CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Incorruptible and the Tyrant

ROBESPIERRE IS THE NAME of the contradiction that continues to characterize the attitude of the French to their Revolution. A hero to some, reviled by others, Robespierre embodies at once the Revolution's promise, still alive today, and the bloody impasse to which it led. That the ambivalent legacy of this foundational moment should be summed up in one man is the distinctive feature of the French political tradition: that which forms the basis of its common understandings is at the same time what gives rise to its most profound divisions.

To be sure, the nature of these divisions has greatly changed over the course of the last two centuries, and Robespierre's image with it. His reputation has been the hostage and, symbolically, the stake of the successive battles through which the principles of 1789 came to be applied; royalists pitted against republicans to begin with, then moderate republicans against progressive republicans, and, after that, socialists against republicans. At first, Robespierre symbolized the monstrosity of the revolutionary movement in the eyes of the upholders of the ancien régime; the party of the Revolution, for its part, made him the prophetic emblem of its struggle for republican liberty. Once the Republic had been established, for better or for worse, divisions within the revolutionary movement itself were given new life, setting Feuillants against Jacobins, Girondins against Montagnards, Dantonists against Robespierrists. Many years later, with the Bolshevik Revolution and the formation of a worldwide Communist movement, Robespierre came to be seen as the herald, both execrated and exalted, of social revolution.

All these disputes now belong to the past. The last defenders of throne and altar have been routed by the forces of a republic whose legitimacy is accepted by virtually everyone. In parallel with this, on the left, recent decades have witnessed the disarming of an avant-garde that sought to supplement and complete political revolution by social revolution. But the remarkable thing is that this general embrace of the principles of 1789 has not eliminated division. Indeed, paradoxically, a strengthened allegiance to the ideals of liberty and equality has had the effect of accentuating the revulsion felt toward the extreme measures with which Robespierre's name remains associated. The Republic—lawful, liberal, peaceable—that ended up being established is unanimous in its detestation of the guillotine, committees of public safety, coups d'état, and terror. Robespierre is a reprobate in the view of most people today, something official memory is reluctant to admit. This has not prevented him, however, from attracting a not inconsiderable number of loyal supporters. For with the restoration of the rights of man to a central place in the life of the nation, Robespierre, who early on was the most fervent, rigorous, and implacable proponent of these rights, came also to be seen as the champion of fundamental principles. Even if the specter of 1793, the year of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Law of Suspects, cast him down into the circle of the damned, the man whom popular opinion now gladly regards as a precursor of totalitarianism, the same logic of republican consensus nonetheless raised him up again as a prophet of the triumphant justice of democratic values. Far from disappearing, as one might have expected, the old divisions were simply recomposed.

Is this to say that we are condemned to replay the Revolution all over again, and, by giving it new life, to perpetuate the quarrel between Robespierrists and anti-Robespierrists, on the one side glorifying the advocate of universal suffrage and the right of all to life and liberty, and on the other bringing new charges against the unrelenting prosecutor of anyone presumed to be an enemy of the people? Not at all! Fortunately, the situation opens up another possibility. It places us in a position to understand that it is as pointless to take sides in this unresolvable dispute as it is futile to try to settle it. Neither of the two camps can hope to prevail. Instead they are doomed to coexist, because they defend causes that are equally justified in reason. The very irreducibility of the quarrel allows us to go beyond it, by granting each one its rightful share of the contradiction.

Examining the course of history over the past two centuries permits a more detached perspective. The slow and difficult consolidation of democracy in Europe has taught us that it is the responsibility of the state to

acknowledge the existence of two competing forces that pull it in opposite directions, the one arising from what its founding principles require and the other from what its political system will tolerate. The apparently innocent doctrine enunciated by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, from which democracy draws its legitimacy, conceals a deeply radical tendency that threatens to blind it to the practical conditions of orderly government. The French Revolution gave the first warning of the perils of this sort of excess, of which Robespierre was the outstanding example. His greatness consists in the fact that, both as orator and actor, he embodied the attempt to give liberty and equality their most complete expression. His tragic fate was to embody the failure to make a viable system of government from these principles, and the resort to terrorist violence in order to fill the gap between idea and reality.

