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Robespierre: The Man Who Divides Us the Most

Marcel Gauchet
Malcolm DeBevoise, Translator
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In his compelling interpretive biography *Robespierre*, Marcel Gauchet reveals his subject as a complex man who was both an advocate for democracy, and a murderous tyrant with the potential to destroy democracy.

Gauchet traces Robespierre's rise from his position as an undistinguished lawyer and member of the French Assembly to his crucial yet contradictory role in the French Revolution, in which "the ends were just and the means were horrifying." The book implicates Robespierre in both the justice and the horror. While advocating for the rights of man over the supposed "divine right" of kings, for voting rights for all adult men, for the abolition of the death penalty, and for an end to wars of aggression, Robespierre also supported repression, fear, and terror as valid tools in the creation of a humane state, writing that "in a time of revolution, virtue is powerless without terror."

Indeed, Robespierre, who was called "The Incorruptible" for his pure and unadulterated stand for principles and his ascetic, self-sacrificing way of life, was also known as a bloodthirsty tyrant. Believing that the French Revolution had to eliminate its enemies wherever they were found, he sent many to the guillotine. He saw counterrevolutionary conspiracy everywhere, even among his colleagues. In the end, this detailed, meticulous study argues that Robespierre was at once the French Revolution's purest incarnation and its greatest contradiction—a man whose life and thought reflected "the tragedy inherent in a revolution whose own prophetic ideals were impossible to implement."

Epic in scope, *Robespierre* relates how the man who became an icon of the movement for French democracy also became its first tyrant. Its narrative is a potent, timely warning that the very real danger of tyranny lies within democracy itself.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2022)

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