



Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution

By Ruth Scurr

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Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution By Ruth Scurr

A riveting biography of the French Revolution's most enigmatic figure that restores him to his pivotal historic place

Since his execution by guillotine in July 1794, Maximilien Robespierre has been contested terrain for historians, at once the most notorious leader of the French Revolution and the least comprehensible. Was he a bloodthirsty charlatan or the only true defender of revolutionary ideals? Was his extreme moralism—he was known as "The Incorruptible"—a heroic virtue or a ruinous flaw? Was he the first modern dictator or the earliest democrat?

Against the dramatic backdrop of the French Revolution, historian Ruth Scurr follows the trajectory of Robespierre's paradoxical life, from his unprepossessing beginnings as a provincial lawyer opposed to repressive authority and the death penalty, to his meteoric rise in Paris politics as a devastatingly efficient revolutionary leader, righteous and paranoid in equal measure. She explores his reformist zeal, his role in the trial of the king and the fall of the monarchy, his passionate attempt to design a modern republic, even his extraordinary effort to found a perfect religion. And she follows him into the depths of the Terror, as he 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.

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Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution By Ruth Scurr Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The short, violent life of Maximilien Robespierre was a mass of contradictions crowned with a supreme irony: this architect of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror would in July 1794 be executed by the same guillotine to which he had consigned so many others. Cambridge University historian Scurr says she has tried to write a biography that expresses "neither partisan adulation nor exaggerated animosity," but even she must conclude that with the Terror, he "kept moving through that gory river, because he believed it necessary for saving the Revolution. He can be accused of insanity and inhumanity but certainly not of insincerity." Robespierre can also be accused of being a revolutionary fanatic who hated atheists, and "became the living embodiment of the Revolution at its most feral"; a dedicated upholder of republican virtues whose hands were smothered in blood; a fierce opponent of the death penalty who helped send thousands to their deaths; and a democratic tribune of the people who wore a sky-blue coat and embroidered waistcoats so aristocratic they wouldn't have been out of place at the court of the Sun King. Scurr's first book scores highly in unraveling not only her subject's complexities but those of his era. 2 maps. (Apr. 29)

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From [Booklist](#)

The name Maximilien Robespierre seems to embody the excesses that contributed to the deterioration of the French Revolution; his name is synonymous with the expression "Reign of Terror." Born in the provincial city of Arras, the lawyer Robespierre carved a significant place for himself in the destruction of the ancien regime, but in 1794 he fell under the machine of terror he had greatly contributed to creating and was himself guillotined. Scurr is to be applauded--and read, of course--for bringing the intricacies of the revolutionary philosophies and actions to a readily comprehensible level; as this author maintains, "To understand [Robespierre] is to begin to understand the French Revolution." Robespierre was a peculiar personality, distinctive in ways that were not all positive, and here he is as accurately assessed as hindsight permits. For the general reader, then, this is not simply a well-balanced, evenly shaded portrait of the man and his motivations, mistakes, and achievements but also a helpful explanation of an event that makes our American Revolution seem straightforward and of undeniable good sense. *Brad Hooper*

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Review

"Ruth Scurr does for Robespierre and the French Revolution what Quentin Bell did for Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: she apprehends the complete personality of the man, the moment, and the movement. A work of genuine scholarship and political literature, *Fatal Purity* is an electrifying biography of an epoch's vaulting ambitions and wounded pride, radical vision and terrifying uncertainty, bracing heroism and decimating energies." *Corey Robin, author of Fear: The History of a Political Idea*

Users Review

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Evelyn Spencer:

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Christopher Pipkin:

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Lisa Westra:

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Steven Murray:

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