



Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution

Ruth Scurr

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Since his execution by guillotine in July 1794, Maximilien Robespierre has been contested terrain for historians. Was he a bloodthirsty charlatan or the only true defender of revolutionary ideals? The first modern dictator or the earliest democrat? Was his extreme moralism a heroic virtue or a ruinous flaw?

Against the dramatic backdrop of the French Revolution, historian Ruth Scurr tracks Robespierre's evolution from provincial lawyer to devastatingly efficient revolutionary leader, righteous and paranoid in equal measure. She explores his reformist zeal, his role in the fall of the monarchy, his passionate attempts to design a modern republic, even his extraordinary effort to found a perfect religion. And she follows him into the Terror, as the former death- penalty opponent makes summary execution the order of the day, himself falling victim to the violence at the age of thirty-six.

Written with epic sweep, full of nuance and insight, *Fatal Purity* is a fascinating portrait of a man who identified with the Revolution to the point of madness, and in so doing changed the course of history.

Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution Details

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From Reader Review Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution for online ebook

Colleen says

I recently read a book on The Terror following the French Revolution and my reaction after that (very good) book was to immediately want to know more about Danton and Robespierre. Hence me ordering this book, which then made me badly want to know more about Madam de Stael (that book arrived today! so expect my thoughts on that in like 4 days).

As someone who knew absolutely nothing about Robespierre, except maybe as the villain in the Scarlet Pimpernel movies, which my mom was a huge fan of and frequently quotes. And as a person going in blind basically my thoughts after reading this book is that he was evil on like a horror novel level. I don't understand so many reviewers of this book accusing the author of pro-Robespierre leanings. I guess it's ironic, especially given the subject matter.

Not that evil is something that can be quantified exactly. Was Hitler evil? Yeah, but in a different way than Stalin or Napoleon. I think as time passes, people can forget about earlier evil men, because they're quaint in old timey clothing, but I think something this book stressed, although it was hinted many times maybe not said outright, is that history itself tried to forget Robespierre. The way his hometown and residence avert the eyes and I think much of French history does not want to focus on him. Maybe a comparison would be our attitudes towards Joseph McCarthy (obviously McCarthy's influence while bad, didn't have the same cost of lives that Robespierre did)--there's probably not a lot of fuss in Grand Chute, Wisconsin over him. Unlike those other 3 tyrants of history though, Robespierre is a chilling one since he was so bloodthirsty while at the same time distantly cold from the carnage he created.

In a way, thankfully Robespierre lived in the time he did--if he had access to social media or a publicity, he would have been all over that. There's really nothing I can think favorably about Robespierre even after reading this book. That he was driven and not especially concerned about money? Those really could be his only positive qualities, which he would up using for destructive ends. A coldly ambitious lawyer who was willing to say/compromise anything, destroying all his friends and allies one by one to get personally more powerful is the picture you are ultimately left with after reading this book.

Very interesting overall and the author does an amazing job of summing up the events of the time AND masterful job in quoting sources.

Danielle says

I read this for my Western Civilization II class Spring 2013. Going into reading this my knowledge of the French Revolution was what I remembered kind of from my European History class in 11th grade and the Doctor Who serial The Reign of Terror featuring the First Doctor, which honestly isn't a lot to go off of. This biography is a very fair view of Robespierre that isn't overly affected by bias. I can see that Robespierre had the best intentions going into the revolution and his focus never strayed off of his goal for a perfect "democratic utopia" (to borrow my teacher's words) gaining him the nickname Robespierre the Incorruptible. I think he was a bit crazy to start off with but after the execution of Louis XVI he became too focused on the rooting out of the people he considered "undemocratic" and against his goal of the perfect "democratic

utopia" that he lost sight of what really mattered and I would definitely say he was crazy after that. My only problems with this book is that although it would probably have been better if I had gone into reading this with a bit more knowledge of the French revolution then what I stated above, it was a little confusing to follow sometimes and occasionally it would be a little vague on some events. I feel like this was the author's way of teasing the reader on the subject so they would be intrigued enough to go do further reading. Other than that this is a really great book for anyone interested in the life of Robespierre and his involvement in the French Revolution. I will also probably go rewatch "The Reign of Terror" now that I have a better idea of its historical context.

Lauren Albert says

When a historian attempts a work on a "person in his/her times," a balance between the biographical and historical parts of the book are usually very difficult to balance. I think Scurr falls on the side of focusing on the times (at least the revolutionary part of it). But I think that both sides lost out to some extent by giving cursory treatment. Perhaps the book should simply have been longer so Scurr had more time to fill in the historical and biographical details and do justice to both. The book is very readable and interesting and it is a shame that Scurr couldn't have spent more time on both participants in the actions of the book--Robespierre and the Revolution.