It has taken two centuries for us to learn the hard way how to arrange matters so that liberty and equality may live together in harmony. There can be no question that the means for doing this are exactly the opposite of the ones imagined by Robespierre and his companions. But now that they have been firmly established, we may finally do justice to the grandeur of this longing to achieve the impossible, without in the least ignoring the horrors that followed in its train. At the same time, we are better able to appreciate the creative dynamic of these rights, whose meaning and scope sensible conservatives nonetheless struggle to grasp. Recognizing the Revolution's ambition, measuring its cost—these two things must go together if we are to profit from the progress that has been made in the interval.

Marc Bloch, appealing for an enlargement of patriotic feeling in *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (1949), famously rebuked two classes of his fellow countrymen who, he claimed, will never understand the history of France: those who cannot permit themselves to be stirred by the memory of the crowning of French kings at Reims, and those who feel no emotion on reading accounts of the Festival of Federation. It may fairly be said, in retrospect, that he made things easier for himself by seeking to reconcile the cause of the ancien régime and that of the Revolution on the basis of their most amiable symbols. It is a harder thing to reconcile admiration for the founders of the Republic and abhorrence of the terrifying violence of Year II. And yet Bloch's motivation was sound. We must press on, however arduous the journey that lies ahead may be, not losing sight along the way of the cleavage he rightly identified.

The moment has come at last when we are able to avoid a confrontation that can only lead to the impasse over means and ends in which the legacy of the Revolution has until now been stuck, and which made the

path to democracy in France so torturous and so obscure for the people who led the way. Democracy has come to be established almost in spite of them, without their having been aware of it. For some, celebrating the ends made it unnecessary to consider the means, which were excused as a concession either to brute necessity (no omelette without breaking eggs) or to the adversity of circumstances; for others, denouncing the means sufficed to invalidate the ends, which were seen to amount to nothing more than a lethal fantasy. The truth is that the ends were just and the means were horrifying. The two parts of this truth need somehow to be conciliated—a difficult task, for they correspond to contrary ways of looking at the world, which naturally tend to diverge rather than come together, to such a degree that they cannot help but continue to nourish opposite points of view; but in each case a point of view capable in principle of giving a fair hearing to its opposite, the one learning to temper the pursuit of ends by taking means into account, and the other learning to qualify its devotion to means by recognizing the desirability of the ends. Eventually, the two sides could find a way to agree to disagree—exactly the willingness that was most lacking in the Jacobins, who in this respect resembled their adversaries.

The French face a choice with regard to a past that has for so long and so violently divided them: whether to let it slip away into oblivion in the hope of making a fresh start, this time on the basis of a standardized liberal order—in a world shaped by European unification and globalization, the temptation to proceed in this direction is strong; or to reappropriate a turbulent history by overcoming it—a more demanding alternative, to be sure, but also a more promising and indeed a more realistic option, especially if one believes that the imprint of such tragic beginnings is indelible and their memory destined to go on haunting France far into the future. All the more reason, then, to try to come to terms with the Revolution by trying to make sense of the dual character of this enigmatic man, Robespierre, in whom is concentrated the most problematic part of the French past—the part that is at once the most inspirational and the most repellent.

Thought and Action

Let us be clear about one thing from the outset. It is futile to try to say who Robespierre was, as Marc Bloch demanded in another memorable apostrophe, imploring friends and enemies to declare a truce: "Robespierrists, anti-Robespierrists, we've had enough; for pity's sake, simply tell us who Robespierre was." A natural and perfectly reasonable demand, but

impossible to satisfy. No one will ever be able to tell us who Robespierre really was. To begin with, his persona was constructed around an impenetrable secret. The share of mystery is great in every stage of his career, from the initial participation in the Revolution—which nothing about him, an apparently rather conventional and well-mannered provincial lawyer, would have led anyone to expect—until the moment that the tide of events finally turned against him, on 9 Thermidor. We are, and we will remain, reduced to speculating about his motives. The most that we may say with any confidence is who he was not. In this regard, at least, the protracted battle between his admirers and detractors has been of some use. It has efficiently stripped away all that is legendary about the man, disposing of both the hagiographical clichés and the teratological fantasies inspired by the piety of some and the animosity of others. We have before us a demythologized Robespierre, still no less inscrutable in his deepest motivations, but now fully intelligible in respect of his outward behavior. We may be thankful to his most recent biographers for having provided us with trustworthy information.[1]

