

**The Terror of Political Violence**

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## Abstract

The Reign of Terror was an infamous chapter of the French Revolution. It was a period of violence, suspicion, and mistrust. With Louis XVI's execution in January 1793, governmental factions and individual leaders vied for power as the new French government took shape. Internal threats posed by antirevolutionaries and external threats posed by hostile European countries coupled with economic issues set the country on edge. During the Terror, violence became an effective tool to crush opposition or threats to the new French government. To examine the use of political violence during the Terror, this paper will focus on three revolutionary politicians: Maximillien Robespierre, Georges Danton, and Collot d'Herbois. Each of these men represents a different point on the political spectrum. Robespierre was an ardent advocate of the use of political violence and was known as an architect of the Terror. Danton believed that political violence served an important purpose, but that it not always the proper solution. Collot was the most radical of the three, arguing for pervasive and brutal methods of execution. By examining the contexts in which Robespierre, Danton, and Collot embraced political violence as a tool, its role within the Terror will become clear.

## Introduction

“Whoever refuses to obey the general will be forced to do so by the entire body; this means merely that he will be forced to be free.”<sup>1</sup> This statement by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* reflects the dichotomy that exists between the ideal democratic or republican government and the danger that arises when an individual’s will diverges from that of the collective. The irony of the statement is highlighted in one of the most impactful events in world history, the Reign of Terror which lasted from 1793 to 1794 amidst the French Revolution that began in 1789. Having executed Louis XVI in January 1793, the Reign of Terror was the first time that the French revolutionaries no longer had a monarch or a monarchy to guide them or to use as a scapegoat for their problems. After Louis XVI’s execution, France became involved in a series of international conflicts that threatened French territorial sovereignty, pride, and the Revolution itself. Amidst the chaos of wars with countries including Britain, the Austrian Empire, and Prussia, the government of France struggled to deal with multiple problems. To the North, historically dominant countries and longtime rivals fought the French armies. Within France, cities and peoples rebelled against the Revolution. These uprisings pitted French against French as the antirevolutionary royalists battled with revolutionary forces.

In April 1793, the revolutionary government, desperate to manage the seemingly endless streams of problems, established the Committee of Public Safety, a group of twelve men who acquired unparalleled power and influence in crafting, managing, and enforcing governmental policies that eventually created the framework of the Terror. The Terror built upon noble ideals, namely the protection and preservation of their new revolutionary system of government. This form of government, founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, was the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998), 18.

embodiment of 17th and 18th century Enlightenment ideals that challenged the monarchical status quo of Europe. As a result, philosophers like Rousseau were not simply inspirations for the revolutionaries; they were folk heroes and some of the first people to be enshrined in the Pantheon of great leaders in Paris. However, many principles of the Enlightenment that inspired and guided the revolutionaries, such as Rousseau's idea of the general will, were manipulated by them and others, including members of the National Convention and Committee of Public Safety, to justify the use of political violence during the Terror. This resulted in rampant mistrust and suspicion among the French public and within the government and led to the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of French citizens and the execution of tens of thousands in just one year. This paper will explore the sanctioning of political violence by members of the Convention and Committee of Public Safety which resulted in the Terror. It will ask: Why and to what extent did the leaders of the Reign of Terror embrace political violence as a strategy? To answer the question, this thesis will identify and analyze philosophical, domestic, and international factors that specifically influenced the attitudes towards and acceptance of political violence perpetrated in 1793 and 1794 by three of the most notable members of the revolutionary government: Maximilien Robespierre, Georges Danton, and Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois.

While focusing on these three individuals is one way to examine the use of political violence during the Terror, there certainly are other worthy approaches. For example, the topic could be studied by examining the lives of those who lived through the Terror, or the actions of non-governmental but highly influential actors including clergy, women, or citizen activists who garnered public followings. Another approach would be to look at how political violence was portrayed in contemporary art, literature, and music. Such a study would give a sense of how culture influenced and was influenced by political violence. Another approach would be to

explore how the military viewed the Terror. During this period, the French military played an integral role in protecting France from European enemies. It would be fascinating to examine military records to analyze how the leaders of the French military felt about the support they received from the government and how they perceived the government's use of violence against civilians. While each of these approaches is worthy and should be explored for a broader understanding of the period, an in-depth look at Robespierre, Danton, and Collot is the most direct method of analyzing how and why the government condoned the use of political violence.

By looking at these three leaders of the French Revolution, one will see the varying degree to which political violence was adopted by each and by other politicians during the Terror. Robespierre and Danton were both Jacobins, yet each led a different faction within the National Convention. An analysis of how each leader employed political violence presents a more specific understanding of how it was viewed and used by the government. The fact that these men had different benchmarks for what they deemed acceptable uses of political violence demonstrates that during the Terror mass imprisonments and executions had significant political, economic, and military implications. Unlike Robespierre and Danton, Collot did not lead a major faction. What set him apart was his willingness to endorse excessive political violence. During the case studies presented in this paper it will become clear that Collot was merciless towards those suspected of harming the Revolution or the people of France.

In order to present how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot differed in their acceptance of political violence, this paper will rely upon their individual words and actions regarding key events and ideologies during the Terror. The primary sources cited predominantly come from Parliamentary Archives and records of the Jacobin Club of Paris. Through discussions of topics such as the Foreign Plot, economics, antirevolutionaries in Lyon, the general will, and conflicts

among political rivals, this paper will demonstrate how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot interacted with each other and how their acceptance of political violence impacted the aforementioned topics.

## **Background**

### **The French Revolution 1789-1793**

To understand the attitudes of Robespierre, Danton, and Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, henceforth known as Collot, regarding political violence during the Terror, the Terror must be contextualized within the greater Revolution. This section will examine key events that inspired the French Revolution and guided it from its inception in 1789 to its most violent period during the Reign of Terror in 1793. While there were numerous things that influenced the trajectory of the Revolution, the issues and events presented in this section will provide information about the origins and milestones of the Revolution. By presenting this information, one can contextualize the events of the Terror within the ideological and historical framework of the French Revolution. The last part of this section provides biographical information about Robespierre, Danton, and Collot. Each of these men benefited from the French Revolution and used the power he acquired to help guide France during the Terror.

### **Frustration Regarding the Aristocratic System of Privileges**

One of the longstanding issues that had challenged French society in the years before the revolution was access to food. Leading up to the events of July 1789, France was burdened with debt, rising grain prices, and changing social dynamics based on Enlightenment ideals. This led to mass frustration among French peasants and in 1775 "*La Guerre des Farines*, the 'flour war,'

broke out across the region.”<sup>2</sup> The riots, which lasted about a month, were led by French peasants who, angry at the rising price of grain, expressed their disdain to their aristocrat landlords. For decades if not centuries, French peasants were saddled with the responsibility to keep France afloat financially, agriculturally, and infrastructurally. The aristocratic system of privileges instituted by the French *Ancien Régime* created a situation in which peasants paid the lion’s share in taxes, *taille*, produced the goods to feed all of France and her armies, and were conscripted, often without pay, to build and maintain France’s infrastructure, which they either were forbidden from using or had to pay to use.<sup>3</sup> The most notorious symbol of aristocratic privilege was the *Chateau de Versailles*. The discrepancy between who built Versailles and who lived there highlights the disparity between peasant class disenfranchisement and aristocratic privilege. It was the peasants’ frustration over the system of privileges that led to the Revolution.

### The Estates General

The convening of the Estates General in July of 1788 was one of the crucial governmental events of pre-revolutionary France.<sup>4</sup> Louis XVI approved the calling of the Estates General, which had not been held since 1615, in order to appear more democratic in resolving the financial and agricultural issues burdening France.<sup>5</sup> The Estates General was presided over by the King and had representatives from the three estates, or classes, of French society. The First Estate and Second Estates were composed of the clergy and nobility, respectively. The Third Estate consisted of peasants, which was the largest segment of the French population. The

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Popkin, *A New World Begins* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Popkin, 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 99-103.



main issue in the structure of the Estates General was the inequity by which decisions were made. The representatives of the Third Estate were the most vocal about instituting reforms that reduced aristocratic privileges and provided much needed support for France's starving masses.<sup>6</sup> However, since the First and Second Estates often had interests that aligned, the Third Estate was always outvoted since each estate had equal voting power regardless of the populations they represented. The representatives of the Third Estate grew frustrated, abandoned the meeting and, in June of 1789, pledged to draft a new Constitution. This event was known as the Tennis Court Oath since it was on a tennis court that they gathered to draft a new constitution.<sup>7</sup> The events at and following the Estates General represented the Third Estate's effort to push back against the system of privileges that financially ruined France and prioritized resources for the rich over resources for everyone.

### The Storming of the Bastille Prison

Frustration among the French peasants came to a head on July 14, 1789 as civilians stormed the Bastille Prison in Paris. The seizing of the Bastille was both a practical and a moral victory for the revolutionaries who saw the looming prison towers as a symbol of their oppression under the *Ancien Régime*. Popkin writes, "The message was clear, and also prophetic; if the French were to be free, the Bastille had to be destroyed."<sup>8</sup> When the Parisian mob broke through the gates of the Bastille, the prison's commander, Marquis Bernard-Rene Jourdan Delaunay, was left with two options: ignite the 250 barrels of gunpowder he had stocked, which was sure to destroy the Bastille and the surrounding neighborhood, or relent to the will of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 137.

mob.<sup>9</sup> Delaunay did not ignite the gunpowder and was subsequently killed by the mob after they successfully stormed the prison.

The sacking and subsequent destruction of the Bastille provided Parisian revolutionaries with armaments and raised awareness about growing class tensions. It showed Louis XVI that the anger and frustration expressed by the representatives of the Third Estate during the Estates General was not simply political jargon. Rather, that the issues ingrained in the social and political fabric of France were untenable. If Louis XVI was not willing to change, the people of France would force him to.

### The October Days

As the taxing year of 1789 continued, grain prices remained high, setting the stage for one of the most important events of the Revolution, the October Days. Frustrated over their inability to provide food for their families, the women of Paris marched to Versailles to confront Louis XVI.<sup>10</sup> After killing two guardsmen, the women forced their way inside the gates of the palace and demanded that Louis XVI and the royal family return to Paris. Popkin writes, “The idea that women’s actions had forced a decisive reversal of the relations between the king and the people underlined the degree to which the Revolution was putting fundamental aspects of French society into question.”<sup>11</sup> The October Days was a paradigm shift in the relationship between Louis XVI and his subjects in that he was now accountable to their will.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 136-139.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 178-179.

## The Downfall of Louis XVI

One of the last and, perhaps, one of the most important events that led to the beginning of the Terror and the dissolution of the monarchical system was “The King’s Flight.” Despite public appearance that he was complying with the new changes to the French government, Louis XVI longed to escape Paris.<sup>12</sup> He realized that leaving France and returning with an army was his only viable option to regain power. On June 20, 1791, the royal family fled Paris. Rumors spread throughout the countryside of Louis XVI sightings as “the king incautiously got out of the carriage at relays while the horses were changed and even engaged in conversation with bystanders.”<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the royal family was stopped in the city of Varennes by national guardsmen and was subsequently returned to Paris.<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath of his failed escape, Louis XVI lost all credibility among the people.<sup>15</sup>

For two years, beginning in 1791, the National Assembly debated the merits and ethics of killing the king and detaching themselves from their monarchical history. The trial of Louis XVI had important implications regarding the idea of the general will, a concept championed by Rousseau. When debating whether Louis XVI should be executed, some members of the National Assembly proposed that it be decided by referendum.<sup>16</sup> This motion ultimately failed, and Louis XVI’s fate was decided by the members of the National Assembly who decreed by a vote of “380 in favor, 310 against” to execute the king.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the government leaders voted not to give the people a choice in the execution of their king is interesting particularly because of their belief in the importance of the general will.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 238-239.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 240-241.

<sup>15</sup> François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 27.

<sup>16</sup> Popkin, 312-313.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 214.

The flight, trial, and execution of Louis XVI created rifts among the leaders of the Revolution. Until that point, the revolutionaries used the nobles and the monarchy as scapegoats for their problems. Now that Louis XVI was out of the picture, the revolutionaries had no one onto whom to deflect their ire. Just because the nobles emigrated and the royal family was imprisoned or dead did not mean that France's problems magically disappeared. The issues over funding the wars with Prussia, Austria, and England, coupled with the persistent problem of growing enough food to feed the armies and the French people, created tension and factionalism within the leadership of the Revolution. The policies that the government enacted in order to deal with these problems and the public dissent that accompanied them became important policies that often sanctioned the use of political violence, which helped create the Reign of Terror.

### The Terror

The Reign of Terror was an integral part of the French Revolution and served as a violent transitional period between the downfall of the monarchy, which came to an end in January 1793 with Louis XVI's execution, and the more stable period of government rule after the Summer of 1794 preceding Napoleon's rise to power. Historian Timothy Tackett describes the Terror as a period in which "an increasingly dictatorial government was promoting denunciation and repression, while surveillance committees were everywhere rooting out 'suspects' and purported traitors."<sup>18</sup> This period saw the mass incarceration of hundreds of thousands of French citizens and the execution of tens of thousands, including eighty-six members of the National Convention.<sup>19</sup> When exactly the Terror began is a matter of scholarly debate. The most common date cited is September 1793 when the notorious Law of Suspects was

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 1-2.

created. This law defined who was considered a suspect and therefore eligible to be executed for betraying the Revolution.<sup>20</sup> Others argue that the Terror started well before September 1793 when Louis XVI was executed. They point to the notorious September Massacres of 1792 when Sans Culottes raided prisons, dragging those imprisoned into the streets and brutally murdering them.<sup>21</sup> Still others date the beginning of the Terror to April 1793 when the Committee of Public Safety, the government body that essentially ran the Terror, was created. Regardless of when it began, the Terror ended in July 1794 after Robespierre's execution.

The causes of the Terror are easier to pinpoint than an exact starting date. One way to think about the Terror in the context of the broader French Revolution is as a period of extreme growing pains when the new republican government tried to fill the power vacuum left by the monarchy. The government also faced significant economic issues including debt and high food prices. The most important contributing factor leading to the Terror was France's ongoing wars with antirevolutionary factions within France and with hostile European states that felt threatened by the Revolution. These wars required raising and supplying armies and commissioning commanders, which proved difficult because most French officers under the *Ancien Régime* were nobles and had since fled France. While economic issues led to riots in the streets, the internal and external military threats posed a direct threat to France's sovereignty. Terrorist policies enacted throughout 1793 and 1794 allowed the government and specific committees, like the Committee of Public Safety, to take the steps they deemed necessary to protect France at any cost. It was this attitude of protecting the Revolution from any and all threats that allowed for the Terror to become as violent as it did.

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<sup>20</sup> Popkin, 359.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 288.

## Robespierre, Danton, and Collot

In its early years, the government of the Terror was not a dictatorship. Within the revolutionary government, factions debated the best ways to fix the urgent domestic and international problems France faced. While each member of the National Convention played a role in the buildup to and implementation of the Terror, three of its leaders stand out: Maximilien Robespierre, Georges Danton, and Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois. The following sections will provide the backstories of these three men in order to establish who they were, what they had in common, and how they differed.

### Maximilien Robespierre

Robespierre was born in the city of Arras and raised by his two aunts in a financially comfortable household. Robespierre lived in Paris for a number of years prior to the Revolution, where he studied at universities and began his career as a lawyer. It was in Paris that his passion of advocating for those who had little and who toiled under the injustices of the *Ancien Régime* became ingrained in his identity. Palmer writes, “He was a competent lawyer, a man of integrity, respected. He won most of his cases, partly because he preferred to defend victims of obvious injustice.”<sup>22</sup> Despite his evident skill as an attorney, Robespierre was an aloof and lonely person who had a profound self-righteous flare.

During the Revolution, as a deputy in the National Assembly, Robespierre was a member of the “Mountain”, along with other prominent revolutionaries including Danton and Jean-Paul Marat. The Mountain, a Jacobin movement, was the largest faction within the Convention and thus had tremendous influence. The Mountain saw themselves as champions of the Revolution and defenders of the poor peasants and working classes of France. Robespierre was also a

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 6.

member of the Committee of Public Safety, which was formed by the National Convention in April 1793. This committee was central to the creation, administration, and execution of government policies during the Terror. Robespierre's work both in the National Convention and in the Committee of Public safety earned him a reputation as a well-respected deputy and allowed him to rise through the ranks, simultaneously earning him the title of the "incorruptible."<sup>23</sup> Robespierre was an admirer of Rousseau and referred to him and his ideas throughout the Terror. Robespierre's legacy as a dictator was solidified in part due to his role in spearheading the deadliest part of the Terror, called the Great Terror, during the summer of 1794. Robespierre's appetite for power and control eventually brought him into conflict with both Danton and Collot and led to his execution in July 1794. This paper will describe how Robespierre used political violence as a tool to deal with international and domestic issues and eliminate political challengers.

