

Robespierre, Rousseau, Napoleon Bonaparte - and the influence of the French Revolution on modern Europe

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ROBESPIERRE, ROUSSEAU, NAPOLEON BONAPARTE – And the influence of the French Revolution on modern Europe

BY GEOFFREY H. BUCHLER, PhD

In spite of his professional career as a senior adviser to one of the largest assurance groups in the UK, Geoffrey Buchler has always maintained a specialist knowledge of the early 19th Century romantic period, and has contributed various articles to a number of literary publications.

Amongst these must be included The Swiss Observer in which many and varied portraits have appeared in previous issues on the lives of Voltaire, Rousseau, Marat, Edward Gibbon, Mme de Stael, Chateaubriand. There have been numerous others, but it was particularly to the period of the French Revolution that Geoffrey Buchler wished to turn his attention. Not only because of the impact these years had on the creation of a modern Swiss republic (introduced under Napoleon) but also for the fact that the French Revolution, and the wars that it caused, seemed to herald the beginning of a new era in modern history.

It was felt that an appraisal of this period would have to be split into two parts: for the events of 1789–94 means for most Englishmen, Robespierre and the Reign of Terror; whereas the events of 1796–1815 Bonaparte and the conquest of Europe. This is the first in a series of two articles in which, surprisingly perhaps, we are shown that in the final judgment of history the events of the five years, 1789–94, are likely to be accounted as of more lasting value than those of the 19 and to Robespierre may be attributed a greatness due to his setting and theme which is not incomparable with that which Napoleon claims by his own genius of thought and actions.

Once again, our sincere thanks are due to Dr. Buchler for his finely researched article.

Of the leaders of the French Revolution none has a greater claim to be considered its guiding spirit, its very personification, than Maximilien Robespierre. At times the names of other contenders have been put forward – Mirabeau as the outstanding personality of the Constituent Assembly; Danton as the embodiment of revolutionary national defence; Marat as the ever-consistent exponent of Terror; and even Carnot, as the *organizer of victories*. Yet none of them held the front of the stage for as long: Robespierre alone left his mark on the whole course of the Revolution from its inception in May 1789 until his death in Thermidor (28th July, 1794); and when he fell the Revolution seemed to stop in its tracks and certainly took a very different course – some would say it stopped altogether.

Like many of the Revolutionary leaders, Robespierre was profoundly influenced by Rousseau, from whom much of his political thought – and much of the vocabulary in which it is clothed – is derived. From Rousseau he drew his belief in the social utility of a religion stripped of superstition and, above all, his social ideal of a republic of small and *middling* property-owners, uncorrupted by either wealth or poverty; this concept lies behind much of his talk of *corruption* and *virtue*. However to conclude from this, as some have done, that he was a doctrinaire fanatic whose every action was determined by a slavish attachment to abstract principles is to ignore his instinct

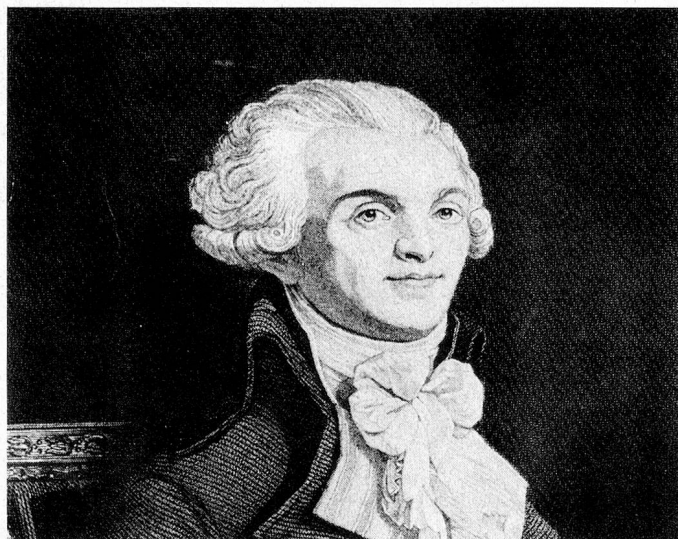
for political realities and his capacity for practical statesmanship. These qualities were revealed in each of the great crises of the Revolution up to the summer of 1794, and have even earned him an undeserved reputation for hypocrisy. This is, perhaps, because the image of Robespierre that has come down to us is singularly confused.

