Other authors in the collection include Beauvoir, Bourdieu, Descartes, Durkheim, and Hugo; there are also volumes on the Commune of 1871 and other revolutions.

Saint-Just's ideology, like that of his peers, drew on a potent mixture of Enlightenment thought and the classics: at the time of his arrest, his collection of books included works by Mably, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Hume, but also works on classical Rome, China, and India.[3] Saint-Just, like Robespierre, was also formed by his experience of the distinctive social structures of his northeastern *pays*, characterised by a vast noble and ecclesiastical patrimony which underpinned a complex of hierarchical social relations. This was a world of sharp class antipathies which produced other militant revolutionaries, such as Desmoulins, Le Bas, Fouquier-Tinville, and Babeuf.

Reading Saint-Just is not a simple matter: his speeches were often succinct and brilliant but studded with maxims and classical allusions. "Tu n'es qu'une boîte à apophtegmes," quipped Collot d'Herbois. Saint-Beuve would later describe him as "atroce et théatral" (pp. 15-16). For Belissa and Bosc, in contrast, Saint-Just's politics stemmed from consistent, deeply held principles: freedom based on personal dignity, the right to existence, and active citizenship. This ideology was the expression of his belief in an essential human nature, not in legal individualism: liberty was to be founded in social equality (the end of personal domination) rather than in the rights of individuals. "Si vous voulez fonder une République," he argued on 29 November 1792, "faites en sorte que le peuple ait le courage d'être vertueux; on n'a point de vertus politiques sans orgueil, on n'a point d'orgueil dans la détresse" (p. 50). From this assumption of *bonheur* (well-being) as the gauge of the good society came his Jacobin politics of social welfare and access to property through sales of *émigré* property.

For Saint-Just, the foundation of a true republic was incompatible with extremes of wealth and comfort, and he saw *fonctionnaires* who dominated the public sphere as part of the same faction as the rich and leisured; and "toute faction est donc criminelle, parce qu'elle tend diviser les citoyens…elle neutralise la puissance de la vertu publique" (p. 152). Most controversial would be Saint-Just's proposal on 8 Ventôse Year II (26 February 1794) to sell off the property of those held in detention as "suspects," once those who could prove their patriotism had been released: "Abolissez la mendicité qui déshonore un État libre; les propriétés des patriotes sont sacrées, mais les biens des conspirateurs sont là pour tous les malheureux….Ne souffrez point qu'il y ait un malheureux ni un pauvre dans

l'État" (p. 128). Was this simply a rhetorical tactic to bolster Jacobin support among the *sans-culottes* and undermine the Enragés or instead a serious proposal aimed at mass property distribution to the indigent? Despite the Jacobin ideal of small property ownership, most deputies recoiled from such a sweeping elision of political opposition and "conspiracy" and the law was never implemented.

Finally, Belissa and Bosc's brief outline of Saint-Just's early life prompts reflection on further parallels with Robespierre beyond the similar structures of power, wealth, and privilege of their northeastern provinces. Like his hero, Saint-Just had been formed in part by the difficult circumstances of his upbringing. Saint-Just lost his father when he was just ten years old; Robespierre's mother died when he was six years old, and his father then left his children with relatives and departed Arras. These were two very clever young men with family claims to noble status through the paternal line, yet who grew up on the margins of power and status through the circumstance of absent or dead fathers.

Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc have succeeded in their goal of introducing Louis Antoine de Saint-Just to a wider public. Their judicious selection of key texts, together with their commentary and pointers to further reading, is an excellent introduction to the life and ideological passions of this brilliant young man who continues to intrigue and polarise those who encounter him.

LIST OF EXCERPTS

Amour de la patrie, fraternité universelle, June 1791

"On ne peut point régner innocemment," 13 November 1792

Qu'est-ce qu'une économie politique républicaine? 29 November 1792

"La royauté n'est pas le gouvernement d'un seul ; elle est l'indépendance du pouvoir qui gouverne," 28 January 1793

Qu'est-ce que constituer une république? 24 April 1793

"La souveraineté de la nation réside dans les communes," 15 May 1793

"Un peuple n'as qu'un ennemi dangereux, c'est son gouvernement," 10 October 1793

La mission de Saint-Just et Le Bas à l'Armée du Rhin, October 1793

"Les malheureux sont les puissances de la terre," 26 February 1794 (8 Ventôse Year II)

"Le bonheur est une idée neuve en Europe," 3 March 1794 (13 Ventôse Year II)

Révolutionner les autorités, 13 March 1794

NOTES

[1] Among the biographies of Saint-Just are: Antoine Boulant, *Saint-Just, L'Archange de la Révolution* (Paris: Passés Composés, 2020); Jean-Pierre Gross, *Saint-Just: sa politique et ses missions* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1976); Norman Hampson, *Saint-Just* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Albert Ladret, *Saint-Just, ou les vicissitudes de la vertu* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1989); and Bernard Vinot, *Saint-Just* (Paris: Fayard, 1985).

[2] Albert Mathiez, *Autour de Robespierre* (Paris: Payot, 1957), pp. 156-157; Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution. Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 230.
[3] See Marisa Linton, "The Man of Virtue: The Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L. A. Saint-Just," *French History* 24 (2010): 393-419.

Peter McPhee
University of Melbourne
p.mcphee@unimelb.edu.au

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ISSN 1553-9172