### Georges Danton

Danton, like Robespierre, was both a prominent deputy in the Convention and a lawyer by profession. He was born in Arcis-sur Aube, a town southeast of Paris. Like Robespierre, Danton grew up in an economically stable household. He began practicing law in Paris in 1787. Unlike the reserved, antisocial Robespierre, Danton was a boisterous, powerful leader. Indeed, Madame Roland, a figurehead in the Revolution, "found Danton's manners too ... crude for her salon.... Whereas Robespierre kept his emotions under tight control, Danton was unrestrained, both in his oratory and in his private acts."<sup>24</sup> Although he too was a Jacobin, Danton was one of Robespierre's fiercest opponents during the Terror. Danton was elected to be the first president

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<sup>23</sup> Popkin, 302.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 302.

of Committee of Public Safety in 1793. Danton served on the Committee of Public Safety for a short period and was dismissed on July 10, 1793. Danton and his followers, the Indulgents, which included a close childhood friend of Robespierre, Camille Desmoulins, were a powerful oppositional force to Robespierre within the Convention. The Dantonists were openly against the Terror as France's wars began to turn in their favor and stood against radical factions within the French government, most notably the Hébertists. Danton and many of his followers were executed in April 1794 after being accused of conspiring against the Revolution. The events leading to Danton's death were, in part, led by Robespierre and serve as examples of Robespierre's use of political violence to suppress political opponents.

#### Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois

Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, a prominent member of the Hébertist party and of the Committee of Public Safety, "was the nearest of all [the members of the Committee of Public Safety] to being a plain man of the people."<sup>25</sup> Unlike Robespierre and Danton, Collot was born in Paris and was an actor by trade. Since actors were seen as morally corrupt and untrustworthy, Collot was a social outcast. As a performer, he often found himself in bourgeois social circles, but due to his profession he was never accepted. Desperate for fame and recognition, Collot became an author, which was a more respected profession, but he was not particularly successful. Palmer notes that "he was an excitable person, quick to take offense, resentful, and inclined to feel himself persecuted, irritable from being so often snubbed, given to violent gestures and imprudent speech, enjoying dramatic effects, climaxes and tirades, a hearty man of the people whom the more refined who think definitely vulgar...but more than any of his eleven

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<sup>25</sup> Palmer, 15.



future colleagues [on the Committee of Public Safety], he entered the Revolution with an acute sense of personal frustration.”<sup>26</sup> Collot had a different perception of the Revolution and the will of the people than Robespierre and Danton. As a Parisian, he aligned himself to the political party most directly associated with the people of France, the Hébertists. Like other Hébertists, Collot was a spokesman for the increased use of political violence during the Terror, including methods of execution many deemed excessively cruel. When the Hébertist party was wiped out in April 1794, Collot was one of its few surviving members. Collot was the only one of the three main leaders discussed in this paper who survived the Terror, albeit not for long. Although less famous than Robespierre and Danton, Collot was a key figure in the Terror.

Robespierre, Danton, and Collot provide a holistic view of the Terror from three different political perspectives. Their varying backstories and different personalities provide insight into the egos of these leaders, which is crucial to understanding why each embraced political violence as an effective tool during the Terror.

## **Literature Overview**

### **The Historiography of the French Revolution**

The French Revolution was a seminal event that shifted points of view about the relationship between a ruler and those who are ruled. Many scholarly publications address the French Revolution and the rise of Europe’s most important 19<sup>th</sup> century general, Napoleon Bonaparte. One of the preeminent scholars on the historiography of the French Revolution is François Furet. In his book *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Furet analyzes arguments and theories about the French Revolution posed by history’s greatest French Revolution scholars.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 17.

Within the framework of the historiography of the French Revolution, Furet claims that scholars tend to fall into three distinct categories: “a royalist, a liberal, or a Jacobin.” Furet further asserts that “There is no such thing as ‘innocent’ historical interpretation, and written history is itself located in history, indeed is history, the product of an inherently unstable relationship between the present and the past...”<sup>27</sup> The crucial point that Furet makes is that any scholar of the French Revolution inherently takes a one sided approach to interpreting the legacies of the Revolution. In doing so, many use their interpretations of the Revolution, the cause(s) of the Revolution, and the actions of the leaders of the Revolution to make pointed arguments about governments or various societal issues.

This legacy of conflicting views about the French Revolution is not a new phenomenon. As Furet notes, the heated philosophical battles between contemporaries Edmund Burke, who in 1790 pessimistically predicted the coming of the Terror, and Thomas Paine, who defended that actions of the French Revolutionaries, draw attention to the history of the polarity in interpretations of the French Revolution. Furet further elaborates on this trend by highlighting the writings of 19th century French Revolution scholars including Karl Marx, Georges Lefebvre, and Alexis de Tocqueville. By examining the contrasting interpretations of the French Revolution throughout history, it becomes clear that Furet’s argument about the various categories of scholars is true. Whether it was Tocqueville who wrote during the times of Napoleon III or Jean Jaures who was one of the founders of the French socialist party, the French Revolution serves as the crux around which French society, government, and culture revolves.

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<sup>27</sup> Furet, 1.

## The Terror

Due to the depth of scholarship pertaining to the French Revolution itself, it is only fitting that there is an equally deep inquiry into the causes and events of the 1793-1794 Reign of Terror. Although the Terror only lasted one year, the fact that it is discussed in almost every scholarly work about the French Revolution signifies its importance. One notable example of this comes from the writings of revolutionary theorist Crane Brinton. In his book *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Brinton presents various stages of revolution that seem to recur throughout history's most legendary revolutions. Brinton based one of his stages of revolution, which he called "the Terror", on the French Revolution event.<sup>28</sup> There is also significant scholarship as to the origins and causes of the Terror. In four of the most important books that will be used in this paper, Jeremy Popkin's *A New World Begins*, Robert Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*, Dan Edelstein's *The Terror of Natural Right*, and François Furet *Interpreting the French Revolution*, there is uncertainty about the start and end date of the Terror. While some scholars argue that it was the Suppression of the February 1793 Constitution, the execution of Louis XVI, or edicts from the Autumn 1793 like the Law of Suspects, it is hard to pinpoint an exact start date for the Terror. By looking at each of these author's interpretations, one can see that the Terror was not caused by a single catalyst, but rather was the culmination of many things which make it such an ill-defined period during the Revolution. Furthermore, this debate is also important for scholars in debating the causes of the Terror and how the Terror influenced the outcome of the Revolution. Since scholars have different interpretations on the start date of the Terror, the events that they choose to highlight reflect each author's perspectives and goals.

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<sup>28</sup> Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 176-204.

### Robespierre, Danton, and Collot

This paper is a comparative analysis of three of the most important leaders on the Committee of Public Safety: Robespierre, Danton, and Collot. It will become clear that these men agreed and disagreed at different times regarding the use of political violence as an effective tool during the Terror. In regard to literature about these three men, Robespierre is written about the most. Background information on Robespierre will be acquired through the collective works of authors including Palmer, Popkin, Edelstein, and Robespierre biographer Peter McPhee. Each of these scholars offers different ideas about Robespierre's hopes and desires as they pertain to the Revolution, which helps create a well-rounded approach to understand Robespierre and his intentions regarding the use of political violence during the Terror. The work of these scholars and more will be complemented by primary sources of Robespierre's most important speeches, recorded interactions with colleagues, personal notes, and debates in the Convention and in the Committee of Public Safety. These primary sources were largely compiled using the Parliamentary Archive database created by Stanford University and the French National Library and François Aulard's collection of records from the meeting of the Jacobin Club of Paris. The primary sources include transcripts of meetings, debates, and speeches written by or about Robespierre, Danton, and Collot.

Danton is written about second most. He often is mentioned in tandem with Robespierre since Robespierre is inextricably linked to Danton's execution. Danton's place in the history of the Terror comes from his refutation of the ubiquitous use of political violence and his belief that the Terror should end. Palmer, Popkin, and Danton biographer David Lawday provide important accounts about the events that most influenced Danton's beliefs and ultimately led him and his

followers to oppose Robespierre. Scholarly writings about Danton will be complemented by primary source extracts of Danton's speeches and debates from 1793 and 1794.

The last of the three leaders, Collot, is the hardest about whom to find information. While he is referred to in almost all the books about the Terror, it is usually just in reference to an assassination attempt on him and Robespierre in the summer of 1794. Unlike Robespierre and Danton, most of Collot's speeches and writings are lost to history. Luckily, Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled* is widely regarded as the most complete profile of Collot the man and leader. As a result, most of this paper's analysis of Collot will be based on Palmer's groundbreaking research. Palmer's scholarship will be complemented by primary sources from the National Convention and the Jacobin Club accessed through the Parliamentary Archives compiled by Stanford University Libraries and the French National Library and Aulard's collections. Collot was not a big name revolutionary like Robespierre or Danton, but he should be. One area where I have found surprisingly scant literature regarding Collot is his death, or rather lack thereof. That is not to say that he is not dead; he is, but he was the only one of the three Terror leaders discussed in this paper who was not killed during the Terror. The lack of existing literature about this aspect of Collot is rather surprising. Therefore, analysis of why Collot, who was the most radical advocate of the use of political violence, was not guillotined, will prove crucial to this paper's analysis of political violence and Collot's relationship to the *sans-culottes* masses of Paris.

### Political Violence

Political violence is a key aspect of the literature pertaining to the French Revolution. Scholarly works on the Revolution use important moments of political violence as focal points of discussions. For example, in *The Terror of Natural Right*, Dan Edelstein goes into great detail

about the debates among revolutionary leaders about whether there was a legal and moral precedent to execute Louis XVI. It is from these discussions about royal executions or, in the case of the Terror, public executions, that authors explore the intricacies behind the motivations of revolutionary leaders to endorse the use of political violence. This also was a key part in Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*, as the reader saw how government attitudes and policies directly led to or reacted to significant moments when the use of political violence was prominent. Within the context of the Terror, political violence is arguably its most important legacy. Most authors try to play down this legacy by highlighting the remarkable governmental achievements of the revolutionary government. Nevertheless, there is a reason it is called the Terror. Scholars like Popkin tend not to analyze the intricacies of what defines political violence or whether it was even justified. Most of the histories of the Revolution accept the fact that political violence happened. Contemporary studies of the Terror explore what factors made political violence against civilians and political opponents acceptable and even potentially righteous. Whether it is Tocqueville's agricultural and aristocratic focus on the Revolution, Palmer's focus on the Committee of Public Safety, or Edelstein's focus on the philosophical aspects of the Terror, the main thing that ties them together is a recognition and acceptance of the fact that political violence played a major role in the guiding the Terror.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Political Violence**

In order to properly analyze how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot understood and accepted or rejected the use of political violence, there must first be a clear definition of political violence. This paper will rely on the scholarship of Dr. Cindy Sousa who defined political

violence as “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals...political violence is characterized by both physical and psychological acts aimed at injuring or intimidating populations.”<sup>29</sup> This definition provides is a useful and well defined benchmark to help understand the role of political violence within the Terror. The theoretical framework for understanding the use of political violence during the Terror can also be linked to ideas proposed by Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau whose beliefs and arguments were manipulated by some leaders to endorse the use of political violence. The writings greatly influenced how revolutionary leaders such as Robespierre, Danton, and Collot viewed political violence as a means to achieving specific goals. In the case of the Terror, the government’s goal was to root out and destroy those who were seen as potential threats to the Revolution itself. Though the political violence promoted throughout the Terror was mainly physical, in the sense that people were imprisoned or executed, it also created a psychological atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion which only increased the pervasive presence and use of political violence.

### Argument

By analyzing why and the extent to which Robespierre, Danton, and Collot embraced political violence as a tool to address domestic and international threats, I intend to show that political violence was used more as a tool that served a person’s individual desires. This desire varied from eliminating rivals to suppressing genuine anti-revolutionary conspirators to dealing with economic problems. While Danton differs from Robespierre and Collot in that he urged for the end of the Terror and a moderated use of political violence, I propose that his hesitancy to

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<sup>29</sup> Cindy A. Sousa, “*Political Violence, collective functioning and health: A review of the literature, Medicine, Conflict, and Survival*,” Taylor Francis Online. 2013, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13623699.2013.813109?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

endorse political violence hurt his political standing and hastened his death since it put him in direct opposition to Robespierre.

Robespierre initially used political violence as a tool to root out counterrevolutionaries, but as his power grew, his motivation in labeling people as counterrevolutionaries was to maintain his own power, rather than strengthen the Revolution. Danton embraced political violence as a tool that was needed to maintain control of France while it was at war. Once it became apparent that France was winning the wars, Danton rejected political violence and urged leaders, such as Robespierre, to end the Terror since the danger to the Revolution had passed. Collot, a member of the Hébertists party who was dedicated first and foremost to the will of the people, or at least to the *sans-culottes*, his willingness to embrace political violence was rooted in a desire to ensure that the Revolution was controlled by those who started it, namely the French people.

Lastly, I argue that Robespierre, Danton, and Collot used Enlightenment ideals, specifically those of Rousseau, as a moral justification for their actions. I argue that these men manipulated Rousseau's ideological framework to their own ends. While the specifics will be discussed in subsequent sections, it is important to state that Robespierre, Danton, and Collot, as members of the Committee of Public Safety and/or the National Convention, all either endorsed or were complicit in the accepted use of political violence against French citizens. This paper seeks to analyze the intricacies of their acceptance of political violence and their motivations for endorsing it to achieve certain goals.



## Methodology

My analysis of why and the extent to which Robespierre, Danton, and Collot embraced political violence as a strategy to deal with domestic and international factors will be based on their writings and speeches from primary sources and from secondary sources from prominent French Revolution scholars.

The primary sources for my analysis will be articles, speeches, and pamphlets written by Robespierre, Danton, and Collot. Given that each had a different view, an analysis of their writings is crucial to gaining a basic understanding of where they agreed and disagreed on issues pertaining to the use of political violence. These primary sources come from a multitude of sources including the Parliamentary Archives compiled by Stanford University and the French National Library, records from the Jacobin Club of Paris by François Aulard, as well as select extracts from the Works of Robespierre, and the Archive of Lyon. Many of the documents found in these sources are transcripts transcribed by those who were in the room hearing these men debate and argue during this period. Examination and analysis of these documents provides unique insight into the relationships between these men and the extent to which their ideas clashed with each other. The one caveat to this is that although I speak French, I am not trained to translate 18th century French documents. As a result, I will rely on my own knowledge of the French language. Furthermore, since the writings of Rousseau, author of *The Social Contract*, influenced the revolutionaries during this time period, I will compare how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot used this same philosophical text but came to different conclusions about political violence. The combination of primary and secondary sources will allow me to present an analysis of Robespierre, Danton, and Collot that highlights areas in which they agreed and disagreed in the acceptable use of political violence.

In regard to secondary sources, I will rely upon a handful of especially prominent scholars who have studied the Terror, most notably Robert Palmer. Palmer, who wrote *Twelve Who Ruled*, which tells the story of the Terror from a semi-biographical perspective. Palmer describes prominent events of the Terror by identifying the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety. For example, in his documentation of the conquest of Lyon, Palmer tells the city's story based on the actions of one of its main leaders, Collot. A thorough examination of this book not only provides valuable information on the main events, coalitions, and decisions of the Terror, but also biographical information about Robespierre, Danton, and Collot. This book is crucial for understanding these three men and contextualizing them and their actions within the larger Terror. Furthermore, Palmer's scholarly work on Collot is groundbreaking and heralded as the most complete account of his actions. As mentioned in my literature review, I will also utilize secondary source material by other French Revolution scholars, including François Furet, Timothy Tackett, Dan Edelstein, and Jeremy Popkin. These authors' writings provide different perspectives on the history of the Terror and the roles of Robespierre, Danton, and Collot.

### **Structure**

This paper will present key events and ideological themes that occurred during 1793 and 1794 to show the extent to which Robespierre, Danton, and Collot endorsed the use of political violence. They include: the creation of a Foreign Plot, France's economic problems, antirevolutionary dissent in Lyon, the general will, and political violence as a tool to deal with political enemies. The Foreign Plot was a fiction that stipulated that France's European enemies planted spies within France to undermine and destroy the Revolution from within. By defaming people as traitors, politicians like Robespierre and Collot were able to justify the use of political

violence against anyone suspected of working with France's enemies. In addition, the economic problems that France endured challenged the government's ability to adequately feed and supply both the people and armies of France. Political violence became an effective tool in eliminating those who sought to exploit the French people economically either by hoarding foods, charging astronomical prices, or generally being corrupt. Another way that political violence was used during the Terror was to suppress antirevolutionary dissent within France. The elimination of antirevolutionary federalists in Lyon, led by Collot, was one of the most violent and deadly parts of the Terror. By analyzing how political violence was used in Lyon and politicians' reactions to the atrocities that took place there, one can understand the limits of Robespierre and Danton's endorsement of political violence. Furthermore, since the Enlightenment was a source of inspiration for the French revolutionaries, by analyzing how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot interpreted philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, it will be shown how his ideas were interpreted and manipulated in order to support these individuals' goals. Such different interpretations are vital to understanding the attitudes of these men regarding the people of France and the use of political violence during the Terror as an expression of the general will. Lastly, political violence was often used as a tool to deal with political rivals. Analysis of Robespierre's use of political violence to endorse the death of Danton and Collot's use of political violence to endorse the death of Robespierre will show how political violence served as an effective yet brutal tool to eliminate one's rivals.