Though in his lifetime he was both loved and revered by many and hated and feared by others, his strangely assorted executioners – the men of Thermidor – took good care to obliterate the first impression in favour of the second; and they succeeded well enough.

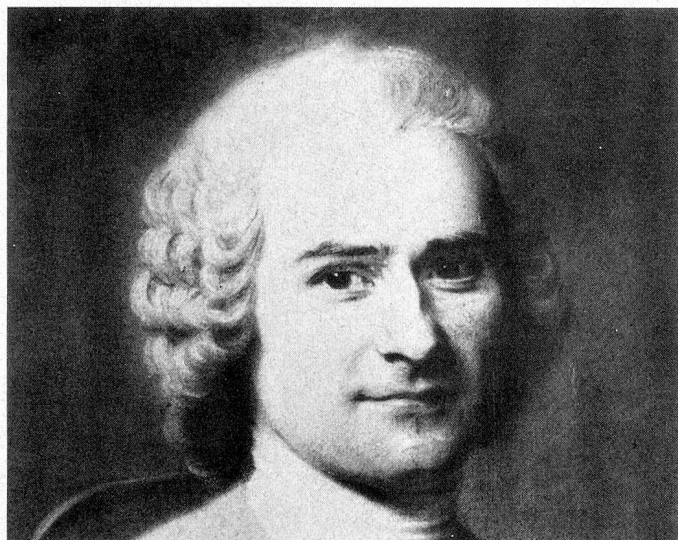
Mirabeau's and Marat's remains had

both found a haven, albeit temporary, in the Pantheon; but Robespierre's were flung into a common grave. A flood of pamphlet literature was let loose to revile his memory; and he became the scapegoat for every major or minor crime ascribed to the Terror and its practitioners. His supporters were silenced, hounded and proscribed; and the picture emerged of a humourless, mean and petty tyrant a *buveur de sang*, dedicated to the cult of the guillotine and aspiring to personal dictatorship. With many, the label has stuck, and the picture has survived in many a history text-book.

Even the Radical historian Aulard and the Socialist Jaures, both writing a



Maximilien Francois Marie Isidore de Robespierre, French Revolutionary Dictator. Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.



Jean Jacques Rousseau by Lateur. Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

hundred years after the event, did Robespierre's memory less than justice, and Lord Acton called him "the most hateful character in the forefront of history..."

On the other hand there have always been those who have revered the memory of the *Incorruptible* as the stern upholder of Republican *virtue* and the Revolution's most consistent democrat and greatest spokesman. Albert Mathiez, in particular, devoted the greater part of his work to rescuing Robespierre from the *Chamber of Horrors* and placing him amongst the foremost statesmen and benefactors of his age. Many may ask, why Robespierre? Why not rather Sieyès the architect and constitutionalist of the National Assembly? Why not Mirabeau, its foremost orator and statesman, the enemy of despotism and the champion of a limited monarchy? Or Danton, the inspirer of national resistance to foreign invasion and of reaction against republican despotism? Of Lafayette, the hero of American independence, the commander of the National Guard, the guardian of the Constitution?

Maximilien de Robespierre was born at Arras on 6th May, 1758, the son and grandson of lawyers. Educated in classics and law at the college of *Louis-le-Grand* in Paris, he became the classical scholar of his year and as such was chosen to deliver a Latin address of welcome to Louis XVI after his coronation at Rheims. (They were to meet again when Louis was on trial before the National Convention in December 1792 and Robespierre clamoured for his death). More important: it was here that he acquired his taste for the Ancients and his love of Rousseau.

As a provincial lawyer, whose orbit never moved outside the environs of Arras and Paris, Robespierre had none of Mirabeau's experience of men and affairs nor his impulsive eloquence. He made little impression in the early States General; most of his speeches in the Convention were carefully prepared harangues.

In effect, he could never extemporize an appeal to the crowd like Danton, and there was none of Lafayette's glamour, nothing heroic or soldierly in his spectacled eyes and sharp features. (He habitually wore the green-tinted glasses that gave him that inquisitive penetrating look).

