

# Marat : A study in fanaticism

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## MARAT. A Study in Fanaticism.

Through the dark shadows and the lurid lights of the French Revolution there looms a sinister and baffling figure: Jean Paul Marat, self-styled friend of the people, Apostle of violence and terror, and one of the most prominent actors in that great drama.

His claim to special attention by the Swiss rests on the circumstance that he was a native of Neuchâtel. To refer to him, however, as Swiss-born is misleading since at that time Neuchâtel had not yet been incorporated in the Swiss Confederation. In his later life, as will be seen, he showed little tenderness to the Swiss, though he was always a great admirer of Rousseau, the Geneva-born philosopher.

No history of the French Revolution would be complete without the name of Marat. Much has been written about him and widely differing opinions have been held on his character and his career. Lamartine, Michelet, Acton and Carlyle, to name but a few, describe him as a blood-thirsty monster with scarcely any redeeming features. Others, such as Bougeart and Bax, are biased in his favour and point out his greatness. The truth, probably, lies half-way.

Marat came from a Calvinist family of the lower middle-classes. The oldest of six children, he was born in 1743, in Boudry on the shores of the Lake of Neuchâtel. His mother, Louise Cabrol, was a native of Geneva; his father was of Italian extraction. His real name was Mara; he added the t later so as to make it appear more French. Of his childhood nothing is known, but at the age of 16 he entered the University of Bordeaux to study medicine, and two years later went to Paris to complete his studies.

In 1765 he came to London where he lived twelve years enjoying an extensive medical practice. He resided in Soho, then a fashionable part of London, and appears to have been admitted to the best society. He joined a Freemason's Lodge, was awarded the citizenship of Newcastle, and received the honorary

degree of Doctor of Medicine from St. Andrews University in Scotland. At that period he issued two Marat also wrote novels and an *Eloge de Montesquieu* whose *Esprit des Lois* received his enthusiastic appreciation. He furthermore became the translator of Newton. All this scientific and literary activity came to an end when the Revolution broke out. Marat threw himself, heart and soul, in the insurrectionary movement and during the next four years, gradually rose to a dominating position in the political leadership of his adopted country.

His first step was the founding of a newspaper which he called *L'ami du peuple*, a name that presently he adopted for himself. In it, he attacked without distinction of party or position all those he considered a danger to the success of the revolution and gave expression to his own theories of statesmanship. His violence of language and lack of restraint made him numerous enemies but he became the idol of the lower classes; the proletariat worshipped him.

Repeated attempts were made to suppress the inconveniently outspoken journal. At least seven times its publication was suspended and Marat had to go in hiding, on one occasion even to take refuge in England. He was accused of seeking a dictatorship for himself and to have incited the populace to commit the excesses of the 10th August and the prison massacres which followed. He denied these charges and it is now known that Danton more than Marat was responsible. But he, at least, shares the guilt. On 19th August, 1792, he wrote in the *Ami du Peuple*: "Put to the sword all the prisoners at the Abbaye, especially the Swiss officers, their accomplices of the 10th August. Had they not been taken in arms against the country?" These unfortunate Swiss who had escaped the slaughter of the 10th August, some of them badly wounded, were duly murdered during the September massacres.

In 1793, Marat was elected deputy to the Convention and President of the notorious Jacobin Club. He soon came in conflict with the Girondins, the moderate party, who succeeded in obtaining his impeachment. He was arrested and stood his trial before the dreaded Revolutionary Tribunal. Thanks to his eloquent defence and, probably, the sympathy of the jury, he was acquitted. He promptly resumed his journalistic activity and his violent attacks on the Girondin party. The name of his newspaper had meantime been changed to *Journal de la République Française*.

Marat was now at the height of his power but his health had suffered and he had become an embittered and suspicious invalid. He continued to preach the gospel of violence and there was probably no one in France more feared than he. But he was not the only fanatic in this violent age. A young girl from Caen in Normandy, Charlotte Corday, friend of the Girondins, determined to rid France of the monster she believed Marat to be. On 13th July, 1793, she gained admission to his lodgings, found him sitting and working in a medicated bath and, after a short conversation, drove a knife in his chest. She was arrested and, narrowly escaping lynching, taken to prison. Four days later she was guillotined. A vivid and detailed account of the Charlotte Corday tragedy can be found in the glowing pages of Carlyle's history.

After a two day's laying-in-state, Marat was given an elaborate State funeral. The following year his remains were solemnly transferred to the Panthéon,

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the Westminster Abbey of Paris, but in 1795, when the Revolution had ended, the body was removed to a nearby cemetery.

Marat's appearance was striking but singularly unattractive. He was short, not more than five feet high, thick-set, with Napoleonic features, piercing eyes and a hoarse but penetrating voice. Slovenly in dress, a dirty cloth wound around his forehead to relieve his continual head-aches, and afflicted with a skin disease, he presented a weird, if not repulsive figure. But beneath the squalid exterior lay a powerful intellect and a strong personality. medical tracts one of which was considered important enough to be republished in 1891 by the Royal College of Surgeons. He also wrote essays in English on "The Human Soul," a philosophical "Essay on Man" and "The Chains of Slavery" which were subsequently translated in French.

From the foregoing it will be seen that Marat was not the political upstart with a shady past he has sometimes been depicted, but a cultured professional man possessing considerable intellectual attainments. He was a Lenin rather than a Hitler and would probably have made his mark in other spheres of life had he not been drawn in the vortex of the French Revolution.

In 1777 he came to Paris and was appointed Doctor to the body-guard of the Count of Artois, a post he relinquished in 1786. Between 1783 and 1789 he published eight books on physical research, fire, electricity, light and optics, one of which was crowned by the Royal Academy of Rouen. The great Goethe, writing

of Marat's contributions to science, pays him the tribute of "*Viel Scharfsinn und Beobachtungsgabe.*"

His private life seems to have been free from scandal. In an era of much licence and libertinage, he led a life of austerity and strenuous hard work. The only known romantic episode was, apart from an earlier liaison with the Marquise de Laubespine, his attachment to Simonne Evvard whom he married in 1792, not in church or before a magistrate but, as he wrote, "before the *Etre Suprême* in the vast temple of nature."

Whatever his failings, rapacity or graft were not amongst them. He was as incorruptible as Robespierre and lived and died a poor man. When after his assassination and inventory of his belongings was taken, it was found that in money he possessed exactly one assignat worth 25 sous!

Charm of manner he neither possessed nor cultivated. His was a single-track mind and he lacked all sense of proportion. That he was not altogether devoid of humour is shown by the pamphlet he wrote in reply to the attack on one of his scientific works by a certain Abbé Sans. He entitled it: *Observations de l'amateur Avec.*

Of his passionate sincerity there can be no doubt but he certainly was a terrifying and unlovable character. He may appear a homicidal maniac but it is well to remember that great social upheavals often produce men who, like Marat, throw themselves whole-heartedly in the struggle and allow no obstacle to interfere with the progress of the cause they champion.

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