Nathan says

Ruth Scurr manages to sidestep the polemics that seem natural to a subject like hers. She has that most valuable gift of the historian: implacable impartiality. Her equanimity goes a long way to give her book credibility; if all you know of Robespierre comes from "The Scarlet Pimpernel", this will complicate the issue- in a good way.

As with many such impartial books, however, Scurr's greatest failing is that she tends to vagueness. No substantial analysis of contemporary political doctrine is provided- a real handicap, especially if you're new to this period of history. It is often easy, throughout the course of the book, to forget why Robespierre did what he did, what ideology drives the events of the narrative. Robespierre was responsible for the deaths of many, and he saw mercy as traitorous to his radically democratic views; that we are never given a clear understanding of the ideas that inspired such deadly devotion is a major failing of this book. The prose, likewise, manages to be colorless and dry, though perhaps this is a result of her impartiality. The book, on the whole, is too general and broad to stand on its own. I would recommend this to a reader already well-grounded in pertinent history; unfortunately such a reader is likely already familiar with this material.

Godlarvae says

Robespierre was a personality little known, and much less understood, by me. Other than the occasional character in old movies "The Scarlet Pimpernel" and a musical, and some such, I had never read of him or understood why he wielded such amazing power during those tumultuous times.

Ruth filled this want beautifully. She followed him from very early times to his eventual death, almost by his own hand, as victim of the monster that he had helped create. She followed his psychological development which was centered on his incorruptibility, his purity of motivation, his adherence to his truth.

Perhaps more, it was a study of how the very idea of incorruptibility and sincerity and high ideals is not the same as TRUTH. It was fascinating to see how the builders of their revolution were, in turn, attacked and sacrificed for the common good.

At a more visceral level, it made me wonder how a country could emerge from this time as a viable entity. The anger and joy of the common folks coalesced into a wild, undirected blood letting of those deemed to be enemies of the people was incredibly sobering.

A student of Rousseau, as was Thomas Jefferson, it was an engaging study of how different times and different situations produced wildly different results.

I feel Robespierre is quite misunderstood, especially within the context of our 20/20 hindsight and our politically correct thought/ modern sensibilities. He did what he felt was right, paid for his sins through his own death and, for better or worse, became an example for our study and enlightenment.

Karen Cox says

This is the first book I've ever read on the French Revolution that actually explains what happens in what order. I've read a lot of history of this period, but most of the books start with the assumption that the reader knows what a Girondist is or that the Holy Roman Emperor invaded France in 1791. Not only does Scurr explain Robespierre, she also gives the most succinct description of the events between the calling of the Estates General and the rise of Napoleon that I've ever read.

Mieka says

If you want a totally incompetent, biased, and patchy review of Robespierre (the "neurotic and terrible dictator of the French Revolution" as Scurr would have you believe), this one's for you.

Madeline says

No kidding: I put *Fatal Purity* aside in October thinking, "I will return to this after Clinton's been elected."

Rebecca says

The number of French Revolution themed books on my goodreads is getting embarrassing...This book is one of the more serious offerings on the subject which was regularly popping up as a suggested read, so I decided to give it a go. Like, (I suspect) many others, I've been kind of deeply fascinated by Robespierre since I read Hilary Mantel's characterization of him in "A Place of Greater Safety," and this biography only solidified my fascination. Scurr does a pretty good job of making him out to be extremely empathetic, without turning him into a totally sympathetic character and rightly so, since he was more or less directly responsible for a few thousands state sanctioned murders. Scurr's Robespierre starts life as a politically ambitious country lawyer, who is as deeply sensitive to perceived slights against himself as he is to injustices suffered by the poor. He is also, very much against the death penalty. Scurr chronicles his rise to power and increasing isolation and paranoia, which leads him to make more and more extraordinary and extra-legal decisions in the name of

keeping the Revolution alive.

At the heart of it, Scurr's book-and Robespierre's life is a study of idealism gone horribly astray and ultimately, completely detached from reality. As many people have said, much more articulately than I can in a late night goodreads review, his is really the first in a series of modern experiments with social restructuring that may have started in a lofty place, but which finished with a blood bath. As an unashamedly romantic leftie/total history nerd, I'm totally fascinated by stories of people who have attempted something radical in the name of the public good, and what the consequences of those actions were.

