

ABSTRACT
ROBESPIERRE - 'THE INCORRUPTIBLE':
AS SEEN THROUGH HISTORIANS' EYES

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This paper reveals Maximillian Robespierre through the eyes of twentieth century historians. It studies how they present this unusual and elusive character and how they present his impact on the French Revolution. Historians need intuition to expose a psychological enigma such as Robespierre. His speeches and writings, like those of other statesmen, were intended to persuade others rather than to reveal himself. Historians' views of Robespierre were influenced by their personal political ideals, social attitudes, and their times. For example, what was written about Robespierre by his contemporaries was one-sided; if they survived him, they were political enemies. Many nineteenth century biographers of Robespierre were biased, showing his character as all black or all white. Twentieth century historians are more objective, even generous to Robespierre. They portray him as a 'petit-bourgeois,' a fundamentalist, or a socialist.

Twentieth century historians respect his honesty, his diligence, his self-made social respectability, and his capacity for hard work. He may have been a 'petit-bourgeois' in his initial proposals in the Constituent Assembly which were radical and democratic. He championed freedom of speech and the revocation of property qualification for voting. The historians also show Robespierre as the prophet of republican religion in the style of Rousseau.

Robespierre's close association with Rousseau's *Social Contract* link him with democratic socialism. Robespierre believed that politics must serve ethical ends in government, that 'virtue' came from the natural goodness of the people, and that a republic of small property-owners could create social equality. At the same time Robespierre became convinced that he was the true apostle of Rousseau and only he could speak for the 'general will.' However, Robespierre retained his popular appeal, directing all of his speeches to the sovereign people. Robespierre's mass appeal also came from circumstances. War created a *need* for an authoritarian government. The sans-culottes feared yet admired him, and allied themselves with Revolutionary Government in the summer of 1793.

Twentieth century historians realized that Robespierre, perhaps best understood the Revolution. A civil religion, creating an ethical public consciousness or soul force for the new Republic could be of great value. Universal suffrage could counterbalance the inequality of wealth. But Robespierre failed to realize that with authoritarian leadership, it was not the people's will, but that of their rulers, which was sovereign. Thus Robespierre went beyond political democracy: he blazed a path towards a social revolution, a major reason for his fall.