He was made for opposition not for government and his gift was not that of Sieyès for political or constitutional science, but rather for the arts of criticism and party intrigue. After working his way up from backbench obscurity, he rode in turn every wave of popular reaction to the political wind of the moment and made himself the spokesman of the *petite bourgeoisie*, distinguishing himself as a liberal and democrat in the Constituent Assembly. There he quickly acquired a reputation as a spokesman of the Left and played a conspicuous part in nearly every one of the great constitutional debates of the early years. "That

man will go far", Mirabeau said of him, "he believes what he says".

When Mirabeau died in 1791, Robespierre was generally acknowledged as his successor — essentially for his uncompromising sincerity and the remarkable persistence with which he upheld the cause of popular sovereignty and the Rights of Man.

Meanwhile, he was building as great a reputation as a leader of the Jacobin Club, which, from its humble beginnings, had grown into the flourishing concern of the Rue St.-Honoré rivalling the Assembly itself as a forum for the discussion of public affairs.

By the time of the King's flight to Varennes in June 1791, Robespierre had already established a strong ascendancy among the Club's members and patrons; and on the night of the King's capture a remarkable scene took place. As the principal target of aristocratic vengeance, Robespierre declared his life to be in danger and the whole audience of eight hundred rose to their feet and swore to protect him with their own bodies against assault.

Nevertheless he played a minor part in the *Champ de Mars* affair of a month later. The democrats of the more plebeian Cordeliers Club had called for a mass meeting, to sign a petition demanding the King's removal from office. As Robespierre withdrew the support that the Jacobins had at first promised, the Cordeliers went ahead on their own. Martial Law was declared and Lafayette's National Guard fired on an unarmed crowd, leaving fifty dead on the *Champ de Mars*.

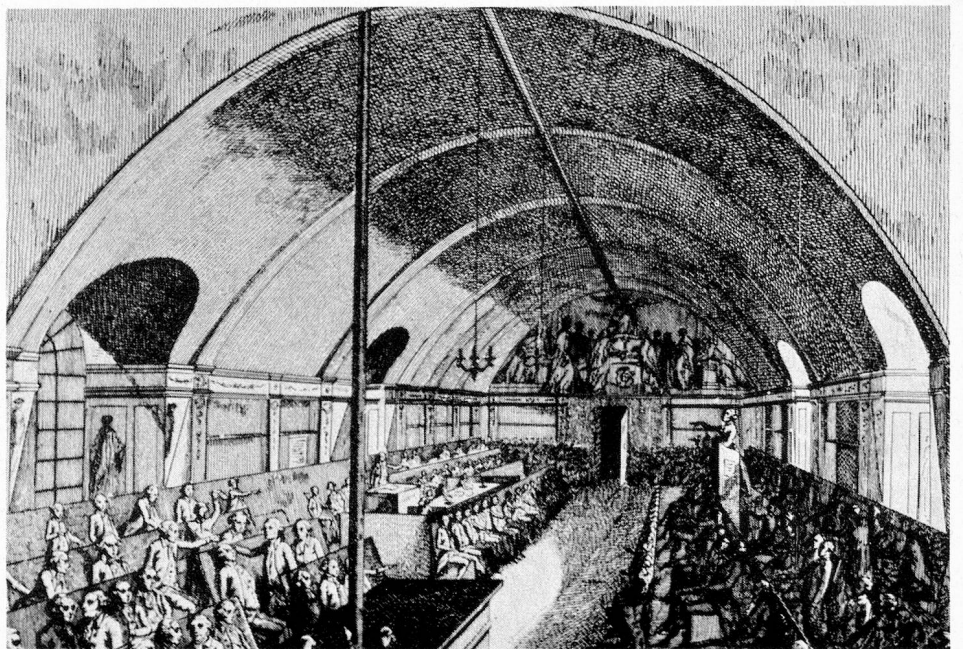
Wholesale arrests followed, and Robespierre though threatened, was left untouched. Yet when the Constituent Assembly, having completed its work, dissolved itself in September, it was Robespierre along with Pétion, soon to be

elected mayor of Paris, who was garlanded by Parisian crowds as the popular hero of the hour.