Jonathan says

This book takes a look at how an awkward, very self conscious, and moralistic individual was transformed by and also greatly changed the French Revolution. Early in his life, Robespierre greatly struggled with harming anyone. An attorney by trade, he became physically sick when he condemned a guilty man to death. Early in the French Revolution, he criticized the individuals whom promoted violent means. However, he justified his change in attitude, when he said that the King must die so that the Republic can live. Later on, it wasn't just the King but any of the many individuals who could be seen as political enemies.

The French Revolution wasn't a quick rush to violence. It started as a push for more rights and liberties for the vast majority of the French people. It was a long and drawn out affair that eventually used violence to crush any opposing views.

In the end, Robespierre overstepped his power, and he condemned too many people as enemies. They then turned on him, and he met his end at the guillotine.

Robespierre never compromised his values. However, his values changed along with his life's work. In many ways, the Revolution reflected Robespierre's life, and his life became the French Revolution.

Jules says

I gave it one star because Scurr is a good writer: her prose and style are good and easy to read.

And that is the only positive thing I can say about this book.

The author claims she wants to write an unbiased, non-partisan biography of Robespierre. And the title led me to believe that the core of the book was the concept of virtue and the consequences it had for Robespierre personally and for the Revolution as a whole. But what I found is a work that makes no attempt to make true of its objectives. Scurr sustains and repeats the most traditional and reactionary readings of Robespierre's life through the abundant and uncritical use of Thermidorian propaganda as sources. Proyart, to name one, is quoted without reservation while sources favourable to Robespierre (mainly Charlotte's memoirs) are doubted. The most striking example is, I think, the fact that Scurr reproduces the description of Robespierre's rooms filled with paintings, busts and engravings of himself; but this account appears only after 9 Thermidor and by hostile authors. And yet the author does not provide this simple qualification.

Too many things that add to the obvious bias of the author and that made this book a thoroughly unpleasant experience. I would tell anyone who is interested in knowing about Robespierre, his life, his ideals and his

role in the Revolution to skip this book completely.

J Onwuka says

Explicitly stated in the foreword, Ruth Scurr attempts in this biography to present an unbiased documentary of the life of Maximilien Robespierre, one of the principal architects of the French Revolution. This key period in his life is a short eternity, just five years from the Revolution's inception to his execution, but packed with extremely dramatic events such that the entire makeup of the Revolution seems to change from week to week and day to day. The story of this period and of this man was as thrilling as I thought it would be. However, I do not agree with the project of this book or the essential idealistic way in which Scurr presents Robespierre's story.

I feel like this trend of "unbiased history" is a new one and in most cases, as here, it is mislabeled. Rather than unbiased I would say that this book is very anxious about presenting itself as impartial and objective. What this results in is Scurr questioning Robespierre's complicity in terrible actions while never giving solid evidence of his clemency. The most she can muster in his defense are things he said or things he was supposed to have said. If Robespierre ever actually opposed the atrocities of the Terror he never did anything effective about it, and despite Scurr's desire to assure us that Robespierre was not a tyrant or a dictator, he certainly had the influence to curtail these excesses had he believed it necessary. I find Robespierre, rather than being a noble champion of justice, to be a consummate coward and a reprobate. A clear theme throughout this book, one that Scurr does not try to hide but instead to explain away, is Robespierre's tendency to set dangerous lines of thought in motion but keep his hands out of the blood. He preferred to control from removed positions of influence such as the Jacobin Club rather than to acquire meaningful powers that required his direct application. Scurr makes much out of Robespierre's reluctance to attend the executions he ordered, but I find nothing admirable about a man who is squeamish about his own justice.

I make these points because these are things that I believe Scurr does her best not to face. She sets up conjecture, obvious biased reporting, and rhetoric on the same level as documented fact because without that the case that Robespierre was a good person/politician/leader becomes remarkably slim. And in saying this I think that her unfortunate stand hurts the prose of this book, which is the strongest part of it by far. Scurr does not attempt to be an "artist" but she refrains from dryness and memorization. She ebbs and flows as needed by her topic, keeping a general temporal sensibility but making sure details that are necessary are always at hand. It's a very well-compiled book and, in seeing the lengths to which she's tried to exonerate Robespierre, I have no doubt that it is a very good history of Robespierre's part in the French Revolution. The only thing I'd say is read between the lines.

Paul Bryant says

PARIS, CITY OF LIGHT

Andrew Neil, a BBC political tv journo, took off into a magnificent rant last week after the Paris bombings. It was a week, he said,

In which a bunch of loser jihadists slaughtered 132 innocents to prove the future belongs to them rather than

a civilization like France. Well I can't say I fancy their chances. France, the country of Descartes, Boulez, Monet, Sartre, Rousseau, Camus, Renoir, Berlioz, Cézanne, Gauguin, Hugo, Voltaire, Matisse, Debussy, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Satie, Pasteur, Molière, Frank, Zola, Balzac, Blanc. Cutting edge science. World class medicine. Fearsome security forces. Nuclear power. Coco Chanel, Château Lafite, coq au vin, Daft Punk, Zizou Zidane, Juliette Binoche, liberté, égalité, fraternité, and crème brûlée.