But the most solid material on which we can rely, in order to appreciate how vital Robespierre's role in the Revolution really was, remains the impressive mass of his speeches and writings, which by itself sets him apart from the other figures of the period. In what follows, I shall concentrate on analyzing this singular corpus. My object is not to produce yet another portrait of the man, but rather a view of his intellectual and political development between 1789 and 1794, which, I trust, will illuminate the meaning of the events themselves. For it was through the figure of Robespierre that all that took place during these tumultuous years was best expressed; all that constituted the motive force of events; all that caused prodigious efforts to establish the reign of happiness and liberty to end up in a murderous quandary. Robespierre's life, and the manner of his death, hold a lesson that goes well beyond his own time. It resonates down through the present day, which has seen the reemergence in another form of the question that the tragedy of the Revolution had left open—a question to which governments have struggled to find an answer ever since.

1. In this connection one cannot praise too highly two recent works, *Robespierre* by Hervé Leuwers (Paris: Fayard, 2014) and *Robespierre: La fabrication d'un monstre* by Jean-Clément Martin (Paris: Perrin, 2016), the first more classically biographical, the second more concerned with locating Robespierre politically in the context of revolutionary events. They complement each other by illuminating, in a remarkably precise, balanced, and nuanced way, the career of a man whom two centuries of polemical historiography had ended up making almost impossible to understand.

Confronted today with the need to reformulate it in the light of changing circumstances, we discover that the fate of Robespierre is more relevant than ever.

It has been said that there are two Robespierres: the one "incorruptible," the other a "tyrant"—words that in his time meant "hero" and "monster," respectively. The two images correspond to the two stages of his revolutionary career: opponent of the monarchy, then ruler in his own turn. In the first phase he earned a reputation for moral integrity, under the Constituent Assembly, by his unwavering defense of principles and of the rights of the people; within the Convention, he incarnated the Mountain's intransigence in the face of the Girondin faction. Later, with the elimination of the Girondins in the aftermath of the insurrection of 31 May–2 June 1793 in Paris, he became a member of the Committee of Public Safety two months later, on 27 July, at the height of his popularity. The esteem in which he was held caused him to be perceived as dominating the Committee—so completely that responsibility for the whole of the dictatorship of the "Twelve" came to be imputed to him alone, with the result that, following his arrest on 27 July 1794, he furnished the ideal scapegoat for the system of terror that had grown up in the interval. Henceforth his name was to remain inalterably associated with the image of a killing machine. The problem historians face, and more generally all those who reflect upon the legacy of the Revolution, is how to connect these two phases of Robespierre's career, which is to say the two faces of the man they have bequeathed to posterity. How did the one lead to the other? What is the link between them, if indeed there is one?

The answers that I give to these questions belong to the realm of ideas. I use the term "ideas" in a broader and somewhat less familiar sense than the one it usually has, closer to the notion of forces, where mental representations are inseparable from the actions to which they give rise. The guiding thread that leads us from the intrepid orator of the Constituent Assembly to the master of the Convention, I will try to show, is to be found in a style of thought that animates both the individual and the society of which he is a part. It is not only Robespierre's own way of thinking that needs to be taken into consideration, but also a way of thinking that enveloped and went beyond him, representing, as it were, the mentality of the Revolution itself. Robespierre was not a thinker in the conventional sense. He did not elaborate a distinctive and coherent doctrine built up from specific concepts and organized in a system. He did no more than pass on received ideas, ideas that he shared in the main with the majority of his colleagues. The Revolution conceived of itself as a rupture, a