Additional events and people could be examined to explore the use of political violence during the Terror. However, the diverse roles and integral involvement in these case studies of Robespierre, Danton, and Collot provide a holistic and widespread analysis of the Terror. The case studies will be discussed using primary sources that document the words and actions of

these three men, as well as secondary sources that illuminate the extent to which they endorsed the use of political violence during the Terror.

### **The Foreign Plot**

The leaders of the Terror worried about numerous things that threatened France daily. They feared failing the Revolution, losing wars, going hungry, and the prospect of being executed. Antirevolutionary movements in places like the Vendée and Lyon threatened France from within, while the monarchs of Europe threatened France's borders from without. This created the perfect climate in which politicians could manipulate people's insecurities for their own benefit. Robespierre and Collot benefited from the threat of a Foreign Plot since political violence was viewed favorably if the people being killed were traitors. Both Robespierre and Collot believed in the existence of a Foreign Plot and justified the use of political violence by defaming rivals as traitors. One such rival who became a victim of the Foreign Plot was Danton who was suspected of conspiring with foreign enemies.

The Foreign Plot was masterminded by a fellow Jacobin and ally of Danton, Fabre d'Églantine, who used the threat of foreign espionage in France as a way to manipulate people for his own benefit. In October 1793, Fabre convinced Robespierre and his ally Saint-Just that he uncovered a plot "funded by the British and Austrians ... [that] was designed to destroy the Revolution from within by putting forward ever more extreme measures and pitting good patriots against each other."<sup>30</sup> This Foreign Plot cast doubt upon leaders and general citizenry alike, adding to the suspicion already present during the Terror. It contended that spies proliferated throughout French society bent on destroying the Revolution from within. Fabre used the threat

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<sup>30</sup> Popkin, 382.

of a Foreign Plot to sow suspicion and mistrust among the people of France. The timing of Fabre's invention of the Foreign Plot was all the more believable because France was at war with other European countries resolved to destroy it.

Violence was the chief tool used to root out and destroy suspected foreign agents. It is one thing to accuse someone of being a criminal but quite another to accuse someone of being a foreign agent working against your own country in service to a foreign, hostile government. An act such as sedition was punishable by death. Even though this Foreign Plot was fictional, the fact that leaders like Robespierre fully believed it made it an integral part of the Terror. Indeed, "Robespierre and Saint-Just were strong men with a strong tendency to believe evil of foreigners, and to accept as a fact any conspiracy that they heard of. Fabre d'Eglantine found it easy to persuade them. The story had a certain plausibility. Spies were known to be active."<sup>31</sup>

Robespierre was not a fool, but he was suspicious. Constantly surrounded by danger, he had no reason to dismiss this seemingly credible threat. Ultimately, Fabre's deceit was discovered, and he was killed on April 5, 1794, the same day on which his friend and ally Danton was killed. For nearly seven months this fictional plot impelled the Terror, which impacted and influenced how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot viewed the people of France and government colleagues.

Looking at how each of these leaders was affected by the Foreign Plot will provide important insight into their embrace of political violence.

#### Robespierre's Acceptance of the Foreign Plot and the Use of Political Violence

From Robespierre's perspective, Fabre d'Eglantine's suggestion of a Foreign Plot made perfect sense. Robespierre biographer Peter McPhee noted, "From October onwards,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 113.

Robespierre's mental universe was crowded with unrelenting conspiracies: vice and virtue were the 'opposing spirits'. He now saw the external and internal enemies of the Republic as in league..."<sup>32</sup> Robespierre regarded those suspected of involvement in the Foreign Plot to be anti-liberty and pro-tyranny. He wrote: "Society owes protection only to peaceable citizens...For it, the royalists, the conspirators are only strangers or, rather, enemies. This terrible war waged by liberty against tyranny - is it not indivisible? Are the enemies within not the allies of the enemies without?...are all those men less guilty or less dangerous than the tyrants whom they serve?"<sup>33</sup> Robespierre's use of rhetoric like "Are the enemies within not the allies of the enemies without?" indicates that he subscribed to the notion of a Foreign Plot and the belief that traitors to the Revolution were directly in league with France's European enemies. He called these traitors "assassins who tear our country apart," which supports his assertion that such individuals were not righteous Frenchmen fighting for their political beliefs. Rather, they were corrupt, seditious spies whose cause lacked honor and righteousness. Robespierre concluded his tirade by asking, "Are all those men less guilty or dangerous than the tyrants whom they serve?" There were certainly spies within France, but Robespierre's assumption that all antirevolutionaries were on the payroll of other countries is surprising and telling. His generalization indicates the depth to which he believed in the Foreign Plot and the dangers it posed.

Robespierre's attitude toward those suspected of being foreign spies provides insight as to why he considered political violence acceptable. For Robespierre, the existence of a Foreign Plot justified the mass imprisonment and execution of French citizens. It was a means by which to win the war against other European states and save the Revolution. Robespierre's use of

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<sup>32</sup> Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 172.

<sup>33</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, "Modern History Sourcebook: Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror," Fordham University, accessed 2/5/21, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/robespierre-terror.asp>.

political violence legitimized the brutality of the Terror as a necessary act of defense rather than indiscriminate cruelty. For the French revolutionaries, executing someone accused of supporting tyranny legitimized their own political standing; for how could someone who executed tyrant sympathizers be a tyrant? As François Furet noted, “The war had been desired by the Revolution, precisely because it ‘needed great acts of treason.’”<sup>34</sup> It was these “great acts of treason” that gave Robespierre the political legitimacy to use violence to eliminate those he saw as traitors and enemies of the Revolution. As seen in the cases of the siege of Lyon and the economic Terror, casting one’s enemies negatively was an effective way of justifying even the cruelest actions. The “great actions of treason” to which Furet referred were at the core of the fear behind the Foreign Plot and created a permissive atmosphere of violence in France. It gave leaders like Robespierre the ability to legitimize political violence, especially when it served them.

### The Foreign Plot Catches Up With Danton

Danton’s legacy in regard to the Foreign Plot is not about his promoting the idea, but rather the fact that it was used in the Spring of 1794 to justify his execution. Danton’s relationship with Fabre, coupled with suspicion about his own corruption, ultimately led to his arrest and subsequent execution. While economic corruption was a contributing factor that allowed his enemies to justify the execution, one of the accusations that hurt Danton the most was that he was collaborating with foreign governments to overthrow the Revolution. Rumors about Danton, who devoted his entire adult life to the Revolution, circulated since late 1793. One rumor was that he conspired with the Swiss government to restore the Bourbon family to power. On December 3, 1793 Robespierre spoke against Danton saying, “Danton, you have been a

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<sup>34</sup> Furet, 128.

accused of having emigrated, we have said that you spent time in Switzerland, that your sickness was faked in order to hide your escape from the people; we said that your ambition was to be an official under Louis XVII, that you were the head of the conspiracy.”<sup>35</sup> Robespierre noted that the Convention was divided in its opinion of whether Danton was actually implicated in a plot to restore the monarchy, but the accusation itself was significant. The fact that they accused him of emigrating carried heavy implications since the Revolution in 1789 led to the mass emigration of French nobles who rightfully feared the Revolution. For Robespierre to use the word “emigrated” to describe accusations about Danton’s devotion to the Revolution implied that he was not only accused of being a traitor and conspirator, but of being an aristocratic, corrupt enemy. Furthermore, Robespierre’s proposition that Danton was escaping the people, much like Louis XVI did, combined with Danton’s own personal ambitions, suggested that Danton was no longer loyal to France or the Revolution, but to himself and his own personal interests. Whether Robespierre actually believed this can be debated, but his repeating these accusations to other government officials was a political tool that drew support away from Danton and towards himself.

Danton’s execution is an example of political violence. By examining how the Foreign Plot contributed to Danton’s death, one can see how theories like this provided legitimacy for violent actions. At his trial, Danton defended himself saying, “Men like me cannot be bought; on their brows are imprinted, in ineffaceable characters, the seal of liberty, the genius of republicanism; and I am accused of having crawled at the feet of vile despots!”<sup>36</sup> Danton’s explicit refutation of the charge that he was working with foreign governments attests to the

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<sup>35</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, *La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 5, Séance du 13 Frimaire an II (3 Décembre 1793), 543, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f550.item.r=Lyon#>

<sup>36</sup> Popkin, 398.



powerful fear that the Foreign Plot evoked. Working with a foreign government predictably warranted arrest, but in this instance the accusation was leveled in order to challenge Danton's character and loyalty to the Revolution. Danton's words affirming his loyalty are emotionally charged since such an accusation was an attack on everything in which he believed. The charges against Danton reflect how political violence and the fear of a Foreign Plot meshed. Danton was not executed for actually trying to restore the monarchy; he and the Dantonists were executed because they were political threats to Robespierre. As Popkin notes, "In Robespierre's view, the survival of the Revolution depended on maintaining the unity and authority of the committees. If Danton and Desmoulins could not be persuaded to end their agitation, they would have to be eliminated, regardless of his personal feelings for them."<sup>37</sup> Danton's execution was more than a simple case of imprisoning and executing a suspected traitor. The very fact that it was Danton on trial made it more significant than a random peasant hoarder facing similar accusations of corruption and conspiracy. Danton's trial and execution were by nature political. Popkin speculates that Robespierre rifled through his notes to find interactions with Danton that he could manipulate to disparage Danton and condemn him to death. One such item was the quote from December of 1793 accusing Danton of being complicit in an attempt to restore the monarchy. The accusation of working with a foreign government, underscored by Fabre's fictional Foreign Plot, was a crucial tool for Robespierre to justify Danton's death.

While Danton's association with Fabre was in itself damning due to Fabre's corruption, accusations of Danton's possible collusion with foreign governments was ammunition by political enemies aiming to get rid of him. The threats that these countries presented to France's national armies were real and worrying. This worry increased due to ongoing civil wars in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 397.

France between revolutionaries and antirevolutionaries in places like the Vendée and Lyon. Fear of a Foreign Plot gave the government the legitimacy to use violence to destroy any and all threats to the Revolution. While many of the executions during the Terror were for political reasons, the death of Danton proved that political violence could be used by members of the revolutionary government to eliminate rivals. “There had always been factions, or rather the faction, for there was only one, the faction inspired by foreign interests, which appeared now as the Orléanists, now as the Brissotins, again as the Hébertists, and finally as the cronies of Danton,”<sup>38</sup> notes Palmer. By adopting the Foreign Plot as fact, Robespierre justified the elimination of his rivals, which contributed to the increasing perception of him as a tyrant. Purging powerful leaders like Danton made Robespierre the most influential and powerful member of the Convention and gave him and his followers the freedom to manipulate the Revolution as they saw fit. This period of tyrannical rule by Robespierre only concluded when Robespierre was guillotined, thanks to the actions of other members of the government, including Collot.

#### Collot d’Herbois Adopts the Foreign Plot

Collot d’Herbois legitimized the idea of a Foreign Plot. He referred to suspects as traitors under the employ of foreign governments and, like Robespierre, used the Foreign Plot as a means to endorse political violence. Collot saw a connection between the Foreign Plot and economic irregularity. This led him to endorse harsh punishments for those suspected of hoarding goods and materials. Under the reforms he passed in the summer of 1793 and again during debates over the General Maximum, an important economic law, in the Fall of the same

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<sup>38</sup> Palmer, 297.

year, the one punishment Collot deemed sufficient for economic manipulators was death. “He stressed that it [the economic laws imposed in 1793] had been dictated by circumstances, that internal enemies destroying the People's livelihood were working with the enemy outside.”<sup>39</sup> Like Robespierre, Collot capitalized on the notion that anti-revolutionaries worked for foreign governments in order to maintain the guise that everything they did was in the name of the people of France, and that the people they arrested and killed were no longer French, but traitors who, therefore, deserved death.

### Collot d’Herbois and the Foreign Plot

In a September 1793 speech, Collot expanded on this idea by advocating the use of political violence against those accused of spreading false information or those working for foreign governments. As with economic manipulators, Collot advocated that the punishment for these people should be harsh. “Most of the counter-revolutionaries who are awaiting judgement from the exceptional tribunal, often do not have any other crimes to reproach themselves, other than spreading false news in order to achieve their designs.”<sup>40</sup> These words give the impression that Collot defended the suspects, saying that their only crime was spreading false information and, therefore, that they should be forgiven. It is the complete opposite. Rather, Collot identified different types of “internal enemies” and advocated that the people be merciless in dealing with them. Later in the speech Collot said, “You declared yesterday that all beings, unworthy of being called a man, would be deported... It amounts to more than 40,000 [men]; and where are you

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Mansfield. "Collot D'Herbois at the Committee of Public Safety: A Revaluation" *The English Historical Review* 103, no. 408 (1988): 565-87, accessed February 8, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/572692>. 574

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, “Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793,” *Archives Parlementaires*, 369, accessed 2/5/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/374/?byte=3056269>

going to deport them? In the countries that neighbor you? These would create new arms that you would be giving to our enemies for our battle.”<sup>41</sup> Collot raises a valid point. Since these suspects were at the least sympathetic to and at the most under the employ of foreign governments, deporting them to other countries would not be an effective means of eliminating the threat they posed to the Revolution.

The solution suggested by Collot demonstrates his stance on how political violence should be used to deal with traitors: “You must employ the ships to a better use, and lock them up until peace [the wars end], at that time, banish them from the land of liberty.”<sup>42</sup> While such punishment does not match the brutality one came to expect from Collot, his approach was pragmatic. He noted that there were 40,000 people implicated as antirevolutionary traitors, which was more than the total number of people executed during the entirety of the Terror. Collot most likely understood that the logistics of systematically executing 40,000 individuals would prove impractical. However, imprisoning these traitors still was a form of political violence, “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals.”<sup>43</sup> Collot’s advocacy of imprisonment was both a physical and a psychological means of destroying antirevolutionary sentiment. Near the end of his speech Collot declared that his proposed treatment of suspected traitors would serve “to set an important example to the enemy of the people and to those who refuse to recognize their sovereignty.”<sup>44</sup> Collot intended to set an example for those who did not

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<sup>41</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, “*Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*,” Archives Parlementaires, 368. Accessed 2/5/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/374/?byte=3056269>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Sousa.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, “*Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*,” Archives Parlementaires, 368. Accessed 2/5/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/374/?byte=3056269>

recognize the sovereignty of the people, in other words, monarchies. By assuming that these traitors conspired with the monarchs of Europe either directly or indirectly through a shared political philosophy, Collot promoted the notion of a Foreign Plot.

### Conclusion: Universal Fear of a Foreign Plot

While the Foreign Plot most likely was a fiction created by Fabre d'Églantine, the fear and suspicion it aroused warranted the use of political violence during the Terror. Even if members of the Convention did not know about Fabre d'Églantine's Foreign Plot, ongoing wars and revolutionary movements in France gave them legitimate cause to fear and feel threatened by foreign governments. This section focused on the Foreign Plot's role in justifying the execution of Georges Danton, one of the most renowned and respected leaders of the Revolution. While Danton's death was promoted mainly for political reasons, it signaled that nothing and no one was more important than the will of the people. It is important to note that in all of the cases of political violence presented so far, there never was an instance of unjustified violence. The severity of the brutality was of concern and debate, but in each situation, threats to the revolution from internal and external forces vindicated its use. Furthermore, the Foreign Plot was a tool by which people like Robespierre and Collot fomented more suspicion about traitors within the French public. This not only contributed to the already palpable sense of fear and suspicion, but served as justification to dispose of political rivals.

### Economic Problems as an Influencing Factor on Political Violence

Among the many challenges tackled by the leaders of the French Revolution, one of the most problematic was how to keep the economy stable in order to provide relatively inexpensive

goods to the people of France lest they face starvation. This issue was among the most pressing that instigated the riots that evolved into the French Revolution in 1789. During the Terror, the French government was burdened by similar problems as Louis XVI and his government. It faced economic deficits while financing France's ongoing wars and domestic projects. Popkin argues that "With great difficulty, it [the Convention] had kept the urban population from facing actual starvation and had provided its armies with enough supplies to enable them to prevail."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, leaders of the revolutionary government, like Robespierre, Danton, and Collot, utilized political violence as a means of maintaining economic control. This section will examine how political violence was incorporated into economic legislation and describe how economics and violence were closely connected. Both Robespierre and Collot believed that political violence was an effective tool to deal with those trying to interfere in France's economy. However, Robespierre disagreed with Collot as to the extent to which political violence should be used. In contrast, Danton believed that a structural approach, not political violence, was the proper way to fix France's broken economic system and bolster its economy. Economics came to play a key role in justifying Danton's death since his association with corrupt individuals compromised his public image.