Before its dissolution, the Constituent Assembly had, on Robespierre's proposal passed a *self-denying ordinance* debarring all present members from sitting in the Legislative Assembly that succeeded it; hence, in the following year, his public activities were largely confined to the Jacobin Club. Here he soon became involved in the great debate on war and peace. War with Austria was already imminent and was favoured by Brissot and most of the so-called *Girondin* deputies. According to them a *revolutionary war* against Austria and Prussia would discredit the constitutional monarchists, transfer executive power to the Girondin leaders and, by means of *armed missionaries*, bring France's neighbours under her political authority. Robespierre alone, among the leaders of the Left, strongly resisted this mood. War, he argued, would concentrate the armed forces at the disposal of the Crown, leave Paris at the mercy of the Court party and pave the way for a military dictatorship: but it was the war party that prevailed, and war was declared on Austria in April 1792.

Robespierre's fears were more than justified by the defeats, desertions and treachery that quickly followed; yet, in the long run, it was the monarchy, and not the Revolution, that proved to be the war's principal victim. When the King, having been compelled by events to appoint *Girondin* Ministers, took an early opportunity to dismiss them, he was met by a storm of popular protest.

The Tuileries themselves were invaded by men and women of the *faubourgs*, and the demand for the King's abdication quickly gathered ground. However, Robespierre was still stressing the need for a popularly elected National



The Jacobin Club (Société des Amis de la Constitution). Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

Convention, rather than an armed insurrection, to amend the Constitution and settle the future of the monarchy. So, the *Girondins* now drew back in support of the King: they had not bargained for a Republic that should be at the mercy of the votes and weapons of the hitherto *passive citizens*, or *sans-culottes*.

The leadership of the movement thus passed to the Jacobins. On 10th August, Louis was driven from the Tuileries and, soon after, a National Convention was summoned in place of the now discredited Legislative Assembly. To this new Assembly, Robespierre was returned, with Danton and Marat, at the head of the list of twelve deputies for Paris.

The struggle between Girondins and Jacobins was now transferred to the Convention, and was only resolved with the expulsion of the Girondin leaders nine months later. In each of the crises that marked it, Robespierre played a major part — first, as the defender of the Paris Commune; then, as the advocate of the King's speedy trial and execution. (Louis had been interned in the Temple prison after his deposition in September; Robespierre now urged that he be brought before the Convention and sentenced to death as a traitor to the people. The Girondins, whilst agreeing to a trial, favoured a stay of execution and — failing that — a referendum; but they were eventually outvoted, and Louis was executed on 21st January, 1793).

A third crisis arose in March over the conduct of the war. In the autumn,



Napoleon Bonaparte on the Bridge at Lodi by Baron Gros. Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

the new Republic had cleared its eastern frontiers by the victories of Valmy and Jemappes. However, its Commander, Dumouriez, was soon driven back from the Netherlands and, failing to persuade his army to march on the convention, deserted to the enemy. Mutual recriminations followed in the Assembly. The Girondins, as close associates of the general, were the more exposed; but, to defend themselves, they turned the attack on Danton, who had been sent to parley with Dumouriez on the eve of his desertion.

The attempt failed, yet there emerged from it, on Robespierre's initiative, two of the most important institutions of the Revolution — the Revolutionary Tribunal and the Committee of Public Safety.

Meanwhile, there had been food riots in Paris; and soon afterwards, a demand arose for a drastic purge of the Convention. Robespierre and the Jacobins were able to turn the movement to their political advantage by directing it against the Girondin leaders. Once more, a central revolutionary committee was formed to direct operations, and thousands of *sans-culottes* were recruited to the National Guard. In the bloodless uprising that followed, the Convention was to expel twenty-nine Girondin deputies, the Jacobins thus emerging as the dominant party in the Assembly.

Again, Robespierre took no direct part in this insurrection; yet his was the guiding voice and the brain that inspired it. When on 13th July, Charlotte Corday (a girl who had been worked upon by Girondin propaganda) came to Paris and murdered Jean-Paul Marat, the Jacobins seized the opportunity to outlaw the Girondin leaders who were now at large, and to bring to trial those who were still in their hands. Many were guillotined, and of sixty-three leaders of the party, only twenty-five survived the Revolution.