redirection of the course of history in the name of an idea. Its intention, ultimately, was to substitute an order designed in accordance with reason for an order inherited from tradition. For this purpose, it could draw upon a body of propositions expounded by natural law theorists. But under the pressure of events, and of the urgent decisions they required to be made, looking to books for solutions was not an option. As a practical matter, the most that could be done was to adjust whatever could be borrowed from them at a moment's notice to the needs of the situation at hand, without any concern for scholarly fastidiousness. This was the attitude that Robespierre and his fellow revolutionaries brought to bear in their various ways. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, ratified on 26 August 1789, was its first characteristic monument.

There is of course some Rousseau in Robespierre. Rousseau was the only modern thinker for whom he had the highest regard, though probably more as a model for living than as an intellectual authority. There is also some Montesquieu, some Pufendorf, some Mably. But this alone is not enough to explain how Robespierre's austere eloquence was able to hold the attention of so large an audience during this period. What mattered above all was his ability to combine the ideas that he drew from these authors with the very spirit of the events that were just then in the process of unfolding. His manner of expression communicated the promise of the moment with a clearness and a precision that gradually elevated him to a preeminent place among his peers. Robespierre embodies the French Revolution in its most original aspect, the one that made it the Revolution of the Rights of Man—a decisive juncture in the transition from immemorial submission to divine authority to the idea of power legitimately created and exercised by human beings. Robespierre is the interpreter par excellence of this moment, its most systematic and most radical spokesman. From this there followed his incomparable prestige, uniting personal virtue, particularly self-abnegation in the service of the people, with unfailing intellectual steadfastness.

The tragedy of Robespierre is that his dedication to noble purposes ended up leading him astray when the moral supremacy that came from it brought him to power under the dramatic circumstances of 1793. Increasingly he found himself trapped by an untenable vision of popular government lastingly established on the ruins of the old monarchy. Some aspects of this vision were of his own invention and had the effect of isolating him; others derived from a common way of thinking that he more than anyone else helped to impose. By unraveling them, it will be possible to discern both the causes of his downfall and the reasons why his enemies

later became entangled in the same difficulties—difficulties that were to be long-lasting and whose persistence was to constitute the distinctive mark of French political history. Throughout the entire course of its development, the Republic was to be plagued by the urge to embrace a theoretical radicalism that thwarted all attempts to give it practical effect.

The indelible imprint left by the Revolution consists in just this. The possibility that a regime of liberty founded on reason and rights might fail was incomprehensible to the very persons who sought to bring it into existence, convinced as they were of the self-evident correctness of the principles they imagined to justify their undertaking. As a consequence, the failure was fated to repeat itself. From this situation there arose a dilemma, whether to carry on in the pursuit of the Revolution's ambitions or to admit the justice of objections to its premises. This tension between two ways of "finishing the Revolution" was to be permanent—finishing it either by seeing it through to the end, on better terms and in the hope of more favorable circumstances, or by forswearing once and for all so many pretensions that had regularly been invalidated by experience. Thus a division was to be perpetuated in various forms, similar in inspiration, between an idealism blind to the conditions under which it could be realized and a realism utterly unaware of the ideals it was meant to achieve. It is true that this chronic tendency of French history seems now at least in part to have been dispelled. France appears to have found a way, if not to resolve the dilemma, then at least to make it more tractable. But it could just as well be the case, as we will see, that this dilemma is merely assuming a new form in the context of events that have permitted some measure of reconciliation. At all events, it has yet to be resolved.

There is not only a retrospective interest, then, in reexamining the historical origins of a peculiarly French predicament. We also have to consider the Revolution's formative influence on political modernity, the implications of which we are yet far from having fathomed. The career of Robespierre, from his ascent to his fall, is uniquely instructive in this regard. It offers the singular possibility of grasping from within—within a way of thinking placed in the service of action—the sources of a rift that has divided the French people down to the present day. Still today, no one divides France more than Robespierre.

INDEX