#### Collot's Violent Approach to Dealing with France's Problems

Collot's belief in the efficacy of political violence as a tool formed the cornerstone of his economic policies during the Terror. As an Hébertist and a native Parisian, Collot was a man of the people, specifically the *sans-culottes*. The *sans-culottes* wielded tremendous influence and power over the Convention mostly through intimidation. In relation to economics, "The *sans-*

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<sup>45</sup> Popkin, 416.

*culottes* wanted bread and demanded Terrorist measures against the merchants and ‘*les riches*,’ suspected of hoarding grain.”<sup>46</sup> Collot was the man to deliver for them. His agricultural initiatives were particularly important during the summer of 1793 when he pushed through a series of anti-hoarding, price fixing, and tax laws.<sup>47</sup> These laws, primarily supported by the *sans-culottes*, were designed to address the problem of people who were hoarding food or charging astronomical prices for staple goods. Hoarding automatically increased the demand for specific goods, which drove up the cost to unreasonably high prices. The laws endorsed by Collot during the summer of 1793 were designed to set fixed prices in order to make sure that the people of Paris would not be gouged. Collot’s initiatives relied on the appointment of governmental representatives who would be stationed throughout France and charged with monitoring and enforcing the law. The punitive measures Collot endorsed for these laws were explicit about the use of political violence. They allowed for two possible outcomes: acquittal or death.<sup>48</sup> Violators were often jailed while they awaited trial to see whether or not they would be executed.

Collot’s system led to widespread citizen arrests based mostly on conjecture. Due to the severity of the law, merely accusing someone of hoarding food or refusing to pay the proper taxes was an immediate cause for arrest.<sup>49</sup> This meant that petty feuds unrelated to anything economic could land someone in jail if another person accused them of something suspect. Such arrests, the stark outcome of which was acquittal or death, fall under the category of political violence as defined by Dr. Sousa: “the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals.”<sup>50</sup> This effective tool to silence dissenters or non-conformers created what Paul Mansfield

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<sup>46</sup> Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 138.

<sup>47</sup> Mansfield 567.

<sup>48</sup> Palmer, 40-41.

<sup>49</sup> Mansfield, 567.

<sup>50</sup> Sousa.

referred to as “a veritable economic terror.”<sup>51</sup> Collot’s support of such laws during the summer of 1793 demonstrate that he was not only aware of the economic problems that France faced, but that had no patience or sympathy for those trying to take advantage of the situation. Despite the harshness of the laws he promoted, Collot’s embrace of political violence was based on the pragmatic need for a strong economy rather than on baseless cruelty.

### The Law of Suspects and the General Maximum: Terror and Economics

The Law of Suspects was one of the most powerful pieces of legislation introduced in 1793. It established the criteria for someone to be considered a suspect and outlined the general punishment for those found guilty. The law provided broad, unspecific definitions of what makes someone a suspect, with the result of sowing vast fear and mistrust throughout France. The law identified six kinds of suspects, including “those who, by their conduct, relations or language spoken or written, have shown themselves to be enemies of liberty; those who could not give a satisfactory account of their means of support or their discharge of civic duties...”<sup>52</sup> and others ranging from being an emigre to nobles who did not show absolute fidelity to the revolution. With such broad definitions, this law essentially qualified anyone to be accused of being a suspect. After arrest, the normal course of action was for suspects to remain in jail while awaiting trial. At the trial, the accused would either be exonerated, guillotined, exiled, or imprisoned again. Due to the non-specific nature of the Law of Suspects, people could accuse each other at will of being antirevolutionary suspects. Collot and Robespierre were obsessively fearful of suspects and knew they had to be dealt with severely. Yet Collot’s use of political violence to deal with suspects exceeded anything Robespierre could stomach. “He [Collot]

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<sup>51</sup> Mansfield, 570.

<sup>52</sup> Palmer, 67.



advises... that suspects be herded into mined houses, and that the mines be exploded.”<sup>53</sup> Such a method of execution was so monstrous that merely by endorsing it Collot set himself apart from other members of the Convention or the Committee of Public Safety, even among those who supported political violence.

The timing of the Law of Suspects was equally important. It was introduced mere weeks before the next sweeping economic law, the General Maximum, was instituted. The General Maximum set universal maximum prices for staples deemed to be of prime importance. This included meat, fish, butter, beer, salt, iron, steel, lead, and cloth. Robert Palmer describes the General Maximum as “one of the fundamental laws of the Terrorist regime. Like the Law of Suspects, it systematized and extended a body of practices that already existed haphazardly.”<sup>54</sup> The Law of Suspects and the General Maximum go hand in hand and reflect the relationship between political violence and economics. Collot advocated the necessity of a law for the punishment of suspects saying, “Those accused of being suspects should be categorized with those who procure exorbitant commercial benefits.”<sup>55</sup> He pressed for the most severe punishment possible for those accused of being suspects, the most obvious of whom were merchants and those who conspired to hoard or take advantage of the French people during wartime and famine when resources were scarce. Collot further endorsed economic terrorism by urging the people of France to support this policy saying, “Citizens you cannot hesitate to punish these traitors.... I would add that it is time you deal a final hit on the mercantile aristocracy.... I demand that you

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 383, accessed 2/14/21.  
<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/389/?byte=3199010>

include suspicious people, the merchants who sell food at an exorbitant price.”<sup>56</sup> To Collot, any and all people who hoarded goods or unfairly charged poor citizens for food were akin to antirevolutionary suspects and deserved to be tried and probably killed. Collot faced resistance among his colleagues in the Convention, including Fabre d’Églantine who said, “No particular individual can judge how exorbitant a price is; only the people at large can be a good judge, because the people in general are good and just.”<sup>57</sup> Fabre d’Églantine’s rebuke of Collot was probably meaningless and did little to dissuade Collot’s support of punishing hoarders. In theory and in practice, Collot was more of an advocate for the average citizen of France than the other members of the Convention. Despite what Fabre claimed, Collot was not speculating about what was best for the economic future of the people of France. Rather, he put it into practice and used political violence as a means of enforcing it.

### Robespierre’s Reaction to Collot and Terror Economics

Like Collot, Robespierre understood the problems and damage of poor economic and agricultural management due to governmental incompetence. He believed, although to a lesser extent than Collot, that violence could be used as a tool to deal with these issues. On May 10, 1793, Robespierre asked, “Should we therefore be surprised that so many idiotic shopkeepers, so many selfish bourgeois still maintain towards craftsmen that insolent disdain that the nobles lavished on the bourgeois as well as the shopkeepers.”<sup>58</sup> Robespierre’s words demonstrate the

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<sup>56</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 368, accessed 2/14/21.

<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/374/?byte=3056269>

<sup>57</sup> Fabre d’Églantine, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 383, accessed 2/14/21.

<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/389/?byte=3199010>

<sup>58</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Paris E. Leroux, 1910), 498.

<http://archive.org/details/oeuvrescomplte09robeuoft>

disdain he held for all those who sought to undermine the French economy, especially aristocrats. Later that Fall, Robespierre endorsed Collot's proposal for suspects to be imprisoned and tried in court saying, "A representative of the people, a witness to a damaging act, has to avenge the angered people, robbed by a greedy merchant... Collot's decree is a helpful revolutionary act."<sup>59</sup> Robespierre, like Collot, saw the connection between economic deviants and antirevolutionary suspects. By endorsing Collot, he also sanctioned Collot's desire to treat suspects mercilessly.

Despite his tendency to agree with Collot in principle, Robespierre refuted one of Collot's arguments. During a speech about the arrest of suspects, Collot had stated that the "the evil, the enemy of the people, hide behind barriers, behind which they can attack and assassinate liberty! It was for the people that these things were decreed; it is he [the people] alone who have to use it [their power] against their enemies."<sup>60</sup> Many within the Convention found this sentiment troubling, since it seemed that Collot endorsed mob rule by advocating that people should take justice into their own hands. The members of the Convention distrusted the people and were fearful of their power. That is why after praising Collot's strong words against hoarders, Robespierre admonished him, saying that Collot's law was "a law which... could be construed as arbitrary, and in a sense disastrous for the patriots."<sup>61</sup> The disaster to which Robespierre referred was that which would occur if the decision of who was a suspect and how they should be punished was left to the will of the people rather than to their elected

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<sup>59</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 383, accessed 2/14/21.

<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/389/?byte=3199010>

<sup>60</sup> Collot d'Herbois, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 368, accessed 2/14/21.

<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/374/?byte=3056269>

<sup>61</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 383, accessed 2/14/21.

<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/389/?byte=3199010>

representatives. He also believed that such “arbitrary” enforcement of the proposal could potentially be injurious to legitimate patriots who fortuitously were swept up in mob rule. From the perspective of political violence, Robespierre’s admonishment of Collot’s seemingly negligent endorsement of indiscriminate violence indicates where these two leaders’ thinking diverged. In a speech delivered on September 25, 1793, Robespierre declared, “It does not just take great acts, but great characters, great virtues, it must have men who propose strong measures... who [never] ceases to serve the people.”<sup>62</sup> When it came to economics, Robespierre at the very least admired Collot’s zeal for punishing suspects in the name of the people and in defense of the economy. The problem, however, was that Collot trusted the people implicitly and Robespierre did not. In regard to economics, this means that Robespierre was looking at the macro perspective rather than the micro. Yet like Collot, he believed in punishing suspects if they were found to be price manipulators or hoarders.

#### The Role of Economically Inspired Political Violence in the Death of Danton

Georges Danton’s death highlights the tipping point between responding to the will of the people and being self-serving. Indeed, Danton’s death was due in part to him being perceived as corrupt and working with others who are corrupt. Despite being an influential revolutionary leader, Danton was destroyed politically and sentenced to death partially due to his economic misdeeds. Whether Danton was actually corrupt does not matter. What matters is that the people believed that he was corrupt. The Law of Suspects codified what had long been a widely accepted practice: the detainment of anyone suspected of anything antirevolutionary. As

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<sup>62</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXV du 23 Septembre 1793 au 3 Octobre 1793*, 159, accessed 1/24/21.  
<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/76/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/165/>

discussed, those labeled as suspects were accused of hoarding, manipulating prices, and pretty much anything else that would allow someone to profit from trading goods. Jeremy Popkin writes, “The fact that some Danton’s supporters, particularly Fabre d'Églantine, were truly guilty of crimes cast legitimate suspicion on Danton himself.”<sup>63</sup> Fabre d'Églantine, who was identified earlier as a critic of Collot's economic policies, was accused of corruption and embezzlement. It was Fabre who perpetuated the foreign plot, the theory that foreign powers sought to overthrow the Revolution from within. While sending the government on a hunt to track down culprits, Fabre manipulated stocks and profited significantly from the Revolution. Fabre was an ally of Danton and, inadvertently, an architect of Danton’s demise. “Danton’s own record in money matters was not above reproach. He returned to Paris in an unfavorable light, seemingly as a defender of corruption.”<sup>64</sup> Danton was one of the most renowned, respected, and powerful revolutionary leaders. If he was susceptible of being accused of treachery due to doubts about his economic legitimacy, then anyone was.

Months before his execution in April 1794, Danton was one of the most ardent supporters of economic reforms. Seeing that the wars in the north were going well, Danton wanted to shift focus away from the violence of war towards the efficient management of markets. In September 1793 Danton declared, “Our brothers in the Army of the North have just established the honor of France; it is at the moment where they are going to be rescued that we must take care of them, there exists a committee that stagnates progress of operations; it is that which examines the markets.”<sup>65</sup> The committee to which Danton referred was charged with managing the markets

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<sup>63</sup> Popkin, 399.

<sup>64</sup> Palmer, 256.

<sup>65</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXXIV du 12 Septembre 1793 au 22 Septembre 1793*, 53, accessed 2/5/21.  
<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/75/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/59/?byte=447387>

and implementing reforms to maximize the efficiency of France's economy. Danton was determined to improve the situation for the troops and believed that the way to do so was by fixing France's economic failures. Danton's devotion was not to political factions or to retaining power, but to France itself. When discussing the General Maximum in the Convention, Danton sparked a debate among his colleagues by saying, "The Convention decreed that there will be a maximum for the price of grain, uniform throughout all of the republic. I ask the question... how will the departments who cannot collect grain be able to obtain it?"<sup>66</sup> Danton was proud and assertive in the Convention, admonishing what he viewed as inept economic practices enforced by the Convention. He believed that the most efficient way to enforce the equal and fair distribution of resources was not through fear, but through fixing problems in the existing economic framework.

Danton's approach to dealing with economic issues was not contingent on violence, but on the strength of the selflessness of the population of France and their willingness to put selfish desires behind the needs of the state. Conversely, Robespierre and Collot looked at the problems of hoarding and price manipulation as ruses by unjust or corrupt people trying to undermine the Revolution. Their solution to remedy the situation was to use political violence. Danton, however, did not believe that political violence was a necessary tactic in achieving his economic goals. He believed that government reforms would create a better system. Danton said, "The people, who are always just, will not pay attention to the little inconveniences that are going to happen in the department where the maximum is less today that you are trying to establish; but they will applaud a law that ensures sustenance for the army and the entire Republic."<sup>67</sup> Danton

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<sup>66</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799)*, 359, accessed 2/5/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/74/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/365/?byte=3219914>

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 359.

did not put the blame on suspects or antirevolutionaries. He did not rely on fear as a method of control. Danton believed that the welfare of France itself was more important than the whims of individuals and argued that the people understood that as well. He believed that the people willingly would endure hardship and deprivation in order to keep France's economy alive and its people and armies fed. However, this was folly. Danton was so out of touch with what the "people" actually wanted that his faith in a "fix the system approach" instead of a "use violence to control everything" approach directly contributed to his demise. Whether he was wrong to suggest a non-violent course of action in order to help the French economy is a matter of debate. What Danton, a robust and obviously well-fed man, did not glean was that when one's entire family is starving to death, it is very hard if not impossible to take a macroeconomic outlook and say that death by starvation is for the greater good. While Robespierre and Collot's solutions were not any better in actually fixing France's problems, their use of political violence in order to punish those seeking to undermine the welfare of the economy was done in good faith. Danton's refutation of the use of violence in favor of trying to improve the system, though also not the perfect solution, demonstrates how he negatively viewed the role of political violence in achieving political goals.

### Conclusion

The revolutionary government had tremendous difficulties in fulfilling its responsibility to feed and sustain the people of France while simultaneously supplying and supporting the armies in order to keep other European countries at bay. Government policies including the Law of Suspects and the General Maximum were severe because the Revolution would not survive without treating harshly those who hoarded supplies or manipulated prices just to make a profit.

Political violence, as a response to economic and agricultural corruption, was not simply a matter of brutality. Rather, it was a necessity. Collot's continued endorsement of indiscriminate political violence was strongly influenced by his devotion to the *sans-culottes* and general hatred for those who would seek to harm the people of France. Robespierre agreed with the idea of laws like the General Maximum but was unwilling to endorse the arbitrary justice that Collot envisioned. This may have been in part due to the fact that unlike Collot, Robespierre favored the idea of being a servant of the people, but was mistrustful of them and their power. Danton viewed the victories of the French armies in the north as a sign of success and an indicator that the Terror did not need to be expanded. His firm rhetoric indicates that he understood the necessity of strong government and stringent economic regulations. In the end, however, it was Danton's connection to people like Fabre d'Églantine and the rumor that he himself was corrupt that led to his death. In the French Revolution, strong rhetoric was not enough; action also was required and Danton's refusal to support political violence may be evidence of why he was the first of three men featured in this paper to be a victim of the Terror.

### **Political Violence in Practice: Terror in Lyon**

Year I (1793), as it was called by the revolutionaries, was a time of extreme brutality that built upon the violent origins of the French Revolution. In January of that year, ferocious debates within the revolutionary government culminated in the execution of Louis XVI. Antirevolutionary factions throughout France, including in the city of Lyon and, most famously, in the Vendée region, threatened the survival of the Revolution. Also endangering the survival of the Revolution were ongoing wars with the European monarchs along France's borders which jeopardized contiguity and strained French resources. Amidst the chaos of foreign and



domestic war, food shortages, economic insecurities, and a fledgling experimental government, the leaders of the newly formed Committee of Public Safety began to advocate violence, imprisonment, and death as the most effective tools for suppressing threats to the Revolution. This suppression was felt heavily in the city of Lyon, France's second largest city and an important economic center. This section will describe the barbaric methods of suppression employed by Collot d'Herbois in Lyon. It also will examine Robespierre and Danton's reactions to these atrocities, thereby revealing each leader's perspective on the use of political violence as a tool with which to suppress threats to the Revolution.