Versus what?

Beheadings, crucifixions, amputations, slavery, mass murder, medieval squalor, a death-cult barbarity that would shame the Middle Ages.

Well, IS, or Daesh or ISIS or ISIL—whatever name you're going by, I am sticking with IS, as in Islamist scumbags.

I think the outcome is pretty clear to everybody but you. Whatever atrocities you are currently capable of committing, you will lose. In a thousand years' time, Paris, that glorious City of Light, will still be shining bright, as will every other city like it, while you will be as dust, along with the ragbag of fascists, Nazis, and Stalinists that have previously dared to challenge democracy, and failed.

How instructive, then – how cruelly instructive – it has been to read the biography of Robespierre, at this time, and to descend into the gruesome maelstrom that was the French Revolution, and rediscover that no nation, however cultured, is immune from the belief that the death of a few thousand of the right people is not only necessary but good.

Jean-Paul Marat : “I believe in the cutting off of heads”.

10 June to 27 July 1793 : 1,376 people guillotined in Paris.

THE GUILLOTINE : A HUMANITARIAN INVENTION

In 1791 Dr Joseph-Ignace Guillotin speaking in the National Assembly, was promoting a new device, not yet perfected:

Now, with my machine, I'll knock your head off [je vous fait sauter la tête] in the twinkling of an eye, and you'll never feel it.

Ruth Scurr comments : “At this the deputies collapsed in helpless mirth.”

As the acerbic historian John Croker pointed out:

Amongst the laughers there were scores who were destined to be early victims of the yet unborn cause of their merriment.

ROBESPIERRE THE SOCIALLY PROGRESSIVE VISIONARY, NO. 1

Interestingly, at this point Robespierre was arguing for the abolition of the death penalty, rather than its mechanical improvement.

He was against the death penalty for two reasons : first, its injustice; second, its ineffectiveness as a deterrent. “Someone who butchers a perverse child that he could disarm and punish seems monstrous”.

At the same time he was arguing for the end to all forms of censorship, even for pornography, which was a flourishing underground trade. He also wanted the National Assembly to be housed in a building which would have facilities for up to ten thousand spectators. Ruth Scurr comments

In this way, he anticipated by two hundred years the televising of parliaments in the democratic world.

Nice one, Ruth.

WHO THE HELL WAS ROBESPIERRE?

Robespierre's life was an odd one. For 31 years he was a provincial buried in a small town called Arras. He became a lawyer. He was quite poor and socially awkward. He was no ladies man. Then he buzzed around and got himself elected to the new Estates General which was where the King had run out of money and has to call this parliament as we might put it to ask them to bail him out.

They bailed his ass all right.

So this shy provincial lawyer arrived in France and after doing very little for 31 years he did everything in the next four years, to the point where he became the living personification of the Revolution.

Ruth Scurr, our biographer, gives us two characteristics of Maximilien which eventually turned him into a monster – an “intoxicating paranoia” and a conviction that he was always right about political issues (“He will go far because he believes everything he says” – Mirabeau). Perhaps this is not saying a great deal. Richard Nixon was paranoid, Stalin was paranoid, I dare say Pol Pot was too. If you’re in power, it surely comes with the territory. And well, why would you be in the grisly business of politics in the first place if you didn’t think you were right about the great issues of the day?

DESPERATE TIMES DEMANDED OVER THE TOP PONCING AROUND IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

the painter David ran into the middle of the hall, ripped open his shirt and pointing to his bare breast cried “Strike here! I propose my own assassination! I too am a man of virtue! Liberty will win in the end!”

And our guy would say stuff like

I have nothing more to say to you, and I have decided that, unless there is a revival of public spirit, unless the patriots make one last effort, I will wait in the chair of senatorial office, to which the people have raised me, for the daggers of the counter-revolution!”

Boy, you can hear the eye-rolling from here.

ROBESPIERRE WAS NOT A DICTATOR

There was no single person who ruled during the Revolution. But he was so influential, and busy in so many capacities – head of this and that Committee, president of the Jacobins club, constantly speechifying and writing – that he was *perceived* as a dictator.