The Revolution, Robespierre now believed, could only be saved, and its internal and external enemies be defeated, if a strong central government were set up to restrain both the *selfish rich* and

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the remnants of aristocracy. The programme is nowhere exactly formulated, but it emerges both from his speeches at this time and from a memorandum later found amongst his papers:

"What is our aim? It is the peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality, and the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved, not on stone or marble, but in the heart of every man".

Such words both served as a programme of action for the insurgents of June 1793 and laid the foundations for the Revolutionary Government that followed soon after. In a word, Robespierre's speeches brought Rousseau's cloudy dreams into the workaday world and turned his philosophical poetry into the prose of a political programme.

Resting on the twin pillars of the Committees of Public Safety and Public Security, the Revolutionary Government was able, for the best part of a year, to establish a more or less *single will* in the direction of affairs and to maintain the support of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. Robespierre joined the Committee of Public Safety in July 1793, and for a year and a day, was its most active, experienced and respected member — while still retaining his ascendancy in the Convention and Jacobin Club.

He and his colleagues administered the country, by despatching *représentants en mission* — forerunners of Napoleon's Prefects — to supervise and supplement the work of the Departments; checked the course of inflation which, under the Girondins, had assumed disastrous proportions; drafted numerous laws relating to education, industry, the civil code and public assistance; raised, fed and equipped the Republic's armies; and generally *organized* the victories, culminating in that of Fleurus (26th June, 1794), which finally drove the invaders from French soil.

More than is usually admitted, Napoleon Bonaparte had much in common with this Committee of Public Safety. It was because he respected the social legislation of the Constituent Assembly that he was able to remain the leader of France. His military victories assured that the work of the Constituent Assembly would endure and become permanently rooted in French society.

Perhaps more than that, his victories enabled French ideas to sweep over the Continent with a rapidity and an efficacy which neither propaganda nor spontaneous diffusion could have equalled. Had he not implanted the fundamental principles of the modern state and society in all the countries which he dominated, no trace would have ever been left of his attacking campaigns.

In vain did he attempt to create a new legitimacy and a new aristocracy. His contemporaries always saw him as the soldier of the Revolution, and it was as such that he made his mark on European civilization.

Of the Committee's work, its dealings with the internal enemies of the Republic, during the so-called "Reign of Terror", has probably attracted the greatest historical interest. Some 18,000 fell victim to the guillotine, the great majority in the frontier regions that were most affected by war and civil war. In Paris itself, where the Revolutionary Tribunal operated, their numbers amounted to a little over 2,700. Not surprisingly, the most spectacular trials before the Tribunal, took place in Paris; consisting of those of Danton and his followers who had challenged the Government from the Right, and of Hébert and his associates, who had challenged it from the Left. In this extermination of opposing factions, whose operation he saw as a mortal danger to government based on a "single will", Robespierre

played a principal part. To quote his own words:

"If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, its basis in time of revolution is both virtue and terror — virtue without which terror is disastrous, and terror without which virtue has no power".

Geneva, the birth-place of Rousseau, was also the home of Calvin. Servetus had been burned there two hundred years before *Emile*. Thus the latest disciple of Rousseau unconsciously became a Calvinist. The *Vertu* that Robespierre drew from 18th century *sensibilité* flamed into a *terreur* lit by the executioners' fires of the 16th century.

Yet, within four months of Danton's death, the Revolutionary Government had fallen apart and Robespierre himself had perished by the guillotine. On 4th June, he had been elected president of the Convention; four days later, he seemed to be at the height of his popularity and authority when he presided over the colourful pageant devoted to the Cult of the Supreme Being.

However, behind the scenes, dangerous divisions had already begun to appear within the Committee of Public Safety itself. Robespierre was accused of setting himself up as a *pontiff* of the new cult, and of aiming to form a Triumvirate with his close colleagues Couthon and Saint-Just. These charges were taken up by a group of deputies in the Convention; and the large body of *moderates* in the Assembly, too, on whose support Robespierre had been able to count in his war against the *factions*, had, since the victory of Fleurus, begun to cool towards a regime of Terror. Their defection proved decisive, and in the dramatic session of 9th Thermidor (27th July, 1794) Robespierre was refused a hearing, and he and his brother Augustin, and other close supporters, were placed under arrest.