### The Importance of Controlling Lyon

Lyon was not the average French town. It was not agrarian and its citizens were not rural peasants. The citizens of Lyon were heavily involved in commerce and played an important role in manufacturing supplies for France's armies.<sup>68</sup> Lyon is situated on the Rhône River and was historically a major trading hub since the Roman Empire. As an economic hub that is centrally located in France, controlling the city was vital to the ongoing war effort. After all, how could the French government move troops and supplies to different military fronts if movement within France was restricted because of antirevolutionary opposition? Due to its economic success and strategic military importance, Lyon became a target of the left wing radical factions within the Convention, namely the Hébertists, who viewed successful Lyonnais citizens as bourgeois elites responsible for the economic ruin of France. Furthermore, since Lyon was a regional hub of antirevolutionary dissent, the Committee of Public Safety felt that subduing this

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<sup>68</sup> Aidan Turek, *The Architecture of Violence: The Reign of Terror and the Character of Bloodshed*, Trinity College, n.d., 96, accessed 1/25/21.  
<https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1872&context=theses>

antirevolutionary fervor was necessary for political, strategic, and economic reasons, as well as for the ideological survival of the Revolution itself.

To ensure the survival of the Revolution by suppressing antirevolutionaries in Lyon, the Convention adopted a series of objectives. On October 12, 1793, the Convention declared, “The city of Lyons shall be destroyed. The buildings of the rich shall be demolished; only the houses of the poor will remain, the houses of the patriots who have been misguided, the buildings used for industry and the monuments devoted to humanity and public instruction.”<sup>69</sup> The use of words like “destroy” and “demolish” show how seriously the Convention viewed the situation in Lyon. Also included in the October 12 declaration was the fourth objective which stated, “The name of Lyons shall be erased from the list of cities of the Republic. The houses still standing will bear the name of *Ville-Affranchie* - the Liberated City.”<sup>70</sup> The word “erased” is used both literally and symbolically in this instance. Not only would the name of the city be changed, but so would the nature of the city as a bastion of resistance to the Revolution. This aggressive use of rhetoric, while not explicitly promoting violence, was interpreted by leaders like Collot as a governmental sanction to use severe methods of suppression, including violence, as a way to subdue the antirevolutionaries in Lyon.

### Collot Brings the Terror to Lyon

The Committee of Public Safety sent Collot to Lyon because it knew that he accepted violence as a key tactic of suppression. Examining Collot’s attitudes and tactics throughout his time spearheading the eradication of antirevolutionary movements in Lyon shows the extent to

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<sup>69</sup> Bruno Benoît, *Extrait du Procès Verbal de la Convention Nationale*, Archives Municipales de Lyon, accessed March 13, 2021. <http://www.archives-lyon.fr/static/archives/contenu/64parcours/Recherch/benoit/105.htm>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

which he adopted political violence. The methods implemented by Collot became a point of controversy and debate within the Committee of Public Safety, although initially the Committee “urged them to be severe.”<sup>71</sup> The objectives set forth by the Convention regarding the destruction of Lyon mainly referred to deposing the elites of the city and destabilizing the institutions that supported them. As noted above, one of the principles that the Convention declared on October 12 was “The buildings of the rich shall be demolished.”<sup>72</sup> Collot’s punitive actions went further than the Committee intended. Indeed, he “came to Lyons as a man bent on the annihilation of an accursed city.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Collot declared, “The explosion of mines, etc., the devouring activity of flame can alone express the omnipotence of the people; its will cannot be checked like that of tyrants; it must have the effect of thunder.”<sup>74</sup> Collot’s desire to bring the city of Lyon to its knees is perhaps the best indication of the extent to which he embraced political violence. Collot’s rhetoric, reminiscent of biblical fire and brimstone, indicates that he took this mission seriously and that he meant business. Collot believed that he represented the voice of the people and that through his actions in Lyon he was not just accomplishing the Committee’s objectives, but serving as the people’s patriot and champion. On October 17, 1793, ahead of his departure for Lyon, Collot Declared, “It is not Collot d’Herbois who is departing for Lyon, it is the representative of the people who is going deploy the power of the nation, in order to contain the rebels...”<sup>75</sup> The irony of Collot’s admiration for the people of France is that he adopted crueler than necessary tactics in order to instill fear in those French citizens who did not share his values. In reality, Collot was not a representative of all the people

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<sup>71</sup> Palmer, 161.

<sup>72</sup> Benoit.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>75</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 5, Séance du 8 Brumaire an II (29 Octobre 1793), 486, accessed 2/2/21. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f493.item.r=Lyon>

of France. He was a representative of those like the *sans-culottes* who believed in the validity and necessity of a bloody campaign.

Collot thought the best way to control Lyon and suppress revolt against the national government was to make the people afraid. The methods he employed successfully instituted the fear he sought to instill. Yet after nearly a month in Lyon, Collot was dissatisfied with the progress his regime was making. To assuage his frustration that only twenty people a day were dying, Collot endorsed new methods of political violence. Infamously, Collot marched sixty Lyon citizens, found guilty by the Lyon provisional revolutionary court, from the city to a place known as the Broteaux. There the prisoners were placed in open ditches and shot with cannons; survivors were killed by dragoons. This continued again the next day when two-hundred prisoners were marched outside the city, tied together, and raked with grapeshot.<sup>76</sup> The victims were then dumped en mass into shallow graves. Palmer notes that “within a few weeks the municipality had to sprinkle them with quicklime to prevent pestilence. Another hundred were similarly put to death after a pause of two days.”<sup>77</sup> After seven months of brutal suppression, it is estimated that nearly two-thousand people had been executed in Lyon, which constituted “more than a tenth of all those sentenced by revolutionary courts for all France during the whole period of the Terror.”<sup>78</sup> Though Collot returned to Paris before the number rose to two-thousand, his policy of ruthless suppression in Lyon is a testament to the brutality of the Terror in general and his unflinching embrace of political violence. Such brutal tactics rightfully earned Collot the reputation as a radical and set the standard to which future acts of political violence were compared. While not all executions during the Terror were carried out for the same reasons,

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<sup>76</sup> Palmer, 169-170.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 170.

Collot's willingness to endorse brutal methods of killing and instilling fear set him apart from Robespierre and Danton.

### Robespierre and the Crisis in Lyon

Robespierre was one of the chief leaders of the effort to raze Lyon in order to destroy every form of antirevolutionary dissent. His insistence on the violent suppression of Lyon's citizens was not simply a matter of cruelty but a campaign to thwart internal and external threats to the Revolution itself.<sup>79</sup> On October 14, Robespierre declared "I see the men who have assassinated the memory of the heroes of liberty... [In Lyon] there are unpunished scoundrels, traitors escaping the vengeance of the nation, and the innocent who have perished under their fists."<sup>80</sup> Robespierre's statement provides insight to his perception of the problems in Lyon and the necessity of violence as a means to achieve his goals. Although he did not adopt the same attitude as Collot, in that he did not support the mass murder of people, his attitudes are clearly in line with that of the Convention. Robespierre's words also illustrate his conviction that any and all vengeance against the antirevolutionaries was justified. To Robespierre, the destruction of revolutionary sentiment in Lyon was not simply a matter of subduing a warring faction, for he believed that these people were the enemies of liberty and, therefore, the enemies of the true people of France.

Robespierre's endorsement of the use of political violence in Lyon put him in opposition to fellow members of the government including Georges Couthon, the first member of the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>80</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, "*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*" Tome 5, Séance du 23 du Premier Mois de l'An II (14 Octobre 1793), 458, accessed 2/2/21. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f465.item.r=Lyon>

Committee of Public Safety sent to manage the situation in Lyon. Couthon was quickly dismissed from these responsibilities due to his unwillingness to indiscriminately kill civilians. Robespierre admonished Couthon's reluctance, saying: "Traitors must be unmasked and struck without pity. These principles, adopted by the National Convention, may alone save the country."<sup>81</sup> Robespierre's sentiment indicates his willingness to endorse political violence in order to quell antirevolutionary action in Lyon. Yet Robespierre's willingness to use brutal means of execution as Collot had, helps create an understanding of how he and Collot differed in their embrace of political violence when working to achieve the same goal.

#### Governmental Disagreements Over Collot's Actions in Lyon

Collot's actions in Lyon became a focal point of debate within the Committee of Public Safety whose members, including Robespierre, were safely located in Paris. As is true with any significant occurrence, the events in Lyon were met with varying degrees of admiration and disgust among the members of the Committee. Traditionally, when members of the Committee went on missions, as Collot had, they corresponded with the main Committee body in Paris. Yet there are few documents written by Collot about his measures in Lyon. Although Collot undoubtedly embraced political violence, his reluctance to brag about his accomplishments to the Committee hints to his recognition that others, even those who normally embraced political violence as a legitimate tool, felt that his actions in Lyon went too far. Still, Collot was proud enough to brag about his actions to a friend in a letter dated 15 Frimaire (December 15). Palmer speculates that "Had [Collot] believed that Robespierre and the Committee would be as enthusiastic as he was, he would probably have sent a more direct and more glowing account"<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Palmer, 157.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 171.

to the Committee. Despite Collot not sharing explicit details about his exploits, a letter that he sent to the Committee on December 21 indicates that he perceived that the Committee and Robespierre still supported him and his mission in Lyon. Collot wrote, “We must reanimate the courage of our Jacobin brothers in the *Coumme-Affranchie* [Lyon]. I have spoken with the Committee of Public Safety and Robespierre himself charged himself with the duty of writing to our disheartened brothers [the Jacobins of Lyon].”<sup>83</sup> As mentioned earlier, Robespierre favored the use of political violence in Lyon and was quoted as saying “No, their [the defenders of liberty] memory has to be avenged. These monsters must be unmasked and exterminated, or I must perish!”<sup>84</sup> Yet Collot’s hesitancy to truthfully report his actions to Robespierre and the rest of the Committee of Public Safety illustrates that even he believed that his execution of political violence was extreme. Indeed, the Committee of Public Safety “believed in the Terror, in creating confidence by fear, and purity by excision. They did not intend to have two thousand persons killed, or to have massacres theatrically staged to the taste of overheated playwrights [Collot]...”<sup>85</sup>

As the violence in Lyon continued, some on the Committee, including Robespierre, began to admonish Collot for his actions. Since Collot was a member of the Committee of Public Safety and a de facto member of the radical Hébertist faction, the Committee, for political reasons, could not arrest him. Instead, Robespierre advocated for the

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<sup>83</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 5, Séance du 3 Nivose An II (23 Décembre 1793), 573, accessed 2/2/21.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f580.item.r=Lyon>

<sup>84</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 5, Séance du 23 du Premier Mois de l’An II (14 Octobre 1793), 458, accessed 2/2/21.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f465.item.r=Lyon>

<sup>85</sup> Palmer, 173.

arrest of Charles-Philippe Ronsin, one of Collot's collaborators in Lyon.<sup>86</sup> Robespierre's willingness to arrest Ronsin, who was hardly as culpable as Collot, alludes to the fact that Robespierre, who favored the brutal suppression of dissent in Lyon, felt that Collot's actions went too far. Politically, Robespierre kept his allies close and defended them. If Robespierre saw someone as an enemy, he would, at least, do everything possible to take away their power and, at most, have them executed. The arrest of Ronsin and other deputies who served in Lyon indicates that Robespierre did not subscribe to the radical ideology of Collot and the Hébertists.

Robespierre was criticized for arresting Ronsin by other influential leaders like Jacques Hébert who "demands the punishment of the slanderers who arrested Ronsin."<sup>87</sup> Hébert's strong words reflect the growing factionalism within the Convention. Even if members of the Convention supported the mission in Lyon, it was clear that disagreements over the proper way to use political violence during the Terror was not agreed upon by all.

#### Danton's Attitudes Regarding the Events in Lyon

Danton was heralded as one of the most imposing personalities of the Revolution, but his opinions regarding the necessity of conquering Lyon and the use of political violence to quell dissent there set him apart from Robespierre and Collot. By late 1793, Danton had been removed from the Committee of Public Safety although he still was the leader of a significant faction within the Convention. Despite not serving on the Committee during the campaign in Lyon, Danton made clear his initial feelings about the antirevolutionaries in Lyon. In August 1793,

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<sup>86</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, "*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*" Tome 5, Séance Extraordinaire du 27 Frimaire An II (17 Décembre 1793), 563, accessed 2/2/21. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f570.item.r=Lyon>

<sup>87</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, "*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*" Tome 5, Séance du 1er Nivôse An II (21 Décembre 1793), 570, accessed 2/2/21. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f577.item.r=Ronsin>



Danton spoke in the Convention about the urgency of dealing with the rebels and on December 18, 1793, about how the aristocrats of Lyon were murderers and enemies of justice.<sup>88</sup> Danton recounted the ordeals experienced by two representatives of the National Convention, Pierre-Claude Nioche and Jean-Bernard Gauthier, saying, “the aristocrats slandered and persecuted them...”<sup>89</sup> Danton asserted that the abuse endured by Nioche and Gauthier by the antirevolutionaries in Lyon was a sign of their patriotism. He regarded those rebelling in Lyon not as patriots, but as threats to the Revolution.

Compared to Collot, Danton was less supportive of the use of political violence, but he was pragmatic about the need to intervene in Lyon in order to bring its citizens into the revolutionary fold. As the Terror progressed, Danton became the outspoken opponent of the indiscriminate use of political violence. In reference to the execution of the Girondins, the least radical and borderline antirevolutionary deputies in the Paris government, Danton said, “Dissenters! Aren’t we all dissenters? We all deserve to die as much as they do. One after the other, we shall meet their end.”<sup>90</sup> This is significant as it relates to the events in Lyon since many of those executed in Lyon were supporters of the Girondins. Palmer notes that when the Lyonnais prisoners were being marched to the Brotteaux where they were shot with cannons, “They arrived singing the Girondist hymn...”<sup>91</sup> Danton’s admonishment of the treatment of the Girondists in Paris can be extrapolated to Girondist factions across France, including Lyon. Danton was among the original and most ardent supporters of the Revolution, but “If obliterating

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<sup>88</sup>Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tomme LXXII du 11 Août 1793 au 24 Août 1793*, 575, accessed 2/14/21. <https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/73/0/0/0/0/0/0/580/?byte=4823723>

<sup>89</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 5, Séance du 28 Frimaire An II (18 Décembre 1793), 565, accessed 2/2/21. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116856j/f572.item.r=Lyon>

<sup>90</sup> David Lawday, *The Giant of the French Revolution: Danton, A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 226.

<sup>91</sup> Palmer, 169.

the Vendee region cost 100,000 lives, the Terror's toll was too high in bringing royalist Lyons to its republican senses."<sup>92</sup> Danton's acceptance of political violence as a legitimate tool clearly had its limits. Unlike Collot and Robespierre who, to varying degrees, believed that there was no cost too great to restore order to Lyon, Danton believed that the indiscriminate execution of French citizens was too much.

### Conclusion

Despite the Committee of Public Safety's proclamation that Lyon be destroyed, the city was not utterly destroyed, nor were its citizens completely decimated. Lyon was conquered and the antirevolutionaries subdued. However, the legacy of the atrocities that occurred there provide insight to the violent mindset of radicals like Collot d'Herbois. Robespierre and the rest of the Committee were not as conflicted as Danton about the necessity of or justification for the use of political violence against the citizens of Lyon. There were valid strategic and economic arguments as to why the Committee wanted to subdue Lyon. However, the extremist political violence spearheaded by Collot was, for many, beyond the pale. To understand why Collot and Robespierre embraced political violence in Lyon as a strategy, it must be recognized how important the city was to the survival of the Revolution and the greater domestic and international war efforts. This is not to say that Danton did not feel that the capture of Lyon was a priority; he believed it was from a strategic point of view. Where Collot, Robespierre, and Danton diverged was the red line between the efficacy of political violence and wantonness of unnecessary death.

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<sup>92</sup> Lawday, 248.

## The General Will

“Man is born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”<sup>93</sup> These are the opening words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous 1762 treatise on government, *The Social Contract*. In this book, Rousseau presented his views of the ideal form of government: one that is oriented not around a leader, but responsive to the will of the public, i.e., the general will. Rousseau also put forth the idea that “man is born free,” meaning that people can only voluntarily submit to the rule of a sovereign power and that the rule cannot be imposed upon them. The result is that a pact is created between the sovereign, Rousseau’s ambiguous term for government, and the people, hence the idea of a social contract. In pre-Revolutionary France, people did not voluntarily submit to the rule of the Bourbon family. If they had, the French Revolution would not have occurred. Rousseau’s writings greatly inspired leaders like Robespierre, Danton, and Collot who adopted, with varying interpretations, his ideas of the general will and the role of government towards its people. Knowing the role of the social contract, Rousseau, and the general will within the context of the French Revolution and to its leaders is vital to understanding the eventual manipulation of those ideals by Danton, Collot, and Robespierre to justify political violence.