They call me a tyrant. If I were one, they would grovel at my feet. ... To the nobles they say “He alone persecutes you”. To the patriots they say “Robespierre protects the nobles”. To the clergy they say “He’s the one persecuting you”. To the fanatics they say “He’s the one who destroyed religion”. ... “He did all of

it!” – “He won’t prevent it!” – “Your fate is in his hands alone!”

THE TERROR

The revolution went through major convulsions and became ever more paranoid. On 17 September 1793 the Convention passed the Law of Suspects – you could now be guillotined if your conduct, words or writings showed you to be a supporter of tyranny, of federalism or to be an enemy of liberty. So if some patriot didn’t like the cut of your jib, tough on you. That was when the Terror began in earnest and the tumbrils began rolling every day. During the 9 months which followed around 16,000 people were condemned to death, mostly not in Paris, and there were many lynchings too.

He initiated the law that menaced absolutely everyone, on the most spurious grounds, and without recourse to any form of defence.

Usual amount of time taken between denouncing a citizen for a crime and the execution of the citizen: **three days.**

ROBESPIERRE THE SOCIALLY PROGRESSIVE VISIONARY, NO. 2

At the very same time as heads were rolling into baskets at the rate, on occasion, of over 60 a day in Paris, to the point where they had to move the guillotine because the amount of blood was becoming offensive to the local citizens and was polluting the water supply, at the same time as all that, Robespierre was setting out his vision of how education should be organised in France :

Free centralised state education of all girls aged 5 to 11 and all boys aged 5 to 12, followed by free secondary education for all who wanted it, the costs to be met by progressive taxation.

Well, he was only around 120 years ahead of his time.

ROBESPIERRE = THE REVOLUTION

He could speak about himself so often because he identified so completely with the Revolution – the two were not separate in his mind. Even more peculiarly, he was surrounded by others who also believed in this coincidence between Robespierre and the Revolution. ...The strange combination of his self-centred rhetoric, clean living, clear principles and passionate political commitment made him seem like the Revolution incarnate... and now that the Revolution had become the Terror, he found himself identified with that too

HE WAS NOT AN ATHEIST

Some revolutionaries were, but he was a passionate believer. Here he is denouncing atheist propagandists - you can’t deny he had a way with words:

Who commissioned you to announce to the people that God does not exist? How does it help a man if you persuade him that blind force presides over his destiny, and strikes at random, now at the virtuous, now at the criminal? Does it help him to believe his soul is nothing but a thin vapour that is dissipated at the mouth of the tomb? Will the idea of annihilation inspire him with purer and higher sentiments than that of immortality?... If the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were nothing but dreams, they would still be the most beautiful conceptions of the human spirit.

THE END CAME FAST

He and his faction denounced the Girondists, they were guillotined. They denounced the Dantonists, their heads rolled. The deputies left alive in the National Assembly could see that their number would be up at some point so they got their retaliation in first and denounced Robespierre's faction. And it was that easy.

Old woman to Robespierre on the way to the guillotine :

Monster spewed up from hell – the thought of your punishment intoxicates me with joy.

Well, Robespierre was a curious beast. You can't warm to him. You can be amazed at his progressive ideas and then chilled at his ruthlessness. No one was spared, no one was pitied if they got in the way of what he thought the Revolution was. It was to be entirely for the poor, not the rich. His whole political dream was to make life bearable for the poor. It was a good intention and it was one of the many roads to a particular type of hell.

Caption : Robespierre, having guillotined everyone in France, now guillotines the guillotiner.

Louise says

Scurr ends this volume with a poem by Wordsworth, noting how he is one of the first not to "get" Robespierre. I read this book to find out how to "get" an idealist who morphs into the opposite. This book is not the interpretive narrative I was seeking.

The beginning part that covers MR's childhood provides clues, and this is where the book is at its best. Scurr speculates on how his parental loss, his poverty, his "scholarship", his having to borrow clothes, his relations with his sister and brother might have molded his thinking. She writes about his early law practice and the stands he took. She writes about his election to the 3rd estate and what it might have meant for him and how his confidence grew. After this, the book becomes more narrative than interpretive.

For instance, MR started as an avowed death penalty opponent. Scurr shows his first change of heart was justifying the execution of the king. While she tells us why he said he came to this, she does not demonstrate HOW he came to this, nor his total betrayal his original stance.

There are many books of MR and the French Revolution. Contemporary biographers need to either unearth new facts, present a new interpretation or add dimension.

Michelle says

Oh Robespierre... You were always strangely attractive to me when I first studied the French Revolution at school. And now that I have learned that you were neurotic, self-righteous, serious, bookish, paranoid and

obsessive, you are even more obsessive. I felt the author was unsympathetic to you, but clearly she is not worthy of your genius.