Even now the fortunes of the Robespierrists might have been retrieved had they been able to count on the solid support of the Paris Sections and their armed force, the National Guard — but the *sans-culottes* had been estranged by recent Government measures. There were protest meetings at the Hôtel de Ville on 9th Thermidor itself; and, when the Commune summoned the battalions of the National Guard to rally in support of the arrested leaders, the response was half-hearted.

That night Robespierre and his handful of friends were declared *out-laws* by the Assembly. In the early hours of 28th July an armed force under Barras appeared at the Town Hall, and, meeting no resistance, carried them off for formal identification by the Revolutionary Tribunal.

A few hours later they were hustled to the Place de la Révolution (the present Place de la Concorde) for execution. Among twenty-two victims, Robespierre was the last but one to mount the



The Oath of the Tennis Court, June 1789. Picture by courtesy of Radio Times Hulton Picture Library.

scaffold. With him perished not only a group but a system. The democratic Republic of Year II gave way to the Republic of Thermidor and then the Directory. The *single will* remained in abeyance until Bonaparte, five years later, re-established it on a very different foundation.

There have been few men whose claim to greatness has been more strenuously denied by their critics. Hypocrite, petty despot, blood-thirsty tyrant, doctrinaire fanatic — these and other epithets have been freely applied to Robespierre. Even the one praiseworthy quality that has seldom been denied him — his *incorruptibility* — has been so presented as to suggest that he was something less than human. Yet nothing, perhaps, has contributed more to the legend of Robespierre's hypocrisy than the contrast between his personal appearance and the part that he played in history. The prim fastidious figure; the meticulous attention to sartorial elegance; the powdered hair; the cold manner and didactic tone; the twitching eyelids behind his tiny green-tinted spectacles — this picture was found to be ill-suited to a man who, day in and day out, paraded his devotion to democracy and inspired and directed the Terror in the proclaimed interests of the poor and humble.

More cogently, it has been asked, how is it possible to trust the sincerity of a man who condemned capital punishment on the one hand and yet sent the

King (and countless of his former subjects) to the guillotine on the other? Who condemned war in 1791–2 and condoned and vigorously encouraged it in 1793–4? Who swore eternal friendship to Danton and Desmoulins, only to sign their death-warrants shortly afterwards?

Yet the charge is ill-deserved. In each case, the decision taken was determined by a consistent devotion to political principle. To Robespierre, the sovereignty of the people, the triumph of the Revolution, was all-important: this theme runs through all his speeches and actions from June 1789 to Thermidor. In 1791 the war was condemned, not on pacifist grounds, but in the belief that it would strengthen the Court and counter-revolution. Objection to the death penalty was abandoned because he believed that the King's survival after abdication would create a tangible centre for aristocratic intrigue.

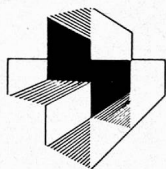
Similarly, the liberal of 1789–91 gave way to the protagonist of *revolutionary government* because he had become convinced by the experience of military defeat and treachery that the Revolution could not go forward on any other basis. The sacrifice of Danton was, of course, a different matter; but it is hardly to Robespierre's discredit that he should have put what he believed to be the safety of the Republic before the ties of personal friendship. Nor can one doubt the sincerity of his democratic ideals.

No other deputy fought so hard to make a reality of the Declaration of the Rights of Man: — but formal political

equality was not enough. Officials and deputies, far from enjoying unlimited immunity, must be continuously subject to the salutary pressure of public criticism and, if need be, condemnation. Such was the conviction underlying the great *purges* carried out at Robespierre's instigation.

But how, it may be asked, reconcile these ideals with the suspension of the democratic Constitution of June 1793? Yet it is doubtful if the dangers then facing the Republic from within and without could have been averted by any other means. What of the charge that he was a bloodthirsty fanatic, whose reign of Terror was only cut short by the resolute action of his enemies? It seems plausible enough, but the case is not proven. A far more conclusive answer to this charge is that the decisions of the Committee of Public Safety were collectively taken.