The idea of the general will was a key component of Rousseau’s advocacy for the dismantling of the monarchy. He wrote, “To say that a man gives himself for nothing is to say what is absurd and inconceivable; such an act is illegitimate and invalid for the simple reason that he who performs it is not in his right mind. To say the same thing of a whole nation is to suppose a nation of fools; and madness does not confer rights.”<sup>94</sup> Such sentiments infuriated the French monarchs. Rousseau refuted their legitimacy to rule, arguing that the only rightful way

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<sup>93</sup> Rousseau, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 9.

that a government could rule justly was if it was based on the general will. Rousseau stated, “Now, the sovereign, being formed only of the individuals that compose it, neither has nor can have any interest contrary to theirs...”<sup>95</sup> While Rousseau’s ideas are noble, there is still the issue of actually interpreting the general will. Dan Edelstein writes, “Despite this insistence on the need for a democratic assembly, deliberation plays no role for Rousseau in the expression of the general will. Debate would only serve factional interests. Voting itself, furthermore, is insufficient to determine the general will.”<sup>96</sup> If one interprets the general will as a simple majority, 51% of the population, then whatever action the government takes is technically the general will even if it disenfranchises the other 49%. Similarly, there are technical issues with the idea of gauging one’s will, and implementing a system of direct democracy in which everyone votes by referendum presents a logistical nightmare. These challenges get to the heart of the problem with *The Social Contract*, namely implementation. *The Social Contract* is theoretical, which made it difficult for the French revolutionaries to implement a government inspired by the ideals Rousseau proposed. Rousseau’s lack of specificity was a contributing factor to why the Terror adopted political violence. Since the leaders of the French Revolution had no other frame of reference on which to model their government, violence became a practical and useful tool through which to assert and maintain their power.

### Rousseau and Revolutionary Politics

Rousseau scholar Gordon H. McNeil argues that during the French Revolution, the public perception of who Rousseau was as a philosopher and political theorist changed from a literary

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>96</sup>Edelstein, 78-79.

admiration to one rooted in politics. McNeil writes, “Instead of Rousseau making the Revolution, it would seem that the Revolution made Rousseau, or at least his reputation as a political philosopher.”<sup>97</sup> McNeil’s argument centers on the thesis that Rousseau’s ideas initially crafted the moral framework guiding the French Revolution in 1789, but that the French Revolution’s leaders eventually turned away from an admiration of Rousseau’s ideas towards following the man himself as a cult-like figure. It is important to note that Rousseau died nearly a decade before the French Revolution began, so he was not alive to provide clarity to the revolutionaries about putting his theory into practice. Throughout revolutionary France, the legend of Rousseau was profound. “Thousands paraded and sang in honor of Rousseau without having more than a vague idea as to just who Rousseau was or why he was being honored.”<sup>98</sup> This power and reverence for Rousseau created an appealing political hook for leaders hoping to appear more favorable in the eyes of the people.

Within French revolutionary politics, factions on opposite sides of the political spectrum were Rousseau stalwarts. On the radical left-wing side of the Convention was Jean-Paul Marat, the main author of the newspaper *L’ami du Peuple*. McNeil notes that Rousseau influenced Marat who was one of the first revolutionary leaders to actually read *The Social Contract*.<sup>99</sup> On the other side of the aisle were the right-wing and/or centrist-conservative Girondins. McNeil writes that the Girondin in general were the most loyal and exacting when it came to following the writings of Rousseau.<sup>100</sup> The irony of political leaders on opposite sides of the political spectrum claiming to be the champions of Rousseau becomes even more apparent when

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<sup>97</sup> Gordon H. McNeil, *The Cult of Rousseau and the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945), 201.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

examining interactions between the two groups. As noted above, Robespierre, who was arguably the most outspoken admirer of Rousseau, led the charge to murder all of the Girondins, those most loyal to Rousseau's writings. The Girondins despised Robespierre and Marat, so much so that a Girondin sympathizer, Charlotte Corday, assassinated Marat in his own home. Given that *The Social Contract* was a philosophical treatise, knowing how various factions interpreted it is important to understanding its use and abuse to promote partisan agendas.

### Rousseau and the Terror

Robespierre, Danton, and Collot were all greatly influenced by the writings of Rousseau and adopted his ideas to varying degrees into their governmental policies and thus into their embrace of political violence. Indeed, all three men took advantage of Rousseau's notion of government based on the general will to legitimize and promote their personal views. Furet supports this idea that "The 'people' were defined by their aspirations, and as an indistinct aggregate of individual 'right' wills. By that expedient, which precluded representation, the revolutionary consciousness was able to reconstruct an imaginary social cohesion in the name of and on the basis of individual wills."<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, he asserts that due to the logistical difficulties in taking the general will of all of France into account, leaders were more inclined to promote ideas that were in the spirit of the general will but specific to certain groups or people. This idea of acting in the spirit of the general will allow for leaders like Robespierre, Danton, and Collot to promote their own individual or factional agendas while simultaneously claiming to be champions of the people.

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<sup>101</sup> Furet, 27.

In relation to political violence, this means that people were able to justify the killing of just about anyone as long as they did it in the name of the general will. What will come to be shown is that most of the time when Robespierre and Danton talked about the “people ” or the “general will” they were doing it as lip service and as a political tool. Collot, on the other hand, was the most in touch with the general will, which as he saw it, was the will of the *sans-culottes*. This is perhaps due to the fact that Collot was a Parisian and not as highly educated or rich as Robespierre or Danton. Despite the fact that he was the most ardent proponent of political violence of the three, it may have been Collot’s fierce devotion to the people of France that allowed him to survive the Terror.

#### Danton, a Champion of the People

Both before and during the Terror, Danton did his best to give the impression that he was a champion of the people. He frequently declared that the initiatives he promoted in the Convention were for the people and he tried hard to give the appearance of being sympathetic to the peoples’ plights. One thing that is clear about the Terror is that when leaders had the backing of the people, or at least the *sans culottes*, they had the legitimacy to push their initiatives with more success. Furthermore, those who successfully gained the support of the public tended to live longer.

Throughout his time in the Convention, Danton sought to give legitimacy to the ideals he promoted by invoking the name of the people. On September 3, 1793 during a debate on economic manipulation and hoarders, Danton began an argument saying, “It is necessary for the Convention to declare between the monopolists and the people, and it is necessary that they

declare it today; nature has not abandoned you, do not abandon the people.”<sup>102</sup> Danton divided the French population into two camps: those who were economic criminals and those who were righteous. Danton used similar wording three other times during the same debate. The topic of discussion was the imposition of the general maximum, the price fixing mechanism discussed in the economic section. While the law truly benefited the people, Danton’s frequent evocation that it was necessary for the people made him look like their champion. Danton connected this law with the general will and with Rousseau in order to justify it further. He said, “It is a general law that you must create, because the legislature only takes into account the general interests. The people are always just.”<sup>103</sup> Stating that the people were always just, and that the initiative was in the French public’s interest automatically made any politician seem more favorable. For Danton, such statements implied that he heeded and respected the will of the people. In reality, Danton did not trust the people and, evidently, the people did not trust him. His inability to garner their support may have contributed to his execution by guillotine.

Throughout the French Revolution, the people had all of the power. Falling out of their favor proved costly for Danton. Politicians needed to respect the people and, at the very least, pretend to act in their interests. Danton’s association with corrupt individuals and discredited figures of the Revolution motivated him to improve his public image.<sup>104</sup> He did a great job of feigning this admiration and respect. A collection of Convention documents compiled by Stanford University and the French National Library reveals that in 1793 Danton was quoted as referring to “the people” more than anyone, excluding Antoine Barère, another influential

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<sup>102</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799)*, 367, accessed 2/14/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/74/0/0/0/0/0/0/373/?byte=3297637>

<sup>103</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799)*, 359, accessed 2/14/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/74/0/0/0/0/0/0/365/?byte=3219914>

<sup>104</sup> Palmer, 45.



member of the National Convention and the president of the Convention.<sup>105</sup> If Danton was such a staunch defender of the people, why did the public rally for his assassination in April 1794?

While there is not a concrete answer to this question, his falling out of favor with the people was an important contributing factor.

Danton understood the power of the people and the centrality of their power in the dogma of the revolution, but he did not trust them or the validity of the general will. “He had called public opinion a harlot and posterity foolishness...”<sup>106</sup> Danton was a man of the Revolution. He was a staunch believer in its values but as an individual was unable to connect with the will of the people in the way that Robespierre or Collot did. Danton stood apart from Robespierre and Collot in his opposition to the use of political violence during the Terror. Whether justified or not, the *sans-culottes* supported the mass imprisonments and executions during the Terror. Danton’s political coalition, known as the “Indulgents”, were of like mind in their shared Danton’s desire to end the excessive violence.<sup>107</sup> Even the name “Indulgents” is a charged term. It implies that one is self-centered and unaware of, or indifferent to, the will of the people. Admittedly, Danton “had never been in true harmony with the Revolution. He had said severe principles that frightened people away.”<sup>108</sup> Due to the fact that he “frightened people away” one can understand that, in part, Danton was killed because the people allowed it. That they regarded him and his policies as counter to their own desires was unfortunate for Danton, although it benefited Robespierre. Ultimately, it reflects the fact that Danton was not a man of the people. He believed he knew what was best for the Revolution, which included opposing excessive

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<sup>105</sup> *Archives Parlementaire*, accessed 2/14/21. [https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/query?report=concordance&method=proxy&q=people&start=0&end=0&script=&frequency\\_field=&arg=&sort\\_order=rowid&year=%221793%22](https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/query?report=concordance&method=proxy&q=people&start=0&end=0&script=&frequency_field=&arg=&sort_order=rowid&year=%221793%22)

<sup>106</sup> Palmer, 297.

<sup>107</sup> Popkin, 383.

<sup>108</sup> Palmer, 297.

violence during the Terror, but the people in Paris most vocal about the Revolution, the *sans-culottes*, did not share Danton's belief that political violence should be restrained. This division between the will of the people and Danton's personal beliefs serves as an important indicator in delineating the difference between how the people, or at least the *sans-culottes*, and Danton embraced political violence.

### Collot, the Man of the People

Unlike Robespierre or Danton, Collot did not grow up in the countryside or receive a fantastic education. He grew up in Paris as one of the "people." Collot was a member of the Hébertist faction, the radical left wing named after Jacques Hébert which was regarded as the party mostly closely associated with Paris's *sans culottes* peasants. Robert Palmer described Collot as "the nearest of all [the members of the Committee of Public Safety] to being a plain man of the people."<sup>109</sup> Collot believed in the power of the people because he was one of the people. Therefore, it is understandable why he felt more connected to the *sans culottes* than Robespierre or Danton.

Since the people Collot represented were the *sans-culottes*, his place of moral authority based on Rousseau's ideals allowed him to promote their will, which in this case often supported the use of political violence. Furet writes, "Rousseau had stated, the people cannot, by definition, alienate its rights to particular interests, for that would mean instant loss of its freedom. Legitimacy therefore belonged to those who symbolically embodied the people's will and were able to monopolize the appeal to it."<sup>110</sup> Collot as a representative of the *sans-culottes*, "symbolically embodied the people's will."

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>110</sup> Furet, 48.

### Forcing People to Be Free

One of the most controversial parts of Rousseau's Social Contract is, "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free...."<sup>111</sup> This statement is problematic for a number of reasons. As discussed earlier, finding a method by which to determine the general will was unclear and pragmatically impossible especially during the 1700s. Furthermore, while Rousseau believed that individuals had individual wills, the sentiment expressed above seems to indicate that those whose wills differed from the general will posed a threat to the sovereignty of the general will and, therefore, should be forced to follow the general will. While this was not a direct endorsement of political violence, its ambiguity allowed for violence in which people were "forced to be free." This concept impacts how one perceives both Collot and the purpose of the Terror in general. France during 1793 and 1794 was anything but unified. The fact that there were internal revolts and violent clashes negates the idea that any one person or group could articulate the general will. However, for people in power, like Collot, the will of Jacobins and *sans-culottes* was their guide for deciphering the general will. This implies that these leaders acted in defense of the general will when they killed antirevolutionaries, price manipulators, hoarders, foreign plot participants, and corrupt political rivals. The reality of the situation is more complex especially when it comes to eliminating political rivals. Nevertheless, the use of rhetoric to imply that they defended the people and the people's will inherently gave legitimacy to these leaders' actions. Furet further asserts that "Politics was a matter of establishing just who represented the people or equality, or the nation: victory was in the hands of those who were

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<sup>111</sup> Rousseau, 18.

capable of occupying and keeping that symbolic position.”<sup>112</sup> During the Terror, the group that maintained the position of power and legitimacy was the Committee of Public Safety, of which Collot was a prominent member.

### The General Will or the Committee’s Will?

The centralization of power in the Committee of Public Safety was important for a number of reasons, all of which help to present the roots of political violence during the Terror. First, it gave power and authority to those who were not seen as staunch supporters of the *sans-culottes*. One example of this is Danton who advocated that all projects be diverted away from the Convention and towards the Committee of Public Safety.<sup>113</sup> Danton asked for that transition to give the Committee more power in April 1793, months before the intense parts of the Terror began and at the very same time that he was a member of the Committee. This tactic had a double-edged effect. The centralization of power in one small body allowed for more efficient decision making at a time when France was dealing with many issues, but it enabled members of the Committee to become the de facto rulers of France who could endorse imprisonments, executions, and other forms of political violence to maintain order to make sure that their power remained unchallenged.

The unchallenged authority to propose political violence as a tactic throughout France is specific to Collot. Mansfield quotes multiple historians, including Sydenham, Lefebvre, and Higonet, who argued that “he [Collot] was appointed to the Committee 'only to placate the

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<sup>112</sup> Furet, 48.

<sup>113</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799) Tome LXVI du 3 Juin 1793 au 19 Juin 1793*. 177, accessed 2/15/21.  
<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/66/0/0/0/0/0/0/183/?byte=1560516>

sans-culottes,' to whom he continued to be 'inclined' or 'sympathetic.'"<sup>114</sup> Mansfield theorizes that since not much documentation still exists about Collot, his appointment to the Committee, despite his radical views, most easily is explained by the fact that he was seen as a representative of or placation for the *sans-culottes*. Despite the fact that Collot would become known as a radical, uncontrollable, bloodthirsty member of the Committee, this appointment probably was most in line Rousseau's idea of the general will. After all, the reason that other members of the Committee disliked him was because he was sympathetic to Hébertism and inextricably linked to the *sans-culottes*. In other words, he was a man of the people. This illustrates a quote from *The Social Contract* that states that, "Now, the sovereign, being formed only of the individuals that compose it, neither has nor can have any interest contrary to theirs; consequently the sovereign power needs no guarantee towards its subjects, because it is impossible that the body should wish to injure all its members; and we shall see hereafter that it can injure no one as an individual."<sup>115</sup> What Rousseau is expressing is that the general will is greater than the individual. Part of the reason Collot could promote the violent ideals he held was because he was not acting or advocating as an individual, but rather as a representative of the general will. One can see another example of this during Collot's time leading the violent campaign antirevolutionaries in Lyon. Despite the rest of the Committee's horror at the violence that took place in Lyon, the Committee was unable to arrest Collot and instead settled for arresting Ronsin, one of Collot's collaborators.<sup>116</sup> The Committee's reluctance to arrest Collot, notwithstanding his egregious endorsement of violence in Lyon, gives the impression that if he had been arrested there probably would have been revolts among the people of Paris. Those riots would in turn reflect

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<sup>114</sup> Mansfield, 574.

<sup>115</sup> Rousseau, 18.

<sup>116</sup> Palmer, 173.

two things. One, that the Committee was voting based on its own principles and not the general will, a clear violation of Rousseau's ideas. Two, that Collot was actually a representative of the general, that the people desired violence, and that Collot delivered.

It is important to remember that the general will was not static. The general will during 1789 was different than it was in 1793. The needs and desires of the people changed as circumstances dictated. From 1793 to 1794 when "Terror was the order of the day", Collot was the voice of the people, which explains why he was not executed during the period of the Terror. It was only after Robespierre's execution, when the Terror ended, that the general will again began to shift and Collot faced punishments for his actions. When looking at the period of the Terror in aggregate, the main focus is the violence, and for good reason. Based on the ideals set forth in *The Social Contract* which unofficially formed the cornerstone of the Revolution's moral and governmental guide, the violence perpetrated during this period is understandable. It was the will of the people, or at least the *sans-culottes*, and as one of the people, Collot delivered.

### Robespierre the Rousseauist

Robespierre is arguably the most important revolutionary leader when it comes to using Rousseau and the general will as models and tools. Even prior to the Terror, Robespierre was obsessed with Rousseau. McNeil notes that Robespierre was not only the most famous Jacobin, but the most famous adherent of Rousseau.<sup>117</sup> For example, on May 10, 1793 Robespierre began one of his speeches saying with almost a direct quote from the beginning of *The Social Contract* saying, "Man was born for happiness and freedom and everyone he is a slave and unhappy."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> McNeil, 206.

<sup>118</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre Tome IX* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1910-1967), 495. Accessed 3/2/2021.  
<https://archive.org/details/oeuvrescomplte09robeuoft/page/494/mode/2up?q=je>

Robespierre, unlike Danton, rooted both his actions and his rhetoric in the general will. Furet writes, “Robespierre was a prophet. He believed everything he said and expressed it in the language of the Revolution; none of his contemporaries assimilated as he did the ideological coding of the revolutionary phenomenon. For him there was no difference between the struggle for power and the struggle on behalf of the people, since they were one by definition.”<sup>119</sup> While the trend of Robespierre fighting on behalf of the people would not last, his rhetoric remained wholly centered on doing what was best for the people until his death. During the last speech he delivered, Robespierre admonished his colleagues and defended his actions during the Terror stating, “What tyrant protects me? What faction do I belong to? It is you yourselves! What faction, since the beginning of the Revolution, has overwhelmed the factions?... It is you, the people who are our faction!”<sup>120</sup> Robespierre believed in and was a defender of the people. Even at the end of his life, which occurred days after he spoke those words, Robespierre viewed himself as the righteous defender of the people.

### Rousseau’s Sanction of Political Violence

By the Spring of 1794, Robespierre was the de facto head of the Committee of Public Safety, which by then was the most feared body in France. Though the deadliest part of the Terror would not start until June 1794, Robespierre’s callous endorsement of political violence was firmly rooted in his Rousseauist ideology. Rousseau believed that the general will was always just and that any threat to the general will was a tyranny that should be eradicated. This means that in revolutionary France, those who were anti-revolutionaries, those who tried to harm

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<sup>119</sup> Furet, 59.

<sup>120</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 6, À la Convention dans la Séance du 8 Thermidor, 258.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116857x/f264.image.r=tyran>

the Revolution, or those who attempted to manipulate the general will were regarded as “*hors la loi*” or outlaws, as Danton referred to them.<sup>121</sup> These people were not simply dissenters with different opinions; they were anti-general will, anti-Rousseau, and anti-revolutionary traitors who no longer were party to the rights and privileges afforded to normal citizens who participated in and believed in the Revolution. This attitude towards citizens permitted the government to legally take whatever steps it deemed necessary to eliminate tyrannical threats in order to preserve the Revolution and the sanctity of the general will.<sup>122</sup>

In a speech delivered in February 1794, Robespierre presented to his fellow revolutionary leaders his justification for the use of political violence during the Terror. He declared, “The government in a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny. Is force only intended to protect crime? Is not the lightning of heaven made to blast vice exalted?”<sup>123</sup> Robespierre continued, “We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror.”<sup>124</sup> Robespierre justified the use of political violence and explained the necessity of the Terror as the appropriate means for dealing with allies of tyranny. As already noted, he did not conceive of this idea on his own. Regarding political violence, he adopted the same stance as Rousseau. The problem for Robespierre was not that he lost faith in the Revolution or that he started allying with foreign countries. Rather, his problem was that he

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<sup>121</sup> Edelstein, 19.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 156-157.

<sup>123</sup> Maximilien Robespierre. "*Maximilien Robespierre: On the Principles of Political Morality, February 1794*," Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, accessed 2/14/21, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1794robespierre.asp>

<sup>124</sup> Maximilien Robespierre. "*Maximilien Robespierre: Justification of the Use of Terror*," Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, accessed 2/14/21, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/robespierre-terror.asp>



became so consumed by what he viewed as a righteous crusade to defend the general will that he became a tyrant.

### Robespierre, the Rousseauian Tyrant

Robespierre was killed in July 1794 at the end of the bloodiest period of the Terror. The people of France grew disillusioned with Robespierre and began to believe that he no longer acted on behalf of the general will, but rather in his own self-interest. This ran counter to the ideals of Rousseau who wrote, “he who rules men ought not to control legislation, he who controls legislation ought not to rule men; otherwise his laws, being ministers of his passions, would often serve only to perpetuate his acts of injustice; he would never be able to prevent private interests from corrupting the sacredness of his work.”<sup>125</sup> For most of the Revolution, Robespierre lived up to the ideals that Rousseau enshrined in *The Social Contract*. He did not seek to manipulate legislation or government affairs for his own gain.

During the Spring and Summer of 1794, Robespierre created a cult of personality that cemented the idea that he was becoming tyrannical. One example of this cult of personality was Robespierre’s invention of a new, largely Rousseau inspired, religion known as the Cult of the Supreme Being. The cult is important for understanding the history of Robespierre, especially since, unlike many other revolutionaries, he was never comfortable with dechristianization. There has been debate for centuries about what exactly Robespierre hoped to accomplish with this cult, but a number of things are certain. For one, the cult was largely inspired by the Rousseauian ideals of liberty, nature, and virtue. Second, this was one of the turning points in Robespierre’s political career since people began to see him as an egocentric maniac.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Rousseau, 41.

<sup>126</sup> Popkin, 404-406.

Robespierre thought that he was a god; his fellow revolutionaries thought he had gone mad. The decline of Robespierre's image as well as his simultaneous rise as a perceived tyrant escalated on June 10, 1794 with the passage of the infamous and deadly law, the Law of 22 Prairial. This law, which was proposed to the Convention by Couthon, an ally of Robespierre, but which most scholars agree was either written or dictated by Robespierre, "denied the accused the right to legal counsel; allowed the prosecution to introduce 'moral' proofs, in the absence of (or in addition to) material evidence; vastly accelerated the judicial process; maintained trial by jury, but handpicked the jurors; and finally, limited sentencing to the stark choice between acquittal and death."<sup>127</sup> This law led to the most brutal part of the Terror, *La Grande Terreur*, the Great Terror which, although it lasted only a month, led to an 80% spike in conviction and in Paris alone, the execution of 1,300 individuals in about a month.<sup>128</sup> "The timing of its presentation, its severity, and the lack of a clear, immediate motive transformed the law of 22 Prairial into an emblem of primal violence."<sup>129</sup> The most troubling part of the Law of 22 Prairial is that there was no need for it. By the summer of 1794, France had successfully defended its borders from Europe's monarchs and handily defeated internal insurrection in the Vendée. For the most part, there no longer was an impending threat to the Revolution. Why then the need for an accelerated trial and execution process? The French people and non-Robespierrist members of the Convention and Committee of Public Safety asked the same question. This traumatic period for the French people provides an important case study of instances in which Robespierre endorsed the use of political violence and caused people to view him as even more of a tyrant. It erased any credibility that he once might have claimed as the spokesman of the general will.

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<sup>127</sup> Edelstein, 249.

<sup>128</sup> Popkin, 406.

<sup>129</sup> Edelstein, 250.

## The General Will Wills the Death of Robespierre

One way to deduce who has lost the will of the people is how the public reacts to them. For Robespierre, his Cult of the Supreme Being made him seem out of touch with the common citizen. Another indicator of disdain for Robespierre was an assassination attempt that took place in late May 1794 when a man tried to kill him but accidentally shot at Collot. A few days later another person was arrested for lurking around the Convention with knives looking for Robespierre.<sup>130</sup> While two lone assassins do not represent the general will, Robespierre's reaction to these attempts led to a negative shift in public opinion about him. It is no coincidence that it was mere days after these assassination attempts that the Law of 22 Prairial, spearheaded by Robespierre, was passed.

The law's callous ability to send just about anyone to their death served as a tool for Robespierre to dispose of anyone he viewed as a threat. During his last speech before his arrest and execution, Robespierre admonished his colleagues in the Convention, which at the time was being presided over by Collot, laying blanket accusations against them as traitors trying to destroy him and the revolution. Robespierre fumed, "Of course, at the risk of harming public opinion, having consulted only the sacred interests of the fatherland, I alone took away the decision of those whose opinions would have led me to the scaffold, if they had succeeded."<sup>131</sup> These are not the words of a selfless man fighting for the Rousseauian ideals of liberty and the general will. The reason that people called Robespierre a tyrant was because he behaved like one, not because they had all turned traitors. Rousseau's claim that "he who rules men ought not

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<sup>130</sup> Palmer, 328.

<sup>131</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, "*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*" Tome 6, À la Convention dans la Séance du 8 Thermidor, 253.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116857x/f259.item.r=La%20Soci%C3%A9t%C3%A9%20des%20Jacobins%200%20recueil%20de%20documents%20pour%20l'histoire%20du%20club%20des%20Jacobins%20de%20Paris#>

to control legislation, he who controls legislation ought not to rule men; otherwise his laws, being ministers of his passions, would often serve only to perpetuate his acts of injustice; he would never be able to prevent private interests from corrupting the sacredness of his work”<sup>132</sup> clearly applied to Robespierre during this time. He had lost the mandate of the people, lost sight of the general will, and was using political violence as a tool and scare tactic rather than as a tool for the great good.

### Conclusion

The general will is based on the idea of selfless rulers and mandates that a government provide for its citizens and is in line with their wishes. There is good reason why Rousseau became one of the first people enshrined in the Pantheon in Paris. There is also a reason why he was not enshrined there until after Robespierre was killed. Robespierre was among the most outspoken and famous followers of Rousseau, yet he was the one who twisted Rousseau’s ideas as a tool to endorse political violence. The very fact that Robespierre was so deeply tied to Rousseau was scarring for the French people as the ideals of the general will and *The Social Contract* became the moral sanctioning of wanton death.<sup>133</sup>

Collot, too, used the ideals of *The Social Contract* to endorse political violence. The difference between him and Robespierre is that his actions were not based on a self-righteous egoism to become the unquestioned ruler of France. Collot remained a staunch defender of the people, and the fact that he led the charge in orchestrating Robespierre’s death demonstrates that. That is not to say that Collot served without ego; he certainly had plenty of ego and his ego may have contributed to how and why he endorsed political violence, but he never betrayed his

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<sup>132</sup> Rousseau, 41.

<sup>133</sup> McNeil, 208-209.

brethren *sans-culottes*. Danton understood the power and ideals behind the general will and did his best to act as though the things he promoted were for the people. In all fairness, in Danton's mind everything he did may have been justified and done in service to the general will, but he lived a lifestyle that was out of touch with them. Furthermore, he admitted that public opinion could not be trusted. As renowned a leader as he was, his hesitation to endorse political violence in a similar way to Robespierre and Collot showed that he was still acting not as a representative of the general will, but as an individual.

The general will is an ideal. The reason why it is so ill-defined in *The Social Contract* is because Rousseau did not write the book as a manual. It was theoretical, which inherently means that any attempt to implement the ideals of *The Social Contract* were bound to be imperfect. Yet the idea behind the general will always remain the most decisive factor in the Revolution. Leaders led and were deposed at the will of the people. Likewise, the Terror happened with the will of the people. Even if the general will was implemented imperfectly, its power and presence were forces that dictated the course of the Revolution and Terror and the role of political violence within them.

### **Political Violence in French Revolution Politics**

During the Terror, the hope that those leading the country would act for the good of all slowly faded. Factionalism reigned supreme and violence was the default tool for leaders like Danton, Robespierre, and Collot to eliminate people or factions viewed as threats. Although rivalries between leaders like Danton, Robespierre, and Collot were based on legitimate political disagreements, they were often solved through violence rather than through civil discourse. This section will examine the extent to which violence was adopted as a tool to use against political

rivals. It will become clear that Danton believed that the use of violence against political rivals was only justified if their actions warranted punishment. Like Danton, Robespierre endorsed violence when necessary, but his decisions were motivated by ego as he viewed himself the lone savior of France. In contrast, Collot endorsed the use of violence for political reasons, not selfish reasons, out of a sense of devotion to the people of France and a moral obligation to oppose tyranny.

### Danton and Political Manipulation

Georges Danton did not have the same proclivity for or reliance on political violence as Robespierre and Collot. He believed that political violence, which is rooted “in the deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals.”<sup>134</sup> was only justified when someone was directly trying to sabotage the Revolution. This set him apart throughout the period of the Terror and contradicted the approaches of Robespierre and Collot. This section will examine Danton’s regard of political violence and how this led to conflict with Robespierre. Danton was not a pacifist, but he abhorred the indiscriminate use of political violence against those whom he believed to be innocent. In a debate with Robespierre, Danton claimed, “It is absolutely right to suppress royalists...but let us not confuse the innocent with the guilty!” Robespierre countered, “What makes you think we have killed a single innocent?” Danton was aghast. ‘Did you hear that?’ he said, turning to their hosts. ‘Not one innocent soul has perished!’<sup>135</sup> This exchange between Robespierre and Danton illustrates their inherent disagreement when it came to political violence. Danton conceded that the suppression of royalists was acceptable, but the loss of innocent life was not. The fact that Robespierre questioned whether a single innocent person had

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<sup>134</sup> Sousa.

<sup>135</sup> Lawday, 236.

been executed was infuriating to Danton who subsequently stormed out of the room.<sup>136</sup> This incident also shows the extent to which Danton supported political violence. After all, he said, ““It is absolutely right to suppress royalists.””<sup>137</sup> This was not simply lip service to try to convince Robespierre that they were partially in agreement about killing royalists; Danton meant it. In April 1793, months before the passage of the Law of Suspects, Danton said in the Convention, “I do not know any actions more deserving of punishment than those which take place in the shadow of the law... he who oppresses [others] will be treated as such [a murderer] ...”<sup>138</sup> In this speech Danton was referring to economic traitors, though this was not the only group against whom he felt justified using political violence. In September 1793, Danton expressed similar sentiments about the antirevolutionaries entrenched in Lyon, suggesting that the government make the aristocrats “who infect them [the departments of France] ...disappear.”<sup>139</sup> Although Danton supported the use of political violence in these instances, his endorsement was based on the desire to protect the Revolution from antirevolutionary enemies. Danton viewed the Revolution from the macro level. He saw himself as a part of something greater than himself, which may have contributed to why he, unlike Robespierre, did not act primarily on ego. Danton’s refutation of political violence for unjust reasons is the cornerstone of understanding his disgust for the use of violence as a tool for dealing with political rivals. As the Terror progressed and as Robespierre’s political dominance became more entrenched in the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety, Danton found himself opposed to what he

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>138</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799)*, 710, accessed 3/4/21. <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/philologic4/archparl/navigate/62/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/716/?byte=6212768>

<sup>139</sup> Georges Danton, *Archives Parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 Première Série (1787 à 1799)*, September 6, 1793, 468, accessed 3/4/21. <https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/74/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/474/?byte=4228227>

viewed as Robespierre's unjust use of political violence. One example of this growing tension between Danton and Robespierre occurred in the Spring of 1794 during and after the execution of Jacques Hébert, the leader of the ultra-radicals and the namesake of the Hébertist party. To Danton, the motives behind these executions were unjustified, at least in comparison to the execution of price manipulators or spies. The reason Danton and Robespierre disagreed with each other over this execution was because the true crime that the Hébertists were guilty of was being so radical that Robespierre could not control them. Robespierre leading the charge to execute them was, as Robert Palmer says, "the beginning of the general liquidation" of Robespierre's rivals.<sup>140</sup> While Danton did not openly speak out in defense of the Hébertists since he too saw them as excessively dangerous, he clearly was uneasy about the motives behind their execution.<sup>141</sup> From that point until Danton's death a few weeks later, the Dantonists were fervently outspoken in their condemnation of Robespierre's use of violence to eliminate rivals. This was not the first time that the Dantonists admonished Robespierre's use of political violence to achieve political aims. If one recalls Danton's defense of the Girondins in Lyon, the moderates who Robespierre labeled as antirevolutionaries, one can see that Danton and his followers opposed the use of violence for any purpose other than directly serving the interests of the Revolution. Unfortunately for Danton, this would be the last time that he and his followers would be able to protest the use of violence for political purposes, as they would be Robespierre's next victims.

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<sup>140</sup> Palmer, 295.

<sup>141</sup> Lawday, 234.



### In the Room Where it Happens: Robespierre and Danton

The relationship between Danton and Robespierre illustrates what is perhaps the best example of how Robespierre used political violence as a tool to deal with political rivals. These two great leaders of the Revolution were not just fellow politicians; they were friends. By exploring the dissolution of their relationship from amiability to hostility it will become clear that Robespierre's tyrannical obsession with power not only led to the downfall of important revolutionary factions like the Girondins and the Hébertists, but of his friend Danton.

The best example of the friendship between Robespierre and Danton is an effusive and emotional letter of condolence written by the former to the latter in February 1793 after the death of Danton's wife.<sup>142</sup> Robespierre's heartfelt sentiments are atypical for one sent to an adversary. Scholars disagree as to the exact nature of the relationship. Danton biographer David Lawday portrays Robespierre as a manipulative callous person and dismisses whether they were actually friends. Conversely, Robespierre biographer Peter McPhee portrays Danton as a lifelong friend and ally with whom Robespierre simply had occasional disagreements. The letter of condolence suggests something deeper than a casual friendship, which begs the question of how Robespierre could bring himself to kill Danton. Whatever the disagreement, Robespierre was infuriated by Danton and his allies' opposition to him and their skepticism that he was the only one who successfully could guide the Revolution.