In effect, Robespierre and Saint-Just had a special responsibility for the Committee's police department, but the instructions that emanated from it were as likely to be signed by Carnot, Barère or any one of their enemies of Thermidor. Besides, Robespierre, for all his severity, was a discriminating judge: he showed greater clemency to the 73 Girondin supporters who protested against the revolution of June 1793 than most of his Jacobin colleagues, and he himself publicly condemned the excesses of Collot d'Herbois and Fouché at Lyons and of Carrier at Nantes — a condemnation that drove these *extremists*, in self-protection, to conspire to destroy him in Thermidor.



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Napoleon, for one, believed that as important a reason as any for Robespierre's overthrow was that he had plans to relax the harsher rigours of the Terror:— "*Il a été culbuté parce qu'il voulut devenir modérateur et arrêter la Revolution*".

From first to last the weakness of Robespierre illustrated and impersonated the strength of the Revolution: as a supporter of Mirabeau's policy in 1789, as a visionary champion of popular liberty in 1790, as a cautious republican in 1791, as an opponent of war and a partisan of the Paris Commune in 1792, as the chief exponent of Jacobinism in 1793 and as its most prominent martyr in 1794.

No one else had lived so fully through every experience of the Revo-

lution or with such a regard for its principles. Mirabeau and Danton were dead, Sieyès was living in retirement, Lafayette lay in a foreign prison; when Robespierre fell, it was the end of the first phase of a movement which was indeed destined to repeat more than once its round from monarchy to republicanism and back again; but there would not be another Robespierre.

In fact he saw all life like a chess board, in black and white squares and no neutral colours. With too few friends, and too many admirers, he had nothing to correct his excess of logic or his defect of humour. He could, indeed, read men's minds, but he could not judge their characters; so he could make them think what he thought, but could not make them do what he wanted — like his

master, Rousseau, he valued religion mainly as a bond of citizenship.

He became in time too small-minded to forgive, and yet powerful enough to punish; but punishment is a measure of despair. It may cause conformity; it cannot produce conviction, and, in adopting punishment Robespierre was taking up a weapon which he knew neither how to use nor how to throw away. So he failed and fell — the victim of men who had no convictions, and who were in most respects worse than himself: such at least was Napoleon's opinion, for he knew them well. Certainly with Robespierre's death the Revolution lost almost its last trace of moral dignity or political idealism.

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ART FROM THOSE WE THINK ARTLESS!

Art Brut — or outsider art — consists of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned. They are recluses, maladjusted persons, psychiatric patients, prison inmates. They have produced from the depths of their own personalities and for themselves and no one else, works of outstanding originality in concept, subject and technique — works which owe nothing to tradition or fashion.

Of the three artists featured in the exhibition to be shown in Glasgow, Edinburgh and other places in Britain, only ALOISE (Aloyse Corbaz) was an educated person. Born in Lausanne in 1886, she became a governess upon graduating, was certified insane in 1918, and died in 1964 at the age of 78, still a mental patient in her native city.

After an underprivileged childhood ADOLF WÖFLI (1864–1930) was jailed, at the age of 25, for assaulting young girls. A year later he was committed to an asylum for similar offences. Having become violent he was kept in solitary confinement for 20 years.

FORTHCOMING EVENT:

21st September, 7 p.m., OPEN MEETING of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique at the Swiss Embassy Lecture Hall, 16/18 Montagu Place, W1. There will be reports on the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad at Einsiedeln and information will be given on various matters of interest to Swiss living outside Switzerland (legislation affecting Swiss abroad, information, Solidarity Fund which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, etc.). All Swiss and their friends welcome.

Nothing is known about the personal life of HEINRICH ANTON MÜLLER beyond the fact that he was "institutionalised" since childhood.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN SWISS INDUSTRY

The Swiss Union of Trade and Industry has published the results of a survey carried out in 1975 concerning the state of research and development in Swiss private industry, from which it can be seen that private enterprise finances four-fifths of the R + D expenditure in Switzerland, which is unique in Europe.

The R + D expenditure of Swiss industry at home and outside Switzerland totalled 3.5 billion francs in 1975 and 4.1 billion when expenditure by other than private enterprise is added.

The ratio between overall expenditure and the gross national product works out at 2.86%, which places Switzerland first among industrialized nations according to the figures published by OECD.