Danton's admonishment of the ubiquitous use of political violence, which Robespierre supported, led to conflict between Robespierre and other revolutionary leaders. As others made known their disdain for Robespierre's actions, Robespierre, believing he was right and everyone else was wrong, saw everyone who opposed him as an enemy. Robespierre's actions did not

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<sup>142</sup>Lawday, 180.

infuriate just Danton, but other leaders like his childhood friend Camille Desmoulins. Camille was the author of the pamphlet *Le Vieux Cordelier*. Despite being lifelong friends, when Camille began criticizing Robespierre and the violent tendencies of the Terror, Robespierre's attitude toward him changed. An example is in *Le Vieux Cordelier No. 3*, dated December 15, 1793. Throughout the pamphlet Camille referred to the brutality of monarchies and the ancient Roman Empire, which he compared to the government under the Committee of Public Safety and the leadership of Robespierre.<sup>143</sup> After Camille rebuffed Robespierre publicly, Robespierre no longer viewed him as an ally, but a threat. Popkin notes, "In Robespierre's view, the survival of the Revolution depended on maintaining the unity and authority of the committees. If Danton and Desmoulins could not be persuaded to end their agitation, they would have to be eliminated, regardless of his personal feelings for them."<sup>144</sup>

By examining the dissolution of Robespierre's relationships with Danton and Camille, it becomes clear that Robespierre's support for their execution was motivated out of self-interest rather than necessity. Days before Danton was arrested, he and Robespierre had dinner together, arranged by their friends as an attempt at reconciliation. There is no record of their conversation, but we know that Danton soon was arrested and that Robespierre's vote was a deciding factor in sanctioning the arrest of Danton and his allies and in denying their right to defend themselves.<sup>145</sup> Not even an amicable dinner could change Robespierre's view that Danton and his allies were threats to himself and to the Revolution. Robespierre's mind was made up, and he subsequently sanctioned the death of two of his close friends because "Danton stood in the way."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Camille Desmoulins, *Le Vieux Cordelier No.3 Rédigé par Camille Desmoulins* (December 15, 1793), 1-25, accessed 3/4/21 at the Bibliothèque Nation de France. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1045474h>

<sup>144</sup> Popkin, 397.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 396-397.

<sup>146</sup> Palmer, 296.

Robespierre's self-obsession and egotistical need to retain unchallenged power led to his endorsement of violence as the most effective tool to eliminate political opposition.

Robespierre's polar shift away from being the friend who comforted Danton in February 1793 to being the man who refused to listen to his pleas during their last dinner together in 1794 is a stark example of the fact that Robespierre did not just use political violence to kill antirevolutionaries, he also supported its use to give himself a leg up and to secure his own influence. Complete responsibility for the execution of Danton, Desmoulins, and the rest of the Dantonists did not land squarely on the shoulders of Robespierre. He may have been perceived as a dictator, but he was not actually one. That being said, "For the incorruptible [Robespierre] there was room in France only for his brand of patriotism. How easy it was, then, for Robespierre to situate Danton among enemies of the republic."<sup>147</sup> After Danton's death, Robespierre led the Revolution from the relative moderation of the Terror into the deadly Great Terror, cementing both his legacy as a tyrant and demonstrating his belief in the utility of violence as a tool to eliminate political adversaries and achieve his aims virtually unopposed.

#### Collot's Stand Against Robespierre

In the summer of 1794, Collot d'Herbois became a key part in the arrest and execution of Robespierre, his longtime colleague on the Committee of Public Safety. By examining Collot's actions to support and hasten Robespierre's death, one can understand how his use of political violence served as a tool to eliminate Robespierre and preserve his own power. Collot never shied away from endorsing the use of violence, but he always had a purpose for doing so. This remained true during this last part of the Terror after the passage of the Law of 22 Prairial. To be

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<sup>147</sup> Lawday, 229.

clear, Robespierre's actions and co-authorship of the Law of 22 Prairial which created the Great Terror was not the reason for Collot's opposition to Robespierre. Rather, it was the fact that Robespierre started accusing everyone who did not endorse his specific ideology as a political threat. This was of great concern to Collot and his allies since Collot, on numerous occasions, diametrically opposed some of Robespierre's positions including dechristianization, Collot's actions in Lyon, and economic policies.<sup>148</sup> Due to these disagreements and the fact that Robespierre openly accused fellow politicians, Collot's use of political violence to help overthrow Robespierre was also based upon a desire for self-preservation. As a man who strove to represent the *sans-culottes*, Collot endorsing violence to overthrow Robespierre was also based on his increasing hostility to Robespierre and his regime.<sup>149</sup>

Collot took it upon himself to publicly oppose Robespierre and rebuff him and his allies for their authoritarian rule of France. On a number of occasions Collot and his allies criticized Robespierre's collaborators during Committee of Public Safety meetings. On June 29, 1794, they openly called Robespierre a dictator to his face, prompting him to storm out of their meeting.<sup>150</sup> Collot's open defiance to Robespierre added fire to the growing number of Convention members who shared Collot's sentiments and viewed Robespierre with both fear and loathing. This loathing was compounded on July 26, the day Robespierre would give his last speech. In it, he proposed that he alone was loyal to the Revolution and that there were traitors in every faction of the Convention.<sup>151</sup> This caused just about every other member of the Convention to turn against him and gave Collot the clout to gain support in his effort to kill Robespierre. During one meeting Collot screamed at Robespierre's ally Saint-Just saying, "You are preparing a report, but

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<sup>148</sup> Palmer, 368-369.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 371.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 369.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 372-373.

from what I know of you, you are undoubtedly drawing up a decree of accusation against us. What do you hope for? What lasting success can you expect from such horrible treachery? You can take our lives, have us murdered, but you cannot delude the will of the people.”<sup>152</sup> Collot, as the leader of the Convention at the time, had the power and influence to create the perfect conditions to eliminate Robespierre, which would simultaneously save him from Robespierre’s wrath and eliminate the threat Robespierre posed to him politically. The next day, after a dramatic scene in the Convention, Robespierre and his allies were arrested. They tried to kill themselves to escape the guillotine but were unsuccessful. On July 27, 1794, they were put to death.<sup>153, 154</sup>

While Collot was not directly responsible for Robespierre’s execution, he used his position and power to influence and endorse the use of violence to eliminate Robespierre. In his speech on July 26, Robespierre got one thing right when he said, “The Enemies of the Republic call me tyrant!”<sup>155</sup> Indeed, Robespierre was a tyrant, unlike Collot who was a man of the people and had the mandate of the *sans-culottes* to eliminate the tyrannical Robespierre.

It is important to note that Collot did not advocate the execution of Robespierre for the same reason that Robespierre pushed for the execution of Danton. Collot’s motive was not self-aggrandizement. Rather, he endorsed it because Robespierre personified what the Revolution was founded to destroy.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 375.

<sup>153</sup> Popkin, 412.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 414.

<sup>155</sup> François-Alphonse Aulard, “*La Société des Jacobins: recueil de documents pour l’histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*” Tome 6, À la Convention dans la Séance du 8 Thermidor, 258.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k116857x/f264.image.r=tyran>

## Conclusion

The use of violence by Danton, Robespierre, and Collot against political enemies displays the extent to which each was willing to go in defense of the national interest and oftentimes, their own interests. Danton's endorsement of political violence was based on necessity rather than on ego. To Danton, violence was necessary to achieve a goal, as in the case of Louis XVI's execution and the execution of antirevolutionary leaders. This moderated stance greatly differed from that of Robespierre who was much more liberal with his dispensation of political violence, as seen by his endorsement of the elimination of the Girondins, the Hébertists, and the Dantonists. Robespierre believed that it was his vision alone that could guide France to glory and that violence was the most effective tool to eliminate anyone who stood in the way of those goals. Collot, whose unrestrained and merciless use of political violence disgusted even its most ardent supporters, pushed for Robespierre's execution because he feared Robespierre and his tyrannical tendencies. Though Collot would not live much longer than Robespierre, the fact that he, a lowly playwright, would rise to a position to overthrow the most influential revolutionary leader is a testament to the values of the Revolution, the ideals of the general will, and the unfortunate utility of political violence.

### **Conclusion: The Legacy of Political Violence during the Terror**

The use of violence during the Terror was the French government's most effective tool for remaining in control. The endless stream of problems forced politicians to put the wishes and needs of the people and the country ahead of their own, at least in theory. Deciphering the will of the people was not a simple task and personal pride, ego, and ambition often influenced political decisions. The inability of those in power to be completely selfless led to petty disputes in which

political colleagues were defamed as traitors simply for sharing their opinion. The pervasive violence and constant need to watch one's words and be wary of others is why this period was called the Terror. While there were certainly many other impactful figures during the Terror, in regard to political violence, Robespierre, Danton, and Collot are key figures to examine. Not only did these three have significant direct impacts on each other, but due to their differing partisan affiliations, they reflect the fact that the Terror and the use of political violence in the Terror was not something everyone agreed upon.

During the Terror, Robespierre was involved with almost all aspects of political life including warfare, economics, drafting legislation, and founding a religion. It is not surprising why most French Revolution scholarship about the Terror tends to focus on him. However, Robespierre's legacy is more sophisticated than the fact that he became dictatorial towards the end of his life. This paper has demonstrated that in regard to Robespierre's endorsement of political violence, his motives were not exclusively personal. Since the beginning of the French Revolution Robespierre aspired to be the best representative of the people and their interests, as he perceived them. For example, his advocacy for the use of political violence to suppress those seeking to undermine and manipulate the French economy was not motivated by a cruel desire to eliminate those he saw as enemies and agitators. His purpose in pursuing those manipulations was the same as it was for his sanctioning of political violence in Lyon: the preservation of the French Revolution. In both instances, the people Robespierre sought to kill were directly jeopardizing the welfare of the Revolution economically, governmentally, and strategically.

Another indicator of the fact that Robespierre's intentions were more profound than a desire to remain in power was the way in which he spoke about the people of France and the ideals of the Revolution. Although Robespierre was an egomaniac, his passionate and seemingly

sincere rhetoric praising the strength, endurance, and righteousness of the French people and the causes of the French Revolution were crucial to his actions. It was only towards the end of the Terror when he began eliminating political rivals like Hébert and Danton, created the Cult of the Supreme Being, and was instrumental in passing the Law of 22 Prairial that public opinion about Robespierre shifted entirely. By that point, his oppressive actions caused an irreparable rift between him and the people he worked so hard to protect. The popular belief that Robespierre was a maniacal leader is historically inaccurate. Though he was overzealous at times in his endorsement of the use of political violence, he should be remembered as someone who was fiercely devoted to his country and spent much of his adult life trying to build a better future for his people.

Danton shared many traits with Robespierre, the most important of which was his love of and devotion to France. Like Robespierre, Danton was one of the original architects of the French Revolution and among its most outspoken and influential proponents. Given the fact that these two men shared this history, looking at how and why they became enemies is based largely on the role of political violence during the Terror. Although he claimed to be a champion of the people, Danton failed in that pursuit. He spoke passionately about his belief in the people of France but he never trusted them or their ability to govern by themselves. As an educated, well respected person, Danton envisioned himself as the voice of the people. The problem, however, is that he did not listen to them. His endorsement of political violence, or lack thereof, during the Terror ran contrary to the will of the *sans-culottes* and fellow politicians like Robespierre and Collot who fraternized more frequently with the people than he did. Danton's desire to bring a swifter and less violent end to the Revolution was not in fact based on his interactions with the people and listening to their desires, but rather was influenced by what he envisioned as best for



the people of France. An example of this is his economic policies which he believed should be based on a structural solution to problems. His approach prioritized the well-being of the state in the long term as opposed to the welfare of the people of France in the short term. This plan did not necessitate the same use of political violence which may have given the appearance that he was not as serious about helping France's economy as were Robespierre or Collot.

The death of Danton also serves as an important historical moment to understand the reasons behind and the power of political violence during the Terror. While there certainly was public outcry over Danton's execution, the fact that the majority of Parisians did not flock to his rescue indicates that he fell out of favor with them. His reputation was tarnished heavily due to his association with corrupt individuals and possibly foreign governments, which gave the appearance that his lifestyle ran contrary to the ideals of the Revolution. Despite this, Danton's death played an important role in hastening the death of Robespierre. The day before Robespierre was killed, he was shouted out of a meeting of the National Convention. It is said that one member yelled, "The blood of Danton chokes him!"<sup>156</sup> This reference to Robespierre's complicity in Danton's execution shows Danton's enduring impact on the Revolution as a respected leader. While he may not have been the ideal advocate for the general will, in that he did not respect the opinion of peasants, his actions, including his refutation of the necessity of the Terror and the use of political violence, always were based on fighting for what he perceived was in the people's best interests and those of France.

Collot d'Herbois was the least well known of the three figures discussed in this paper. Scholarship regarding him is confined to a few articles, Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled*, and brief mentions in other histories of the French Revolution. Despite this, his involvement is perhaps the

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<sup>156</sup> Palmer, 377.

most important to study as it pertains to the use of political violence during the Terror. Some of the instances of political violence and the methods he endorsed were inhumane. Whether it was killing Lyonnais citizens en masse with cannons or advocating for herding prisoners into mined houses and blowing them up, Collot was never timid when it came to his belief in the necessity and scope of using political violence. Furthermore, his involvement as a presiding officer in the Convention on the day that Robespierre was arrested and his enduring role as an influential member of the Committee of Public Safety go to show that despite his humble upbringing, he had a profound impact on the Terror.

Perhaps the most curious thing about Collot and the Terror is the fact that he was not guillotined. While exile to Cayenne, French Guyana in 1795 and death most probably by contracting yellow fever is no reward, it is curious that the man who was the most outspoken proponent of political violence was spared the death that he prescribed for so many others.<sup>157</sup> One explanation, established in this paper, was his close relationship with the *sans-culottes*. As a man of the people, Collot had a personal sympathy and understanding of their needs and desires. No doubt his actions were cruel, but if you and your family are starving and cannot afford to put food on the table while there is a looming threat of being killed by foreign invaders, it makes sense that people respected Collot's zeal to root out and destroy those trying to undermine their welfare. In this way, Collot was perhaps the most genuine embodiment of Rousseau's ideal of a person representing the general will. While Collot certainly had a large ego and selfish desires; the way in which he spoke about himself and others was indicative of that, but he strived to be the best embodiment of the general will. The counterargument to this is that Collot was in fact convicted and exiled after the Terror, so he must not have been a good representative of the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 388.

general will after all. This is a valid and important argument but it is essential to remember that the general will by nature is not static. Therefore, within the context of the Terror, political violence was the general will of the *sans-culottes*, and during this period of transition and violence, Collot served as a faithful adherent to the belief in the efficacy and justification of the use of political violence. The statements and actions of Robespierre, Danton, and Collot reflect three distinct political views on the use of political violence. These men adopted political violence to varying degrees based on how they believed problems should be addressed. Arguably, it was not only their actions that were important in determining public favor, but how their actions were perceived. The stories of Robespierre, Danton, and Collot, then, offer a snapshot in history rather than a holistic picture of the Terror or a comprehensive survey of the use of violence during the French Revolution. Their philosophies and actions must be understood and judged within the larger context of the French Revolution, not in comparison to earlier or current leaders.

Despite or perhaps because of the use of violence throughout the Terror, the government was able to ensure the survival of the Revolution and the country itself. Popkin concludes that “the human cost of the period of revolutionary government was high...it had successfully warded off the combined forces of the other European powers, as well as the royalist uprising in the west and the federalist revolts... it had kept the urban population from facing actual starvation and had provided its armies with enough supplies to enable them to prevail.”<sup>158</sup> Despite the violence of this period, it is still commendable that France survived the transition of power from the monarchy to the new French Republic, fended off foreign enemies, and kept its people relatively well off.

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<sup>158</sup> Popkin, 416.

In regard to the origins of the French Revolution, François Furet states, “Repression became intolerable only when it became ineffectual.”<sup>159</sup> This sentiment can also be applied to the use of political violence during the Terror. It became insufferable only once it proved less effective, which explains how Robespierre, Danton, and Collot became victims of political violence despite being its most vehement proponents and executors. Ironically, the fear and horrors perpetuated by the Terror and the use of political violence enabled the survival of the new French Republic. This historic episode has become a template for the French. The success and mistakes made by leaders like Robespierre, Danton, and Collot were models for future French politicians hoping to be the next leaders of France, including the Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte who progressed rapidly through the French military ranks partly due to the power vacuum created during the French Revolution.

Furet also notes that “For the same reasons that the Ancien Régime is thought to have an end but not beginning, the Revolution has a birth but no end.”<sup>160</sup> Ever since the fall of the Bourbon monarchy, France has been on a seemingly interminable quest to find a form of government that best represents its interests. It is for this reason that the French Revolution never truly ended. To this day, when the French people have a grievance, no matter how petty, they take to the streets with banners in hand just as the *sans-culottes* did. Revolution is abnormal by definition so there inevitably will be instances, such as the Terror, when good intentions turn oppressive. The examination of political violence during the Terror serves as a reminder of the power and dangers of revolution and a warning about the peril of radicalism and extremist actions.

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<sup>159</sup> Furet, 25.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 3.

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